



# Wiregrass

2015 LITERARY AND ARTS JOURNAL



Cover art: **The Cover Up** - Lexus Lewis

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East Georgia State College, University System of Georgia, Swainsboro, Georgia 30401  
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# Wiregrass 2015 Literary and Arts Journal

Featuring the writing and artwork of East Georgia State College's  
students, staff, and faculty.



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Thanks to Alan Brasher, Val Czerny, Desmal Purcel, and Kimberly Page

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## Ocean 5-11-2011

Time moves on like a boat  
In the ocean with the sail  
At full mast and only the  
Waves moving as if no  
Tomorrow will come.

As the waves wash away  
The tears that falls, a peace  
Comes over the person because  
They know that an adventure  
Is about to take place that  
The ocean always brings.

The feeling of freedom comes  
With the boat on top of the  
World a thousand miles below  
The water and above the waves that  
Are filled by a million tears.

— *Shannon Eason*



**Untitled** - Ann Marie Hendley

## Lost Ones

Jesse was a peculiar young boy to his peers and neighbors. He would walk straight to school and afterwards would walk home with no other destinations in sight. He wouldn't talk much, unless he had to, and he'd rarely smile. Matter of fact, the only time anyone could recall seeing his teeth was when he would take food out of his braces with his tongue. It wasn't always like this, though. He used to be a jubilant child, until his family accident. He never was the same after that, at least not to the outside world.

When Jesse was younger his intermediate family, which included his little brother Dom, his father Jeff, and his mother Dalia, got into a fatal car accident. It was all over the news; everyone seemed to hear about it but Jesse, who was asleep at home when this tragic event occurred. His parents were on their way to take his little brother to the hospital after realizing his fever, which he had for a week or two, wasn't going anywhere soon. They were arguing in the car about nonsense that didn't matter and ended up crashing into a passing truck. Hours later they were pronounced dead, but not to Jesse, to Jesse this never occurred. Surprisingly, no one ever told him of it or brought it up around him because they assumed he knew or thought it would be rude to bring up such a tragedy. How could he know? Every time he came home his family was still there as he remembered them. One thing he did notice, but never questioned was that they never left the house. He never questioned it out of respect for his parents. He just assumed his parents went out while he was in school because bills were being paid. What Jesse wasn't aware of was his mother and father both had quite a lot of life insurance money saved up in case of emergencies or for "rainy days," as his father would say. Everything seemed normal to Jesse, and he went years living like this until one girl came in his life and changed everything. Jesse may have been peculiar to most, but there was one girl who saw him and saw her future in his eyes. Her name was Imani, and she was a diamond in the rough if Jesse had ever seen one. He'd see her in school every now and then, and would watch her dreads bounce as she'd walk and her captivating smile, which he loved. He also loved the way she could make everything sound so interesting when she described it. She had a gift. He had most classes with her, and would usually have to present a project in these classes, which he hated, but he loved those days because he knew she would hypnotize him with her words; even if it was about something as bland as the weather.

Jesse was late to class one day and ran with no sense of balance as fast as he could. Coincidentally, he ended up smashing his face into Imani's locker which had just opened as he was running. She looked down at him, appalled at what just occurred.



“Are you okay, Mr. Pinkman?” she asked.

Jesse wondered why she called him that, then recalled that just like him she was a fan of *Breaking Bad*, and that his name was quite similar to one of the main characters.

So he smiled and responded, “No. I mean, yes. I mean, I’ll be okay, no biggy.”

After he got up, there was this brief awkward moment between the two and they stared at each other. Imani was smiling as Jesse looked around, doing his best to avoid eye contact with her, but every now and then he would glance at her eyes to see if they were still locked on him. They did this until the bell rang, and once it did, she hugged him, said bye, and went off to her next class. That was a big moment for Jesse, he thought to himself, “Could it ever get better than that?” Little did he know, it would. Imani would go out of her way to hang out with Jesse in between classes, showing him more attention than any girl had ever shown him in his whole life. She would go on and on about the latest episodes of her favorite shows, forgetting most parts due to her bad memory, but he loved every minute of it.

Months went by and Christmas time was approaching. By this time Jesse and Imani’s relationship had already evolved to being more than just a simple friendship. This relationship changed Jesse; it made him happier, a bit more of a joy to be around. He would even smile more. His neighbors and classmates even noticed it. He would tell his parents about Imani and how great he thought she was and how he wanted her to meet them, but those conversations would usually always go the same way.

“Mom and Dad,” he’d say, “you guys just got to meet my girlfriend. She is literally the greatest thing since bacon on pizza.”

And his parents would respond with a simple phrase, shunning such an idea every time, as if he was talking about winning an award for perfect attendance or something. They did this because they knew that she wouldn’t be able to meet them because they were dead. The only person who was able to see them was Jesse, as if they were figments of his imagination. With these facts in mind, they did all they could to avoid such an event, but when Christmas time came around, Jesse wasn’t having it anymore. He decided to bring her anyway, going against his parents’ wishes.

It was December 24, and Jesse had it all planned out. He would bring Imani over that night to meet his parents and his little brother even if he got in trouble for it. He had told Imani that his parents knew she would be coming over, and that it was fine with them. He walked in the door holding her hand and led her into the living room where his family was.

“Family, I would like you to meet Imani, aka the muse to my smile,” Jesse yelled.

His mom and dad looked back with pure fear and surprise, he assumed it was because he had just yelled and probably startled them half to death, but when he looked back at Imani he saw a look of confusion on her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her, scratching his head in worry.

“Um, there’s no one there, Jesse,” she said slowly.

“What’re you saying? My parents are sitting right in front of you. Are you blind?” He asked in frustration.

Imani stared at Jesse for a minute trying to figure out whether he was joking or not because he was known to play a practical joke every now and then.

“Jesse, I’m not in the mood for jokes right now. Where’s your family?”

Jesse looked at her like she was crazy, so Imani kissed him on the cheek, and then said she’d call him later and left. He was confused, so confused that he couldn’t even make out the words to say goodbye to her before she left. Once the door closed behind her, his parents called him into the living room. He walked in, puzzled, and sat down across from them.

“Now, son,” his father said while holding his mother’s hand. “I need you to hear us out. Your mother, little brother and I are dead. We died years ago in a tragic accident. I know this may be hard to take in right now but there are three things you need to understand: One — You are the only one who can see us. Two — We’re only here and not in the afterworld because you needed us, and Three — Now that your heart has opened up to someone new, we won’t be here much longer.”

Jesse looked at his parents, his little brother, then at his parents again. *How could I not have known this, he thought; how is this even possible?* His mom got up and walked over to him and took his hand in hers and said, “It’s best we enjoy the time we have left together, honey.”

He was still trying to understand it all, but knew she was right. So they continued on the day putting up Christmas decorations and sitting in front of the fire as if everything was okay.

New Years seemed to come by so fast, much faster than Jesse ever remembered it coming after Christmas, and far more dreadfully. The clock was only an hour away from striking twelve; nothing else mattered more than that last hour with his parents and brother. They shared stories, laughed, cried, and hugged for what had seemed like forever until before Jesse knew it, they were gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesse eventually ended up marrying Imani, and they had a few kids together. He would share this story with them every Christmas, leaving out no details, especially about how he and their mother met.

“The end,” said Dom as he put his paper down on the table he stood next to in front of his 8th grade class. “This is what I feel my older brother’s life would have been like if it was my parents and I who were in that car instead of him and Imani all those years ago. Thank you for listening.”

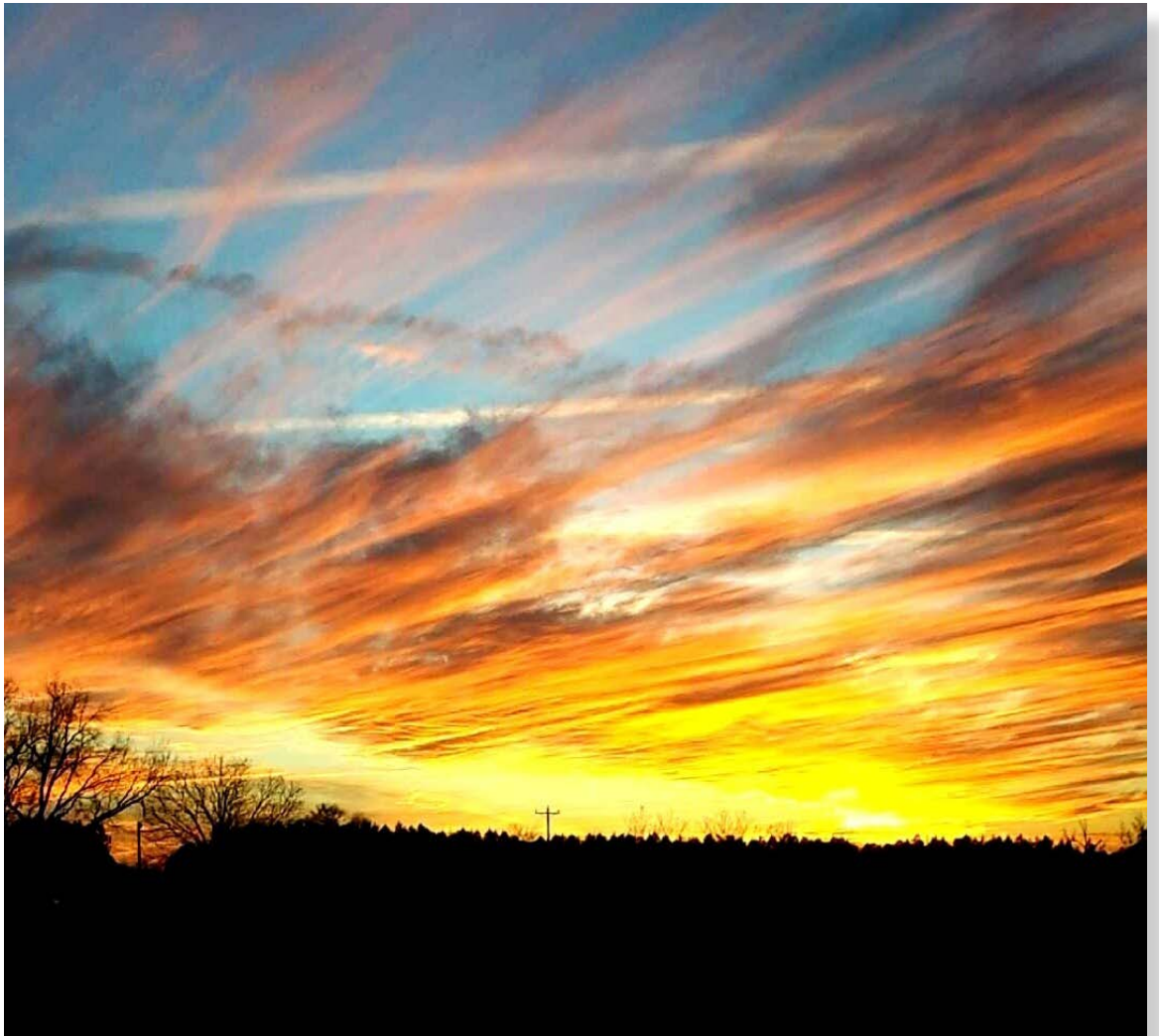
He walked back to his desk followed by applause from everyone in the classroom. He looked up and saw his teacher shedding a few tears; he knew he’d get an A. He looked to the ceiling and whispered, “Thanks, bro.” Then put his paper away.

— *Darrow Fraser*

## A Soul's Journey

The sun rises in the morning  
And sets in the evening.  
It reminds me of the life we are all living.  
We think about the time between sunrise and sunset.  
It's bittersweet  
Because at some point it has to end  
The birth of a child,  
The point where we are all in denial,  
The birthday's we celebrate,  
Where we eat all the cupcakes.  
Addictions and demons we all face,  
The things we break and cannot replace,  
Our joyful graduation day,  
I couldn't wait until May,  
The moment you fall in love,  
The doves that fly above the church on your wedding day;  
When you think you have a new start,  
Suddenly it all crumbles and falls apart.  
Eventually those pieces get picked up again.  
It helps to have the shoulder of a loving friend.  
Everything means nothing if memories are not made.  
The things we say can last forever.  
Make the most of your days.  
Make it last.  
Because the sun is setting, and it is setting fast.

— *Danielle Johnson*



**Untitled** - Ann Marie Hendley

## The Description of a Common Emotion

The deepest form of admiration,  
The culprit of desire,  
The reason for our existence;  
Why would we go to such great lengths to achieve something  
that may be unobtainable, or is it?  
The thing that breaks all racial barriers,  
The key to our inner thoughts and feelings,  
The feeling of affection toward a human being,  
The urge to hug, kiss, and console a person at their weakest point;  
What great force could cause such a disruption you may ask?  
I believe it's love;  
Love, The thing people yearn for,  
The root of happiness,  
The thing people want most but are too afraid to give.

— *Danielle Johnson*

### 3 A.M.

We sat in your car till 3 A.M.

You blew cigarette smoke in my face, alongside with all your dreams

I'd go home every 6 A.M. with smoke residing in my clothes

We took our innocence far from the realm of reality,

As if I died and escaped to Heaven because of the way you held my hand,

But each night on the drunken ride home, your true colours would mix with mine,

Wanting to drive into a tree was as tempting as grabbing the bottle to become more

Familiar with it.

You would drunkenly damn each day as if being alive was God's way

Of spitting in your face.

Each car ride home, you'd speak so ill of hope, becoming your enemy of each night.

I'd softly say each night, "A drowning man will clutch at a straw."

You'd stop speaking and the tears would jump like a suicidal man looking for the ground.

Our song would reverberate off our weary bodies, though the sounds of weeping

Penetrated through.

You were my heaven and I'd tell you that each night when the tears fell;

The proverbial saying, "Everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die."

Swam inside my head each day; I must've died, because I've met my heaven.

And each night she was alone on the drunken drive home, she watched her death

In the trees,

But each night, at 3 AM in the lonely parking lot, everything was fine,

And on the drunken ride home at 6 AM, she told me she loved me.

She never returned the next day.

I sat in your car till 3 AM.

I blew cigarette smoke in my face, alongside with all my hopes

I'd go home every 6 AM with alcohol staining my breath,

And each night I was alone on the drunken drive home, I watched my death in the trees.

"Everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die"

I would drunkenly damn each day as if being alive was God's way of spitting in my face

I was willing to die to get back to Heaven again, but I don't think God

Would allow me back;

Not this time

— *Jack Huggins*

## Dragon Hunting

Dragon hunting wasn't just a job; it was a way of life. You had to go through two years of training, and it took up all of your time. There are four bases specifically for trainees, and we were regularly rotated between them. You weren't allowed off, excluding the in-field training during the last two months. And even then, you were only 'hunting' stuffed versions of dragons.

It felt like the ceremony had gone on forever. I ran down to my family and friends, getting many compliments, mostly composed of, "Good job, Cass!" Lynn and Milo, my best friends, had arrived a few seconds after I had.

"So, what base did you all get assigned to?" Milo's mom asked. I know they were all hoping that we'd get Fort Cana, the Western base, or Fort Jean, the Southern base. Fort Rose was the Eastern base, and the one that would be the largest distance between our families and us.

"Fort Maria," I replied after unrolling my diploma and checking the stamp. Milo and Lynn had gotten the same, so we were all headed to the North.

Despite all of the hard training we went through, I loved it. The two years had flown by for me, and I was happy to be a graduate. Then, our first day at Fort Maria, we were informed that we would all be going on a mission to capture a dragon for study purposes. We had one week to memorize the plan and get some practice for it. Plenty of the people on the team had just graduated, and we were all doing our best to not freak out.

The day of the mission, I was extremely nervous. My palms were sweaty, and I my jitteriness was more intense than it normally was. As we started off, I ran through the weak spots of a dragon while also trying to keep my hands from slipping off the handlebars. Besides their eyes, dragons had three other weak spots: where their wings joined their body, between their toes, and their gums. For obvious reasons, the only people that were even allowed to go close to the gums were the people who had been hunting for at least seven years.

The swords we used were similar to hypodermic needles. On days dragons needed to be slain, they were filled with poison. Today, it was a purple sedation fluid made specifically for dragons. I was assigned to help inject the fluid at the wing joints. At first, that had surprised me, but I was told that newbies were made to do that on their first mission, so that they weren't babied. Milo had actually been assigned to inject in-between the dragon's claws.



I heard the dragon's roar and the loud whoosh of his wings before I saw it. Then came the Squad Leader's commands to attack. The red and gold giant was roaring and swiping his heavy black claws every which way as the first group started looping chains around it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a claw rip at someone's arm, heard a scream. Shoving worries of it being Milo's arm into the back of my mind, I concentrated on my job. I dodged its wings before I hopped off my hoverbike, taking care to land close to its joint. Heat billowed towards me from the right, followed by screams of excruciating pain. I gave Lynn a worried look as we plunged our swords into the somewhat thin scales, injecting the sedative as fast as we could. I could see the fear in her eyes; knowing that she had seen whatever had gone on behind me. Then, we grabbed the rope that tugged us back onto our hoverbikes. With my hands still being somewhat sweaty, I had to move quickly so as to not slip and fall to the ground. Thankfully, I got up there with minimal struggle. Everybody started looping the chains that would prevent the dragon from escaping as we transported it back to the walls.

We had needed a great deal of help from the medical team. The guy who had been clawed was being injected with antidotes in case the claws were poisonous, and he had red stained bandages wrapped around his arm. Another was getting treated for burns, and one soldier had died from being incinerated.

I watched as the smoke rose from its nostrils, curling up into the sky. Even though I was worried about that, I smiled, extremely proud of myself and my friends. Maybe it was a bit selfish, since someone had died, but I didn't care.

Milo suddenly appeared beside me. "I'm glad you weren't the one that almost got scraped by the wing, Cass," he said.

"And I'm glad that you weren't the one that got clawed," I replied. "Or, more importantly, the one that died."

We made it to the research base just as the sky started to darken, thickening the chill of the outdoors. As soon as the dragon was let down, it was sedated again. Thank God that smoke hadn't turned back into flames. Some people had seen sparks flying out of its nose, but that didn't really matter now. Besides, they could've been imagining it. We helped get him deep underground, into a reinforced cage that was in front of a large underground lake. Once that was done, we got to go eat.

"So, congratulations," said a lady researcher I had seen earlier, "to those of you who just got back from your first mission!" She had a bit of a crazy look in her eyes, which was not even slightly concealed behind her glasses, and had talked to the sleeping dragon like it was a puppy. I noticed that she had a bag in her hands.

“She looks crazy,” I whispered.

“Way to state the obvious, Cass,” Lynn replied, her voice flat. Sitting close to Milo and me, she had avoided conversation with everyone else. She had seen the guy as he burned, falling to the ground; so it wasn’t too surprising, despite the fact that she was usually talkative.

“As a reward for your work,” continued the researcher, “you all get a dragon scale.”

I gasped, along with many others. It was believed that having a scale was good luck because it meant that you had either successfully escaped a dragon attack or had just missed one while traveling through its territory. It was also rare, since most of them had to be kept by the scientists.

When she got to Milo, Lynn, and I, I was the first to shove my hand into the bag and grab a scale. My eyes widened as I saw that it was dual colored, both red and gold. It was slightly smaller than my hand, and if I touched it one way, it was smooth as silk. If I ran my hand the opposite way, it felt prickly, like it was going to slice my skin. I smiled, and then put it in the pocket inside my jacket. Turning back to my friends, I started talking with them, trying to cheer up Lynn, laughing as we ate. We talked to others in the group, with the older soldiers complimenting all of us who had just been on our first mission. We left soon after we finished eating, heading back to Fort Maria.

Lying in bed, I ran through the events of the day. Despite all the danger, I was glad I had chosen this way of life.

— *Margaret Hutcheson*



**Dragon** - Mary Neal

## Warrior's Cry

A country's dream once founded on the principal  
Of freedom and religion beliefs has left it's mark.  
The dedication of men and women in the military  
Is hard and life changing where many have become strong.  
The few strong and brave risk their lives daily to see the  
People and the dream come true and stay safe.  
The armed forces have served well over the years to protect.

Wars that have been fought and lost have made history.  
The men and women who battled will live on  
As true heroes in many eyes, not knowing the true meaning.

The Veterans as they are known have seen many brothers  
And sisters lose their lives for the price of freedom.  
The history that they bring are the scars of their battle  
To live and see another day while others lost their lives.

Flying high over mountains and across the seas,  
Listening to the blades going in circular motions,  
Holding on to our gear and guns for dear life.  
Upon arrival we watch each other backs,  
Not knowing where the enemy may lie.  
Protecting is a way of life for soldiers and veterans.  
Their stories are hard, but a reminder of a price.

— *Shannon Eason*

## Vikings

Our gods are not your own.  
Only through spilt blood,  
Through plunder do we live.  
Our gods are many—  
Highest is the All Father Odin.  
In the cold, only the strong can live,  
You see us like demons,  
Call us heathens, pagans.  
We see our harsh paradise—  
We are not you, Christian.

## Christians

Your gods will be rooted out.  
All pagans will be turned to the light.  
Through our compassion you will learn.  
Our god is one—  
Highest is the Lord our Savior.  
In the warmth all can live together.  
You are misguided savages.  
You call us unbelievers.  
We see you trapped in inferno—  
We will convert or smite you, Viking.

— *Charles Gutzmer*



**Still Water** - Stephen Graham

## The Coming of Spring

As winter passes, we shall soon feel cool breezes in the air  
As it touches our skin and passes through whatever we wear.  
The days become longer, and the nights become shorter.  
Look at the sky. The moon looks like a quarter.  
Alas, spring is coming.

You can see the tiny droplets and hear the early morning showers  
While picking petals off of flowers.  
Colorful and small as they bloom next to the giant trees,  
They need to be surrounded by plenty of honey bees.  
Alas, spring is coming.

Listen closely, we can hear the children's laughter.  
Look outside and see their rosy cheeks right after  
As they run till they're out of breath to catch the butterflies,  
But instead look up to see only clouds in the great blue sky.  
Alas, spring is coming.

Beautiful but fragile, the songbirds sing their notes high and clear.  
Without a doubt, their music is pleasant to hear.  
You can feel the soft raindrops fall behind.  
Do not worry, I have only a rainbow on my mind.  
Alas, spring is coming.

Tell me child, are you eager for spring to come?  
You will feel joy and experience lots of fun.  
Hurry now, you do not want to be late.  
As of this moment, there's no need to wait.  
Because spring has come.

— *Jessica Prasad*

## So That I May Feel the Breeze On My Face

Every time I see you,  
I breathe in your air.  
I dive down in my heart  
And I look at what is there.

Remnants of its glory,  
Shattered monuments of giants  
Whom I gave pieces of my heart to,  
And they incinerated them with fire.

Why would she have done this to me?  
Is there something that I lack?  
Ill just dwell down in my mind some more  
I hope she's here when I come back.

Cold, broken, and lonely,  
I stumbled in the door.  
There's no fire, there's no welcome.  
Her presence was no more.

So I wandered then in silence,  
Searching for that warmth,  
But I won't make it with the throbbing pain  
Of my halfway broken heart.

Laying now in agony,  
Ripping it from my chest, I know the last  
vein's been severed  
With the kiss of sweet numbness.

For days I could carry on now,  
Weeks and then some years,  
Not needing the love of anyone,  
Not needing a woman's kiss.

Until one day through a smoky haze,  
Some rays of light shined through.  
They woke up my soul.  
They filled all the holes  
As that light beamed in from you.

I diagnosed my heart,  
And despite a few missing parts,  
I got it banging and knocking for you.

You gave me everything,  
But my knocking heart is strained.  
I couldn't give everything to you

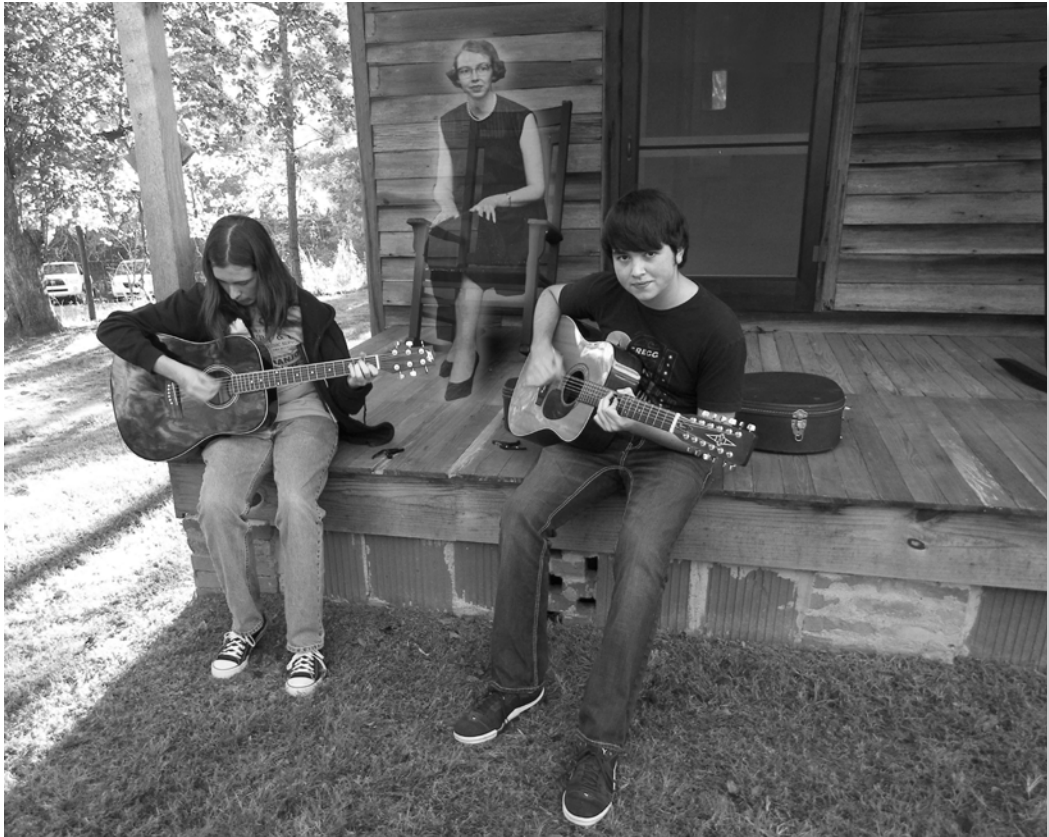
Because still through its cracks seep in  
numbness,  
And still in my heart there is fear,  
But now I will purge that cold and that  
sadness,  
So I can cherish everything dear.

My heart is real.  
The things I said to you I feel,  
And I'm not gonna let the numbness in  
anymore.

It will take some time to fix me,  
But I hope you'll be there with me  
When my heart is fixed and fully,  
Restored.

— *Carter Wray*





**Our Lady of Andalusia - S. D. Lavender**

## Patina

If someone inquired of me my tastes,  
I'd not make haste to discuss my abstract music.  
Nor would I tell them about my political views. It  
Wouldn't suffice to show them pictures of my favorite models and actresses,  
Nor my love of gothic chapels with great flying buttresses.  
The addresses of my favorite homes couldn't hope to shed light on the tones  
And hues that make  
Ripple my mind's water.  
Or the flaws of this world that give me great bother.  
I would instead show them my simple sea shell collection,  
Not the kind that I used to find suitable of adding to my arrangement.  
I've learned to find delight in those not typically fit for attainment.  
Yes the broken, the beaten, the old, and the eaten.  
Oh I quiver at how the sea can forge such beautiful art.  
Their grace is engraved as the sand and waves rip them apart.  
Nowhere else can there be found such gorgeous structure and swirls.  
Like long flowing blonde locks of the most beautiful curls.  
Elaborate matrices of passages gnawed by small sea creatures  
Make up the former home's most intricate features.  
For example, look into the cone of this one.  
The most honed painter couldn't stir such coloration.

And with the wall of this specimen eroded,  
It's inner structure is now exploded!  
The lines carved across this fine piece's surface give it a home in my heart  
And its life such great purpose.  
Most collectors wouldn't pay a glance to a broken shell on the beach.  
They know not what feelings its content in their hearts could release.  
Look at all the shells you find and first analyze their character.  
It's not about their surface.  
Look deeper!  
Look inward!  
The marring of each reveals volumes of history.  
I couldn't begin to describe what each and every shell means to me.  
My taste is not guided, measured, nor rated.  
The stride of my likings are not unnaturally gaited.  
Take not to the flock, who prefers a song just to nod to.  
A song should unlock worlds of feeling inside you.  
The world may teach you to take things at face value,  
But what you like you ought to like because it speaks something to you.

— *Carter Wray*

## The Crash

The old Chevy truck groans as its body panels flex, rattling violently. The old inline six engine knocks, spits and backfires, sure signs that it will soon give up the ghost. The old upholstery, worn and hanging loosely, raps on old metal pieces, squeaking like mice. Writhing in Death's grip, an irritating vibration shakes the cab. I rev the engine, willing it to climb the crest of the hill. The damage to the front end was pretty bad. If it weren't for the roll cage and the racing harness, my friend Paul and I installed last summer, I would be sorry right now. Without modern safety devices such as air bags and crumple points, this is a literal death trap.

Frustrated, I hold my face. The day had begun so pleasantly. Tonight is prom night, and I began the day by skipping school, as is the tradition of seniors at my school. More importantly, I got the chance to drive out of town to take my mom some flowers. Nobody knows that I'm visiting Mom, not even my dad. While everyone else in my class is at the senior picnic complaining about the heat, I am just glad to be driving an hour's distance to visit my mother. I had really been anticipating this outing. With mom, I can be myself and talk to her about anything. Our conversations are long, usually about my worthless problems, but mostly I let her know how much I miss her. I really needed this release; things haven't been that great at home lately. She could probably see through the lies about me and dad getting along, but somehow this is comforting. I really miss her.

I'll be good, Mom.

I brushed off the grass from my pants leg and turned away to leave. I made my way down the hill towards my truck. The faded green skin, and the toothless smile of my 1967 Chevy C-10 greeted me as I walked around the corner; its old sad puppy eyes lit up, letting me know I was missed. The rusty hinge begged for a pinch of grease as the door opened and slammed shut. The key turned in the ignition, the screech of an old Chevy starter owl rang once and then again, but the engine wouldn't start. Come on girl. Again the owl. You can do it. I believe in you. Crank, Roar, and then a smooth idle. I took this as a sign that today should play out well.

Getting dumped by your girl days before prom was nowhere near as painful as what just happened to me. Stupid deer! That deserted straightaway had just been too tempting. The needle had just crested eighty when I had to let of the gas and nearly put a hole in the floor pan when I slammed on the breaks. Too late, a huge buck was dancing on my hood. I undid the safety harness, and grabbed my shotgun off the rack, ready to commit murder. It scurried off, prancing awkwardly. It's not even loaded. I turned to the truck, which had just stalled. Steaming green liquid splashed on the blacktop. Yeap, fan blades through the radiator. A pain in my chest and a fit of shivering took over me. Son'bitch nearly gave me a

heart attack. Somehow it cranked again and I was able to limp the whole circus home. The smell of antifreeze filled the cab as the temp-gauge climbed higher and higher. Then my fears came true when the smell of burning oil stung my nostrils. Though the head gaskets were doomed, the truck kept fighting. The lifters clattered horribly as I pulled in to the drive. With a shudder, it died as I put it in park. I had heard that the inline six was bullet proof, but this was ridiculous.

I opened the gate and pushed the evidence into the woods behind the house so that Dad won't immediately see it, or at least until I fessed up. I could have put it in the garage, but I didn't feel like explaining myself just yet. Plus, that P.O.S. was taking up most of the space. I opened up the garage door, and there it sat, gloating in its dusty black and gold paint. A 1966 Shelby GT 350 Mustang. It was out of place in this garage. Some fat old baby boomer's private collection was where it really belonged. I hated its guts; its back seat holds too many painful memories of hospital visits, death, and broken promises.

I went upstairs to get ready. Putting on the suit I bought, I still had hours to kill, so I just sat on the corner of the bed looking around. It's a neat little nursery style room with walls painted blue. No one would ever guess that it was a seventeen-year-old's room save for the sports gear piled on the old toy chest next to my bed. The silence hung in the air in the same way the smell of baking pies had floated so many years ago. Scanning the room for something to do, my eyes fell upon it. I opened the toy chest for the first time in years. I dipped my hand in the mess of Legos and hot wheels. Rummaging and stirring, I found my favorite toy and I was suddenly six again:

I'm crawling around in the bench seat of my mom's truck when my dad calls me over. He and his drinking buddies are working on a customer's ride. My dad is cheap; he isn't going to pay them for their work. As usual, he provides the frosty cold beverages in exchange for whatever is so great about his friends. They are all half drunk, and very little is getting done. My shoes light up as I jump down and run to where they are all standing around drinking beer. They are stuck. They can't get a torque converter bolt into the transmission because their hands won't fit. Dad shows me how, and I am able to screw it in far enough that they can get a wrench in. They turn the car on and cheer like idiots.

Dad picks me up. "Look at what I got you," he says, holding up a black toy car. "You can borrow mine when you're older." He puts me in through the open window of the Shelby.

"Prom is going to be hell in this bad mo. The girls won't be able to keep their hands off of you."

"Dang it, Larry. Don't cuss around him. She is going to go off on my ass."

"Y'all hear that boys?" That is the sound of man who loves his wife."

“Nah, that sounds more like the sound of some rare species of bird.”

“I think he is whipped!” By this time they are all hollering and throwing fake punches. That turns into someone trying to fight the wrong person. Before things get any wilder, Dad opens the door and tells me to go show Mom.

I find her crying quietly in the kitchen, holding a letter, brushing tears from her eyes, and fixing her hair when she sees me come in. “You wanted something honey?” Wide eyed, I hold up the miniature Shelby. She sweeps me up and gives me a hug. I am scared; Mom never cries. Her mascara is smeared, and her eyes are red. I hug her back, and that is when she loses it again. Our embrace lasts a while, but yet it feels so brief. She puts me to bed, turns on the cartoons, and softly shuts the door behind her.

I don’t know how I got to Megan’s house, but here I am. Megan’s mom snaps our picture one last time.

“Your hand looks swollen. Are you ok?” I had been rubbing my eyes to prevent from going blind.

“Baseball, you know. I’ll be alright.” I open the door for Megan and walk around to the driver’s side.

“You are so handsome,” says Megan’s mom. “Your mother would have been proud.”

Larry has been standing silent the whole time. “Y’all behave y’all’s self now,” he says, retracting his booze fueled prophecy.

“Sure thing Mr. G.” What’s wrong with me, this was Larry we are talking about.

Megan’s mom’s words burn in my head. Mom wouldn’t be so proud of me right now. I had just struck my father. So much for “Honor thy father.” I had been lying in bed dreading telling dad about my truck, and hoping he remembered his offer from ten years ago. I heard his car come in the driveway and the slam of the screen door. I took my time coming down the stairs. I even went back to brush my teeth, and rehearsing what I was going to say. Should I even ask?

“Dad, uh...” I found him kissing our neighbor.

“Hey, I thought you were already gone.”

“What the hell?”

“I can explain.”

“You would actually do this to mom?”

“Hey wait just a God...”

My fist had nearly shattered against his skull. I grabbed the Shelby's keys from the hook by the door and ran out.

The tradition of lame proms has continued tonight. The music is terrible, as are the decorations. For the girls who had overspent on gowns, hair, and makeup it is over way too soon. It soon gives way to the after parties. Jacob and I have been enemies since the third grade. It has been a nine year battle of oneupmanship.

It all started when we were playing flag football as kids. He and I were shorter than the other kids, which made me his target. He tried to tackle me, but I grabbed his arm and used his momentum to put him on the ground. Kids will be kids, and before you know, it the other kids made it worse by making fun of him. He has hated me for the humiliation I made him go through. I'm on my way to Megan with our drinks when I see him dancing with my ex. They are dancing in the middle of the crowd, making a show of groping when they see me. My blood begins to boil again, but I don't want to ruin Megan's night. When I get to our seat Megan is holding a red cup.

"Are you ready to go?"

"You don't own me."

"Oh God, Megan. You are drunk."

"I only had one drink." Her eyes begin to roll sleepily. Something isn't right.

"I have to get you home." She doesn't even protest. She stands up awkwardly and holds my hand while I walk her to the door.

"That's right, get them drunk so that they won't leave you!" The crowd falls silent.

"Shut up, Jacob."

"Oh, do you want to go?"

"I don't want to fight you man. You're drunk."

"You are just too chicken to do something about it."

"Whatever, man." I open the door.

"That is why your mom is dead and your dad is a broke drunk."

Kids start howling, jeering. I almost swing on his face, which is now inches from mine. At that moment Megan steps in and slaps his face. He pushes her down, surprised that she struck him. I come across, punching him in the jaw, sending him to the floor. I pounce on him, swinging at his face until my fist hurts so much I begin using it like a hammer. He's half conscious, but at that moment I don't care about honor; I'm getting him back for all the grief

that he's caused me. Kids pull me off and push me outside. I grabbed Megan and we left the party.

By eleven we are sitting in a booth at Huddle House, stuffing our faces with burgers and fries and sipping Cokes. I'm not really hungry, but Megan needs to sober up before I take her home. Larry will kill me if I bring her home drunk.

"How do you feel Megan?"

"Ok, I guess," she said, taking an unladylike bite out of her food.

"As soon as you finish we need to get going."

"Or. We can go for a little ride."

She creeps over to me, and puts her hand on my knee. I try to ignore her, but before I know what is happening she grabs puts her arms around my neck and kisses me without warning. Immediately, I push her back none too gently. There is a pause, and then I stand up and walk out the door and head towards the car. She grabs my arm, but I pull it out of her grip.

"I don't need this from you too, Megan." She looks at me and begins to cry. "You are my friend, and you are drunk. Let's not ruin this."

"Who do you think you are?" she says. "I knew I was only going to be your consolation prize when you asked me to the prom, and I was ok with that! As long as I got to go with you, I was happy. I've loved you since we were little kids. You are a jerk. You won't let anyone get close to you. It's like you are dead, and you don't love anyone except yourself. Goodbye! I don't want to see you ever again!"

She runs back inside, crying. I open the car door and turn the car on. I rest my forehead on the steering wheel. The events of these past few hours have left me exhausted. I look up and see her in the window, sobbing. I hate myself at this moment. Who am I to cause someone so much pain? The rough idle of the Shelby lulls me, rocking me like a child. I shed a tear, years of holding back take their toll. Horrible images come rushing out all at once. Through blurry eyes, I see the only thing that matters to me at that moment sitting in that booth by the window. She had never been someone I thought of as a girl because she was my friend. Now I feel confused; there had been something in that kiss I had never felt before. I decided to make things right and walked back in the restaurant.

I knock on the front door of my house. A few minutes pass, but there is no answer. We both sit on the top step feeling the cool wind through our thin dress clothes. I give Megan my jacket.



"Maybe he doesn't want to see me; I did hit him."

"He is your dad; he has to forgive you."

"I know he will always be there, but I just wish I could take it back, you know."

I go to the garage to get a ladder, which we climb to reach my bedroom window. I crawl in and help Megan over the windowsill. We walk downstairs to the living room. That's strange-- the TV is on, but I don't see Dad on the couch. I walk over to the light switch, but I trip on something on the floor. By the dim light of the TV, I see a horrible sight. Megan lets out a scream. My father is face down on the beer can covered floor with my shotgun in his hand.

I try to calm her down by holding her. I don't know why, but I hold on to her.

"I am sorry," she says through choked tears.

I walk over to the still figure. I carefully turn him over on to his back. He looks so young, but his hair has spots of gray. I guess that comes from raising a child by himself. On his left cheek, the dark bruise I gave him. With a trembling hand, I reach for his face as I kneel next to him. His eyes open. I jerk back.

"I have to find my boy!" he says in a frightened voice.

"I'm here."

"I saw your truck," he says, tears in his eyes. "It looks bad. I didn't know what to do with myself, so I kept drinking. You don't know the dreams that I kept having. I saw you in a car wreck."

"I am ok, Dad."

"I don't know what I would do if I lost you."

"What were you doing with my gun?"

"I felt shitty about what I almost did. I promised your mother many things. I told her I would raise you to be someone she could be proud of and that I would be faithful. She told me she didn't want me to do that, but that is how much I loved her. Back then I thought she doubted my strength of will. I broke my own promise. It reminded me of what a great woman she was-- and it pained me. I kept thinking of ending it, but I realized I don't want you to inherit my guilt. You are a good kid, and I don't want you to suffer for my selfishness."

— *Juan Rangel*

# The Thirteenth Annual Emily Pestana-Mason Memorial Poetry Contest



The judge for this year's contest is **Dr. Mary Marwitz**, Associate Professor Emerita in the Department of Writing and Linguistics. Her creative work has been published in Wilderness House Literary Review, Freshly Hatched, and Perigee: Publication for the Arts.

**FIRST PLACE POEM: "The Heart of a Dream" by Athan Kane Waters**

*"This piece strikes me as a spoken word poem; I can hear the speaker delivering the lines with punch and verve, the rhythm of the syllables tumbling and echoing each other. It is full of energy."*

**SECOND PLACE POEM: "Kagome-san" by Kori Rogers**

*"An interesting take on the Japanese game and anime song, which often has dark overtones. The poem preserves the rhythm of the game and taps into the mythology of a more Western tradition. The playful shifting of gender identities is also nicely done."*

**THIRD PLACE POEM: "Librarian" by Dustin Coursey**

*"While not a conventionally structured poem, this piece appeals because of its subject matter, away from the traditional and abstract. It moves from a standard description into interesting metaphor and images of books as noble artifacts. The writer has brought the archaic image of dusty librarians into a more vivid life that protects the quest for knowledge."*

## The Heart of a Dreamer

Within the wondrous, wistful world of your realm of slumber  
there is a house composed of brick, and stone, and lumber  
and if you let your mind travel to this place of wonder  
you will see the things unearthed from what lies under,

under the pit of goals and hopes and aspirations  
there is a place that sparked the flames of inspirations  
and at its core all doubts and fears face their incinerations  
through this fiery flaming forge comes all of your creations

All the dreams and goals and hopes begin within your mind  
and if they're figments than we're two of a kind  
who's to say your dreams are not as real as the world in front of  
your eye?  
if dreams are not alive then how come so many of them die?

When you wake from sleep into your perceived reality  
remember there is that dream inside dying to be set free  
falling down is possible but falling is still motion  
don't forget why you take each step, it's like the ocean  
the ebb and flow is constant like it's tied to an emotion  
but to believe you cannot achieve a dream is a superstitious notion

'cause moving is still motion even when you're falling down  
just tuck and roll and get back up, be there to claim your crown  
if you can dream, create, and be and the limit is the sky  
if dreams are not alive then how come so many of them die?

— *Athan Kane Waters*

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SECOND PLACE POEM

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## Kagome-san

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
Stop telling people I'm the one.  
They look at me unpleasantly  
For something I have done.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
I have nothing nor riches or gold;  
I own just a star-gaze scarf,  
Not the fanciest to hold.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
I wear just a gown of rags.  
The pretty girls wear the finest,  
Mine are patched, wrinkle, and sags.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
I want him to notice me.  
The prince who never smiles  
Nor a hearty glance to vulgar princesses-to-be.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
He lost that smile long ago;  
When I sailed away  
Now I returned, grace and beau.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
I left behind my pirate ways.  
Away from the treasure and sea  
But I cannot flee from those days.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
The wicked sea witch caught me,  
“Listen well, you gypsy girl,  
“True love you will never see!!”

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
The prince found me by the gallows.  
Tears rolling down, he embraced me.  
Why witch, would you take away the vows.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
“I will be here when the curse strikes.  
Take my clothes and run.  
Without a clue, it does not know we are alike.”

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
I am now the prince and he is the gypsy.  
The witch is an old fool,  
She is ditzzy as a drunken pixie.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
My vision is beginning to blur.  
The heart is slowing and frozen,  
Please remember, there is no cure.

Kagome, kagome, kagome-san,  
My death is everything but grim.  
Please Lord, hear my plea,  
“Watch over him.”

— *Kori Rogers*



**Mirror** - Mary Neal

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THIRD PLACE POEM

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## Librarian

The word Librarian is accompanied with a picture of elderly men and women in lonely quiet rooms filled with old boring pages. In many eyes this perception holds true, but the title is not what it seems.

Librarians are the true knights of the round table. They guard their post protecting all the worlds rooted in the palace of books. They are the keepers of time, preserving histories and legacies of the kings and gods.

Librarians embark on many noble quests from golden sunrise to golden sunrise they race to find the treasures of their trusting subjects. The Librarian is therefore not bound by age or rooms, but is instead the great explorer and guide.

— *Dustin Coursey*

## Body Snatchers

What does it mean to be inspired? I used to think being inspired just meant you were a driven person, but I just feel like I am running in circles, chasing my tail like a dog. I can honestly say in my twenty-four short years I have never truly felt inspired. I make my choices based on complex, drawn out consideration. I weigh my options daily by deciding what I am to do first on my “what to accomplish today list.” It’s safe to say I’m a little obsessive when it comes to structure. It’s honestly a grueling way to live. If even the slightest thing goes wrong, I panic. My day always has order; my life thrives off order. So how did this happen? Did I just decide to go off the path one day, or was it fate? I don’t remember making a conscious effort to sway off of my everyday life, but maybe that is what inspiration is. In order to find my inspiration, I had to let loose; however, this was not my idea of letting loose. As I lay here hoping this is a bad dream, all of these thoughts are running through my head. I am a good, by-the-book, never-get-into-anything kind of girl. Why me?

Waking up in a tub of ice is not my idea of a good time. I am freezing! I can barely move, and God, does it hurt when I try. Why am I in so much pain? I can barely remember a thing, much less why I woke up here instead of on my memory foam bed. I’m not tucked into my neat little plan of life anymore. But why? I reach my arm around, running my cold, shaking fingers up my back through the loose ties of the ragged hospital gown I’ve somehow acquired, to investigate the pain. My fingers run across a strange, bumpy line across my left lower back. Do I have stitches? I can feel my heartbeat pounding in my ear drums as I try to think of why I was sedated, opened up, and stitched up again. If I wasn’t panicking before, I sure as hell am now. I quickly apply more pressure upon my left lower back to confirm my hypothesis. I’m too smart for my own good. I am indeed one kidney short. So let’s get this straight, I’m in a strange place, and I’m missing a kidney, and to make matters worse, I don’t know if I can move. Again, I circle back to my original question: why me?

After weeks of working very hard day in and day out at the hotel and the diner, I just wanted to have a few drinks and unwind; which is totally unlike me. As I have mentioned, I am a planner; my life is set day by-day. Yesterday was different though. I felt like something was missing, and that’s why I went out to look for inspiration. I’m a struggling journalist, and I just haven’t been able to come up with anything. Ha! I guess this is fantastic inspiration! Be careful what you wish for. It’s not every day you wake up and your kidney has been stolen.

Okay, time to try and get up. Where am I? Oh God, this is the worst pain I have ever had! Tile floors, cheap wallpaper, cracked toilet, I must be in a cheap hotel room. I don’t hear

any voices. Maybe I'm alone? I don't know how I am managing to stand right now, the pain is unbearable. Oh, crap! I hear voices coming in the main door. I turn my head toward the door to listen. One guy has a deep voice.

"I doubt she's awake yet. I mean, we took out her kidney. I'm just not sure where we should drop her, but we have to act fast before she goes to the cops."

A second man replied with a much softer voice. "Maybe we should drop her at a hospital."

They think I'm asleep still. I have to get out of here! I take a deep breath and think to myself, *mind over matter*. I must suck it up and bear the pain if I want to get out of here alive. Quickly and quietly, I lock the door, holding back my whimpering cries of pain. They are still in the other room, talking about what to do with me. I need an escape plan. As I pan the room, I come across an idea. The window! I reach up to try and push the bottom glass of the window up with every last ounce of strength in my very weak body. Yes! It moved! If I can only get it a little higher. The man with the deep voice must have heard the window open.

"What was that coming from the bathroom? Oh no she's awake! What if she is trying to escape? Get in there!"

I have to hurry, and I'm in pain. Oh God, this is going to hurt! Deep breath. *Mind over matter*. I feel woozy as I realize things are starting to look more warped, and I'm dizzy. I think I am going to pass out. The window is pretty high and just moving sends my body into agony. *Stay awake! I have to get through this! Don't lose consciousness!*

Somehow, I manage to get out. I feel as if I'm going to puke, and I want so badly to fall to my knees and cry in pain. Snap out of it! *Mind over matter*. I have to run! Pumping my legs, gasping for air, I'm seeing spots of light twinkle ever so slightly in my line of vision. I feel something drip down my leg. I reach my hand back mid-run and realize I'm bleeding! My stitches must have popped open when I climbed through the window. I'm not going to make it! I'm going to pass out. I can't! *Stay conscious!* I don't know how much more I can take!

I feel my legs ready to give out as every muscle in my body starts to weaken. I feel like death. I ponder lying down, giving up, and just surrendering what's left of my body to whoever played out these horrendous theatrics. I want so badly to just fall to the asphalt, close my eyes, and await my gruesome death. But wait! What is that? Could it be?



I see a gas station. If I can just get there and call the cops. *Just a little farther. I have to get there! I've come too far to give up now! How did my life get so crazy? Why did this have to happen to me?* I can barely see, my sight worsening as more blood rushes from my stitches. The pain is crippling me. I'm almost there — I have to make it!

*What? Huh? Where am I?*

Clean sheets, beeping, the smell of cleaner; *I'm home? Was it all a bad dream?* Slowly I open my eyes, expecting to see my Stephen King poster hanging on the wall across from my bed.

To my surprise, I awaken with a woman in scrubs hovering over me. An unnecessarily loud beeping is ringing in my ears as if it tracked my heartbeat. I hear it beep faster as I start to feel anxious. I'm in a hospital! The nurse standing above me notices I'm awake and smiles at me.

"Oh, honey, you're awake! We are so happy! You are such a fighter. We thought you might not make it. You had a kidney stolen from you, but the worst part is the infection you developed from the removal."

*Oh God, so it wasn't a dream!*

"Am I going to be okay?"

"Oh yes, honey, we have you stable and on some very strong antibiotics. The police will be in to talk to you soon."

I wait patiently for the police to come in, carefully going over what I remember. I don't remember much; however, someone must have slipped something into my drink. Why did I even bother going out that night? I don't drink. I guess I was just feeling sorry for myself. I felt like my life was going nowhere, and I needed to break from my usual routine to find something new. All I wanted was some inspiration for a new story, not this tragic, horrifying, life threatening nightmare!

Finally the police come in.

"Ma'am can you please tell us anything you remember from that night? Anything at all will be helpful."

I carefully think this over.

“Well, I went out to Jake’s Pub to get a few drinks after work; I think I only had maybe four. I started talking to this dark-haired man, blue eyes, a little stubble, about 5’10, maybe 160 pounds. He looked pretty average, honestly. We talked about work, life, and other things that lonely, drunk, adults talk about in a bar. He ordered me a drink, and I went to the bathroom. I came back, and we danced. I really don’t remember anything after that. I woke up in a cheap, run down hotel, wearing a ragged hospital gown in a bath tub of ice with a searing pain from the stitches I had acquired from a non consensual kidney surgery. I heard two of them talking. One had a deep voice, and the other kind of a soft voice. The one with the soft voice kind of sounded like the man I met at the pub. I locked the bathroom door and climbed out of the window and just ran to the nearest open place — it looked like a gas station, but everything is kind of fuzzy.”

The officer just looks at me a moment. Finally he says, “Ms. Jenkin’s, I am terribly sorry that this has happened to you. We are going to do everything in our power to find these people. It *was* a gas station you ran to. The manager called us right away, and we checked out the hotel room. We managed to get a few partial prints and some DNA. We are hoping to get a match soon. The doctor says you can go home tomorrow. We are going to keep a 24 hour surveillance on your home. Do you have any questions?”

I consider this for a minute. “Yes, officer, I think I do; where’s my kidney, and am I allowed to write about this?”

“Well, ma’am, you can write about it if you want to. We can’t stop you, and honestly we have no idea where it is — more than likely sold already on the black market. These deals tend to work pretty fast.”

“Okay, can you give me all of the information you have on black marketing organs?”

“You must be a journalist or a writer; I’ve never seen anyone else excited about losing a kidney before.”

I laugh out loud. “Well, officer, I went to Jake’s feeling hopeless and uninspired. All I wanted was for some kind of direction in my life, I plan everything; I make lists, I have two jobs, and I’m a struggling journalist. Basically, my life sucks. So I am hoping to turn this into a story to raise awareness so lonely girls in bars don’t fall for the same thing. It sucks to lose a kidney, I think the ice bath is the worst though; I’ve never been so damn cold!”

I smile at my own weird humor, the cop seems amused as well.

“Alright, Ms. Jenkin’s, give me a call if you can remember anything at all. I’m going to give you my personal number; don’t hesitate to call anytime.”

I guess it’s now or never, “Hey officer! Ms. Jenkins is my mom’s name; call me Alice.”

I winked.

Wow, I guess I needed a near death experience to finally give me the push I needed in life. I haven’t even felt the urge to make a list or fret about if my jobs are still intact. The officer smiles a kind smile.

“Alright Alice, I’m Jason, and remember, call me if you need anything, I’ll be in touch with the info you wanted.”

Both jobs give me a leave for a little while to recover. During this time I am buried neck deep in my writing. Every detail needs to be known, I have finally found my inspiration. Jason hadn’t lied; there has been a cop across the street all week, undercover of course. It’s okay; it is just another thing to put in my story. The doctor has given me strong antibiotics and told me to come back in a week and we will check out what damage was done then. Basically, kick the infection and we’ll tell you how life with only one kidney will be.

It’s crazy how one decision can affect your entire outlook on life. I’m still very sore, but it is no longer unbearable like it was that night. I’m going to have a really nasty scar. The guys that cut me had no idea what they were doing. They just wanted to make some quick money. When I tell people what had happened they laugh at me and think I’m joking, a crazy hangover from a bender. Then I show them the cut. I wish I could take a picture of their faces! Apparently stolen kidneys and ice baths are something you only see in the movies.

Jason came through with the information on black market organs. I never knew just how much a kidney costs or I may have cut it out myself a long time ago. There is no news on the men that took my organ. I can honestly say that as a journalist I would have really liked to interview him on the whole process. Jason says I sound just like a reporter, I’m even giving up organs for a good story. He makes me laugh, that’s for sure. He’s been stopping by to “check on me.” I think he may like me. He’s good looking, a nice guy; who would have thought I would lose a kidney and gain my inspiration, my story that is going to set me apart from the

others, and a cute cop who wants to take me out when I'm healed up. I add all of this into my story. I want to make it as detailed as possible. I'm almost done with it finally; tomorrow I'm sending out my article to everyone. People need to hear this; others need to be aware, and getting my name out there is a bonus. Where did all this ambition come from? Did I have all this just bottled up inside me the whole time?

A week later, I finally heard back from the local newspaper; they want to run my story! I'm so excited; the doctor told me this morning that other than missing a kidney, I will be just fine. People live perfectly fine with only one kidney. I have been religiously checking my email all morning. After I got the first confirmation email, it's like the flood gates opened; everyone wants to run my story; a few want me to come write for them. It's like a crazy, warped nightmare that turned into a great dream. People are calling me their inspiration. Wow! I can't believe that! This all started because I was looking for something — anything to break me from the person I was becoming. I haven't made daily lists or laid in bed planning my day in a whole week. I think I could get used to this. That's when I saw it-- my dream job-- *The New York Times* sent me a message. They want me to be in the field, interviewing people; they read my article and loved it! They said I have been through a lot, and the fact that I turned it into a way to help others impressed them. They were also impressed that I got it out to the public so fast.

My life has really turned around; it's been a month since the body snatchers got me; no one was ever arrested, but I have come out of my shell. I now work for *The New York Times*, doing what I love. I have a date planned with Officer Jason. I went out that night looking to get inspired, not lose a kidney, gain a job, and a boyfriend. I guess I should be careful what I wish for; I might not get exactly what I was expecting.

— *Amber Simmons*



**Open Wide** - Kimberly Page

## Ghazal For Narcissists

Others intrude upon my bliss  
And fail to glory in me.

A chiseled face, the perfect grace--  
God gave these gifts to me.

Others scramble fruitlessly  
But fame so far eludes me.

Why can't people see my needs?  
It's really just about me.

Lovers may come, but soon they go.  
Most do not adore me.

I am a paragon of the age  
But why don't people like me?

Love is a many splendored thing  
Love is all about me.

— *Kenneth Homer*

## Poison Oak

Deprived soil is what the young sprout behold.  
Love depleted; he grows in the cold.  
Inadequacy breeds broken bonds with broken people.  
The deprived soul now deprives the deprived;  
A realm of *dark* despair.

Whimsical fortunes, blessing distortions —guttered,  
Walking through life with his hands out and eyes covered.  
*Herbicide* poisons the faith of the innocent,  
Rooting to the lifeless branches of his decisions,  
Nesting a fabricated view of intent,  
A gullible chick leaps to the death of an untrusting bird.

She wonders the fruits of thawing a frozen stone;  
*Stone Capone* revealing no back bone.  
Her love ignites a burner under the pot  
As the bubbles kindle her plight.  
Capone's stone burst open, exposing dark light.

*Cultivate a poison oak tree  
Regret endlessly.*

— *Britt Raye*

## My Morning

In the early morn I rise from my bed  
No day of light shown, still not yet in its place  
Regret looming, still slow, I shake my head,  
Lethargic movement, the clock I must race.

Knowing time an evil and fickle wench,  
Unconscious actions no thought of care,  
Scent of burning oil, that familiar stench,  
Slighting death, I push as hard as I dare.

Calm wind, all alone, no sound as I run.  
I still cannot believe this is for fun.

— *A. Schenk*



**Untitled** - Ann Marie Hendley



## Mountain Homily

I moved with morning  
In the dawn tipped day  
And fire moved over mountains  
And rolled across the sky

I moved with the dawn  
With the sun's soft birth  
As the sky unfurled  
In the dreaming light

Softly sang the wind  
In the towering treetops  
Softly sighed the green  
Feathery fingers  
Of the trees roosting there  
Tamed by time to not take flight

To the north was mountain and mountain  
To the south more mountains  
The east and west mountains  
In this island in the sky

Stillness was hymn  
And the earth my hymnal.

— *Kenneth Homer*



**Untitled** - Tiffany KoKotis

## Pirates Ahoy!

"This simply shall not do!" a fairly short man screamed at his coworkers. The man was a movie producer, based on his designer sunglasses atop his head and the large microphone he carried around. His frown turned his already unpleasant face into something quite undesirable. The men and women around him were cringing away from his sudden outburst; they had only just begun filming the scene for what felt like the umpteenth time. The actors on stage groaned at this and went back to their original places, the few pieces of set material that had been knocked astray were fixed back into their places.

The actors were filming a new movie under this producer, David Star, and they could already tell he would be difficult. And they were only on the third set!! Everyone was tired and grumpy save for the producer, but it wasn't as if he was doing much other than shouting. The actors and set were finally returned to the starting positions and the take was reset. With a cry of "Action!" the movie began again.

The actors were all yelling their own lines at each other as a massive brawl broke out; there was even an accommodation factor for the churning waves tossing the ship to and fro. Everyone was done in typical, action movie fashion: the fight was filmed in high detail to small things. One could watch as a cutlass sliced through the air, taking with it a pale blue bandana instead of someone's head. A pistol shot rang out as smoke suddenly sprung from the rigged gun. Several barrels were sent rolling as one of the actors was pushed into them. And suddenly, a single figure sprang from the mass of limbs.

The single woman on the stage had leapt from the melee onto the captain's area of the "ship." She was dressed in a tight, leather cuirass that was intended to deflect glancing blows without sacrificing any of her mobility. Her long, dark hair was swept back by a maroon headband around her head. In one hand she held a bloodied cutlass; in the other she held a dripping flintlock. Her eyes stared straight ahead, her attention focused unwaveringly on the man standing in front of her.

The man was dressed in dark leathers, so dark in fact that they had to have been dyed that way. The leathers were wrapped in an equally dark coat that hung almost to the floor, a hood pulled over the man's hair. At his waist hung two, silver cutlasses with finely inlaid hilts. Behind the swords hung four golden pistols. The man currently had his hands on the captain's wheel, steering the massive ship.

"Marcus." The woman spoke softly. Her voice easily carried the distance, her words heavy with the thrill of authority. "Funny that we should meet again so soon."

The man, now identified as Marcus, turned his hooded head to look at her. The woman could barely make out the glow of two, piercing blue eyes that felt like they simply saw through her. The man had barely even acknowledged her before the only other person on this section of the ship charged forward. The large, black man swung a heavy looking scimitar at her. The woman dodged nimbly, and retaliated with a quick strike of her own. The scimitar

found its way between them and both combatants stood locked, the faint light glancing off the blades and the black man's many piercings.

"Cecil," she said simply, "I should have known you would not be far behind." The man threw her away bodily.

"I am his quartermaster, Miss Emily. Of course, I would not be far behind." He held the blade in front of him.

Emily gritted her teeth, preparing to attack again. She realized that it had started to rain during this brief conflict. She actually realized it right as she pulled the trigger for her pistol, only to hear the wet smack of soaked gunpowder. Cecil took the chance to rush her, his blade flying for her head. Emily smote it aside, but Cecil had anticipated the action. He used the momentum to spin around, planting his boot firmly in her gut. As she reeled, he loomed over her with his blade held high.

Luckily for Emily, one of her men tackled the studded man to the ground, shouting at her to take care of Marcus. She had no time to watch their struggle and immediately returned her attention to the captain of the ship. Marcus had returned his attention to the seas, and Emily suspected it was because they were nearing their destination. Emily planned to take full advantage of the captain's foolish lack of awareness and ran for his back.

Leaping over a piece of railing that had been knocked aside by a stray cannonball, she aimed to strike the man down with an aerial strike from behind. What she was not expecting was to feel her head explode against the wheel. Only afterwards did she realize that Marcus had sidestepped at the last moment and slammed her into it. Emily fell quickly to the ground, dazed from the sudden blow.

"Do you take me for a complete fool, Miss Emily?" Marcus had a voice that was full of primal emotion, his Welsh accent only accentuating such. "I am not so foolish as to leave my back open for any old attack to strike me down. You are too late anyhow; Kingston lies just ahead."

Marcus pulled one of his own pistols out; Emily saw him placing dry gunpowder in from under his coat. She tried to sit up, to attack, but Marcus laughed as he easily avoided the blow. Emily heard the background noise of a blade abruptly running through flesh. The pained and familiar grunt told her that Cecil had bested his opponent. As she stared into the muzzle, she realized that she had failed. And then there was a loud crash, smoke from a gunshot, and the feeling of flying through the air.

Emily yelled as she suddenly went flying overboard, the cool waters bringing her back to reality sharply. She immediately began to claw her way through the liquid, swimming around sinking pieces of wood and even some cannons here and there. She saw a few other men swimming also and even one trapped beneath a sinking crate. She surfaced to a hellish sight.

Marcus stood there, on the prow of his ship, with his golden pistol aimed for her. Several other men of his crew, including Cecil, lined the railings with all forms of firepower aimed

and ready. Emily dived back down as the gunshots begin ringing out, the bullets punching through the water but none hitting her. As she swam in the general direction of shore, she watched several men with gunshot wounds, struggling to swim. The water around her dyed red far too quickly for her liking.

Miraculously, Emily pulled herself ashore without being hit a single time. She briefly glanced over her shoulder. Marcus still stood, reloading his pistols. His dark form, blocked by the glaring sun at his back, gave her chills for a brief moment. She started running as fast as she could, heading to safety amongst the tall trees of the forest. She dove for the nearest and only just made it behind before a round tore a chunk of bark from it.

Giving herself a moment's respite, Emily pulled herself against the tree and tried to calm her breathing. She heard the faint splashes of several men diving into the water after her and briefly wondered if any of her other men made it to shore. Things had been so hectic she had not even paid the thought any attention until now. Shaking her head, she stood up to continue her flee; she could find safety amongst the citizens of Kingston, if that is where they truly were. She was reminded that she would find no sympathy behind her as Marcus pulled himself onto the wet sands, the scrunch of his boots and rush of the waves a unique sound.

Emily took off at a sprint and felt another bullet graze past her. These shots were really too close for her liking. She heard yelling behind her but never stopped to check over her shoulder. She simply ran and ran and ran. She ran past dozens of wild animals, none overly hostile thankfully. She ran past many large plants and bushes, pushing them aside as she kept on running.

At last, she could see light, the end of this canopy of woods. She never made it to the end regrettably. A rope found its way around her neck before she could, a sharp tug sent her reeling backwards to the forest floor. Cecil suddenly loomed over her again, his scimitar poised to rip through her chest. As the blade fell, she was pleasantly surprised to see another blade sprout from his. Cecil was roughly pushed aside as one of her men helped her to her feet.

Together and without exchanging a single word, they rushed out of the forest of trees. There she was, the beautiful city of Kingston, smoke lazily drifting around the buildings, coiled like some sort of vague serpent. Emily dropped to her knees in relief; they had made it. Her savior knelt to pick her back up.

"Miss Emily, we aren't safe yet. Come o-!" his words were brought to a sharp end by a single gunshot.

Emily turned to see him, Marcus, standing there with a smoking flintlock. He lowered the gun as he simply stood there, his dark attire giving him a sinister vibe against the backdrop of the lush forest. This man was evil, and he had eliminated all of her crew. Her time had finally come. Emily cried tears of rage as she stood to her feet, swiping the fallen man's sword. Marcus smiled at the useless actions.

"Miss Emily, I believe we both realize that I am by far the better fighter. You have no chance against me. Lay down the blade, it is not too late for you to join us."

"Never! You're a wicked man, Marcus! They say you're in line with the devil himself and I shall have no part of it!" Marcus sighed.

"A shame. I did enjoy your...company while it lasted." Mary blushed at his words, knowing full well of his meanings.

"Enough talk!"

Emily lunged forward suddenly, the tears mixing with the blush to create a very hot feeling on her cheeks. Marcus lazily swatted the blade aside, bringing his fist into Emily's gut. Emily grunted at the pain but swung again, weaker than before, to drive Marcus away from finishing her off then and there. Marcus swung his blade this time, slamming Emily's blade with such force that she could not keep any form of hold on it. The sword thunked into a tree some distance away. Marcus flicked his blade up, holding Emily at the tip of his sword.

"And now, you die, Miss Emily." He reared back to thrust the blade through her windpipe.

"Cut!!!" the director cried. "More feeling when you say it. 'And now, Miss Emily, you die.'" He talked out the way he imagined the words should be said, a dramatic flair to such things. "This simply won't do, this scene is the climax of the opening! I want it feel as if it's ushering in a grand and epic story!"

The actors all sighed and groaned again. Things were replaced as they were at the start of that scene. The dead man picked himself back up; Marcus returned to the woods. Emily knelt on the ground again, preparing to reset herself into her state of ultimate relief. The take was reset once again.

"Aaaaand, action!!!"

The man knelt once again, placing his hands upon Emily's shoulders.

"Miss Emily, we aren't safe yet! Come o-!" His words were again interrupted by a sudden gunshot.

Emily turned to see him standing there again, the gun still smoking. The same vibe he had the first time had easily returned. Emily felt the tears slide down her face again as she stole the fallen man's sword.

"Miss Emily, I believe we both realize that I am by far the better fighter." Marcus spoke the lines again, and everyone on the set wondered when they would call the shooting for a quick lunch break.

— *Dylan Royal*

## True contradiction. (For black history.)

You have set your agenda.  
You have laid your plans.  
You have motivated others to believe your views.  
    Didn't you know?  
    Couldn't you see?  
    These passions-- that rage inside of me.  
Your words have been like poison for too long,  
    Burning like acid on the soul,  
A sharp death-- to the heart and to the mind,  
    My strongest hope  
        To escape,  
        To survive,  
        To be different.  
I will not become who or what you have sculpted in your mind.  
    I will climb higher.  
What you have foreseen will not be the end of my race.  
    I will run even further.  
    I am the definition of a born fighter.  
Even though there will be lions in the field and other obstacles,  
    I – will –not –shy away.  
I will run toward everyone like a dark asteroid being hurled into the sun.  
    Then, like the phoenix, I will arise from the ashes.  
    A complete wonder, an exception to the stereotypes.  
Loud and proudly will I shout out, "I am, and will forever be, a true contradiction."

— *Jewournie Jenkins*

## What a world we live in

When and where did all this chaos begin?  
The world is filled with too much hate, and not enough love,  
Too many black crows, too few white doves,  
We say so much and think a lot less.  
All that does is create one big mess,  
People think they know why we do what we do  
But they don't have a single clue.  
So instead of trying to understand,  
They try to change us to fill their own selfish demands.  
We have to change the way we think,  
So that all this chaos will not push us to the brink.

— *Harry G. Dukes*

## Wishing Well

I'm trapped between four walls,  
And the only exit is a thousand feet up.  
The walls are bare—slick as black ice.  
With each passing new day, the exit only seems to climb higher.  
How I got sucked into this miserable space,  
With its cold damp cement floor,  
Draining the warmth from my body, is  
Something I couldn't explain.  
But, I am. Alone. With myself.

— *Adriana Rodriguez*

## All of Me

Hannah hated this city and everything in it. When she was a little girl, her mother was murdered during a prison riot, and Hannah was thrown into a jail cell by the guards who thought she was another prisoner. A few years later, she's free but on the run with the prison's former psychiatrist Dr. Tschudi and his 'assistant', the "Coffin Maker." Coffin Maker was just an alias; his real name was Griffin. His specialty was making coffins, though he was also feared for his strength and stealth. The professor needed him for the reputation he earned by stealing money from under the crime bosses' noses and his intimidating appearance.

Griffin didn't like telling why he got the jagged scars that were large enough for a spider to get in. Hannah is the only one who knew that his father tortured him as a kid though half of the scars came from trying to shield his little half-sister Vivaldi from their father's abuse.

The metallic hiss of knives scraping pierced through Hannah's ears. She finally found time to read James Patterson's latest novel in the *Maximum Ride* series. All she wanted was peace and quiet. Of course, her boyfriend thought now was a good time to sharpen his knives. They were staying in an abandoned furniture warehouse and the metallic hiss was coming from everywhere. She shot up from her chair, determined to give that man a piece of her mind, but she stopped by the couch.

There was a large, heavy brown coat sprawled out on the tattered couch. The back of the coat had scratch marks along with the sleeves and it was slimy. Hannah looked inside the pockets and found a bag of flaming hot Cheetos, a small box of nails, a crocodile-skin wallet with \$10 in it, and a *Most Haunted Places in America* DVD.

*This must be Griffin's*, Hannah thought to herself, slinging the coat over her shoulder very carefully and walking down the hall. The deeper she went, the quieter the scraping sound was. Griffin's room was where the former workers of the warehouse used to store wood for the furniture, but now it's used to make Griffin's coffins.

"Griffin, you left your coat in the living room," Hannah said, opening the door to his room and freezing in place. Griffin was changing into a different shirt. There were numerous scars on his back, his arms, sides, and his face. Some of the scars were older than others and deeper too. Hannah thought she saw hints of cobwebs inside one of the back scars. His long black hair was tied samurai style, and his right eye-patch was still on but it barely covered the large claw scar across his face. Griffin looked back at her.

"Doesn't anyone knock anymore?" he asked, completely unphased of the fact she was about to have a nosebleed at the sight of him shirtless. Griffin grew up with mostly girls, his best friend, his little half-sister and her friend, before he came into the city, so this didn't bother him. "If you wanted dinner, I'm afraid it will be late. The professor needed me for something."

"Uh, I-I just found your coat. Wait, what's wrong with your arm?!" She noticed the bright red bandage wraps on his right arm and ran over to him and gently caressed the wraps before tearing them off. There were five open cuts deep to see the damaged arm muscle and the dry blood around it. Hannah's skin turned pale and she covered her mouth with her hands.



"Can I have my bandages back, please?"

"Who did this?!"

"Excuse me?" Griffin tilted his head.

"Who did this to you?!!" Hannah trembled, clenching her fists.

"The professor wanted to see how sharp his knives were on my skin-" He tried to explain before a large book hit him in his face. Dr. Tschudi stood at the doorway with his arms crossed. He had his lab coat draped on the left side with his newly sharpened knives in his pocket. He pushed the rim of his glasses up with his middle finger, pulling Hannah over to him.

"She doesn't need to know." The professor calmly stated.

"What did you do this time?!" Hannah shoved him away.

"That is none of your business."

"Well, it is now." Hannah crossed her arms.

"She saw my wounds," Griffin sighed.

"Whatever happens to my employees is none of your concern! And why are you even caring about this monster?!" Dr. Tschudi angrily spat with a hint of jealousy.

"He is not a monster!" Hannah clenched her fists, glaring at him.

"I'm still here, by the way," Griffin called from his bed, wrapped his wounds back up.

"Stay out of this!" The couple shouted, turning over to the scarred man. Hannah couldn't take it anymore. She stormed out of the room.

"And where do you think you are going?!" The professor stomped out of his employee's room and glared as Hannah opened the front door.

"Let me think. None of your business!" She slammed the door. The vials of chemicals on the top shelves shattered falling down. The professor growled going back to his 'lab'. *She'll be back*, he thought to himself, *she won't last a minute in this city without my help*.

Heavy rain began to pour when Hannah stormed out of the warm warehouse and onto the cold street. There was barely any traffic and hardly anyone outside now. She pulled her hood up, just in case there were any cops lingering around. Half of the boys in blue worked for crime bosses and took care of the dirty work for them. Their bosses paid Dr. Tschudi for the chemicals he created. *Why am I even staying with him? When we go out to dinner he flirts with the waitress, and then goes to make deals.*

"You're that shrink's girl, aren't ya?" A husky voice called out from the alley. Three badly dressed men came out of the darkness. One of them was bald with a very thin gray beard and wearing a cheap black leather jacket and a white undershirt and muddy bellbottoms with no shoes on. The other two had hair. One had dirty blonde Mohawk and wore a Sons of Anarchy t-shirt with a spiked black belt and blue jeans with red and black sneakers. The last one was a

redhead with his hair to the left side. He didn't have a shirt on, and his blue jeans were baggy and he was barefoot.

"Wanna have some fun, girlie?" They circled around her. The men reeked of booze and cheap Ocean Breeze cologne. Hannah noticed the redhead had a bloodied knife in his left hand and the bald guy had a pistol in his pocket. She figured he was the leader from the looks of him, the smartest of the three. Hannah tried to back away from the men, but the bald one grabbed her arms and forcedly tugged her close to him.

"We just wanna have a little fun. We don't bite. Much." Hannah glared at him and kicked him in the crotch hard enough for him to let go of her before angrily slamming the redhead into the alley wall. *I did not just walk out just go get into another fight!* She screamed in her head. Suddenly, the blonde grabbed hold of her neck then pinned her to the wall while their 'leader' began to punch her rapidly in the stomach. She grunted and blood seeped through her lips and she fell back on her knees when they finally let go. She glared at them as the redhead kicked her hard to the side of a nearby dumpster.

"Think you can fight us all, huh?!" The 'leader' grabbed her by the neck. "Any last words?" Hannah spit in his face, and he growled angrily, and then snatched the knife out of the redhead's pocket and aimed it at her throat.

"Give it to her, boss!" The thugs cheered. Hannah closed her eyes tightly in pain. She couldn't scream or move. No one was around the scene, and even if there were any policemen out, who would want to help someone like her? She was weak and pathetic. She couldn't even defend herself or get away from a fight. In her mind she begged for someone, anybody to help her. She mostly wished for this to be over.

Her eyes jerked open when the 'leader' shouted in pain and saw the knife was jabbed into his hand by a shadow. The shadow was slender with red glowing eyes and long, sharp, red claws. It glanced at her and laughed menacingly before fading into the sidewalk's shadow and that's when she saw him. A tall being stood five feet away, dressed in a long brown cloak and a tattered fedora and a few black strands over his face. The shadow shot up in the person's sleeves and disappeared inside his clothes. The thugs shaken frightened a bit at the person as he tilted his hat up. There was an eye-patch over his right eye, and his left eye was silver. Hannah's eyes bugged out because she knew who it was!

"Who is this guy? Hey, butt out! We're busy here!!" The blonde finally found the backbone to talk.

"Put. Her. Down," Griffin threatened in a low, dark tone with a menacing look in his eye as he started walking toward them. The blonde took out a pistol from his pocket and fired two rounds at him, but Griffin just kept going! The bullets were hovering in front of him before he flicked his right hand to the side and the bullets turned onto the redhead's legs, crippling him and blood gushed out as the thug screamed in pain. The blonde grabbed a piece of broken pipe nearby and smacked Griffin in the head. It barely did anything because Griffin grabbed hold of that pipe and it started melting in the thug's hands, making the thug yell in pain and confusion as it burned his hands before Griffin jabbed his elbow hard in his face.

The leader trembled, letting go of Hannah and charged at Griffin.

“Cover your eyes, Hannah.” Griffin instructed, cracking his knuckles. She wasted no time doing so, but she wished she covered her ears too. She heard the men screaming bloody murder with the sound of bones crushing and the squishing and popping of organs. Her skin shivered and she finally covered her ears as faint tears rolled down her face at the horror she heard. She shrieked when someone pulled her hands off her ears and punched him in the face.

“Ow.” She heard a familiar voice and jerked her head over, seeing Griffin rubbing his forehead where a small bruise formed. “That’s what I get for saving your retarded self?” He joked with a small smirk.

Hannah looked around and discovered the bodies of the three men torn and beaten and the thug’s heads cracked open with their eyes white. They were dead. None of them moved or even twitched. She turned her head back to Griffin as he got back up and she spotted a gash in his stomach as he pulled a piece of the knife out before flinging it to the side.

“You’re hurt,” she frowned.

“It’s just a scratch,” He reassured her and turned his head over to her. “Are you alright, Kitten?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Wait, what did you call me?”

“Kitten. That’s what I’m going to call you. Because you believe you’re ready to fight on your own, but really you’re just scared of being alone. You’re scared, but feisty like a kitten.” Hannah’s face turned red and she punched his arm before falling to her knees.

“H-How did you find me?”

“I knew you wouldn’t go far. But I didn’t think you’d get into this much trouble so fast. When I heard you scream I came running. You gave me quite a scare there. I thought I was too late.”

“Why save me? I’m pathetic!! I can’t even hold my own! I nearly got you killed!!” Tears ran down her cheeks as she tried not to cry. Griffin took off his coat, draping it over her to shield her from the rain, and then picked her up bridal style and started walking back to the base.

“You are not pathetic. You just need to practice fighting. You didn’t almost get me killed. I took them out, didn’t I? I save you because you’re my friend. I promise to protect you with everything in my power. I swear I will never let you down even if it kills me. But even if I’m dead, I won’t stop protecting you. Besides, it is cute when you blush at me.”

Hannah blushed, looking away, wanting to tell him thanks and to put her down, but she was too tired to do anything. Her body ached from the abuse those men did to her, and she wanted to just sleep it off. She didn’t care if the professor was going to yell at her for storming out. It was his fault anyway. She was lucky Griffin came to her rescue, but she wished desperately that she had covered her ears before he did what he did to those three. Hannah yawned and rubbed her eyes, trying to stay awake. But she failed. She ended up dozing off in Griffin’s arms. She curled up close to his chest as she cuddled up to the sound of his heart.

Griffin smiled slightly at her. Despite his horrendous appearance and his reputation, Hannah wasn't afraid of him. Women ran away from the sight of him and would only come near him if the professor ordered food and they had no choice but to talk to him. Hannah was different from those girls. She didn't shiver from his scars or try to come up with a stupid excuse to leave. She reminded him of his deceased girlfriend. Sadly, he knew he couldn't have her. There are other men better than him and possibly better looking than him.

No, all he wants is for her to be happy, even if it's not with him. He lightly kissed her forehead and softly whispered in her ear.

"Pleasant dreams, Hannah. You're safe now."

— *Kori Rogers*

## Men

Men are magical and terrible creatures. They captivate you with their easy smiles, warm laughter, and eyes that never seem to reveal as much as you want to know. You run your fingers through their dark hair, feel the gentle scruff of their beards on your cheek, and it is easy to imagine forever. Fools trick themselves into believing in forever, but you know better. You've seen what forever means.

You've never been in a real relationship, but you've known many men. On lonely nights, you bring them home and pretend to be in love for a few hours. After they leave, you lie in your bed and wonder what it would feel like if one of them were to stay. But of course, you'll never let that happen – nothing more to ease the loneliness than cheap one-night stands that leave you feeling cheap yourself. The comfort they provide is only temporary; there is a void that will never be filled. But that's okay, because you know that love is temporary, too. When he is gone, he'll leave a crater big enough to completely swallow you. You may never know what it feels like to be in love, but you'll never have to know what it feels like to lose love, either. Ruin and heartache – it isn't worth it to feel loved until he decides to stop loving you.

After what you saw, you'll never let anyone get close. You saw what happened to your mother. You watched him destroy her, steal her smile. She used to dance around the house, humming as she vacuumed or tended to her garden. She was so content with life and always wore the most radiant smile. She was happy just to love and be loved – until he decided to stop loving her. You saw her radiant smile fade and then disappear altogether. Her crying was the last thing you heard every night before sleep would finally show a bit of mercy and take you away for a while. When your father left with his young slut, you watched your sweet, precious mother fall apart. She was such a bright light in the lives of everyone around her, and he extinguished her.

For nineteen years, she had given him everything. Married at the young age of eighteen, she gave him the best years of her life. He consumed every part of her, and she was happy to let him. She was in love, and she placed all of her faith and trust in that love. A mistake. Because, after nineteen years, he fell out of love. He betrayed her trust. He hid an affair from her for two years. To have someone's trust is something precious and fragile, never to be taken advantage of. But people destroy it like it means nothing. That is why no one will ever have your trust. Your father's infidelity taught you what people really mean when they say forever.

So tonight you stand in front of the mirror and look at yourself for the last time before going out. The guy from last week called earlier, but you didn't call back. He should have known better. You'd told him from the beginning what to expect. When you decide you look presentable, you head out for the night. The club is nothing exciting tonight, of course. It never is. You hate the bad music, the tasteless dancing, the alcohol. But this is the way it has to be. A cute guy offers to buy you a drink, and you start dancing with him. After a couple hours, you're stepping out onto the sidewalk together, headed for his apartment. He wraps his arm around you and calls you baby, and you wonder if it's because he's already forgotten your name. It doesn't matter. You can pretend he's yours for the night, and then you'll never see him again.

When you get to his apartment, things unfold rather predictably. The two of you hadn't done much talking at the club, and had done even less since you'd gotten to his apartment. It's for the best. You usually try to avoid excessive talking anyway. It's easier for everyone, the less you get to know one another. So you're surprised when, at 1:00 a.m. as you lie in his bed staring at the ceiling, he rolls over and asks you what kind of music you like. You're taken aback at first, but you answer, and in just a few minutes you've learned that you share an obsession with the Eagles, "Doolin-Dalton" is your favorite song (though *Long Road Out of Eden* is your favorite album), you share a love for *Lord of the Rings*, and you agree that Paul McCartney is definitely the superior Beatle. You start talking about everything you can think of. You discover that you both have English degrees, were thespians in high school, and don't know how to swim. You're both obsessive about your books and keep them alphabetized by author's last name. You share a mutual love for Edgar Allan Poe, swing music, Greek mythology, horror movies, roller coasters, and Atticus Finch, and a mutual disdain for math, country music, cats, and the color yellow.

He's so easy to talk to. You share that neither of you has ever been in a real relationship. He doesn't ask why, and you don't either. He tells you that his parents divorced when he was only seven years old. You feel sympathy for him; you know what it feels like to see the two people you always looked to for guidance fail in such an important aspect of their lives. You tell him that your parents are divorced as well and that it still weighs on you every single day. You tell him that your father hasn't tried to contact you since you were sixteen. He gives you a sympathetic look and pulls you closer. As if he knows how painful this is for you, he starts telling you all his favorite corny jokes, and you learn that he shares your affinity for puns. He tells you about his childhood pets and about the time his cat got into his fish tank and the massacre that ensued. You talk and laugh and you realize that hours have passed. It's getting late, but the conversation between the two of you is so effortless, you don't want it to end. You talk for hours more until he drifts off to sleep.

You lie there and think about the night you've had. You've never had an experience like this before. You have so much in common, and your personalities seem to complement each other very well. It would be fun to get to know him better. It's so easy to imagine what it would be like to fall in love with him – to share his easy banter, to laugh with him, to hold his hand and playfully kiss his nose, to love him and let him love you back. It could really happen. You wonder if it might be worth a try.

You roll over away from him and try to clear your mind. You notice a book lying on the floor. *The Great Gatsby*. One of your favorites. You think how sometimes you feel like Daisy – the one who turns her back on love. Or maybe you'll be more like Myrtle – the one who lets it kill her. Silent tears slip from your eyes. You consider finding its proper place on the shelf and putting it away for him, but you decide against it. He can put it away when he wakes up. You'll be long gone by then.

— Brianna Watson

## Little Girl

Sophie is pounding on the drums. Her parents are softly, slow dancing across the kitchen floor, their favorite jazz band playing on the radio. Sophie stops, stares at her parents, and clearly sees pure love showing on their faces. The candles her parents lit for dinner lean gently in the breeze. Sophie's mother likes to leave the windows open some while they have dinner.

She pictures her prince, Bentley, rescuing her, taking her out to a jazz club to celebrate their finding each other. People bump into them from all directions, but they are too lost in each other to care. As the music plays on, suddenly something sparks:

*I wonder if he can feel it too?* thinks Sophie, mindlessly dreaming.

Then there is a flash of light and the room gets really bright and hot.

Sophie breaks eye contact from her prince long enough to realize that the place is on fire. She reaches for her his hand, but clutches only air.

She starts screaming, "Bentley! Bentley!" She spots him flailing in the crowd, trying to get to her; the fire is growing higher and hotter. When he finally reaches her, Sophie holds on to him for dear life. He struggles to unlock the nearest window. It's no use. He hoists a chair and Sophie watches in amazement as glass breaks into a million sparkling pieces.

The fire roars towards the window and Bentley grabs his princess' hand and says, "Baby, we got to jump."

Sophie looks at Bentley, bewildered. They are on the twenty-seventh floor.

"On the count of three" he gasps, "ready-- one, two, and three--" Sophie closes her eyes and jumps; falling, she opens them and sees her prince, still at the window. As he is engulfed in flames, he cries out, "I'm afraid of heights!"

Sophie screams--loud and long.

"Honey, Honey! Wake up."

"Mom?" says Sophie, not understanding what her mother was doing on her date.

"Honey, you were having a nightmare," says her mom, moving closer.

"Oh, Mom!" Sophie cries on her mom's shoulder.

"Honey, what happened?"

"Mom, I never want to grow up," Sophia says, hugging her mother tight.

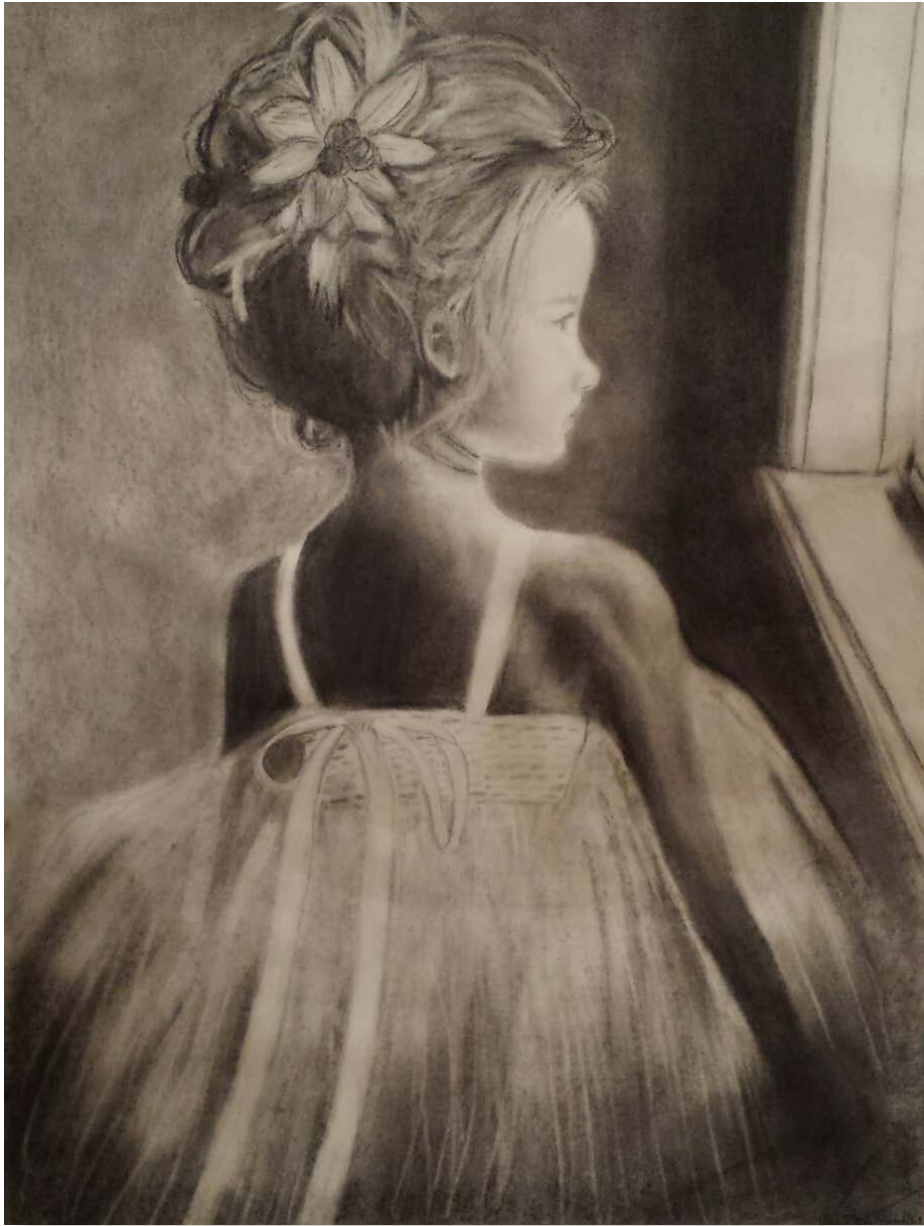
Her mom laughs and replies, "I hope you stay my baby forever."

Sophie suddenly says, "If I find my prince and he takes me to a fancy jazz club with twenty-seven floors, you can ground me for life."

Eventually she drifts back to sleep and her mother holds her, knowing that her little girl

wouldn't be little much longer and wishing there were some way to make this moment last a long, long time.

— *Ashley Francis*



**Untitled** - Ann Marie Hendley



## The Gamble

“Alright, stop — stop, that’s enough.” The well-dressed man in front of me extended one hand with his fingers outward, the other pulling a Marlboro cigarette out of the pack tucked inside his inner suit pocket, his facial features vague as I tried to come back to my senses—but the blood that spilt down and through my scraggly beard, along with the constant throbbing in an eye I could barely see out of, was too loud for me to pay further attention. Suddenly, I was blinded by the lone, fluorescent light that shined above me, and it was extremely easy to imagine the petite man trying to scold the bruiser for having handled me so rough—however, it was also brutally easy to imagine the bruiser returning to fracture my lower jaw, so I choked back a laugh and let Arnold work on his crossword. The light was beginning to hurt my eye, so I dipped my head downward, but even such a gentle motion only served to magnify the aching in my body. I turned my head away and gritted my teeth as I heard the wailing screech of metal scuttling across concrete flooring in front of me, the sharply dressed man seating himself before sifting through a leather wallet I identified. The man raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth as if he were hoping to see something extraordinary in my wallet, and then furrowed his eyebrows and leaned to, with his thumb under his chin and his index finger over his lips, before he curled the rest of his hand into a fist and looked to me.

“So, a Mr. Devon Andrews, age 29, brown hair with a touch of grey, blue eyes, walks into the Rising Sun central casino with no apparent profession, no credit or debit cards to default on, with only— twenty-one dollars to his name, and single-handedly, mind you, manages to clear through slots, roulette, and the house favorite, black jack, to accrue a winnings of two-and-a-half million dollars, just to say it was his lucky —day.

“Well, Mr. Andrews, I happen to be employed under a particular Byron Min, perhaps you are aware of him? He is the man you managed to rob out of two-and-a-half million dollars, and I can promise he’s dying to put his hands on you, and I’m willing to bet you are eager to gamble for your life--The blind is what you stole, see? It’s simp—”...

I remember falling asleep to her gentle embrace, her long legs and her vermilion lips — I grinned absently, feeling the sheets of long, jet black hair between my fingers, her skin surprisingly cool, but this didn’t bother me — for after all, these were mere comforter thoughts, my love having vanished away into the day. I relished in what thought I could while I stared at the ceiling, and then proceeded to the bathroom to wash my face. This may be the only time, or perhaps the best time to consolidate myself — I peered up at the mirror, my hands taut on the bathroom vanity as water trickled down my neck. I raised a hand and felt the damp hair bend against my fingers as they ran across to my chin, before coming to a

grip and a gentle twist, a slight smirk forming on my lips as I noticed something out of place — the slight impressions of red lipstick in the mirror corner as I opened the medicine cabinet, following to partition the daily dose of multi-vitamins. Decrepit wasn't such a bad look for tonight, and I wasn't here to impress—I was here to win against the House of the Rising Sun.

There was no smirk, but a scream as the lit cigarette was pressed into my right cheekbone, the falling embers catching on my face, compounding with the searing of muscle jolting me awake, followed by three light slaps from the suited man before he sat back down.

"It's really quite rude to fall asleep while conversing with such a host, wouldn't you say? Such behavior is unacceptable," He started to pace his knee up and down before narrowing his eyes. "Now, now, look at you, you're so tense! Relax, you are among friends--and friends tell one another their secrets right?" He leaned in close with an elbow on his knee, slightly turning his head as he looked down before grinning as he started to stare at me, his half-shaven-half-pixie haircut hanging over his forehead. "Let me divulge a little hint for both our sakes, alright?" He lit another cigarette after flicking the spent one to the floor. "You're going to love this one," he said, before taking a sharp hit and blowing the thick, irritating smoke into my nose and eyes.

"You see, in order for you to progress in this game of life, you have to, just like me, divulge secrets, secrets that I want to know." I started to drift off, my eyes wandering behind the man — all I cared about were what tools were behind the man, not what he was talking about. It never occurred to me that torture could be this easy to conduct, but I can now understand that any foul deed can be justified, sanctified, and made popular if you eliminate what makes the victim human — however, this was not the case with this man, for he seemed to actually enjoy what he does.

This would only be the beginning, I would find, as the crisp, grey room suddenly began swimming in red and purple, with white, hazy dots racing across my vision as I looked down at the sudden surge of pain running up my left leg, the bland concrete floor splattered red as the sudden realization hit me: *I'm going to die in a hole, and nobody will know or even care enough to give a damn.* I threw my head back absently as I writhed and screamed, my hands bound behind me, my cheeks burning with tears I could not resist shedding. I began to hang limply on my side, unable to coordinate myself as my brain was unable to process the situation. I felt a hand grasp my neck, and then lift with a thumb under my chin until I faced my interrogator eye to eye.

He shook his head slowly before he started to grin, "You know, you're a righteous asshole for making it so hard for me to like you, you know that? But I can't help but do so, and now that I've got your attention, I'm willing to divulge another bit of information, a secret, mind

you, that I would bet-again with the gambling, that I would bet you're the type of guy that can appreciate the innate value of things such as paperclips and dumbbells, while I myself value wisdom teeth and fingernails; you see, all of these serve a function and aren't considered valuable until they start to disappear, but I have the creeping suspicion that you're able to sympathize with me beforehand—So, now that we're on the same page, let's discuss digits." He sat back down and propped his elbows on his knees, lacing his fingers together while the bruiser in the corner stopped working on his crossword puzzle to watch.

"You owe two-and-a-half million big ones, alright, and you have two-hundred and six bones, thirty-two teeth, around 4.9 liters of blood left, and twenty--one dollars to show for it. Now, assuming we break your bones in two places, remove your canines, molars, incisors and what have you, auction off your organs and only shoot out your kneecaps, not only would that fail to carve a fraction of what you owe, but that would personally set me back a few bullets with the boss man," he sat upright and got out of his chair, placing one hand on the top handle before walking behind it and placing his other hand parallel.

"Now--I know what you're thinking; is it not essential to my livelihood that I administer my patrons smaller doses, like the 9mm or the .22, in order to keep them alive and well for longer, so that I might extract the very information the boss man wants in the first place? See? We're starting to form that psychic-mute bond that's really dysfunctional because maybe I want to talk about my problems when all you do is bitch and complain — but I digress, most men work for money, I'm here for the practice. Boss man wants to use a bigger gun to intimidate dead men, that's fine as long as I get my share."

He started to back away, leaning forward with his arms taut, alternatively and periodically throwing punches faster like a desperate, Italian boxer would in a meat locker, grinning like a hellion as his suit shined in the light, "I can tell that me and you — are gonna tear shit up!" He turned away quickly and threw his arms into the air triumphantly as his suit tails mimicked him, and walked outside of the room. I turned my head in anticipation, believing I was to be blinded by the hallway lights, but to my surprise, and disappointment, only a heavy, swift blow to the side of my face awaited me before I fell backwards to the floor, out cold.

It was a bitter February morning in 1983, and the wind was ushering the frost into my very bones. It's too damn early for this shit. I shuffled out of place under a tin roof extending from the nearby apartment complex and pushed my hands deeper into my pockets, the long-sleeve I had happened to grab barely protecting me against the elements. I had moved into my apartment on the first, but my belongings were scheduled to come two days later to save

on shipping, so all I had was what I had brought with me on the trip down south: two shirts, a pair of pants, two boxer briefs, a pair of wool socks, and my leather-bound journal. Had I known any better, I would've brought a heavy coat and an extra pair of socks, but even then, the dense fog that sifted through the town and the thunderstorms above would've given me a hard time to believe it was only 53°.

Down the street, on the opposite side, I could see a Joey Mugs coffee and pastry shop on the corner, with a headwear store beside it. My stomach was beginning to growl at the thought of a doughnut and coffee while the aching inside refused to quiet, but my neck was bare to the cold and rain, and the headwear store had everything from trucker hats and beanies, to scarves and ear muffs on display. I heard the splashing of water and turned my head, flagging down a truck with a hauling storage unit cruising towards me. It slowed and moved to my side of the curb, but not slow enough — the driver's front tire hit a large puddle and threw it up right at me; my body seized up in anticipation, and I tried to turn away only to have both my front torso and back soaked with cold rainwater. Shit — it's even colder now, and the wind made it worse. I stepped inside and cracked the door instead of greeting the men, and then hurried up to my room on the third story to exchange shirts.

By the time I got back down they had unloaded what little furniture and cardboard boxes I had shipped and apologized before marking off some of the price. I led them to the room, and they began to pile my belongings against a windowed wall overlooking the city. I wished them a happy Mardi Gras, paid the balance and let them be on their way before running my hands through my hair, stepping towards the wall and pulling a weathered photograph and a postcard out of my wallet. On the photograph was my dad, standing in front of the Rising Sun Downtown casino with ten one-hundred dollar bills in his hand — it hadn't been too long after it had opened until my father sought it out. He wasn't much of a celebratory personality, but that day he had won his first victory in what would become a campaign likened to Alexander the Great or Caesar — he at least had a memorable appearance: a bowl cut of brown hair, a thick mustache, wrinkly, tanned skin, and a sort of lanky appearance — his eyes were anything but mediocre though — for when you saw how his cheekbones would raise and his eyebrows furrow when he got finished putting up with you, those eyes would shoot a shot clear through your soul, and you knew you wouldn't have far to run — not that you didn't deserve to be whooped on by then.

My old man was never a bad father though. He'd be the first to lend a hand when something broke or needed to be towed or taken care of. He idolized work, along with helping others, and would do little to maintain himself — always working overtime and staying concentrated on the task at hand whatever it may be. That was his work ethic, and

it was strong; unfortunately, it also began to be applied to other aspects of his life as he got older and was met with gradually decreasing opportunity. I had never seen my father lay a hand on a woman before until the day I saw my mother and father shouting at each other, a generously younger woman who was both embarrassed and near naked standing behind my father, clutching what clothes she hadn't the time to put on, and looking for an escape.

I was eight years old at the time, and never before had I seen my father make my mother cry like that. She was on the floor, holding the side of her face while I, in pajamas, held onto my blanket. The younger woman was gone, and my dad stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him, shaking a few picture frames off the wall. I cried and ran to my mother and wrapped my arms around her neck. I didn't quite understand at the time what it was that gave my mother her broken heart, but I know now that it was my dad.

It had started with drinking—one or two after work at the bar before coming home, then ordering drinks with every meal when we went out, the jack and coke at home, and finally the cases piling on the trash can, until one day my mother had had enough of it. The bars quit serving my father, and the police only pardoned him because they knew he was a good man — they called it a mid-life crisis, and tried to joke about it, but they knew it was wrong. Then he found the casino, a place where he could drink and feel accomplished about his winnings, and things started to look up for once. That is, at least, until he began to lose; with the only thing left for him was wasting away our savings on expensive drinks, rigged games, and loose women—and then he was gone.

Clothing, church, pictures, dinners at the table, shoes, Easter eggs, birthdays, belts, money for presents, rings, keys, and my home — all of these vanished with him one night. Above all this, that casino took the life out of my life, and that's something I cannot forgive. The image of my mother crying faded away as I was hauled off my back and dragged along the cold floor by the nape of my neck, my hands no longer bound to the chair but to each other behind me. My leg wound started to open up again and drip onto the floor as I counted each light fixture passing me by. One, two, three, four, stop — turn, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, door. My memory made extremely clear to me where I was headed; an old textile mill from the twenties converted into a local butcher shop owned by the casino that was rumored to be a front to smuggle weapons and narcotics through the cattle carcasses.

The casino had been smart, bribed the construction operators and the U.S. customs officials to outsource the materials that went unrecorded in construction of a passageway that connected the old textile mill to the casino basement, allowing freedom of movement between the two without watchful eyes from the local P.D. That is, if they weren't also under Min's thumb. A foul smell began to strike me, and the concrete turned to white tile — a

wet-room, the area where cattle could be slaughtered while being easy to clean up. I felt the pressure relieve as my face hit the floor, hearing what sounded like a heavy bundle of metal clunking on a wooden table in front of me before the bruiser unfurled the impressive array of tools from the roll sleeve they had been carted in. They were the tools from the room before from what I could see — it suddenly dawned on me that I couldn't move except for my face and neck, and even then it was through sluggish, lousy contortions as I tried to force my body to respond. Nothing. I barely managed to lift my head high enough before I began to hear clacking on the tile behind me, turning my head so I could peer up and see the pair of shoes that passed in front of me belonging to a familiar face, and a sinister smile.

— *David Wade*

## In The Closet

My name is Lucas Brockton. I'm a resident of New York City, in what was once known as the United States of America. I decided to keep a journal, under the advisement of my life partner. He thinks it will be good for my sanity. I was skeptical at first, but, as always, his advice has proven sound. I'm also writing for posterity, seeing as I have no idea how much longer I or my partner will be alive. It's only a matter of time before they discover who we are.

It's getting harder and harder to stay inconspicuous. Everyone is scrutinized, measured, labeled, and analyzed, and soon I fear that we will be found. All it would take is one random police inspection for us to be arrested, imprisoned, and ultimately executed. Maybe when we are gone someone will find this journal and learn the truth. The real truth. Not the media's, and certainly not the government's. All accessible information is so twisted, skewed, and intentionally censored that it is near impossible to discern what is fabrication and what is not. Please believe me. I was there. I watched it happen.

The Christian Brotherhood grew out of the Religious Right political movement in the mid 2010's. Centered around the idea of "reclaiming America for Christ," the Religious Right focused on regulating America according to the Bible and Old Testament law. The movement spread like wildfire in the Southern states, commonly known then as the "Bible Belt." These people believed in biblical literalism and the supremacy of the Bible over man-made government. Mainstream politics rejected them one too many times, and over time the political movement evolved into a violent paramilitary organization. Rebranding themselves as "The Christian Brotherhood," these fanatics brought the country to its knees.

It has been ten years since the Revolution, ten years since the first soldiers marched through our streets, ten years since all logic and sanity disappeared from the land. I remember when the takeover was officially announced. For three days, amidst the mortar shells and gunfire, we waited. We'd done the best we possibly could to protect ourselves; windows were barred, sandbags placed in front of doors along with everything in our home that could potentially stop a bullet or a piece of shrapnel. My partner sat in front of our television for hours at a time, waiting for the emergency broadcast channel to announce the inevitable surrender of the resistance. When the announcement finally came, we breathed a sigh of relief. It was only after the end of the war that we saw the real terror just beginning.

Now, "secular humanists" are declared enemies of the state. Liberals, homosexuals, and evolutionary scientists are imprisoned and executed. All religions except for Evangelical Christianity are outlawed, under pain of death. At the end of the war, most of the governmental infrastructure was left intact. The surveillance capabilities of former entities such as the National Security Administration are now in the hands of the Brotherhood. They are using these new capabilities effectively, and are constantly searching for dissidents to purge. My partner and I live under the constant threat of discovery and execution.

Before the war, I was a high school science teacher. I taught at Public School 111, right on the border between the Brooklyn and Manhattan boroughs. My partner, John, owned a small

corner bistro a few blocks away. I would always go over there during my lunch breaks for a monte cristo and coffee. I remember the first time I saw John. He was watering the orange tiger lilies that he kept next to the coffee bar. His eyes were like blue glaciers. Forgive the poetic language, but those frozen eyes seemed to bore a hole straight into my soul. I'm not a hopeless romantic, and I don't generally believe in love at first sight, but him....there was something different. I felt like I'd known him for a million years, despite not ever saying more than four words to the man. I like to reminisce about things like that from time to time. It's become an escape for me from all the fear and paranoia. People were not meant to live this way.

Today is Sunday. That means everyone, without exception, had to be in church. I remember when religious services used to be voluntary...not so much anymore. Usually, I can deal with it. You get to the "worship" building, you sit for an hour and a half while some fat, grey-haired man preaches about the sins of the world, how blessed America is to finally have a righteous society that doesn't tolerate sin, how the rest of the world besides America and Israel is going straight to Hell, so on and so forth. It's normally not so bad, and I can usually just turn up the music in my head for the duration of the service and zone out for a while.

Today was different. Men stood at the back of the building wearing body armor, with weapons at the low-ready position. The sermon today was about how people may say and do one thing, but believe another. The man preaching in the pulpit reminded us that "It is our patriotic and spiritual duty to report suspicious persons and suspected subversive activity." I wish alcohol was still legal. I could really use a strong drink right about now.

The last couple of days have been pretty quiet, if tense. That last church service really messed with my head. Do they know something that we don't? I've never heard someone preach that subject before. Usually it's all the same sort of Fundamentalist drivel over and over again; Jesus is coming soon, God's judgement on the world, blah blah blah. In this remarkably conservative society, any sort of miniscule change is a cause for alarm. I can't help but wonder what kind of point he was trying to make. I have an incredibly bad feeling about the future.

I heard rumors at work today. Apparently, there is a new government program unleashing a force of informers on the populace. These people will wear civilian clothing, but carry government issued sidearms. The new force will have the right to arrest and execute any citizen at any time suspected of "treasonous" or "subversive" activity. I'm not exactly sure I believe the rumor. There's still a process for that sort of thing; even immediately after the Revolution, appearances of relatively fair trials and humane treatment were still minimally kept up. I can't believe that they would resort to gunning people down in the street.

I talked to John about my concerns with the rumors. He doesn't seem to think that it's very plausible either. I wish I had his confidence, or his surety. He's a much stronger person than I could ever hope to be. I don't know what I would do without him. Nothing ever seems to phase the guy. You could tell him the world was ending tomorrow, and he'd just shrug and whistle a jaunty tune while strolling down the sidewalk. Sometimes I wonder if that's a by-product of the constant paranoia we have been subjected to over the years, a sort of system



overload if you will. You stay terrified for so long, the part of you that actually responds to fear becomes completely numb. I really hope he hasn't snapped like that. He's supposed to be the sane one. I can't help but worry. That sort of complacency is dangerous in this day and age. We have both seen what happens to people like us when they are caught.

We were wrong. We were so very, horribly, abysmally wrong. The rumors were true, and today I saw the devil. John and I were walking down the street, on our way to the store to pick up some provisions for the week. As we walked, there came a large, burly man powering his way through the crowd. He was dressed in normal civilian clothing, albeit a somewhat nicer quality than the rest of us were used to. He walked with a purpose, like a hunter who had just marked his prey and was relentlessly stalking it. He came up behind a small woman, grabbed her by the back of her neck, and forced her to her knees. I've seen public executions before (we are actually forced to watch them occasionally), and most of the time the victims are surprisingly accepting of their fate. They don't struggle, they don't wail, most of the time they don't even cry. They are like zombies up on the execution dais; sheep led to slaughter that are completely resigned to the inevitable. Not this woman. I've never heard a human being make sounds like that before. She bleated and struggled against her attacker like an injured animal, tears cascading down her face leaving solid red lines of agony. The man's grip was too strong. There was nothing she could do.

In a loud voice, the man proclaimed that "This woman has been found guilty of manipulating her husband with sex." He shouted that this was tantamount to witchcraft, and that she was possessed with the evil spirit of Jezebel. He then pulled a very large, very wicked looking pistol from his waistband. As she screamed and pleaded and cried, he pointed the weapon at the back of her head, and said only "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Then he shot her. Blood, bone, and brain matter went everywhere, covering the executioner's stark white shirt with bright red flecks. The woman pitched forward violently, her eyes went completely blank, and she fell to the ground. Blood pooled around what was left of her head and flowed into the street. There came a wheezing noise out of her mouth as her dying lungs expelled what little air they had left in them. Her murderer stared at the body for a moment, faced the crowd, and simply said "Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." He then turned his back and walked away, leaving her corpse lying where it fell.

I looked over at John, and his face was as white as a bedsheet. I think that's what terrified me the most. My partner's usual passivity was replaced by complete and utter terror. I've never seen him look like that before, and I know him well enough to know that if he is scared, then I damn sure better be. It's surprising, but I am actually sort of numb. I'm not sure if I'm still in shock or what, but I don't have any words for what I'm feeling right now. Being rendered speechless is not something that happens to me. Ever.

It's been two weeks since we watched that woman die, and I still can't get it out of my head. Not the death part, necessarily, even though it was a new kind of brutality. By now all of us have seen someone executed at least once. I'm more concerned with how they knew what she had done. Did her husband report her? That's a new kind of low, reporting your own

wife to the authorities for playing the bedroom card in an attempt to win some petty domestic squabble. I can't imagine the kind of person that would do that to someone that they supposedly loved. Were the powers that be able to see and hear what went on in their home? I feel like I must either dismiss that notion, or count myself very lucky. John and I aren't publicly a couple, we even have separate bedrooms in our house and are officially documented as "roommates." If they really knew what went on in our bedrooms during the quiet hours of the night, we would long since have been caught and strung up from the nearest streetlight. They call us "unnatural" and "abomination." Perhaps we have just been very fortunate, and this new force of informers and executioners are more well equipped and resourceful than we imagined. We have to be even more vigilant now. He isn't going to like it, but I don't think I'll be paying any nighttime visits to John's room anytime soon.

I really hate my job. I miss being a science teacher. At least then I got to interact with intelligent people, and foster creativity and critical thinking in the minds of a new generation. Now, I work at a data center. The government created special data collection agencies whose job it is to count and categorize all the casualties suffered during the Revolution and up to the present day. I have no idea why they thought this was necessary, from what I understand Jesus never had a body count, but I guess they feel they need to have an accurate account of how much suffering they have caused over the years. I spend my workdays surrounded by simple minded fools who only know how to eat, sleep, pray, and kowtow to God and the government. In other words, perfect citizens. We collate and catalog every single reported Revolution-related death from the past ten years. It's the most depressing job on the planet, but it pays. That's really all anyone can do nowadays; can't change the world, have to learn how to get by in it.

What's worse, I think we may have an informer working with us now. We recently received several new hires, and one of them, named Aaron, is suspiciously over-friendly. The staff normally works in a very deliberate, plodding way. Each person doesn't talk much and minds his or her own business. This guy, though. He didn't waste any time chatting people up, asking them who they were, where they lived, personal details about their lives that really were not anyone's business but their own. I always try to give people the benefit of the doubt, after all, all of us are trapped in a situation not of our own making, but something about that man struck me as being off. I should probably mention this to John, and see what he thinks. I can always rely on his judgement.

John doesn't think I have anything to worry about. He says that maybe Aaron's unique personality directs him to immediately try to assimilate into the new environment he's been put. I love that about John. He's always looking for the best possible alternative to the worst possible outcome. He never has a negative thing to say about anyone until he gets to really know them. The world needs more people like him. Even though his take on the situation is somewhat comforting, I can't help but retain some of my suspicions. He didn't see the sly smiles, or the chummy arm grabbing. Aaron looked less warm and friendly and more flirtatious than anything else, like a schoolgirl advancing on her secret crush. He was this way with absolutely everyone he interacted with. Men who act like that with other men in public are

usually taken away and never seen again. He wouldn't do this unless he was under some sort of protection and had an ulterior motive. John thinks I'm being overly paranoid, but I don't think there's anything wrong with constant vigilance, especially considering the events of the last few weeks. Something is definitely up.

Something very strange happened today. I'm honestly extremely frightened now. I was at work, around close to lunchtime. As I was walking down the hallway toward the copy room, Aaron passed by me. I've had the good fortune so far not to have to interact with him, but as we passed each other, he greeted me with a smile and said, "Hello, Lucas." Normally, I would have just been polite and smiled back, maybe given him a slight wave of my hand. The way he said it stopped me, mid-step. It reminded me of those old James Bond spy movies. Often times, the villain would cordially greet the spy with a patronizing, "Hello, Mr. Bond." That's exactly what Aaron sounded like. A Bond villain. Secondly, as I continue to think back on it, how the hell did he know my name? We've never spoken before, or had any sort of interaction outside of that singular instance in the hallway. I stopped and turned as he continued walking past. He looked back at me and flashed that plastic smile of his. That look made my heart drop straight into my stomach. He knows something. I'm sure of it.

I got home today and John wasn't there. He didn't leave a note for the first time in years. I really need to talk to him about the situation at work. I think we need to leave town for awhile. All of our papers are in order, and neither of us have used any of our vacation days yet. No one would blink if we decided to leave for a few days. The first government check-point is more than fifty miles outside of town, so the officers should be lazier in checking our papers. Even if we're being watched or put into a database by the New York Metro, odds are, that far out of town, they won't bother to cross check anything with the New York departments. I need to start packing and getting provisions together.

Am I overreacting? Have I finally completely lost my mind? I can't take this constant pressure. I feel like I've got a million eyes upon me, but I can't see any of them. It seems like all I'm basing this kind of action on is a weird new guy at work with a malevolent smile who cryptically says my name. I wish John were home, he would be able to sit down and work this out with me. I still have no idea where he might be. I suppose all I can do is wait. I hope he returns soon, I'm really starting to worry. The entire city is under an eight o'clock curfew, and it's nearly six thirty now. If he's caught out after eight, the authorities will haul him in and he'll be severely punished. I think they give you thirty or forty lashes for breaking curfew, and they'll make our entire neighborhood watch the beating. I can't bear to think about them torturing John that way.

Today was the worst day of my entire life. I feel completely dead inside. I know what is coming to me next, and in all honesty I feel like I don't even care. My instinct for survival has been stretched to its breaking point. There's nothing left for me in this life. I know they'll be here soon. John did not come home last night. I found out what happened. At three this afternoon, armed police officers and government agents came to our neighborhood. They began to bang on doors, announcing their presence, and forced everyone to come out of their

homes. They rounded us up into the neighborhood square, and herded us like cattle into the chapel. On the center of the stage, there were six metal stakes set up. We then knew what we were about to witness. The armed men shut and bolted the doors behind us, and stood ready to shoot anyone who attempted to leave.

They brought out the victims to the dais. I saw John among them. He was beaten black and blue. One of his eyes was swollen shut, and he walked with a slight limp. He had obviously been tortured. I did the best I could to keep from bursting into tears. Had I cried, I would've immediately been taken in as a sympathizer. As bad as he was, he wasn't even close to the worst looking one up there. One woman had been scalped. Wispy locks of her hair barely hung from her head by torn skin. Her eyes were giant, red, and puffy. There was blood covering her dress. I recognized the look of her. She'd been arrested for fornication. They scalp fornicators to further increase their humiliation. One man I also recognized as a common thief. His hands had been severed at the wrists. Several guards marched the victims to the stakes and secured them with iron chains. I recognized the guard escorting John. It was Aaron. He looked completely different clad in a black jumpsuit with the Cross patch on the sleeve. Instead of a homely looking office worker, he looked imposing and deadly. I was right about him. I was right about everything. They'd been watching us.

When the victims were secured to their places, an official in full clerical regalia came out to the center of the stage. He loudly proclaimed that the victims on the platform were traitors, liars, sinners, and abominations, and that according to the word of God, they must be destroyed. I remember every word of that speech. "God does not tolerate sin. This society does not tolerate sin. The Scriptures say that if your right eye offends you, pluck it out, for it is better for you to lose an eye than to burn in Hell for all eternity. These people are that eye. They must be purged, else the wrath of the Lord Almighty spill out onto all of our heads. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Amen." I watched the platform open up beneath the victims' feet. Flames exploded from under them. The screams. Merciful god, the screams. I can't get them out of my head. I watched them roast my partner alive. Sweet, beautiful, passive John, who never hurt anyone or anything, who watered tiger lilies on the coffee bar, who committed no crime except loving me was burned to agonizing death in front of my very eyes.

This will be the last journal entry that I make. I can hear them rummaging around downstairs. I'm writing this while hiding in the bedroom closet. I knew they would come for me after they'd made an example out of John and the others. They knew I'd be in that crowd, and they wanted me to watch him die. I know that they're just going to open the door and find me sooner or later. My concern for my own life died when John did. Now all I care about is finishing this. It's strange, I have a certain calmness about me. I can finally stop hiding. They're going to kill me, but I'm going to die honestly. I don't believe in their definition of heaven. I refuse to believe that I won't see John again. He was too perfect for this world, he'll definitely be waiting for me in the next one. I hope that someone, someday finds this journal and draws something from it. Maybe someone will see and understand that we're not evil. We're people just like everyone else; people with hopes, dreams, fears, and consciences. I will never under-

stand why they hate us so much. Why doesn't their god have any room for us? I suppose it doesn't matter anymore. It's come to this. I'm literally hiding from the Christian authorities in my bedroom closet. I can't help but smile when I think about how poignant that fact really is.

— *Ryan Sharpe*



**Untitled** - Stephen Graham

## The Necklace

The most memorable Christmas for Grandma Sue was her first one without Margie, her mother, her best friend. Who would solve her problems; who would tell her what to do? Grandma Sue found a picture of Margie that she loved a lot. In the picture you could see Margie's silver hair as it shone through the kitchen window; you could almost hear her pink slippers sliding across the tile floor and imagine her tiny hand grabbing that ever-present piece of gum out of her mouth, showing off. The primrose patterned dress her mother was wearing reminded Grandma Sue of the times she stayed up late just to chat, the many nights she would rest her head on Margie's shoulder and fall fast asleep.

Grandma's Sue daughter, Cindy, and Margie LaDonna finally had the perfect gift to give their mom, and it came straight from the heart. They saved up for months, bought a gold necklace and had it engraved: Margie's face on the front and words on the back that said, "With you always."

Now all that was left was to count the long days until Christmas. When it finally came, and they presented Grandma Sue with her gift, the last gift of the evening, she opened it, and upon seeing the little black box, began to cry. She held the necklace up to the light and then wiped the tears from her eyes and gave everyone a hug and said, "I believe I am the luckiest person, and that I got the best present today." That was many years ago, and she wears her necklace all the time so that Margie, her mother, her best friend, is always with her.

— *Ashley Francis*

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