

An abstract watercolor portrait of a woman's face. The artwork features soft, blended washes of pink, magenta, and light purple. The eyes are dark and expressive, with pink and purple tones around them. The lips are painted in a vibrant red. The overall style is ethereal and artistic, with visible brushstrokes and watercolor textures. The background is white, with some darker purple and pink splatters and drips around the edges of the face.

Tapestries

*SFU's Literary and Visual Arts
2012-2013*

Each year the School of Arts and Letters hosts the Gunard Berry Carlson Writing Contest, a creative writing and visual arts competition open to all Saint Francis undergraduates. Students may submit written entries of up to 3,000 words in the following categories: (1) fiction, (2) creative nonfiction, including personal narratives and memoirs, (3) essay writing, and (4) poetry, with a minimum of five poems per submission. Students may also submit works of visual art, such as photographs, sculptures, paintings (oil, water, and acrylic), sketches, and collages.

The contest begins in late fall and ends in March, during which time students may submit as many entries as they wish. Entries must be either e-mailed to Dr. Brennan Thomas at bthomas@francis.edu or personally delivered to Room 321 Scotus Hall before the announced contest deadline.

The 2012-2013 contest winners and honorable mentions were published in the second volume of Saint Francis University's literary art magazine, *Tapestries*. Opinions expressed in this magazine do not reflect those of the contest judges and magazine editor or those of the Saint Francis community.

For more information about the Gunard Berry Carlson Writing Contest, please contact:

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Tapestries

Weaving the Threads of Creativity & Innovation

Editor

Brennan Thomas

Cover Artwork by Alexandra Pizzuto

“Tears of Wisdom” (1st Place Winner in the Visual Arts Category)

Editor's Note

This magazine's development, production, and distribution would not be possible without the help of many, *many* individuals from the SFU and surrounding communities. First, I wish to thank the dozens of talented students who submitted their creative writing and artwork for the 2012-2013 Gunard Berry Carlson Writing Contest. I also thank the five writing judges—Deborah Budash, Bradley Coffield, Patrick Farabaugh, Balazs Hargittai, and Janice Rummell—who read and scored all 71 written entries as well as this year's guest judges, Bennett and Carol Vaughn, who reviewed the 145 visual art entries. Thanks also to Dr. Wayne Powel, Dr. Timothy Whisler, and Ms. Donna Menis for their guidance in the contest's promotion and supervision; to Laurie Madison; to the university website's editors; and to Beth Bellock and the staff of the SFU Print Shop. Finally, I thank Mrs. Barbara C. Travaglini and her son, Frederick C. Travaglini, directors of the Gunard B. Carlson Memorial Foundation, for their continued funding of this contest and support of our student writers and artists.

And now to offer an invitation...

There is no act so thought-provoking, so peace-giving, so stirring, so soul-satisfying as pondering over the pages of an eloquent essay or poem or the shadowy nuances of a painting or photograph. When we read or study others' works, we become part of their artistic worlds and visions. "We slip," observes Joyce Carol Oates, "involuntarily, often helplessly, into another's skin, another's voice, another's soul." And so I invite you to try on the "voices" and "souls" created by the authors and artists whose works comprise this volume of *Tapestries*. Slip into the skin of a college football player whose career one violent play may cut short. Speak the contemplative voice of a young traveler who, at the end of her stay in France, discovers a place more beautiful than anything she has ever seen or imagined. Roam freely through the universes of frosted fences and blood-red flowers, of cold sunsets and moss-covered statues.

Go and enjoy these other lives; go explore these other worlds for a time. And then see what you might bring back to your own world, for safe-keeping.

Best,

Dr. Brennan Thomas

Writing Judges

Ms. Deborah Budash, Director of the Masters of Health Sciences and Masters of Medical Science Programs

Mr. Bradley Coffield, Assistant Information Services Librarian

Dr. Balazs Hargittai, Professor of Organic Chemistry

Dr. Patrick Farabaugh, Assistant Professor of Communication Arts

Ms. Janice Rummell, Assistant Professor of Accounting

Visual Arts Judges

Mr. Bennett Vaughn, guest judge

Ms. Carol Vaughn, guest judge

Contest Coordinator & Magazine Editor

Dr. Brennan Thomas, Assistant Professor of English, Writing Center Director

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A Tragedy and a Miracle (Fiction)

Elizabeth Wheeler

Tragedies don't always come with screaming headlines, with blaring sirens, pouring rains, or dying groans. Miracles, likewise, are rarely heralded by the trumpeting of angles or effected by a flash of lightening. For every one of these, a thousand—perhaps a million—transpire unnoticed, unseen; subtle but profound shifts of pattern in the weaving of a life, of a soul. Such is the story of a little girl who needed glasses.

She was eight years old when she got her first pair, and she hated them. She hated the shiny frames, the plastic that rubbed her ears, the pads that left little red egg-shaped prints on either side of her nose. Most of all, she hated the lenses themselves, which seemed to narrow her sight into two little circles so that she had to turn her whole head to look around. Like an owl, she thought. For a while, she rebelled. She left the glasses sitting on the desk, in the small case covered with colorful kittens, and refused to take them out. But as time went by, the chalkboard became blurrier, the headaches stronger, until at last she gave in.

The girl could not deny that the glasses helped her. Slowly, she accepted them. She had little choice. The big *E* on the doctor's screen grew fuzzier and fuzzier until it disappeared completely. Her mother assured her that the deterioration was slowing, that she would not go—quite—blind. Then the child asked, hopefully, if her eyes might get better one day. The doctor shook his head, explaining gently that what she had lost could never be regained, and the little girl cried. But that was not the tragedy.

One day, as the girl was playing at recess, a classmate asked her, "Could I try your glasses?" With a shrug, she passed them over, and her friend put them on—only to whisk them right off again, rubbing his overwhelmed eyes. He held the frames out to their owner, asking, "Can you even see *anything* without these?"

The girl laughed ruefully as she settled the glasses back into their rightful place. "Not much!" she said, and she believed it. And that was the tragedy.

By the time she was ten, the shiny frames seemed a part of her, an extension of her face. The little red egg-shaped prints on either side of her nose had become permanent. Of the lenses she took especial care, for they were her windows to the world. She never took off the glasses except to clean them or to sleep. Once, she woke from a nap with no memory of where she'd laid them. Panic and an overwhelming vulnerability seized her; with difficulty she pressed down the urge to scream for help. On her hands and knees she crawled about the room, patting across the tops of the furniture, groping at the carpet. Finally, clutching desperately at the windowsill, the girl felt the smooth lenses beneath her fingertips. With shaking hands she put the glasses on, relief flooding her as her world snapped back into focus.

That was when the girl began to pray for the miracle, for though she depended on the glasses she did not love them, and her damaged sight seemed a curse to her. Sometimes she felt her prayer was an incredibly selfish one in a world filled with death

and heartache and pain, but she reasoned that surely, surely, an all-seeing God would not hold her plea against her. Surely He would understand her deep inward craving for a vision that was correct, complete, perfect. She longed to open her eyes to a morning that was sharp and clear, to close them beneath a night sky punctuated with distinct points of brilliant light. So she prayed for a miracle, and kept praying even when it did not come.

When she was twelve, the girl took up painting. What began as a hobby soon morphed into a passion, and she spent countless hours in the studio. She worked from photographs, studying them carefully, bending close to see the smallest details, the slightest variations in color or line. She translated what she saw to the canvas with precise, delicate strokes. Soon, people began to talk about her work, about her talent. In high school, she took on students of her own, younger children who idolized her pictures and dreamed of painting as she did. Each week, as she began her instruction, the girl would remind them that art was not only about learning to draw and paint. “Art,” she would tell her students grandly, “is about learning to *see*.”

She believed that she had learned this. After all, it was the most common compliment she received: “What a good eye you have!” A good eye! She would smile her thanks, pushing her frames up her nose and chuckling to herself. She, who could not see two feet in front of her unaided—*she* had a good eye! She, by the grace of two convex circles of glass, could see, could see with a precision and clarity that made sighted beings marvel! But that was not the miracle.

Time continued its steady march, and the girl grew up. She disbanded her small class, packed her brushes and easel and paints into her car, and set off to the university. There, she found herself surrounded by a richly variegated assemblage of subjects and situations, which she scrutinized like a scientist peering through a microscope. Armed with her observations, she fell to painting with unprecedented vigor.

But the sights of the university were not the only novelty that the girl encountered. New ideas, new insights and questions, began to wind themselves around her mind, challenging what she thought she knew. And slowly, slowly, a thought began to grow, pushing up through her preconceived notions, and with it grew a peculiar, uncomfortable sensation. Soon, even the precise strokes on the canvas and the admiration of her classmates were not enough to mask her restless discontent. Accuracy in itself no longer satisfied; she hungered for something more—something she could not define. The girl put down her paintbrush and fingered her glasses uneasily, wondering.

One day, she took an empty backpack to painting class. As the other students settled into their spaces, the girl loaded the bag with her paints and brushes, tucked a small canvas under her arm, and slipped out the door. With no particular destination in mind, she wandered away from the campus, down a winding back road and out into a field. For a moment she stood motionless, her eyes shut, her head bowed. Then, shakily, she lifted her glasses from her face, folded them, and hooked one of the arms over the collar of her shirt. She raised her head and opened her eyes.

An alien world rushed at her with such force and vibrancy that she took a step backward, blinking and reaching instinctively toward the glasses at her neck. As her fingers brushed the metal frames, though, she quickly dropped her hand again. With determination she fixed her gaze and looked, truly looked, with eyes and mind and heart wide open, at what she had dismissed twelve years before.

The girl felt that she could not possibly be standing in the same place. This world knew none of the laws of the other, no principle of depth, no rules of space and form. She stared, gaping at it with the wonder of a child peering through a kaleidoscope. The once-solid trunks of the nearby trees were transformed into ethereal, dryad-like wisps. Yet the gaps between them appeared oddly tangible, like panes of weathered glass, and the girl wondered vaguely if they were windows to some mystic realm beyond, somewhere she couldn't quite define. She looked up, and the blue sky pushed itself forward through the tree branches, spilled itself over the tops of the distant mountains. She looked down, and the ground rose up to greet her—a carpet of trembling, vibrating color. In fact, everything was trembling, everything was throbbing, as if the very pulse of the universe lay suddenly exposed. And everything—everything—was color, once-isolated specks morphing into a radiant symphony of hues more vivid and intense than any the girl had ever seen. They danced before her, sweeping her along with them; she could no longer stand still. Hesitantly, she took a step, and then another and another.



"Gaze into My Wisdom" by Kimberly Elter

For over an hour, the girl wandered, savoring each unexpected taste of beauty. With every step, her confidence grew, and with it grew a strange, thrilling sensation. Again she reached out instinctively, but this time she did not grasp for her glasses. Instead, she stretched her hands high, embracing her loss, her curse—her blessing. Perfection she might lack, but this—oh, she had this! So she lifted her hands in gratitude, knowing that she, by the grace of God, had been given a gift.

Finally, when the eyes of her heart could hold no more, the girl climbed a hill and sat down at the top. She took off her backpack and unloaded her paints and brushes, then looked out into the distance and began to work, translating what she encountered to the canvas with eager, dancing strokes. She remained there until the sun began to sink in the sky, and then she gathered her things and made her way back to the studio. As she neared the campus, she slipped her glasses on again, and her world snapped back into focus—but the sensation of vibrancy remained, as if the new vision yet enriched the old. The girl smiled as she turned to enter the studio.

Her professor was still there, and she shyly took her small painting over to him. He regarded it with furrowed brow. “This is so different,” he said at last, “from what you normally do. But I think you might have something here. It has a . . . a *freshness* to it.”

“I took off my glasses,” the girl declared.

The professor nodded thoughtfully, looking at her with an expression that she couldn’t quite read. “Can you see very much without them?” he asked.

Behind her glasses, the girl’s eyes lit up. “I can,” she said, and she laughed with joy—for she believed it. “I can! I can!” And that was the miracle.



"Starry Night Shoes" by Claire Kovach



"Longevity" by Maria Cup

"Hello?"

"Hey... Gloria had a stroke."

"...Ok... Ok, what's that mean?"

Silence, this time from my brother's end.

"She's going to eventually die. But... but we can keep her for a day or two. You know... to say goodbye... The vet says she isn't suffering or anything. She can't feel anything. But she can't *do* anything, either. We'd have to, you know, feed her and help her drink and... and clean up after her... and it'd be for only one day, to take her back to the house to say goodbye and everything...."

"Put Mom on."

I hear the phone exchange hands and my mom answers, shakily. "Hello?"

"Hey, what do you think?" I don't even bother to ask her how she's doing.

"Well..." And that's the only coherent word I hear for a long time. For years my mom has complained about the dog, but I always thought she secretly cared about her. Her incoherent sobbing confirms my suspicions. "Well," she whispers as she tries to gain control, "we can take her back to the house, but... Hun, she's just a mess... I don't think I could deal with it...." More sobbing.

"What's Dad say?" I am the oldest son, and therefore I must be the strongest.

"He agrees with me, but Alex... Oh, Alex wants to take her back, saying it's fair and it'd be cruel to leave her. And you know Adam would want her at home, but I don't think he can handle it. Oh my god, he's at camp... what am I going to tell him when I pick him up? What did you tell him when you dropped him off?"

I swallow and answer, "I told him that Gloria would be okay."

I hear a yelp from the other end of the line and the phone changes hands again. "I'll be there in a bit," I tell Alex. "Watch Mom, okay? I'll be there in a bit."

"What are we going to do with her?"

"Let me see her first." And then I hang up the phone.

I do my best not to speed to the vet's. I doubt a cop will let me off if I tell him I'm above the law because I have a Golden Retriever on her deathbed.

The day was supposed to be a joyous one. I haven't seen Gloria in two weeks because I've been traveling, first with friends, and then with family. Today was the day we were supposed to pick her up from the kennel. Then, at about nine in the morning, we got a call from the kennel. "Gloria can't get up," a woman said. "I think she needs to see a doctor or something." My mother and younger brother Alex rushed off to get her while I took my youngest brother, Adam, to his summer camp. When he asked me if Gloria would

be all right, I wasn't putting on a brave face—I sincerely believed she'd pull through. Sure, she was twelve years old and had her bad days. Arthritis had kicked in long ago and it was not unusual for there to be periods where she hobbled around the house. Given enough time, though, she'd loosen up and be fine. I figured sleeping on concrete had probably just severely inflamed her arthritis. Let her limp around a bit and she'd be fine. I looked at my brother through the rearview mirror and said, "She'll be fine. She always is, right?" And then I smiled.

A half hour later I was at the gym. I was breaking one of my rules by having my cell phone in my pocket. While I lift or run I refuse to be contacted by the outside world—it's my own time. However, considering the situation, I felt I should be available in case something went wrong. But nothing would go wrong because Gloria was fine. Suddenly, my phone vibrated and Alex was at the other end.

Gloria never was a bright dog. She was a lummoX, to be precise. She knew one and a half tricks: sit and stay, but she only stayed until you were ten feet away. Then the distance became too unbearable and she'd charge for you. She fetched, but only once. After that she'd take the object and run under the table, wagging her tail the whole time. She also suffered from an identity crisis: she was under the impression that she was not ninety-five pounds, but nine pounds and five ounces. Accordingly, she had no qualms with crawling up on laps and sleeping there, contently snoozing while the selected mattress struggled for circulation. She lied on top of couches, beds, and even tables. When she wasn't on the furniture she would lean against it, making her a perfect pillow for reading or watching T.V. You could pet her for hours and hours, and as soon as you stopped she'd stare at you, as if to say, "Jesus, *that's it?* Five hours? Really?" And you'd pet her for hours and hours more.

As I park the car in the vet's lot, I try to bury these memories. I know Mom will still be bawling. I also know that Alex is on the verge, and I haven't seen him cry in years. I have no interest in seeing him cry now. Dad would normally be in charge in such conditions, but he is almost an hour away. I am the oldest son and therefore I must be the strongest. I try to use logic as I walk up the steps to the office's front door. *She is just a dog. She is old. She was going to die eventually. Better now and not when you're in college. She is just a dog. She is just a dog.*

I tell the receptionist I'm here to see Gloria and she takes me to a room in the back. She opens the door to a white room with a table in the middle. Behind the table is my mom with her face buried in a tissue. My brother's face is sullen and his eyes are turned down. He's blinking a lot. His one hand rests on the giant pile of golden fur resting on the table. Gloria's face is turned away from me and her sides rise and fall quickly. I take a step into the room and she moves her head in my direction. Her mouth is split into a grin despite her condition. Her eyes are horrifying, though. They bulge out of her skull and roll around, never resting on a single object in the room. Regardless, somehow she is able to recognize me. She wags her tail and tries to get off the table to jump on my chest, but she can barely move her legs. I rush to the table to keep her from falling off. As soon as I

touch her she falls back on the table. Her tail continues to move feebly, back and forth, back and forth.

Twelve years ago I received my dog. *My dog.* She was *my* birthday present. My parents had told me they had gone out carpet shopping. When they returned, my mom emerged out of the mini-van with a small bundle of light tan fur that was almost white. I was ecstatic. It took all of my energy not to grab the puppy and squeeze it to death. I already had the name picked out: Gloria, after the character in my favorite childhood book about a dog that could do all sorts of amazing tricks, like sit and play dead and do back flips. I planned on having a dog just like that, the ultimate dog, the best dog in the entire world.

Eventually, I was able to calm myself enough to sit down and hold Gloria for the first time. "Careful," I remember my mother saying. "She's just a puppy. Careful." Gloria opened her eyes for the first time since I had seen her. She looked at me, and then cautiously reached forward to lick my cheek. I distinctly remember crying and laughing at the same time, overwhelmed with boyhood happiness. It was a Norman Rockwell painting.

Twelve years down the road that little kid is six feet two with a ratty goatee, and that chubby puppy is a plump and dying dog. Twelve years down the road that little kid begins to cry all over again. I can't help it. I completely break down. I try hard not to, but I do. I haven't shed a tear the entire way to the vet. I can't even remember the last time I actually broke down and just bawled. It's been a long time, maybe since the first day I got Gloria. It doesn't feel good at all. All those people who say that a good sad cry makes you feel better must be masochists. My mom comes over to my side of the table and gives me a hug. Alex never moves.

I haven't even noticed that the vet has entered the room. She places her hand on my shoulder and says, "I'm sorry," with a very sad expression on her face. I realize she's probably only doing her job, but I don't care. I am the oldest son, and I'm crying in front of my mom, my younger brother, and a woman I have never met in my life.

"She can't eat or drink," my mom calmly says. She is no longer crying. Either her mom instincts have kicked in or the shock of my weeping has calmed her. "We wouldn't even be able to feed her or bottle her. She'd be hungry and thirsty if we took her home." She nods toward Gloria's eyes. "Right now she's probably experiencing severe motion sickness, but other than that, she doesn't feel any pain."

I open my mouth to respond but I can't get anything out. The vet speaks for me. "We should end the suffering now?" I nod feverishly. Yes. Yes, my God, yes. Anything to get her eyes back to normal. I walk over to the corner of the room as the vet prepares a series of shots. It's as if years of tears had been dammed behind my eyes and now they're flooding everything. I'm not even thinking about my dog any more. All I want to do is stop crying.

"The first shot will put her into a deep sleep. Her eyes will stop rolling and her heart beat will slow. The second shot ends the pain." I notice how the vet never says "death." Nobody dies anymore. Everyone moves on or passes away. My brother massages Gloria behind the ears as the first shot goes in. The effects are immediately obvious. Her eyes become still and she stops breathing. I think maybe the vet has given her too much and my dog has died prematurely. I place my hand on her side and feel a distant heartbeat. The vet sticks in the second shot. The heartbeat slows, slows, stops. Gloria is dead at twelve years old. Eighty-four in dog years.

Everyone stares at the body. The eyes no longer move, but they are still bulging. Worse, they are open. Alex reaches out and tries to close them, but he can't. It isn't as easy as it appears in war movies. The best my brother can manage is to push loose skin to the front of the face to at least hood the eyes. Thankfully, the vet distracts me from my brother. "Do you want the beach towel back that you brought her in on?"

I open my mouth to say yes. It is, after all, a perfectly good beach towel and my cheapness sees no reason why it should be thrown away simply because it served as the stretcher for my dead dog. However, my mom beats me to it. "No. Get rid of it." The vet nods in understanding and leaves the room. My mother and I stand there for a bit longer, watching Alex trying to close Gloria's eyes. Mom makes a movement for the door, and Alex, after one last attempt, follows her. I walk over to the table to say goodbye. I place my hand on Gloria's now still side and look at her face.

Her eyes slowly open. I don't panic. I don't believe for an instant that my touch has brought my dog back to life, that we've defied death together. I realize that gravity is taking effect and the skin is falling back into place. Before her eyes can become fully open, I turn away and give her a final pat as I run for the door. As Mom and Alex turn to walk down the hallway, I risk one final look back into the room. I feel a little sick when I realize I'm leaving Gloria by herself. For a minute I'm a fly in the corner of the room. I see myself leave the doorway. I see Gloria lying there for one second, for five seconds, for ten seconds, for thirty seconds, for a minute. The room is completely still. Nothing but a vet's room with a dead animal.

That's the hardest part, to walk away and leave her alone. I feel like I abandoned her. Why a corpse needs company I don't know, but I feel like Gloria shouldn't be left alone.

I drive home by myself. Twice I pull the car over and weep into the steering wheel, getting angrier with myself every time I do it. I take the long way home. For two days all my family does is lie around the house and cry, sometimes hard and sometimes softly. I keep thinking back to the way I left Gloria, alone in a strange place. *The dead do not need company*, I try to tell myself. Every time I tell myself that, though, I wind up crying even harder and getting even angrier. I regret leaving her on that strange cold table, unable to convince myself that I left a body and not my dog. The dead do not need company, just like I am the oldest son, and therefore I must be the strongest. That's what I think.

Reflections of a Snowy Night

Glittering jewels sparkle in the pale light.
I leave from the overpowering gloom.
My dark house is nothing in this bright night,
As I gaze at the splendor of the moon.
I draw a deep breath from the ice cold air,
Hearing the crunch of the snow beneath my feet.
I exhale and know that there is no fear,
For I know nature and its rhythmic beat.
The winds swirls my wild hair and lifeless trees,
As I listen to the sounds of soft snow,
Gently lay on earth and my heart agrees,
That each unique crystal has its own glow.
This night gave life to something I once knew;
I remembered that I was special too.

I Dreamed a Nightmare

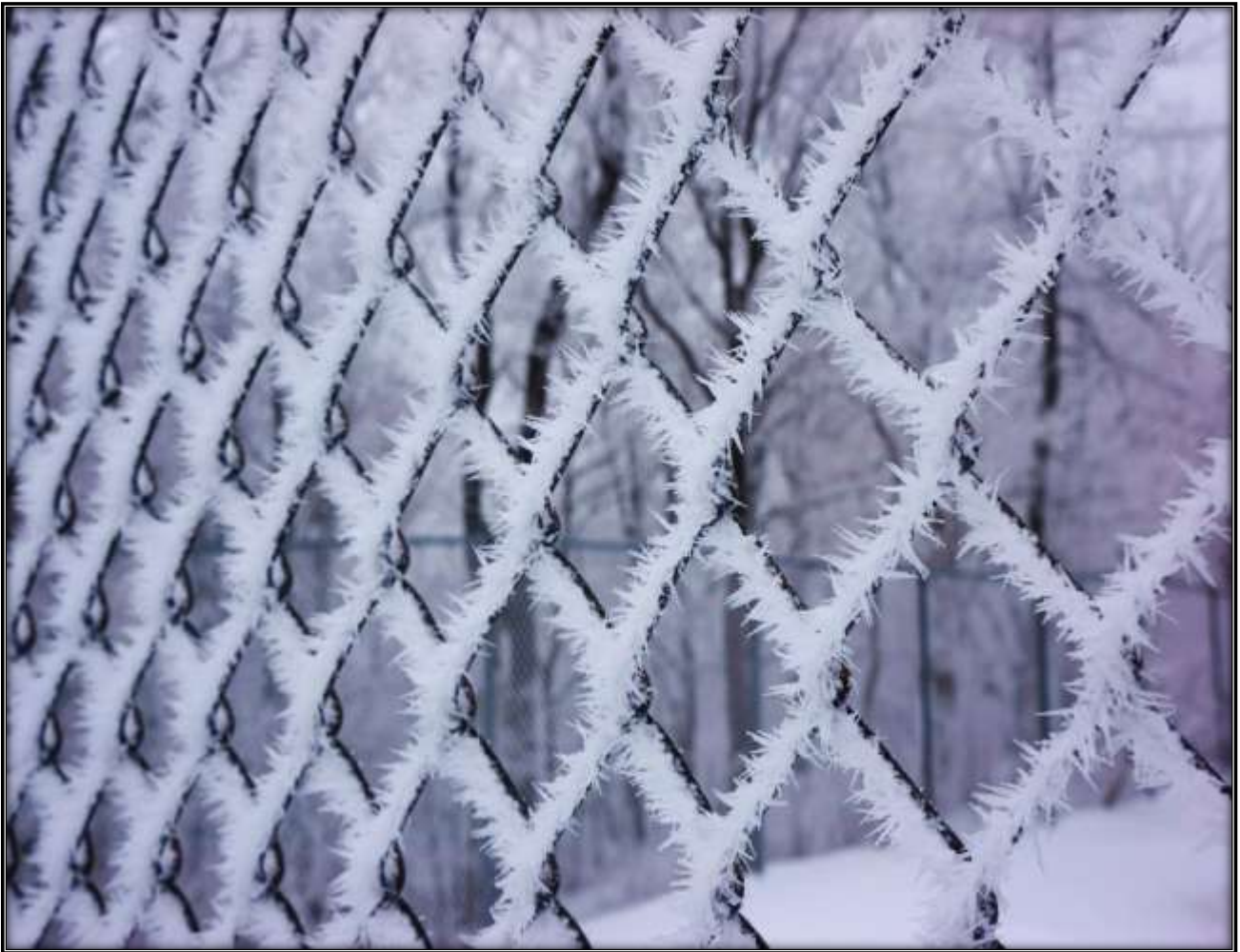
It was evident as I stood in fear
My path clearly aligned to that one spot
Which held the force that chained me to his stare
Searching my shaken figure that fought
To forget the ugly truth as it came
Farther into my eyes which cried with blame
At the one who had let me be romanced
In false hopes to attain
Advancing yet never moving forward
I freeze and fall, like a young foolish bird.

The Unattainable

Unease impels me to further seek dialogue
Your throne holds only the unresponsive
My awkward style begs for interrogation
Except yours which easily struts the room
Anxious to reach the door
Already locked

Investigating My Island

Words creak from my mouth but no one seems to hear
A rusty dry bed is made for my tongue so I refuse to speak for fear
Which now pumps what is left of my heart
My trust has faded with the lies that they dart
Pretending to be immersed in their papers and other friends
Leaving me stranded in the room and all of the dead ends
Are not blocked roads but people adjacent on every side
Terminating my joy so that my travels consist of a very lonely ride



"Frost" by Adam Ciner

The Right Directions

I flex my foot and then point
In that one different direction
As I shuffle right even though I left
The beat that I already hear which you cannot
Know that my step forward
For you is too far away from my graceful arms
Extended above my liquid eyes
I twirl disoriented
By myself I tumble onto my elbows
Supported by my toes which point
Away from me



"The Light" by Shane Martin

As Chad drove his cherry metallic Malibu across the night he meandered through the radio, each song lasting only about four seconds before he'd change the station. He went through everything: pounding dubstep beats and electronic melodies; steel guitars and cigarette-stroked vocals; scratchy wails and vinyl riffs; rap hooks and bubblegum lyrics; power chords and hormonal angst. None of them were able to reach Chad.

"Nothing," growled Chad. "Get my iPod outta the glove box and hook it into the car." I did as I was instructed and asked what he wanted.

"Try putting it on shuffle. We'll see what comes up."

A springy Jack Johnson tune was offered first, and Chad listened. "No no. Not Jack. Not tonight. Not the right time." I agreed. Jack was not meant for dark city driving, especially in the autumn; it was too soon. There was not enough time for mourning. I tapped the iPod and it skipped to the next song.

A band I had never heard of called Within Temptation came on next. I could hear distant milling violins, but Chad quickly told me to change. "It's lifting music. Pump up music." When I asked him who they were, he told me they were "a gothic metal opera thing. They're European. Epic stuff, bud. Like they could do a soundtrack for a war movie."

A slew of bands and artists came forth and were all rejected. Against Me, Vampire Weekend, Arcade Fire, Wilco, Kiss. The Band, the Allman Brothers, the Raconteurs, the Doors. Stuff everyone had heard of like Green Day, The Eagles, and Weezer. Stuff I didn't even know existed like Gogol Bordello, Panda Bear, and Frightened Rabbit. Eventually I couldn't take it anymore and I asked Chad what the hell he was he looking for. What did he feel like?

Chad frowned. "Feel like? Uh, feel like, feel like... Go to my playlists."

I flipped to the playlists and scanned them. There were the generic ones like 90's Music, My Top Rated, Top 25 Most Played, and Recently Played. Down further there were more obscure ones: Work Out, Warmth, Night, Agape, and Melancholy. "Try Night. That seems appropriate."

Chad let the first song play, and then the next few. I scrolled through the playlist and saw a lot of the Killers, some MGMT, and Eric Clapton, but only from his *Pilgrim* album. "Atmospheric music," Chad called it while Clapton bent a guitar in front of synthesizers. "It surrounds you. I should make a playlist of only atmospheric music. Go to Agape now. I'm done with this."

When I asked him what Agape was, he explained to me it was something he learned in a religion class back in high school. "The Greeks, they believed there were three different types of love: philia, eros, and agape. Philia was friendly love, family love, and

eros was more sensual, for lovers. Agape, though, was all-encompassing love. No, that's not what I mean. It was sacrificial love. It was... that willingness to do anything for somebody, you know." Trying to help him out, I asked him if he meant true love. "No, not really, but I guess that's the closest thing we have today. Anyway, I liked that idea of different kinds of love, so I made a playlist with songs that made me feel like agape. Songs I'd like to play with a girl. I don't know. It's just something I did. Forget it."

So Agape is a bunch of fuck songs? "No. Pop is a bunch of fuck songs. Rap is a bunch of fuck songs. Show rock is a bunch of fuck songs. Those songs I picked, they're... they're... I don't know. You imagine someone when you hear those songs. You imagine the same person, and you're always with that person. But you're not picturing sex. You're just both... it's like you're both trying to fuse to each other and with the music? No, forget I said that. That's not right at all. I don't know. Do you know what I'm getting at? At all?"

No, I said. I didn't understand what he was talking about. A song from the Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Stadium Arcadium* came on. I asked Chad if he knew that all the tracks on it were love songs, to which he frowned and nodded. "You can hear it in the instruments and voice. The lyrics, though. Pointless." He asked me to skip the song. Tim McGraw was next, and Chad gently bobbed his head. I watched his fingers waver about on the steering wheel, like they were directing a mini orchestra on top of the dashboard. "Next," said Chad, and then he said next to Phish, Coldplay, and then the Who's "Love Reign O'er Me." He listened to a full Brad Paisley song, but then he said, "We're close now. Go to Melancholy." I did as he said.

Counting Crows cautiously crawled forth, Adam Duritz's vocals moaning about a murder of one. I think that's what they call a group of crows. A murder. "Michael introduced me to these guys." I said oh and nothing else. "I can't listen to them anymore without thinking of Michael. You ever have those songs that latch on to someone, or something else, and whenever you hear it you think of that person or thing? Even if you hate them now, you still associate it with them? Like a song you and a girlfriend had that was your song, but then you two broke up on bad terms? You still think of her when it comes on, even when you hate her. Or like how my cell phone used to be my alarm clock, and I used Counting Crows' 'Mr. Jones' as the wake up ring. I can't listen to that song now. Can't do it. I always think about waking up, about that jolt. About being drug out of my dreams. And that's a shame, because it's a good song."

Blink 182 took over for the Crows, and Chad gave a weird laugh. "Michael, again. I disagreed with him on these guys, though. He loved them, and I thought they were jackasses. But the songs they got right are great. This one, especially. I really like its sound." *I miss you, I miss you, I miss you*, whispered the speakers throughout the car. Chad pulled into the parking garage and the car came to a halt, but he made no move to unlock the doors, so I made no move to end the song. When it ended, Chad said, "I know what I want now. Here, let me see the iPod."

He scrolled through the library, clicked something, and then set the iPod down in the cup holder. He closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat. A cheerless guitar began

stumbling along, but it somehow sounded very clean. It sounded heavy, like the musician was struggling to hold it as he played. The notes that came out were thick and lazy and flitted about the floorboards. I picked up the iPod. "Cortez the Killer," by Neil Young and Crazy Horse.

"Don't change it." Chad hadn't opened his eyes. I slowly put the iPod down, resting it soundlessly back in the cup holder. I didn't say anything for the rest of the time the guitar bled and wept and dragged itself along for a good seven minutes. I didn't say anything until Chad did.

"Michael introduced me to that song, too. I told him I wanted to hear a sad song. No particular reason. I just felt mellow. So he put this on his stereo. You remember that stereo he had. I remember... I remember thinking how sad I felt then, and how I wanted to stay sad forever. I never wanted to be happy ever again. I wanted to be sad and beautiful.

"That's what I meant when I was trying to explain agape. When I spoke of that girl and me, and us trying to fuse together with the song, that's not right. I imagine us abandoning everything. We're not trying to blend with the song; we become the song. When I listen to that Neil Young song, I want to be that song, all by myself. Do you get what I'm saying? Do you understand? I'm not talking about a song being written about you, or someone dedicating a song to you, or you and a girl having your own song. Did you ever want to be a song?"

I shook my head no, and Chad talked very slowly. "Did you ever want to be nothing but vibrations and sound, where you have none of the ugly emotions, only the beautiful ones? Did you ever want to be crushing sadness that also cradles you in its arms? Did you ever want to be raging anger that can build civilizations or tear them down? Did you ever want to be agape, you and your love an interweaving string of notes in perpetual night? Did you ever want to be a song?"

I didn't answer Chad, and I don't think he expected me to. His hand was up around his mouth now, his fingers dancing about his mouth. His head was turned away from me and his voice sounded funny.

"Michael asked me that question a few months ago and I didn't get it. He asked it just like that, the poetics and all. I didn't laugh at him or anything, but I didn't get it. Now, tonight, I get it. I remember feeling like that. I remember wishing more than anything else to be a song. But now every note, beat, and lyric reminds me of him. I can't listen to Jack without remembering Michael playing his songs while we didn't watch TV. I can't listen to The Killers without remembering that night Michael and I danced with these two good-looking girls to 'Mr. Brightside.' I can't listen to anything without remembering how Michael would spend nights getting a little drunk and then listening to whole albums, eyes closed and his arms crossed in front of his chest, like an Egyptian prince buried with his most prized possessions."

I reached across the car and grabbed Chad by the shoulder. His left hand performed a sweeping motion, but I didn't let go. Soon Chad turned back to me, although he still

avoided my eyes. “Thanks, man. Thanks.” I told him no problem. I asked him if he’d be okay. “Yeah, no, I’ll be fine. Just had to get it out, you know. Thanks, man. See you tomorrow. I’ll pick you up.” I gave him a pat as I got out of the car, and as I opened the door to the stairwell, I turned back and gave Chad one last wave goodbye as he spun the car out of the garage. He honked and waved back.

Back up in my apartment I took off my black jacket and tie and unbuttoned my starch white shirt. I walked over to my stereo and found Bruce Springsteen’s *Born to Run*. I let the stereo eat the CD and I skipped ahead a few tracks. As the piano in “Backstreets” picked up speed I turned off all the lights in my apartment. The Boss began to sing and I closed my eyes and crossed my arms. I saw the girl, the one Chad was talking about. She always has brown hair, big eyes, and she wears yellow. As we lay next to each other, our bodies woven into the other’s, Bruce and the E Street Band gently, lovingly pick us apart and cast us into the wind. As I drift off to sleep I wonder if this is what happened to Michael. I wonder if he’s swirling through the black sky, never having to worry about waking up or the album ending, always invisibly beautiful. *Hiding on the backstreets, hiding on the backstreets*, sang Bruce as I drifted away. *Hiding on the backstreets, hiding on the backstreets...*



"The Nature of Time" by Laura Harmon

He got a nosebleed that day. I knew that he had said they would come, but I was still shocked – shocked to the point of speechlessness. Bending my head down in silence, the soft, cruel chuckles tormented me. My eyes looked up across the table and found my friend looking back, biting his tongue to stop from laughing.

Stares followed the boy with the nosebleed as he asked the teacher if he could go to the bathroom, all the while his hand applying pressure to his nose liked a veteran paramedic. Blood seeped between his fingers and dried beneath his nose. He did not twitch or squirm, but simply stood there, questioning the teacher's authoritative demeanor.

It struck me as odd that he wanted to go to the bathroom and not the nurse, especially because of why he was getting the nosebleed. But then again, he was one of those kids who kept everything to himself. He didn't want to or like to tell anyone anything personal. And this could certainly be classified as personal.

As he passed my art table he nudged his friend. "You know why," he whispered, attempting to make light of the situation, but failing immensely in the process. His eyes – jagged glass in a sea of smooth stones – were too cold and hard to be truly laughing, and they instead wandered past to some unknown void.

Not knowing what to do, the teacher merely shrugged and pointed towards the door, then placed his hand on the mouse and his attention on the screen. No words, no questions, no answers. Just the kid and his nosebleed.

Not once did he look at me or glance my way – even though I knew, too. Not once did his eyes tear up. It was as if he had accepted what had happened, what was occurring, and what the future held for him.

Quietly my heart searched for the student I had never known. The student's eyes seemed to relive the pain that had struck his past. His hollow eyes looked through me.

His name was Cameron. Cameron Knott. The freak. The kid with the auburn hair that resembled metal springs that had long ago lost their elasticity.

Rumors floated along the hallways, stopping at every child stooped at her locker, weighed down with burdening books. "He snorts coke," they would chant. "And gets high every weekend," they sung like little school boys in a choir. But he told me that he had been clean for nine months. I believed him.

He had no reason to lie to me, so why would he?

Cuts along the inside of his arms had forged the outlet for his pain. An outlet that he claimed to have given up. Yet still the scars were there – faded lines, from pink to red with every repetitive use.

"I've found a new outlet," he confided in me one day after class. He pulled out a notebook, lined with scribbled words jotted down on the pages. Poetry. I quickly scanned

down the page. It wasn't Edgar Allan Poe, or even good for that matter. But it was a way he escaped his pain. So it was great.

That October, he proposed to his girlfriend. He was fourteen – so was she. This caught wind within the ninth grade. He was a nobody at the mercy of the diplomats of teenocracy. I wondered where I was in the social ladder and hoped I was a princess, next in line for the throne.

So even I fell prey to the cruelty of high school.

“Hey, are you Sasha? Is it true that you're going to marry Cameron Knott?” My words were rude, but I didn't notice – couldn't notice, else I might fail my mission to uncover more information.

I only felt insulted when she turned around and held to her mute, mind and mouth. But I had been the insulter, not the insulted. Consciousness begged me to apologize, to just call out for her to come back.

Words, my forte, evaded me.

Cameron had told me that he had a tumor - one on his brain, the kind of tumor that you find out one day that you have and the next month you're dead. He was different, though. I guess it was his rough home life that had made him tough – maybe, maybe not. But either way, he was strong. He had to be strong to have survived this long.

Doctors had told him that he wouldn't live to see twenty. A mid-life crisis at age ten.

Later he brought me good news. “I passed out over the weekend!” he exclaimed, a twinkling light playing in his eyes, a happiness that I had never seen before. “They had to rush me to the hospital.”

How could that ever be a good thing? For a moment I tossed around the idea that he was living in his own personal parallel dimension where fainting and trips to the hospital are mere “fun” occasions. But then he continued.

“The doctors said that the tumor is shrinking and it's alleviating the pressure on my brain. They said that I might have a better chance of living longer.”

“That's great,” I said, unable to voice how I truly felt. My two words did not suffice the emotion that I felt, yet I didn't know how else to respond. They never teach you how to communicate your feelings in school. Instead they stress the PSSA and how to multiply matrices that are never used once after you graduate. Nothing's in the curriculum about expressing your feelings or showing sympathy. Nothing at all.

Replaying the words in my head, I realized one extra word could have such a monumental impact on everything. He had a better chance of living longer, not living. So he was still going to die. Something so small had evolved into something bigger, something huge. Like one parasite being capable of mutating and ruining a whole garden, a small word and tumor had destroyed his life. Immune to tears he was, having created an ever-

building brick wall, but I had not built up any kind of defenses around me. It took all of my restraint to stop the tears.

Then he inhaled sharply and held a finger to his nose. "It's the nosebleeds," he explained, with the calm composure I never saw him forget. "I get them from the tumor." Then his finger left his face, and he was fine, a false alarm among the sirens.

A week later I sat in art class. That's when he got the nosebleed. The small sign, a trigger almost pulled that proved that maybe he wasn't all right. As he left the room the snickers still continued. No one spared a thought to the kid with the nosebleed. They wasted their time instead on what they were going to wear to a party that no one would remember and how they were going to break up with their girlfriend who they never truly dated.

I couldn't pin down my emotions. I still wanted people to know what I knew, however selfish.

My footsteps seemed louder than usual on the linoleum floor as I descended the steps from the art room. The light reflected from the ceiling off the floor, blinding my usually insensitive eyes. My vision seemed blurred, and I slowly swiped a finger against my warm cheek. I slowed my pace, until I was practically dragging each foot. I shrouded my face with my hair.

Then the bell rang. Students shoved past each other, a stampede of elephants wanting to escape class and yet not wanting to attend their next. My reverie was lifted. I didn't need to be protected. My smile was fake; so was my happiness. As hard as I tried to stitch myself up, I was no doctor.

My ubiquitous peers were looking. I nodded my head in acknowledgment, smiled, said hello, and waved. I had to; my popularity was depending on it.

I found my chance to share my "knowledge" before algebra, the class where you learn those matrices that you never even knew you didn't know how to solve.

"Do you think that Cameron is okay?" I asked.

"I don't know," Evan replied, shutting his locker, math book in hand. He turned around to face me. "Why would I care?"

"He has a brain tumor," I told him, the mocking tone in my voice that I felt myself returning to too often. A tool, I realized, a tool that helped me gain the self-satisfaction that I wanted, the self-satisfaction that came from knowing.

"Who does?" came Alex's voice from behind me.

"Cameron Knott."

And so I had told someone – two someones, someones that were popular and that I cared what they thought about me, someones that might increase my social status. Greedy

for attention I had twisted the problems of others and turned the tables to myself. It wasn't me who was counting my days, and yet it was me who was acting as if my world was ending.

Alex was the counselor's son. Maybe that's why Cameron was called down to her office. All I know is that his trust in me was lost. I had ruined it. I wondered if he knew it was me who had ratted him out but I wasn't sure, never will be.

Popularity had betrayed me. Popularity appeared to be the glue that held the whole school together, and I had wanted to be stuck in it.

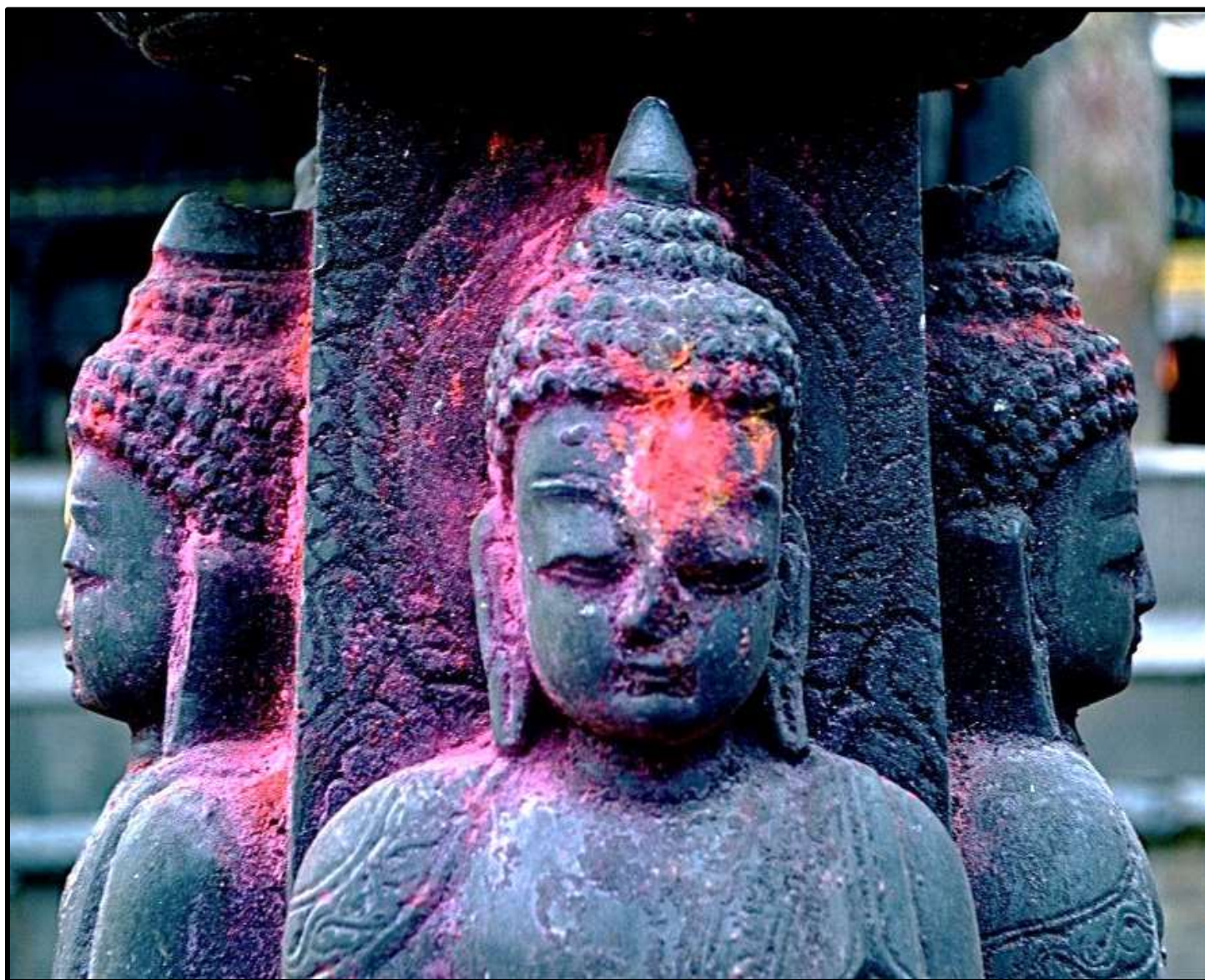
Evan and Alex don't remember that day I told them that Cameron had a brain tumor. It would be no surprise if they didn't even remember that I told them he had a brain tumor. And ten years from now, they won't even remember that he existed. But I will.

And in less than ten years from now, Cameron, Cameron Knott, the freak, the kid with the auburn hair that resembled metal springs that had long-ago lost their "elasticity" – probably won't even remember me. Instead he will sleep seventy-two inches underground, compost for the daisies.

When I would pass Cameron in the hallway, we would still both smile and wave. He always made sure to say hi at the start of each class. Our neighboring seats at lunch never changed.

Yet a haze had spread over our friendship. Cloudy and all-consuming, it permeated every aspect and settled as the dust rests after being stirred.

Cameron never told me anything truly important again.



"Two Sides to Every Story" by Danielle Gryckiewicz

The Minotaur haunts the shadows of his tunnel, bouncing from one foot to the other. He has a lunatic grin. At the other end of the tunnel lays perfection: green turf, clear skies, and crisp autumn air. Forty-year-old pine trees planted an even fifteen feet apart now tower like coned Roman columns on the banks that support the packed metal bleachers. The monster's breath floats in front of him, coming in forceful gusts; he believes he breathes fire. He feels it smoldering in his belly, in his groin, in his heart.

Today the defensive captain speaks of the end, of how this is their final home game, how home must be always be defended no matter what, how they need to fight for their seniors, how they need to bleed for their leaders. Are they ready, are they ready, are they ready? The young men thunder their allegiance and then part the red sea to unleash their hero, their destroyer, the Minotaur. He punches his helmet and shrieks with joy as he tears at his jersey, snapping invisible chains.

He sprints into cheers and the godlike voice of the announcer. Everyone calls for the Drewnóc Dobermans not just to defeat the Mount Fillmore Falcons, but to bury them in the graveyard of Church Field. They will accept nothing else.

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The graying mother jabs her pointer finger at the television screen.

"It's coming up." She's breathless.

The box glows with children in oversized helmets running every which way. The only semblance of system are the teams' uniforms. The tallest of the children, towering at five-two, drops back with the football poised in his right hand. He scans the field, looking for a competent receiver in the mob. There is no pass rush.

"Here he comes!" squeals the mother.

A boy, the smallest of the small children, scrambles out of the confusion and sprints for the quarterback, who is a whole foot taller than him. Unafraid, the tiny attacker throws himself head first into his target, barely budging the QB. While sliding down the biggest boy's chest, the smallest boy wraps his arms around his prey's waist and begins to thrash. The quarterback tries to break away, using his free hand to smack the defender's helmet, but the boy refuses to release his catch. Their legs become entangled and the quarterback collapses with a hard thud. The tiny attacker rushes to his feet and leaps into the air, pumping his fist and unleashing a choir boy roar. No one is keeping score.

"I knew it from that moment," explains the mother. "I knew he'd never want to do anything ever again except play football. He told me after the game, he said, 'Mom, I wanna be a football player,' and I didn't baby him, I told him that he was smaller and that he'd have to work twice as hard, and then he went out and worked five times as hard. And look at him now."

She tears up. "And look at him now."

Unnoticed, the television screen is beaming the next play. The QB drops back again and the little hellfire comes after him. This time the quarterback is looking for him and rushes the boy, lowering his shoulder. The smallest boy is flattened. He doesn't leap up like last time; he doesn't get up at all. The coaches run onto the field. The screen shakes and then cuts to a birthday party three months later.

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Fingers dig into the dirt and identify attackers. Check ninety-nine! Motion eighty-four! Calls and counter-calls, disguised in animals, colors, numbers. Green sixteen! Gold falcon! Red roddy, red roddy, twenty-two, twenty-two! Watch him, watch ninety-nine! Red roddy, red roddy! Some change everything and some are just noise. It doesn't matter. The Minotaur is coming. Code him and confuse him, it won't work. He knows where he is going, no matter what they yell. His body tells them, not trying to hide its intentions. He is coming, right up the middle, right down their throat, so try and stop him.

Hut one. Then a hard hut two. No one jumps. The Minotaur waits. A reluctant hut three. The ball snaps between the center's legs and the Minotaur barrels through him.

The quarterback and tailback run to meet each other. The back's arms are open to receive the football and . . . no, play-action, the quarterback yanks it away and the tailback snaps his arms shut as if he took the handoff. He runs at the Minotaur, doubled-over, trying to sell his charade, but the Minotaur calls his bluff. Never stopping after going through the center, he plows through the tailback. The tailback soars backward and spreads his arms, forgetting his act in this play as he tries to cushion his fall. The Minotaur tries to yell *Pass!* but his mouthguard muzzles him and allows only a muffled scream. His men know the distinct yell, though, and fall back in coverage.

The quarterback rolls right, searching for a receiver. He's running out of field, closing in on the corner of the end zone and an easy safety. Almost there, almost there, the Minotaur is . . . *crack!* The quarterback gets the football off, throws it away, but it wobbles as it leaves his fingers, as he feels the ram-like head of the Minotaur collide with the center of his back. The hit steals the air from the QB and he goes down in a pile of pads and limbs. The Minotaur rides him like a sled for five yards out of bounds.

He howls as he rolls off. Not a safety, but he'll have another shot next play. Now they know he's here.

The Minotaur turns to jog back to the huddle, but his team is down at the other head of the field, dispersed and walking to the sidelines. The Falcons congregate in the far end zone, bumping chests and slapping shoulder pads. He sees number eighty-four flick the football to a ref who has only just arrived at the goal line and thrown his hands in the air, quickly snapping them back down to catch the ball. Najm. Blaine "Break Neck" Najm, the fastest man in the Appalachian Mountain Conference. The other beating heart, the man who fuels the Falcons like the Minotaur fuels his men, the man who earlier this week said he didn't fear the Minotaur, who dared say he could level the Minotaur, who had the audacity to say he was going to beat the Minotaur one-on-one, that he was going to

overpower the beast, that he was going to slay the Monster on the Mountain. . . . He just scored on a ninety-eight yard touchdown pass off a broken play.

While jogging off the field Break Neck crosses himself and points to the sky. Then he points to the Minotaur and disappears amongst the jumble of white and navy uniforms.

The Minotaur storms to the sidelines, throws his helmet off, and thunders understood incoherencies at the student section, throwing his hands in the air. The students respond, and the Minotaur and his people roar together.

Never again. Next time he'll be better.

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"So the story is set," continues the invisible, articulate voice. "A young man, through sweat and determination, achieves his dreams and becomes a professional football player. But there is yet another obstacle for the man they call the Minotaur to overcome: his own body. When asked if he's ever suffered from a concussion, the Monster on the Mountain said 'maybe one or two, when I was younger and I wasn't that big.' His college coaches agree, including his head coach, Gary Polone."

"We always tell our kids that safety is most important, and that if anything seems wrong, they can't be heroes and tough it out. They're just hurting the team in the long run, and more importantly, they're hurting themselves. Mino knows this. I think the reason he hasn't gotten one yet is because his head is so thick. Ha ha!" The man's eyes disappear in wrinkles when he laughs.

"MRIs say otherwise. This year, Dreagnóc University was one of over three dozen schools to volunteer for an NCAA review of concussions and overall brain damage during a regular football season. They used a series of tests, including the ImPACT test—part of which monitors visual memory—and functional MRIs (or fMRIs) to follow blood flow through the brain and isolate active areas. While Dreagnóc's team findings were typical of most other programs, including poorer test results in general as the season progressed, the invincible Minotaur's were far more alarming. In the initial test, the Minotaur's brain showed trauma usually seen only at season's end. To give you a comparison, teammate David Klutho suffered a blindside hit that resulted in a concussion so serious it sidelined him for the rest of the season. His post-concussion brain was still healthier than the Minotaur's at preseason."

"It lit up," says a balding man as the title "Dr. Bill Layden" appears beneath his image. "I've never seen anything like it. We really feel there is extensive damage, so much so that maybe this young man should consider giving up the game."

"So why is the Monster on the Mountain still on the field?"

"The problem is, we don't have a before test," continues Layden. "We have nothing to compare it to. That was supposed to be the before test. What may be extensive damage could very well be normal brain function. Not everyone's brain is wired exactly the same, and the young man showed only moderate decline as the season went on. It's hard to say what's normal and what's trauma."

"After this, the NFL isn't quite as confident as they were a few months ago," says the Voice.

"Those brain scans, that scares us," a crackly voice says as the station beams an NFL logo. "We had a few experts look at them, and none of them gave us any answers we liked. We've asked around to see if any damage has taken a toll, and everything we're getting back is yes, there is a slide. The Scouting Combine offers us a chance to test just how bad this all is, and maybe it's not bad at all. Maybe it's nothing to worry about and we'll sign him and he'll be a great contributor to the team. But it'll take some convincing. The guy might be the hardest worker in the gym, but we won't touch him if he's one big hit away from the end of his career, or worse, serious permanent damage. We don't want that on our conscience. At least, I know I don't. We'll do what we think is best for us and for him."

"For the Monster on the Mountain and his remarkable story, we hope the best for him and his future. Up next, we sit down with Kansas City's Eric Winston as he talks about last week's comments, Matt Cassel's health, and why there needs to be a major cultural change in professional football. Stick around, we'll be right back."

There is final, brief clip of a large man speaking into a swarm of microphones. "We are not gladiators and this is not the Roman Coliseum," he rumbles. "This is a game." Then, some flashy graphics, the infamous SportsCenter theme song, and a commercial with tailgating, blind referees, and a talking dog. They're selling life insurance.

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The Falcons take the line. More colors, numbers, names. The Minotaur scans the fleshy barrier that keeps him from his prey, the wall of meat that is the offensive line. Where are they going, who's blocking whom, the Minotaur reads the eyes and body language when he spots it. It's not a heavy, though; it's Najm. He's out to the right, the wide end of the field. He's staring down the line toward the ball, primed to go. His hands are in front of him, ready to shake his man, and his digits are twitching like he's tweaking.

The Minotaur can read his bastard brother and know the ball is coming to him. He knows that elation, the anticipation which serves him well on defense, but needs to be concealed in the cloak-and-dagger game of offense. Break Neck is too excited to be blocking or running a dummy route. His fingers dance, eager to catch his present and run it all the way home.

The Minotaur makes a decision, fighting the instinct pounded in to him to charge where he is told and smash who is in the way. He continues to show blitz, haunting the trench and listening to the familiar calls. Red roddy, red roddy! Check ninety-nine! Hut one, hut two, and the next battle begins like a replay of the last. There goes the quarterback, here comes the running back, the fake handoff, the tailback reaching the line of scrimmage and forgoing the fake as he breaks down and prepares for the onslaught of extra attackers. But there's no one. The Minotaur has dropped back into coverage, his risk paying off as he watches the QB's eyes, fully aware of whom he's looking for, only waiting to see if he'll be

open. This time the Minotaur is quicker. This time he is ready. Off to the side he sees Najm and his shadow break for the middle of the field.

The quarterback cocks back the ball. Break Neck is open, his shadow falling over his own feet. The Minotaur will be there, though. Break Neck will need to earn this catch. He'll need to sacrifice everything to hold on.

The ball is thrown, is in the air, and Najm catches it. He lowers his shoulders. He will meet the Minotaur. He will do what he said he would. The mortal will face the Monster on the Mountain like a warrior's last stand.

Break Neck raises his head just enough to make eye contact with the Minotaur. They understand this perverted brotherhood, wanting nothing more than to destroy family, an ongoing Cain and Abel. Their eyes smile while their mouths snarl.

Come. Come now. Come quickly.

They yell around their mouthguards and lower their crowns.

The gods clash. The impact echoes amongst the pine columns at Church Field.

Everyone cheers.

• • •

The graying mother tilts her head before answering. "Hm, no, not exactly. I want it if he wants it. That's all that matters. What I want doesn't matter. Every night, I pray for his happiness. I don't ask for the NFL or money or fame. He can ask for that if that's what he wants. I don't want that. I want what he wants. And I know he wants football, so in that way, I suppose I do pray that he'll make it to the NFL."

She laughs and wipes her eyes. "I'm sorry. That's a roundabout way to answer." She sniffs. "But that's what I want for him. If he's happy, he can't do any better. I just want him to be happy." She tears up again, and the whirring camera loves it.

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Green to the left and blue to the right. A bell is ringing. Cleats rip the green and disappear into the blue. Where's the ball?

Now the Minotaur sees all green. The ball will be on the green. On the turf. Find it.

He finds a leg, follows the leg to the torso, up to the face. It's Blaine Najm. It was Break Neck. The Minotaur finds his eyes, but they can't see each other. There's no smile. A fog has come between the broken brothers and they can't find each other. Where's the ball?

The Minotaur moves his bandaged hands up and down Najm, like a soldier looting a body. Where's the ball?

Where's the ball? There it is. It's in the end zone, the right end zone. The man with a C on his chest shakes it over his helmet like a decapitated head.

There are bodies surrounding Break Neck, pushing the Minotaur away.

The green and blue wobble as he runs toward his teammates. The ringing won't leave. It's not important. Someone's talking to him. It's not important.

He looks back and sees one of the karts. Two spiked feet protrude from a flock of jacketed bodies gathered around Najm, like vultures in Nike windbreakers. The Minotaur sees it through a telescope. Someone is talking to him again. They tap his pads and then his head. The Minotaur ignores them. They'll go away.

The spiked feet ascend and slide on to the kart. The Minotaur can now see Najm. His facemask is gone and strange new armor hugs his neck. He stares into the cloudless sky. The Minotaur squirts watered-down blue Gatorade into his mouth and it hits the back of his throat. Two people are talking to him. One has a flashlight.

The kart is leaving, taking with it the broken body of Blaine "Break Neck" Najm, now bones to chalk the yard markers. The Minotaur stands and ghost hands pull at him. He watches the exit of a brother.

There's the green again. Where'd the blue go? It was there. Where'd it go? Where's the football? No, that's been taken care of. He didn't have to do that one. More hands and voices.

He sees the crowd's hands part and reunite, part and reunite. Everyone's spinning. Everything's spinning. The world is spinning he hit it so hard.

The green is gone and there's the blue, found the blue and lost the green. Faces with hands and voices descend upon him, calling his name. He tries to bat the hands away but his arms feel heavy. Someone is kneeling on them and they're too heavy to lift.

What's the score? They're up. It was three to seven. Now they're up. Now he'll get up and finish the game. Now he'll get up and rise to meet the constant ringing of that damned bell.

Come.

Come now.

Come quickly.

The sky above us billowed with dark swirling clouds of grey smoke, which seemed to burn with orange light at its core. The air was thick with the smells of burning flesh, sweat, and the distinct metallic scent of blood. Beneath our feet the ground shook with such a violent force it was as if a stampede was heading in our direction. It was nearly impossible to see anything in front of us and almost completely impossible to breathe without choking on the soiled, putrid air. The stench of smoke stung at my nose and caused my eyes to tear up, impairing my vision even more.

My long skirt snagged on rocks and branches scattered across the grassy field, causing me to stumble every few steps. It was getting harder and harder for me to run away, as if escape was an impossible dream, a figment of my overactive imagination.



“Colors of the Wind” by Stacey Edmiston

I forced my legs to continue moving, though. My muscles and feet ached, my sides burned with lack of oxygen, and my head pounded as if filled with a million beating drums.

“Edee...” Aviva, my younger sister, whimpered behind me. She was clinging to my hand in a desperate attempt to keep up with my fast pace, but despite her plea I continued to move forward towards the forest on the other end of our family property.

I had to keep moving. I had to push forward and find a place to hide, to hide her. Aviva was all I had left in this world. I was prepared to do anything to keep her safe and the forest would provide the protection I sought for her.

“Please,” she mumbled behind me again, breathless and exhausted. “Edee, I can’t go on anymore. I need to sit and rest.”

My instincts were insisting that I run as far away from here as possible, but I could tell she was tired. If I continued to push her, she would surely pass out before we got far enough away. I wouldn’t be able to carry her if that happened. I could barely run on my own anymore. I slowed and eventually stopped, scanning the area around us for any sign of disturbance or unwanted visitors.

“We can rest here for a moment, but only a moment.”

“Thank you,” she sighed and collapsed on the cold, wet ground. Her skirt, previously a pretty pale blue, was now a dirty brown. It was the same as her hair and face, completely filthy. I was in no better shape cleanliness-wise and my body felt as if I had been bucked and trampled by a raging bull. I slowly sat beside her, bones and muscles protesting every small movement I made.

We sat there in silence for a few moments before a cold chill began to creep over my skin, sending chills up and down my arms. My teeth chattered slightly and I rubbed at my bare arms in a pitiful attempt to warm them. What I wouldn’t give for a coat. Aviva was starting to shiver as well, and, because the sun had set, it meant that it was only going to get colder as time went on.

“We need to find shelter,” I muttered, mostly to myself. I was still on edge from the night’s events and I did not need us both to freeze to death in the middle of the field.

“Do you think anyone else got out, Edee? Papa would be able to find us somewhere to stay.” Aviva’s large and innocent eyes stared up at me. It made my heart sink further into my stomach. She was dwelling on false hopes and I didn’t want to have to be the one to crush them. Aviva was my little sister and she was innocent in her ways. Tragedy was not a word that frequented her vocabulary. Unfortunately, I no longer had the luxury of sparing her feelings or telling her little white lies to get her by. She needed to be reminded of what had just happened, even if I wanted her to keep what innocence she had.

This was not like the time that my puppy had eaten her doll. Nor was it like the time she had fallen from the swing in our backyard and scraped her knees. Those were simpler times and now we were in a situation that called for truth. This was so much more

dangerous and the casualties would continue to increase as time went on. She had to be aware of how drastically everything had changed for us.

“No, Aviva. Papa cannot and will not come and find us a place to stay tonight because he is gone,” I stated simply. I was usually rather good at hiding my emotions, but as I spoke it became harder for me to hold back the tears that were threatening to overflow. My voice shook with the raw emotion of having just lost everyone and everything. “You were there when it happened. Mama, Papa, even Carter and Eve; they are all gone and they aren’t coming back.”

Her face dropped and the sadness that filled her eyes made me realize how cold and harsh my words had come across. It broke my heart to see that look. If I could have, I would have taken everything back; I would have in an instant. Better yet, I would have changed this night so that it had never happened. If it hadn’t, then I wouldn’t need to be having this conversation.

“B-but... They c-can’t all be gone,” she sniffled.

“They are. I’m sorry, but there’s nothing we can do now. The best thing for us to do is to run away from this place before the soldiers come along and find us. We’re sitting ducks out here in the open.”

“What do you mean?”

“The soldiers, Aviva. This was obviously a planned attack. Do you not see that? We were trapped and pillaged and now the two of us are the only ones that are left, victims of a war we never thought would reach us.”

Shakily, Aviva rose to her feet and for a moment I thought that she had understood what I was telling her. I thought she was actually going to listen to me and continue our walk towards the woods, but she turned back towards the direction from which we had come and started to stumble back. It was as if she were possessed or in a daze.

“No!” I rose to my feet and lunged after her, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her down to the ground with me. She screamed, a startling and almost inhuman sound filled with pain. She attempted to wriggle out of my grasp and when that failed, she turned and tried to kick me away from her.

“I have to go back! Mama is there and Papa is, too!” Aviva screamed and continued to try and get away from me. She was still holding on to those hopes.

“No, they’re not,” I insisted, desperately trying to keep my hold on her and keep her from the suicide run back to our destroyed home. My mud-slicked fingers were slipping away from the fabric and I couldn’t hold any longer. Her skirt slipped from my grasp and she was free. She picked herself up and tried to run away again.

She made it only two feet before a large boom echoed through the skies, shaking the ground again and sending her tumbling to the ground. A large orange and red swirling fireball rose into the darkened sky. Our home, previously a large and gorgeous mansion,

was now engulfed in flames that lapped hungrily at the structure. The light from the fire was staggeringly bright and made it easy to see the damage that was happening. The heat caused many of the windows to crack and shatter with the sound reverberating around us in the empty field.

A loud scream erupted from my throat as the tears that I was holding in finally came spilling out. It was final now. Everything was gone and there was nothing to come back to if ever we could have come back. Aviva looked back at me, tears streaming freely down her cheeks. It was obvious to her now as well. She finally understood that there was nobody but the two of us left. She crawled back over to me and we collapsed in a heap of tears and wails.

I cried hard and long. I cried until I couldn't conjure any more tears or even muster the energy to cry anymore. I didn't cry like that often and it usually was a short-lived experience. Aviva hiccupped and refocused my attention on her and what I was previously trying to do: protect her from the fate that our parents, siblings, and servants had suffered.

"We need to go," I muttered finally, wiping at my cheeks. I rose to my feet and pulled her up with me. Together we turned and walked, using each other for balance. I felt numb and cold, but I couldn't let that stop me. I had a duty to fulfill, an obligation to protect my baby sister.

It didn't take long for the two of us to make our way across the remaining expanse of field and into the darkened forest. This place was usually one that we avoided as children. Papa had told us that it was forbidden because of the dangers that lurked there. He said that there were wolves and other creatures that would harm us if ever we were there alone.

Right now, though, it was the safest place that we had. It was the only place that we could hide away from the harsh, cruel, and ruthless world of war, a world to which we have been newly awakened.

Author's Note:

- The title, *Bellum*, is the Latin word for war.
- *Aviva* means innocence, while *Edee* means fighting spirit.

Hello, my name is Elvis Presley, and I'm a compulsive gambler. I am now comfortable enough to admit this about myself. Family, group sessions, and bankruptcy helped me recognize this, although bankruptcy was the biggest help. As for family, well, they're limited. No brothers or sisters, Dad's been dead for a few years, and Mom is resilient enough in her graying years to realize that an empty nest breeds depression, so she stays active: church groups, bus trips, piano lessons, and other senior activities. She also plays pinochle and likes to joke (now, of course, not when I had my problem) that I got my gambling chops from her, but I know that I caught the disease from a different woman.

I grew up in a little town an hour and a half outside of Las Vegas called Homer's Ridge, which was just as dull as it sounds. The West has some of the most exotic names in America, from Los Angeles to San Francisco, but no, I popped out in Homer's Ridge. And as if it was a rule, the town had to be as boring as its name. It wasn't a bad town, don't get me wrong. Good schools, nice homes, cute town square, but there was no bite to anything, no teeth. The closest I got to anything exciting was hearing stories from hungover travelers about their adventures in Vegas. The lights, the shows, the way the city could rip you to bits if you didn't watch yourself, and only a half hour away! So, upon my graduation from high school, I shook Dad's hand and kissed Mom goodbye, and then I headed toward Sin City to earn my way in life.

At this juncture, I must say that I wasn't going to Vegas to earn my fortune through gambling. To that point in my life, I had never gambled. I never understood the point of it. I saved every dollar I ever made and picked up every cent I ever saw. I wouldn't have called myself quite miserly, but I was definitely beyond cheap. This trait was fortified whenever I met those Vegas travelers. Most were fine average Americans who knew when to call it quits, but there were a few I had met who had lost everything. I mean everything. No money in their wallets, checking accounts, or savings. Credit cards maxed out. I remember one guy they found in a motel stairwell, bed sheets tied around his neck and hanging from a railing. His suicide note said he was sorry, but he didn't have the cash to buy a gun.

I was determined not to wind up like that poor guy. You see, I had a destiny. God (or whatever) smiled upon me when I was created. At nineteen I had jet black hair and doughy eyes. I was also in possession of a larynx that could sing at least on key. I also had this uncanny sneer that didn't make women of my generation swoon, but flash it to a little old grandma and her knees went weak. A quick shake of the hips and they threw tip money at me like I was a stripper in... well, you know where. "Give the boy a nice tip, Harold," I remember one old woman yelled. "He looks just like Elvis!"

The first couple of years as an Elvis Presley impersonator were kind of rough, but not as bad as they could have been. I always had work at least in cheap dives, but I wasn't playing on the big stages that I wanted. I wasn't vain. I just knew that bigger stages meant

bigger money. I got a license to marry and started performing weddings at one of those little chapels that are the leading cause of divorce in America. Again, not to be vain, but I almost thought of giving up the Elvis impersonator life and performing the Good Lord's work as a minister as long as the Good Money kept coming in. Then I got a break, stepped up on a big stage, and I stayed there for a long, long time. I was the King, back from the dead and doused in the Fountain of Youth. Viva Las Vegas.

One night I had an especially stellar show and gave an encore. Sweating through my sequined jacket, I stepped backstage as the announcer screamed, "The King has left the building!" The old women gave one final shriek and, call me sick, but I loved knowing they wanted me. I opened the door to my dressing room and was surprised to find a woman standing there who was not old, wrinkly, and whose, ahem, assets weren't by her knees, but up exactly where they were supposed to be. Not that I was staring. This wasn't the first time I had a rogue fan in my dressing room, but this was certainly the first time I had one who wasn't a member of AARP. Usually I just give them a quick hip shake, a sneer, and coo, "Thank you very much," and they're done. It's all they can take. So try to understand why I just stood in the door and stared at this babe who was in her twenties, had wavy strawberry hair, and thick lips that covered white teeth. (Jesus, they were white!) Those pearly whites were turned up in a smile that completely threw me off. And that red dress she was sporting? Oh my, oh my, oh my, forget blue suede shoes. Just let me look at the red dress one more time.

"You were really great," she said. She was sitting on my makeup counter, legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. Normally I find such a habit both revolting and needlessly expensive, but she made it look good. The way the smoke danced and curled in front of her green eyes... I got nothing. It just looked damn good. Sorry, but no other way to put it, and I'm positive you know exactly what I mean now. "If I didn't know better, I would have thought Elvis had dug out of the grave tonight and was swiveling around up there for just little old me," she said in a sarcastic Southern belle accent.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" I responded. I refused to completely abandon Elvis altogether. If she was backstage, I thought she must have had either a fetish for Elvis or grown guys who played dress-up professionally. Therefore, there was no way I was going to chase off my first young groupie by being myself.

"My stage name is Lucy." She said nothing else, so I assumed she was a stripper. She certainly had that loose atmosphere about her. An awkward silence followed where I'm pretty sure I was the only one who felt awkward. "So, Mr. Presley, you have a pretty girl in your dressing room, it's a fresh Saturday night, and I'm not much of a church girl, so I can stay up all night." When she said the "all night" bit, her eyes sparkled and her tongue made sure that each of those words came out crisp and wet. "Well, Mr. Presley, what do you say? Let's go stroll Sin City and see if we can find those teeth that everyone is always talking about." And then she smiled again. I continued to stand in the door, whatever composure I had gone. The King had left the building.

"Let me grab a shower real quick?"

“No time.” She grabbed my hand, laced her fingers through mine, and pulled me out the back door.

Most of that night is fuzzy, although I don’t remember drinking that much. A couple of drinks at the bar, but not enough to put me under the table. If anything, I drank to try and calm my nerves. I was honestly scared to death of that girl. I remember that, at least. I think I was also in love, but love and fear produce similar symptoms, so I’m not sure. We hit up a bar, a club, and then the casino, and the whole time she had a cigarette in her hand. Looking back, I don’t think I ever saw her puff on it once, but I remember her turning to me a couple of times and playfully blowing smoke in my face. Even odder, I don’t think I ever saw her light a new death stick. It was always the same one from my dressing room in her hand, delicately placed between two slender fingers, the smoke always hovering around her emerald eyes. There was always smoke.

Once at the casino, we did what you do at casinos: we gambled. I offered the suggestion of roulette, but she turned me down. “No,” she said, “Blackjack. I’ve always had a knack for blackjack.” She giggled at the rhyme she created. “Guys say I’m like a lucky charm. Can’t lose when you’ve got a pretty girl on your arm,” she sang, and then howled at her own wit.

I had only dabbled in blackjack, and only then with friends for random favors and ridiculous tasks. (One time I had to dress in drag and walk into a McDonald’s at two in the morning, but, dammit, I kept my money.) Strangely, her idea of gambling never crossed my mind as repulsive. I just did it. I didn’t think about it. I didn’t think that entire night. Why would I? Like Lucy had said, how could I have lost with a pretty girl like her on my arm?

And you know what? She was right. I cleaned up. I made obscene wagers, but I always came out on top. I knew when the dealer should hit me and I knew when to stop. Soon a crowd gathered and I put on my best performance yet. With a sneer on my face and Lucy on my arm I won ten, twenty-five, fifty thousand dollars. I began performing tricks to prove that I wasn’t counting cards. I had the dealer put another deck in the pile, played with my eyes closed, and asked onlookers what I should do. (Looking back I can see that was stupid, but they never let me down.) Lucy entertained the crowd as much as I did. Occasionally she’d use some of the winnings to buy drinks for everyone around the table. She shrieked whenever I won an especially desperate hand, and she led the mob in chants and cheers. One hand was on my arm and the other was pinching that eternal cigarette. I felt like I would never lose because I had Lady Luck clinging to me every second. I never pictured Lady Luck would have a nicotine addiction.

When I finally called it a night I had made a very nice sum of money. It was gorgeous, beautiful, and partially mine. If it was up to me, I would have stayed at that table until the casino went bankrupt, but Lucy laced her fingers into mine again and pulled me away. I followed like I had done the entire night. She pulled me into an open elevator. “My room is here, on the top floor. It’s a suite. It’s got a killer view of the city.” As the doors closed I had a sudden out-of-body experience and saw the two of us in that elevator.

Sneering Elvis Presley and Lucy the Smoking Stripper, wads of money all around them, heading up to the top floor of a Las Vegas hotel to have sex. Take a picture, kid, and send it as a postcard to Grandma.

I don't remember the suite. I don't remember the view. I remember turning from the window to find Lucy standing right behind me, eyes on fire with smoke all around them. She lunged at me and kissed me deeply on the mouth. There was no romance involved. She buried her nails into my back and pushed her mouth into mine, and I responded by pushing back just as hard. She took off my sweaty, money-stuffed sequined jacket and I began to unzip the back of her dress. When the zipper was halfway down her back, I opened my eyes for a minute. I tried to scream, but her mouth muffled it.

Her irises had turned from emerald green to a rose red, and the whites of her eyes were now black. She was crying blood and her tears were getting smeared all over my face. I tried to pull away, but her claws burrowed into my back, breaking skin. My mouth began to dry out. I could feel her tongue exploring my mouth, burning everything it touched. She got my gums, then my tonsils, and then I felt it begin to slide down my throat. Finally, with a big shove, I managed to get away. When our mouths parted, black smoke billowed from hers as I coughed and wheezed on the floor. As soon as the physical connection was broken, everything seemed to go back to normal. She was Lucy the Supposed Stripper and not Lucy the Demon Woman. I was Elvis Presley, gasping on the floor.

"Come on, King!" she squealed as she squatted on my chest. "The only reason it stings a wee bit is 'cause you're fighting it. Relax," she purred, "and stick with me, babe. They call me Lady Luck and I'll never leave your side as long as you never leave mine." Then she smiled like she had done all night, but it was different this time. Her teeth were big and straight, but also white and pointy. I was staring at the teeth of Sin City and I didn't want them to chew on me. I knew they'd never spit me out. Instead, they would swallow me and I would burn for all eternity. I'm just a hunk, a hunk of burning love. She leaned down to kiss me one last time. The King wants to fucking leave the building right fucking now.

I swiveled my hips and bucked her off of me, then tore out of the room, my satin shirt shredded, fluttering in my wake. I forwent the elevators, and I leapt down the stairs by fours, down every floor of that hotel, all forty stories. It seemed like that stairwell went all the way down into Hell. The entire time I heard her at the top, shrieking with laughter. I reached the lobby and ran outside. I kept running. I ran for a long time. I don't remember ever stopping.

The next afternoon I woke up in my apartment. How, I'm still not sure, but at the time I assumed it was my own doing. I remembered the previous night and groaned. She drugged me, I thought. The bitch must have drugged me. I rolled out of bed and searched for my jacket, hoping that the money wasn't a hallucination, too. I couldn't find it and figured that I had left it at her place. That was fine. I remembered how she had scratched my back, so I ran to the bathroom. I checked my back and couldn't find a scratch on it.

Must have been a hell of a drug. As I was getting ready to go back to bed and sleep off my hangover, drugover, whateverover, I saw it. There on my nightstand was an ashtray that had never been there, and in that tray was a cigarette. It was lit. I didn't move for well over an hour, honest to God, and that entire time the cigarette burned steadily with no one puffing it. The ash never grew.

After that, everything fell apart. I left my apartment and never went back, crashing on a friend's couch for a long time. I tried to go back to performing, but my swagger was gone. My doughy eyes darted around the audience, my sneer quivered, and one time I actually screamed when a little old woman grabbed my leg. I went back to the dives and chapels and even there I was horrible, maybe even worse. There was always smoke in those places. I took whatever money I made and took it to the casinos. I hated myself every time I went, and I was always sure I'd see her there, but I couldn't stay away. I went to the same casino and sat in the same seat at the same blackjack table as I did that horrific night. I didn't even expect to win, nor did I, but I just couldn't stop. I didn't even get a thrill from gambling, but I felt this need to go, this pull. Like an addiction. Like I was addicted to cheap cigarettes and I was in nicotine withdrawal. I just kept going and going until I had nothing left. No money in my wallet, checking account, or savings. Credit cards maxed out.

I almost ended my life like that guy with the bed sheets. In a final ditch to save myself, I called my mom to pick me up and take me back home. Just until I got my feet under me. Now I work at the same bar as I worked during my teenage years. For how long I'll stay here, I can't say. I tend bar now, and I listen to the victims of Vegas. And I really do listen. I listen to every word they say, because occasionally one of them talks about a girl. Sometimes she's blonde, but she's also been brunette, raven haired, red-headed, and one guy even claims it was pink. So far there hasn't been another Lucy, but there've been variations like Lucinda and Lucille, and some random ones like Trixie and Candy. But they always talk about her cigarette and about the smoke. "There was always smoke," they say, and I nod my head in an understanding way like a good bartender does. There will always be smoke.

I pretend I'm still asleep, but I can see you're wide awake. Standing in front of your reflection, you partially lift up your shirt, revealing your stomach. Look at yourself in the mirror. Suddenly your belly shrinks away as it's sucked in and your back goes as rigid as a performing ballerina's. A finger pinches the ounce of flesh you barely have left. You tug at it, pull at it, almost as if it will disintegrate like powder in your delicate fingers.

I can still feel your eyes inflating it ten-fold.

Fingers touch your cheek as you draw the skin back, revealing an unnaturally bony structure, features sunken in. The smile that was once plastered upon your face has become nonexistent, as if the joy in your life was sucked out like the fat.

I can still feel your eyes finding faults.

You turn your back to the mirror, but not your face, as it's distortedly twisted around so you never stop looking at your image. Apparently, your butt's still too big, even if you passed fitting into a size one months ago.

Memories pop into my head like bolts of lightning, powerful and unexpected. You told me that you were envious of my figure, how you wished you could have my slim body. You threw your clothes in a heap on the floor, unsatisfied with the way they hung off your slender shoulders. I mistakenly laughed at your melodramatics; you chimed in with me, ebbing away clinging doubt.

I can still feel your eyes buying double zeroes.

A hand pushes at the thin skin on your thighs. Your once athletic legs are gone. The question mark of your calves has been reduced to the exclamation mark pleading your cause. I was informed you ate a ton this weekend, a bowl of soup and a salad in one meal! Commensurate to the amount you feasted upon, you spent the rest of the day biking off those calories.

I can still feel your eyes cringing disgustingly.

Now you look at your arms. You've managed to close your hand around one of them. If you are what you eat, does that mean you're nothing at all?

I can still feel your eyes wanting them to be smaller.

The bowl of cereal sits untouched. A sandwich is thrown into the cafeteria trash can. Dinner was at a friend's, although we both know you spent the evening alone. And so we both turn a blind eye as we both pretend you don't know that I know.

I pretend I'm still asleep, but I can see you're wide awake. As you stare at yourself the fear flashes beneath the façade of being put together. In the beginning you confided to me you were afraid.

So how do you look past the yellow, sallow skin and think it's healthy? Since when did skin sagging on barely bone scream beautiful? Did you learn your habits? Were they

observations made that formed your new lifestyle? Or did some morphed perception of reality lead you to this? Who ever said you were fat?

Tilting, squinting, day light, night time, right side, left side, one-eye closed, from above or below. I've looked at you from every angle; somehow I've missed what you see.

I can still see your eyes thinking you're fat.



“Transitory” by Shane Martin

Irreconcilable Differences (Essay) – 3rd Place Contest Winner

Elizabeth Wheeler

Irreconcilable Differences: The Binary Opposition between the Individual and the Crowd in Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist"

Franz Kafka's 1922 short story "A Hunger Artist" is essentially a tale of deconstruction, the story of a man who builds an "unparalleled career" only to watch it fall to pieces (Kafka). The title character is a professional faster, a performer who once traveled throughout Europe with his impresario. Wherever he went, "the whole town took a lively interest" in the hunger artist (Kafka). However, the excitement eventually waned. Abandoned by his audience, the once-proud artist is forced to take his act to a circus, where he is relegated to a cage near the menagerie.

The hunger artist's story is that of individual struggle and internal human longing inextricably intertwined with crowd mentality and the external demands of the public. Destructionist critic Paul de Man, at the beginning of his essay "Semiology and Rhetoric," states that there "stands a highly respectable moral imperative that strives to reconcile the internal, formal, private structures of literary language with their external, referential, and public effects" (396)—in effect, internal and external, form and experience, can and must come together to create meaning. De Man goes on to argue that this assumption is more wishful thinking than reality, that "the attraction of reconciliation is the elective breeding-ground of false models and metaphors" (396). In "A Hunger Artist," this inability to reconcile the internal and the external becomes an indispensable structure within the story itself. The struggle between the external and the internal, the crowd and the individual, is the binary opposition which holds the story together; the impossibility of their reconciliation is the very thread with which Kafka's tale is woven.

The artist's struggle, his deep, searching soul-hunger, does not play itself out in private, but on a stage for all to see. The act of fasting is undeniably personal and intrinsic. Others can see the artist's fragile frame, but he and he alone feels the consequences of his fast. Yet, without the presence of the onlooker to interpret and elevate his act, the artist is merely a man starving himself. He has constructed an identity as a performer, an individual who plays out his solitary struggle in front of the world. His livelihood depends on the interest, enthusiasm, and involvement of his audience. Without the impresario and then the overseer, without the watchers, without the young women who help him from his cage and the "children [who stand] openmouthed, holding each other's hands for greater security, marveling at him as he [sits] there," the hunger artist's chosen profession ceases to exist; he finds himself no longer a celebrity but "merely an impediment on the way to the menagerie" (Kafka). The crowd provides the platform and the audience without which the identity he has built crumbles. De Man argues that "[t]here can be no dance without a dancer, no sign without a referent" (400). Taking this argument a step further, a sign needs an interpreter—someone who attempts to uncover and understand the referent,

the incommunicable force that lies behind the word or deed. In the same way, the character of the hunger artist—a sign whose reference is so deeply internal—cannot exist without the external audience.

De Man continues his argument with a description of the way in which meaning is “fully obscured by the duplicity of a figure that cries out for the differentiation that it conceals” (400). Though de Man is referring to grammatical structures, the statement seems also applicable to the social structure established in “A Hunger Artist,” adding another level of complexity to the opposition between individual and crowd, internal and external. The artist’s relationship with his audience is strained by his own ambiguity. He needs the crowd, yet he feels no connection to it, lamenting, “To fight against this lack of understanding, against a whole world of non-understanding [is] impossible” (Kafka). Furthermore, though the artist is celebrated for his willpower, for his ability to do what the majority of society cannot, he declares that fasting is “the easiest thing in the world” (Kafka). At the same time, the public’s initial benevolent actions toward the hunger artist mask an underlying uneasiness that grows throughout the story. This is illustrated in the reaction of the young ladies who help the artist from his cage. At first, they are “blissful at having been selected for the honor”—until the hunger artist’s body touches them. Then they recoil from him, one bursting into tears, as he looks up into eyes that “pretended to be so friendly and were in reality so cruel.” Eventually, the negative reaction of the crowd is no longer hidden, reaching the point at which the audience chooses to abandon the hunger artist.

As the public moves on, forgetting the artist altogether, the significance of the binary opposition between the solitary individual and the crowd becomes especially clear. Until this point, the interactions between the artist and the public seem to create a sort of tension, as if stretching taut between them a tightrope upon which the act can be played out. When this tension eases, the rope falls; when the binary opposition between the crowd and the artist’s inner struggle is fragmented, the artist crumbles with it. Left to his own devices, his own internal struggle unbalanced by external forces, the man disintegrates along with his reputation. His fasting and dissatisfaction consume him, and no one sees or cares. A small audience, in the form of the overseer and a few circus workers, reappears briefly as the artist takes his last breaths—but the resulting exchange serves only to emphasize their indifference. As the overseer listens “affably,” without real concern, the artist explains, “I had to fast, I couldn’t help it. . . . I couldn’t find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else” (Kafka). The overseer’s only response is to turn to his employees and order, “Well, clear this out now!” (Kafka). In death, the artist is severed completely and finally from the crowd—his last desperate attempt to explain the significance of his actions proving futile.

This poignant final revelation alludes to the core of the artist’s struggle, the root of the opposition between the individual and his public. This dilemma, manifested so clearly in the artist’s desperate whisper and the overseer’s apathy, is what de Man refers to as the

inability to reconcile “form and meaning” (396). The crowd looks at the artist’s fast and sees only a laudable—or horrible—feat of will. The audience inevitably fails to see that the hunger artist’s fast is the embodiment of a deep, consuming dissatisfaction within. De Man’s “sign” and “referent” are not brought together, but rendered oppositional. The sign, the individual, is tragically misinterpreted because the crowd, as the external, finds the internal incomprehensible. The referent is left obscured—intangible—and the artist’s searching hunger remains a question that cannot be answered, cannot even really be asked; this deep groaning of the soul, an enigma that even the most skilled artist can never truly capture, but merely suggest.

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“Life and Shakespeare” by Anna Jeffries



"The Divine" by Chelsie Adams

Industrial Aquaculture (Essay) – 2nd Place Contest Winner

Angela Pucciarella

Industrial Aquaculture: Emptying the Oceans

Picture a world without seafood. Seafood operations are shut down indefinitely, and even worse, sea mammals and sea birds have completely disappeared. The world as we know it has changed, and we are to blame. The truth is, this hypothetical scenario is not so far from becoming a reality. It is almost impossible to travel the developed United States without passing a Red Lobster, Long John Silver's, or sushi restaurant. One would be hard-pressed to find a restaurant that did not have seafood on the menu. However, as common as fish such as tuna and salmon seem to us now, within our lifetime they may no longer be available to us at all.

With the world's population booming, there is an ever-increasing demand for more seafood. People around the globe are becoming more health conscious, therefore looking for more sources of lean protein, causing the demand for fish to grow very quickly. This demand has brought about the rise of industrial aquaculture, which, like terrestrial CAFOs, is intended to help feed the world in a much more efficient way. It is true that these systems keep food cheaper and easier to obtain—but at what cost to our planet?

Industrial aquaculture, as it functions now, is a horrible threat to the health of freshwater and marine ecosystems. Fish farms produce vast amounts of waste, all of which go directly into water systems such as streams and rivers, eventually making it out to sea. Fish are kept in extremely cramped cages, which allows for the easy transmission of many diseases (Steir and Hopkins 148). Furthermore, fish can frequently escape their pens, which allows them to breed with wild species, and experts worry that this may lead to a genetically weaker wild population (Castro and Huber). Because industrial aquaculture is becoming detrimental to freshwater and marine ecosystems, more natural, eco-friendly methods of aquaculture need to be implemented before the damage to our oceans is irreversible.

Surprisingly, food from the sea still represents only about 1% of all the food humans consume, although it provides about 30% of the animal protein eaten by people around the world (Castro and Huber 384). Despite this seemingly low percentage of seafood being consumed, it is still enough to decimate many wild fish and other marine life populations. It has recently been estimated that about 90% of the big fish species that once thrived in the oceans have already been completely eliminated as a direct result of commercial fishing (Castro and Huber 392). Fish such as salmon, cod, tuna, and bass are in the highest demand and therefore are at the highest risk of being eradicated from the wild (Greenburg). If nothing changes, and fish populations continue to dwindle at the rate that they have been, it is not far-fetched to imagine an ocean containing vastly fewer species in the next few decades.

Species that are overfished but still remain in existence, such as tuna, now have a much smaller body size on average than they did just a quarter of a century ago. Smaller fish produce fewer eggs, which consequently slows the populations' ability to rebound (Castro and Huber 390). If this trend continues, even very common fish species such as salmon, herring, and tuna, will surely see a severe collapse in population size. With key fish species going extinct, larger predators such as dolphins, whales, sea lions, seals, and even many birds will also become threatened. In fact, a 2002 study found that the populations of most shark species on the Atlantic Coast of the U.S. had declined by about fifty percent; this alarming crash in numbers had only happened in the previous fifteen years (Castro and Huber 392). Removing one key predator from a food web can have a trickle-down effect, causing imbalance and devastation to an entire ecosystem.

Many of us are supporting this type of destruction indirectly by our food purchases, without even being aware of it. The average person from Japan eats around 37.7 pounds of fish a year, and in America, the average person eats around 16.6 pounds of fish per year (Castro and Huber 385). Fifty percent of the seafood that we eat comes from industrial fish farms (Steir and Hopkins 148). The fish from these farms are kept in concentrated areas and produce a lot of waste; the feces from an aquaculture facility containing 200,000 fish can be compared to the amount of sewage coming out of a city of 20,000 to 60,000 people (Steir and Hopkins 148). The waste from the fish contains nitrogen and phosphates, both of which pollute the water with an over-abundance of nutrients. Although an increase in nutrients may sound advantageous, it actually increases algal blooms in the water, which can be very harmful to any marine environment. An increase in algal blooms in the water means that there is less oxygen and sunlight in the water (Steir and Hopkins 149). This lack of oxygen can cause a rapid decrease in the fish species of that area, substantially decreasing biodiversity.

In addition to harming fish species, algal blooms also threaten the health of many mammals and birds. For example, a major threat to manatee populations is the occurrence of red tides, a type of algal bloom that has been noticeably increasing over the past several years (Reep and Bonde). Red tide algae produce a toxin that hovers over the surface of the water and is very poisonous to manatees when they come to the surface to breathe. The toxin affects the nervous system of the manatee, resulting in death if not treated quickly. The increase in red tide blooms seems to be directly correlated with the increase of pollution, such as nitrates and phosphates, coming from streams and rivers (Reep and Bonde). Couple this pollution with the rising global temperature, which also allows algae to thrive, and it becomes an even bigger recipe for disaster for the manatee and other mammals.

However, some species of marine life thrive off of these algal blooms. Jellyfish flourish in waters that are high in eutrophication; for these stinging drifters, the more pollution there is, the happier they are. This has proven to be detrimental to fish populations that can neither reproduce as quickly as the jellyfish nor compete with them for food. Fishermen all over the world are beginning to pull up more jellyfish in their nets

than fish. Any fish that are pulled up with the jellyfish are not fit to be eaten because they have already been stung and killed and therefore go to waste (Greenburg). Shrimp fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico are having serious problems catching anything but jellyfish, which can result in losses of millions of dollars (Pohl). Even on beaches, there is an extremely noticeable rise in the number of stings reported, and the severity of the stings has also increased (Pohl). If this pattern continues, it may not be too long before beach-goers are completely uninterested in venturing into the water at all.

Not only is the pollution from these farms harmful to other freshwater and marine creatures, but it is very harmful to humans as well. High nitrate levels in the water have been shown to greatly degrade human health. Women drinking from water that is high in nitrate levels have a significantly higher number of miscarriages compared to women drinking water with low nitrate levels (“The Environmental Impact of Factory Farms”). Even though water sources are supposed to be safe for us to drink from, there is still always a chance that nitrates and other pollutants can make it into our glasses or onto our plates. This is a problem that will only increase if changes are not soon made to decrease the levels of nutrients and pollutants in the water systems.

However, point source pollution is not the only escape artist that fish farms find hard to contain. It is not uncommon for fish to escape from these farms and go back into the wild, where breeding can cause the genome of the wild population to be less hardy. The genomes of farmed salmon cause them to have a much weaker immune system and therefore make the salmon much more susceptible to disease and stress. Currently, over 500,000 tons of Atlantic salmon is being farmed; therefore, even a 1% escape rate means that at least 5,000 tons of farmed fish are now left to spawn with wild populations (Davenport et al.). According to the book *Aquaculture: The Ecological Issues* by John C. Davenport et al., “Where field experiments have been designed to assess the relative fitness of farmed escapes and wild native salmon, farmed fish are found to have reduced fitness both in freshwater and over the whole life cycle.” Davenport et al. go on to say that since the farmed fish are bred to grow and reproduce at a much faster rate than wild fish, they are repopulating more quickly, thereby out-competing and replacing the wild populations altogether. It is a serious situation when the genes of wild species are being completely altered, and the full consequences of this have yet to be completely understood.

A third major problem arises in that many farmed species are alien to the area in which they are being raised. An alien species is one that is not native to that particular area, but has been relocated there. The majority of introductions of alien species into an ecosystem occur through aquaculture, resulting in a huge problem for biodiversity (DeSilva et al.). Not only can alien species introduce entirely new parasites and diseases, but they also out-compete native species for food. There are instances where introduced species of fish have wiped out nearly all of the other species of fish living in that ecosystem, causing the extinction of several fish species as well (DeSilva et al.). If this

occurs in a smaller water system, such as a lake, the impacts could ravage through the entire food chain of that area.

Diseases are another huge issue, and their effects are becoming increasingly apparent. Parasites and diseases can spread very rapidly among fish in closed conditions (Castro and Huber 398). Each species of fish carries its own diseases; therefore, as each new species of fish is brought into aquaculture, another new host of diseases enter the wild population (Davenport et al.). Because interbreeding between escaped and wild fish causes the genome of the wild species to be compromised, the wild fish are then much more susceptible to diseases that they would normally easily overcome or avoid (Castro and Huber 398). These diseases could cause a tremendous decrease in population size if they become epidemics; there are no antibiotics in the wild to keep the fish alive.

Among the hardest hit by introduced diseases are wild salmon. A study was recently conducted in which the effect of farmed salmon parasites on populations of wild salmon proved to be devastating (Castro and Huber 400). Farmed salmon commonly carry sea lice, small copepods that feed off of the salmon's skin, blood, and mucus. Usually the sea lice only live on adult wild salmon, which live in seawater the majority of their lives. When the salmon return to freshwater to spawn, the sea lice cannot survive (Castro and Huber 400). However, these lice are becoming a very regular menace to farmed fish. Salmon juveniles are now being found with this parasite after passing fish farms on their way back out to sea after spawning (Castro and Huber 400). In recent years the mortality rate of the migrating fish was found to be around ninety-five percent, since the juveniles are much more easily harmed by these parasites than the adults. It has also been predicted that at this rate, it won't be long before many species of salmon are completely extinct, due to this parasite issue alone (Castro and Huber 400).

When diseases arise, they can be next to impossible to control before almost the whole farmed population has been affected. In worst-case scenarios, entire farms have been sacrificed in order to control the spread of the disease as an only means left to stop the disease from harming other fish populations (Davenport et al.). Killing several thousand tons of fish because they were overtaken by disease is a huge waste of resources, not only economically but ecologically as well.

Usually, this type of mass killing is prevented by the use of antibiotics on the fish, a method which, although it may keep the fish in the farm alive, could cause unhealthy, unnatural results further downstream. According to the web article "Floating Hog Farms," about 150 pounds of antibiotics are administered per acre of farmed salmon. In open water pens, these antibiotics can drift freely into freshwater and marine ecosystems, where they are ingested by wild fish and other organisms (Stier and Hopkins 148). These low levels of antibiotics present the same cause for alarm as antibiotics given to livestock: they could cause antibiotic-resistant bacteria to thrive, posing a threat to consumer health.

In addition to the issues of antibiotic usage, all of the fish raised in farms are carnivorous; therefore, they need smaller fish to feed on. Fish such as herring and anchovies make up approximately thirty-seven percent of all marine fish caught and are

caught solely for the purpose of being ground up into fish meal for the larger fish being farmed (Steir and Hopkins 153). In order for fish farming to be effective, more sustainable methods of farming need to be implemented to reduce pollution and replenish wild fish populations.

If industrial aquaculture could improve its methods of operation, it would no longer have to be synonymous with the words “pollution” and “destruction” and, in fact, could be very beneficial. In Asia and Africa, traditional aquaculture has been around for hundreds of years (Steir and Hopkins 155). However, their methods of fish farming were and still are extremely sustainable. These traditional farmers would find the notion of putting more resources into a fish than what they get out of it to be completely ridiculous. In industrial aquaculture, it takes almost five pounds of smaller fish to create one pound of Atlantic salmon and a staggering twenty pounds of smaller fish to create just one pound of tuna (Steir and Hopkins 152). Not only is this practice depleting the oceans of their wildlife, but it does not even make sense economically.

Solving this particular problem is fairly simple; however, it would require the cooperation of the main fish consumers around the world. The most popular fish species that are farmed are all carnivorous. Raising herbivorous fish would immediately reduce or even eliminate the need for harvesting so many smaller fish to be ground into fish pellets. By not taking so many smaller fish out of their marine ecosystems, their natural predators will also be able to sustain their populations, leading to a much more balanced ecosystem and increased biodiversity (Castro and Huber 392). This method would also reduce the amount of money being put into each fish, which would lead to a much more prosperous industry.

The incessant demand for fish has continuously overshadowed the need to protect the environment, and that needs to stop. In order to prevent waste from going into open water and potentially harming wildlife, traditional aquaculture raises its fish in ponds (Steir and Hopkins 155). Every several months, the waste at the bottom of these ponds is recycled by being used as fertilizer in crop fields. Even waste from other farm animals nearby goes into this pond and is therefore also recycled (Steir and Hopkins 155). This waste recycling method ensures a healthy and stable environment, for the fish as well as the surrounding areas and waterways.

Another way that these traditional pond systems work is by cultivating a variety of fish in the same area, rather than just one species of fish all crammed together. By having a variety, it creates a more balanced ecosystem; large omnivorous fish can feed on the smaller fish as well as plants, and the waste from the larger fish can become a food source for the smaller fish (Steir and Hopkins 156). This natural system eliminates the need to administer antibiotics to the fish, which is not only better for the fish and the environment, but is much healthier for seafood lovers as well.

Because of our culture’s “we want more” mantra, our oceans are suffering tremendously. It is sad to think that humanity has caused this devastation to our oceans, especially when we realize that the vast majority of it has been caused in the last thirty to

forty years. The populations of many fish species, such as cod, are expected to never fully recover (Greenburg). Fishing operations need to stop taking fish from the ocean faster than the species can repopulate, and fish farms need to use more eco-friendly methods that do not require the use of antibiotics or produce the vast amounts of pollution that they do now.

We don't know if the effects from fish farms on our oceans can be reversed. Fish farms need to operate in a more sustainable manner, and there needs to be more awareness of what is being taken from the ocean. In a 2008 interview, noted food journalist and author Michael Pollan claims that "It's only our ignorance of how our food is grown that permits this to go on. Most people, if they went to the feedlot or to the slaughterhouse and saw how the animals are raised and killed, would lose their appetite for that food." If consumers were made more aware of which species of fish were being sustainably farmed and caught, I think that many would make an effort to eat these types of fish rather than species that are rapidly disappearing. Society needs to stop looking at the ocean as an infinite resource and realize that if fishing continues at this current rate, there could soon come a day when there is nothing left.

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"Stepping Stones" by Stacey Edmiston

I floated through the day in a haze of melancholy. Already, my month in Ambialet, France, was drawing to a close, and throughout my last days at *Le Prieuré* – the converted monastery where we’d been staying – I felt my senses attuned more acutely than ever to the beauty that surrounded me. Stray beams of light pouring through a dusty window, aromas escaping Bernard’s kitchen, and muffled French chatter – all of it I tried to sear into my memory, knowing I might never experience it again. And anyway, if I ever did, it wouldn’t be the same.

My remorse was sharpened by the fact that I was leaving three whole days before the other students. Months earlier, when my best friend announced her wedding date, I panicked, realizing I would still be in France. In a fit of dread, I quickly made arrangements to return in time to be one of her bridesmaids. Because that’s what friends are for.

But there I was, on the tenth-or-so of July, and what seemed like nothing but a few spare hours back in March now tightened the knot in my stomach. Tim, the director of the program, who was the one to welcome us to *Le Prieuré*, had seemed sorry for me when I told him I’d be leaving early.

“Three days,” he had said slowly, drawing out the words. “That’s ten percent of your trip right there, you know.”

“I didn’t think of it that way,” I’d said, bashfully. I hadn’t.

It pained me to keep reminding everyone, each time they suggested plans for the next day, or the day after that.

“Hey, we should go down to the river tomorrow after class,” someone would say. “Then to Nadine’s again!” Nadine was the lady who owned the café at the bottom of the hill, *Le Café de la Presqu’île* – “the almost-island café.” She became good friends with each new semester’s batch of American students, as she sold all the essentials – quaint postcards, stamps, ice cream, beer, and wine. I would just sigh, or grimace, and then they’d remember.

“Oh, that’s right,” they would say. “Why are you leaving again?”

“The wedding...” I didn’t care to keep explaining it.

Never had I been in a situation even remotely similar to this one. The last few weeks felt like a dream, or better yet, like a scene out of one of the Rhinehart books I loved to read. My time in Ambialet let me pretend that I was the protagonist of a novel in which I have come to visit a giant, glamorous estate with a mystery to be uncovered. The people who came with *Le Prieuré* were in themselves a fascinating unknown, and they fit beautifully into the unfolding plot I had imagined. There was Sophie, the petite gardener. She flitted hurriedly about the place like she was weightless, while her pretty face always looked troubled by something very heavy. Krzysztof, the Polish handyman, had lived in

France most of his life and looked like Daniel Craig. We students routinely exchanged fanciful ideas about what brought him here to this sleepy French village. We didn't see much of Marie, the housekeeper; she worked mostly while we were having class, but anytime we did cross paths, she was wonderfully friendly. She was difficult to pin down, like a pleasant energy, passing in and out of view. Bernard, the chef, had a life-sized personality and was simply jubilant in whatever he did. I had never known that a smile could say so much. I wished I could have gotten to know them all better, and though I tried to put my years of French to work, the language was still little more than a collection of memorized sounds, and so there was always a saddening gap between us.

The building lent itself well to such daydreams – the older parts of it dated to the tenth century. Its grandeur overlooked tiny Ambialet like a beacon – a centerpiece that grounded the rest of the storybook village.

I felt tense that day, as I began to gather my scattered belongings. I carefully laid spare bottles of generic French shampoo and two heart-shaped stones among other valuables in my suitcase. I tried to swallow the ache in my throat. It unsettled me to think that I hadn't explored every inch of this place. My sense of time had become so warped, and though our bus ride to the top of the hill that first afternoon seemed foggy and distant, I couldn't accept that a whole month had passed. So little time was left, and I wanted to drench every remaining minute in all things Ambialet.

Over the last couple of weeks, I had heard some of the others talking about “the ruins” – the fascinating remnant of a thousand-year-old church on an overgrown trail somewhere nearby. It had found its way to my extensive to-do list, as I seemed to be much better at adding to it than subtracting. Though there were many things I knew I simply wouldn't have time for, I made up my mind to find this place.

The July sun belligerently breathed sticky, hot air that day. I hadn't even reached the bottom of the “path of broken ankles” – the deathtrap of a walking trail that offered us a shortcut to Nadine's – before I wondered if I should have put it off for a cooler day. I answered myself by slicking my hair out of my face with sweat from my forehead and kept going. My blue pleated skirt floating in the occasional breeze and the peeling color from my cheap brown sandals complimented each other nicely. In the absence of other acts of rebellion throughout my teenage years, I considered this impulsive outing as such.

I ambled through the patio of Nadine's café, between the tables and chairs of every color and below the shady limbs of ancient, crooked trees out to the center of the village. There was no one around – no children coming back from a swim in the river, no makeshift farmer's market selling homemade jam. The serene town sometimes seemed empty, other than the occasional cyclist whizzing past, which perpetuated my delusion that I was just a character in the mind of a clever novelist.

Not much more than a few steps later, I was already outside of Ambialet proper, and I found the sign I'd been looking for directing me to the *Ruines du Château de St Raphael*. Before I had a moment to consider it, a woman tapped me on the shoulder and

asked in hurried French if I knew where the church was. I knew she was asking about the chapel attached to *Le Prieuré*, and I wanted very much to tell her how to get there. My amateur French, though, didn't appreciate being caught by surprise, and so a medley of French-ish sounds spilled out of my mouth before I gathered my thoughts enough to be able to use key phrases like "top of the hill" and "over there." Pointing helped a lot, too, but I was embarrassed nonetheless.

My face was even redder than before, and I sighed deeply. I crossed the street and found myself at the bottom of a steep hill. From what I could see, the serpentine trail turned on itself repeatedly, like the Jacob's Ladder toy I'd had as a kid. The thick, white rope of a handrail further worried me. I can at least start, I said to myself.

By the time I reached the third or fourth turn, my heart felt like it would fall out of my chest. I'd been mistaken in thinking that the trail would level off or that the ruins couldn't be far away. Each time I thought I saw a clearing, it was matched by another stretch of the path. Finally, I caught sight of pieces of old stone walls and other bits of rubble. I couldn't see much, but I was satisfied that they were indeed what I was looking for. Until, that is, I discovered the giant trough that separated me from my findings. There had to be a path nearby to get to them. Just a little farther up, I thought.

Half an hour later, I was beside myself. In retrospect, I'm impressed by my undying optimism, believing that each turn in the trail would reveal this presumed entrance to the ruins. I had reached a clearing in the trail where I found large, inviting rocks perfect for sitting cross-legged and admiring the view below. Until that moment, the trees had prevented me from seeing just how high I had climbed. I sat in unadulterated awe. The river that had never seemed much bigger than the tiny stretch where we would jump off the pillars into the chilling water now took on a pleasant winding pattern that gracefully cradled the almost-island. *Le Prieuré*, always the elegant big brother of the village, was now a barely-detectable blur, and the chapel's massive spire was like a tiny needle piercing cornflower sky. I couldn't even hope to see Nadine's or any of the houses in town. I studied my dusty, tattered sandals, picking an annoyingly sharp pebble from between the worn straps and tossed it over the edge. It promptly disappeared.

I stood up again – I had created a mess for myself, and I wasn't finished with it yet. I had all but forgotten about the ruins and was now much more interested in where this path would end. Past this pleasant clearing, it was no longer a rocky road clouded with trees; it was a barely worn line, winding up a hillside covered in ferns. Only then, when I saw the cell phone tower looming at the top, just a hundred yards away, did I realize just how comically high I had climbed. I stopped just long enough to absorb the situation and laugh.

The prickly overgrowth scraped at my tired ankles, and I wondered if anyone else had mistaken seven-dollar sandals for appropriate footwear for this climb. Just before reaching the top, I encountered a sign with a big red circle that declared: *Sauf piétons* – pedestrians only. Somewhere between the pints of sweat I'd lost and sheer exhaustion, I found the thought of anyone maneuvering a vehicle to this place hilarious.

I had finally reached the top. The peak was a small, open field of scorched, yellow grass that overlooked three-hundred sixty degrees of the most untainted beauty I had ever seen. The earth stretched out below me, all around me, and nothing for miles was beyond my sight. My senses panicked, unable to process it. I found myself pacing, trying desperately to collect pictures in my head of every possible point of view. Then I began snapping photo after photo, increasingly frustrated that the tiny screen could not replicate what lay before me. How would anyone know what I had seen? I already imagined myself stumbling over words and gestures trying to describe what I knew I could not. I already felt defeated.

I stayed as long as I possibly could. I was afraid that Mara or Drew or one of the adults was wondering where I was. I'd told them I wanted to go for a walk before dinner, and I guessed now that dinner had long passed. I started on my way back through the ferns and wildflowers.

Amid my reluctance to leave, I felt an odd sense of comfort. I considered how closely I had come to never finding this place – how closely I had come to finding what I thought I was looking for. I hadn't sabotaged myself so badly after all; how fortunate I was that this was clear for me.

The spare moments between squeezing over-stuffed suitcases into the back of the car and waiting for the little picture of an airplane to cross the screen from Paris to Washington, D.C., were filled with fragmented memories for me to sort out. I wasn't satisfied until each one had been strained repeatedly through my mind, making me sure of every detail. My thoughts floated between things like late nights with new friends under the lights in the courtyard and the way the gravel in the driveway crunched under my feet whenever I returned to my new home; the rhythmic creaking of the overhead fan that coaxed me to sleep each night and the way it felt to sink into the oversized leather couches in the great room after an exhausting climb from Nadine's. I laughed while remembering pieces of clumsy conversation with Krzysztof and grinned thinking of Bernard's hearty smile that creased the skin around his eyes. Though more than anything, I relived each moment leading to my favorite discovery – my accidental gift. I knew that evening was something that, no matter how much time will have passed, will never lose its luster. It changed me. I felt a greater capacity in my heart to cherish things I used to overlook. I began to understand that life could mean much more in the presence of such simplicities than other, more elusive things. Each belabored step that brought me from skepticism to reverence changed for me what it meant to be grateful. I could not have wished for anything more.



“Reach Higher. Go Far” by Lauren Maline

Keys and Strings and Sticks (Fiction) – 1st Place Contest Winner

Eric Horell

The following is an excerpt from a longer story of the same name. It takes place at an institution called Dreanóc University, similar to Saint Francis University. More specifically, this story takes place in the Shed, a building comparable to the Boilerhouse. On the night of the story, the Shed has been transformed into Café Stranger, which bears a striking resemblance to Café Voltaire. Our narrator has just finished listening to a visiting Italian guitar player, whose playing style and vigor echo that of Paolo Schianchi, the Italian guitar virtuoso who was good enough to visit Saint Francis last spring.

This excerpt picks up as our narrator tries to leave after a concert by the Italian guitarist and his students.

• • •

I hear laughter and calls, and then the clang and thud of the metal doors. The Christmas lights go out and the rest of the lights die, all of them save for the chandelier. Someone begins playing the piano. Soft music accompanied by soft chatter float up to me through the grates beneath my sneakers. I take this as my invitation to leave, that Café Stranger is closed, that the show is over and there is nothing left for the public.

I tiptoe across the metal platform, cursing my feet for every squeak or groan they summon, until I reach the bottom of the stairs. I turn to make my own noisy exit through the double doors, but I pause to watch the odd couple I find working under Eckenrode's chandelier.

The Italian man is standing in front of a large canvas probably six feet high, eight feet wide, throwing black paint against it with his hand, his long nails dripping ink. Dr. Belzberg is at the piano, playing something I've never heard; I think he might be making it up as he goes along. His hands take their time finding the keys, in no hurry to impress anyone. His sunglasses rest on top of the piano, and the Italian's Fender rests in its stand alone, its sisters stolen away for the night.

The Italian keeps looking over at Dr. Belzberg, squinting and then throwing more paint on the canvas. Sometimes he holds out his thumb and says something in his native tongue, and to my surprise, Dr. Belzberg responds in the same fashion. The Italian says something, Belzberg says something, and then they laugh. The Italian shovels out more and more black paint. He starts to sing. Belzberg hears him and tweaks his song to meet the lyrics. The tempo picks up a little bit, but it's still measured and meticulous.

A toilet flushes and the door beside me opens. Dr. Anderson comes out, recognizes who I am, and asks me if I liked the show. I say I did. She grabs my arm and drags me toward the two men, saying, "Evan, you need to meet Cosimo. Have you met Cosimo?"

The Italian they call Cosimo sees us approaching, and his piano key smile reappears. Dr. Anderson makes the introductions, and Cosimo extends his hand. He laughs when he sees the paint dripping off of it. He presses his hands together, the black one on the white one, and gives me a little nod. "Pleasure," he says.

I tell him I loved the show and that he and his students are very skilled. He humbly bobs his head, hums and says, "*Grazie, grazie.*" Belz changes the tune into something springier, with a little skip to it.

"So," says Cosimo, "do you play? Play something? Yes?"

Oh no, I say. I tell him I'm not musically inclined. I tell him I'm so lousy that my own family won't let me sing in the house. This seems to trouble him, and he tut-tuts.

"No no no, that is not right. That should not be." I say again I'm really not much of a singer. He says, "Even so, you should be allowed to sing." He gnaws on his mustache and returns to his painting.

The piano song becomes thicker. Anderson has joined Belzberg on the bench, her hands manning the high keys and his the lower. She falls naturally into step with his deeper tones, and I wonder if every faculty member at Dreanóc University has secret wonderful talents.

"Ah!" yelps the Italian Cosimo, and he raises his eyebrows in mock frustration. He violently motions toward Anderson and then his painting, all the while bellowing something in his native tongue. Belzberg acts equally indignant and waves Cosimo off with a dismissive tone. He points toward Anderson and himself and says something to the Italian. Anderson doesn't react to any of this, but for all I don't know about her, she understands everything perfectly and I'm the only one in The Shed wondering what's going on. Cosimo argues and paints, Belzberg argues and plays, and Anderson plays and plays and plays. I stand alone, able only to watch it all unfold, able only to receive whatever they give me.

I ask Cosimo how long he's been painting. "Oh," he sighs, "Years. Since I found paint. Does it look like them, like Boss and Elly?" He points with a thin black finger. I can see the shadows of Belz and Anderson, so I say yes, very much so.

"Too kind. *Grazie.*"

How long did you take art lessons? As long as guitar lessons?

He laughs, and his eyebrows again ascend his forehead. "Lessons? Ah, school lessons? No, no school for painting. But other lessons, yes. Ha ha!" His fingers plunge into the running black paint and frantically capture Anderson's cascading grey hair.

"He's fun, isn't he?" whispers Anderson. "Very cryptic. Or it's the language barrier. I'm not sure."

"So," calls Cosimo. "What *do* you do? What *is* your art?"

I watch his fingers swipe the canvas like they strum a guitar. I tell him I'm not much of an artist either.

"Psh!" he sprays. "Bah, no. I do not believe it. What do you do?"

I shrug, and he asks again, "What is it? What do you do? What do you do, ah, what do you do when you want to scream?"

Anderson giggles and shakes her head. "So cryptic."

I tell Cosimo I write.

"Ah hah! You write! *Fantastico*. I love writing. Come, write something for us."

My eyes move from Belz and Anderson dueling on the piano to Cosimo dancing and painting, merging the two into one activity. I say that writing really doesn't work that way.

"Yes! Tools! Here. Hm. . . ." He opens another can of paint—this one a simmering fuchsia—and hands it to me. I stare at it.

"Sorry! I forget that not every person works like me." He locates a paintbrush with stiff bristles. "Now," he sings, handing it to me, "go!"

It doesn't really work like that, I say again.

Cosimo puckers his lips and frowns. "Hm hm hm. Mmhmm. Why?"

I stammer and stammer and then laugh. I laugh because I don't know what to say.

"No! No no no!" Cosimo seems genuinely hurt by my laughter. "Why cannot you write? We will not laugh. Look at his sunglasses. Look at this." He holds up his dripping hand.

I tell him it's not that.

"What? What is it?" His smile is gone. I feel awful because I don't know how I'm causing him such distress. I want the smiling Italian back. I want to watch him play guitar. I want to watch him paint. I want to watch him dance.

People don't write like that, I tell him.

"With paint?"

No. Not so . . . spontaneous.

He frowns, so I don't know if he's understood me. Made up, I say. On the spot. Like Dr. Belzberg is doing. Like you did with your guitar. I pantomime strumming and immediately feel like I'm insulting him.

"I am sorry. I still do not understand." I go to offer yet another example when he says, "Why plan this? You already know it. I write. When I write, I just let the pen go."

I ask him to show me, eager to divert the attention away from me. Cosimo reaches forward with a wet, black finger, but stops short of the canvas. He cocks his head and squints his eyes.

"No," he says. "No, not tonight. Tonight I want to paint. No." He turns to me. "You write. You write whenever you want about whatever you want." He returns to his painting and begins to dance again. He uses his pinky finger to detail Dr. Anderson's lips. She and Belz have yet to stop playing, moving effortlessly from one made-up song to the next.

I suddenly feel a compulsion to leave, that I'm unworthy to be amongst them. I tell Dr. Anderson and Dr. Belzberg goodnight, saying something about how I have a meeting the next morning. "Goodnight!" Anderson whispers. "Good seeing you! Let's do lunch before graduation." Dr. Belzberg nods, smiles, and trills me a few notes. I think he's playing a game with himself to see if he can go the entire night without speaking English.

I go to Cosimo and thank him again for visiting our campus. I tell him he's great and I hope he enjoyed his time at Dreanóc University. I ask him to tell his pupils they're great as well. I compliment his painting. I compliment his dancing. I can't seem to stop.

Cosimo sighs. "Ah, friend, take care of yourself. You graduate soon, yes? Enjoy your final weeks. And then enjoy everything after."

I open my mouth but can't say anything. Instead, I offer my hand. Cosimo looks at it, laughs, and grips it firmly. I feel the paint gush between my fingers.

"Take care," says Cosimo.

I turn and leave, not stopping to mop the black off my hand. I'm in a hurry for reasons unknown to me, but I look back as I push open those beaten and busted doors. The Italian sees me leaving. He waves with both hands, with the white and the black. Then he presses them together and bows a little bit, like before. I give a brief salute, then slip through double doors. I wonder if the Italian is smiling, but I'm already hurrying up the sidewalk, away from The Shed, away from Café Stranger, toward the Eckenrode Mansion.

The mansion, now used for formal fundraisers, archives, and lavish guest rooms for important university visitors, looms dark and large on the top of the mountain. Dotting the property are several small cottages, at one time used for (very posh) servant quarters, now used as guest houses for artists-in-residence—I suspect Cosimo calls one home for the semester—and long-standing faculty, silver-haired men and women who fit with the cobblestones and painted shutters. The old stable has been converted into a biology lab, the greenhouse next to it now serving a more practical purpose, housing hybrids and experiments instead of the bright, vain flowers Stuart Eckenrode paid others to grow. Dreanóc University received the estate as a gift from a donor who bought the land cheap after Eckenrode died. Eckenrode was a coal baron whose contributions to the Nemelon community and Dreanóc were generous, but the oldest locals still tell tales of his more public vices, not so different from the vices of wealth today: drinking, gambling, women, and a severe dislike of the poor when they asked for more than they deserved. He lost everything in the Depression, and he shot himself in a New York hotel, pantless and with disheveled hair. He left no note and no regrets.

I walk past the greenhouse and toward the gardens that are enclosed by an eight-foot high stone wall, the only technical entrance being an austere, geometric gate that

reminds me of Islamic tile work. The gate is locked tonight, but ten feet or so from this sign are giant holes in the wall. They're beautiful stone arches, supporting trellises that in turn support thick vines that in the summer will shade the walkway better than a thatched roof. The arches are not conducive to security, however, and I simply hop the short ledge and stroll into the gardens using only a little more effort than I would if I entered through the gate.

I regain my brisk pace toward the far corner of the gardens. I pass the koi ponds, the three of them sitting at the foot of a waterfall I've never actually seen spilling water. My feet leave the path and break across the moonlit lawn, toward a wooden mess that resembles a frumpled tent. Boughs cascade toward the ground, the varicose vein branches laden with budding tendrils. It's a gnarled thing, with branches growing every which way with no real plan, no real reason. It rests between a hedge trimmed into perfectly round columns and a half-circle stone bench with stone koi cousins for armrests. The long branches, though, are trying to lay claim to these neighbors, and there are sharp, unnatural ends where the landscapers have battled the tree. Still, it continues to reach. It looks foreign, a bundle of sticks infringing upon the meticulously cut hedge, the kept grass, the smooth stone bench. Even with only buds, hints of leaves, the branches are so thick and intertwined you still can't see through the tree to the other side. In my time at Dreanóc, I've learned the unworldly mass is considered a weeping beech.

I part the boughs and step inside, where it is even more impressive. The trunk is bulbous and immense, twisting and slithering up into the air and upon itself, splitting at points only to rejoin several feet up. At the top it explodes like a firework and the skinny spark limbs arc toward the ground, and when they reach the ground they continue to grow, snaking along through the carpet of past autumns' leaves trampled into the mud by visitors through the years. There are also thicker shoots that come down like its skinny brethren, but these dig into the earth like second roots or tent pegs. It's what's on the trunk that interests me the most, though.

The most prominent one is JOE, about a foot long in cartoon letters, stretched as the tree has reached higher and higher over the years. From here, my eyes wander to the other signatures, many scrawled as algebraic proclamations of love: a sharp BRIAN AND MICHELLE . . . KB+JSP . . . RS over TM, JACK over ANNA . . . MH + is that a D? An O? It's paired with an H . . . CDM hearts LMS, ALLEN hearts ANGEL . . . KG+WJ in a heart . . . DEV+JH, maybe A? It's in a heart as well, but the bottom broke and became distorted as the tree grew, taking poor JH-something-or-other with it and leaving DEV all alone. There's another grotesque one, high up. At one time it read ED hearts DEB, but now it reads more like ED IS DED. And there are dozens upon dozens of others.

Some of these are covered with black spray paint, as if someone came back and tried to erase the signatures. Despite these efforts, though, through the paint you can still feel the deep scars of past lovers. The only thing that covers these are new scars, fresh sepiacuts in the elephant hide. There are fewer hearts—DK DW, A^B+L^J, P+E, M over A, JM over PM—but then there are others like JR hearts JR, and JS over heart over KG. Only one has an

actual year, and it's also the only one not etched in all caps: Polly + Will '12, with a heart to the side. A year old, and the letters and numbers still glow like soft sand over the grizzled gray marks from the distant past.

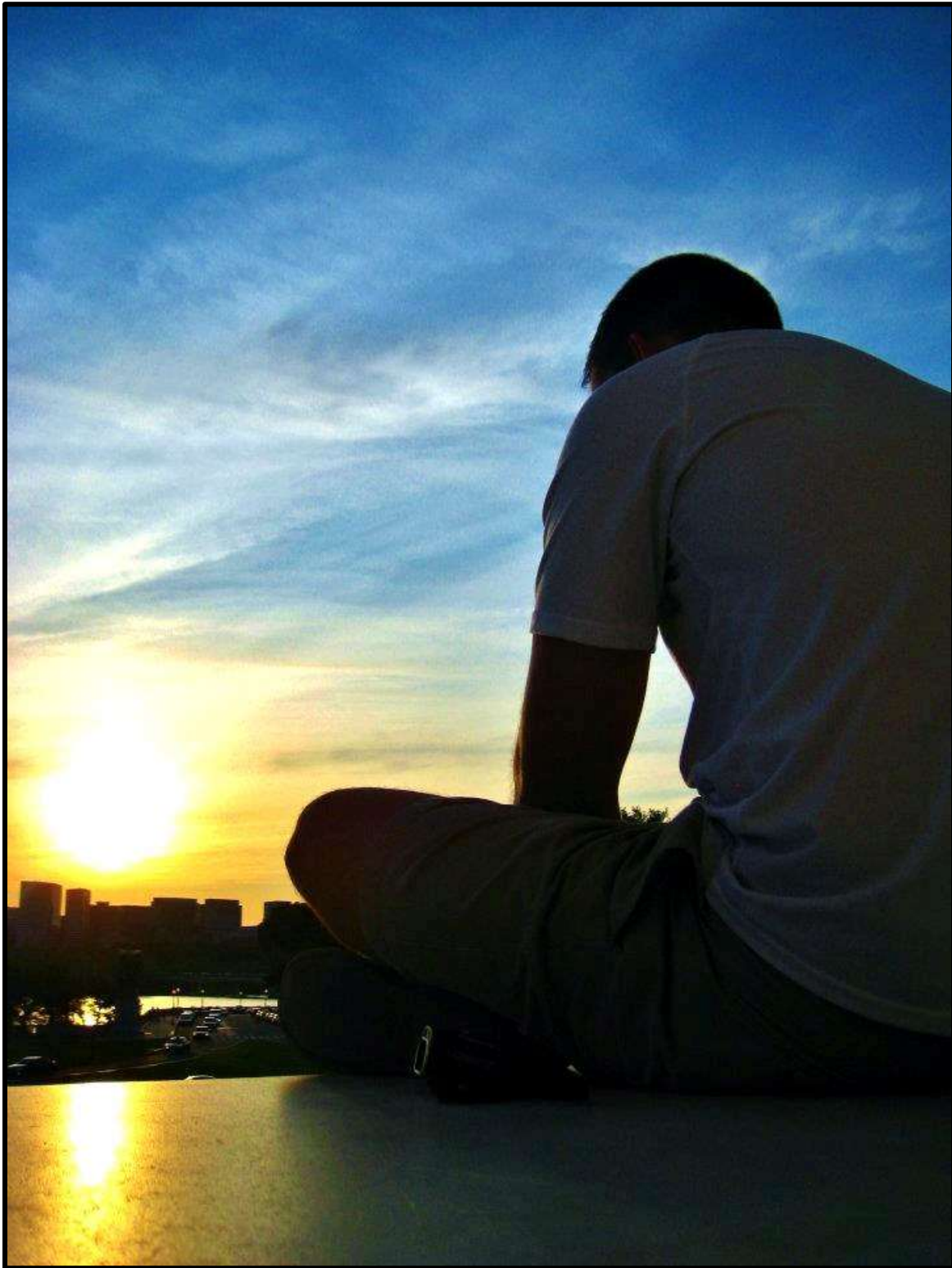
What happened to Polly and Will, only a year gone? Is Ed alive and well, and are DEV and JH-something-or-other still together? No one has come back to update their statuses. All these names from all those years, all those minds and personalities, all the comedies and tragedies, all the marriages and splits, the kids and the careers, and I know not a single name on the beech.

I walk to one of the thick branches burrowing into the mud and give it a shove. It doesn't budge. I grasp it with both hands and haul myself up to the next branch. The bough groans, but it doesn't snap. I go hand over hand, taking it quickly before I grow tired, climbing before I look down; I have a fear of heights, of sheer drops. It's not high, though, before the branch bends back toward the tree and I can wrap myself around it.

I shimmy over the branch, contracting and expanding my body like a caterpillar, inching toward the heart of the weeping beech. I reach the trunk and slip my foot into the notch where the tree first splits. I carefully shift my body from one branch to the other and hug this new extension as I crawl my way back into space. Here, closer to the base, the tree hardly shakes, offering only a gentle shush. There's no one within a hundred yards to hear me.

Cosimo the Italian asked me what I do when I want to scream. Him, he plucks guitar strings and paints with his hands. Dr. Belzberg and Dr. Anderson prefer banging piano keys. Eckenrode built a mansion and then shot himself when he felt like screaming. The people who at one time stood on the ground fifteen feet below me, they felt like screaming at one time, too. They wanted to tell the whole world who they loved. They wanted to leave a bit of themselves when the rest of them vanished from Dreanóc University. I told Cosimo I write. I couldn't then, though. I had nothing to say. So, I came to the weeping beech. I scaled its scarred bark.

On the limb, away from the other names, I dig in my pocket for my keys. I flip through them, careful not to drop them, until I find the one to the House. I don't know if it'll work, but it's all I have. The tree feels soft, though, and I plunge the teeth into the side of the branch. I make the first ugly cut with my tiny brass saw, and then I work on the next, my simple letters coming easily because they're bereft of curve. The tree doesn't move as I add my story to its collection. I carve my screams into the limb, silently.



“Lincoln Sunset” by Brittany Aaron

Tapestries

2012-2013

Weaving the Threads of Creativity & Innovation

