



THE PEN

SPRING 2012

A collection of fiction, poetry
and art by USCB students

The Pen

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A very special thanks to Dr. Carl Eby,
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“The maker of a sentence launches out into the infinite
and builds a road into Chaos and old Night,
and is followed by those who hear him with
something of wild, creative delight.”

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

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FALL 2011

The Midpoint

As I stand at the Midpoint
of a circumference of three doors, with no door knobs
I look around into every door hole
and see what could be my life
what shouldn't be my life
and what has been my life.
I get chills up my spine, I hear a loud "BOOM!"
I turn around to go back to the Midpoint.
There is a toolbox, I open it.
The parts to only one door knob.
I contemplate, contemplate, contemplate.
I feel GOD's eyes looking over my shoulder,
making sure I choose the right one.
I put the knob on the door;
the door of promise, the door of success.
I turn the knob, it is locked.
The door of promise ? The door of success?
But where is the key?
I stand at the door, filled with doubt
I hear a "TINK!"
I turn around and...

Ashley Cochran

This is Not the End.

This is not the end.

It's merely a new beginning.

Sometimes, time seems to bend

and you may not be winning,

but this is not the end.

You just have to keep pushing.

We may need hands to lend,

but the relationships keep slipping.

This is not the end.

A heart that keeps breaking,

one that others don't understand.

One day there will be mending.

'Cause this is not the end.

Your hopes you keep giving

up. But don't give that up my friend.

Though love you aren't receiving...

This is not the end.

One day we'll stop breathing,

though, on death don't hit send.

Death is so deceiving.

This is not the end.

Friends and family are leaving,

which not always they intend,

Their bell tolls may have been ringing,

but this is not the end.

Your heart will keep beating,

and your emotions will blend.

Within my words you'll keep seeing,

this is not the end.

Time Bomb.

Tick tock...

Tick tock...

goes the clock in my life.

It doesn't know how much I loathe it.

Tick tock...

Tick tock...

A constant continuation.

One I could do without hearing.

Tick tock...

Tick tock...

This clock must be necessary.

Without it, do we lose existence?

Tick tock...

Tick tock...

Every second. Every minute. Every hour. Every day.

The clock counts.

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

The ticking gets quicker,

The tocking grows louder.

This clock's such a pain...

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

An annoying pattern,

Knowing the loss of time.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

The clock seems to slow.

Where did the time go?

Tick...

Tock...

Ashley Cochran

This Lie.

Here I am,
right in front of you,
where I swore I'd always be.
This promise means more to you,
than it ever could to me.
Through these times,
I still remain.
Even through this awful pain.
That promise was no promise.
This lie is just a lie.
So long ago I should
have just gone and said goodbye.
I don't love you.
Never had I.
So maybe it's time,
to end this masked charade.
Lets end it.
But who am I
to hurt you by this lie?
So here I lie,
right in front of you,
where I never swore I'd be.
This promise obviously meant more to me.

Insanity

Insanity

is to be sold

to leave without

all you hold.

Once you bend

and once you break

there's nothing to mend

no soul to take.

If what you see

is what you get

then I'm only blind

inside of this.

Falling into

deeper blackness,

numbing darkness,

my last breath I drew.

Waking to a calming light,

I've survived another night.

David Goff

Swing

It's happened so quickly,
as quickly as the ink
flows out of this pen onto this paper.
As quickly as the swing of this song
flows into the air, into my head.
As quickly as I smile when I see you.
I'm not sure, really. Is this real?
I can't tell if it's possible, and I hope
you're feeling the same way.
If we both acted too quickly, what
might happen? Would we risk
ruining each other for the instant
gratification? Should we tell each other yet?
Do you even —

Flood

The city lights cast a cool glow over the water
flowing so confidently across the ground.

Filling the streets, moving concrete.

Turbulence fills my ears as the rush
comes to a sudden halt against the
hard slab of the face of this building.

Should it let the flow in? Water streams
around the structure, seeps into a cracked
window. But the wall is yielding.

You're only miles away, and even though you're
probably safe, for now at least, I don't think my
wall will hold for much longer.

And there's nothing you can do.

So I can only smile, and let the love push harder.

Untitled

I'm crying.
I'm angry that
I can never have
the Thing I want,
what I need.
And I try not to
think about it
the Thing I want
What I need,
but it always
comes up again
and I feel so
helpless.
This Thing I want
what I need
It will never happen,
can never happen.
It's impossible
and a waste of time,
thinking of it.
It's so close
right in front of
me
but even though
I can feel it,
What I need,
I can hear it,
smell it,
taste it,

touch it,
it won't touch back.
It taunts me with its
haunting melody.
And I try.
I try to push it
away,
but it never works.
It's always here
and it's never going
away.
And I know I shouldn't,
but I listen to this song.
I feel it within,
inside me.
And I cry,
cry more
and it won't stop.
Hwær ob þa so bæn?
I lay my head down
and eventually
it stops
and I'm left with
warmth.
Warmth knowing
it can never be.
He smiles,
and I smile back
but what's hidden
behind?

David Goff

Pathos

Maybe I've finally found my muse.

When he smiles, I can't help but to feel
warm.

Full of vigor I drink it. I take it in, it becomes me.
But then I think (damn thoughts) and it's not so
warm anymore.

What's hidden behind? I've read it before, and it
strikes me again. How can he, the one whose smile
fills the room with the light of the Sun really be
as dark as the Moon?

His smile fades, and almost perfectly in time,
my mind wanders farther into the depths.

Cold.

It's cold here, the place where I am now.

It threatens to consume me, to freeze me here.

But I can't let it. Tomorrow (let's not get too hopeful),
maybe the next day,

I'll be able to see it again.

Laced with the abstract, I finally wander back to
Reality. And it hits me. These feelings,
he brings them out. Someone so like me,
but eternally different. Never will we be one.

And now I'm writing this, and I realise.

Maybe I've finally found my muse.

The Girl of My Dreams

The way I feel ...
I never felt for any other person.
If we went on a date
I'd make sure it's perfect .
We started off as friends .
No feelings , no flirting .
I think that's why my feelings
are almost to the ceiling .
Those other girls are appealing
but they don't tickle my fancy .
You always kept it real,
and I don't let those others girls put anything past me .
and if you ask me
I'll do anything for you while I'm here on this earth .
Your last did everything but love you
and show you what you're worth .
I'm not trying to get on your nerves
or feel like I'm rushing you.
I'm just letting you know that I'm
willing to put my trust in you .
No matter where my success takes me
or how far that plane flies .
I'm just letting you know I want you by my side.
To you ..
the girl of my dreams.

The Girl With the Tattoo

So there's this girl
& I'm addicted to her heart .
Better yet her art & there are many questions I want to
ask, but no clue on where to start .
Her heart's pretty big, but it beats quiet .
Started off with a few questions,
but I didn't want to get too private .
Told her I was different, but at first she didn't buy it .
I told her love is priceless and you & i ...
we should try it .
Throughout the conversation, her heart was still silent .
Thinking to myself what else i had to prove
to show her I'm not like these other dudes.
Her heart is still speechless ...
& the only thing I'm wondering is why her heart's not
beating.
Is it afraid?
of the thoughts & fears of being played?
Sorry sweetheart, but that's not how I was raised .
Hurting you was never my intention.
I'm more fascinated with your smile & ambitions.
Your heart is my scale
& I'm waiting on you.
But as for her heart,
yeah it was her tattoo.

Autumn

Leaf tumbles down on the violence of the wind,
torn at its edges and tossed until it reaches mud,
squalor less luxurious than branches,
muck and filth and human shoes and tires.
The green brilliance long faded away,
turned to darker shades and lifeless crackles,
soon to be forgotten amongst a thousand corpses
of once skyward-revering comrades.

The Threadbare Hope

My heart is still somewhere
in your rusty pickup
perhaps rolling under the seat,
with your empty water bottles.
You dropped it there
just before I was going to speak up.
If only my voice hadn't fallen in defeat
things would be different now.
There is still a part of me
that clings to the threadbare hope
that maybe in the future – no.
I always stop myself.
I won't indulge.
But then I remember
the smell of woodsmoke
in your jacket. I cringe.
It's that hollow spot again.
The one that is waiting.
And there I go.
But let's face it.
You didn't love me.
You let me go,
leaving me with
nothing.

Just
a threadbare hope.

The Process of Perfection

I'm Austin. Or rather, I was Austin. I'm now a random eight-digit number. I live in the present, of course, but I wish, with all of myself, that I lived in your future. Every day I fill up these empty hours by writing solutions to our problems, only to have them die when they make me incinerate the paper. I long for the ability to warn the people who made life this way, when they were still able to keep themselves from doing so. Or maybe they couldn't. Who knows?

I was born with an IQ of 150, which is high above the average. When my mother got early fetal ultrasounds, an abortion was recommended. But my parents, who were older and childless, kept me, knowing that my intelligence quotient would be my only flaw. However, the stress of me being in school, with the hatred spewed at me by teachers, drew them over the brink. When I was twelve, I was taken away from my home and led into a black patrol car and taken to a massive, square brick building. They have one every few blocks; no one outside knows what they are, but no one cares. Why should they? I remember being taken from my bed during the early morning hours and brought outside, carefully, as if they didn't want to break me, but also wanted to avoid touching me. I remember my mother closing the door behind me, a dreamy vague look on her face. I remember being dumped into this building and being knocked out, and waking up with a silver cord stuffed up each wrist, and pushing the sleeves of my shirt up to find small metal disks implanted into my arms. And I remember never cry-

Victoria Pivrotto

ing; not once, because I remember thinking that I would escape soon, at any cost.

All hope of that is gone now. Now, I go on the hot walker, as it is unceremoniously called, eight hours a day. I sleep on one of the hundreds of hammocks attached to the walls, and I walk, without fear now, on the glass platforms that everyone lives on; lugging myself up the glass staircases, because we're all always exhausted here. I take one shower a day in the clear glass cylinders, in front of hundreds of other people, but it doesn't bother me like it used to; they say there's no reason it should anyway. I'm surrounded by people of all ages, with all kinds of imperfections. Daniel claims that he also, was born with a high IQ; Daniel is even smarter than me, and a better person, too. He smiles a lot, and always is nice to the grounds people when they venture up to the higher platforms, wearing their navy suits, standing out amongst a sea of people in white scrubs, though they always ignore him, like they do everyone else. Sometimes at night, I feel the waves of despair filling up my lungs, choking me, and I sneak up to the highest platform, which lies directly under the glass roof. During the day it beams sunlight through the platforms and, like a magnifying glass, heats us up so we're always sweating. At night I can see the moon watching me, in the same place as it's always been, as long as man has walked the earth, even when we stopped seeing it. Sometimes Daniel's up there too, doing the same thing as me. Living, I think. Occasionally when we're both up there Daniel creeps his hand on top of mine, but that's it. Love is something that we all love to hate, because the people we love are the people who put us here, but the people who put us here are the people

we long for every moment. Daniel is the best thing about this place, but I would give him up a thousand times if I could go back home to my red bedspread and gauzy cream curtains, and a mother who made pancakes sometimes, and a father who bought me Christmas presents. I just want you to know that, lest you think that maybe I'm better off here.

Nowadays there are a ton of people that live here, I'd estimate a quarter more than when I first came. And these new people are beautiful and perfect, they don't have so obviously substandard I.Q.'s like Daniel and me (although Daniel tells me not to call my I.Q. bad, I still do though, habit, I guess) though they claim to have such problems. I said "Hi." to a new girl today and asked her why she was here, and she said that she had facial symmetry problems that weren't detected in early fetal ultrasounds. She was one of the prettiest girls I've ever seen, but that's what she said. When I first came here five years ago, most of the older people were severely deformed, sub-human, almost, possessing shocking physical and mental deformities, such as missing a limb, or speaking with an unintelligible lisp. The ones my age have problems like mine; typical stuff like basal intelligent quotients that weren't perfect or people with structural problems like hip-dysplasia. But now, the people coming in are almost perfect, though they claim to have been diagnosed with having horrible problems. I asked Daniel what he thought of these new people. I think I was worried about him "replacing" me, a thought that, when it finally occurred to me, brought warmth seeping into my face. Anyway, when I said that, Daniel didn't say anything, but I saw his eyes under the moonlight, frowning and shiny. His hand

Victoria Pivrotto

touched my face, it was languid and dry, like paper brushing against my cheek, and I knew that he was telling me that he was spent. I've seen it happen hundreds of times before, we push the bodies off the edge of the platforms onto the ground floor; people don't live long here.

My time on this platform is almost up, and soon I'll have to go and incinerate this (they know if you don't; I've tried, they made me go on the hot walker for eighteen hours). But, I feel better knowing that I wrote this, Daniel is up on the hot walker right now, his wires attached to the center column with a hundred other people, a breathing version of the mobile my parent's hung over my crib when I was a baby. I'd imagine that he'd approve of me spilling out like this; I've just realized that I want to make him happy. But even so, I'm not doing this for Daniel. I like to dream about the past, where people like me didn't end up in places like this. But, as I've been told from the very beginning, that would be impossible. Humans are the only clean, renewable source of energy that we have, and despite our many flaws, the world couldn't exist without us. Or so I've been told; but I'm not sure I believe it.

Good Trip

She spoke to me like wind chimes,
She had clover eyes and honey hair,
Her name changed throughout the week.
Barley, she said. Today it's Barley.
Tomorrow it may be Lark.
But yesterday it was Maple.
So here's my story about Maple-Barley-Lark.
She took me back to the woods.
To the wild.
Where the eggplant people danced
And the raspberry bushes were merry.
We sat in front of their fire,
We sat on mushroom seats.
She spoke to them like wind chimes,
They spoke to her like a breeze.
With morning creeping up on us
Dew on the ground beneath
We found ourselves flying.
Nevada, she said. We're going to Nevada.
But we'll be in Michigan soon.
And maybe we'll visit the ocean, too.
We chased penguins in Nevada
And crocodiles in Michigan
We saw seven tigers on our way to the ocean.
Not a single spider.
When we landed, it was a strange new land.
Everything felt so good.
Our skin was felt and everything was velvet.
But when we tried to put felt on felt,
All we got was sandpaper
And a big gulp of Tabasco sauce.
When we woke up, we were in a tangle.
Everything was new again.
Velvet, she said. Remember the velvet?
Forget about the sandpaper.
Remember the velvet.
And as Maple-Barley-Lark walked out my door,
She said, "Bon Voyage".
Good trip.

Taylor Webster

I Remember...

I remember the way I felt
The way my heart jumped
And the way it thumped

I remember the pain
I remember the tears
I remember the fear
Of losing you dear

I remember the flutters
From the pit of my stomach
To the tip of my throat
Also when my face
Would turn bloodshot red

I remember the smile
That made me melt
I remember your laugh
That was sincerely heart-felt

Oh the memories that fly
Within my mind
Of all the fun
And the hard times
But I know
That deep down inside
That you changed me so

Oh dear friend
I will always remember you
For years to come
Because I really thought
That you were the one

The Mask

There is this mask
That I created many years ago
To hide the real feelings
That hid the real me

The mask fits perfectly on my face
A gleaming smile
With no tears in the eyes
This was my true disguise

I have created this mask
To shield the world from the truth
To show them the girl I wish to be
Someone who is truly happy

Over the years the mask has had its problems
Strong emotions have cracked it
Chipped off layers
And worn out tremendously

The tools I have to fix it are never permanent
Every once in a while the mask falls apart
Which shows a glimpse of the shielded girl
And without any help, I find more ways to fix it

At times my emotions run so deep
That the mask falls off completely
But that only occurs when I am completely alone
So I hide behind my words
And write all these poems

I never expose entirely my whole self

Taylor Webster

No one knows the real me
At times, I don't even feel like
I know myself

I am tired of pretending
I have been hurt so many times
By the same few people
So they rip off my mask
Without even realizing it

When I am exposed so greatly
I hide in silence
Never to truly express how I feel
I shut down so you can't feel the pain
That runs through my brain

I wish I could control when this occurs
Warn my friends that it's falling apart
"The real me is appearing for the day
So please stand out of my way."

As time goes by
The real me never changes
Even though I expose myself
The problem never gets solved

I just want to rip this mask off
Not be forced to wear it every single day
Show the world a happier me
That is my one true dream

The Story of the Hole

Lost in the desert of my heart
Were miles upon miles of empty land
I wondered around looking for who I am
A boy appears who changes my life

Suddenly a shovel appeared in my hand
I began to dig a hole in this bare desert
The more I dug
The deeper my feelings developed.

Eventually my hole was deep enough
Where I could comfortably live in it
I looked up and noticed that the hole was too deep
I had no way to get out

Images encircled me in the hole.
Memories, desires, and dreams
Flashes onto the walls
All the images were about the boy
I feel in love with.

I felt happy in this hole.
I felt protected
Even though nothing was shielding me.
My heart was completely vulnerable in here

Rapidly the most horrible images began
surrounding the walls.
I couldn't get away
All the memories and nightmares

Lindsay Wilburn

That I was running away from
Were completely in my face
I was trapped.

The memories got more and more agonizing.
It felt like knives piercing my heart
To protect my heart I curled into a ball.
Protecting my chest from all of the pain
But it wasn't working
I had to get out of the hole somehow

I could hear a faded sound of voices
I glanced up and looking down in the hole
Were my friends and family
Calling my name
But none of them could reach me
They had to watch me suffer
They tried helping the best they could
By throwing me some gauze
To fix my wounds
But the damage was too much for them to heal

I felt so weak
I gave up
I shut out the helping friends
I was sick of nothing working
The pain was begging to cultivate
Tears slowly ran down my face
That was the only thing I felt I could do

Curled in my ball in the darkness, I give up
Even all my friends went away

Suddenly a bright light shines
Down on the hole of oblivion

A new face of a man I have never seen before
Wants to rescue from this hole
At first I was hesitant
He was promising everything I have been begging for
But mostly, he was my way out

He throws down his ladder made of solid gold
It was pure, like his heart and soul
It attracted me to slowly go
And I decided that it was time to say goodbye

I quickly climbed up the ladder
I did rush getting out of there
Jumping every other step
Ready for my ultimate goal: happiness

Every step I took, the boy was slipping my mind
The man who was rescuing me was actually healing my
wounds
A real smile was gleaming in my eyes
Happiness was fluttering deep down inside

I finally took the last step out of the hole
All my friends reappeared with happiness and joy
Ready for my new life free of the boy
But in the back of my mind something wasn't quite right

I was quickly rushed out of this hole
Awaiting all that I have asked for

Lindsay Wilburn

My head was saying go for it
And my heart was saying no

In this desert of my heart
Was the extremely deep hole
Even though I was out of it
It still remained

With a new shovel in my hand
The man and I began to dig a new hole
Where he and I would stay
For some reason I did not like it this way

The hole wasn't very deep
Only my foot could reach
My feelings were little for this man
At times, it felt forced to even like him

Later on he and I laid hand in hand in the desert of my heart
Both the giant and the little hole were between us
Everything seemed fine for a little while
Until the boy suddenly reappeared

He laid next to me on the side that the man was not
I couldn't help but look
I was still holding hands with the man
But staring at the boy instead

I still desired the boy
But used the man for the attention that I could not receive
So I knew what I had to do
I had to let go of the man of my dreams

As soon as I let go of the rescuer
They both disappeared
And suddenly...
I was falling down the infamous hole once again

The fall back down was pretty painful
My chest is aching once again
I am not proud to say that I am no longer happy
I let go of that ray of happiness
For the dark cloud of pain

And now I am without help
I gave up true happiness for this heartache
I was again trapped in my hole of misery
The one person that I love with all my heart
Is the same person destroying it

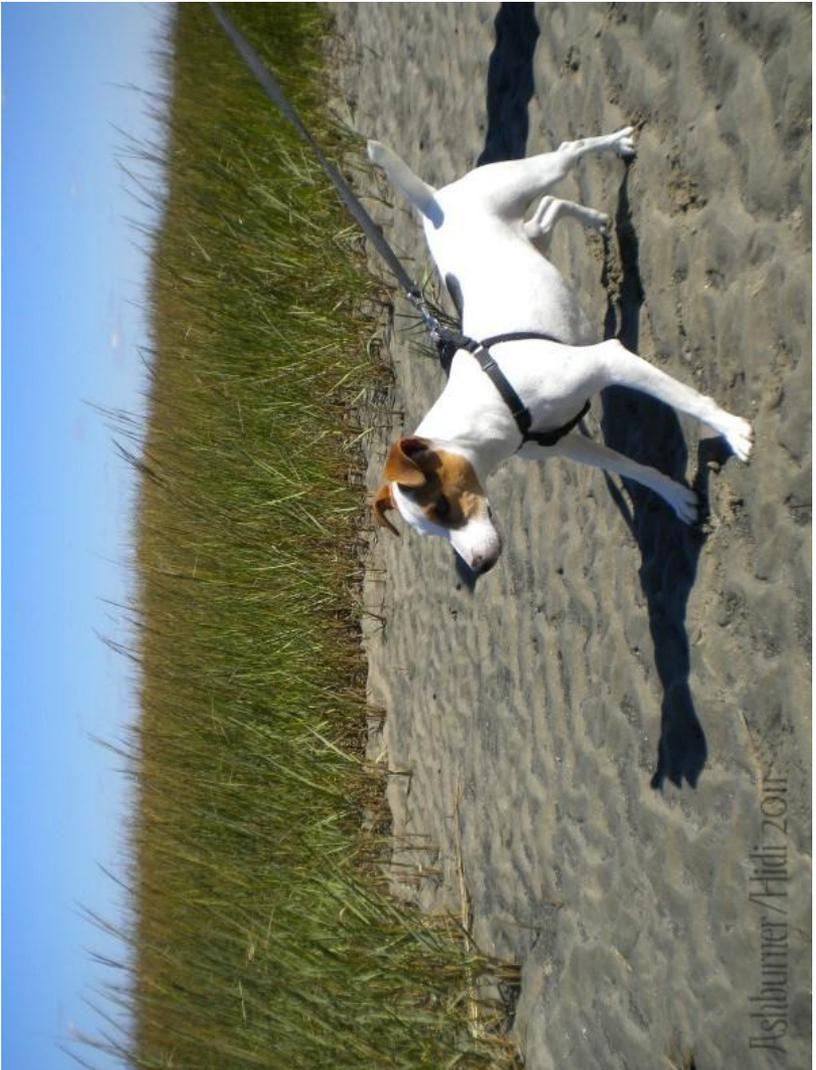
But I know it was ultimately right
For I did not want the man to dig a deep hole
For a girl who isn't ready to leave
The hole of false hope

Don't worry though
I have accepted this hole
And I know when I am ready
I will find my own way out
So for now I will appreciate what I got
Even if it's not all I want

Sam Ashburner and Nicole Hidi



Sam Ashburner and Nicole Hidi







Jordan Belisle











SPRING 2012

Makeyvia Delee

Envy You

So hard to watch. Feel like my heart just dies a lil more inside with each new piece. Happy moment that you knew would one day be a reality. You're excited and can't wait to see it come to pass but....its like watching from the other side of the window "pain". You know it hurts when you can feel it rising, daring to creep out, eyes holding back the flood while it's knocking on your front door. Tap, tap. Lemme in. Lemme break you down again. Ever so slowly, ever so cold we ... try to make up with the truth... the good truth, the genuine one, the acceptable one. All the while fighting these emotions that feel so wrong. The battle with self. It's just a phase, a learning experience. One day you'll look back and realize that they were all immature emotions. But right now, right here in the present, they rule.

How do you let go of the one you love?

How do you let go of the one you love? In the meantime, in between time, I loved you before I ever met you. Can you feel the beat of my soul, Like African drums so out of control -This Love- like a bird falling in mid-swoop? You catch me with your aura, draw me in, paint me in the corners of your heart. For even though you don't love me back, somewhere in your mind I will always have a nice spot to invade, and your soul will always speak of my presence. How do you let go of the one you love? Tell them Good Morning...

There's Art in HeARTbreak

This feeling that got me feeling like I ain't feeling how I'm suppose to feel, when it's just me and no one else, when it's just me all by myself, see there's always been some-one...there, I never learned how to be ALONE mentally, 'Cause physically it's impossible. Not logical, not a you or a he not even a she 'cause physically she's...unavailable, who could have known the need would be stronger 'cause when u leave it lasts longer. 'Cause when you leave I..just..can't..breathe. You're killing me slowly, watch these verses pour from my heart like poetry, watch me bleed lyrically, I take these emotions you give to me and turn them into a work of art. Isn't it beautiful this heartache, like sweet melodies whispering in your ear, telling you the very things that you really don't want to hear? Tattoo this piece across your forearm so others can be forewarned not to love you cause its suicidal and I just signed my death sentence.

Broken

Lock me away under the cold surroundings of the open waters.
For you have experienced the death of all deaths.
Or better yet cut these fatal traits away from my very soul.
For the things that make me human make me hurt.
I'd rather be hollow, then to carry around a broken heart.
That still beats to keep me living.
Give me to the being that I've become.
Iced.
Cold to the core.

Makeyvia Delee

Move Me

Move Me.

Out of this place.

Out of this box.

With these four walls laced with pain.

I'm going crazy.

It's driving me insane.

I want you to love me.

You want me to wait.

I want you to love me.

I can't catch a break.

So move me.

Lose me.

I can't see past you.

And it's killing me.

Mentally drained.

Physically strained.

Emotionally falling apart.

Feelings here, feelings there.

Suffocating in despair.

See I tried to pull myself out of this box here.

But I just keep falling

over memories.

Grabbing me by the ankles pulling me back.

Screaming wait, maybe this time he'll come around

Wishful thinking.

Wish I would have thought before I let this get this far.
You say you care.
Well care enough to tell me to go.
Hanging on your every word like it's my life support.
I need you to
physically move me.
'Cause evidently I cant.
You know my heart.
It has your number on speed dial and seems to call you at
the darnedest times.
I need you to
move me.
'Cause I'm stuck.
Glued to the floor.
Turning 'round in circles.
Wanting...wanting something more.
That I can't have.
Won't have.
Will have.
Have to get out this box,
box of insecurities
when only one fact remains the same.
That I still love you.
But I
need you to
move me
Away.

Dreaming Neon Black

Everything went to hell in a matter of seconds. Our battalion was stationed in a hostile quadrant in the galaxy, Sephra 17. At first, our biggest fear was of supposed Tomb Worlds within the quadrant and a few Tau vessels that had been spotted moving through the area. By the Emperor, if that was all we had to be concerned with: the planet had just been cleansed of mutants by the Blood Angels Space Marines. But, as per usual, the “God Emperor” sends the weaker and less fortunate of our race to hold down the bases that have been established. We had been stationed here about six months Terra time, and we’d had little trouble with the remaining Orks. A few Gretchen and some residual Nobs survived, but nothing we couldn’t handle. Since the landscape was mostly a barren desert, we had no real concern for ambushes of any sort; but, once we thought there was nothing to fear, that’s when things went horribly wrong.

It wasn’t my watch. We were just playing cards, trying to pass time; there’s never any telling how long you’ll be stuck on one forsaken rock to the next. Suddenly, we heard shouting and everyone rushed for their guns and gear. When I got outside, the sky was black, and at first I thought my eyes just needed to adjust to the darkness. I saw hundreds of specks in the sky. I only just realized what was happening before someone yelled it for me: Dark Eldar. A thousand fears rushed through my mind at once and suddenly, in a sea of a thousand comrades, I felt as if I was alone. It was existential. My existence was nothing in the presence of an ancient species that has far surpassed mine in technology and sheer brutality. In those few seconds of introspection, the bastard aliens had landed.

I'm not sure if their tactics were a mistake or a sarcastic mockery of our own. There was plenty of room for their space crafts to set down right in the fort; but, they decided to instill fear by staying outside of the walls instead. I watched their ships land, and not moments later, I watched as winged figures shot up over the walls, their forms silhouetted by the twilight rays. They continued to ascend until I lost them in the darkness, and I swear I heard laughter echo through the night. It didn't take long after that for the killing to begin.

The first to go were the wall guards. All I heard was a shout to fire from the wall, and I watched them all die in seconds... I could see their blood glisten in the moonlight. It was like a crimson rain coming from the heavens followed by a thunder storm of corpses. That's all it took. A macabre of murder had begun, and I watched as at least fifty of them jumped over the walls wielding all sorts of torturous weapons: whips with barbs, swords that defied physics itself, guns as silent as the wind that dropped soldiers in the most gruesome ways. Some died quickly due to an accurate shot or an energy blast. The others weren't so lucky. I watched as skin was penetrated and suddenly the flesh would boil and blister. Men began bleeding out of every orifice and screaming so horribly that I couldn't rightly define it as human. Seconds... In damned seconds the wall was lost. Everything they did took mere seconds. We didn't even have time to react to the death of our friends.

Something hit the main gate. I was always told as a recruit that the most horrifying thing I would ever see was Chaos incarnate; men who turned to the ancient gods for power were the most wicked and degenerate creatures in the galaxy. The Emperor and the Empire know nothing of horror. What I saw come through that gate was some-

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thing that even Chaos itself would have gawked at. It had to have been 15 feet tall, a monstrosity out of runic fairy tales. Its flesh pulsed with agony and ecstasy as tubes and vials protruded from its body and pumped fluids into its nearly rupturing veins. It had a massive butcher's knife, as long as man is tall. Its other arm was a massive piece of arcane designed metal connected to tubes. It fired a putrid smelling acidic liquid. Its flesh was a pale gray hue. More terrifying than any of that, though, were its eyes. By the Emperor, those eyes! It had a mask of black iron through which all that could be seen were those damned eyes. It burst through dozens of men with a single thrust while it staggered with a dull, meaningless purpose. For a moment, I caught its gaze. I saw tears in its eyes. The Holy Throne! This thing was a man once. I could handle no more. I was terrified. I ran. I trampled comrades, dead and alive alike, for fear of becoming like them or that monstrosity. I looked over my shoulder one last time, I don't know if it was in fear or curiosity, but all that was left were bloody remains of my brothers in arms. The only thing louder than the gunfire that night were the screams...

I ran through the barracks and down to the bunkers. All I found was bodies. Bloody chunks, guts, limbs, heads; nothing was fully intact. I don't know how the hell they got in, but I knew they were still there. I could hear their shrill laughter echo through the halls. It was the only sound I could hear over my heart. I locked myself in the kitchen meat locker, it was the only heavy steel door left intact in the barracks, or, at least, the only one I could find. The power had died or been cut off. Within minutes, only silence remained. How do I properly describe such a sound... No, such a sensation, as silence? It's as if all becomes nothing, but within that nothing there is a tragic sense of existence that is only known by the ironic sense

of isolation. It pulsates and throbs as if it was sentient and aware of its power over the individual it has engulfed. Fear, rage, pity, hate, wonder, remorse, empathy: In a moment of silence one can experience every sensation there is. Suddenly, out of that silent nothingness, I heard everything: a rising cacophony that sounded as if an ocean had collapsed in on itself. The tides became whirlpools of moans and tidal waves of laughter. It was unbearable, and whether the moans were of my comrades' pains or those sons of bitches' erotic pleasure, I hope to never know. Now, I was truly alone. I didn't even think for a second what I could have done to help. I was just one man. Wasn't my life more important than dying like everyone else? Isn't this why I have free will? The Emperor has never done anything for me. Why should I end my life for him when there is nothing to be gained? Ha. What blasphemy this is. But, is it really blasphemy when my beloved Emperor has left me to die?

I heard footsteps outside. I realized now that the sounds from above had mostly quieted down. I'll never forget that moment though. Never, not for the few decades more I'll likely live. They were light, graceful steps but had a sound of diabolical dominance to them. Step... Step... Step... Step... As if it weren't bad enough as things were, it sounded as if death itself had arrived for me. I heard the handle on the outside of the door shake a bit... And then it opened. Standing there was a monster in the most elegant of forms imaginable. He was tall and lithe, his hair was jet black, his face was beautiful, his armor elegant, and he had a sword in his hand. My eye descended further. His tunic and cloak were made of faces, faces sown together with the most ornate threads; his hands were drenched in blood, his boots covered in mud and gore. His sword remained relaxed at his side: a crimson omen of the geno-

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cide he had partaken in.

My eyes returned to his, and I felt as if that's the moment life fled from my soul. They were black, with red irises, and a piercing gaze. He smiled, his teeth filed down to razor edges flecked with blood. He took two steps forward and glared down at me. That smile never faded from his face. He stared at me for what seemed an aeon. I couldn't move. It was as if his gaze itself had locked me in a purgatory. I just shook in terror as he slowly approached. He smiled that menacing smile again. Then, he beat me. He smashed my face against walls, cut off a few fingers, broke my legs, raped me, and laughed all the while. After what seemed like hours he finally stopped and didn't seem the least bit exhausted. He then grabbed me by my hair and dragged me out of the barracks and to a large space barge. I passed out before we got aboard. When I awoke, all was darkness. He was there again, though. I looked out through a small porthole of the ship. I could see a city, a city lighted as if by a permanent dying light: a neon black. The darkest and most lucid dream ever dreamt. The city itself breathed a horrifying, obscene odor. Even from this distance I could hear the screams of their victims over the hum of the city. A city of black spires, spiked chapels, blackened alleys, and bloodied streets. There was no end to it, from what I could see. Just an endless black that seemed to swallow every emotion except fear and suffering. This was the darkest of fantasies come true. "Pray they don't take you alive" was the mantra of mankind. That creature just stood there, staring at me. I didn't have to turn around to know it. I could feel his icy gaze clawing into my back. That insidious abomination knelt down next to me, smiled, and said, "Welcome, child, to the Twilight City. I promise you, you will wish you had died long before you do." No truer words, by gods or men alike, have ever been spoken.

Before my time

Intellectual thinking got my mind racing face,
my future lies ahead as I reflect on my past.
Reading all the tombstones and I subtract all their dates,
my years seem the shortest, no one in this graveyard can relate.
I wasn't born with a silver spoon, fork or a knife.
Living like I do, you'll wind up losing your life.
I didn't wanna have my mama read my obituary,
but truth be told, death ain't all that scary.
Yet I'm saying this as if I've already been dead.
I only thought of death, and that's all I said.
Suicide thoughts are killing my brain - how ironic.
Many things moving in my head - plate tectonics.
People out here dying that aint never died before,
'cause the dead never been dead, but birth I do adore.
See you can't walk in my shoes, I tie my laces mighty tight.
You won't make it a mile or even to the next right.
I can't fear death, it never did anything to myself.
Death is nothing but the silent treatment
acting upon my wealth.
Look into my eyes, you'll see the lies that I survived.
I hope death is a party cause I just want a surprise.
I gotta die for something, cause I lived for everything.
I was married to this life until death took my ring.

De'Keidra Drayton

"F.R.I.E.N.D.S"

Boy I tell ya people change like the wind,
and when the wind blows you gotta go with the flow
And yes I'm talking 'bout a friend.
I mean change is good but too much change will change
ya for good.
And if you rearrange the definition of change then you'll
make some cents.
Well at least you should.
But most of us don't understand
that the life we live is in His hands
A friend has never changed my life
but I'd be the bigger person just to make a friendship right.
Friends, how many of us have them,
I can count 'em on my hand, come up with a fist 'cause I
have none.
And who says friends and family
I say family, then friends,
'cause I was born with family.
Came in this world without a friend.
I'm blind to the fact that a friend was ever there for me.
In a bigger atmosphere, my friend has more variety.
Who am I to blame I guess I'll also ride this train.
You'll never see the sunshine unless you see the rain.

Mission Haiti

I laid flat on the thin pallet and looked towards the dark Haitian sky. Heat lightening flashed familiar patterns before me and my thoughts drifted to my mother. It was nights like these that I could understand why she chose to spend more time here than she did at home. The evening breeze swept across my cheek as my mother's fingers once did. I clutched my eyes shut and fought the tears from stinging and my throat from burning. I could hear the villagers far off, starting their nightly voodoo rituals. I inhaled the distant smell of smoke and odd minerals. They chanted and hummed. Sometimes they screamed and I imagined their dark figures crouching, dancing low around the fire in demonic rhythm, their skin glistening in the light with every hard, unusual turn. I drifted deep to the beat of their drums and the sound of their songs. I forgot to say my prayers.

My mother was once a missionary stationed in Haiti, leaving me to stay months at a time with my father in the States. She dedicated herself to providing food, medical care and God's word to the Haitian people. When she came home I marveled over the pictures of the people and listened curiously to her stories, desperate to spend any time I could with her. After a month of getting used to her company, she would leave me again. That was the routine. It was one that I hated, but understood, as my father obediently did, believing that it was my mother's God given purpose to serve in Haiti.

When the big earthquake hit, I watched my father pace the living room nervously in front of the bright TV screen. He kept his head bowed as he paced, always looking to

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the floor. I watched him concentrate on the soda spills that soaked and stained our carpet. He never let me bring food into the living room, the benefits of having a father with OCD.

When my mother returned from Haiti, the two of us would sit Indian style on the carpet, watch our favorite 80's movies and veg out. It was a ritual of ours and the only time my father was ever at ease. I never found a single tense feature in his face when she was around. The day I accidentally spilled the soda, I moved fast for the cup and glanced at my father expecting to hear his anger. But he just looked at her. And she just smiled. She always smiled.

He kept his eyes locked on the spots still listening to the pretty newscaster. I knew that he was afraid to look up and see her mangled body on the flashing screen under the Haitian rubbish. I was afraid too, but I couldn't stop myself from searching for her wavy blonde hair within the dark piled bodies that appeared brightly before me. He fidgeted with the phone, sweating, waiting for any news. Finally, Pastor Larry called, "I'm sorry Sean," I overheard through the receiver. "She was in Port au Prince when it happened." Port au Prince was at the heart of the earthquake. We knew that. I watched as he let the phone drop to the floor and shuffled slowly into the kitchen. I waited until he was gone to move to the carpet.

"Pastor?" I said.

"Reese? Where's your father?"

"He's...busy," I said glancing up at the kitchen door frame.

"I see. Reese, there's no way to fully understand these things..." He muttered something about God's plan. "He wanted her to come home," he told me. "Well Pastor...I think that's very selfish of him," I said hanging up.

A month later, a box came in the mail with a few pictures of some orphans, my mother's bible, and a pearl earring. I emptied the box quickly avoiding the burning sensation rising in the back of my throat and sifted through the items for the other earring. It wasn't there. I ran my fingers over the aging edges of the book and the imprinted words that read Holy Bible. A surge of mixed emotions rose, built, burned in the core of my chest. I closed the book, cocked my arm back and gave it to the wall.

When the mission team was ready to go back, I wanted in. I didn't know why I urged to go to the place that killed my mother so badly, but I wanted to. I needed to. No one thought it was a good idea and my father forbade it. But being that I was eighteen, I forged his signature, dropped a few well-rounded lies and went against his wishes. I was just thankful that by the time he would read my farewell letter, we wouldn't have cell phone service. I knew Pastor Larry and the mission team questioned my faith. I questioned it myself. And there was no doubt that I was there for all the wrong reasons. I certainly wasn't there to "serve Christ," as Pastor Larry had called it. And I knew that if I weren't fluent in Kreyol, they would have never let me come.

I woke in a sweat. As the sun began to peek, I wiped the moppy strands of damp hair from my forehead with clammy palms. My back and neck ached from the hard ground. I rinsed my mouth with bottled water and gath-

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ered my things to hike further up the mountain. Out of the twelve mission members only five, including myself, volunteered to go into the village with Pastor Larry. Last night I let their voodoo soothe me like lyrics to a lullaby. The rest of the team thought they could drown them out by joining hands and praying out loud. And when it didn't work, they were too afraid to join our hike up the mountain. Ridiculous.

When we arrived, the Haitians were hesitant to approach us. The women went about their chores in their tropical skirts, walking with large sweet grass woven baskets on their heads. The animals roamed the dirt-floored village. A fire was going and some women stirred the heavy black pot above it. Some people were taking naps near the edge of the village that lead into the forest, under the palm trees. The dark, naked children crouched behind the poorly concreted, door-less huts. I took the sweets out of my backpack and awaited their excitement after seeing the bright colored goodies. They watched me curiously and I smiled knowing they would come soon. Then they came tugging on my clothes. "Kendy, kendy" they shouted. I kneeled and passed around the sweets. "Mesi," they said running through the palm trees chasing the chickens and piglets. I walked around aimlessly and spotted a young girl my age, sitting under the shade of a palm tree. The girl never blinked as she allowed the tears to stream down freely. I caught the gleam of the white familiar pearl glistening off her wet ebony cheek. The girl looked up and our gazes locked. The girl stood slowly, her eyes wide in disbelief. She began to cry harder at my sight and I didn't understand why. I was trying to take in the image of the small shimmering ball, being that I accepted the fact a long time ago that I would never see it again.

She walked over and took my face in her hands, “ay see huh en yoo” she said shaking. “Kote ou te jwenn ke?” I demanded. The girl continued to cry. “Where did you get this” I repeated lightly touching the pearl. “Ainjel. Luk lyke yoo.” I quickly wiped the tears as quickly as they came. “Manman.” I told her, “my mother.” The girl wrapped her arms around my neck and shook, “Zanj, zanj” she cooed. “They save meh en my brutha Jon. Poosh... us out da wey... keel... huhself. Shey wus gud too us.” she gasped, trying to speak through the hyperventilation. I felt the girl’s hot tears stream down my shoulder as I stroked the colorful wrap that twisted about her head in a bun. I understood that she must have been close to my mother. I had a million questions I needed to ask her but couldn’t seem to let them out.

Loud voices came like thunder from the forest and we released. Shirtless men appeared waving machetes in the air. “Get out!” They yelled. Pastor Larry approached with his hands up trying to talk softly to them. One man who seemed to be the leader looked at all who wore proper clothing and growled, “don want yoo heyr! Yuh god breng big ert qwake. Keel ow peepel! Get out! Get out uff Haiti oh ay cum fuh yoo!” He turned his attention to our embrace, lifted his face with wide eyes and pressed his lips together tightly. “Chantel!” He ran over shoving us apart. Chantel fell backwards and when I reached for her he snatched my wrist up. “Jon, luk et huh. Luk et huh.” Chantel pleaded quickly before he could do anything else. Jon looked at me and pain clouded his eyes as he recognized my features. He looked to the ground then, turned, allowing his dreads to shadow his face and hide the hurt. His jaw muscles contracted. “Leev!” He shouted waving his

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machete around. The team began retreating quickly out of the village, and he looked back at me, "leev." "Nooo!" Chantel screamed, reaching up, grabbing for me.

I didn't know whether to believe in God anymore, or if any of this was a part of his plan. All I could do, in the little time that I had, was think of my mother and the last thing she said. "I'll come back," I vowed. I took the other earring out of my bag and pushed it through my earlobe as a promise to Chantel.

I turned to leave and I heard her scream, "wait!" She ran into the hut made of cheap concrete that made white debris on your hands when you touched it. She came out and handed me a picture. It was a recent picture I had forgotten we ever took. My mom and I were sitting on the carpet floor. I was smiling with a strawberry to my mouth, looking at my mother. She had her arm around me smiling back. I remember that my father took the picture. "I no wat yoo ahhr heyr for," Chantel said.

I knew she wanted to say more but it was already a struggle for her to use English. I could tell as she spoke that it was important for her to use English, so I didn't respond for fear that she would be offended if I ignored her attempt and responded in Kreyol, or that she would not understand my English at all. I imagined that it was important for her to use English because if my mother were here she would tell her to use it as much as she could. The tears came and I didn't fight them this time. I looked to Jon. "Yoo mus not cum bak to Haiti. Dis es ay cursed cuntree," he said. I nodded and Chantel began to cry. I hugged her tight and left.

I stopped in front of the burgundy front door and remembered painting it with her beside me. I pushed it open and waited to hear the footsteps hustling down the stairs followed by his yelling with the phone in his hands. I heard nothing. I set my bags down and moved slowly about the house, sure that I would hear it soon. Still nothing. I entered the living room slowly and found my father sitting on the carpet floor, leaning against the bottom of the couch, motionless, his palm on the soda stain. He didn't look up at me. He didn't say anything. I approached and sat down next to him hesitantly. He never liked me close to him. He only allowed mother close to him and even then he never touched her much.

I sat there unsure of myself. He remained still and silent. The phone was on the floor about a foot away from him and I figured he had called the whole state looking for me and finally gave up. I smiled and slowly placed my head on his shoulder, "I'm sorry daddy." I felt him shake. And I heard his breathing. I looked up and saw the tears race underneath his glasses. I went to the kitchen and came back with cookies and a bag of chips. I cut the T.V. on and sat next to him. He looked up and laughed. I opened the chips and he took some. I laid my head in his lap, still hesitant. But he was relaxed and didn't flinch. "Did you find what you were looking for?" He asked seriously. I looked at my hand in his, "yes." I said.

"I think I did."

Tracy A. Franklin

I Use to Know this Place

I use to know this place
I've been there before
The people their faces so dear
Lost to me, forever gone.

I use to know this place
Of rolling fields and fresh water streams
The occasional black bear or escaped cow, forging and grazing
This place of youth of familiarity, of family
Some gone for eternity.

I use to know this place
The farm of my forefathers etching out a living
With fields of corn, tobacco and large vegetable gardens
Of tranquil summer days on a large wooden front porch
The fields of corn, tobacco and large vegetable gardens are gone
now
They went the way of my grandparents, never to return.

I use to know this place
Of summer nights, catching fireflies, playing hide and go seek
In the comforting and un-scary dark, lots of laughter and romping,
It's gone forever now, we've all grown up, moved away.

The old farm is still there, newer homes, smaller gardens
Those children of my grandparents are grandparents themselves

We're scattered about like seeds, tossed to the wind,
Planting and harvesting in distant lands
Those early days are no more
When grandma and grandpa roamed their land.

I knew this place, it's still there, but not the same
Some family is still there but the spirit of my grandparents
Hover near, perhaps lamenting the seeds that have forgotten where
they were first sewn.

I know this place
I've been there before
The people, their faces so dear
Lost to me, forever gone.
I can go to this place that I use to know
But the people I see are strangers to me.

Victoria Hilton

Desire

As a child, I was fixated upon the idea of having bunk beds. I was an only child and had very few friends, but I saw the desire for multiple beds a necessity. I pleaded with my mother for bunk beds, swore I'd eat all of my greens AND wash behind my ears EVERYDAY.

"You drive a hard bargain, Sweetie, but the answer is still no."

I resented my mother after that. Others found it horrifically surprising and somewhat unhealthy when I sat and smiled in the front row at my mother's funeral; I was only eight years old. I didn't care though. She had denied me the one thing I wanted most in life. I vowed to obtain them, though, and I figured now was a perfect time to ask my father due to his current emotional state.

"Is that all you can think about right now?! Get the hell out of here!"

My father joined my mother on my "dislike" list after that. How selfish was he to only think about himself at such a tragic time! He should have been buying me everything in sight to comfort me, an eight-year-old without a mother. Funny how life works out though; karma paid dear old dad a visit in spades a week later. He joined my mom in Hell, and I went to live with my aunt and two cousins in Raleigh.

My cousins, Thomas and Dylan, were twins just a year younger than me. They had been given all of life's luxuries including, believe it or not, bunk beds. I was thrilled to finally have what I had always wanted. Much to my dismay,

however, I was yet again denied of my desire.

“You can sleep in the guest room, Honey. Give it time and we’ll decorate it however you want, ok? Thomas and Dylan are right across the hall if you need anything.”

This was unacceptable. I didn’t have much time to dwell on it, though. Thomas had fallen off of the top bunk during the night and broken his neck; the neighborhood made such a fuss over his death. I was excited to move out of the guest room and into my rightful top bunk. However, when we came back from the funeral, the bunk beds were gone.

“I couldn’t bear to look at those...deathbeds! I won’t lose my other baby.”

My aunt was so distraught after Thomas died; I guess it’s good that she didn’t have to suffer long. She had left a candle burning in the window sill one night for too long; the flames had gotten a hold of the drapes and burned the house to the ground. Fortunately for me, I climbed out of my window and escaped unscathed; Dylan and my aunt could not unlock the doors or windows to escape.

I bounced around from foster home to foster home after that until I was eighteen. Tragedy and a lack of bunk beds seemed to follow me everywhere I’d go. After a while, I developed a reputation and people began to act nervous around me. I really didn’t understand why; I was a good kid. I didn’t get into trouble. I was quiet. And I’d only asked for one thing in my life. People just didn’t understand me.

The last foster family I lived with agreed to let me stay with them until I got a job and landed on my feet so to speak.

Victoria Hilton

I quickly found a job with a local construction company that paid well enough for me to afford my own place within a few months. The first thing I bought was a set of bunk beds; I also bought a pocket knife. Every night I carved into the wood until my fingers ached.

I lived to be sixty-three years old before karma finally caught up to me. My death was peaceful and painless. When they came for my body, they saw the legacy I had left behind me: fifty-three names were carved into the wood holding my beds together including those of my mother, my father, and my two cousins.

All I'd wanted were bunk beds.

Bazemore

The sun sets beyond the horizon
at an old ballfield;

I can still smell the wet grass,
feel the clay slide through my fingers
and drift off into the wind.

I remember how it felt to sit on those old wooden
bleachers and look out beyond the scoreboard
into the woods;

it was our field.

I painted my initials into the sand with my fingertip,
replacing my last name with yours and hoping it would stay.
And it did, for a while.

I remember playing catch with you and
laughing
without inhibitions

-it was perfect, your lips meeting mine
for the first time

as you cut me off mid-sentence.

Salty but sweet
and oh so gentle.

We tossed down a blanket in centerfield and looked up at the
night sky.

We made promises, my head on your chest, your fingers
woven tightly with mine.

But the sun came up and dried the grass
and the wind swept away what could have been.

The city workers came and tore down those wooden
bleachers and

replaced my clay with cement.

And you replaced me with her.

William Lamar Johnson II

Blank Pages

Full of thoughts unwritten
or of words forgotten.

Never to be remembered .
Never to inspire.
Never to be heard.

Possibly inducing passion to a heart.
Possibly tearing two lovers apart.

Not here, but gone,
just as dew
at the end of dawn.

Lost thoughts throughout the ages,
all written on blank pages.

A Written Observation of the Undead's Condition

The living dead scream mortal arrogance.
The doctrine of pleasure, rage, greed, apathy and insanity
never end.

All Dead! All dead inside! Only feeling pain, pleasure and
pride.
Taking shots of cyanide with smiling faces.
No longer aware of the reality that the poison replaces.
Serving deities they control, in which none confide.

In this collective the only common thing is death.
Searching for security, satisfaction and sufficiency in
mortality.
"DON'T TELL ME THE TRUTH! I DON'T WANT TO SEE!" they
cry
"GIVE ME ANYTHING BUT REALITY! DON'T WASTE YOUR
BREATH!"

Hearts of stone knowing nothing but endless loneliness.
Because their stillborn hearts never started beating.
Attempting defibrillation through spikes of emotional
bliss.
When their razors are dull, they find its pleasure fleeting.

The dead have no concept of what they proclaim other
than annunciation.
Jumping from one corpse to the next trusting these
feelings that they're alive.
Using up one emotion in a frenzied attempt to survive.
Their desire is to feed, TO feed, TO FEED- its only a
distraction.

William Lamar Johnson II

The mirrors were the first to go- their pictures were too ugly.

Surely, its reflection was distorted by that red blood, the billowing smoke, the dark mud.

It was far too horrible to be actual reality

The living dead however could not deny the waters reflection.

So they plucked out their eyes and served them to each other.

But the ghost, his sounds they couldn't smother.

So they probed until their ear drums' eruption.

The chants then came. They- swiftly turned to screaming
Soon only screaming was truth, the screaming was now reality

(and even if it wasn't- but it must be) it felt better anyway.
More pleasurable than the tales of ghosts and mirrors- so stinging.

May & Marsh

Boys who live by May and marsh must sleep
dreaming tides and creeks all winding, weaving.
Marsh tickles river, wooden dock now creaks
where sapphire meets emerald, sky beaming.

A humid breeze it blows in from the east.
Boys wander through grass, meeting latch and gate.
Crabbing traps full, holding crabby blue feast.
While southern flounder lay and wait for bait.

And bite!... and die a fried fish death. Child wakes.

Call Me Hank

Addy knew that Mr. Fuddermucker was going to be her favorite patient the second he tried to suffocate her with the same towel that was just used to dry his bottom. She much preferred working with babies, but hospital policy required several weeks in other wards. This was one of those weeks. Nursing at the elite Matthew Brown Hospital certainly is not what she had imagined it to be at graduation, eight years ago. Yale – did not prepare her to be spattered in old man feces.

Her beeline to the nurses locker room, zig-zagged once as apprehension gripped her again. She could not forget, she could not make it go away: her looming engagement was soon to be announced to a man, so beloved – by her mother. Sarah Elizabeth Stein Ward Slavinski Presnell, in her essence, was a shameless social climber who hid her crimson neck under designer scarves. Her ascent was generally managed on the backs of ex-husbands. Now on her fourth marriage to an ancient, but well-connected dinosaur. Sarah Beth required more frequent trips to her plastic surgeon, who delighted in helping her maintain the physical beauty that had served her so well – for a fee. The third daughter of a single-mom, she had her reasons and Addy understood them. But for now, Addy's thoughts came rushing back to the locker room with the startling stench of shit. She gagged, Oh my, how unprofessional. . .

Nursing had always called to her: babies, old people and the sick loved her, and she loved them back, with a purity of heart that simply bid her to serve. \Service is hard, and she knew it; in the core of her being, she understood. But meeting the most basic needs of humanity was deeply satisfying to Addy. Pulling her crisp pink scrubs over her

head, she stifled a curse word as her phone hit the hard locker room floor.

“Hey Mom – can I call you later, I’m up to my neck in- - -”

“No you can’t call me later!” Came the aggravated response. “We’ve got a million decisions to make, and...” Her mother carried on like this for a full two minutes.

Finally, Addy put the phone on speaker, set it on the side of the white sink and washed the shit out of her hair. She listened half-heartedly as her mother chatted on and on about photographers and videographers, calla lilies versus roses, catering glitches and how tasteful she still thought the embossed invitations had been.

The cool water and foam felt good on Addy’s fingers, as she used hand soap to massage the yuck out of her hair. The smell of hand soap, while not her favorite fragrance, was infinitely preferable.

“Uh-huh” she interjected in appropriate places, only half listening to her mother. In truth, she couldn’t care less, and was somewhat apprehensive about being the focal point of all this hoopla.

Addy had always imagined her wedding as an intimate affair to a man with a huge heart, who loved her and loved people as much as she did. In the nine months since she had met Henry (Henry James Thompson IV), his affection for her was more reserved than she would have preferred. And she didn’t know if he had any at all for the six billion other people with whom he shared the planet. As a young civil litigator, trying to make a name for himself in a large firm, his career seemed to be consuming. She was resisting the thought that this was a social marriage. Her mother’s most recent husband was the recently-retired CEO of a

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Fortune Five Hundred Company. And Henry James, being a fifth generation attorney, with aspirations that reached to the Supreme Court of the United States of America. In truth, she wondered if he had a closer connection to her latest stepfather, than herself. Of course, her mother raved about him to all her well-to-do, new friends.

“He’s the best thing that ever crossed your path, Addy.” Her mother had lectured, when they had first met. Beats all those bleeding-heart hippies you dated in college. At least he’s got a future. And that thirty years old, it might be time to stop being so picky.”

Addy had always wanted a big family.

“I’m only twenty-nine, Mom.” She corrected. But she knew there was a grain of truth to what her mother said. Most of her friends had already finished having kids and the six that Addy had dreamt of when she was a little girl, was looking less and less realistic. Though Addy, wouldn’t even admit it to herself, it was her biological clock that accepted Henry’s proposal.

“Yes, ma’am” Addy said in a tone, to let her mother know that she had to go.

“You should thank God you have me, Little Miss,” Sarah Beth buzzed in a self-righteous tone. “These things don’t take care of themselves. And don’t be late to your engagement party at the Walsh’s tonight. You – and Henry – are expected at seven o’clock sharp.”

“Yes, ma’am” Addy responded as she tapped the end button on her phone.

6:00 PM

Addy was looking for her other gold shoe, when the buzzer of her apartment rang. Her MalitPoo, Nora, had apparently hidden the evidence under her bed, after having again fallen off the shoe-chewing-wagon. Addy ran to the door, to the sound of click – thud – click – thud. There he was, quite handsome in his Armani suit. And Addy, wondering if she had a backup pair of Christian Loubition’s? She kissed him. He tried not to be caught peeking at his watch.

“I know, I know,” she said. “I can’t help it. I lost my other shoe” she said, covering for Nora, as usual.

Seven minutes later, his BMW was rushing through the streets of Boston. A woman suddenly appeared in the windshield, out of the corner of her left eye. Henry drew breath from the nearness of an accident. He watched her shrink away in the rear-view mirror, after the light turned green.

“Is she okay, Addy?” He asked apprehensively. “Turn around and look, I think she fell.”

Addy turned around, in time to see a man standing over her on the ground.

“Oh, my God Henry, she fainted or something. She’s on the ground. We didn’t hit her right?”

“No, I am certain the car didn’t touch her.” Glancing at the clock, “We’re late”.

Suddenly, the car was doing a illegal U-turn.

“Do you think she’s okay?” Henry asked. Concern was evident in his voice.

In a moment, Addy was kneeling beside the pregnant woman.

“It’s okay” She said soothingly. “Don’t try and get up. I’m a nurse. What are you feeling?”

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Her response, wordless – but communicated everything. This woman was heavy in Labor.

“Henry – I’m sorry, but have to get her to a hospital, now.”

Addy watched in amazement, as her fiancé lifted the pregnant woman onto the new leather seats of his BMW.

“I’ll sit in the back with her” Addy said.

And then the car was rolling again.

When the second contraction hit, Addy had her doubts that this baby would wait for fifteen blocks of stoplights and traffic.

“Henry, I gotta check this woman,” she informed him. “Oh God” was all she could say, when she discovered full dilation and effacement with a curly dark head of hair.

“Pull over,” she ordered, instantly a medical professional. “This baby’s coming now, call for an ambulance, Henry. What’s your name miss?”

“Maria” came the breathless response, with a thick Spanish accent.

“Well, Maria, your baby’s coming. You have to help me.” Maria nodded vigorously. Though Addy had her doubts about comprehension. Addy heard Henry’s calm instructions to the ambulance, then she was surprised when she heard him ask what he could do to help.

“You may want to call the Walsh’s; I think we’re going to be later than we thought.”

Within fifteen minutes, the ambulance appeared. Henry covered Maria with his Armani jacket, as the stretcher rolled into the back of the ambulance. Addy’s Chanel

sweater was wrapped around a new baby boy.

"We'll take it from here" The EMS technician assured her, as he reached out for the baby.

"We're going with her," Henry said. "We're staying - "

"But what about the Walsh's?" Addy asked, astonished.

"They'll understand," He answered. "And if they don't, they should."

The young couple was very late to their own engagement party. Addy's mom was clearly fit to be tied. But somewhere in Matthew Brown Hospital, a new baby, cried. His name was Henry. Later that night, long after the party, Henry admitted something to Addy.

"I hope they call him Hank" He said. "Henry's always seemed so stuffy to me"

"Okay, Hank" She said, looking up into his eyes.

In this moment Addy knew what love felt like, for the very first time.

Where the Magic Lives

As long as I can remember, I've been comin' here. Even as a scrawny little boy, I'member the circus. My momma would make up the most wonderful stories 'bout how the circus was where the magic lives. I believed. All through the year, Momma would wait for the familiar advertisement in the paper, then she'd work a couple-a extra shifts. And then one day, it – was – here. In our very town – – The Circus. Where magic lived.

My daddy was a character – sometimes a truck driver. But his real love was the rodeo. He wasn't good enough to be a bull rider, so he was a rodeo clown (the kind that pops out of a barrel). Thinkin' back on it, I imagine he was just a skinny jerk – lookin' for attention. However, my momma fancied him a hero to the cowboys.

He did finally marry her, when I was about seven years old. After losing a bet with her, over who would win the Super Bowl Five – good thing my dad always bet on The Cowboys – who lost in a close game, which I will never forget. Now, like I said, my daddy was a lot of things, but you can't fault him for welchin' on a bet. From that day on, the Colts were my momma's team! Daddy loaded us up in the car and drove us from El Paso, Texas to Las Vegas, Nevada, where I attended my parent's swanky drive-thru wedding. Dad even sprung for the rental of a white gown. I ain't never seen my momma lookin' more beautiful – all in frilly flowers, and rhinestones everywhere. Daddy wore a dashin' red tuxedo. And me, with my feet aching – in a brand new pair of Sunday shoes. In lieu of a ring, he presented her with a Belt Buckle from the Summer Spectacular, at the Stock Yards, in Ft Worth, that he had recently won in a game of poker. I remember him looking deep into my mother's

eyes and saying, with all sincerity:

"It's got 18 kt gold overlay on the flowers, and them little red stones there" He said, pointin' to a tiny little spark, "them's gen-u-ine rubyies."

Momma just smiled at him lovingly, as if he was handing her the Hope Diamond.

"It's the nicest piece of jewelry I ever did get, Ed" She spoke with the loveliest of tones. That was the happiest I had ever seen my momma. I wish I could have made that day last forever. But I couldn't. And Daddy wouldn't.

After the wedding, Daddy did come 'round more, not that it was a good thing. Instead of once or twice a year, he started coming 'bout every other month. He'd stay long enough to sweet-talk my momma out of divorcing him. Then, he'd eat all the food in the house. And before he'd leave, he'd talk my momma right outta her last dime.

She worked two jobs for as long as I can remember: At night – she waitressed at Waffle House – serving the truckers, police and hoboes of Fort Bliss and during the day veterinary technician – which is really just a fancy way of sayin' she cleaned up dog crap.

One night, I'member listenin' to my Momma beggin' my Daddy to stay.

"Damn, your rodeo clownin' dreams." She shouted.

Then I felt my room shutter as the front door slammed shut, and I could hear my momma cryin' through the paper-thin walls of our trailer. That night, at twelve years old, I vowed, to take her far away from my daddy someday (and that she'd never have to clean up dog crap again).

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In the meantime, I decided to take it upon myself to make her life as easy as I could. I made sure that when she got home from a long day and long night she didn't have to work. I did the laundry, vacuumed her purple shag carpet and even scrubbed the toilets. By thirteen, I had discovered I had a gift for cookin'. Aside from the ordinary meals, I loved fixin' sweet treats. I's always tryin' new recipes. My momma would be starving when she got home and would gobble up my cookin'. Kinda made me proud of myself. Then I'd clean up supper and we'd spend the evenin' playin' with whatever creature she took home from the Vets office that day. It was kind of a pet foster-care situation, I guess you could say. Food and pets were our hobby. Them were good days.

But I needed to be rich. My first of many failed attempts at wealth, began when I was fourteen, Momma had told me that Daddy was comin' home again and I knew what that meant. He'd clear her out, and leave her cryin'. So, I decided to open a Lemonade Stand, I think that I spent two dollars on lemons and sugar – used water from the hose and spilled it all before I got to the sidewalk. But I didn't give up. Next I tried working the barbershop sweeping the floor. It was simple enough – but only paid 'bout two quarters a day.

By fifteen, I had begun to stash money away as soon as I found out that Daddy was coming home. This particular time, I had stashed almost twenty dollars by the time that he arrived. I was able to earn another fourty – mowin' lawns that month. I's smaller than a lot of other boys my age; and mowin' lawns took more strength that I had. But I did it anyway. It was summer and I was out of school.

By the time Daddy left – we were broke again. And my momma, had resumed her normal ritual of crying and qui-

etly cussing out the “damn rodeo and it’s damned clowns” as she made up her bed. I walked into her room, and held out the sixty dollars – three, crisp, new-ish twenty dollar bills, (I’d traded my change in at the Quik-eeMart, ‘round the corner). Momma took the bills and started cryin’ all over again. Then she hugged me like she’d never let go. Do you know what she did with them, after she bought us some groceries? She brought us two tickets to – The Circus – Where the Magic Lives.

Sittin’ under the red and yella striped tent that night – starin’ at that sights and sounds that were so familiar to me. The fresh smell of elephants in the air, and eatin’ the stale popcorn, I finally had my big idea! Cookies . . . shaped like animals. . . YEA – it was good! I had a recipe that was similar to shortbread cookies, with a little more sugar, and maybe I could put the dough into molds and. . . that night – my mind spun plumb outta control. When we got home I made cookies all night. And all the next day. . . About a week later – I had made about fifty dozen cookies – then, I bundled ‘em up and started givin’ out free samples – door to door in my neighborhood, ‘cause who doesn’t love something free? I went to the police department – dropped a few off at the local fillin’ station, ran by the grocery store and the Quik-ee-Mart. Soon, people wanted to buy ‘em. Folks was crazy over my animal crackers. I got a hundred calls in one week! Some of the orders were for more cookies than I could make in one oven, or by myself – so my Momma quit her “vetinaryian technician” job, and went to bakin’ with me. Pretty soon, we were borrowin’ ovens from our neighbors too. Then I had a stroke of genius: what I did, is design, little boxes that look like circus cages. . . It was the beginning of an empire, The Animal Crackers Empire.

About seven years later I sold my Animal Crackers to Gen-

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eral Foods, for eleven million dollars. By that time, I'd got me a wife and I had a son of my own. We bought us a big house on the Florida Gulf. Just my momma, my wife, and a scrawny little boy – all my own.

We left no forwarding address for my Daddy, but he found us anyway. I was shocked 'bout how happy Momma was to see him. Love is a strange thing. What could I do? I bought her Hank William Jr.'s decked out tour bus, when he bought a new one – and it came complete with driver (and his yearly salary). Now, my Momma chases my Daddy and his rodeo clownin' dreams, in a fancy bus. I think she's happy.

This story, is not without tragedy. One day I come home, to find a note on the counter – it was from my wife, and it read:

Dearest Dwayne (that's me),

I'm sorry for breakin' your heart. But I can no longer live a lie. I'm in love with Pasquel (the yard guy). I gotta chase my dreams. Take care of Dwayne Junior, and tell him I love him.

Yours Truly,
Tammy Jo

Standin' here with her letter in my hand and a broke heart in my chest, there is only one thing to do. Take my boy to the circus: Where Magic the Lives.

Closing Time

"Just get him out of here."

"What do you want me to do Damien just nudge him out while you're going 60 down the highway and cross my fingers, good fucking luck?"

"You are not understanding me, I could care less what you do with him- I'm over it. He's been killing my vibe for last eight hours, he's dead to me, don't you get it?"

Damien slammed his foot on the brake pedal releasing an awful hissing noise as the tires skidded against the asphalt. Shaking off the whiplash, CJ turned towards the back seat at the crumpled body of Zane. He prodded at the limp figure anticipating a reaction. Nothing. He began vigorously shaking him. Nothing. Finally he grabbed at Zane's arm and in doing so accidentally turned it over- the freshly encrusted colors of three-day-old wine and amethyst swirled back at him. Releasing the arm, he grabbed his own stomach which was now sloshing around like the after-effects of walking up on a dead animal. He quickly rolled the window down to get the image out of his head and shot Damien an inquisitive look.

"Well what now man? I mean, I think he just needs a little clean-up time, you know, let him sleep it off. I'm sure a Gatorade or something will do the trick. He's a chill dude just been hitting on the edge lately, we've all been there D. But we can't really leave him in some bumfuck nowhere town for the cowboys and inbreeds to scrap him off the ground. You hear me right?"

"Yeah C, I hear you. A Gatorade? A fucking Gatorade? Seriously? Look the guy's a loser, and he's been killing my stash this whole trip. It's time to minimize and as far as I'm

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concerned , if you like him so damn much, your little fairy ass can go with him.”

Damien shook his head in an attempt to compose his whirlwind of thoughts and then pounded down on the handle of the driver’s door. He glared once more over at CJ who just sunk into his headphones and looking away, mumbled towards him

“Forget it man. I don’t need the bad karma. You want him out, it’s on you.”

Sauntering towards the grass over the melting patches of ice, Damien jerked the back door open and spit off to the side while staring directly at the back of Cj’s head. In one motion he grabbed the helpless body out, letting the head hit the floor board and then the ground. Then, chucked him towards the ditch.

* * * *

Zane’s glazed over eyes caught the morning rays of sunlight. His face knotting up, as the grassy hills of Mitchellville surfaced before him. Wiping the damp leaves from his clothes and hair, he glared once again at that hateful proof of day.

What is going on? Where am I? Where are the guys? But more importantly where is the...

He reached for his pockets pulling the white lining out of his Levis completely. With much discomfort and displeasure he discovered nothing. Head fallen, he slumped down his yellow-lined destiny. He thought of how he once spent a night chasing those florescent reflectors between the dashed lines that had always seemed to entrance him, but at the current moment how he could do nothing more than simply trudge forward, a decaying

sack of bones. Direction was irrelevant, as it tends to be when one has been lost for some time even if only within one's own consciousness.

* * * *

It was the luminescent glow of the blue telephone stand that kept Zane swaggering down the road. All along the downtown streets the hustle and bustle of the new day was just beginning. Shop owners were arriving at the front doors with coffee and keys in hand. An assortment of plants and chalkboards smeared with sales were set outside. "Closed" signs were turning over and bits of gossip could be heard throughout the streets. This mundane occurrence stirred an unfamiliar spring of hope inside of Zane. Breaking up the sputter of the day the clock rang another hour creating an awful echo effect in Zane's head. Running his tongue over his cracked lips, he tried to regain composure. His stomach let out an unmistakable growl, and looking down he knew food was not what his body needed.

Zane went over the possibilities of who to call as he focused on that fateful blue glow. His memory could not regain a single number. Over and over again combinations ran through his head, but nothing was fitting together. Panicked he fumbled through his pockets again. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Heat rose in his face and unavoidably trickled slowly down.. He wiped them away with his sleeve as he trudged forward. Crossing his arms he shivered as he softly spoke comforting words to himself. Pulling the glass door to the side Zane slumped into the booth. Pounding on the square keys, he tried to reach the operator.

"Hello, city and state please."

Mercedes Mcclam

"Lanier.....Sonya. Sonya Lanier....Highgate, Vermont"
The words fell out of his mouth in a mix of jumbles.

"Sorry sir, no listing for that. Thank you for calling and have a wonderful day."

Slamming the latch down to restart the dial, Zane repeatedly pressed "0".

"Lanier, Lanier, Lanier! Sonya Lanier! Sonya Lanier! Highgate, Vermont! I know you have her number, please tell me!!"

Once again the operator kindly rambled off as Zane slung the phone down and let it sway in between his legs.

Stepping out of the hardware store parallel to the phone-booth a tall broad-chested man started his way towards Zane. Gulping deeply Zane opened the door to face the stranger. "What's the deal kid?"

Zane's unsure look made it obvious he was deciding whether to squeeze under the man's strong arm and run for it, or to actually deal with the confrontation. Still staring at the open gap Zane mumbled to him.

"I just need a phonebook, man.... That's all, just a phonebook."

Picking up on the name tag Zane finally stared directly at the man.

"Come on Bob, I'm not trying to cause any trouble here, just need a phonebook."

Bob's left eye brow shot up simultaneously with the corner of his mouth. The halfway grin sent chills down Zane's body, and Bob let out a coarse chuckle at the sight of the goose bumps edging down Zane's arm. Taking a hard

look at Zane, Bob finally put one hand out, and beckoned him towards the shop.

“Well, why didn’t you say so sooner? I’ve got one of those. You not looking like you’re in the best shape anyways, why don’t you follow me? Take a seat in the back. I’ll grab you a drink and that phone book you haven’t shut up about.”

Anxiety ran through Zane’s blood, but exhaustion overwhelmed him and he reluctantly followed Bob into the store. Arranging himself in the leather chair facing a wooden desk in the small back room, Zane glanced up at as Bob tossed him a phone book.

“Here you go I think its last year’s, but it should do the trick.”

Sitting at Bob’s desk, Zane peered down at the text before him. The words all blurred together and he rubbed hard on his brow as he strained to make out each page. Finally Bob stuck his head back into the door with a solo cup for him.

“...Thanks.”

Zane shrunk into the seat and let the sweet cherry kool-aid run down his throat. Slurping down the drink in only a few seconds Zane crunched on the remaining ice that filled the cup. Leaning forward he looked at the phone book with disgust. Tossing it off onto the burgundy colored carpet, he went in search of a bathroom.

Shutting the door behind him he tried to hit the lock, but discovered the door had been pushed through and it no longer worked. Avoiding the dreadful mirror he slung the toilet seat up and stared at the peculiar painting before him. Reaching to flush Zane had to double take and nearly lost his balance. He attempted to stand straight, but vertigo took over and his limbs gave out below him.

Mercedes Mcclam

Spreading his arms out to break the inevitable fall did nothing as his swollen eyes rolled back into his head and he came crashing on the edge of the counter top

In the front of the store Bob carried on with his usual business pointing people in the right direction of a screw driver; or showing them where to replace their old bolts and washers. It wasn't hard to notice his extra enthusiasm today as he amiably glided down each aisle. Checking the clock repeatedly, Bob awaited the moment that the longer of the two hands reached five-- often his glory hour. When the customers slowly began clearing out as they did everyday at this time, Bob reached for the cordless phone next to the register.

"Yes baby, Roast sounds wonderful. I'm sorry I know I did this to you last week, but I can't stop new packages coming in, after all it is my responsibility to take care of them promptly. It's just business---you know this. See you at home."

Pressing the end button, he smiled at his own cleverness.

* * * *

Opening his eyes Zane's foggy vision peered down his naked body. At once he felt the thick black straps that were tightly bound upon his ankles and wrists. He looked around at the tiny pale blue room searching for any sign of existence or escape. Shock ran through him as his eyes met the familiar face of the shop owner; who sat smiling at him from a stool in the corner. Hardly recognizable in his lacy red get-up and rouged cheeks, the burly man delighted in Zane's final consciousness.

"Now there you are... I've been waiting for you. Not that we haven't had enough fun already, but I have to tell you, those blue eyes make me melt."

Bob's toothy, school-girl smile sent screams out of Zane's lungs and his eyes spit tears. Jumping to the floor Bob began shouting.

"Hush, hush now little one! Let's not have to put the tape on again. We don't like playing that game, do we?"

Zane's eyes widened and his shrills became louder.

"Now, now let's not have to put you away with the others. I like playing with you."

Zane's relentless shrieks finally got the best of Bob and he too broke down in tears.

"You all do this to me, Why? Why, I ask you?"

As if waiting for some beautiful excuse Bob's head lowered and after a few moments he reached for the wooden handle at the side of the bed. In one swift motion Bob pulled back the weapon and took off the screaming head, letting it tumble to the ground, mouth still ajar. Crumbling to the floor he grabbed at the young face, shoving his tongue into Zane's lifeless mouth for one last kiss.

Bob unhooked the chains and solemnly wrapped the body and head up in the once white sheets of the bed. Opening the small freezer door he slid the new victim on top of the others. Hurrying to wash off his face and change his clothes; Bob looked down at his watch and sighed "Dinner time." He pulled at the ladder and made his way into the small office.

Slamming the wooden slab shut, he threw the Arabic rug back in its place and rushed for the door as the dull emptiness started to creep back into his veins.

Samantha C. Phillips

Sunset Hill

The phone's ringing yanked Emily from dreaming by the flannel collar of her nightgown. She picked up the receiver, and mumbled a groggy, "Emily McFarlo".

"Emie, it's your mom."

Emily groaned, and rolled over, the phone propped limply against her ear.

"You haven't been answering your phone. Is everything okay?"

Emily forced her eyes to focus on the clock at her bedside. Barely six AM. Brilliant.

"I'm fine, Mom. It's early. We should go back to sleep. We can talk later."

"You're right. We can talk later. I'm coming there."

"What? No, Mom. That's not necessary." Emily said, sitting up, suddenly alert to gaze frantically about her messy bedroom.

"Yes it is. You shouldn't be so alone all the time."

"I - I'm not. I have a - a friend coming over today, actually." Emily said, hoping that her furtive nodding was aiding her convincing process.

"Emily Michelle, Do. Not. Lie."

"I'm not, Mom. Nichole and I are going out for lunch. Plus, you know Tom's here."

"Alright." her mother answered, voice full of scruple. "But maybe you should come home for dinner sometime next week. Thomas works too much."

Emily smiled. "That would be nice mom."

"Alright, Emie. You better take care of yourself."

"Always."

"I love you."

"Love you too, Mom. Bye." Emily dropped the phone onto its receiver and then laid down on her back to watch the first golden sun rays dance across her ceiling. She vaguely hoped that her mother would never ask to meet Nichole.

*

It was Spring. The trees and bushes all around town were flowering. The colorful birds had come to mingle and call around the cabin that she and Tom vacationed in every year. He came up behind her and interlaced his fingers with her own, and she couldn't help but to smile.

"I like that dress on you." he said, and she glanced down at the yellow material that swayed in the light breeze. It was old, but comfortable. She'd only packed it because it was Tom's favorite color. Nearby a ruby cardinal perched upon a fence and called out its amorous trill.

*

The air around Emily was grey. The blue tinge from the kitchen wallpaper wouldn't wear away despite the golden sunbeams. Her bare feet paced, first one direction, and then the other in front of the small table that proffered her the telephone. It's white plastic beckoned her, but she still kept to her pacing. She couldn't believe that Tom's boss was keeping him so long. Sure, he'd pulled a few all-nighter's recently, but he'd always been there in the morning. This is ridiculous.

Emily had become acquainted with Tom's boss over the years, and though decent enough, that man was all about his work. He didn't give a second thought to family mat-

Samantha C. Phillips

ters, or relationships, or the fact that his employees were humans and that they might actually need sleep.

“Alright.” Emily came to a halt in front of the telephone, and she glared down at it for a moment, then she picked it up, and cradled it on her shoulder with her head, and dialed the number for Tom’s work. After a moment, the phone rang dully, but then a high-pitched error tone sounded, and a female voice said to Emily, “I’m sorry. But, the number you have dialed is no longer in use...” She hung up on the recording before it could continue, and just stood there, staring, puzzled, at the telephone.

She must have dialed the number incorrectly. Emily picked up the phone and dialed Tom’s work once more. Ring. Beep! “I’m sorry, b-”. Emily slammed the phone back down onto the receiver.

*

Downtown traffic at this hour was relatively slow, but then, so was the speed limit, so the time that it took Emily to maneuver the back-roads took an eternity. Especially in her state. There was this gut feeling. It had slowly been creeping under her skin from the moment that she had revved her old red car to life. Where could Tom be? Why couldn’t I get through on the phone?

Emily took a deep breath while waiting for the light to turn green in an attempt to calm herself. As she drove, she glanced about for any sign of Tom’s white truck. Soon, she finally managed to reach the street that he worked on. As she pulled into the parking lot where her husband’s truck should have been, however, all she could do was gasp.

The building that should have contained a handful of very busy men was completely closed up. The business’s sign was gone. Chipping paint showed where letter edges had once presided. A wooden board blocked the main window in the front, and a sun-bleached sign on the

inside of the building read "For Sale". There was no remnant left of the business that had once been run within these aging walls. It was simply gone. Closed.

Panic tried to inch it's way into Emily's reasoning as she looked at the building before her. It looked like it had been transplanted straight from a ghost town; not like it was bustling, or full of dedicated businessmen, men like Tom. She swallowed down the panic once more, and fastened her seatbelt. If he hasn't been at work, then where has he been going?

*

Through the hazy smoke in the bar, a few streets away from what she had once believed to be the location of Tom's workplace, Emily managed to spy the bartender wiping down the little round tables that had been haphazardly arranged about the room. A few younger men, perhaps still in college, were playing pool at the lone billiards table in the far corner. Several more were sitting at a table, the glowing ends of their cigarettes distracting from their faces. Music played indecipherably below the white noise of the atmosphere.

Emily walked up to the bar, and the bartender, Collin briskly walked her way. Once he was in his usual place, he got a better look at her..

"Oh! Ms. McFarlo - Uhm. I- What can I get ya'?"

"Nothing, thanks, Collin. I was just dropping by to ask if you've seen Tom around."

"Tom?" Collin looked down at Emily as if he was in deep thought. Then, he answered, "Uh-No Ma'am. Is somethin' wrong?" He looked at her again, as if he was afraid to look away.

Emily looked up at Collin's face and the expression that riddled every line there startled her. There was something

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off about the way his eyes peered at her. She shook her head “No.”

The sound of the billiard balls breaking to their left broke Collin’s stare. “Are ya’ sure?”

“I have to get going Collin. You see Tom, you tell him to come home.” Emily turned and headed out of the nicotine fog without looking back.

*

“I’m so glad you’re home.” Emily said quietly to Tom, as she ran a hand over his crew cut. She missed the brunette waves he’d had before leaving. Tom smiled brilliantly at her, beaming. He placed a gentle hand upon Emily’s stomach.

“I’m glad you and the little one waited. I can’t tell you how great it was to see your face out there in the crowd after so long.” Tom reached down and switched the light off.

That night, for the first time in months, Emily slept under the quilt that her mother had made for them, in Tom’s arms. The morning came far too swiftly.

*

The old cabin was small, barely noticeable among the trees. Emily and Tom had spent so much time there. It was their place to get away from everything. If there was something that Tom was running from, or if he had just needed to seek out a little peace, then this was where he’d be. But, as Emily closed the door of her little black car, her heart sunk when she saw that his truck wasn’t parked near the cabin.

The two hadn’t been out here in some time, what with Tom’s chaotic work schedule -- but Emily wasn’t really sure what to believe about that anymore, not with the image of the “For Sale” sign still haunting her thoughts.

However Emily still had the key to the cabin amongst the others on their ring, so she decided to have a look, just to be sure that Tom wasn't around somewhere.

Dust had settled in the living room of the cabin, but it had still kept its homey charm. Emily looked up at the walls, illuminated by the sunlight coming through the open doorway. Smiling faces peered down at her from their framed boundaries - exuding happiness below pretty blue and green eyes. A little boy. A little girl. A man, old and grey. Emily had to stifle the scream growing in her throat as her eyes frantically moved from one picture to the next. She had never seen these people.

*

"What's your name, ma'am?" the officer asked her, as his pen flew over the necessary papers. He didn't even bother to raise his eyes to see the worry brimming at the edges of hers, dampening the dark fringe of eyelashes there.

"Emily Michelle McFarlo."

"And who are we drawing up a report for?"

"Thomas Liam McFarlo." she answered, and then clearing her voice, she added, "My husband."

"When did you last see your husband Mrs. McFarlo?" said the officer. When he finally looked up at her, she only managed to trace his shining badge with her eyes.

"The night before last night. He leaves for work before I wake up."

"He didn't come home from work yesterday at all?"

Emily shook her head slowly. "No. His boss has made him pull all-nighters recently. But then, this morning--"

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"What about this morning?" he asked her sternly.

"He still wasn't there when I woke up. He never came home last night. I know, because he would have eaten. His dinner was still in the fridge, and I drove out to his work and - and..." She wondered if she should leave out that part. He was already intimidating her, this officer.

She wondered what he'd think about - well, - about the fact that Tom's business seemed to have disappeared. She re-played the images in her head. Best to leave that out, perhaps, and the cabin as well, unless it was absolutely necessary.

*

"Tom's missing, Mom." Emily said into the round mouth-piece. It felt cool against her face after the summer sun.

"What?"

"He didn't come home from work. I went there, and - I looked at the bar he goes to with his friend. I looked at the cabin." Emily swallowed. She refused to cry. If she did, that would be admitting that Tom was in danger.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier today?"

"I wanted to be sure."

"Well, you need to come out here tomorrow, Em. Maybe I'll make us a pie. We can use artificial sweetener, and fresh berries. Let the authorities do their job."

"Thanks, Mom. I should probably stay in town, though. Don't you think? In case Tom comes back or the cops need me for something?"

"Maybe I'll get a ride there, then. Around one?"

"That would be great, Mom. I really need you."

*

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It was one and Emily's mother still hadn't called to tell her that she was on the way over, so Emily set to tidying up her kitchen. Her mind was far too burdened to allow her to do much else but the thought-numbing process of washing dishes. She still had heard nothing about Tom.

Once Emily had washed the few dishes that had found their way into her sink, she instantly craved some other chore to keep her mind off of where Tom might be. She glanced at the microwave to check the time. Then, she headed to the phone to call her mom. She'd always been so prone to forgetting things, especially recently. About a month ago, the two had scheduled to meet at their favorite restaurant for lunch, but Emily's mother had never shown, and when she'd called her, her mother hadn't even remembered setting anything up.

Emily dialed her mother's phone number, and watched through the kitchen window as a hummingbird arrived to visit the feeder hanging there. However, there was a sharp tone from the telephone, and a recorded voice announced to her, "I'm sorry, but the number that you-". Emily hung the phone up by pushing its button several times, then she redialed her mother's number with wide eyes. The same recording answered her. Grabbing her wallet in a panic, Emily headed for the door. Something had to be wrong.

*

"License and registration?" the officer prompted Emily through her rolled-down window. She made an attempt to suppress her frustration. She reached for her wallet, but there was nothing there. She'd been sure to grab it. Her hands trembled.

"Officer, I'm sorry. My mother is ill and she isn't answering her phone. She's got diabetes. I'm afraid something might be wrong. I was rushing, and so my wallet is at home."

The officer looked at her over his sunglasses for a mo-

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ment that seemed to drag on and on, especially with the anxious buzzing of frantic thoughts that had begun in Emily's head. "How old is your mother, Ma'am? Eighties?"

Emily couldn't believe this. She wondered how quickly he could catch up with her if she made a run for it towards her mom's house. His car still had quite a bit more factory shine than hers. "No!" she answered him tritely, "Sixties. If you are following, okay. Can we go, please?"

The lights in her rear view mirror just deepened the horrible feeling rising in the pit of Emily's stomach.

*

The tires of Emily's car left a cloud of dust from the dirt road as she curved onto the street that the house that she had grown up in stood on. But there was no house there. Only the concrete of a parking lot next to an unfamiliar gas station. She'd known this town like the back of her hand. She'd known that house better.

As she sank to her knees, and the footsteps of the officer quickly approached, all that she could do was allow the confusion and the mourning-tinged nameless emotion that had been creeping in her bones to wash over her.

Soon she and the officer were not alone. There were more footsteps. Hands grabbed her. There was a sharp pain. Then, everything was dark. Everything was gone.

*

It was Easter. The picnic blankets had been spread. All the girls wore their pastel dresses and flowers in their hair. Tom had his arms around her. The wind tousled his gray-ing hair, and his laughter was full of warmth. Jessica and Anne played with little Thomas in the field a short distance away. Tom had been thrilled when the decision had been made that his first grandson would share his name.

*

The edge of Emily's pillow case was imprinted with the faded words "Sunset Hill". Fragments of memories came floating back to her as she slowly sat up and looked at the faces in the room around her. She'd never minded the nursing home. The people that worked here helped her remember. At least they tried to.

Anne walked over to the bed that her mother was laying in. "It's good to see you awake, Mama. You're back on your meds now. Do you remember what happened? We were all so worried."

"I went for a walk."

Anne smiled. "Yes. Yes, you did." Little Thomas ran up to Emily with his arms spread wide. "Nanna!" he exclaimed.

Emily smiled warmly. "I love you, you two." she said to them.

"We love you too!" Anne answered her. She looked so much like Emily, with her brown curls and bright blue eyes. Jessica walked in, and came straight over to hug her mother. "Michael said he's sorry that he can't be up here, but that he's glad you're okay." she said with a smile, and Emily just nodded.

That night, Emily ate dinner with her daughters and her grandson. The food could have been better, but she was in the best company that she could have asked for. After all the "I love yous" and a multitude of warm hugs, they each left for their own homes, with the promise to return in the morning.

The nurse that came in before Emily went to bed to administer her pills was very pleasant, but Emily couldn't remember if she had attended to her before. In the comfort of her own bed, Emily looked up at the silver-framed wedding photograph before closing her eyes.

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The ocean was warm, and its water was far more clear than any that Emily could remember ever stepping into. Tom hugged her close, and the warmth of his skin, and his familiar smell seemed to surround her, mingling with the salt of the sea. She looked up at his face, and their eyes met. She couldn't help but to smile.

Separated Lines

Inky two-in-the-morning
with silver pinpricks
painting stars upon my ceiling.
Eyelids should sweep closed,
yet the coarse scraping of
love-notes on paper,
underneath the white noise goes,
and Worry knocks;
a quiet drum on my sill,
here to tether root-tips deep,
into wondering minds,
which fanciful, deter sleep.
I n h a l e - the lack of you.
That scent I cannot thumb down -
Just you.
The essence you left in my pillow case,
my car, the seams of my sweater...
all faded now...
by salted, Moon-kissed miles,
and the sharp ticking away of time,
at inky two-in-the-morning,
with silver pinpricks,
slowly blinking diamond,
and swimming deeply in our same sky.

Victoria Pivrotto

Mind over Myself

The house is on fire.
Crimson flames lick waves of blue.
I make no move to beat it out,
just grab myself and leave
I step outside to watch it burn
but it doesn't,
Just vanishes like a façade
tipped over by a curious child.
I'm the one who set it on fire.
I think.
I start to run.
Slowly night crawls in
and everything gets so still
that my racing blood is heard around the world.
I stop against a tree
to watch my world shifting.
I will back sea blue skies.
But instead the leaden night lingers
for days, but I keep moving,
aimlessly moving.
Blind.
Trusting myself to my mind .
Finally light comes, but not the kind I'd hoped for.
I find myself in a sea of white concrete
and looming skeleton trees.
And then there's me,
drifting around like a lost leaf
Waiting for another house to spring up.
If ever one does.

Childhood Place of Memories

I think of my hometown I no longer know!
All I knew are gone, its people, now, I recognize no more,
There I grew up happy and care free
My father hard-working, my mother always busy with my
siblings and me,
She worked at home: cooked, and washed and cleaned
She entertained guests: relatives and friends who came from
Near and far
And she gave birth to more kids, I remember;
I do not know how they managed to be "alone,"
mom and dad, on their spare times, I suppose!
Summers were mild, sweet, fruitful, and wild for my
friends and me
We journeyed through the orchards of plum-trees, Cher-
ry-trees and berries
I came home with my white T-shirt dyed in raspberries
and blackberries in spring
Families were acquainted, and busybodies
No secrets kept, no closet with dead skeletons there,
School was dreadful and teachers harsh, strangers to me!
They demanded what they did not impart,
So the years of schooling went by slow,
I anticipated with eagerness summers when there were
no teachers about
With demands, unreasonable and teaching inept!
The years went by fast, I grew up and left
Now I return there no more, for only in my memory, I
often travel there.

