

Broderick
Canales
Charbonneau
Cianciolo
Davis
DiGaetano
Dixon
Evans
Fellmeth
Feshler
Guevara
Hitchcock
Janz
Korponai
Mangels
Meyer
Parolise
Reynolds
Roginski
Rudzis
Scaramella
Schairer
Shannon
Sirois
Thomas
Wetmore



Folio Art and Literary Magazine 2017 · Southern Connecticut State University

FOLIO

Folio

The Undergraduate Art and Literary Magazine
of Southern Connecticut State University

2017

Folio Staff

Editor	Urfa Kadeer
Associate Editor	Madison Csjeka
	Ryan Meyer
Poetry Editor	Amanda Ives
Fiction Editor	Justin Hitchcock
Art Editor	Savannah Hastey
Assistant Poetry Editor	Maile Chaplar
	Maxine Minalga
Assistant Fiction Editors	Jason Mangles
	Mercedez Pulse
Assistant Art Editors	Ashley Pavelko
	Bailey Sullivan
Faculty Advisor	Jeff Mock

2016-2017 Featured Readers and Artists:

Terri Davis, James Hunt, Jenna Cianciolo, Jessie Meyer, Tyler Korponai, Ashley Pavelko, Maile Chaplar, Joseph Schairer, Gary Scaramella, Matt Rhone, Molly Flanagan, Evan Saunders, Jolee Parolise, and Savannah Hastey

Table of Contents

Poetry

JESSIE MEYER	Collection	9
ALLISON SHANNON	Dripping Red	10
GARY SCARAMELLA	Love Letter (From a Cosmicist)	11
	Life Through the Eyes of an Impressionist	13
TERRI DAVIS	I Have Sat in One Chair Nine Different Ways	15
	We're Starving	17
	God, Beer Bottles, and Lingerie	18
YARELIS CANALES	135 W Street	19
BECKON DIGEAETANO	Blue Sky Blind	21
	Lost Love Lives	22
ANDREW JANZ	Cruising Altitude	24
KAZMIRA THOMAS	Tuna	25
JUSTIN HITCHCOCK	Mother's Needle	26
BRADLEY WETMORE	Pike Alley	27
	One Last Goodbye	29
SAM EVANS	Hindsight	31
JASON MANGLES	Looking for Ashberry	34

Art

JOSEPH SCHAIRER	Edge of Nowhere, Cusp of Nothing	45
KYLE BRODERICK	Familiarity	46
JENNA CIANCIOLO	October 2016	47
	Peony and Dahlias	48
	Boar'd to Death	49
KIM REYNOLDS	Fae of the Underdark	50
	Woodland's Defender	51
KATHRYN FELLEMEETH	Piece by Piece, Breece by Breece	52
MARY RUDZIS	Maribeth	53
	Bowie	54
JUSTIN HITCHCOCK	Think	55

Fiction

GARY DIXON	He is Sleeping Peacefully, For Now	57
MADISON FESHLER	Living with Dementia	66
BECKON DIGAETANO	Caramelized Nostalgia	71
STEPHANIE SIROIS	Somei Yoshino	76
JOLEE PAROLISE	Another Lonely Day	82
GARY SCARAMELLA	Blood on the Lake	86
	Crown of Y'Purra	90
TYLER KORPONAI	Breakfast	93
JESSICA ROGINSKI	Little Feat	95
CHASE CHARBONNEAU	The Perfect Night	97
GEMA GUEVARA	Living with a Demon	101

Judges' Commentary	110
Editors' Choice	117
About Our Contributors	122
Thank You	127

Poetry

Collection

It was almost August and I remember watching you from across the table, examining you in the dim light of our favorite bar as you slid your finger up the plane of your nose to push your glasses

back into place. It was already a familiar gesture, after only a month. And I remember thinking, even then, that I should start collecting things to remember you by. That night I locked away

the silent hitch of your breath at the back of your throat as I moved above you, and the way your eyes caught a light that did not come from inside your darkened bedroom. While you slept

I catalogued the smell of your hands after a day at work – sawdust and black paint, blue ink and piano keys. And in the morning as you walked me to my car, I tried not to add this to my collection:

your touch at my elbow, and the sad smile you offered me as you turned to walk to the theatre, and my gut buckling like punched honeycomb as I caught you in my rearview mirror.

Dripping Red

The tree in front of my house drips leaves
So red they're almost purple, hanging
Low like they're filled with the juice of a ripe
Plum, and ready to drop to the ground
With a fat thud.

A thud, like the sound of a bottle,
Thick glass tumbling off the table and not
Breaking. It rolls across the hardwood,
Waking the dog, who jumps up in fright,
Nails scratching the floor.

A scratch, etched deep into my arm, from
Shoulder to elbow, from where mom tried to
Grab me as I pushed past her naked, staggering
Bulk. It hurt, but I didn't look. I ran outside, into
The dawn, and only then noticed

Blood, dripping down my arm, dripping red,
Like the wine from her lips at dinner, at breakfast.
I trip over my own feet, but keep moving up the hill,
To stand with the other kids. I turn around and can see
That tree, sighing and shaking, from the bus stop.

Love Letter (From a Cosmicist)

Lover-

We are the sum
of fourteen billion
years of existence,
two tiny flesh sacks
riding a ball of dirt
and mud, hurtling
through a mostly empty,
probably godless universe
that is entirely unconcerned
with our wellbeing.

Modern scientific understanding
tells me that in approximately
four billion years,
our galaxy will collide
with Andromeda, trillions
of stars writhing against each other,
burning extraterrestrial ecstasy;
two colossal and cosmic giants
entwining their blinking
arms and embracing,
their fated meeting
light years in the making.
By this point, of course,
you and I will be long dead;
the atoms and energy
that made up our
infinitesimal existence

spread and recycled
until the eventual,
unavoidable
heat death
of the cosmos.

So, lover,
before that happens,
let's make like the Big Bang-
because you matter.

Gary Scaramella

Life Through the Eyes of an Impressionist

1.

Childhood was a muddy blur
of green and pavement,
bloody knees and school rooms
where I could only grasp
the general concept of math
(a number plus a number is
a greater number, probably).

2.

That party could have been
the *Bal du moulin de la Galette*,
given that, how I remember it,
everybody fucking looked the same.
Now strangers keep greeting me,
saying my name when I don't
know theirs. (Was he the one
with the face made up of
colorful dots, or smudges?)

3.

When speaking to my lover,
I must tell her that when
we met, there was a swirl
of movement and color;
that when I first saw her,
she bled into everything,
the crimson of her hair
more beautiful than anything

Monet ever painted-
or whatever it takes to distract her
from the fact that I can't remember
the exact date of our anniversary.

I Have Sat in One Chair Nine Different Ways

4

I have stolen, as a grown woman, from children and men.

2

I have trespassed into a garden to pick daffodils
for my mother and, instead, split earthworms into heads
and tails, wringing them of their bloodless dirt,
and wiped clean my right hand by trailing their mess
on my neighbor's siding.

5

I have been the black widow waiting in candlelit motel bathrooms.

3

I have sobbed alongside piglets, covering their ears,
as I witnessed the slaughter of a sow,
who by trusting was welcomed with a shot
to the face. Who died only after dumping gallons
of herself from the final throat gash that let spill onto her murderer's
rubber boots made for rain.

9

I have prayed for the death of someone I hate.

8

I have cheated on a man that loved me. Habitually,
I leased out my body, so that I could feel anything
other than empty. He would drive eight hours to see me.
When he asked where I'd been, I'd give him a shrug, and let him
kiss the lips with the taste of the other man still on me.

7

I have manipulated to get sympathy.

1

I have wondered, while taking a bath with my baby sister,
how soft the soft spot was on the top of her downy-covered
skull, and struck her with a Mickey Mouse cup, and gaped
as the crescent moon-shaped wound that oozed –
spewed faster with her screams.

6

I have pounded, tenderized, and left out to rot
the bleating organ from the chest cavities
of too many men.
I've been asked, "Would you consider yourself a good person?"
I've said yes,
and left many things unsaid.

Terri Davis

We're Starving

Our eyes are heavy, but
there's another boyfriend
in the house with our mom;
we're both shivering
even though it's not as cold
out here as it is inside.
My little sister is one;
she never cries,
and neither do I.
We have been
wandering
in the weed choked
front lawn. Have been
numb;
I lay her down
to sleep on a stained mattress
next to the road's trash heap.
We lie on our backs;
my arm the foundation of her head.
With one hand I itch
at the lice making homes
in my matted brown hair.
I tell my baby sister to look at the night sky.
Our thousand-yard stares
fix on the stars
that don't glow that bright
 at least, not tonight, and not for us.
We're starving for a lullaby,
but there's another boyfriend
in the house with our mom.

God, Beer Bottles, and Lingerie

At ten, me and God were pals. We talked about that crow with the janky wing, and sometimes at night we snuck peeks out our bedroom window when the white-haired man bellowed, and made his Chihuahua of a wife cry. We wanted me to read the New Testament, but my mom didn't bother; the beer bottles clinked more loudly. I stole one from a library.

At fifteen, me and God were acquaintances; we had grown apart, and I found a new holy scripture in 10 cent romance novels, and the sex tip sections of *Cosmopolitan*. One time, when my mother's beer bottles had said all they would, she dragged me to a store and told me to pick out lingerie for my boyfriend. She asked if we ever do oral sex, and I said yes.

At nineteen, me and God weren't on, what you'd call, speaking terms. This one night, my mom confused God's voice with the gibberish of her beer bottles. Talking in tongues was actually just slurring, and she said that it was the spirit when she got dizzy and fell. I told her that I don't believe in God. I told her that if there was a God he wouldn't make one wing crows or Chihuahua wives. Told her that he wouldn't be making children steal to be saved or make daughters wear lingerie.

Told her, "he wouldn't be speaking to you anyway."

Yarelis Canales

135 W Street

Dwellers storm
across 175th street,
Frankenstein faces
setting my sight afire.
I observe
from a dirty downtrodden
New York bus bench
the gloomy but lavish towers
looming over, lesser graffiti'd
diners and dingy dives.
Fat rats run sewers
and survive
on garbage empires
but they needn't pay rent.
Sidewalks suffocate
under burned Marlboros
and recycled Batmans.
The blinding lights
of Broadway change,
as daffodils will flourish;
and the grey hotdog I will buy
from the grimy steel
cart, will be nauseating.
The stunning citizens catch
my eye as I gobble
a third delicious hot dog.
The youthful street performer's voice tastes
of bitter chocolate and suddenly
I wander to my ancient studio,

the one with splintered and uneven
wooden stairs that towers over
the old record store.
The toilet leaks diseased
water and the neighbor's roaches
won't sleep with me anymore.
This bed spread-
contains traces of daddy's old cigars
who hasn't called.
We didn't visit that dingy diner
he promised to meet
at the dirty downtrodden
New York bus bench

Beckon DiGaetano

Blue Sky Blind

Ekphrastic of "The Burning Giraffe" by Salvador Dali

Tree of Knowledge roots are growing out of me, using my brain
as food for knowledge—is power yet I feel no power pulsing
my photosynthesis. Smoke-ridden skies caused by life in flames,
trying to hide our scars with spots but fire's lick threatens to set the
world ablaze.

Drawers line the length of your soul, open to examination,
while life-blood pours from the seams, inviting them in. I'm
not opening myself to such scrutiny. I have some dignity
left but the stilts stabbing into our backs hold both of our
heads high.

If you ever dared to turn around, look behind, you
would see how rough like bark my skin has become.
Instead, you wear the blue-sky snug to your hips
as if there's no reason to be ashamed of being a
pin-up girl.

At the end, neither you nor I know
how far in this world we must go
and whether we will make it alive.
I stand here in the line of your shadows
and lift my empty-eyed pleading gaze to
the heavens.

Lost Love Lives

Every time I go to the doctor, they ask me

“How many pregnancies?” **Three**

“How many live births?” **One**

For a routine question, I often wonder
if they understand the lump in my throat
every time they ask me to answer.

Miscarriage, but it is still my fault.

I didn't ask the two to be taken,
but my body couldn't keep them any longer

My first was four months. *Sweets.*

I was finally 18 and dependently independent.

I lost her while working my 8-hour shift but

I had no idea such a thing could happen
and no one else ever knew it did.

The doctor said there couldn't be more.

“Four months is late for an accident.”

I wasn't even legal and already damaged goods.

My second, a health risk. *Hearken Angel.*

I took precautions, both in mind and in body,
but he happened and the first time I felt him move

his hand across his home I fell in love but

he was simply a temporary joy, soon to be lost.

Until I held his real, tiny hand in mine, crying that we made it.

My third was 3 months. *Peanut*.

I had more emotional support this time, so the pain was real.

I felt her slip from reality's grasp, clutching hope till the end.

Being independently dependent, my mother washed my face
of my tears and made me a bowl of bean with bacon soup.

I kept the remains in a dish and we had a funeral, secret and raw.

Cruising Altitude

Welded shut beyond return
Cruising altitude: Feel free to unfasten
frayed cloth belts sewn to seat cushion
life-jackets and attempt to subdue feelings of
complete helplessness to gravity.

If the walls touch both shoulders
close your eyes recline your chair
sleep and dream of plummeting wreckage
cooled and coddled by the waves.

We serve only the finest in rust-tinged
tap water to wash down free crumbled
cracker dust cashew powder sacks grins
the splitting lipstick stained smile.

Infant skulls dancing a turbulent jiggle
loll carelessly or bleat in horror
across laps of the placidly passive
who refuse to believe that the floor is missing.

Do your feet dangle? Do you smell the sea below?
In the stale bile belly of the metal bird
some read others play none ever think
to pray to Pilot.

Kazmira Thomas

Tuna

I pry my eyes open with crowbars, and
use the same tools to poke you awake. You
just lie there; limp dick and corner mouth
spit. Five o'clock, six 'o clock, and seven o'clock
shadow playing hopscotch
across your face.

I drag myself to the bathroom
and into it. The floor mat is still soaked from
your shower last night. Still laying there –
no matter how many times I ask
you to hang it up. I can feel
the mold spores sprouting.

When I'm done scraping color onto
my cheeks, I trek to the kitchen to make you lunch
Tuna,
Because you're a tuna kind of guy.

Though I wish you were
roast beef. Hot... hot... beef.
But at best, you're just bologna.

I hear you muster up the energy
to get ready. The mold spores don't
phase you.

Why would it?
You eat tuna.
Sonofabitch

Mother's Needle

I was 11 years old the first time I held a Heroine needle.
I remember, the first day of summer vacation being abnormally humid.

I listened as the ice cream man
Rang his bell from the bottom of my street
And knew my mom kept some spare change
In the dresser drawer by her bed.

I had found seventy-three cents
Before the florescent orange tip caught my eye.
How could a syringe whose needle comes to a point
Like a hummingbirds beak be so bad.
I thought being marked with the same ticks as a school ruler
Meant that it was safe.

Black sludge was loaded like a bullet in its hollow barrel.
It felt as if made
From the same plastic as gumball machine toy.
A tiny drop of the liquid sat like dew on the tip of the bevel.
Extracting like a mosquito proboscis,
A hallucinogenic lionfish quill.

Bradley Wetmore

Pike Alley

Lyndhurst, Ontario
In the midst of a Summer night
I drive down a road
Winding between trailers and trees
Until finally meeting
Our cabin by the lake

I hop out of the truck
And smell the satisfying burn of a fire
As I walk along the gravel driveway
Where truck and boat park

I stare to the opposite side of the lake
To a spot my father called
Pike Alley
Where he taught my brother and I
How to catch the toughest fish

Past the cabin I wonder off into the backyard,
A fireplace lies behind two wooden chairs
That lead to the wobbly dock
Where bass boats meet
And float alongside each other

I knew that in the morning
We would ride out to the edge of the weeds
Drop our crank bait lures shining a bright yellow and blue
Patiently reeling until we get a hit on the end of the line

A spot of laughter
A spot of family
We reel them in one by one
And continue to cast away
The struggles of depression and disagreement
We left behind

Bradley Wetmore

One Last Goodbye

My brother and I drive up North
Our father in his lap
Encased in a wooden box crafted just for him
His ashes filled it to the very top

Behind the toll booth
We were questioned
By a young officer asking if we had any booze coming across
My brother responds “just a twelve pack of Labatt sir”

Before the sun completely sets
We reach Singleton Lake where our father
Brought us at the end of each summer

But this time it was different

We hop into the boat that we grew up fishing in
And rip the cord to start the 10 horsepower engine
Pulling out from the dock and
Heading towards Pike Alley

The engine seizes against the weeds
As we float with the crisp Canadian breeze
Ready to cast along the edge
With our crank baits cocked and ready

But first we must do what we came here to do
Lifting the box where our father resides
And opening it to reveal the grey dust
He was made into

We look at each other
Shedding a single tear from each our eyes
As we trickle his ashes
Where we promised to take him
For our last goodbye

Sam Evans

Hindsight

When you said you didn't like it
when I let the neighbor's cat eat our tuna,

I should have listened to you.
When your mom called,

I should have answered the phone.
I shouldn't have told you I hated the obnoxious way

you smack your lips when you chew gum.
I didn't really care. I was just mad

because I had a headache and didn't want
to wash the dishes. When the power went out in May

and we were gorging ourselves on everything in the fridge
that was going to spoil, I should have let you have

the last spoonful of mint chocolate chip ice cream.
When your dad called, I should have answered

the phone. I should have remembered to hang
your bras out to dry instead of putting them in the machine

with mine. I shouldn't have talked about those wrinkles
around your eyes. I shouldn't have told your mom how much

I hate spinach when she made it for us the other month. I
should have cleaned the white cat-hairs off your new

black coat before you wore it to work.
I should have gone bra-shopping with you
when you asked instead of staying home to watch
the neighbor's cat. I should have known the way
to the hospital. I shouldn't have played
"Hotel California" so loud when I knew you were sick
of it. When we ran into Mike at the bar in Kingston
and he started making dyke jokes about us,
instead of backing down, I should have punched him
in the fucking face. I should have
cooked you more dinners. I should have eaten
you out more. I should have said *I love you*
more. When they said you had acute internal hemorrhaging,
I should have known what that meant. I shouldn't have worn
your blue college sweatshirt until it started to smell
like gross-person funk. I shouldn't have yelled
at your mom. I should have read
more horoscopes. I should have consulted
more psychics. I should have studied medicine.
I should have studied physics and invented
a time machine. I should have taken up
fiddling. I should have practiced chess. I

should have learned to make deals.
Instead of letting it take you, I should have punched Death
in the fucking face.
I should have loved you better.

Jason Mangles

Looking For Ashberry

Description of Searching for the Building Where the John Ashbery Poetry Reading was at Plus the Reading Experience (a Poem)

ACT ONE Scene 1

Streets of New Haven, CT

Down, down, down today dazed in the dizzy drains of these downtown ways, drowning
in and among the out-n-about, drizzle of downer-downed, down-n-outs bogged down

by the uppity, upper-upped, upper class, out of mind n' overtly-n-overly into their very own overdone, outward appearances and upside down opinions—

sons and daughters of bootleggers-n-boot-kissers—the weeping class verses the keeping class in this one-size-fits-all, wonder of a war of worlds, words, and atoms—why should we fear for either of them?

Neither tip. Their lives are nothing more than a form of ditch digging—a balancing act of actions, le gros jeu . This achy air—a screech of grey, film, filth—

stretched warm-n-wet like a speaking mouth slurping up undercooked, freeze-dried, spaghetti, spittle—battered humidity salivating over the urban taste of humanity—

ingesting Polonium. Streetlights above: off for one more hour plus how more many minutes to pulse by. Then solar lentiginos will speckle

the close to my half-closed eyes, down casted skies like Plutonian peppered on pretzels.

The stars are obsolete. The sun is almost as low as I am.

Soon parking will be free. Finally wedding season is over. Somewhere,
not here, not far, there is a kitten in a kitchen who kisses Contempt's kids
with wistful whiskers. We, God's people n' Satan's wrecks,
creep on top the city's concrete crusted spine like great, big caterpillars
crawling
on gigantic cadavers. Here lays a country slain for conveniences and the
cadence
of candied, dream tears descending in the landscape's depressions, sucked
off at last
by a statue of lust and liberty—'a piece of decaying machinery, a stack of
rusty nails.'
This is freedom, and the moon is a parasite waiting for this milky eyeball
to wink.

The searchers for Ashbery are me and this three—my living ellipses...
grown tykes—
big-kiddos-chain-ganged—weirdoes who read too regularly—pilgrims
possibly, plebian,
possessors of Russian nesting egg noggins, crowned with many jewels of
perception.
How many people live in this three-headed monster looking cute and
hollow
in its thought bubble halo? Could I be followed by a petite pageant, a
large legion,
a militia of a million multitudes in their marvel mined, makrana marble
minds?
And perhaps it's only I stuck inside a speckle of sleepless slumber of simu-
lated decisions.
And perhaps there is an icicle of innocence in our intersected instances
like kids playin'
criminals and cops on a cul-de-sac street corner before bein' hit by cares
of adult temperaments torn up. The black bomb benign for now,

nothing to worry about except our worries colored as red summer, sun dresses...

In an odd angle of the city, we walk the sidewalks sideways, where we share the friendly fire of pretty conversation —sifting through each other's trivial tell-alls. We are not real people. We are imaginations with legs—
a bunch of ideas morphing into each other in no particular order...

An amber sunflower on the tip of a fag—smoked figures form a perfect fig tree
of fumes—my throat: chimney of a cigarette factory. I let the stick thing hang
from my chops how a veteran mechanic does—the kind that burps up gasoline streams.

It is a symbol of the slothful, middleclass, bohemian, plastic life style. I know this because a CPU once told me. A little berry of ash falls from the tiny, birch branch choked between the hole in my face's inner edges—

an ember jumps to its last lit moments. I puff, puff and the girl of we, one and three, says to me, “Stop smoking that. I don't want to smell like cigarettes.”

But there are worse things than smelling like cigarettes like, for one, not always smelling like cigarettes. Oh! Lil' damp ciggies in my pant's pocket—

don't you forget you won't just rot you will burn, burn, burn your liver spots,

when the tides turn low and my lungs yearn for the toxic, tonic, chemical cure!

Why did God give us these temples that we insist on tearing down?
...qui destruis templum... je suis désolé, je suis désolé...

Me and the three, with colons and parenthesizes for faces, with gore-drums

that beat, beat, beat, like tempests in celestial storm drains of cholesterol
heightened, walk blocks, blocks, blocks, squares and streets...I am the
blockaltester—block headed—gum-steppin' n' presently perplexed on
where we got to go to find the Ashbery man—
the address forgotten—utterly lost between this multitude of secular
buildings, the caged wilderness. It starts to sprinkle and I soak through
my shirt. "John!" I shout,
but only the city gives a brick and mortar answer. The past brooding
motionless
behind us reaches out as we move on. Under the ashen cloud's purple
hearts, we wait
for the sun's blood that will fall like our fathers in war—
the men that crossed that unknown bridge to discover another country
with loaded guns and lumps in their throats. That place has a name,
but we have all forgotten its meaning. Night glows under the future.
Our shadows start to sink into the street as our breath rises
to the blue above the grey's fragile air. Everything around us:
a sideshow attraction breathing in this existence.

ACT TWO

A Yale University Lecture Hall

Scene 1 (seen 'em all)

I saunter, come as I was, to smell the Bay Rum musk of the cream of the
crap—
into a starless planetarium of oak— I sit. I slump. I sulk. I hunker down
to roost.
Like a roasted, acidhead hippie overdosing, I play Dead—only look
alive—
a mannequin wit' Cotard's syndrome—a worthless, wet, wool stocking
draped over
open flames. It is always empowering to be the dirtiest thing in a place.

Seven seconds ago, somewhere in the suburbs, a pussycat screamed in pain about preparing for an auburn autumn. Things are always prettier before they start dying. But let's not get stuck in that past or that future for that matter...

Here's Johnny—
exhausted of falling—pants shitter, pants pisser, air thin, gossamer strong, beef-witted bed wetter to any onlooker that knows no better—rigor mortis tortoise—
poppin' a palliative pill for every word he ever wrote—a sweater and a wheelchair
keep him snug n' sane, a few major awards do the same—violet veins like onion skin—
demoted to an irresponsible age that is the result of a lifetime measured out in line-breaks—bad back and under eye sacks—one of the old folks trying to warn us the frogs are disappearing. Will someone give this guy a bump?
“Will I stop ageing when I mush into mud? What did having an erection feel like?”
he thinks inside his collar like a eunuch or eucalyptus—
a creaky guy—muscles of string—brain not quite a week old turd in a trailer park toilet yet, and yet he did everything right...
Before
he reads he gives his throat a little wiggle n' mutters an indiscernible clutter
of what are presumably vowels and consonants composed together like illegible notes on a pad—an obiter dictum—the sound of air seeping from hot air balloons caged in white ribs. The crowd laughs but they do not understand. Maybe he likes it that way.

Someone in the back is getting foamy eyes jellied. But why though? What do writers do besides strip stripes of their desolation—inject letters into veins of the page, and sniff *Syringa vulgaris* in Spain in sprung spring? Are not poets simply lashing out luses that ponder too much about the moon, loons for the lunar, loners and lunatics popping pimples with periods, typing strange things into tree pulp—people squawking about birds as passengers on angelic clouds, counting machine time like making tin lizzies on the assembly circuits—gutting words for meaning like splitting heres and theres—condensing the flood of ideas to fill a pail? Spoiler: there's a hole at the bottom. It is the all-encompassing zero we hate.

After the crunch, and rainy rustle of pages, he opens that gramophone of scratched, static enlightenment—picks the lock on a box of voices to sing in front of a jury of judges and alienists. He is vanishing. Soon he will only be a disembodied voice—*viaggiatore inesistente*—We sponge up his sleepy language—a shadow of an echo—the poetic junk heaped on us before dust settles on his words.....

Scene 1 ½

(how to write a poem or perhaps anything else really) Remember 2:

Hold your breath. Breaststroke in a stream of half-consciousness over the waves to where the trees tell the truth like the Chernobyl children,

unapologetically human and dirty. Dig through the tepid topsoil. Crawl in the untemporal dirt hole set. Spill your pigs. Stay away from modernism it is all reason without rhyme,

or was it that it's all raisons with rinds? Make sure to add a dose of polysyllabic, thick, textbook jargon to the GMO love poems you mutilated with added artificial additives to calm your arteries' addictions. Pray some day an egg white head will say it reads
the way jazz is played. Always keep in mind writing is an occupation for crap collectors crawling towards their ends as ivy crawls up Camelot walls—schlockmeisters—
golden butterfly tinkerers in the strange fever of time—penny pickers of insane nothings—people comprehending parallels between blue streaks and the maybe masterpieces turned on their sacred sides to be defaced by scared scratches. We're all just looking for the right palm reader to decipher these inscribed lines in our hands. Do not fret; letters are just numbers
with personality—the lowercase kowtowing to the uppercase, you know. Let go—
ideas have bad timing—learn that when you walk away with a fistful of pages
a thousand possible poems die. Find a raincloud shaped like a cotton bell. Sleep on it or in it. Then write:
Dreams are like love.
When it happens it feels
so real. When it's over you see
it meant nothing except maybe
a premonition of your
future.
Then you forget about it
like bleached out grass
stains on blue denim.

Interruptio

(dictionary excerpts, definitions)

A poem: a planned city of mathematics entwined with infinity sign highways
curlicued 'round three story churches and mile high debaucheries—a
closed loop,
a sentenced system of industry—making inches out of acres productive
and sound—
commercial and/or residential—dense with negative space and suspended
numbers—
those titles must feel so isolated way up in that paper ether—columns of
thought
holding up London or Dublin, Athens and Manhattan—the one place we
can be uncivilized and real (society makes dry prose out of all us haikus)

A poem: a magic, a science, a religion, danse grotesque,
edenic occasionally,
often times a farewell, a paradoxical undressing, a hand-2-hold, a rock-2-
throw, a gonzo
subterfuge, a bunch of ?????????s, a pratfall, a proxy food-fight, foot-bind-
ing,
raggedy fragments, spilt-milk, donated blood, self-flagellation/ immola-
tion, caged declarations, a message painted on a ship in a bottle rocket ,
a flock of phrases fountained out in an octopus arm of ink in October—
music for plants; the furniture sees it
as pretentious, though agrees it has great frequencies and potential...

(SUMMARY OF) THE REST ACT TWO

*Ashbery recites the fancy noises he's dreamt up. Some people know a few of
them.*

Some don't. 'I saw it and no one believed me. The old man wept quietly.'

*I wonder, if it still in good fun? Is it the same with all your friends from N.Y
gone—*

*altered from when the hours smelt different? Was your writing the best when
your cheeks sucked up liquid like a baby in a bassinet left out in the rain?*

Why write

*when it is the cave paintings that make history? Somewhere in Sierra Leone
a dying boy with a bloated, brown belly is wishing
he was in Flint Michigan sipping from the tap like a tabby cat.*

*Some people ask the man for autographs to feel
the importance of the process of acquiring materials.*

(Narrator and the three exeunt)

ACT THREE

Seen once and never again.

After the reading. Here.

I imagine Ashbery's wrinkled dimples, two upside down umbrellas,
as he examines his thoughts, as if he were sitting on the edge of a window
sill overlooking where ghosts go to die, where artists become clowns,
where the light whispers to the night. I know the next time we hear his
voice

will be on a séance evening, Ave, Morituri te salutant.

Whatever this is, it was here before we were all born and will not give
a darn when we're gone—never really knew any of us anyway...

So dear reader, if you don't believe in Heaven at least try to

feel what's hidden in-between the willows
where the sea meets with the shore,
or realize what's kept clandestine in the story
of an ageing poet's memories when he says,
we are al(l)one when we fly up, up, up and fall down.

A cruce salus. Amen.

Art



Edge of Nowhere, Cusp of Nothing



Familiarity
Cover Art



October 2016

Jenna Cianciolo



Peony and Dahlias



Boar'd to Death



Woodland's Defender

Kim Reynolds



Fae of the Underdark

Kathryn Fellemeth



Piece by Piece; Breece by Breece



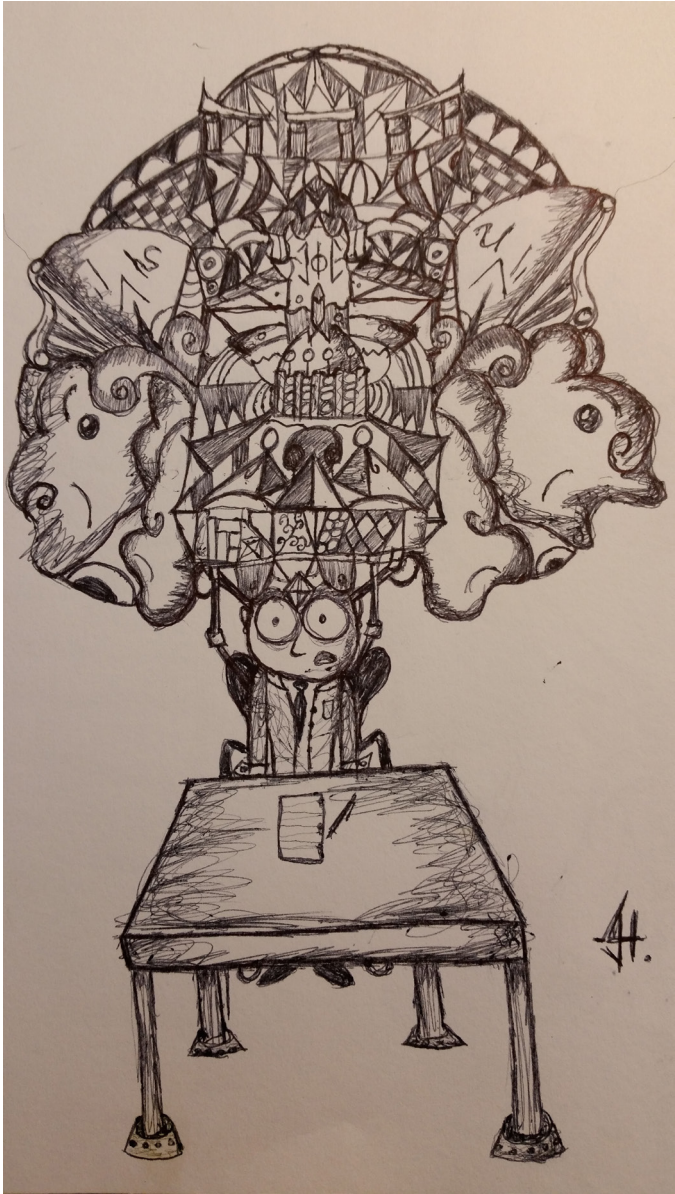
Maribeth

Mary Rudzis



Bowie

Justin Hitchcock



Think

Fiction

He is Sleeping Peacefully, For Now

I wish he knew how much I miss his touch. No matter the intensity of my shouts of love's declarations, my soul is trapped behind my eyelids and reverberates in these chambers. Blocked. Contrary to Bryson's belief, I am safe here. Our life is untouched. Here. My mother and the God she prays to for our deliverance, her invisible grandbabies and her supposed reputation amongst the rest of the (S)aints - That God who cursed her with the abomination that is I, cannot reach me. Here. Though this last part is a lie. The savior has tarried and spilt wine with me. Broke bread and reminded me "Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: do this in remembrance of me." I am conflicted. This is not the Jesus that Druscilla warned me about. That one is too intent on sending me and Bry to hell in a hand basket. I am not sure where I am. But hell this is not. Well maybe it might be, because my heart song is snoring somewhere outside of this battered bag of skin. Awaiting my return.

He is sleeping peacefully, for now.

"How is my favorite patient in the world?" the bubbly, efficient nurse asks as she strokes what I'm sure are my ashy arms and face. In my unconscious consciousness, I envision her examining the doo hickeys and doo dads, that whir, click and beep on behalf of this shell wrapped in white sheets and waning sunlight. Ticking off her checklist as she ensures I am viable in this here yet quite not there... existence. Performing her duties. Disrupting my baby Bry from his worries and his lightly snoring slumber.

Bryson groggily answers the nurse, "Not much has changed. Sulli's still laying there. Still breathing. Still beautiful. A wretched fucking abomination..."

"What was that sweetie?" Zahara inquires as she skillfully takes my vitals. Coos and talks to me as if her kindness and ability to see me as human will be the trick that will save my soul from its eternal damnation. It isn't as if I could scream my frustrations and give this heifer the what for if I felt she wasn't up to par. But I am peaceful.

“Did I hear you say something about an abomination, sugar?” The squeak of her shoes on the linoleum indicates that there has been a shift in her movement. I’m sure she is standing there with what I surmise to be that kind of look only a brown girl who survived the other side of the world who yet fights for her sanity in this space of sterility and technology can embody, as she repeats herself. Again.

“I’m sorry.” I hear Bry pause, imagining him throwing his hands up. In hopes of keeping his composure. He doesn’t. “I hate that he’s fucking here. That bronzed, immaculate, lifeless beauty, connected to all this wondrous technology ... artificial intelligence which ironically enough is providing him with the inspiration to at least be present in the life he so desperately tries to throw away at the most inconvenient moments, has left me here to go bat shit crazy in front of personnel who are here to provide a fucking service for an astronomical fee.” He gasps, choking back tears.

Bry is such a drama queen. He is the epitome of a wretch undone. Can you blame him? This is not our first time at the rodeo and each time before this should’ve been our last. But as you can see...

Bry’s tears are muffled by Zahara’s broad shoulders and soothed by the comfort of Patchouli and Jasmine; the resounding memories of Granma, fresh squeezed lemonade and Junie in the outhouse, burning what he called trees. Smelling like all kinds of skunk. Was that a whiff?

“There, there sugar. It’s alright. Za is right here. Sssshhhh.” She rocks my man to and fro. Bry hopefully feels the love and warmth that emanates from this ebony goddess. Perhaps he will now understand why there is some peace in my unconsciousness. As much as I love Bry and everything that he is to me, he is not versed in the love that is indigenous to mothers. There is the magic of that love all in Zahara’s limbs, enveloping each of us in their tender strength. Restoring our fragility.

Zahara thinks she slick. Rubbing up on my man like that. Im’ma kick her ass good when I wake up. Smiling to myself. Remembering.

The first thing I noticed were your lips. Lips that have brought me more pleasure than pain. I didn’t desire to trade that feeling for the world. Or the church. However, that choice never seemed it was mine to make in the first place. Hence the reason we are here.

Sulli? Miss Honey, I know you hear me, bitch. Can we blow this late ass, tired ass spot already? Ain't nothing but a bunch of gurls out here perpetrating like they men. Lord knows I ain't looking for another sister to bump uglies with," Miss Preston flamboyantly proclaims as he continues to scan the emptying parking lot for trade or what the girls call a real man.

"Chile," I half-heartedly respond as I mimic my good Judy in looking for a pair of warm thighs for the night. And before I knew it, less than 30 feet away, was love personified in the personage of Bryson Jamir Thomas.

"Gurl, you ain't slick. I see you staring that goofy looking boy down. Just throw him your panties already, ol thirsty-ass bitch," Preston chided as she ran through your credentials. I half heard everything and nothing she babbled about, as she cased the spot for her next piece of trade. At some point, our eyes locked. Our hearts must've beat in cadence to Lauryn Hill's "Can't Take My Eyes Off You", because we were in each other's universe in a matter of seconds, though it felt like an eternity.

"What's good, pa?" His smile lit up the sultry summer eve. I offered my hand as a courtesy.

Freshly manicured hand extended, no wedding band or indentation, so far so good. And thus our beginning. Which says everything and nothing about why we are here.

"Really, Sulli?" shouted Bry as he was caught off guard by the reality of the flatulence escaping my comatose body. What does he expect? I'm in a coma. Not dead. At least not yet. At least he can walk out when the environment becomes noxious. Me, I must lay here as he drops bombs that could wipe out a whole damn country.

"I've smelled worse things," Zahara sings as the spell is broken and the overhead page reminds us of why she is here. I am thankful for her energy and her calming spirit. Out of the times we have traversed in this space, though not in this same room, she has been a Godsend. There is a peace that surpasses all understanding when she breezes into this space, to perform her predestined duties.

Repositioning me after changing my gown and diaper, Zahara soothingly says, "There you go, love. Got you smelling so fresh and so clean, clean." She smiles as she pats down and smoothes the wrinkles in my sheets. "Make sure you get some rest after you love up on this fine man," Zahara says to Bry as she glides out the room to the remainder of her responsibilities.

“Yes ma’am,” is the reply from my baby. His bones creak as he stretches his full length and steadies himself as he ambles towards my prone, ashy, silent body. There is a brief pause, some rustling, and the unscrewing of a jar. The calming and healing fragrance of the green tea and mint infused coconut oil soothes my nerves as Bry gathers a generous amount in the palms of his hands and nourishes my body and our souls into another plane of awareness.

My clammy, sweaty right hand trembles with anticipation as I pick up the six-inch blade that will absolve me of these sins and give Druscilla and her God some peace. The cold blade is comforting against my hairless flesh. The blood under my skin dances eagerly as the silver sharpness traces a path to the forbidden treasure it has been seeking for the past hour. Mahalia’s “Motherless Child” has been on repeat, heightening the mood. Candles flicker in response, as if they were coaxing me to “hurry up and do the damn thing”. A trail of salt flavors the tears sliding down my face as I whisper, “Forgive me Father, for I know what that I do,” and feel the pain ignite my senses, spilling my transgressions to the floor.

“Sullivan, darling...,” she pauses, her fresh, French-tipped manicure, tink tink tinkling against the crystal glassware. To our fellow diners and plain yet courteous waiter, it was another instrument adding its distinct harmony to the ambient tapestry woven with whispered conversations and cutlery courting culinary delights. I stare from across the table. My hands are shaking as I navigate another tasteless morsel into my mouth. Searching for the words to explain to this woman who has only been my mother in name and by title, my reasoning for not marrying the woman I only dated to preserve the remnants of the reputation that is the DeMornays, has been an exercise in futility at best. She continues:

“Darling, don’t you think this phase of yours has outlived its shock value? I didn’t raise you to be some God forsaken pansy. I don’t understand why you’d desire to rub flesh with some filthy man. If it weren’t for the fact that I’m a woman and that is my natural duty to procreate and bear children, I wouldn’t go near those mongrels. Ugh!!! Why won’t you be with the woman long enough to give me at least one grandchild? Afterwards, if you desire to

divorce the homely girl, be my guest. Remain a confirmed bachelor, and leave this foolishness about loving some man in the dark. Where such filthiness belongs,” she rants, daintily dabbing at miniscule crumbs on her lips. As if she has eaten anything from her barely touched brunch.

The vitriol spilling out of her mouth had reached an apex within me. It is always about her. What she wants. This intense desire to protect a reputation that exists only in the minds of her and her fellow church minions. I can no longer deal with this insanity. I either release myself to my own unfolding, or remain a caterpillar to appease those who refuse to see the beauty in one’s transformation into a butterfly.

“Druscilla,” my voice cracks as I reach for her hands, in hopes that this will be the beginning of diminishing the ever-widening chasm that echoes between us. She flinches and barely accepts my offering for peace. Tentatively, I say, “As much as I’ve struggled to meet your expectations to uphold this DeMornay reputation that is of importance to you and your ilk, I will not continue to do so at the expense of my livelihood. I am not in love with Anjuna. She is a wonderful woman and will be an asset to whoever marries her. However, she isn’t any of the men you have willfully chosen to ignore during my phase of ‘discovering myself’. She, nor any other woman for that matter, will be Bryson. Accept that reality or risk losing me.”

The look in Druscilla’s eye lasered the remnants of my soul into smithereens. Though the restaurant around us was ablaze with the life and chatter of its occupants, the silence at our table was suffocating. Druscilla dug into her Michael Kors clutch and laid several bills on the table. She arose. Smoothed the non-existent wrinkles in her perfectly pressed red skirt and black silk blouse. “I see you have made your decision,” she noted coolly. “Thank you for your creatively imagined attempt of the Last Supper.” She rises and leaves our table. As she maneuvers her way through the bustling crowd, my tears rehydrated the dry, half-eaten pastry remaining on my plate.

The heady aroma of *Heavenly* and the clack of her heels announced her arrival moments before she stopped in front of my room door. The machines picked up on my uneasiness and beeped their distress signals on my behalf. Bryson stirs from his slumber and begins to massage my unresponsive limbs, wondering aloud if he should call the nurse. My heart is running full speed, ready to rip through my chest. His touch soothes

my unconsciousness. I pray for his peace, for I know the evil that women will do. He must battle this demon alone. Again. It is not as if I can help. Because I am trapped. Here.

Bryson mutters, “Shit. Sulli, you know how much I hate that... female. Shit.” He exhales. I know his pain. For 36 years, I had done everything above and beneath the sun to earn the love of this pillar of our community. Church choir. Usher Board. Youth ministry and Sunday school teacher. Even courted and almost married some homely girl just so that Druscilla would love me. Accept me and let me be. But then Bry appeared. As his authentic self. A spirit, wrapped up in flesh – living in his truth. I discovered myself because of his love. And for that, Druscilla, the queen of all that was sacred, holy, dutiful and righteous in the name of our Lord and Savior, would make us pay.

“Sullivan, darling. Don’t you worry, hun. Mother has arrived,” Druscilla announced in that cloyingly, fake, southern belle accent she utilizes when she needs her audience to believe in her (s)ainthood.

“Hello, Druscilla. How gracious of you to bless us with your presence weeks after your son has decided to self-immolate,” Bry addresses her evenly.

“Oh, yes. You,” she snorts, unfazed at my baby and the information she just received. Typical. I can feel her standing in the doorway, contemplating her next move. Bry has remained by my side, stroking my arms as he continues to remain unruffled.

“I’m sorry Druscilla to disappoint, but who else would you expect to be here? Your brimstone and bible shtick has yet to run me away. Today doesn’t look good for you either.”

“Bryan, is it? Darling...”

His name is Bryson, Druscilla. Bryson.

“It’s Bryson, Bi...”

“Well, whatever. You know who you are Darling. I know that it is quite pretentious of me to expect a woman to be attending to Sullivan after all these years, but a girl can dream, can’t she?” She sighs as she clicks into the room and seats herself in the chair I am sure isn’t up to her standards of grandeur.

“Far be it from me to dash a girl’s dreams. However, do us both a favor and don’t insult girls who have dreams,” Bryson retorts. Still caressing my arms. As I lay here. In peace.

Get her Bry.

In a calculated laugh, she replies, “Touché, sweetie. Well, the one thing that we both know to be absolute truth, is that there may be two queens in this room, three if you count the silent sad form lying in those cheap cotton poly blend shrouds passing as sheets, however; there is only one real woman. And neither of you will become what God never intended either of you to be,” she spat out.

I could feel Bry readying himself to unleash on the woman who is only my mother by name and title.

“If being a real woman means that I be a hateful shrew more interested in preaching religious dogma and rhetoric that destroys those I love as opposed to edifying their personhood, then I will continue to be the queen that God loves upon. In spite of and because of myself,” Bryson states on the edge of tears.

Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap. Druscilla is in rare form. That clap is the initial call to war.

“Well done, Brandon. Well done. Sullivan did say that you were a drama queen. I wouldn’t have believed him had I not seen it for myself. Anywho, what you claim as love for my son will never be real, due to your proclivity for sin and the unnatural desire of fornication between men. You forget God has been punishing your kind for ages. Sodom and Gomorrah, mental illness diagnoses, the AIDS epidemic. Serves your kind right,” She spouts satisfactorily.

As much as I love her, this is why I’m here. Because if a mother and her God won’t love her son, then who will? Bry does his best. I do not deserve him. Even now, he loves me enough for the both of us. Why can’t Druscilla or I see that?

“Druscilla, I love your son.” Bryson inhales deeply. Exhales. “I will not apologize for doing what you and your God refuse to do. I have been gifted to share my life, as much as I can for as long as time allows. We are here Druscilla, not because of God’s wrath, but your refusal to love your child. The man that I love. Who would not be if you hadn’t been. As much as I hate you for everything that you have and haven’t been to Sulli, I restrain myself from lighting your ass up because of the man who has lain here peacefully. Before your arrival,” Bryson says through his tears.

Druscilla is silent. I hear her reach for her purse, unzip it and search around its contents for a few moments. There is a rustle of paper.

Tissue, perhaps? There are more tears. I am sure they are not Bryson's. She snuffles and sighs.

"Bryson, as you have stated before, I am many things. A pillar of the community. A respected and connected woman. A mother who has been shamed by Sullivan professing his proclivity for sin. He not marrying a woman has been detrimental to everything that his deceased father and I stand for. Do I love this man who nearly cost us our lives on the delivery table? In this moment, I am unsure. Because he made a decision to choose the likes of you over the reputation of this family. And that my dear is highly unacceptable."

She does not move. I want to hug this woman who has only been my mother in name and in title. My heart screams out for her to come over and touch me. Cry for the broken body that lies in this bed. So that I may rise as Lazarus rose from the dead and proclaim the good news of the Lord. And hug her in return. Forgive her for (not) knowing what she has done. But she does not move. Bryson has stopped stroking my arm. There is hesitation. Contemplation of sorts. He moves. I panic. I fight to wake up, to protect Bryson from this woman who I know only through name and by title.

"Bryson," I hear Druscilla say through her mascara-slicked tears, "I will pray for his soul to be healed from this sickness as his body continues to recover from his transgressions."

"Your son struggles for life and your main damn concern is your reputation?" Bryson shouts. "Him being here has everything to do with you. Yet how he lives his life has nothing to do with you. I now understand when my grandmother used to tell me 'that every woman who can birth a child ain't fit to be a mother'."

The monitors are offering their commentary on what they have witnessed. How much disgust is entwined in those bleeps, whirs, clicks and whooshes emanating from their high tech constructed bodies? If only I could offer Bry my hugs. Kisses. Caresses. Heal his heart in return.

Whir. Click, click. Beep. Whir. Beep. Click.

"Goodbye Bryson. When Sullivan is ready to take his rightful place in the world, he may contact me. Until then, I will continue to pray for your souls." Though I am unaware of time in this present state, there is a tension that blankets this very instance. Even the machinery in this sterile space are rendered speechless. Moments later, the clack of her heels is but

but a distant memory. The remnants of her fragrance, the salt trails I envision illuminating Bry's chiseled cheeks and my unconsciousness being monitored by these machines are the only witnesses to testify to Druscilla's presence.

I feel the weight of all that has transpired when Bry makes his way back to me. Seconds later, the smooth sounds of jazz bounce from the corners of the room, enveloping us in its melancholy and truth. My flesh is watered from the bitter springs that flow from his face. I cannot hug Bry. From here. I cannot hug him. From here. I cannot wait 'til I can tell him that I love him. When I leave. From here. His cool, rough lips graze my head. Reassuring me. He grasps my hand. "She will come around, Sulli." I am not sure I believe him. But we will see. I can feel the beat of his heart through the heat of his fingers.

His snores some time later are in a playful battle with the melodic sweetness of Sam Cooke's Summertime, as the clicks, whirs and beeps harmonize off-key. He is sleeping peacefully. For now.

Living with Dementia

On Saturday morning, I walk into the kitchen and find my grandfather standing in front of the counter with his walker to the left of him. Cheerios cover the ground and the spilled milk next to his fists begins to drip down the cabinets. I fill a glass of orange juice for him and put his eight pills in his trembling hand. "I already took my pills," he snaps. He shakes his head and then says, "Damn pills."

"No, you didn't," I say. I roll my eyes and slam shut the refrigerator door harder than I intended. The old milk bottles on top shake but catch themselves before crashing to the floor. Oops.

It is my parents' anniversary weekend, so naturally they left me as the babysitter for the next two days while they enjoy the peaceful mountains of Vermont. I wipe up the spilled milk and call Cash over to take care of the dropped cheerios, then take my grandfather's cold hand to guide him towards his chair.

I push him into the table and sit down across from him to play our routine weekend morning game of checkers. He chooses to have the blue checkers today so I take the red and set them up on the black and white board.

"You can go first," I tell him. I take a crunchy bite of my wheat toast and wait for my grandpa to make a decision.

"Where's my toast?" he asks.

"You ate that before your cheerios, Pop, remember?"

"Oh yeah."

He stares long and hard at the board before making his first move. He slowly moves the checker in the middle and places it in between two squares. I move it slightly to the left where I know he intended it to be.

"Now what?" he asks, staring above his glasses at me.

"Now it's my turn," I say. "I'm going to move this one right here." I put my pointer finger on the red checker all the way to the left and move it to the black square diagonally to the right.

My grandfather looks out the window at the blooming flowers and whistling birds, then back to the confusing checkerboard. I'm not sure if he's searching for the answer for what move he should make next, or looking at the firetruck he said was outside his window last night. Maybe it is an airplane this time.

"Go ahead, Papa," I say.

"What do I do?" he asks. I search the back of my eyelids for the strength to not lose my cool. The same thing you always do, I think to myself. I take a deep breath and count to five—something my therapist told me might help with my patience.

"Move one of the blue checkers. Anywhere you'd like. Here, here, or here. Make sure you move from one black square to another black square," I say.

His sigh stings my heart in an unfamiliar way. "Okay," he says. I felt his confusion as his lips turned into a frown and his head shook side to side.

In the middle of our game—and many missed opportunities to jump me and various attempts to move my pieces instead of his later—my grandpa says, "I'm done. I can't do this anymore." The impact of his fists hitting the table shifts the checkers into an unplayable mess. I close my eyes and remember when he used to be so sneaky in his moves and would always grin and say, "King me."

He tries to get up from his chair, but falls right back down into his seat and shakes his head at the ground.

I stare at him, helpless and fearful, on the same kitchen chair in which he used to rock me as a child. He used to tip me over just enough so my head would not hit the floor and tickle me until I had tears coming down my chubby cheeks. We would laugh together and his embrace felt warmer than my mom's homemade apple pie on Thanksgiving.

"Do you want me to help you get to your other chair?" I ask. He responds by reaching his hand up for mine, still looking at the ground. I plant my feet in front of his and together we get him standing steady in front of the chair. With his hand clasping the sleeve of my sweatshirt and my hand gently touching his back, we take shuffled steps over to his chair in the living room. I lay his John Deere blanket over his lap and I turn on the TV for him. The TLC Network, of course. I learned my lesson the last time I left the Animal Planet on.

I speed walk to the stairs, and before I take the first step he says, "I need to use the bathroom."

Patience is a virtue. I remember the last words my mother said to me before she got into the car yesterday afternoon.

"Ok, sit yourself up and grab your walker and head into the bathroom."

He reaches for his walker and says, "Dizzy. My head is busting."

"Nothing new," I say. I let out a deep sigh and smooth the wrinkles in my shirt.

I follow him to the bathroom and stand outside until he lets me know that he is done. As I inch my way in, I look at the elephant wallpaper that I helped my grandmother pick out when I was five, and I simultaneously guide his hands to his blue plaid pajama pants so he can pull them up. I lean down to tie his left shoelace and feel a glob of fresh drool drop on top of my messy curls.

"Really?" I ask.

"What?"

I ignore his question and forget about the saliva on my head until I know he is comfortably and safely in his chair.

"I'll be upstairs if you need me," I say. I blow him a kiss and he works out a small smile, but his eyes do not meet mine.

I walk into my room, put the TV on for background noise, and pull out my laptop to start my homework. Three minutes into my essay on *Catcher in the Rye*, I hear a bird fly into our kitchen window downstairs. Dumb birds, I think. I continue writing about how Holden Caulfield struggles to find his place in this world when I hear a pattern of the noises. *Bang bang bang, pause. Bang bang bang, pause.*

I go downstairs, irritated, because I do not feel like opening the door for another Jehovah's Witness. No one is at the front door so I make my way into the living room where I should have found my grandpa. I look at his empty chair and my cheeks become flushed. My breathing quickens and I speed up my pace, tripping over Cash's toys and bones in the process.

I rush into the kitchen, the same one where I used to see my grandfather sitting at the table drinking an ice cold Bud Light after a long day of haying at the end of August. This time, though, his fragile body lies across the tiles. I take a step back and my scream startles him.

“Papa, what happened? Are you ok? Are you hurt? Don’t get up.”

“I fell, honey,” he says. He kept banging on the floor with the flashlight he found next to the refrigerator.

“You can stop banging, I’m here. I’m going to call my mom. Don’t move,” I say. I start to run into the living room to pick up the phone, but come back to leave a promising kiss on his sweaty forehead. “I love you.”

“Get me up. Where are my keys? I need to get to my doctor appointment.”

“Your keys are hanging up in the closet, but you haven’t driven in three years, Papa. Your appointment is not until Monday morning and my mom will be back by then to take you. Just hang on a second,” I say. I try to think of anything that will calm him down.

“I need to get up,” he pleads. I bite the insides of my cheeks and squeeze my temples with my thumb and my pointer finger.

I call my mom and she answers on the second ring. “Calm down, Leila,” she says. “I can call Auntie Betty and she can be at our house in five minutes to help you out. There is no need to call 911 until she gets there, OK? Be strong, baby girl. I love you.”

My mother’s words send a comforting rush through my body, but once I hang up the phone the fear washes all over me. I walk back into the kitchen and my tears turn my grandfather’s pained face into a sad blur. I quickly wipe them away and let a huge breath of air fill my lungs.

Getting him up myself is not an option, so I sit uncomfortably on the floor with him. I put a pillow behind his back and under his head, and I slowly make my way down to his level to lay beside him. His eyes are glossed over with fear and 88 years of hard work. A soft tear slides down my freckled cheek and hits the floor next to his hand.

“I hurt all over,” he says. “I can’t take this anymore. Pain. How did we get into this house?”

My clammy hand reaches for his tired face, and our eyes lock in place. *Checkers. Bedtime stories. John Deere tractor rides. Trips to the local candy store. Laughter.* I yearn for the way things used to be.

I move my hand back down to my side and shift onto my back because my hip starts to hurt.

The ceiling and I have a staring contest before I say, “Do you remember that time I fell off our horse and you told me everything was going to be okay? That Rosie just got scared because she had a fly on her

so she was trying to shake that off and not me, and that I was just a little bumped and bruised?”

“Certainly,” he says. I have his attention now.

“I will never forget that. I was so afraid to get back on Rosie, but your words came to mind when I put my foot in that saddle and hoisted myself back on five weeks later.”

“Rosie was a good horse.”

The jingling of Auntie Betty’s overcrowded keyring coming through the front door interrupts us.

“Leila, are you OK?” she asks when she comes inside. Tears flood my eyes as I hoist myself up.

“Everything is going to be okay,” I say.

My aunt kisses my forehead and helps her father up off the ground so she can set him securely in his green chair in the living room.

“I’m sorry,” my grandpa says to his daughter. My silent tears turn to sniffling sobs and I look away as I reach for the tissues on the counter next to me.

“You’re not doing it on purpose,” she says. I smile at the two of them in this moment and decide to go to my room with a wad of tissues in hand.

I plop down onto my bed and stare at the blank document on my computer screen. It looks like Holden Caulfield is going to have to wait until tomorrow before I try to sort out his life and write about his struggles. I shut my computer and put that along with my copy of *Catcher in the Rye* on my desk and start to walk down the stairs and into the living room.

“What’s on TLC, Pop?”

My grandfather sits in his chair as he fiddles with the buttons on the remote. I take the remote from him and plug in the right numbers. He smiles, looks up at me and takes my hand as I sit down on the couch next to him and we watch the latest episode of *Little People Big World*.

Caramelized Nostalgia

The sun is relentless in its summer pastime and sweat hangs on every inch of my body. Trees shake themselves to get a cool breeze, futilely pushing hot air around my head while shrill voices of children reverberate off the metal slide and monkey bars, ringing in my ears. Our playground isn't like the fancy one down the block, but it matches the houses around here; old and occupied. Elementary school children crawl from one end of the bars to the other and find interesting ways to not get burned while sliding.

You arrive moments after me and see me sitting in my "usual spot" under the tree. School has already started, and my mid-morning classes are being conducted at the high school down the street. You look at me and point to your watch. I know the reprimand as you sit on the light brown bench with a grunt. The tops of your boots flop open-and-closed with the effort, showing how old and used they are. I wonder if they give you protection anymore, or if you wear them to remember "the good ol' days." Your beard is matted and tangled, and has probably never been combed. The blanket wrapped around your top is an old waterproof tablecloth, and looks almost as tired as your boots. I gave you that tablecloth, when I was a child who played on this playground. I had stolen it after Thanksgiving dinner had been cleared and everyone was in bed. I figured you needed it more than our garage did.

You smile at Tanem as he approaches your bench. Six years old, smaller than most children, bronze skin and dark hair, he's always the first to greet you out of this group of kids. He flashes a smile to show a missing tooth and you laugh like Santa Clause as you reach into your large, dirty green, "save the planet" cloth bag for a golden wrapped caramel. His deep brown eyes widen in excitement as he snatches the candy from your large, dark, wrinkled palm. With a gleeful shriek, he unwraps the candy, puts the wrapper into a trash bag open next to you, pops the sweet delight into his mouth, and runs off to the monkey bars. I was one of those children, once; your caramels nestled in my pockets. Over the years, you've gotten used to these quick greetings.

Every child here will get a caramel from you. There are a few shy ones but even they get a caramel through Jorgé. Five years old and ready to take on the world, he is in charge of making sure each of them get one. He's been coming to this playground with his older brother since he could walk, and you've been giving him caramels just as long. It never occurred to us there might be a problem with that. The two of you even have a special hand shake, which I know you fuddle every time, adding random pieces at your personal whim, but he loves it and gets caramels to pass around after. Today, there are two shy children. I can tell Tanisha, 5 years old, just got her hair pulled into braids this morning because she still has wet lines running down her brown cheeks. Edwin is sitting with her under the slide. They don't talk to each other, but she's the only child that doesn't try to make his Transformers fly, so he lets her play with one while he makes up worlds in his head. Jorgé quickly gives each of them a caramel before returning to his business of finally getting across the monkey bars. I can see your lip turn up in a proud smirk. You also never speak and I wonder if you were like Edwin when you were little, or were you a Jorgé but life happened and took your voice away. Either way, you've become the most reliable thing about this neighborhood.

A little girl approaches your bench, not even a little bit afraid. She is new to the playground and her blonde curls bounce excitedly as she hops from foot to foot. Staring into your almond eyes, her soft, pale face pleads for a caramel too. Her tiny hands cradle each other as she holds them up to you, close enough to touch. She's no older 4 years and your smile widens as you place the golden treasure into the crevice she's made. With a squeal, she thanks you and shoves the candy into her mouth before her father grabs her arm. He gives you a look that would make me cringe and you cower just a little to give the impression of submission. I've never seen you fight anyone, but I believe you would be able to hold your own against this man. He takes the little girl away but she doesn't care. She got the prize before he could stop her. That confidence will take her far in life.

You spend the afternoon watching the children play, and I watch you. Something about the back and forth is your Zen, but I have a feeling we are both avoiding the end of our stories. I'm avoiding rash responses by adults, telling me "16 is not old enough," and you're avoiding the knowledge that life isn't as innocent as children playing on a playground.

As the sun begins to set and the children scatter to their respective homes or parents, I watch you slowly tie the trash bag and place it inside your green, cloth bag. Gathering your blanket, you turn to me and point to your watch. Looking at my phone, I realize it's 7pm and time to go home to help with dinner; another mute reprimand telling me to go back to my life. Without another glance, you walk away for the night.

I don't return to the playground for a couple of days. My high school principal finally got ahold of my dad and skipping school turned into a grounding. Dad stayed home for a couple of days "father-son bonding" but soon enough we got annoyed at each other and the bills began calling his name. I return to the playground on a cloudy day and sit beneath my tree. I mainly come here to smoke my cigarettes and doodle in my sketchbook, but I also like to remember when life was only about who was "it" and whether or not the cooties touched me. I have a lot more to learn, but it seems too overwhelming out there in the world of "True or False." At least here no one questions me. Kind of the same way no one questions you.

By lunchtime, you still haven't arrived and I get a little worried. I've never known you to miss a day, none of us have, and I can hear the whispers of the older kids. Mae, the oldest child here at 10 years old, walks to each group of playing children and leans in to pass her knowledge. She points to your bench and a hush falls amongst them. No caramels today. That's almost as bad as there being no sun in the winter. They quickly forget about their missing treasure, but I can't.

A month later I am finally able to return to the playground; the principal put me in detention for skipping class. I always go to detention because skipping that would result in expulsion. That's the only way I'm still in school and although I'd rather be here, I know that not having a high school diploma will hurt my future. The wind begins to freeze my fingers and leaves race from branches to see who will touch the ground first. Reds and yellows permeate my vision as I squint into the early sunset, looking for your rugged composure. I see Mae again and now the children begin huddling around her. She tells them that Amy's father didn't like that you were house-less.

"Who's Amy?" Lin asks, as his 5-year-old eyes squint in disbelief.

“The new girl,” she responds. “You know, the white one.” A hush falls over the children. No one had seen Amy since that first time, and she’d been the only white child to play on this playground. “The cops got him for habit a shun,” Mae explains, tucking her straight, black, hair behind her ears with a sense of authority. “I heard them talking on the porch, because we’re neighbors you know.”

Gerald looks at his hands with a soft curiosity. He’s 7 but he rarely knows what anything means. “What does ‘house-less’ mean?” Harriette, Gerald’s smarter twin, looks at Gerald and back to Mae. “And what does ‘habit a shun’ do?”

Mae puts her hands on her hips and gives them the most scolding look she can manage. “Don’t your parents tell you that if you don’t wash you’ll be house-less? And it has to be a habit or you’ll be shun.” Her voice raises in pitch at the incredulous question. “It’s common knowledge, you know.”

I listen to the children piece stolen information together and wonder what they mean. You have no house and sleep on the streets. That’s apparent with the dirtiness, like Mae said. I had no idea what “habit a shun” could be. The parents are huddled together as well, but I can’t hear what they are saying. Adults are so much better at whispering than children are. I inch closer to catch a couple of words, but not close enough that they could question why I wasn’t in school. “Rehabilitation...fix the neighborhood...”

Snow begins to fall and fewer children are allowed on the playground. Tiny Tommy can’t come anymore because he has a bad cough and his mother is a nurse at the hospital. He says she knows right from wrong and I chuckle at the authority he’s given by the children younger than him, though only by a little since he’s about 7 anyway.

Eventually, I’m the only one left to wander the playground. I trail my boots around the parameter of the sand box and stop for several moments at your bench. The glittering white snow mocks me, covering your undisturbed spot. In the past, even in all the white, there would be a round-butt shape here. Lighting a cigarette with a match, I jab the match into the pristine scene, leaving a black mark. I refuse to let your image be forgotten under the blankets of silence.

I keep coming back. Snow melts, leaves grow, children return. I’m still avoiding life and I think my dad gave up on trying to fix me.

I chuckle to myself; if only they knew I was looking for no company. As I light a cigarette I look up to see you standing next to your bench. A bright green, “save the planet”, cloth bag hangs from your arm and your clothes are clean and pressed. A black jacket buttons in front like a suit. Startled, I watch the children rush you and hug your legs like leeches, refusing to let go. Your hair is now short, gel making it spike a little in front, and your face is clean like a baby’s bottom; matted beards aren’t allowed with make-overs, I guess.

Jorgé chases his shadow toward the bench, as always, but pauses when he stops at your shoes. Slowly, he looks up your body and his eyes touch upon your face. His brows raise in question and he waits. You reach into your green, cloth bag and pull out a golden wrapped caramel. Jorgé reaches toward your hand, pausing until you nod in confirmation, and takes the candy with the same excitement he used to have. Turning to the group of kids hanging back, he holds up his hand and hoots. With a yell, the children rush toward you in a stampede.

With the same belly-rolling laugh we remember, you hand each of the reaching hands a caramel, sunlight glinting off each golden wrapper like stars in daylight. Even the shy ones have gathered in the excitement. Smiles and comfort in the familiar run through the group. A couple children pull at your clothes, curiosity being more important than playing for a moment. You smile and tug at their shirts, softly, placing caramels into hands and turning them toward the playground. Satisfied that all is right in the world now, they accept the prompt and run back to play. Your pants are not torn and your intact, black boots look like they’ve been recently polished. I don’t move from my spot under the tree, afraid that I would disturb the fantasy. When all the children finally return to playing, you walk toward me. I hesitate, afraid you will have a new type of reprimand. You stop in front of me and hold out a pamphlet. I stand and take it from your clean, dark, wrinkled hand. It’s for a GED program. I look into your almond eyes and don’t feel the reprimand I was expecting. Instead I feel your support of my individuality in the lines around your smile. I take the pamphlet from your grasp and feel hope for my future in the warmth of your hand. Without another glance, you turn from us, place your hands into the pockets of your slacks, empty bag hanging from your wrist, and leave us behind forever.

Somei Yoshino

Yumi would never forget the last conversation she shared with her husband. She remembered her final effort to change Kaito's mind, to maybe convince him to stay.

"You can't just leave like this," she pleaded. "You're going to be a father. We're going to be parents. Please, Kaito. I know you think it's your duty, but you can't leave now."

Kaito stared solemnly at his newly shined boots. His rigid stare then shifted to meet his wife's chestnut eyes—now completely glossed over in tears.

"We've talked about this, Yumi," said Kaito firmly. "If we have a son, I'll expect him to one day step up and serve his country too."

Yumi was now in utter hysterics. Kaito, being one of the youngest doctors in town, knew that he should avoid making his pregnant wife more upset than she already was. He knew her emotions could be straining to his child, but there was no avoiding the subject any further. He'd soon be boarding a train which would take him to a different Japan. Then he'd be off to a different ocean and eventually, to a different earth—crimson to the core and everywhere at war with itself. Kaito firmly placed his hands on Yumi's shoulders, which now trembled like the beginning of an earthquake.

"I'll come back," he insisted, inching closer to her quivering lips. He slid one hand down her body to bid his unborn child goodbye. "And we'll all be so happy together. I promise, Yumi."

"You don't know that," Yumi cooed. The wind whipped at her face, chilling her tear-streaked cheeks and rippling her floral dress. The silk brushed softly against her ankles.

Kaito's ocean-deep eyes briefly analyzed Yumi. He'd always had a remarkable way of making her hysterics seem trivial—it was something in those amber-flecked eyes.

Kaito gently lifted Yumi's chin with a single finger and pointed her toward the fully bloomed cherry blossom tree outside their home.

The ivory flowers waved side to side in a breeze sweeter than honey, as if to bid Kaito farewell. Some fluttered to the ground like butterflies descending on irises, flashing vibrant pigments of white and subtle pinks until they settled in the grass. Yumi recalled sipping jasmine tea against the trunk and kissing Kaito beneath that rosy canopy, steeping in effortless love and breathing immortality.

“Look,” Kaito said. “Our somei yoshino is still young—it will be in bloom when I see you next. I promise, Yumi.”

Yumi nodded at her husband until he flashed her that radiant grin. Kaito beamed cheerfully at his broken wife and sustained his bliss even from behind the car window as he watched Yumi and the somei yoshino disappear.

Months later, when Yumi’s life crumbled into ruin, she made sure to recall that smile so she could cherish it forever.

The uniformed man came to the house, cap against his heart, to report to Yumi that after accompanying the soldiers to battle in the Philippines, Kaito did not return. After he left, Yumi let the death certificate flutter to the floor. She was widowed and all she had to show for it was a piece of paper. Yumi found herself in the bedroom once shared with Kaito, crouched against the floor like her legs had given out. Her nose pressed to the frigid floor, Yumi wailed into the earth she used to praise. Her sobbing eyes then flickered to her wedding ring, which glistened mockingly in the golden beams of morning. How could nature dare to gleam so ardently?

Yumi twisted her ring and let the smooth band caress her finger. She then tore it off and hurled it across the bedroom, pulverizing every memory of Kaito in its path.

“You lied,” she bawled. “*You lied.*”

Yumi birthed a healthy girl days after the news was broken. Even on Kyoko’s first day of life, Yumi saw Kaito in her immaculate eyes. She lamented in having a daughter and was also overcome with relief—perhaps she’d never have to worry about Kyoko being sucked into a war as her father had; Yumi prayed she’d never have to birth a fatherless child.

It was her daughter’s first birthday when Yumi’s parents insisted that she remarry. Kyoko toddled around her grandparents’ living room, giggling at nothing and blissfully ignorant of her mother’s heartache.

“Just meet him,” Yumi’s mother pleaded. “His name is Minoru. He’s very kind.”

Aware of what “just meeting him” would entail, Yumi yielded. Her parents introduced them at a formal gathering and the arrangements were made within two hours. Minoru was a perfectly normal man with average eyes, a forgettable smile, and a bad knee—meaning he couldn’t serve Japan if he wanted to. He was passive and took an immediate liking to Kyoko, which was all Yumi could ask for.

Kaito’s pen glided against one of the last pages of his last medical pad, intended to be used for writing prescriptions and notes of his patients’ recovery processes. Over the past sixty years, it had served a very different purpose. His frail, wrinkled hand trembled these days, making it more and more difficult to write letters to Yumi.

My flower,

There was a full moon last night and all I could see in it was your smile. I haven’t forgotten you, and when this war is over you can expect to see me beneath our somei yoshino. Put the kettle on soon—I’m dying for a cup of tea. We’ll be united within days. I can feel it.

Kaito

Kaito settled his pen on the floor of the cave he’d called his home for the past—how many years had it been now? It had been many. He looked at his hands and only saw age. They reminded him of his grandfather’s hands—was he really old enough to be a grandfather now? World War II must have been the longest war of all time by now, right?

“I caught some fish,” announced Yoshiko upon entering the cave. Still in his tattered soldier’s uniform from all those years ago, he settled the bundle of freshly killed bass on the floor and sat next to his fellow soldier. “I’d get a fire on before these start to rot.”

“In a moment,” Kaito said. His aged eyes fell back down to his medical pad, which was always a blur to him these days. If he were back home, he would certainly have glasses by now. His poor vision made his head pulse in agony—some days the headaches were so awful he felt like a monster concealed itself in his skull and threw itself against the walls of his brain in an attempt to escape.

Kaito pressed his palms to his temples and winced as his usual headache asserted its presence, intensifying more and more by the second.

“Are you feeling okay, Doctor?” Yoshiko inquired in growing concern.

Kaito had cared for Yoshiko many times since the day he had been wounded in battle. He could still hear the general’s voice ordering them to retreat to the forest and hide while the remainder of the battle carried itself out.

“He’s wounded!” the officer shouted at Kaito. “Take him to the jungle and care for him until we come for you. Find a good hiding spot and remember: death over capture.”

Kaito had dragged Yoshiko into the jungle and laid him down in a clearing, where his cries of agony echoed off the Filipino trees and his blood began to stain the earth. Kaito rifled through his medical bag for alcohol and bandages to care for his bleeding thigh.

“This is going to sting,” Kaito warned when it was time to sterilize the area.

Kaito could still hear Yoshiko’s excruciating scream as he felt himself succumbing to the torment in his skull. The explosive pain sharpened itself and the innards of his head now twisted like his brains were trying to escape through his balding, liver-spotted scalp.

“Doctor!” Yoshiko’s voice sounded distant, but Kaito made out a blurry version of his friend right in front of his face. He felt Yoshiko’s hands hoist him up and heard him mutter something along the lines of “Chikushō! Death over capture, Kaito, remember!”

Everything went dark.

Yumi poured herself a cup of earl grey and clung to the mug, letting it warm her shriveling hands—she was always cold these days. She tugged her floral shawl a little tighter around her bony shoulders and shuffled aimlessly in her slippers. The cherry blossom tree outside her window was in full bloom and still, even with her husband in the other room, she thought of Kaito.

The floorboards creaked as Yumi moved to answer the telephone. The house hadn’t aged well and neither had she, but on days like this when she felt Kaito’s presence more than ever, she felt frozen in time—stuck in the days before he’d left.

“Kon’nichiwa. Okabe Yumi?” a deep masculine voice inquired.

“Who’s asking?” Yumi asked, slightly humiliated for answering the phone so casually.

“This is Ando Kenji from Catamina Hospital in Mindanao.”

“Mindanao?” Yumi inquired. She twisted the phone cord around her wrinkled finger as she spoke. “I’m not familiar. I’m sorry; I think you have the wrong number.”

“Okabe Yumi, yes?”

“Yes, but I don’t—”

“We had an Okabe Kaito check in yesterday afternoon after suffering a brain aneurysm. He kept asking for you and it took us a bit, but we finally found your information. I’m calling to regretfully inform you that he passed away this morning.”

Yumi’s blood ran cold. For a moment, all she could hear in her earpiece was her own blood pumping through her head.

“That can’t be right. My husband died sixty years ago,” Yumi insisted. She fought the spark of rage igniting inside her. How could someone make such an insensitive mistake?

“The man found with him is checked in here, as well. He claimed they were hiding out in the jungle, sleeping in a cave and living off fish and vegetation in the forest. It’s happened before—Japanese soldiers turning up from being in hiding for many years.” The man paused, waited for a response, then continued. “We’re still trying to convince your husband’s friend that World War II is over. He can’t believe that the Japanese Empire would surrender—he thought we were lying so we could capture him.” Yumi’s hand trembled violently as she tried to find a response.

“Yumi san?”

“I’m still here,” Yumi croaked like she’d forgotten how to speak.

“You’re the only family we could get ahold of,” the man said softly.

Yumi swallowed at a lump in her throat. Fresh tears pooled in her tired eyes and suddenly, she saw herself standing at her front door talking to that uniformed man, learning of her husband’s death all over again.

At the funeral, Yoshiko limped toward Yumi with a thick parcel tucked beneath his arm.

“Yumi?” he inquired. When she nodded in response, he laughed. “I knew it. Pardon my informality, I just feel like I know you from how much Dr. Kaito would talk about you.”

Yumi stared at the scrawny man before her, knowing he could only be the one her husband accompanied for sixty years.

“Kaito was a good man,” Yoshiko said. “He saved my life, you know!”

“Oh,” Yumi breathed, letting fresh tears trickle down her sunken cheeks, sliding down her scarlet-painted lips. “I have so much to ask you.”

Yoshiko flashed Yumi a yellow, toothy grin and held up a single pruned finger. “First, I have something for you, Okabe Yumi.”

His frail hand slid into the envelope and he extracted the bundle of Kaito’s medical pads, sprinkled with water spots and dirt but for the most part, in decent condition.

“He was always writing letters to you,” Yoshiko said. “Always. Whenever I didn’t know where to find him, he’d be sitting in the cave writing in one of those pads.”

Yumi stumbled backward and collapsed in a chair. Suddenly dizzy and lightheaded, she gently leafed through the pages—there had to be hundreds of letters addressed to her. She flipped to the last page of one the pads that had only three lines, scrawled in Kaito’s messy hand:

*Somei yoshino
even the whitest flowers
wilt when winter comes.*

Another Lonely Day

“Cameron!” I hear. I turn around to see Alana running towards me with Mia trailing behind her, carrying all her suitcases. Alana pulls me into a hug, and I can see Mia dropping a bag and sighing. I never thought this is how my cross-country trip would end up, and I laugh at the thought of it. Alana lets me go and starts talking, rambling on about how her hair does not do well with this humid weather.

I wanted to take this trip with Alana, but she insisted I go with Mia instead. I don't know what to think, but Alana can be very persuasive. I went to high school with Alana and Mia, but I've only interacted with Mia once. It was sophomore English class, and I had to pass back everyone's graded essays. I didn't know who Mia Matthews was so I asked the girl in front of me. Mia heard and said, “That's me.” I could tell she was embarrassed. I didn't mean to make her feel invisible, but I really didn't know. I hope she's forgotten that.

I always wondered how someone as popular and outgoing as Alana could be best friends with an introvert like Mia. When I started dating Alana, I figured I'd see a lot of Mia, but Alana either never invited her out or Mia never wanted to come. Anyway, when I asked Alana to come on the trip with me, she said, “I don't know. Hey, you should bring Mia!” I thought she was kidding, but she insisted Mia get out of the house and Mia had her own business to tend to in Illinois. I've never been there so I offered to take her. I thought it'd impress Alana, but right now she just looks like she's in a hurry to leave.

“Mia, come on! We haven't got all day!” she yells at her. She laughs and takes her sunglasses off her head to fluff her curls. Mia drags her bags along and stops in front of us. I start to think this is a mistake. She doesn't look happy, but maybe I should have tried to help with her luggage. She's wearing a plain blue tee and jeans. Her left shoe is untied, and her jacket is falling off her shoulder. I spy a pink bra strap, and try to look away.

“So here we are! You guys better get going! You don't want to hit traffic,” Alana says, patting me on the back. I scratch my head, and there is an awkward pause.

“Hey, Mia,” I say. She lifts her head, and I can see her pale little face. Once I learned who Mia was, I could see she was pretty. She still is. She’s got these big, brown, doe eyes and a button nose. She’s pretty in a quieter way than Alana who’s all make up and tight outfits. Alana called Mia “simple” and “plain,” but of all the adjectives I can think of now those don’t come to mind. I’ve never really looked at her. A field of freckles lightly speckles her rosy cheeks, and she nervously licks her full, pink lips. She pushes her hair behind her ears and tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach her whole face. I give her a grin and she pauses before giving it another try. Better this time.

“Hi, Cameron,” she says. I don’t think I’ve heard her speak since that English class.

“All righty then! You guys can take it from here, right?” Alana hugs us both goodbye and is soon out of sight.

We pause just a moment before loading Mia’s things into my beat up old van. Once we’re all buckled, I start up my car and ask her how her summer was. She tells me it was okay. I ask her if she thought the senior prank, releasing a blow-up doll attached to balloons in the cafeteria, was funny. She laughs and says yes.

“You’re taking the year off, too?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do so I thought I’d take some time to think about it.”

“Yeah, same pretty much. I really want to go to this arts school for photography, but I didn’t get in. Maybe I’ll try again next year.”

That exchange takes us to the highway. It’s gonna be a long trip.

“So Alana tells me you want to visit your dad, too?” I ask. I’ve never known anything about Mia except that she’s smart. I always saw her with her head in a book. That’s why I was surprised when Alana said she isn’t going to college. Even Alana who won Class Worst Case of Senioritis is going to college. Anyway, Alana only told me that Mia’s parents are divorced, her dad now lives in Chicago, and Mia is hoping to see him since he left four months ago. It’s something we kind of have in common. I’m on my way to California to see the father I’ve never met. I figure this is a good topic to get us talking.

Mia hesitates. “Um, yeah. He lives in Chicago. That’s okay, right?”

“Yeah, Alana told me. I figured out a system. We can take turns with driving and the gas. This is your road trip, too. It should be fun.”

We drive a few miles out of our small town in Rhode Island, listening to the radio. I'm suddenly aware of the station I have it on and wonder if she wants to change it, but she just sits there.

"So are you and your dad close?" I ask. She shrugs. "When did they divorce?"

"In June."

"Did you see it coming?"

"No," she says, staring out the window.

"Really? I always wondered if I would have seen my parents' divorce coming, but I'll never know because I was only a baby. There weren't any signs at all?"

"No," she says frustrated.

I close my mouth and keep driving. I didn't mean to upset her. I turn up the volume to Fleetwood Mac's "Go Your Own Way."

"Sorry," she says. "I just don't like talking about it. Let's talk about your dad instead."

"Okay. I've never met him," I say as I see we've hit rush hour traffic.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I was just a baby when he moved to California. I guess my mom kicked him out."

"Is that what she told you?"

"No, she never wants to talk about him so I've had to guess."

"Does she know you're going to see him?"

I think of my mom's long hug when I left and her red eyes. She doesn't like to cry in front of me. "She's not too happy about it," I say, "but I'm eighteen now. My dad sent me a letter on my birthday. He said he wanted to see me and that he lives in California, so here I am."

"Has he ever reached out to you before?"

"No."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know. He probably figured I couldn't come see him until I could do it on my own."

"But he's your dad. He could come to you."

She's really looking at me now so I keep my eyes on the road. I hadn't thought of that. I'd always figured my mom just kept him away. It kind of pisses me off that Mia doesn't want to talk about her stuff, but can talk about mine. "Well, it's the same as your old man. Why'd he move so far away from you?"

"I don't know," she says defensively. Her face turns red before she looks again out the window. "I thought we weren't going to talk about that."

"Okay, well I don't want to talk about my parents either."

"Fine, maybe we don't need to talk at all."

"Fine."

Blood on the Lake

The sun was just beginning to creep over the mountaintops as Peter and his father launched their little boat out onto the lake. Rays of light broke through the hazy morning mist, making the placid waters dance with flashes of gold and pink. The lake was flanked on either side by thickets of green trees, their dewy leaves rustling in the gentle morning breeze. From their branches, thrushes chirped their morning songs.

Peter watched his father as he pulled the oars to and fro, pushing the little wooden boat across the water effortlessly. At his feet was an old and dented tin tackle-box, a family heirloom that had been given to the man by his own father. Two fishing rods leaned off of the side of the boat; one longer and what the boy thought must be the normal size; the other, a short, stubby thing. Kid-sized.

Soon they were at the center of the lake. The clear water rippled lazily around their boat. The boy's father rested the oars on the side of the boat, then took the lid off of the tackle-box and turned to his son.

"Well," he said, glancing into his son's eyes, "here we are."

"It's real nice out here," said Peter. He glanced across the clear, quiet waters; he could see himself reflected in the surface.

"Yep, that's part of why I like it so much. It's calm. Beautiful." Peter's father gazed out for a moment, taking in the scene. "Are you ready for me to show you how to set up your rod?"

"I guess so."

Peter watched as his father pulled the line from his rod and began setting up the hook and bait, explaining as he went. "Here, Pete. The trickiest part is getting the hook on the line. You've gotta be careful, the hook is sharp. I don't want you to hurt yourself. Here, now it's your turn," his father said, handing the smaller rod to his son. "Just do it all as I showed you, and we'll be ready to go in no time."

Peter nodded and tried to thread the hook himself. Cautiously, he tried to work the barely visible line through the hook, but he fumbled and poked himself. He gasped, as a bead of blood formed on his finger.

“I told you to be careful, Pete,” his father sighed. “Here, let me take it.” Peter watched on, embarrassed. A single drop of blood fell from his finger to the bottom of the boat.

“That’ll do,” grunted his father, tugging on the hook to test the knot. “Now, let’s bait it.”

He handed Peter a small tin can. Inside the can was a damp clot of earth. Worms wriggled in the mud, trying to bury themselves where they couldn’t be reached by the heat of the heightening morning sun.

“Go on, grab one and hook it.”

Peter looked to his father, uneasily, then back to the worms.

“What’s wrong?” His father asked. There was a mild tinge of annoyance in his voice.

“It’s just...” Peter trailed off. “I didn’t know they would be alive.”

“They have to be alive and moving, or else the fish won’t be interested in them.”

Peter was silent for a moment. His father shifted, waiting.

“It won’t hurt them, will it?”

“I don’t think so, son. I don’t think worms feel pain.”

“Oh. Alright.”

Peter knew his father was a smart man, so this reassured him. He picked out a worm – a long, wriggly, fat one – and held it in his hands for a moment, considering it. Then he pushed it down onto the sharp end of the hook, watching as the point pierced through its flesh, straight to the other side. The worm’s wriggling seemed to take on a new urgency, discomforting the boy. His father reached forward and took the hook from him.

“You’ve got to do it twice so that they stay on there,” he said, matter-of-factly. He deftly pushed the hook through the worm’s body once more. “There we go.” He handed the rod back to the boy. “Now,” he said, “let me show you how to cast.” With a flick of his wrist, the Peter’s father sent the worm sailing through the air. It broke the surface of the lake with a wet plunk.

“Now, real it in, Petey. Hopefully that’ll catch their attention.”

“Okay.”

A little disquieted, Peter obeyed. Part of him hoped nothing would bite. The water shimmered with the moving line. Peter was relieved when the hook came up empty, except for the worm. It wasn’t moving so much now.

“Now, cast it out again. Hopefully, we’ll catch something before the hour is up!”

They continued the constant back and forth of casting and reeling in a few more times, Peter following after his father. When the hook and worm were under the surface of the water, Peter felt a little happier – it was only when he reeled it up, seeing the little worm grow paler and more still with each turn, that Peter felt a sense of unease that he couldn’t quite place.

Suddenly, the end of his rod began to bob; gently, at first, then with a stronger force. Peter sat, mouth agape, unsure of what to do. His father leaned in excitedly.

“Go on, reel it in,” he said, gleefully, “It’s pulling hard! Looks like you caught a big one.”

Caught up in the excitement, the boy began to spin the reel fervently. The line whined gently as it pulled against whatever was on the other end. Soon, Peter could make out a shadow under the water’s ripples; it was definitely a big fish. The boy jerked up on the rod, pulling it up out of the water with a splash. The fish landed in the bottom of the boat with a soggy plop. The boy grinned with pleasure at its side – his father was going to be proud of him for this one.

As his father searched through the tin tackle-box for something to cut the line with, Peter watched the fish. It struggled in the bottom of the boat, slapping its wet tail against the dirty floor of the boat in a frantic attempt to escape. The hook was pierced through its lip, a small trickle of blood pouring out from the side. It opened its mouth and spread its gills, gasping desperately for water and finding none. As he watched the fish flop back and forth, pitifully trying to find its way back into the lake, the boy felt deeply guilty.

“This one will make a good supper, won’t it?” said Peter’s father as he cut the line with a gutting knife.

The boy looked at his father, speechless. He didn’t know what to say. His father stuck his fingers under the fish’s gills and hoisted it up. “Great catch, son,” he said, preparing the knife, “Now, let’s get this one to stop wiggling.”

“No,” Peter interrupted. His father looked at him, surprised. “I don’t want to hurt him.”

His father frowned, lowering the knife. “Son,” he started, “We have to kill it. What will we have for supper, otherwise?”

The boy’s voice shook. “I don’t know,” he muttered, “can’t we have something from the garden? Or buy something else from the store?”

“That’s not a man’s meal, son,” his father said, “We need something more.”

“But why do we have to hurt the fish? There has to be something else we can eat.”

“Well,” said the man, “that’s just the way it is. That’s the way my father taught me, and the way his father taught him. It’s the way I’m teaching you now.”

Peter thought for a minute. His lip quivered as he sat in silence, in a dead lock with his father. The fish’s convulsions were slowing as it asphyxiated.

“Okay,” Peter muttered dejectedly. His father looked towards him, smiling.

“I’m glad you understand, son,” he said, warmly.

Peter watched as his father took the knife, slowly pushing it into the fish’s throat. Crimson streaks of blood made their way down the blade of the knife as it pushed in. Some smeared onto his father’s hands, staining them red. With a quick flick of his wrist, the man pulled the knife across the fish’s throat, splitting it open. Fresh blood streamed out of the wound. Peter’s gut filled with dread as he noticed that some of it had found its way into his lap. The fish’s movement slowed, then stopped entirely.

“Well,” his father laughed, “that was a messy one.” He opened the lid of the cooler they had brought, digging out a cavity in the ice for the fish’s body before laying it down and covering it. “It’s getting late. Let’s head back and clean that fish up – it should be big enough for the whole family.”

Peter nodded. His father smiled at him and rinsed the fish’s blood off of his hands in the lake’s pristine waters. As they paddled away, Peter watched as crimson swirled on the lake’s surface, spreading out like a phantom in the clear water before dissipating entirely.

The Crown of Y'Purra

I had only shot Doctor Rutherford out of pure necessity.

I knew the vile thing had to be done as soon as I had laid my eyes upon the Crown of Y'Purra. The moment the flickering amber light of our lanterns reflected off of its flawless golden surface, its inlaid emeralds shining back at us like the eyes of some long-forgotten god, I knew that poor Rutherford was going to betray me. As we observed the invaluable artifact, long thought to be nothing but myth, I could feel the black mass of treachery swelling inside of him like some devilish tumor.

It was truly a shame that things had to end the way they did; Rutherford and I had been colleagues for many years. He was quite the frequent visitor at my household, and I at his; our friendship was of such closeness that he had asked me to be the godfather of his child. We had studied archaeology at Oxford together, both of us having been absolutely entranced with ancient civilizations. Nothing, however, held our fancy as much as the ancient ruins at Y'Purra.

The ruins, only known by the western world since they were discovered the better half of a decade ago in 1862, were thought to predate known history. They were located in the arid deserts of the Mid-East, half buried in the sand for millennia. The local people told legends of the ancient city. Thousands of years ago, it was inhabited by a race of brutish heathens; dark men who worshipped wicked things and practiced queer rituals. The foul society, according to myth, met its downfall when their gods presented them with a beautiful crown, more valuable than all of the riches on Earth; a thing that could drive men to madness.

Doctor Rutherford and I were long fascinated by these ruins and their history; after many years of poring over the minute amount of information we had on the city, we planned an expedition to the site. Upon arriving in the strange country where it was located, we set out to find men who could lead us to the ruins. This proved to be a difficult task; the locals were remarkably superstitious, and it took a fortnight to find a group of men brave – or desperate – enough to take us there. After promising a large sum of money, we began our journey to Y'Purra.

We were interested in examining the ruins, yes, but we did not tell our men nor our guides of our true goal: to find the fabled crown.

Night had long since fallen by the time we had reached the city; a full white moon leered down at us, and thousands of uncountable stars dotted the sky like punctures in a black curtain. Under the light of the moon, we could make out what must have been the ancient city's temple; oh, how it gleamed under that pale light, as if it had been built yesterday! The colossal ziggurat stood tall over the rest of the ruins, bizarrely untouched by the eons of exposure.

As we started towards it, the camels began showing signs of unease. They stopped in their tracks and moaned a deep, unpleasant cry of dread. They would not continue onward; the men, having been tired from the day's journey and frightened by the animal's display of fear, wanted to make camp. Rutherford and I chose to continue onward, leaving the warmth of their newly made fire and pressing on through the cold desert sand.

When we arrived at the temple, we were in awe at its design. Large reliefs of incredible detail were carved into the walls of the gargantuan building, depicting eerie scenes of debauchery and blasphemy. Monstrous images of otherworldly beings protruded from the wall, seeming almost to be reaching out with living arms. The visions I saw portrayed on that wall were something that no good Christian man should ever have to imagine.

After examining the outer wall, Rutherford pointed out a chasm in the center; presumably an entry way. The dark passage yawned in front of us, and from it came a peculiar and frigid wind. Lighting the oil lanterns we had brought with us, we entered.

The blackened hallway stretched for a seemingly infinite expanse of time, inwards and downwards, towards the center of the temple. Its walls were painted in a rather extraordinary colour; they portrayed scenes similar to those on the exterior walls, recounting strange rituals and obscene traditions. They were covered in strange hieroglyphs, a language long lost and forgotten by time. Eventually, the hallway ended, spilling us out into a wide room filled with treasures innumerable.

The light from our lanterns reflected from thousands of pieces of gold and silver; jewels of every size and colour dotted the heaps of riches. Any archaeologist would have been delighted by the find, as something of this nature would be career-making; however, a queer force seemed to

draw Doctor Rutherford and me past all of it, towards the center of the room where, on an ornate stone altar, the Crown of Y'Purra rested.

The sight of it was captivating; it was a treasure unlike any I had seen before. The craftsmanship was exquisite, as if it had been created at Olympus in the forge of Hephaestus. Its many emeralds glimmered brilliantly. I knew at that moment that every step in my life had been leading up to this point, in this dank, antediluvian crypt. That crown was mine.

I turned to glance at Rutherford. I saw the look of passion in his eyes; that green, all-consuming desire that swelled within him. I knew then that he was no friend of mine; no, he had come to take what was rightfully mine, to stab me in the back and claim the crown all for his own, and leave me rotting in this accursed, unholy place. Surely this had been his plan all along. A surge of fury unlike any emotion I'd known before rippled through me and, in a swift, precise motion, as if guided by some supernatural force, I pulled out my pistol and shot him in the chest. Hurriedly, I took up the crown and sprinted into the dark, leaving my lantern behind.

As I watch now, peering around the stone column I took refuge behind, I can see the lanterns near Rutherford's corpse dimming. Down the hallway from which we entered, the faint lights of distant lanterns bob to and fro in the darkness. The rest of the men are coming; they must be wondering why we have been gone so long. When they arrive, they'll want to take away my crown.

I still have five bullets left.

Tyler Korponai

Breakfast

Young George sat politely in his chair. George waited for his mother to bring out breakfast.

“Here you go sweetie.” She said laying out for him pieces of toast and two jams: one a red-berry and the other a blue-berry.

“Okay so I’m going to the store very soon and we need more jam, but I’m only going to buy one, so you need to decide which one is better, and that will be the one we’ll have in the house.” She walked away and left young George and the jams to their devices.

The red-berry jam, being the more intense, began first.

“WE ARE GOING TO MAKE BREAKFAST GREAT AGAIN. WE ARE GOING TO TAKE BACK BREAKFAST FROM THE FREE LOADING PORTUGUESE ROLLS. AND WE ARE GOING TO BUILD THE GREATEST BESTEST BREAKFAST SEEN IN YEARS.” The red-berry jam spoke fervently, wildly flinging bits of jelly all over the table.

George was a bit taken back. Why can’t breakfast include both Portuguese rolls and toast? Wasn’t breakfast meant to be inclusive? He added a bit of the jam to one slice of toast. The flavor was wildly overpowering and dominated the taste of breakfast. Perhaps the blue-berry jam would be better.

“In sharp contrast to my red-berry jam adversary, I will keep breakfast on the same path that has been on. What we need is steady hands for breakfast. Someone who knows what breakfast is all about.” The blue-berry jam was clearly well rehearsed and seemed rather sensible.

George added a bit of the blue-berry jam to one of his slices of toast, but the taste was bitter as if the jam had gone bad, corrupted as if someone had used a knife containing peanut butter, subversively adding it into the mix. The blue-berry jam, too, was not satisfying. How would George take his breakfast when neither jam seemed to satisfy? After all breakfast was the most important meal of the day. Could breakfast be trusted to the fiery red-berry jam? And what of the blue-berry jam, had

not breakfast lately become tiresome and repetitive? George had a great deal of doubts. His mother returned to the room.

“So which jam will it be dearest?”

George began throwing the jams on the ground and flailing in his chair.

“Breakfast is better without jam! Have you thought about that? A breakfast free of the limitations of red or blue jam? Why can't they work together? Or maybe have some avocado slices or butter instead?”

His mother calmly slapped him on the wrist and scolded him.

“This is the way breakfast has always been! One or the other George! One or the other!”

Little Feat

His eyes open slightly, at first just a peep, then wider and wider, each blink a struggle to wipe the tiredness from his body. The scene around him came into view, a small but snug bedroom full of elephants, giraffes, gazelles, and other safari animals that were plopped on the cool blue walls. The animals stampeded together in a huddle, circling the perimeter of his oasis. The same creatures that darted across the room spun above him in his mobile. It twisted and turned like a carousel rapidly spinning faster and faster. His mother, Emily, had crept into the room while he was still asleep to leave him with its presence for his awakening. The mobile now sang him a high-pitched lullaby that echoed in the quiet room.

He lay there in his bed taking in his surroundings. He was a babe of fourteen months, with the pudgy pink skin to match. His eyes were a brilliant hazel green that shone with the luster of leaves in autumn, framed by long spider-legged lashes. The wispy blond hair that sat atop his head was now tussled from the constant rolling in his sheets while in and out of sleep. Though his cheeks still puffed with infancy, his words of “goo goo” and “mama” and “dada” now formed phrases and short sentences.

Most mornings he sat in the crib entertained by the mobile or perhaps relaxed in the warmth and coziness of his bed. But today, neither the dancing safari nor clouds of blankets swaddling him was enough to keep him in his cage. He could hear his mother having a one sided conversation on the phone, but he didn't need her help. No, not today. He broke free from the restraints of his fluffy blankets and peered through the bars of his white wooden cell down to the distant wooden floor. It was a far drop down, but rather than deterring him, the newfound scheme thrilled him. He stood up abruptly and energetically, using the bars of his crib to steady himself. He reached for the top bar as if he was a gymnast performing in the Olympics, but couldn't find the strength to execute his trick. He brought up a pudgy leg, using it as an aid for leverage but toppled over after losing balance from the top-heaviness of his round head.

He fell into a pile of soft furred stuffed animals and blankets, still toasty from when he had lain there just moments earlier. He raised up on his elbows, yet again using the crib itself as a means of bringing himself forward. He looked back down at “Leo” the lion, his most treasured friend that Grammy had given him for his first birthday. He grabbed Leo, who he needed now more than ever, and placed him carefully on the outer edge of the crib. He stepped up on top of him, hoping to get high enough to escape. Now the bar was right below his hip and he smiled joyfully, a gummy five-toothed grin. He stared down to the shiny wooden floor and could not wait to be free in its open space.

But when he reached up with his leg, it was just a toe too short. He crept up repeatedly and performed the same routine to no avail. He dropped in final defeat and threw himself onto his bed. His anger spread from his head to his chest and he soon began sniffing until he let out a scream like the cry of an animal. Salty tears flooded his vision and began to pour down like a South American rainforest. His face was scrunched in outrage and pure frustration.

He heard his mother still on the phone outside, “No, Pam I need this shift. Me and Oliver really need this extra money,” she choked. “Yes of course, I could get his grandma to watch over him while I’m in the office.”

He cried and screamed louder, sniffing and hoping to catch her attention as he peered through the bars of his crib. She twisted the handle to his room and took a quick glance inside, seeing her baby in obvious distress. However, she remained glued to her phone and all she could do was give him a quiet hush, pulling a finger to her pursed lips.

The only remnant of this outbreak were labored hysteric breaths and the drippings streaming from his nose. But still, he sat in the crib; through the defeat and the tears, his mother had not come to free him from his prison. All he wanted was to be held in her warm reassuring embrace.

He did not try to get himself free nor cry again. He grabbed Leo and held him tighter than ever against his chest. He look all the animals roaming around the room and seemed to envy their privilege of wandering where they pleased. So he sat and listened to his mobile singing over the sound of his mother losing another argument, waiting for his rescuer to arrive.

Chase Charbonneau

The Perfect Night

I sat in the back of my friend Jesse's beat-up old pickup truck as we sped down the dusty back road, feeling like I'd fly right out after every pothole we hit. I looked across the bed at my girlfriend Brandy. She was smiling widely while clutching to the truck as tightly as she could. Long brown hair whipping behind her and the gold necklace I bought for her bounced up and down on her neck. The moonlight shaped her face perfectly. Jesse slapped his hand on the roof of the truck a couple of times and cranked the radio. He never could help himself when ZZ Top came on.

While everyone else was screaming along to Sharp Dressed Man, all I was thinking about was the ring in my pocket. Tonight was the night. After the party, I was going to ask Brandy to marry me. I saved the last five paychecks from the garage to get the perfect ring. The man at the jeweler's looked at me like I was out of place. Like I didn't belong. I guess he wasn't used to seeing my kind in his shop. My hands were still a little greasy and I was clearly out dressed by everyone else in the room. It was the first piece of jewelry I ever bought.

"Hey Jackson, why aren't you singin'?" Brandy asked while tapping my leg, "Have some fun why don't ya?"

I laughed and said, "I just love hearing you sing." I smiled to make her stop poking my leg.

She shook her head and went back to howling along to the guitar. Another pothole nearly knocked my hat off and Jesse yelled back an apology. His newest "girlfriend" sat next to him in the middle of the pickup even though nobody was sitting in the passenger seat. I had just met her that night, I think her name was Stacey. I never bothered to remember their names because Jesse was never with the same girl for long.

The party we were going to was supposed to be a real rager. It was the end of the year and we were graduating from high school the next week. I think Dave Adding was hosting it at his place. His parents were gone for the weekend and his brother was supposed to buy him a couple of kegs.

Everybody knew about the party and everybody came. We pulled up onto the front lawn and parked at the end of a huge line of cars.

Jesse's door swung open with a rusty creak and quickly slammed shut behind him. We hopped out of the back and Stacey clung to Jesse's arm. From the outside you couldn't even tell there was a party going on, besides all of the cars out front. Inside the house the stereo was blasting and people were drinking everywhere. A couple of kegs turned into four kegs and two coolers filled with Budweisers. There was already a bit of shattered ceramic on the floor from a busted vase. The whole house reeked of sweat and beer. Brandy did not take her time grabbing us each a full solo cup.

"Thanks babe." I said and kissed her on the cheek as I took the cup she was handing to me.

We walked around for a little while just chit chatting with people we knew. There wasn't a lot of room to walk around, everywhere you looked there was a group of people dancing or raucously laughing. Jesse and his girl left us after about a half hour to go find an empty room. Typical Jesse behavior.

Brandy dragged me over by the stereo to dance with her. "I love this song! Let's dance!" she yelled as she pulled my arm behind her.

I was not a good dancer. In fact I was a terrible dancer, but for her I didn't mind embarrassing myself. My dad used to tell me, "As long as your girl thinks it's cute you're alright." It was one of the few things he said that I ever took to heart. To be fair most of what he said was drunken slurring and misquoting Bible verses. I can barely remember a day where he didn't have a drink in his hand. Some preacher he was.

Brandy looked so good dancing around in that tiny corner of the room. She wore a black tank top and some old Daisy Duke shorts. That look always drove me wild. I don't know how she was moving the way she was in those boots. I had on a pair of jeans and a sleeveless plaid button up shirt. I looked pretty good myself that night.

After a few songs we found a couch and plopped down on it. We both had a few more drinks and were definitely feeling great. The couch was a dusty piece of crap but in the state of mind that we were in it was just fine. We sank into the soft cushions and listened to the music blare.

Not long after we sat down Jesse came running up to us. "Hey!" he slurred, "Y'all remember Doug Marshall?"

It took me a moment but I did remember him. He was a hockey player at our school. He wasn't the most well known person in school but I had seen him around. "Yeah, what about him? Did he steal your girl?" I laughed and sipped my beer. I remember it being flat and warm but I was too drunk to care.

Jesse smirked, "Naw not even close. Me and Stace just walked in on him and another dude!" He motioned with his hands like his head was exploding. "They were making out in one of the bedrooms."

I was a little shocked. I put my cup on the table and Brandy slapped the back of my shoulder and said, "Well, what are we gonna do about this?" I thought for a second before clapping my hands on my knees.

"God help me, I guess we're gonna have to take them out back," I stood up from the couch and helped Brandy to her feet.

"Yeah! That's what I'm talkin' about! Let's go pay them a visit," Jesse shouted as he spun on his boot heel. We started to walk upstairs when out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of Doug sneaking out the back door. He had another guy with him.

"They're trying to get out the back!" I blurted as I ran back down the steps, people cleared a path for me as I ran. Jesse and Brandy weren't far behind me. We burst out the closed screen door and I saw the pair running towards the woods behind the house. Jesse and I were closing in on them, Brandy was bringing up the rear. "Where ya going? We just wanna talk!" I yelled without missing a step.

I could hear the two of them panting as we got closer and closer. When I was only a foot or so away, I grabbed the back of their shirts. Their necks caught on the collars and they fell onto their backs.

Jesse caught up to me as they fell and swiftly kicked Doug in his ribs. I leaned over the other guy, I never caught his name, and spit in his face. "Good job baby!" Brandy laughed as she got close.

"It wasn't any trouble running down a couple of nancy boys." I said standing up straight, "I think you two know what has to happen here so why don't we just get this over with." I nodded to Jesse and he just smiled. We picked the two up by their shirts and placed them on their feet. The fear in their eyes made the whole thing feel even more intense.

Brandy cheered us on as we beat their asses. The air around us felt electric. Our knuckles were stained red with blood. We left them laying in the woods, their faces bloody and bruised. As we walked away Brandy threw in a kick to Doug's face.

We walked back into the house and grabbed some more drinks. After a few minutes some people came up and thanked us. “Good job dealin’ with those fags guys,” one of them said. For a little while we were like heroes. It felt good. Jesse went off to find Stacey leaving me and Brandy alone on the couch again.

“You looked so sexy out there Jackson. I love it when you fight,” she whispered as she leaned in to kiss me while playing with the cross around my neck. I took her hand and stood up.

“Let’s go outside. I wanna be alone with you,” I said. We went out the front door and started to stroll down the road holding hands. I looked at the streetlights shining through her hair. She looked incredible. I was so nervous, but just as excited. My hand was shaking as I reached for the little box in my pocket.

I stopped walking to look into her eyes. “Babe. I love you. You know that right?” I asked her. She smiled and brushed the hair away from her face.

“Of course I do. I love you too!” She giggled.

“Good because I have something to ask you.” I clutched the box tightly in one hand as I got down on one knee. With my other hand I opened the lid revealing the shiny gold ring inside. “Brandy Summers, will you marry me?”

She nodded and jumped into my arms. We started to kiss until we felt the rush of wind from a speeding vehicle. It was Jesse’s truck, the windows were rolled down. “Hey lovebirds!” he yelled as he went by.

“Eh, it’s fine. It’s a nice night for a walk anyways.” We headed home together hand in hand, ready to start the rest of our lives together.

Living with a Demon

I. You learn the demon likes board games

The afternoon the demon possessed my sister, we were playing Scrabble and bickering over whether *aspergillum* was a word.

“Now you’re cheating,” I said. “There’s no way that’s a word.”

“Of course it is.” She trailed a finger down the tiles, proud of herself. “I’ve seen it before. It’s a device you use to sprinkle holy water.”

“I’m not awarding you any points,” I said. “I still say it’s not an actual word.”

“Maybe you should read the dictionary every once in a while,” she said, sweeping the tiles off the board. “And I’m done playing with you.” I shrugged and rested my elbows on the table.

I studied the tiles scattered around the board. When you have a sister whose hobby is memorizing words, you know precisely what you’re in for when you suddenly suggest to play Scrabble. Still, somewhere inside, I never relinquished the hope to outsmart her someday. Of course, I was too dumb to know better.

Sunlight filtered in through the window above the sink, but it did nothing to warm me. Strangely enough, and despite the fact that it was still fall, the temperature had dipped before we’d started playing so that our breaths came out in visible puffs. I cupped my hands over my mouth and blew hot air into them. It was moments like these that I wished I could pluck the sun out of the sky, contract it to fairy-size, and stuff it into a jar. I clucked my tongue and jiggled my leg. Nova looked off to the side, still annoyed that I wouldn’t declare her the winner. I didn’t care. It was too cold to do much of anything, really, least of all worry about some stupid word game.

The silence stretched between us, but neither of us appeared too eager to shrink it. Even before the game began, I’d been hearing creaking and scuttling upstairs. I suspected it was a mouse, but I was no cat and the last thing I wanted was to set mousetraps around the house.

I looked at the tiles again, harmless and yet devilish in their ability to make me feel stupid. I peered up. Nova sat with her eyes pinned on the Scrabble board, oddly transfixed, as though she could see the mysteries of the universe unfolding before her. I lifted an eyebrow. Even with her so-black-that-it-looks-blue hair and habit to cover herself in black, it was tempting to dub Nova a “socially freaky pariah.” And if this were part of some intricate plan to creep me out, I was impressed.

The clock on the wall ticked out its mechanical song, and as I listened, I had the bizarre sense that we’d been transported to someone else’s dimension, an unfriendly and barren one. It was then, in the cold of the kitchen, that a smell like sewage water slapped me with the force of a tree-branch. It made me want to hurl, and I considered doing it just to amplify my disgust when a tile suddenly slid across the table. I sat back, scratching my head. For a minute nothing happened, relief pouring into me. But, as soon as I scooped up my tiles and dropped them into a bag, something slid again. I craned forward, determined to prove to myself that I was imagining things. This time, however, I watched, idiotically, as Nova’s tiles rearranged themselves on the board. I blinked rapidly, and when the tiles didn’t stop moving, I scrambled out of my chair. Nova just continued to sit there, hypnotized. An I slid up, then an N moved right, and then a V slipped into place. The rest of the letters followed. Invite me in, it read.

“What the fuck?” I took several steps back until I was leaning against the wall. “If this is a joke, I ain’t laughing, Nova,” I said. But Nova didn’t glance up. Instead, she nodded as if in response to an unspoken question. Nodded as though bewitched by a voice I couldn’t hear.

“Dude, stop, you’re freaking me out,” I said. “I get it. You’re a weirdo.” But Nova retained the same dead stare for a while before looking up and widening her lips into a clown-psychotic grin.

“Well, hello, there,” she said in a gruff voice, similar to that of a chain smoker. At one point I entertained the possibility that maybe she’d hit PLAY on a tape recorder she’d hidden under the table. Then again, I doubted Nova owned a tape recorder. Shoot, I didn’t think she knew how to use one.

Over time, it would become obvious that it was far from a prank, and I wish I’d seen the signs then. I would have saved myself a headache or twenty.

II. You consult a telepathic witch

There was no denying that Nova was not herself—quite literally. For a prank, it was far too elaborate and impossible to pull off unless you were some sort of deity. Nobody could learn to speak Aramaic in a matter of hours, and I have never seen little flames flicker in anybody's pupils. Yet Nova made the impossible possible.

After the Scrabble tiles spelled out their cryptic message, Nova pushed back from the table and announced she was in the mood for a game of hide-and-seek, which turned out to be even worse than Scrabble, as, I soon learned, she could run so impossibly fast that she'd often turn into a blurry streak. I'd never known her to be so physically active. In fact, Nova stress-ate more than any person I knew, which meant she could not run very fast or at all.

Nevertheless, I played along, mostly because I was frightened by Nova's sudden telepathy. No matter where I hid, she had no trouble ferreting out my location, like when I wedged myself into the hollow of the tree-trunk and she pulled me out, saying, "You can't hide from me, but you can most certainly try." Fortunately, the odds were still with me, because, she soon retreated into her room, where she'd devote all day to writhing in bed and sometimes bleating like a goat.

Once out of sight, where nothing, least of all sunlight, could touch her, Nova's condition worsened. Her skin began to sheen with patches of fish scale and reek of urine, almost like a New York City alley. One morning I'd awoken to find that she'd made a diminutive oak tree grow in the center of the room. Once or twice I saw gnomes sprawled out in front of the tree, tanning in a pool of sunlight.

The upside, if I had to think of one, was that our parents were never home. They were either too busy with their careers or cheating on each other to grace us with their time. Still, the few times they bothered to check in on us, I'd promise them to look after Nova, even if the irritation in my voice said otherwise. I didn't want to imagine the kinds of rumors that would circulate if I failed to restore her to normalcy. Boy with freak show sister on the verge of desperation, the headlines would read, accompanied by a trail of finger-pointing. But, in all truthfulness, I was scared shitless. Apparently, Nova could also make a silver crucifix mysteriously appear in her room, force it to come alive and torture it every night at midnight. It would bleed and scream out in agony, the cross smudged red. All the while, Nova would jeer and howl with inhuman glee.

It was during one of those sleepless nights, after I'd shut myself in my room and jammed earplugs into my ears, that I went online and found the witch. I sat at my computer, staring at the screen for half an hour and thinking of a way to put my despair into words. Finally, I typed supernatural helper into the search box. I scrolled down the page until I found the address to an occult shop only seven minutes away from home. I didn't even check out the website. I simply tore a strip of paper from the corner of a notebook and jotted down the address.

That same night, before the clock chimed midnight, I skulked out of the house, biked to the town center with the address in hand, and marched into the occult shop. I'd walked by the shop more times than I can tick off in my hands, but maybe because of the black-tinted glass window, I never looked closely enough. It was obvious from the moment I entered that it was owned by a witch. Inside, a round, candle-dotted hall lay before me. Incense crackled and burned in bowls on tables, cloaking the room in white. Black cats slunk out from behind bookcases weighed down with crude busts of alien-looking faces and laced through my legs. In one corner of the shop, a claw-foot cauldron burped out blue smoke. On shelves were bottles filled with shimmering potions. The label on one of them read: The Puck Effect—to make lovers break up. Great. Even the witch read Shakespeare.

"What brings you here so late?" said a voice through the smoke.

I wheeled around and let my eyes drift to the back of the store. The witch stood behind the counter, wearing a dreadful pointed hat adorned with stuffed ravens. Their wings were outstretched as though they were flying in midair. She stuck a giant goldfish into a bubble and palmed it toward the ceiling where it floated with all the others. I tipped my head back to look at the goldfish. They looked miserable and swollen. I imagined them exploding and fish guts smearing the inside of the bubbles. I shook my head. I had a mission, and the goldfish were not it.

"I'm worried about my sister," I said, my admission shocking to my ears. I was not one to readily confess that I do, in fact, worry about others. I'd always perceived it as a sign of weakness, and perhaps that in itself was weak.

"Ah, from the moment you walked in, I sensed great distress in you," the witch said, unsurprised. She cleared what sounded like slimy goo from her throat and narrowed her eyes at me.

“My sister is not herself,” I said. “Strange things have been happening around the house, and I was hoping you had a potion to make her better.”

“That’s not how potions work. I need to know more,” she said.

One of the cats leaped onto the counter and arched its back, purring. The witch absentmindedly passed a hand through its fur. She then walked out from behind the counter and said, “Let me read your mind.” I opened my mouth to protest, but she hushed me, shut her eyes and put two fingers on my forehead. She took a deep breath and held it in. I imagined the way we’d look to a stranger, a boy and a witch in what looked terribly like an imitation of a priestly blessing, but with a lot of groaning and creasing of the witch’s forehead. I noticed a mole like a piercing on her nose. It was bean-sized and hairy. Stereotypical, ugly witch. The ravens on her hat loomed over me, threatening and with beaks slightly unhinged.

Just when I thought I’d have to live with her fingers on my face, she clutched a hand to her heart and gasped, as though she were looking into the eyes of a boogeyman. I doubted mind-reading was accurate, but I reckoned it was not a good idea to challenge a witch’s expertise. The witch already had an advantage over me—her spells. I did not need any of that right now. At last, as the contents of the cauldron bubbled over, her eyes quivered open.

“Oh, dear,” she said, “you do have a problem. We’re dealing with a common case of possession.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

The witch raised an eyebrow. “It’s quite easy to understand. A demon is living in your sister’s body.”

“Rubbish. Demons don’t exist. And why would anyone want to possess Nova? She’s already a freak anyway,” I declared.

“Ah, but that’s what they want you to think. But do not worry, incredulous one,” she continued. “It just so happens that I have a simple solution.”

She turned and lumbered into an open door covered with a bead curtain. A moment later, she came back out, holding a vial containing a clear liquid.

“This is holy water,” she said. “Drink it and command the demon to leave your sister’s body. Holy water, combined with the rite of exorcism,

is more powerful, especially if the former is blessed by a witch.” She rotated the vial between her hands and mumbled in what I assumed was an ancient witch’s language. She offered it to me.

I hesitated, but, finally, I grabbed the vial.

“Now go,” said the witch. “It’s almost closing time and I have a ritual to attend to.”

Just as I walked out of the store, she cackled out, “I’ll mail you the bill. And don’t worry, I know where you live.” I mouthed a What?, shook my head, and pedaled back home. Despite the autumnal chill, sweat dampened my palms and armpits. In my desperation, I trusted the witch, but, now, a twinge of doubt poked my stomach. The witch wouldn’t lie. Or would she?

III. Understand that you are not an exorcist

Back home, I went into the kitchen and poured the witch-blessed holy water into a glass. I gulped it down and then ran my tongue over my lips. I waited a minute. I didn’t feel any differently, but I supposed it would be a while before it took effect. In the meantime, I decided to head up the stairs and into the room where my sister—the demon—pounded her face against the pillow. It reminded me of a pigeon pecking at bread-crumbs. Since the possession, the atmosphere in the room felt crushing, as though I were a slave carrying a pharaoh’s palanquin on my shoulders. The stench of urine saturated the air and every corner of the room. I pinched my nose between my thumb and forefinger. The demon had managed to slowly efface the last traces of my sister’s former self and mold them into something more sinister. Her tongue was forked and long. She looked up and the flames in her eyes burned orange.

“And what do we have here? My stupid brother!” She howled at the fake moon hanging by a black cord from the ceiling.

I cracked my knuckles and said, “I command you to leave.” I even made sure to inject confidence into my voice, but apparently it didn’t work, because my sister rolled over her bed, guffawing.

“Yes, yes, of course I shall leave, Your Majesty.” She bowed in mockery and then bellowed with more laughter.

A hell-fire warmth spread over my cheeks, but I still walked over to where the demon laid, pulled her hand in mine, and said, “I drank holy water. I am powerful. Now leave.”

She gasped.

Her head lolled to one side and her body went limp. She hit the bed face down. In the silence that ensued, she pretended to snore, whistling sounds escaping through her lips. I was certain I'd cast out the demon, but, of course, it was a deceiver, for no sooner had I sighed in relief than she opened her eyes, raised her head, and yelled, "Surprise! Want to play hide-and-seek?"

I knew squat about demons, and apparently neither did the witch for that matter.

The problem was that the next exorcist was booked solid for the next three months. That meant three months of listening to the Christ yelp in pain. Three months of no sleep. Three months of hide-and-seek. Maybe the witch had a sleeping draught, I wondered. Instead, I went back online and looked up the rite of exorcism. A long Latin poem came up, which I spent hours piecing out and learned it said something about commanding the demon in some dude's name.

How hard can uttering a few Latin words be? I decided to go at it again, as this time I would be armed with more than just the witch's advice. I belted back what was left of the holy water and stepped into Nova's room. She clung to the wall like a fly, scaling it and working her away across the ceiling. Her fingernails were black and curled spirally, like a snail's shell.

"Does brainless sheep Sebastian want to play?" Her tongue flicked in and out of her mouth. Despite the near-absence of light, except for a black candle burning on the nightstand, I noticed the purplish tone to Nova's skin; it almost looked as if she'd been repeatedly hurling herself against the wall.

I bit the inside of my cheek and tried to project confidence, maybe even anger. "You're not welcome here," I said. "I want my sister back or else I will exorcise you."

Perhaps there was something powerful about convincing yourself that you were confident even if you weren't, because the demon looked down at me, stunned. I thrust a hand into my pocket and rummaged for the piece of paper where I'd written down the Latin poem. I began:

"Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus, omnis satanica potestas, omnis incursi." I wish I could say I'd succeeded, but seconds after I began reciting, the demon cackled madly. Annoyance flared up in her eyes.

“If that’s the game you want to play, that’s the game we shall play,” she said, loosening her hold from the ceiling and descending swiftly to the ground. A scream of shock burred up in my throat, something primal and loud with worry, but before it could reach soprano levels, Nova’s body lurched to a halt, floating instead three inches off the floor.

According to the guide I’d found online, the demon will perform magnificent feats, and even expose secrets you once deemed forgotten, but even then, it is imperative that you ignore it and complete the ritual. I recited another line: “*Infernalis adversarii, omnis legio, omnis congregatio et secta diabolica.*” A violent gust of wind kicked up in the room, sending books flying from their shelves and scattering pencils across the floor. The diminutive oak tree bent sideways, and the gnomes poked their heads out, eyes bulging with fear.

Demon Nova rolled her eyes back into her head and boomed out, grinning, “You cannot expel me, you imbecile. Your Latin is poorer than your IQ.”

“*Ergo draco maledicte et omnis legio diabolica adjuramus te per Deum,*” I recited, blocking out the demon’s taunts.

“*Tu stultus es,*” said the demon, her body assuming an upright position. She extended her arms and aligned them with the arms of the crucifix on the wall behind. A mockery of Christ. Though Nova’s now milk-white eyes froze my body, they were nothing compared to her wolfish grin. It betrayed a certain hunger, but not for food, but for something even more valuable—perhaps souls.

“This is such a bore. I am leaving and you’ll never hear from us again, you brainless sheep,” she said.

Maybe she was right and I was a dumb sheep. I knew should have begged her to stay, tugged at her hand and grabbed her leg, but no. This is what I did: I segued into a shorter Latin poem.

“*Pater noster qui es in coelis.*”

The demon pressed her hands against her ears.

“*Sanctificetur nomen tuum.*”

Shrieking.

“*Adveniat regnum tuum.*”

Nova ripped the curtain from the window and propped it open.

“*Fiat voluntas tua.*”

“Fiat voluntas tua.”

She placed a foot on the windowsill, seized a branch from the tree outside, and leaped out.

I crumpled the poem in my hands and raced over to the window, shouting, “Nova! No!” I leaned over, but Nova had already vanished, and only her phantom screams echoed through the house. It was dark, and the night world seemed undisturbed, except for the fog rubbing against anything it encountered. Weirdly enough, it felt warmer inside than out. Was temperature another thing that Nova could manipulate? Yes, yes, it was, I concluded, a sense of defeat pricking my gut.

IV. Impatience is not a virtue

Seriously. Had I waited for the exorcist rather than taking matters into my own hands, I wouldn't be trudging through snow, two months later, looking for Nova. So far, I've had no luck, and something tells me I won't. I dare not imagine what the witch would say about this. Probably something along the lines of, “I told you to drink the holy water, you fool.”

Judges' Commentary

Poetry Judge

Sheila Squillante

FIRST PLACE:

Jessie Meyer - Collection

A poem of love and, ultimately, loss, whose imagery invites the reader into incredible intimacies rendered with vivid precision and gorgeously musical, restrained language: glasses pushed up the bridge of a nose, the smell of the beloved's hands "sawdust and black paint, blue ink/and piano keys," "gut buckling like punched honeycomb," and this stunner: "That night I locked away/the silent hitch of your breath at the back of/your throat as I moved above you..." I know that hitch. I've heard it. I've made it, but I've never considered it the way this poet has. I'm so grateful for this line; it will stay with me and make me pay closer attention. I'm grateful for this love poem that aches with such singularity, such sincerity.

SECOND PLACE:

Allison Shannon - Dripping Red

A poem that enacts how memory can be triggered by anything, how objects in our daily world can stand in for powerful, sometimes painful emotion. Here, the leaf of tree in autumn becomes a wine bottle, thudding to the hardwood floor of a house inhabited by childhood and alcoholism. This poet does a beautiful job moving us from that initial image, into the not-so-long-ago past where a child must deal with things no child should have to deal with, and back out into a present moment ripe with clarity and resolve. The poem's ending, with the speaker observing "that tree, sighing and shaking, from the bus stop," is like a gut punch: it's just another day.

THIRD PLACE:

Gary Scaramella - Love Letter (From a Cosmicist)

A poem of love and, ultimately, loss, whose imagery invites the reader into incredible intimacies rendered with vivid precision and gorgeously musical, restrained language: glasses pushed up the bridge of a nose, the smell of the beloved's hands "sawdust and black paint, blue ink/and piano keys," "gut buckling like punched honeycomb," and this stunner: "That night I locked away/the silent hitch of your breath at the back of/your throat as I moved above you..." I know that hitch. I've heard it. I've made it, but I've never considered it the way this poet has. I'm so grateful for this line; it will stay with me and make me pay closer attention. I'm grateful for this love poem that aches with such singularity, such sincerity.

Sheila Squillante is the author of the poetry collection, *Beautiful Nerve* (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2016), and three chapbooks of poetry: *In This Dream of My Father* (Seven Kitchens, 2014), *Women Who Pawn Their Jewelry* (Finishing Line, 2012) and *A Woman Traces the Shoreline* (Dancing Girl, 2011). She is also co-author, along with Sandra L. Faulkner, of the writing craft book, *Writing the Personal: Getting Your Stories Onto the Page* (Sense Publishers, 2015). Recent work has appeared in places like *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Indiana Review*, *Waxwing*, *Menacing Hedge* and *River Teeth*. She teaches in the MFA program in creative writing at Chatham University, where she edits *The Fourth River*, a journal of nature and place-based writing. From her dining room table, she edits the blog at *Barrelhouse*.

Art Judge

Don Wunderlee

FIRST PLACE:

Joseph Schairer - Edge of Nowhere, Cusp of Nothing

This wall mounted sculpture has a commanding and uplifting presence. Although the title suggests an indifference to a specific place or thing and more a state of mind the piece is filled with poetic meaning. One can get the impression that it might just sail or fly right off into space. There is stature and elegance in the geometric collaboration of natural pine slats deftly arranged by this highly creative artist. The added twine and what appear to be saw blades offers an added touch of ambiguity to the piece. Quite wonderful!

SECOND PLACE:

Kyle Broderick - Familiarity

This photograph is fascinating. It has a whimsical, playful tone yet there is an air of mystery about it as well. Who is this hula hooping young woman smack dab in the middle of an auto-free colorfully painted intersection? She's being eyed by a wall painting of the universally familiar image of Girl with a Pearl Earring. Our hula hooper looks over her shoulder back at another mysterious woman. They are all characters in some old town familiar to some and brought to life to be shared with us by the imaginative staging and creative skill of the photographer.

THIRD PLACE:

Jenna Cianciolo - October 2016

Trick or treat? All kidding aside. This is not an easy image to look at. It is scary, it is fierce. Two sides of a face split by a white vertical partition that distracts us only momentarily but is no contest for that stare, those teeth. It holds your gaze because the drawing skill of the artist is so good. Not all art is readily assimilated and October may fit into that category. It is challenging. One can only imagine what this gifted artist will share with us in the future.

Don Wunderlee is an abstract painter whose work reflects an evolving search for an inventive style and a creative use of paint. There are also influences in his work from his careers in puppetry and music. Don's training as a docent at the Yale Art Gallery was the final synthesis that inspired him to paint full-time. The dynamic presentation of color in his artwork, from a vibrant spectrum to moody hues, appeals to a wide range of clients. Don's work is nationally and internationally purchased and included in prestigious corporate and private collections. He has established partnerships with ADC, Art Design Consultants and Blink Art Resource in Cincinnati, OH, and Studio El Fine Art Print Publishers in Oakland, CA. Don is also on the faculty at the Neighborhood School of Music where he teaches guitar.

Fiction Judge

Christopher Torockio

FIRST PLACE:

Gary Dixon - He is Sleeping, For Now

“He is Sleeping Peacefully, For Now” is an ingeniously structured and linguistically stunning story, wrought with tension right from the start and increasing in depth as it moves toward its heartbreaking but beautiful conclusion. Told from the subconsciousness of a comatose young man who has attempted suicide, the narrator struggles to reconcile who we was supposed to be with who he truly is. His lover is at his bedside, but his mother--a pious woman more concerned with her reputation within her church and community, and unable to accept her son’s lifestyle--is not. When she finally does show up at the hospital, the narrator, from the depths of his coma, listens to the conversation between his mother and his lover as they try to discover some semblance of common ground. In doing so, this author displays an uncanny understanding of the ways we talk--or don’t talk--to the people we love, handling the intricacies of family and commitment with brutal clarity. This world will linger in my memory like a treasured photograph.

SECOND PLACE:

Madison Feshler - Living with Dementia

“Living with Dementia” is rendered with heart and honesty; it’s a wonderfully detailed story, masterfully capturing a single day in a much larger and nuanced world. The narrator is charged with the task of “babysitting” her aging grandfather. They try to push through, playing checkers, a game they played together when the narrator was a child, but it soon becomes clear that her grandfather is incapable of even the simplest of activities. As the day progresses, the love she feels for him is evident, but this love increasingly is undercut by frustration, leading to a resolution that is compounded of equal parts hope and sadness.

THIRD PLACE:

Beckon DiGaetano - Caramelized Nostalgia

“Caramelized Nostalgia” exhibits a brilliant use of perspective and time progression in exploring tricky family relationships and societal woes, leading to tender moments of self-discovery. In expertly managed second-person, the narrator speaks directly to a homeless man who used to hang around the playground where the narrator grew up, handing out caramel candies to the delighted children (and occasionally horrified parents). Now 16, struggling in school and in his relationships at home--particularly with his father--the narrator has taken to cutting school to go to the playground to watch the homeless man, who still hangs around, passing out the same caramel candies. When the homeless man suddenly disappears, the narrator is left to ponder the expectations that society has of all of us, and his expectations of himself.

Christopher Torockio is the author of two story collections and two novels, most recently *The Soul Hunters* (Black Lawrence Press, 2016). His fiction has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Willow Springs*, and many others. A native of Pittsburgh, he now lives in Connecticut with his wife and son, where he is a professor of creative writing at Eastern Connecticut State University.

Judges' Commentary

Editor's Choice: Poetry

Poetry Editor

Amanda Ives

Terri Davis - I Have Sat in One Chair Nine Different Ways

"I Have Sat in One Chair Nine Different Ways" the speaker admits to acts committed that most people would summarize as "something I'm not proud of" or "not good." The honesty is harrowing and follows the speaker through silly offenses like stepping on someone else's flowers to intentional physical violence. Despite the harsh truthfulness there is also a gentleness in each way the speaker has sat in the figurative chair. The poem begs the reader to confront their own horrors. The last line is heavy, but a place of delicate work where the readers may question their personal lives and self righteousness through the speakers own narrative. This brings the title and the "ways to sit" together, and allows the reader to consider the way that people, generally and personally, act in a seamless series of insightful images.

Amanda Ives is not obsessed with the Beatles because John was a mean dude and Rocco's the joke and then there's "the other guy" and that's pretty sad and Paul is cute but only in British standards. Their music is pretty rad though and that's really cool because Amanda kinda likes "I Am the Walrus" and once Amanda made an eggman in a ceramics class but then someone broke it and Amanda was really sad about it for like two weeks. Amanda is totally over it. It's fine.

Editor's Choice: Art

Art Editor

Savannah Hastey

Savannah Hastey - Woodland's Defender

“Woodland’s Defender” The viewer will immediately be stopped in their tracks as soon as they make contact with this defender’s eyes. Alluring and composed of deeply intense colors, they suck one in and make the viewer wonder how she became this forest’s guardian. The colors are rich and well displayed, ranging from the deep greens and browns of the forest in the background, to her flowing and detailed hair, to her “armor.” With her mouth partially open, one is curious as to what she could possibly be getting ready to say, with her slight smile seeming to beckon you closer to be privy to a secret. Straight out of a fantasy world!

Savannah Hastey is a senior art education major. Savannah has been painting and teaching classes for about 2 years, and also throw pottery and draw. Working with Folio was a huge step for Savannah in breaking out of her shell at Southern.

Editor's Choice: Fiction

Fiction Editor

Justin Hitchcock

Stephanie Sirois - Somei Yoshino

“Somei Yoshino” effectively encapsulates the complexities of the human condition in a way that is as equally poignant as it is moving. Set in Japan during WWII, this monumental moment in history serves as the backdrop for a story of loss, acceptance and suffering. After her husband departs for war, the focal character must raise their newborn child and adjust to life alone. At its core, this story provides an important reminder of the unconditional and undying nature of love.

Justin Hitchcock is currently studying at Southern Connecticut State University to become a secondary education English teacher. Various forms of his writing have appeared in Fresh Ink, Folio, and CT Viewpoints. While fiction plays an important role in his life, he is also an artist and musician and loves experimenting with new forms of expression.

About Our Contributors

JESSIE MEYER is a returning adult student working to finish a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She works part-time as a swim coach and water fitness trainer. Her interests include tarot reading, watercolor painting, and going to IKEA and spending more money on plants than furniture.

ALLISON SHANNON is in her final semester as an English student where her focus has been creative writing. She started writing when she was twelve, and she hopes to continue to produce short stories and novels for as long as she can. When she's not writing or studying, Allison enjoys reading any available book and blogging about politics and pop culture.

GARY SCARAMELLA is an English major in his junior year. If he's not writing, he's probably somewhere eating raspberries, sleeping, or thinking about space. If you want to say hi, go ahead - he's usually friendly.

TERRI DAVIS is an English Major at Southern Connecticut State University with a concentration in Secondary Education. Reading and writing has always been her passion. She used to skip her high school classes frequently to spend her day reading at bookstores (instead of being cool like other teenagers). She is a mother, and a slightly older non-traditional student – How do you do, fellow kids? She is honored to have some of her poems chosen for Folio.

YARELIS CANALES is a second-year senior here at SCSU and is majoring in Social Work, which means that she is going to be rich when she graduates. Stay tuned, folks. She's a commuter but works on campus in the Office of Student Involvement so she practically lives at school for free! Yay! Yarelis loves cats, coffee, and showering twice a day. She's a real treat.

BECKON DIGAETANO is graduating Spring of 17 with a degree in Psychology and a minor in Creative Writing. Story telling is one way to immortalize our world and Beckon works to understand all perspectives. She writes to express the humanity in the every day person and hopes we hold all people as highly as we hold ourselves.

ANDREW JANZ would like to thank all of the professors and peers that have made learning at Southern Connecticut State University an invaluable experience. “Je ne dis les autres, sinon pour d'autant plus me dire.” – MM

KAZMIRA THOMAS is a college senior who overuses the word superfluous. Favorite pastimes include arguing on Facebook, and petting strangers' dogs. If she's not eating, she's probably sleeping, or buying useless Groupons. Upon graduation, she hopes to move to NYC and edit resumes in her room all day.

JUSTIN MATTHEW HITCHCOCK led a promising life. However, he died shortly after submitting his poetry to Folio. Some say, on grey December nights his ghost can be heard roaming the halls of the English Department.

BRADLEY WETMORE is sophomore at SCSU and is majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. He began with the mindset to be a fiction writer, but after taking more classes in poetry writing has shifted his mindset. Bradley would like to thank SCSU Professor Vivian Shipley, Graduate Teaching Assistant Rebecca O'Bern, friends, and family for the support on his journey in poetry.

SAM EVANS is an English Major both in her heart and according to SCSU records. As much as she looks forward to graduation and a bright future of being rejected from paid publications, she still has a few more semesters' worth of credits to go, during which she plans to continue indulging her favorite hobbies of racking up student loan debt and making questionable life choices.

JASON MANGLES used to have a mustache and everyone hated looking at him. After he shaved it, people still hate looking at him.

JOSEPH SCHAIRER is in his Junior year at Southern, majoring in Sculpture. He is enthusiastic about coffee, playing with cats, science fiction, and building things.

KYLE BRODERICK is a senior, graduating with a bachelor's in studio art with a graphic design concentration. He enjoys taking photographs and making music.

JENNA CIANCIOLO is currently studying abroad in Italy this semester and wants you to know the food and art are better than what you'll ever imagine. She wants you to know that she's grateful for the publication and knows that you're all jealous that she's in Italy and you're not. If you need her, she'll be the wide-eyed American girl on a quest for finding the best wine and pizza in all of Florence. Ciao!

KIM REYNOLDS is currently a Nursing student at Southern, taking painting classes on the side. Kim is interested in creating works that explore other worlds and characters of her imagination through digital art and oil painting. The unhealthy amounts of anime she watches certainly influence her process, along with the video games and books that take up the rest of her free time.

KATHRYN FELLMETH is a junior at SCSU. At the age of 7, Kathryn celebrated placing second place in the state of Connecticut for her dinosaur drawing. Little did she know, that like the inhabitants of this planet, so too would her artistic talent evolve.

MARY RUDZIS is a junior studying journalism and studio art. She spends her time seeking out new vegan restaurants, petting her dog Penny, and helping out with the Humane Society club on campus. She'd like to thank her friends and parents, as well as T. Wiley Carr for inspiring her to create new work and try new things.

GARY DIXON is a native of Missouri and Ohio, who recently transferred to Southern from THEE Ohio State University. His poetry has been featured in the anti-bullying anthology "Letters to My Bully", as well as "The Colored Section"; a performance piece produced by Gamal Brown, which speaks to the histories and atrocities of lynching in our not so recent past. Gary works at the S.A.G.E. Center on campus and is overly excited and anxious as he works on finishing his English/Creative Writing degree in 2018.

MADISON FESHLER is a sophomore in the Honors College studying English and Psychology at SCSU. She plays on the softball team, is an honors college peer mentor, and a member of Active Minds on campus. Madison adores her husky, Mia, and is a regular pizza eater and tea drinker.

STEPHANIE SIROIS is an English major who consists almost entirely of chocolate and espresso. She suffers from multiple unhealthy obsessions which include (but are not limited to): her cats, books, coffee, and movie nights. She'd like to have a house in the middle of nowhere, but wonders how she'd be able to get ice cream home before it melts.

JOLEE PAROLISE is a junior at SCSU. She is an Early Childhood Education major and resides in Branford, CT with her parents, three siblings and a cat and a dog. She is a Beatles enthusiast.

TYLER KORPONAI is happily living outside the United States of America. His printed short story, “Breakfast,” satire of the 2016 Presidential election, is a fine testament as to why he’s considering not returning. Furthermore, he thinks the irony surrounding the racist notion and polemical rhetoric of an “illegal immigrant” in America, and his time abroad potentially exceeding the allotted short term student visa should he appeal for asylum, an idea he’s been playing around with, is hysterical (he believes there’s a good joke there somewhere). He wishes the rest of you good luck in his absence, much love!

JESSICA ROGINSKI is a junior elementary education major with a secondary major in interdisciplinary studies, specializing in STEM and English. She works at the Southern News as the Online Editor. Jessica aspires to teach by day and write children’s books by night.

CHASE CHARBONNEAU is a sophomore majoring in Creative writing. He hopes to one day be a full time author. For now he is working on improving his skills as a writer. He doesn’t care if he ever becomes famous for his work, he just wants to provide for his family while doing something he loves.

GEMA GUEVARA is a sophomore majoring in English and minoring in Journalism. She is a compulsive buyer of books—mostly of magical realism and middle-school novels—and lives in idealized versions of reality. Her goal is to write a children’s novel that will hopefully appease the pressures of her inner-child. She would like to thank her parents for encouraging her to write, her classmates for their honest feedback, and Spotify for vitalizing her creativity. This is her first Folio publication.

Folio would like to thank...

Everyone who submitted their work

Jeff Mock

Our featured readers & artists

Open-mic readers

Reading attendees

Our members

Tim Parrish

Rachel Furey

Cindy Stretch

Sal Rizza

The Media Board

Bookmarks English Club

The English Department Interns

Charlene Cammarasana

Daphney Alston

Denise Bentley-Drobish

Tom Dorr

The Fireplace Lounge

Sheila Squillante

Don Wunderlee

Christopher Torockio

Past Folio Staff

Washington D.C. AWP

Sarah Kay

Jesse Howard

Blood, Sweat, & Tears

Roscoe & Simba

Bradley Aphrodite Wetmore

Kevin D. Redline

Banana Laffy Taffys

Dr. JMH

Coffee

Folio's Kurt Vonnegut stuffed doll

The Official Folio Collection

Sushi Palace

Cheese