



# Wiregrass

2014 LITERARY AND ARTS JOURNAL



Cover art: **Linear Lovers** - Lexus Lewis

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East Georgia State College, University System of Georgia, Swainsboro, Georgia 30401  
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# Wiregrass 2014 Literary and Arts Journal

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

Editors: Benjamin Mimbs, Amber McNure, and Halei Lamb

Faculty Advisor: S. D. Lavender

Thanks to Alan Brasher, Val Czerny, Savannah Parker and Desmal Purcell



**Rusted** - Tabithia Ross

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## Where I'm From

I am from blue collared Toombs County folks,  
shelled peas, and a farmer's playground.  
I am from the cookie-cutter home and its common neighborhood,  
(safe, freckle-inducing warmth)  
From the roots of the whispering pines,  
anchored, grounded.

I am from Sunday Christians,  
Holiness Baptists, and the dusty pews of an undersized congregation,  
From "Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul,"  
Hymns forever in my spirit and a preacher I'll never forget.

I am from southern hospitality,  
Grandfather's banana pudding I miss at Christmas time,  
From the times Pa would tuck me in bed after a warm bath,  
the callused hands that built our family's foundation.  
I am from a life wrapped around love and the anticipation of a  
brighter, prosperous future.

— *Hayley Jackson*

## A Glass Half-Empty in a House of Blue

On a curvy, dusty dirt road in the middle of a small town was an old blue house discreetly hidden from view of the highway by a lush, green cornfield. During summer, the house was filled with the humid heat only found in the south or in the breath of David Hasselhoff if he were to yawn near an open flame. I watched, ensconced on the kitchen counter, which was now marked with slits from chopping vegetables, as the winter began to approach the patiently awaiting house. The sound of pecans soon began to echo off the tin roof outside as they plummeted to the ground from the tall, innumbrating trees that towered over the house. The mornings were suffused with the scent of coffee and the sound of murmuring that slipped through the cracks in the walls into the ears of the slumbering. The laundry room, covered only by a large, white towel in lieu of a door, let out a draft of cold air and freshly washed linen. Its barely luminescent bulb, accompanied only by a rusting chain switch hanging from it, emitted a sad glow about the hallway. The cracking of static from the radio was heard not long after sunrise, and everybody began their day. Where they went beyond this house, I knew not, still *in situ* on the cold kitchen counter.

The cold nights of winter soon became warm, pleasant summer days. Mornings were now filled with the evocative aroma of maple syrup and the sizzle of pancake batter pouring delicately into a dark, cast-iron skillet. The mornings glistened like an emerald as the dark, moist lawn refracted light through the bulbous drops of dew that condensed on the sharp blades of grass. Nights were vibrantly embellished by the effulgence of fireflies and the luminescence of a white, celestial moon in the clear, open, starry-night sky. Van Gogh himself would have used his own masterpiece as a raft to row across the shores of the Atlantic just to catch a glimpse of one of these bespangling nights. These were the nights you wished you could stretch out forever, and then wrap yourself up in as you slumbered away what seemed to be the rest of your life; but it was never the rest of your life; it was merely a rest.

On that asperous counter, I would watch time go by, day by day. Once, I actually saw time pass right by me, right through the kitchen door. I asked him where he had been all of these years, to which he replied, "Looking for my watch." There were always spectacles to watch from this view. I once watched Desiree drown herself in nostalgia one afternoon after Joey and Dawson split up for the fifth time. Everybody says she just fell in over her head and drowned, but I know she really jumped in head first. I also saw the house become more and more desolate. The halls were no longer dispersed with the redolence of linen, just as the sound of the old wooden floor that creaked whenever it was walked upon slowly waned. The coffee pot was no longer full every morning at daybreak; it was now empty, just like me.

One day, there were no lights flickering, no laughter, no linen, no creaking, not even the faint mutterings that sometimes escaped through the cracks in the walls. The house was empty. The school bus still roared by every day, shaking the windows as the vociferations of children echoed throughout the house. The rain still pattered against the dusty windows, and the smell of moist, loamy soil was still present on rainy days, but there were no tomatoes growing on the bush like crimson ornaments in the garden. Through this old, fading, untenanted house with its putrescent wooden floors and crepitating walls, I was all that remained: an empty glass once replete with the essence of fulfillment that nobody ever bothered to drink.

— *Tyler Hooks*

## Unfortunate

A lukewarm existence  
And a fiery passion  
Entailing waves of mass, molten mania  
With cool undertones of sympathy  
And an icy discontent with cold, creeping death,  
But still a lukewarm existence--  
How unfortunate

— *Troy Howe*



## Muse

Tell me — are they lies, the things they speak of?

I was blinded by love — a fool by far.

Does she know you better than I, my love?

I hear you have been in the cookie jar.

Was it her baby blues or golden hair?

Ask not why I walk with my head so low.

This woman in the mirror can't compare.

You, of everyone, should be the first to know.

I'm running in circles, screaming out loud.

Should I pack my things and never look back?

You deserve it after the things you vowed.

I know what I want — the courage I lack.

Oh, dearest husband, have you heard the news?

No longer am I your weak little muse.

— *Halei Lamb*

## Ode to a Parking Lot

There used to be trees in a forest.  
Now there's just stubble—and remnants.

Lost is the beauty of nature—  
Neither hint, nor even a semblance  
Of the owl, the doe, and her fawn.

Alas!

Nature's peace is

gone.

— *Mike Luzzi*

## The Parking Lot's Reply

That bit of nature touching me  
    (that bears upon my soul)  
Are drops of rain pelting me  
    (in each forlorn pothole).  
    I drink them in  
    In summertime.  
In fall, I catch the leaves.  
    By then, they're dead,  
    and black with grime—  
    The asphalt in me  
    gRiEvEs.

What warms me in the wintertime  
    Are tires with rubber smell.  
In spring, though it's a fairer clime,  
    My pain's too  
    b r o a d  
    t o t e l l —

Phantom roots growing under me  
    Haunt me day and night.  
Blind dreams of green fields over me  
    **Block**  
    paradise  
    from  
    sight.

— *Val Czerny*

## Ropadope

Two square off  
On the glassy screen  
    Held high above the bar.  
They float  
    And sting.  
They bob  
    And weave.  
    They dance a dancer's dance.

They parry haymakers with a quip  
And dodge each roundhouse with a laugh.  
Each hopes to split  
The other's lip  
And seize upon a gaffe.

Below  
Two watch this barroom fight  
Like two hawks circling prey  
    Between the easy rounds of beer  
    Between the easy cheer  
    Because of things they want to hear  
    They caw like carrion crows

Each cheers as his candidate strikes a blow:  
A platitude  
An attitude  
    A promise and a prayer  
The telling phrase  
The learned gaze  
The snowjob  
    And the grand bon mot

The fighters in  
This grudging match  
Have taken off their gloves  
Each one it seems  
Is getting mean  
While caged by a glassy screen

Below the fans  
Begin to stir.  
It's been  
A brutal ballet.  
A beer ---some gin  
They both have skin  
In the game.

Floating in the air above  
In that lofty crystal place  
The fighters move with easy grace  
And each one knows  
What goes.

They will not taste  
The salt of sweat,  
The salt of a bloody lip.  
They will not trip  
On any act,  
Or facts they miss by miles.  
Their practiced smiles  
Remain in place,  
And they do not feel the blows.

The pain is felt  
By the men at the bar:  
The blood they bleed.  
The sweat they sweat,  
The fear that that they can smell.  
    And after the fight,  
The razor cuts  
Will open swollen eyes.

— *Kenneth Homer*



**Larry** - Rebekah Mock

## Blossom's

Hamilton Felton, also known as Hambone, was one of the most interesting men I have ever met. He had been a fisherman when fishing was done from sail boats. He ran rum from Cuba for Al Capone during prohibition. He was a husband and father, but he wasn't very good at it. He had been tarred and feathered once for "being bad."

For years he was what we call today a homeless gentleman. But in his time he was just a bum. We found out that a lot of the old men hung around Blossom's. So we got directions and went to see if he was there.

When Blossom's store opened for business the owner named it after his little daughter, still in diapers. In time, Blossom took over until she also got too old to spend the entire day working in the little grocery store. This was a store in one of the seedier neighborhoods of the seedy city of Key West. The first impression one got of the store was to wonder how long it had been closed, but a closer look revealed that the air conditioner stuck precariously in the side of the cement block structure was, against all odds, still running. Deep rust-red colored stains covered the wall beneath the ancient unit.

Upon entering the store, you were struck by the pungent odor of a building that had been in constant use for many, many years. As you looked around you could see that this store sold everything: food of every kind: potatoes, carrots, bread, Vienna sausage, and cigarettes. Every inch of wall space, including the space behind the cashier, was completely covered with shelves. Every shelf was completely full of boxes, bags, and containers of every color and description. There was nothing fancy about Blossom's, but if you needed something, this was the place to get it. Mostly, what Blossom's sold was beer. A few six packs went out the door and fewer cases. What Blossom's sold was beer by the can. A large stack of little bags graced the counter. Each can of beer was slipped into a little bag. The beer's new owner was free to walk the streets, sipping on a little bag, and the police could make believe they didn't know what was going on. This looked like a place that Hambone would sooner or later come to.

We talked to the cashier for a few minutes. He didn't know Hambone by name. But he admitted that a lot of the old timers came in from time to time for beer. He said that a lot of the time they get a beer in a bag and sit in the yard at the side of the store for a little while. He invited us to check the yard on the side of the store. As you walked out the side door, the first thing you saw was a huge ice cream truck. Not a small van that cruises the neighborhoods, but a big tandem axle, dual wheeled truck that could haul tons of ice cream. From the condition of the truck, its ice cream hauling days had ended a decade or so earlier. Around the truck pecked a dozen or more scrawny chickens, obviously the source of the acrid smell of chicken mixed with chicken shit.

Around the yard were dozens of cages. These also contained chickens, not the simple yard birds around the truck. These chickens were for another purpose. One step into the yard brought an immediate challenge from at least half of these game cocks. Each one of these little warriors was willing to fight to the death with each other if possible. If they couldn't fight with each other, they were willing to fight with any other thing, people included.

Along one side of the store was an old board, one end supported by an old milk crate, the other on a pile of rubble completely overgrown with weeds. The top of the board was shiny from many years of old timers sitting and drinking, away from the prying eyes of the police and condemning public. This little haven for the old timers was only nice if you could drink yourself into a stupor. For me it was like being inside a chicken coop: hens clucking, cocks challenging. Some kind of cooling unit was humming noisily nearby. This was no place for us. We immediately went back into the store, bought a cool Coke and a bag of chips. There was a nice shady spot across the street. We sat down, opened the Coke and chips and began our vigil.

A little more than an hour later we spotted someone who looked familiar. There he was, wearing worn out tennis shoes, one little toe sticking out. His pants were worn, spotted with paint, uniform type pants. His T-shirt was frayed and had not been washed for a very long time. His head was bare to reveal a full head of pure white hair. He was walking quickly, apparently with a purpose. As he approached, we stood up. A look of recognition was immediately apparent. He quickly embraced Marie in a big hug, holding tight. It wasn't long before he went into Blossom's where he bought each of us each a can of beer, each with its own little bag. We sat in the parking lot across the street for a couple of hours, talking about the good old days.

— *Bob Marsh*



## Winter Storm

It is strange to see the panic,  
Watching The South preparing for the snow.  
The winter storm has things a bit frantic.  
It hasn't been this bad in years, you know?

This is actually funny to me.

I am trying to take this serious.

Watching the weather warning on TV,  
I can not help but laugh. What is the fuss?  
But part of me gets it, though--in the back  
Of my mind I can feel the stress building.  
What if the power dies? What if the pipes crack?  
Then the storm comes. The effects are humbling.

I sit in the dark, trying to get warm,  
No longer laughing at this winter storm.

— *Devin Mentz*



Kimberly Page

## Sombrer

I never noticed how bright and shiny coral was. It always looks so different on those documentaries about those fish in Australia that only come around a certain time of year, and if you swam too close to them, they would just swim away before you got your camera out. The current was gelid and swift, especially for a mid-summer's afternoon out on the coast. I felt shivers trail up my legs from my waterlogged feet, and I gave out a low shudder.

"Is it too cold for you?"

I looked over, startled, only to see a young man with sleek, jet-black hair and smoky, blue eyes in bright red, Hawaiian-style shorts. "Just a little," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, just floating about," he replied. And then, looking down past the coral into the abysmal trench directly below us, he said, "It looks pretty dark down there."

"Yeah," I said. "What do you think is down there?"

"Probably gold or a lost civilization," he said. Then he smirked. "Sand and fish. What do you think is down there?"

I looked up at the sky, avoiding the snide remark. It was getting dark. "So, what are you doing out here?" I asked once again.

"Just enjoying this marvelous evening out in the water." I couldn't tell if he was being serious or not. "This water is a soothing curtain which drapes over the coast, hiding its sable, tranquil undercurrent; it's a lucid, abstruse canopy for those that inhabit it. Do you see the reflection of the sun on the surface? Every day, it casts a new pattern – a new chef-d'oeuvre."

I looked over at him. "It's beautiful."

"We're a talk show," he said. "Every bit of irony, surprise, and enigma that encapsulates us – it's so predictable in the end." He floated over on his back. "How have you spent your life?"

I thought for a moment, only to be disconcerted by the cold stream of water that passed by me. "Not all in one place." The coral, which, now shaded by the setting sun, cast a solemn, crimson tint off into the unperturbed waters.

The man, now a mere silhouette, floated gently, almost like an atramentous buoy. "So, this is it?" I asked.

"It would appear so."

I closed my eyes and let out a long, deep breath.

— *Tyler Hooks*



**Berry Nice** - Curtis Clemons

## Termina

“Hey?” I could tell she was getting restless by the tone of her voice. “Hey! Grant!”

“What?” I finally answered in an annoyed tone.

“I’m tired! Can we take a break?” she moaned.

“Liz, we’ve only been walking for twenty minutes since our last break! How is it even possible you are tired?”

“Come on, Grant. Please?” Liz was giving her signature cute face that was honestly hard to resist.

“I see a sign up ahead, less than ten minutes walking distance.” She groaned instantly. “Come on, you’re a big girl aren’t you?” I teased her in a condescending tone.

“Fine, but if my legs give out, you’re carrying me!” I ignored her and kept walking.

We had been traveling together for a few days now. I met her in the forest I had woken up in. However, Liz remembered less than I did. For some reason, I felt compelled to take care of her, so we started traveling together in hopes of finding out answers.

Let me take a moment to clarify. Both Liz and I have lost our memories. Apparently we had both awoken in that forest and only managed to bump into one another. I knew my name, but that was about all I had besides a few flashes of cars and an upside-down building. Liz barely could remember her name.

Liz looked to be about eleven years of age. She wore a pretty white dress and had a sun hat. Her skin was pale and had no imperfections the eye could catch. I, in contrast, was a scruffy, sun-tanned older man. If I had to guess, I’d say I was about the age of thirty.

It took us a day to get out of that forest that ended abruptly at a dusty highway. We’d been walking down it since, in hopes of finding a town, but we hadn’t even seen a single sign. What I was walking towards was my only hope. When we finally arrived, Liz planted herself on a rock as I observed the sign.

“Aeon ahead.” I read aloud.

“What’s that?” Liz asked.

“Seems there is a town on this road after all.” Liz jumped to her feet excitedly.

“Let’s get moving then! I’m tired of all this dust! I want a proper meal, too!” Suddenly she was full of energy.

“Didn’t you want to take a break?”

“Who said that? I’m a big girl remember!” She marched ahead of me as if she had won a hard-fought battle.

I traveled with Liz for a few more hours. By then, she had given up and made me carry her piggyback. However, I finally saw the beginnings of the town in the distance. We arrived in the outer-most border of the city and went into a gas station.

It did not seem odd to me that there were no cars nor any sign of other customers in the station. There was, however, one man behind the register.

“Sir! Sir?” I called, but he didn’t answer, so I went up to the register and asked, “Do you mind telling me where we are? This girl and I seem to have lost our memories. Is there a hospital nearby?”

The man barely stirred. He seemed almost strained to look up at me. I caught his eyes and they looked almost empty of life, like years of hardship and tears had drained them of color. On instinct, I sheltered the girl, asleep on my back, from him and backed up a step.

“Down the street, take a right; it’s the second building to your left.” His words dragged out as almost a groan.

Leaving the station could not have happened quicker. I almost sprinted out of it. His directions led me past several large buildings, where the tips were out of sight. Regardless of the size of the city, it seemed basically lifeless.

There weren’t many people in the street and no cars that I could spot. My sense of unease was growing at every step until I reached my destination. The building looked a bit odd for a hospital.

As I crossed the threshold, Liz stirred, and I let her down off my back. She looked about sleepily and then at me.

“We made it.” She smiled, and I found comfort in it.

I took her hand and led her to the desk at the entrance of the building. There was nobody at the desk, so I dinged the bell a few times. A man who wore semi-casual clothing and bore a wicked grin on his face stepped out from the back and walked to the desk.

“May— I help you?” The man seemed to struggle with his words .

“Yes, my name is Grant and this is Liz. We both seem to have lost our memories and we are just looking for help.” My words came out more desperate than I felt and I shifted

myself awkwardly.

“Help?” The man seemed to be lost in thought for a moment. “Yes, I can get you help. Let me get you into a room.” The man walked off and kept his twisted grin on the entire time.

“Thanks...” I looked at Liz who was shifting about like I did. “He was... strange.”

“That’s putting it nicely. I got the creeps all over me every time I looked at his smile.” Liz put her face in my back as the man returned.

“Follow me to your room.” The man led us up some stairs and down a hallway on the third floor. He stopped at the door marked 333, and then led us inside.

“I’ll have someone check in with you, in a moment-- oh, and welcome to Aeon.” The man left and shut the door behind him.

I sat Liz on the bed and looked about the room. There was no window, no TV, or any medical equipment in the room. It was odd, but it had a hospital bed and a few chairs for guests. Maybe it was just a room for brief examinations.

That’s what I thought. This was just a waiting room and someone would come in and help us sort things out. Then Liz and I waited and waited and waited. After an hour and a half, I was getting annoyed, and Liz was getting restless.

I went to the door and attempted to open it. It didn’t budge. I tried harder and still nothing. Liz was getting scared, seeing me struggle. I attempted to calm her with a smile, to no affect. Then I started kicking the door, and finally it gave way and busted down.

The hallway outside was empty--no medical staff or patients. What was this place? I took Liz by her hand and led her down the hallway. We had to get out. The white hallway, that had no distinguishable characteristics, seemed to stretch on and on. As we walked faster, the hall seemed to get longer, until we were running. I couldn’t find the stairwell and was starting to get panicked.

Liz stopped and shouted, “Grant! Look!” She pointed to the end of the hallway and I could see the stairwell.

Relief poured over me and Liz took me by the hand and started leading me instead. I was wary of the stairs at first, thinking that it might be a repeat of the endless hallway. But with Liz in front, we made it back to the lobby.

As we made our way to the door, the twisted-grinning man stood in front of it.

“Welcome to Aeon. How may I help you?”

“Why are you stopping us?” I shouted, demanding answers.

“Welcome to Aeon. How —” I grabbed Liz’s hand and pushed him out of the way. He didn’t resist, so I busted through the door.

However, instead of the empty street and tall buildings that we had passed to get here, I was greeted by the gas station on the outskirts of town.

“No—Liz, get on my back!” I bent down, and she wordlessly complied. She was no doubt as confused as I was.

I started running down the street. Instead of a right, I took a left onto a different street. However, when I reached the end, I stopped. It was the same gas station.

“How? How!?” I was overcome with fear and started panicking.

Down the street I ran. There had to be a mistake. Was I going in a circle? Instead of turning, I went straight. At the end of that street, I was stopped again.

“Left — Gas station — Straight gas station — ” I was going mad. I had to be crazy! I decided to turn around. “Gas station — Gas station — Gas station!” Liz was crying now.

I went frantically in the gas station. It was the same old man behind the register. This time I shouted at him.

“Where is the exit? How do I leave Aeon?” My tone was furious

The man stirred, looked at me with those lifeless eyes. “Down the street, take a right; second building on your left.”

Liz started crying, “Grant. Grant! I want to leave!”

I ignored her. “No! How do I leave Aeon!?”

The man smiled. “Pray.”

“What?” I started breathing erratically. “What is this place? Where am I?”

The old man’s smile turned into the same twisted grin as the man at the hospital.

“Welcome to Purgatory.”

— *Kyle Smith*

## The Builders

Maintained by the young and ordained by the old,  
The wall was well built and meant freedom from fear.  
They did not dare look past the top of their wall.  
It is said some did and were never the same.

Improved through long years, it now stands on its own —  
No longer approached, but hardly forgotten.  
The wall grew more frightful with weather and age  
And now dwells in their minds as the source of their fear.

The fence went up next as a source of protection.  
They built it with pride, placed ten feet from the wall.  
With the children all safe, they could die with no regrets.  
It was their greatest of gifts to the next generation.

Today they all work on their own private walls,  
No longer content with the work of those passed.  
Alone and all safe from the things still unseen —  
A price they don't know paid for freedom from fear.

— *Jonathan Kauffman*



## Unrequited

Wounded and timorous, hesitant, they met.  
Sparks flew, aroused and enthused, minds were shared.  
    "We're not meant to be, this can't be correct,"  
Doubt whispered, but, too late, hearts were ensnared.

Eye to eye, hand in hand, pure blissfulness.  
Lost, dreams were made, hopeful formulations.  
    Then, ill Reason came across Happiness,  
    Tainting him, death by deliberation.

Made just a phase, forever then faded;  
Red lips sold lies with beautiful language.  
    Fond recollections soured. Now jaded,  
Alone, he remained in the charred wreckage.

Unscratched, unscathed, the actress walked away,  
Unharméd, lover was just a role she played.

— *Zachariah Machado*



Kimberly Page

## Night Stalker

i'd deem myself a nocturnal being.

Seeing...

things in the night

that would bring most eyes out there fright,

like the pureness of your heart, or the past in your eyes.

During the night — in the dark, you have no disguise.

You may give those daywalkers all of your deceit and lies,

but i see the pain & hear your sighs.

i don't need the light to know that you've been burned by a day or two.

i don't need a flash to see that you've made it through things others couldn't even attempt to do.

During these nights i'm here for you,

to listen to your stories without you saying a word,

to be one with your everything, even though that may sound absurd,

but when the night ends & the light begins, i'll be gone again.

leaving you to mend

all the issues you have within,

for i won't be far.

i'll be hidden inside your pain, your shame, your scars.

— *Darrow Fraser*

# Concrete

If  
all at once  
everything you thought  
you knew to be true and real  
was suddenly taken away  
and proven to have  
been nothing but  
a figment  
of your  
imagination,  
What would you do?

If  
all at once  
there was an enlightenment,  
would you find yourself pondering  
is it really real – is this too, the very figment  
of my own very overactive –  
desperate for anything –  
reaching for the stars –  
way of seeing  
unreality?

If  
all at once  
we two become  
intertwined  
into  
one.

If  
all at once,  
would we become like one?

— *Faith Gordy*



**Gateway** - Tabithia Ross

# The Twelfth Annual Emily Pestana-Mason Memorial Poetry Contest



*The judge for this year's contest is **Christina Olson**, author of *Before I Came Home Naked*, a book of poems. Her poetry and nonfiction have appeared in magazines and journals including *The Southern Review*, *Brevity*, *River Styx*, *Gulf Coast*, *Passages North*, *The Normal School*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *The Best Creative Nonfiction, Volume 3*. She is the poetry editor of *Midwestern Gothic* and teaches at Georgia Southern University.*

**FIRST PLACE POEM: "Paper Comes From Trees" by Benjamin Mimbs**

*"The poetic conceit is interesting, fully formed, and surprising. A portrait of a complicated, though loving, relationship between a father and son. The speaker's voice is clear and confident."*

**SECOND PLACE POEM: "My Theme for English B" by Kathiyene McDowell**

*"A list poem whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Each detail about the speaker reveals a complex portrait of a life. It's also a love letter to the town of Portal, and the speaker's husband, all in fewer than two pages."*

**THIRD PLACE POEM: "Linger in my Footsteps" by Dannielle Smith**

*"A nuanced, voice-driven narrative from the point of view of a slave. The dialect and syntax feel authentic, and the poem avoids the easy anger associated with the topic. A clear and compelling voice."*

## Paper Comes From Trees

My father formed me, not out of the dust,  
But carved me out of warm wood. No use of  
Cold, lifeless metal, nor meltable wax.  
I was created by the calloused hands  
That turned hard oak and cypress stumps into  
Works of art, all worthy of kings and queens.  
He would've built the Holy of Holies  
Out of the great cedars of Lebanon,  
If only he had been offered the job.

His arms were as strong as hickory trunks,  
And his palms as rough as mill-cut lumber.  
Sawdust littered his beard, covering him;  
Sharp-sticking splinters pierced into his skin.  
When I was young, I looked upon him as  
A sapling would see a mighty redwood.  
He told me that I was his masterpiece —  
A product that he could put his name on.

With great care he shaped me into a man:  
Cut off my excess and puttied my gaps,  
Smoothed my personality—leveled me.  
He applied a stain of sound character,  
Blended together good and bad features  
Until I was ready for the finish:  
A respect for the builder — For my past;  
A coat that only I could've applied.

The old man still works with wood, I with words;  
But I choose a pencil over a pen.

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SECOND PLACE POEM

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## My Theme for English B

The instructor said,  
    Go home and write  
    a page tonight  
    And let that page come out of you —  
    Then, it will be you.

Is it that easy to write words?  
I am twenty-two, white, born in Atlanta, Georgia.  
I went to Portal High School and then here to the East Georgia College in Swainsboro.  
I am a married woman with two little girls.  
The road from the college leads into Portal.  
I go through a little town called Twin City,  
I keep going, through Portal to a two lane road, the two lane road stops,  
turn right on dirt road, house on right, into my house, lay down, and write this page:  
It's not easy to tell all about me to yourself  
at twenty-two. I'm shy. But I guess I'm what  
I learn and see and hear, Portal, I hear you:  
need you, love you, us too, you, me, talk on this page.  
(I Love you Portal, so) Me — who?



Well, I like to play around with my family.  
I like to learn and soon have a nurse degree.  
I'd like a big Victorian house,  
Or just work to pay for our bills.  
Being a college student with two kids is hard,  
But having a husband makes it easier.  
He makes sure I can do all that I can do,  
Be all that I can, to be me.  
Our kids so sweet are a part of us — me, you.  
I am smart, but yet I still learn brand new fun things  
every day.  
That's education.  
Sometimes learning  
gives me knowledge  
I can use later.  
This is who I am!  
I am a woman.  
I am also a mom — who is a college student.  
I love to be me.

This is my page for English B.

— *Kathlyene McDowell*



**Lediterranean Mandscape** - Lexus Lewis

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THIRD PLACE POEM

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## Linger in My Footsteps

Yes em master no em master.  
Do u need me to wash your feet em master?  
Shall i bow down on my hands and knees em master?  
Everyday language; this is how I speak em master.  
Rugged Life on a plantation stripped from my integrity,  
Not able to run and consume my soul and mind as being free,  
Looked upon as a foreign species or an alien that just vanquished,  
4 heads 6 arms and 9 legs,  
This is how my race is being looked upon.  
We're mules that are being used to do the labor work of the white man and his mistress.  
I is been secluded to this plantation,  
Working the fields sun up till sun Dawn,  
Torn apart from my family,  
Dealing with the propaganda blood, sweat, and tears of my people,  
My people that is that has created their economic prosperity,  
Only to seek and find that my skies are restricted,  
That my growth is an untouchable dream and that my future is inhibited.  
Oh lord please has mercy on me.  
I is got no money, no education or liberal rights to this here horrific society.  
I is a vacant damned left in the wilderness to fight for my own.  
What Have we as a human race deserved to get mistreated like this?  
I'm starting to fall into the abyss,  
Losing hope, losing dreams which my people often envision  
Us one day growing wings like a dove and soaring off into the deep blue sky  
With no limits and bondage to another human being.  
I just don't get it sir, what makes them different from I?  
What makes them feel as though they may be superior than I?  
That they refer to me as a nigger besides the name that I was given at birth?  
The color of our eyes and skin may differ,  
But  
We are all human beings and deserve to be treated equally.

— Danielle Smith

**The Critical Thinking Short Story Contest** was created to honor the creative use of written language, recognizing that creativity in all its many forms is an important part of critical thinking.



*Dr. Armond Boudreaux, an Assistant Professor of English at East Georgia State College, judged the entrants. He earned a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Mississippi and has published fiction, reviews, and literary criticism.*

*"For first place in the Critical Thinking Short Story Contest, I choose Albert Pertalion's 'Don't Cry, John Junior.'*

*The writing is clean and the story both sensitive and emotionally affecting. Though 'Don't Cry' deals with a subject matter that can and often does descend into the cliché (small-town racism), the author avoids telling a hackneyed racism story by spinning a thoughtful tale that at once feels both fresh and familiar."*

*"For second place, I choose Jesse Westendorf's 'The Elevator Incident.' Like 'Don't Cry,' this story deals with material that could easily descend into the cliché—the mildly progressive college student who seems to pride herself on having grown out of her upbringing—and turns that material on its head. In an almost Flannery O'Connor-like twist, the protagonist ends up . . . well, I don't want to spoil the end, now, do I? Let it suffice to say that the author leads readers down a path that feels familiar but turns out to have a dark and revealing end."*

## *Don't Cry, John Junior*

— Albert Pertalion

When the Newmans moved into our neighborhood, they settled in my great-aunt Emma's sprawling old green frame house on the corner of Sabine Street and Huron Avenue. The house no longer belonged to Memmy; she had sold it years before I was born, but everyone still called it Emma Crawford's place.

The Newmans were Old John Newman, who ran a credit clothing store across the street from the train station; Ester Newman, Old John's wife; John Junior, their fat little boy, and their nanny goat they kept tied in their back yard because Old John had to have goat's milk for his health. Old John and Ester had two older sons, but we never saw them; they were married and gone.

When the Newmans moved into Memmy's house, they transferred their letter to our church, Superior Avenue Baptist. It wasn't a letter, not like one you got in the mail, but it was something everyone called a "letter." It meant that they didn't have to be dunked in the baptism tub behind the pulpit. The old people in the church were always talking about Old John still being a Jew, but he joined the Baptist church because it was good for his business. After all the kids heard this, we would go over to the corner of Sabine and Huron when there

wasn't anything else to do on a Saturday and call John Junior a Jew.

"John Junior's a Jew. John Junior's a Jew." Everyone would chant in a silly sing-songy way. John Junior would get mad and say he wasn't a Jew. "I'm a Syrian. That's a lot better than a Jew," he would say.

One day my mother heard of this and called me inside. "Foster McTaggart, I don't want you to call John Junior a Jew. Do you hear?"

"Why, Mother?"

"Do you even know what a Jew is?"

"Uh, not really."

"That's what I thought. Foster (Mother was using her talking to tone of voice. She was a sweet mother, but when she had to make a point, her voice got pretty serious.), a Jew is someone who believes in Judaism, and has the right bloodlines. There's nothing wrong with that, but all you children are calling John Junior a Jew because you think it's something bad. He knows that and it hurts his feelings. Besides, the Newmans aren't Jews; they're Baptists like we are. Now promise me you won't say that any more."

I said nothing.

"Do you hear me, Foster?"

"Goll-lee, Mother."

"Well...?"

"All right. I promise. I guess."

"No guessing."

"Ohhh Kay."

That did it. I couldn't call John Junior a Jew any more. I could never intentionally break a promise to my Mother. The few times I had gone against my word, she just cried, and asked, "Where have I failed?" I could not take my Mother's crying.

"Besides," I thought, "what good is it calling John Junior a Jew if it was just some religious name?"

One day after the Judaism talking to, we were all sitting around on our porch not doing much when Tooty Gibbons walked up and announced that he knew something about John Junior that we didn't know. Tooty was about a year younger than everyone else, so he was always bringing up some secret he knew so he could tell us and be in the group, at least for as long as the secret was new.

"What?" someone asked.

Tooty sort of grinned and enjoyed the moment, then he said, "John Junior doesn't wear regular shorts."

"Whatchewmean?"

"He doesn't wear regular underwear like we do."

Regular underwear was white boxer shorts that we all wore so we could use them for swimming if we forgot our trunks when we went to the gravel pit. I thought only Catholics wore those Jockey shorts.

"How do you know?"

"My brother figured it out. Old John and Ester haven't got any daughters and the only men's underwear they ever have drying on their line are Old John's one-piece union suits. My brother says Old John probably makes John Junior wear the rotten old girl's britches that he can't sell in his store."

Everyone stared at each other and then we tore off to look at the wash behind John Junior's house. Sure enough, there were the large one-piece union suits, some large woman's step-ins, and some smaller girls' step-ins hanging among the sheets and towels of Ester's laundry.

The underwear hanging there was unbelievable, but it must be true. They were hanging there right in front of our eyes.

"I still don't believe it," I said.

"What d'you mean, Foster? You see them hanging right there?" Popsy Lively said. Popsy was the oldest member of the gang and perhaps the leader. The step-ins hanging on the line were all the proof he needed. He began to make plans to get John Junior.

"On the way to school tomorrow, we'll take off his pants and settle it for sure," Popsy said.

The next morning everyone was hiding in Mr. White's garage by 7:15. School started at 8:00 and Popsy had insisted that we should be hidden in plenty of time to catch John Junior when he came by. John Junior walked to school by the alley that ran behind Huron Avenue,

and Mr. White's garage doors opened onto the alley, making it a perfect place for an ambush.

Popsy's mind had hit on the idea at once.

John Junior came by around 7:30, and after the excited, giggling, snickering wait, everyone burst out of the garage and surrounded John Junior before he could run.

"What d'you want?" John Junior asked around the circle.

"Don't be afraid, John Junior," Popsy stepped forward. "We only want to see what kind of underwear you're wearing."

My part of the circle was close to Popsy, so I had a good look at John Junior's face. He turned white as a fish belly when he heard Popsy's words, and the body connected to that face grew rigid as a poker. The circle closed in and knocked John Junior over. Popsy loosened his belt and fly and pulled down the grey poplin pants. John Junior rolled over, hiding his face. He was sobbing. We could hear the wet crying.

Everyone started grabbing for books and running away toward school. In the frenzy of getting away, I ran too, staying with the rest for about fifty yards. Then for some reason I can't remember, I stopped running and walked back to where John Junior was lying in the alley.

He had pulled his pants up, but his face was still hidden, and I could hear sniff-sniffing coming from under his arms where his face was buried.

"Don't cry, John Junior, don't cry. Everything will be all right. Ask your mother to get you some white underwear, then you'll be like everyone else." John Junior turned and looked at me for the longest kind of time.

He got up and headed toward school. He didn't take the short cut through the alley we all used. He walked over to Superior Avenue that took him to school the long way.

# *The Elevator Incident*

— Jesse Westendorf

My name is Anna. I am a sophomore at the University of Miami and am interning at a local law firm. I like dogs, beaches, pizza, and horror movies. My friends back home would describe me as fun-loving, energetic, and sweet. I am from a small town in Alabama and I have a cat named Fuzzy, lol. I am a hopeless romantic searching for love in paradise...

I glance over my paragraph once more to find any grammar mistakes or misspellings. After all, I am going to school to be a lawyer and need my paragraph to reflect my literacy. Ironically, if I was actually as great as I describe myself to be in my profile, I wouldn't still be desperately browsing lonely men on Find-a-Husband.com. Every reply I receive after every message I send sequentially alerts me that the member I choose to email is either not interested, already taken, or a creep who wants a weekend hook up.

My profile picture depicts me in a swim suit at the beach, beside only a sliver of an old friend on the edge of the photo. I don't mention it, but it was taken two years ago, the summer before my first semester of college. Now that I'm on my own, I sometimes have to compromise health for time. Back home, I'm the girl next door, but here, people see me as plus-sized. They never come out and say it, but they tell me with their glares.

Tonight I hear my boss talking discretely in his office with one of his clients. He is a very handsome man: hazel hair, sexy glasses, perfect teeth. Although our relationship is very professional, I sometimes imagine what it would be like to go home with him. It has been forever since I have been romanced, since my long-term boyfriend back home broke up with me. I feel a little antsy sometimes — is there really anything wrong with that?

Today is December 20, 2012, only minutes until "doomsday." After seeing the clock on the corner of my computer monitor, my mind drifts to the weird church near my childhood home. My mom mentioned that the church is doing a midnight prayer circle for the "lost" souls in the world before the Y2K rapture. I, however, am putting in extra free hours for my boss only days before Christmas. Why? I don't know. I guess it beats sleeping alone at my dorm since every normal student can go home to their well-off parents who can actually afford to pay for their kid's gas.

My boss walks out, bags under his eyes. He has been giving many extra hours on a certain case — one that he said could help buy him a new Jag. He was meeting with the defendant, Thomas Juntos, a son of a Cuban immigrant who had been linked to a brutal MS-13 murder somewhere downtown. My dreamy boss, Mr. Laurie, says he believes he is innocent, but I am not sure if he says that because he is paid to or because he truly believes it.

He turns toward me and says, "Come on, Ann, time to go. I need to pick up my son at the airport tomorrow morning. We all could use some rest."



I log out of the dating site and shut the computer down. I glance at Thomas, then at his tattoos and his chiseled muscles. If he wasn't being tried for murder, I just may ask him out. It is just the three of us in the entire building. The firm is closed during holiday break and will not reopen until the second day of January.

We climb into the elevator. Fatigue is apparent in Mr. Laurie, as he is always seen clowning and joking. Thomas, however, looks worried.

"Thirteenth floor to Lingerie," I say in a joking voice, trying to lighten the mood.

No response. We begin to descend.

I hate elevators. The people with you never respond when you try to open up to them; it leads to quite an awkward ride downward. I glance back at Mr. Laurie. He smiles a little then quickly glances at Thomas and then at the floor. I hate elevators.

As we pass the sixth floor, the elevator jerks and the lights flicker. I tense up with my knees bent and my arms out as to catch myself. It resumes normally. I want to make another joke, but I hold my tongue. Instead I look up at the ceiling, trying to find a less awkward view and a more distant thought. I glance at Mr. Laurie with a flirtatious grin. He is intently listening, and mentions that he needs to have someone look at that before January.

I then stare impatiently at the numbers as we go down: 5...4... 3... tw... BANG.

The elevator jams and I blurt out, "What the heck? What just happened?"

The two men appear to want to say the same thing, but instead take turns pressing the first floor button. No response. The horror movies I watched as a kid begin to replay vividly in my mind: This is when the cables snap and we fall to our deaths. I immediately grab the rail along the walls.

"Shoot!" Mr. Laurie shouts as he bangs and slides his hand violently down the keys. He tries to call for help, but the elevator's intercom system does not seem to work. I quickly pull out my phone and dial 911:

"I'm sorry, but you do not have service. I'm sorry, but you do not have service," repeats the evil computerized woman on the other end.

"No service. What now, Mr. Laurie?" I ask, hoping for a calm answer.

"I guess I will try to see what happened in the shaft. Can you give me a boost, Mr. Juntos?"

Thomas, without saying anything, grounds himself and cups both hands, inviting Mr. Laurie to use his hands as a ladder rung.

Within 40 seconds, it seems, he has half of his body in the shaft, looking up and down.

“Okay, Juntos, let me down.”

He crawls back down, and with a tone of discouraged confidence says, “The security guard comes at seven in the morning. Who knows a road trip game?”

My frustration is evident, but for some reason, I feel a little excited.

“Well, my brother used to play this game called Apocalypse. Every time someone says the Apocalypse is going to happen, we stay up the night of and tell each other what we would do if it really happened,” I impatiently contribute.

“If it really happened?” Thomas asks in an awkward, but stern manner. “I believe in that stuff. My Abuela used to tell me about the Rapture and the Tribulation. I thought she was nuts until she told me that when I was a boy, she saw angels standing behind my crib one night. I was born with anemia or some kind of medical thing like that and after that night, my angels healed me of it.”

A shock goes down my spine as I think about how ridiculous this sounds while I half agree for the sake of being nice and the fear of being rude.

Thomas continues, “When I was eleven, I smoked pot for the first time, and I swear I saw my angels. I even had an overdose when I was seventeen and my angels saved me from that, too. I don’t do that stuff no more, though: clean and sober for six months.”

I stand silently, wondering how Mr. Laurie is reacting.

“Man, I bet crap is getting rough out there. You know it’s not a power outage, right? It was prophesied that today was going to go down. I’m ready, though. With God and my angels protecting me, ain’t nothing gonna touch me.”

At this point my body is stiff with shock. He begins telling us about his time on the streets and which cousins were in which gang, which friend had died of whatever reason, and other chilling real-life tales my father would say were not meant to be first discussed while locked in an elevator with a white girl. In fact, minorities in my hometown were subconsciously avoided at all costs for whatever fears that still linger from the pre-Civil Rights Era.

I know it isn’t right to think of him as dangerous because of his race, so I begin trying to rationalize if he is schizophrenic or not. A person raised in an atmosphere of prejudice then taught to be tolerant in a liberal college just tries to make logic of her prejudices and express them in a seemingly more politically correct way. Whatever the reasoning, I am getting very uncomfortable, and I begin moving slowly to the opposite side of Mr. Laurie.

The more Thomas talks, the more worked up he gets, and the more I fear him. Mr. Laurie, however, looks calm and remains silent, although I can tell he is becoming increasingly tense. It isn't long before Thomas begins flailing his arms to illustrate his points, even to the point that he describes the murder that he allegedly had not committed.

Suddenly, while doing a physical narration of the fight, he hits the side of the elevator wall so hard, that the lights turn off! Now I am scared. I am stuck in an empty building, in an elevator, stuck for hours with a convict, addict, and possible rapist as well as schizophrenic, and now I am in the pitch dark with him! I scramble to find my phone to provide light as I put my back to the wall.

One of the men, which I think is Thomas, shouts interrogative profanity.

The elevator begins shaking and I hear Thomas yelling religious statements about judgment and the end of the world. I get into a fetal position as I feel a body skim me as it is being beaten.

"What's going on?" I scream, hiding my face, squeezing into the corner as far as I can, covering my head with my crossed forearms. The fight ends suddenly with a large thump and then silence.

"Hello?" I ask. No answer.

I grab my phone with a shaking hand and quickly shine it towards the other side of the elevator. There I see Mr. Laurie on top of Thomas, Thomas with blood all over his face.

"Is — Is he okay? What was he doing?" I ask shakily.

"He tried to attack me," Mr. Laurie responds. "Let me borrow your phone."

I slowly get up and hand him the phone.

"I'm going to try to call for help again," he tells me.

The phone still has no service in our metal can, and now I am in a dark elevator with a dead body. Mr. Laurie ends the call and the elevator again goes dark. I am unable to speak anymore as my fear overwhelms me. I reach into my purse and pull out my taser just in case Thomas isn't done for. I hold my hand on the trigger.

Then, I hear stirring and suddenly a loud bang! I instinctively outstretch my arm with the taser on. I cannot watch; I am too scared! I scream while forcing the contacts into skin. I start to smell burning flesh and finally let go of the trigger, sobbing from terror.

“Did I get him, Mr. Laurie?” I ask between sobs. I get down on my hands and knees to feel for my phone. I feel it right in front of me. I pick my phone back up and shine the light: I realize I killed Mr. Laurie!

I lock my phone’s screen, back up and slide my back down the wall to sit on the carpet. I am still in shock, but for some reason I do not feel guilt about killing my boss. Instead, I feel safe. I am now technically by myself, not trapped with others with whom I do not feel comfortable. I grab my knees and pull them into myself. I begin to calm down, analyzing the situation. I remember Mr. Laurie saying that someone would come at seven in the morning: only a few more hours. For the next few hours I have to think of a story. After all, who would believe they both killed themselves simultaneously? I am surely headed for prison.

I rehearse the story I created, and before long the elevator lights come on and begin to descend.

Ding.

The number 1 is lit. The doors open and the janitor on the other side jumps back upon seeing the bodies. I frantically tell him to get help; I say that these men tried to rape me after they locked the elevator in between levels. He nods his head while looking in horror at the bodies. He begins running to the nearest phone.

## Value of Life

I remember when gas was fifty-nine cents,  
fifty-nine point nine, to be exact, back in  
sixth grade, 1976, when my brother  
pumped gas for the only Cajun in Shelby.  
Air was free then.

Now I pay seventy-five cents; seventy-five  
cents for a few minutes, compressors running  
on timers. I still breathe it for free, but that's  
just human life; if I want to keep my car afloat,  
I have to pay.

— *Alan Brasher*

## This is what you call Love

You cuss me and condemn me  
then you come to me for lovin'.  
The lashings you been dealing  
leave me broken. Worth nothin'.

Your words are toxic  
poisoning my very existence.  
Your silence in-between –  
stoic, unadulterated resistance.

We used to be gentle and loving  
now we see who caves first.  
The Oath, the promise of forever  
...is it over? This hurts!

I promised! To love you always  
I pray forgiveness from my God above.  
As I am walking away –  
I keep telling myself... This is what you call Love

— *Faith Gordy*

## A writer in math class

Words on my paper, don't know what they say.  
Words in the air, it's a game that I play.  
Words in my head, words in my mind.  
The words are alive, but what is their kind?  
Twenty-seven letters, millions of words.  
They make up the world, or that's what I've heard.  
Heavens above, none of this makes sense.  
At least I'm not using words like thither or thence.  
Why do numbers try to take over my mind?  
Numbers truly can be a pain in the behind.  
Why must we talk about this crazy stuff?  
I want to go home. I have had enough.  
It's the probability of A or the probability of B.  
It could be this one or that one or one, two, or three.  
When did the time come to count the alphabet?  
Is it time to go now? Is it time to go yet?  
A table, a number, a polygraph test.  
It overloads my brain, and now I need rest.  
There used to be numbers like eight, nine, and ten.  
Now there's point this and point that. When did this happen? When?  
And slowly I feel my brain slip away.  
No, to your question, I am not ok.  
My brain is now gone, my mind will not bend.  
Though class is not done, I will just say the end.

— Savannah Parker

## Chopsticks

That was my life back then: I played piano four nights a week at Fong's Chinese restaurant on Chicago's North Side. I was just background noise — atmosphere — people came for the food, which wasn't half bad. I practically lived on the Moo Goo Gai Pan. My day job was at Shelton Risk Management, and then almost every Sunday I'd have dinner over at Mom's apartment in Schaumburg.

On one particular Sunday, my brother Mitch was there, and no sooner had we sat down to eat than Mom started talking matrimony.

"When are you going to get married?" Me and Mitch looked at each other. "I'm talking to you Gary. Your brother has already made three trips to the altar, and you don't even have a girlfriend."

"He's too picky," said Mitch, buttering up a roll.

"Some of us have high standards," I shot back. Mitch snorted.

"All right," said Mom. "Standards are fine. I just don't want you to end up like me, old and unmarried."

I said, "Why don't you ask Mitch what's taking him so long to find wife number four?"

Mitch laughed. "I guess the word's out on me."

"That's not funny," said Mom. "Marriage is a sacred institution, and you have made a mockery of it — and without even giving me a grandchild."

Mitch gave her a kiss on the cheek and said, "Don't you worry, Mom. I've been thinking about settling down for real. Look at this." He ran his fingers through his helmet of Elvisian hair. "Look at that."

"What?" Mom asked, squinting.

"I'm going bald."

Mom stroked his head and said, "You're a gorgeous man. Just find a girl with some brains this time, and that'll make all the difference."

Mitch looked like Mom. I looked like my father. He was a piano player, too. I had no idea where he was — still don't.

After coffee and dessert, Mitch watched the Blackhawks while I helped Mom with the dishes. I couldn't get the new girl off my mind. She had only been working at Shelton's a week or so and we hadn't really spoken — she had asked me where human resources was and gave me a really nice big smile and — well, if I was going to try and describe her, I'd say she looked like Julie London from the *Lonely Girl* album — long light brown hair, kind of sleepy blue eyes, beautiful and soulful, not a party girl like the ones that go for Mitch. I'd say she looked the way Theolonius Monk plays — simple, honest, something you could spend forever with and never get tired of.

Against my better judgment, and wanting to ease my mother's mind concerning my chronic bachelorhood, I said "There's this girl."

Mom turned to me, her eyes wide. "Yes? And — ?"

"Nothing," I mumbled. "She's new. A temp — and —"

"She's a tramp?"

"No. A temp. You know. A temporary employee." I was already sorry.

Mom nodded, smiling encouragement, "What's her name? Is she pretty? Is it serious?"

"I don't know her name, but yes, she's very nice looking and no, I haven't asked her out yet."

"What are you waiting for? Don't procrastinate, Gary. The one good thing about your father was he went after what he wanted. Oh boy, did he ever. You take after him in all ways but that."

I shrugged. "She probably has a boyfriend."

"You won't know until you ask her, will you? If she is single, how long do you think she is going to stay that way? If she is the least bit attractive, don't think for one minute that there's not a handful of men ready to make their move. I know what it's like. I was once young and attractive, you know."

"You still are, Mom."

She waved off the compliment. "What are you going to do about this girl? You seldom confide in me, so I know she must be something pretty darn special."

"I don't know if she's special or not, Mom. We haven't really talked much. I know nothing about her. I just thought she'd be someone I might want to ask out. That's all. Please, let's not make a big production out of it."

She studied me, her index finger pressed to her lips. "Invite her over for dinner next Sunday."



"I don't know."

"Yes. Invite her over. Is she ethnic? Never mind. I'll make spaghetti. Everybody eats spaghetti."

"I'll think about it."

Then she began talking about Dad, what a talented but totally irresponsible guy he was, but I heard very little of it. My mind was on the girl. Feeling light-headed, I went into the living. Mitch was in the lazy boy, glaring at the TV and blowing angry little smoke rings into the draperies.

"When is this town gonna get a decent hockey team?" he snorted. He hated losers. When I didn't answer, he looked over and said, "And when are you gonna get smart and start making some real money and stop farting around selling insurance?"

"I'm a claims adjustor," I said.

"Come work for me. I'm going to be expanding." He owned a limo business.

"I'm fine where I'm at."

"You're nowhere. I'm telling you."

One of the Blackhawks went down from a high stick to the back and Mitch let out a howl. As I was leaving, he gave me a brotherly pat on the shoulder and said, "Maybe I'll come around this week, take you to lunch."

"Sure," I said. "Just give me some warning."

I rode the Metra to Union station and then the el to my apartment. Mom had given me some leftovers in Tupperware, so I put them in the freezer.

My apartment was a dump: Green pastel walls covered with jazz festival posters. A loud and frightening still life of a fruit basket Mom had painted during one of her forays into self-expression. Industrial type metal shelves filled with LP's, many of them collector's items still in shrink-wrap. I selected Art Tatum's "Cocktails for Two" and put it on my old RCA turntable. I poured my cat Jelly Roll a saucer of milk, a ginger ale for myself, and sat down at the kitchen table. As I drank and listened to Tatum, I looked around the room, at the garage sale couch and the unfinished cable-spool coffee table. Down the hall, I could see into my bedroom and the unmade bed. There was no way I was going to bring the girl to that dump. No, when the time came she was going to get the Royal treatment. I would take her to the Palmer House. She deserved nothing less.

That night I had a dream about her. In the dream I was at Shelton, at the water cooler, and suddenly she appeared. Though I've read somewhere that you don't dream in color, I swear her eyes were so bright and blue it almost hurt to look at them.

She gave me a shy little smile and said, "They tell me you play the piano."

"That's right," I said coyly, resisting the urge to take her face in my hands and kiss her until one of us passed out.

"I must hear you play," she said. As I struggled to speak, she floated away in all her female glory, turning to look back at me several times before disappearing down the corridor. Next, the dream moved to Fong's, and she was sitting at a table near my Steinway, gazing at me, mesmerized by my artistry, falling more deeply and passionately in love with me with every note I played.

But when I woke up, I was alone in my little box of a bedroom, inside my bigger box of an apartment, trying desperately to reconnect with the dream. But I couldn't, so I got up and ate a bowl of corn flakes. Later, while shaving, I experimented with different smiles and found that if I tilted my head in a certain way and raised only the left side of my mouth I looked almost provocative — but I quickly reminded myself that it was not my looks that would win her love; no, she had to hear me play.

A few hours later, at Shelton's, I was at my desk shuffling papers when she appeared wearing a navy blue blazer and matching skirt, carrying a brown lunch sack, headed towards the break room. I had written down Fong's address on a slip of paper and hurried to intercept her as she came out.

"Excuse me, Miss," I said, stepping alongside her.

"Can I — may I speak with you for a moment?"

"Yes, of course," she said with the sweetest southern accent I had ever heard. I immediately thought of Dinah Shore. I started to say more, but then I saw someone approaching. It was Claude, the accountant, whose twenty-cup-a-day coffee habit caused tremors in his small chubby hands. I waited for him to pass, but instead he stopped, looked down at his feet, and then dropped to one knee. For a moment, both the girl and I watched as he struggled to tie a shoelace.

Afraid of losing momentum, I quickly gave her the piece of paper with Fong's number on it, and making sure Claude heard me, said, "That's a really fine restaurant. It has very good food. I practically live on their Moo Goo Gai Pan. But they have many other fine dishes as well. My mother loves the sweet and sour shrimp, and my brother Mitch — well he likes just about everything on the menu. Many people eat there. It's a very popular place. But not at all crowded. There's never a crowd. It's — It's just right. It's a delight."

"I see," she said, a hint of fear in her eyes.

Thankfully, Claude finally finished tying his shoe and sauntered off, whistling — no — butchering "But Not for Me." I looked around to make sure nobody else was coming, and when I was confident that she and I were alone, I held out my hand. She took it with some

hesitation. "My name is Gary Boxberger. I'm a claims adjustor here."

"I'm Marla Schifler. Nice to meet you."

There were several moments of awkward silence. I pointed to the scrap of paper.

"I play piano there."

"Oh?" she said, her eyebrows rising.

"Yes, in the lounge and and — uh — and — uh —" I realized that I hadn't taken a breath in a while, and when I did, I was mortified by the little wheezing sound it made.

"I was wondering, if you weren't too busy, whether you might like to come and hear me play."

She smiled for real then, as if relieved to finally understand what the hell I was getting at. I noted at this time that her teeth were not as perfect as in the dream. One of the front ones was slightly turned, but this could be easily corrected. Also, I noticed that up close she looked older, not substantially so, but enough to make me wonder how much she had been around — how many men she had succumbed to.

"Do you sing?" she asked.

"No, I don't." I hated it when people asked me that. I couldn't imagine anybody ever asking Oscar Peterson or Theolonius Monk if they sang. Of course, Nat King Cole had been both a phenomenal pianist and singer, but he had, in my opinion, terribly neglected his playing once he became famous.

"When would you like me to drop by?" she asked.

"Well, Friday nights are usually good. Would this Friday be all right with you?" I smiled big — a little too big for my own comfort. I caught myself rocking and stopped.

She thought it over, looking around a bit nervously. I figured she was probably wondering if it would jeopardize her job to go out with a co-worker. "Sure," she finally said. "I just moved here from Carbondale, and I really haven't had a chance to get out and do anything. I've been so busy job hunting."

"Ah," I said, stupidly, "Well, I'm glad you finally found one."

She laughed. No — giggled — like a cartoon chipmunk. It was so cute. "Actually," she said, looking around impishly, "I'm trying to be an actress."

"Oh, really?" I said. An actress? Mitch was always consorting with actresses — girls from Detroit, Des Moines, or Milwaukee, hoping to get into Steppenwolf or the Goodman.

“Okay then,” she chirped, “I guess I better look busy.” She slipped the paper into her purse and walked off saying, “I’ll see you Friday then.”

“Fantastic,” I heard myself say. I watched her walk away, very proud of myself. I spent the rest of the day in a kind of whimsical trance until around quitting time — when Mom called.

“Did you ask her?”

“Ask who what?”

“That girl. About Sunday dinner.”

I fiddled with my stapler. “Well, I was thinking that it might be better if she came to Fong’s first.”

“Why?”

“To hear me play. To sort of break the ice.”

“I see.” I could tell by her tone of voice that she was wounded. “Well, I can’t wait to meet her.”

“If things work out, then you’ll see plenty of her, believe me.” I didn’t like the sound of that, but I had to say something. When I finally got off the phone, I went to the water cooler and drank myself bilious.

On the walk home I started believing that Marla might really be the one. There was something familiar about her, like I had known her all my life. I had heard of it happening like that. A girl walks into your life, you exchange a few words and you end up spending the rest of your life together. I wasn’t like Dad, and I wasn’t like Mitch.

I got a pen and paper and sat down at the table and worked up a special song list, asking myself what kind of songs Marla would like. “There’s not a woman on the planet who isn’t a sucker for sentiment and romance,” I told Jelly Roll, stretched out before me. “Let’s see. She’s an aspiring actress — so maybe some show tunes and movie themes.”

I finally decided on a medley consisting of “The Impossible Dream,” “My Favorite Things,” “Tonight,” and “Matchmaker, Matchmaker.” Then I would go into some slow, sensuous songs like “Sentimental Journey” and “One More for The Road.” That way she would see that I was not only cultured, but soulful as well.

I felt good, but still, a question nagged at me. What if nice, thoughtful, romantic guys bored women to tears? Perhaps I needed to be cold and cruel, at least in the early stages of the relationship.

For the rest of the week I avoided contact with Marla to avoid jinxing the whole thing. When I passed her in the hall I nodded and smiled but made like I was in a hurry to get somewhere and couldn't talk. At night, I studied my dog-eared copy of the Kama Sutra, as well as Stanislavsky's An Actor Prepares. By the time Friday rolled around, I was beginning to feel that it was quite possible that not only would I get Marla to fall in love with me before the night was over, but by Monday morning she'd be begging to bear my children.

On Friday evening, I began my first set promptly at seven. Marla was nowhere in sight. At the closest table, where I had wanted Marla to sit, a gaggle of secretaries were laughing and talking too loudly. After playing ten songs, the last one being "Mona Lisa," she had still not arrived, and I went to the restroom to splash some water on my face. She's not going to show, I told myself. She stood me up and was probably laughing at me. The nerve of that guy, she was probably thinking— as if I would go out with him.

I wanted to smash the mirror with my fist and bleed all over the keyboard, but I doubted anyone would notice.

I sat down at my piano and took a drink of ginger ale. I looked over the rim of the glass and — there she was, standing in the doorway. She smiled and gave me a little wave and I waved back. Nancy Fong showed her to a table and took her drink order. I rubbed my hands on my pants, stretched my fingers, and began to play. God! I hit a wrong key, right off, but luckily nobody seemed to notice. "Settle down," I told myself. Take Your Time. I had to keep my eyes on the keys. Focus. I had to play like I was already making love to her. Nice and slow, like I had all the time in the world. Thinking that way helped, and soon I was playing better than I had ever played in my life. It felt like that, for the first time since I had started at Fong's, I heard no chatter, no clatter, no clinking of ice. Were people were actually listening? I didn't care about them. It was just me and Marla.

I didn't take my eyes off my hands until I had stopped playing. Then came the applause — so loud it surprised me. It was only then that I looked up and—she was no longer alone. There were two people sitting with her—a man and a woman. They looked familiar. Mom and Mitch! All three clapping, but Mitch and Marla engaged in lively conversation. He was no doubt regaling her with accounts of his business success, or airing his knowledge of the Chicago theatre scene, bragging about his connections, dropping names — reeling her in. I felt vomit sting the back of my throat. I wanted to go back to the restroom and kneel in one of the stalls and puke out my guts, my lungs, my brains — but I knew I had to go over to their table. Had to show them I didn't care.

"You played very well," said Mom.

"Wow," said Marla, smiling big. "You're really good. I wish I could play piano."

"So," I said in a miserable attempt at nonchalance, "you two know each other?"

"Oh, yeah," said Mitch. "I stopped by the other day to take you out to lunch and ended up taking Marla here instead."

"I tried to tell you," she said, "but you always seemed so busy at work."

"Yeah. I've been pretty busy."

"Sit down," said Mom. "Did you eat yet?"

I just stared at her.

Mitch was sitting close to Marla. I couldn't see their hands. I stood there, watching my brother with the girl of my dreams, knowing that Marla would be wife number four and I would be best man at their wedding. I excused myself and went back where I belonged — at the piano.

Mom came up behind me, started rubbing my shoulders.

Mitch and Marla were still gabbing away, their foreheads almost touching.

"Your father would be so proud of you," said Mom, tightening her grip.

— *S. D. Lavender*



**Industrial Sunset** - Curtis Clemons

## The Mirror

There I was.  
A pathetic, misfit gosling,  
grudging along in the shadows of the greats.  
The beauties — the ladies — all glowed,  
While  
I faded in their light.  
As if a shared stepsister.

There you were.  
The talk of the conspiracy.  
A smile, a laugh, and a good natured joke  
That caused all the lads to laugh while the jesters just mumbled.  
You were perfect.

And there she was.  
The damsel on your arm.  
A plaster of a smile on her crafted, painted face.  
She didn't love you.  
She didn't need you.  
I was the one in distress.

They said it.  
"If the slipper fits, put it on."  
And it fit. So I wore it with Grace and Dignity.  
Within my glass case I became who I wanted to become.  
I was lovely.  
Then I broke it.

The pieces fell.  
And with it, so did my resolve, my confidence...  
I questioned everything.  
Trouble lurked and dangers intermingled my life.



Many knights in shining metals came,  
Arriving in my heartland.  
Galavanting in on Pretentiousness, Arrogance, and Audacity.  
And I felt something.  
I was wrong;  
I didn't need them.

And knew I was right.  
For like the red upon the rose,  
They all quickly faded,  
Fluttering away as the layers of bloodstained petals,  
Revealing underneath  
The foil and tin and smudges and dirt,  
But I wasn't distressed.

With tenacity,  
With bravery,  
I picked up the pieces and slew the crystal dragon.  
I was beautiful.

Here you are again.  
Your arms are free, bare,  
And open.  
You are still perfect.  
Your smile, your laugh,  
You haven't lost your self.  
But I've found mine.  
I'm not afraid.  
I don't need you anymore.

Don't worry,  
We will each have our own happily ever after.  
And maybe,  
Well,  
Just maybe,  
We can have it together

— *Amber McNure*

## Reflections

My sin covered me like cold, scarlet blood.  
I hid from my reflection in the glass.  
I groaned, and my tears ran swift like a flood.  
I longed to be free from this heavy mass.

I then resolved to change and become pure,  
But resolve alone did not create change.  
I searched desperately for the true cure,  
And my priorities I rearranged.

When I saw the cruel truth my steps faltered,  
But I drew my sword and my fear I slew.  
I sacrificed myself on the altar;  
From the ashes I rise cleansed and made new.

Now, as I stand in this place all alone,  
The reflection I see is not my own.

— *Hannah Young*

## Alligator Roll

You lie cold  
slipping consciousness—  
Like stone you sleep  
in a chilling soul  
I've turned away—  
stolen the blankets—  
Dreaming, content  
in my alligator roll.

— *Val Czerny*

## Burn the Ships

Burn the ships  
And dance by the fire.  
Murder your fears and dance with desire.  
Drink wine to the lees and stain your lips

Purple; wear the color of kings.  
Greet each dawn on the long march west.  
Beat the drum and let bells ring.  
A long life lived is a long life blessed.

Pilgrim, find your path.  
Step over stones that block your way,  
But beware the rage of days.

Stop your ears; tie yourself to the mast  
Lest you hear the sirens' song  
And swim to the clamoring throng.

— *Kenneth Homer*

## Sifting Through Life

From the whitest tops of the highest clouds,  
To the very earth where I lie down,  
There must be a meaning to this.  
One of importance, not to be dismissed:  
What meaning spans both earth and sky?  
So important, it entangles both you and I.  
To love, laugh, learn, and play  
All of our lives, until our dying day.  
To think, and think, and think some more  
Until the day we refuse to think anymore.  
To speak when spoken to, or out of turn  
That drive to make our voices heard,  
To take a life or perhaps give it again,  
To feel the comforts of all our friends,  
To cry to the point of no more tears,  
To feel our triumphs, failures, and fears.  
What is this meaning with love and strife?  
I, my friends, contend that this meaning  
Is life

— *Troy Howe*

## A Poem for an Artist

she said that cold air had a beautiful smell to it.  
her nose was as keen as keen could be.  
so i smelled the air & smelled beauty.  
she sung songs & i'd hear angels casually speaking at the same time.  
she'd eat food and she'd be as captivating as a highly anticipated film.  
she'd sleep and everything would shut off. everything.  
she is what is. or what was.  
she'd smile and i could swear she had swallowed part of the sun.  
she'd have opinions that should have been carved in stone.  
her touch, as delicate as a snowflake in the winter, was so full of love you'd wonder how she  
makes it in this cruel world.  
her art... so well put together. she's art herself.  
an art piece making art. what a sight.  
what a sight...

— *Darrow Fraser*

## Growing Up

“Finally,” I thought as five o’clock rolled around. Now that *Boys and Girls Club* was over, I would be headed home to watch *Dragonball Z*, or whichever television show could hold my six-year-old attention span. I finished my Frito Lays BBQ twists and put on my faded denim jacket, enjoying the snap of each metal clasp as I closed the front. Hoisting my book bag over my shoulders, I rushed into the hallway and ran to the front desk. As I got closer, I noticed that my dad was already there waiting.

His face was square, and one of his top front teeth was slightly larger and a different shade than the other. On a normal day, he was clad in blue jeans and a short sleeve button-up, and although he was no more than five feet and seven inches tall, to me he seemed like a giant. The only thing we had in common physically was the curl in our hair, but even then, his hair was a faded black, while mine was a light brown. Although the exact words I have long since forgotten, I’m sure I excitedly asked, as I usually did, what he was planning to cook for supper that night. After a short while, my two sisters appeared: Margaret, the oldest at eight years old, and Samantha, the youngest at four (four and three-quarters, if you asked her). Racing to our old, purple Dodge Caravan, I reached the front passenger seat first and won the coveted spot, forcing them to buckle into the second row seats equipped with racing straps. With all of our book-bags in the vehicle, and each of us buckled in, we left.

As we rode, classic rock played on the F.M. radio. It was 1999, and even at six years old I could quote the lyrics to hits by Journey and Guns and Roses, among others. I looked over at my dad, my attention drawn by the crinkling sound of soft plastic, like that of a candy wrapper, and removal of a clear plastic bag from his pocket. In the bag was some sort of dark green material that appeared to have a texture much like the Marlboro reds I had once torn open to see what was inside. Pulling a white strip of paper from his chest pocket, he reached into the bag and placed the green material on the paper, carefully brought it to his lips, licked part of it, and rolled it up—all while driving.

All I could think to myself was how impressive it was that my dad, even while driving down the road, could roll his own cigarettes.

In a matter of minutes we were in the busy section of downtown, and even though I had no real sense of direction, certain landmarks looked familiar: the old metal cross that read “JESUS IS COMING SOON,” the statue of a man on a horse that looked at one time to have been white, but was now a patchy gray with spots of green mold near the bottom, and also the red brick building with a giant 8-ball painted on the side. I had always noticed the 8-ball, but as we got closer, I realized we were pulling into the parking lot where the it was located.

Looking up, I read the sign: Rudy’s Rack & Cue. Maybe it was because it was five-fifteen, or maybe it was because I had never payed any attention to anything but the side of the building, but it seemed busy in the parking lot. With a fast-spoken, “Stay here, I’ll be right back,” and without shutting off the van, my dad was out of the vehicle and walking up to two black men – one tall and slender, the other average height and stocky build—roughly twenty feet away, who stood by themselves against the 8-ball wall. As he left, I rolled down my window, as most any child with the opportunity to do so would, and looked around.

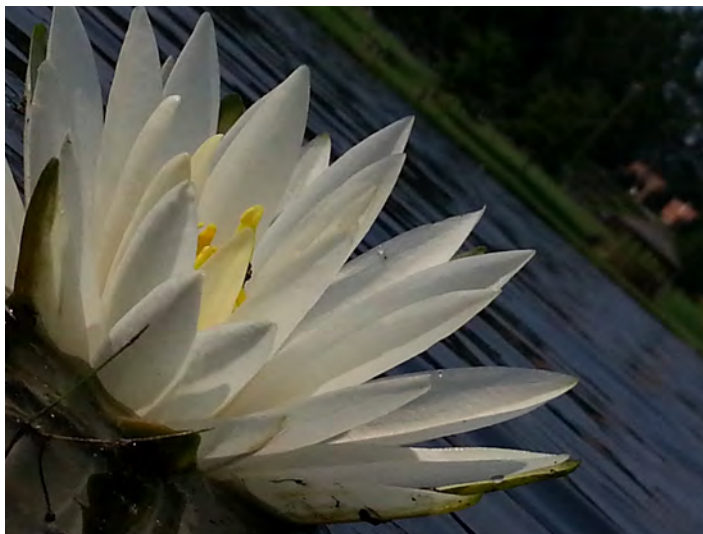
My sisters were quickly gathered around the window as well, the three of us like animals breathing fresh air after being put into a box without holes for nearly too long.

He reached the two men, and appeared to speak directly to the heavier one. My dad was facing away from me, and at a distance of only twenty feet I could hear his voice, although I couldn't tell what he was saying. But when his voice stopped, I looked into the eyes of the unknown character he was speaking to (and I assume he looked into the eyes of both my sisters as well) and maybe it was because the man was facing me, or because he was not speaking in a hushed tone, but over the sound of cars and people's voices I heard him clearly say, "No way man, not while your kids are here."

My dad pulled some cash out of his pocket, and tried to speak some more, but the man continued to refuse whatever it was my dad suggested. He repeated the phrase, "No man, not with your kids here." My dad turned around, and with a very deadpan expression, walked back to the van, got in, and started driving.

I remember how upset I was as we left because the strange men wouldn't give my dad what he wanted, and because I may have been the reason.

— *Benjamin Mimbs*



Curtis Clemons

## Verité

South Louisiana is an oral country.

In bars, factories, oil rigs, boats,

stories live in repeated tellings.

Mary Karr calls them Liars' Clubs.

Don't ever ask why one version differs,

the question may come back to you.

A fish was bigger; much bigger this time.

"Chere, you can't believe dat catfish, 101 pounds!"

"Caught dat sucker on a limb-line; trot-line couldna held em."

After fish and deer come the over-ripe conquests,

about a too beautiful woman; if her ways sound familiar,

would you let on? The telling is the truth of the teller.

The voice, the eyes, the body-talk, the truth is there,

the unblinking look, the head cock, the persuasion,

the tales the tales, I'll hear them again.

— *Albert Pertalion*



## Tangled

I want to be tangled, interwoven, entwined;  
Your arms and legs mingled softly with mine.  
Tongue-tied together, so words don't get muddled,  
Searching hands taking hold, fingers all jumbled.  
No mix-ups or twists (besides us and the covers),  
Pillows the pedestals for two tightly-knit lovers,  
Curves of bare bodies rise and fall, overlap—  
Fingers follow crossed creases, tracing a map.  
When exhausted, we'll sleep, wrapped up in sheets,  
Everything silent (save for alternating heartbeats),  
Until night bids adieu and we stir from our rest,  
Tossing and tumbling in our blanket-lined nest.  
Convolved and coiled, morning hair all befuddled,  
From curled, smiling lips will come amalgamated mumbles.

We'll finally unravel to scramble eggs and pour coffee,  
Rays of light from the window will envelop your body;  
And as you lay there, encompassed by sunlight,  
You'll remember being encompassed by me through the night.

— *Benjamin Mimbs*

## Jimmy: Satellite Wrangler

Jimmy manipulated the controls with his left hand, orienting himself with the Earth at his back and the swath of the Milky Way before him. Jimmy had only felt a sense of awe one time upon coming face-to-face with this spiral of stars a hundred-thousand light years across: the first time. Ten minutes after that, he had discovered that our little piece of the universe is a pain in the ass. Jimmy was there to wrangle a satellite, and even though he knew it was floating out there less than a mile away, he still couldn't distinguish it against the background of thousands upon thousands of stars. It would appear to be the same scale as everything else until he got much closer. Jimmy cursed himself again for taking the job.

When Jimmy read the pamphlet advertising for volunteers, it had looked easy – fun in fact. He had been out of work for over a year, and it had become more and more difficult to convince the lady at the welfare office that he couldn't find a job. Two months ago, she had handed him the pamphlet, and he had signed up right away. According to what he was told, in the past two hundred years, humanity, in its drive towards an exciting, technology-augmented future, had gotten a little over-zealous with launching things into orbit, and now there was a great big mess up there that needed to be cleaned up because it had gotten very dangerous to send anything off the planet due to the high chance of colliding with some forgotten, multi-million dollar hunk of space-junk. Something had to be done, but there was a problem: missions into space to collect trash aren't very glamorous, and the public didn't want to pay for them, so another solution had to be found.

Although Jimmy couldn't understand why it was cheaper, people like him were the solution. After a month of training, they were sent up in pairs for what would be month-long missions. Even though the amount of debris was enormous, the location of everything in orbit had been carefully catalogued, and the mission had been planned so that they would be able to reach five predetermined pieces of junk a day, which would then be pulled down into a decaying orbit to burn up in the atmosphere. The whole thing was orchestrated from the ground, and Jimmy and his partner simply did what they were told as the orders came in. One of them would stay behind in the small capsule they had been sent up in while the other, usually Jimmy, would move up into higher orbit to perform the collection. The object was then towed down to the capsule, where a small disposable gas canister would be attached and then used to push it down towards the Earth. Today was going to be Jimmy's final day, and he was looking forward to getting back down to spend the money he had made.

With the help of the nice girl, Gina, guiding him from the ground, Jimmy finally found his target and moved in to attach the line. "I got it hooked," said Jimmy.

"Great job, Jimmy! I'll tell Bill to start the winch," said Gina in her usual enthusiastic manner. Jimmy had really gotten to like her in the past couple of months, and he thought that she might be thinking the same of him, although he couldn't understand why an educated girl like Gina would be interested in somebody like him, who had barely made it out of high school.

"You know, Gina, I think I woulda gone nuts up here without your voice there every morning to wake me," said Jimmy. "I've been thinking, I'll be back tomorrow and —"

“Yeah, just a second Jimmy. I need you to do something a little different this time when you get back to the capsule. Bill will be outside waiting on you,” said Gina.

“Aye, anything for you, Gina. But anyway, like I was saying--”

“Listen to me now, Jimmy. I need you to go around to the back of the capsule, and you’re going to find Bill there with an attachment for your suit. I want you to put that on for me. Bill already has his on. Once you have yours on, I want you to let me know.”

Jimmy did as she asked without even thinking about it. The only thing running through his mind was getting home. His mother was going to cook him some real food, and he couldn’t wait.

“Do you have it on, Jimmy?”

“Yeah, I do, but I don’t understand. This looks just like the thing we use to —” Jimmy heard a click and then lurched downward.

“Jimmy, I’d like to thank you and Bill for the great service you have performed for your planet. You have guaranteed the safety of many of humanity’s finest who will go on to do great things in the future. Thank you ever so much, and don’t worry. It will be fast, and it won’t hurt.”

It had taken him a couple of months, but Jimmy finally realized how they had managed to cut costs.

— *Jonathan Kauffman*

## Real Life

Fairy tale love existed in tales of queens and kings,  
of sad little princesses living in castles wishing for different things.

If I were in a story like that I believe I'd be a moth,  
Not living in finery, just flying around, nibbling on different cloth.

I would not be a butterfly or a bird upon the wing,  
but a big brown moth that flies around and lands on different things.

The queen would yell and swat me away for fear of such a bug.

I'd fly away, a narrow escape from being squashed into the rug.

Then I'd meet the princess, and I would be her friend.

Somehow, she would wish to be me, though I fit in the palm of her hand.

As a moth, I may not be beautiful like her or the butterfly you see.

But unlike most, I have something else. I know how to be free.

— *Savannah Parker*



Kimberly Page

## Tough

*Well, this is new.*

Not the car of course. The car is an old Nissan with peeling white paint, one shiny headlight, and a dent by the left back tire. That dent has been there since I first heard Mom say a four-letter word.

No, I mean the situation; by “situation,” I mean the conversation. The conversation that’s going on in the front row. It’s actually — civil.

My sister leans in and whispers, “How long do you think this will last?”

I cup my mouth and say, “Probably until they have to pick a place to eat.”

She bites her lip to keep from laughing. No need to draw attention from our parents. Wouldn’t want to ruin their good moods so soon.

Lizzie pulls the new book series — the one I had told her about — out of her backpack and piles them onto her lap. “Which did you like best? The first or the second?” She yanks her long, dark, wavy hair out of the way and drapes it over her other shoulder so I could better see the hardbacks.

“Oh, the second one, definitely,” I point to the one with awesome flames all over the cover. “That’s when the wizard meets — uh, someone. And then they go to this — uh, place,” I sigh. “You’ll just have to read it first. I don’t want to give anything away. But it’s the best book. Ever.”

She laughs at me again.

Good. I can still make her laugh.

We don’t get to see each other all that much anymore. Not since the divorce. Both parents wanted full custody; neither one wanted an all-out fight, so they settled it. They separated, and so did Lizzie and me. Of course, she could have chosen to come live with Dad and me. She was old enough at the time. But I wasn’t mad at her for going with mom. Mom was lonely. Mom needed her just like Dad needed me. We both knew that. The problem was that we both needed each other, too.

But no one is really worried about that today. It’s crazy how things happen and it makes people want to get along all of a sudden. Like when Big Jerry kept calling me “bookworm” and “teacher’s dog” and “fart-face” until he found out I was having a big pool party. Everyone in the class was invited, and Dad said I had to invite Big Jerry to “face my problems” and “be the bigger man” or something like that. Heck, he was the nicest guy the day I was handing out invitations, through all that week up until the party and on the day of the party he was acting like we were cool and pals and he even told my dad that

he would help me with homework if I ever needed it. Ha! Like he could actually help me. Besides, the day after the party, the name calling started back, as well as the wet willies. The Loser. So much for being the bigger man.

I've told Lizzie about him. I tell Lizzie about everything. Well, I haven't told her about Sarah yet and that she sits next to me in third period math and that she smells kinda nice. But I have to have some secrets. Anyway, Lizzie used to stand up for me against guys like Big Jerry. Most of the bigger kids in my class — and I guess, when I think about it, most are bigger than me — would just ignore me when Lizzie was there. She made sure they didn't bother me. Now she is in a bigger school and I don't get to see her much anymore. She says she is just one county line over — whatever that means — but I still don't understand why things have to be different.

"Well, kiddos," Dad says, "we're here."

I hate big cities.

Lizzie and I look up at the twelve story building we have just parked under.

Mom and Dad argue about what floor we are supposed to be on while Lizzie and I discuss the quickest escape routes and best refuge places in case of a zombie apocalypse. It can happen at any time.

I do a little Macarena to the elevator music and Lizzie pretends she doesn't know me. One day she will learn that I'm supposed to embarrass her like this. It's in my job description.

Mom goes to the desk and argues again with Dad about what to write on those gazillion pieces of paper.

"I hate waiting," Lizzie remarks as she pulls out her phone and goes to some girly app. I watch her look at random people's random photos, but not because I'm interested. I'm just trying to do some of that bonding stuff we never get to do, that's all.

"Lizzie Manning?"

My whole family looks up to the lady dressed in an oversized ladybug shirt with matching pants. You would think we were a big four-headed monster by the way we begin to move as one—up from the hard, uncomfortable seats, awkwardly following Miss Ladybug past the desks, down the hall, and to the third door down on the right.

Lizzie sits on the bed, which is strangely covered with wax paper-type stuff.

I wish I could sit on the bed. It looks more comfortable than these ugly blue chairs; they feel like bricks under my butt. I tell Lizzie so and she laughs. I ask her if she wants to trade spots, but that makes her turn all serious-like. She doesn't want to trade. She wishes she

could sit next to me in a chair. I tell her she can, I can even squeeze her in beside me, but she looks away at the wall and Mom tells me stay still and be quiet.

So here I sit in the corner of the room, being quiet and hoping no one will notice me.

The white-coated man comes in with a weird smile on his face. "Hello again! How is my favorite person today?" I know I should remember his name.

"Oh, I'm alright I guess." Lizzie says, She seems kinda nervous. I don't know why. It's not like her boyfriend would get jealous for her talking to this old dude or anything.

"We are all really anxious," Mom says.

Why is her voice so shaky?

"Yes, we really are," Dad says. He takes in a loud breath. "So if you could be very straightforward, we would really appreciate it."

"Well," Mr. White Coat begins, looking around at the faces in the room, "I need to call down to the lab and get your copy of the reports, but I've read them." He looks up from his clipboard. His face grows tired as he glances from my parents to his board and back again. "I'm afraid it's not all that great news." He rubs the back of his neck with his hand. "The tests came back positive. It's begun to spread and it's going fast. We need to run a few more tests to see exactly what we are up against. Let me go make a quick phone call and see what we can do today. I'll be back in just a moment."

And with that, he places his hand on the knob and opens the door. He turns.

"I'm sorry," he says.

He quietly leaves the room.

Mom is sitting between my chair and the bed. Her head falls into her hands.

I look to my dad on the left. He'll know what to do. He crosses the room and grips Lizzie's shoulder.

He opens and closes his mouth several times, but no words come out. Not even a sound. He gives a brave smile before he turns away. I see him with his hand rubbing the side of his head as he leans against the wall.

The sunshine dances through the branches outside and makes its way through the blinds and around my shadow on the floor. It makes it glisten, causing me to realize I'm staring at it.

I look to Lizzie. Her eyes — wide and deep with fear — meet mine.



So I stand up out of my little corner and march. The sun sways with my shadow as I take the four steps to the bed and jump onto it, plopping down right beside her. I catch her eyes again, and roll my own.

I lean in close and say, "They just don't know how tough you are yet."

She smiles and laughs; the tears that begin to fall make it sound strange.

She throws her arms around me, squeezing me tight and whispers, "I love you."

I squeeze her back.

"I love you too."

I know I'll cry later on. I know I'll probably throw my action figures across my room and yell at the ceiling. Maybe I'll go outside and kick the soccer ball as hard as I can at the garage door. But for now, I have to be strong. I have to be strong for her.

That's what little brothers are for.

— *Amber McNure*



Kimberly Page

## The Insignificance of Feeling Significant

Charles begins and ends every day by brushing his teeth. Everything in between is clouded by the decadent dance of his soft bristle toothbrush and super-minty toothpaste. He often fights off the stipulations of childhood reminders like “sing the ABC’s” or “always go in a clockwise motion.” Such an enjoyable and beneficial event shouldn’t be scrutinized by his long deceased mother’s overbearing commands from two rooms away. A simple toothbrush in mouth seems like an easy job enough, no maternal help necessary.

Breakfast is mere foreplay. The burden of a visit to the grocery leads to the usual acceptance of stale bread as an opportunity for French toast. He hums a song he wishes he wrote as the combination of eggs, milk, and cinnamon collide into a small plastic bowl. Today’s primary objective is to make it to the park and back in one piece. Firmly in belief of the longer it takes to prepare, the later he could arrive at the park, Charles takes great care to cook the evenly, but lightly toasted bread. He never likes his French toast too well done, and who could blame him? His father would let the bread burn to a callous charcoal black then scrape it off with a butter knife over the trashcan.

“It’s better for your heart,” he would always say.

The irony of his father’s fatal cardiac arrest many years ago was not lost on Charles, who has now moved on to dipping his bread into the mix, applying a steady even coat. He then places them into the pan and begins to let them cook. His eyes glance upward to the rustling brown leaves outside on his maple tree. The fall had been particularly harsh to the tree’s surrounding brothers, but this one managed to hold on just a little longer.

Charles knows better than to go outside on a day like this, but as usual, he will anyway. The wind chills his thinning blood, and rushes a ruby red flush to his face. His grey scarf is disheveled in a way that is the least beneficial to its actual use, but is too much of a bother to fix. His coat is long and ill-fitting, though the light brown makes him feel like he is embracing the fall chill. Never considering himself a slave to fashion, Charles completes his outfit with his brown boots and dark green slacks. He is quite particular about the way a fabric feels over its outward appearance. It is easier for him to shop for clothes by pacing the store with an outstretched hand ready to feel each texture until he finds one to his liking than to look for matching palette to his already burdensome wardrobe back home. It has to graze his skin in a way, not making him feel claustrophobic, but welcome, as if the clothes are today’s skin and an itchy fit would mean Charles has an itchy day ahead of him. He very seldom has to shop for clothes because he wears them until they fall apart.

He never drives anymore, not by a choice of his own, but of his car’s terrible habit of frying spark plugs. His grandson said it was simply a habit with the older cars when he

last came to town, but Charles couldn't see how that was possible.

Charles believes walking is best for the circulation in his legs anyway. Although neither the left nor the right leg begin their day at the same time Charles does, a few small circles around his kitchen will usually catch them up to speed.

With his French toast cooked evenly, Charles flips them onto his plate and pours syrup very liberally. He thinks about how he'll need the energy for his trek to the park, which usually only takes a few short minutes to walk.

At the park bench, he wipes off a thin layer of dust on the iron armrest. The dust reminds him of his long days as a cataloguer for the local machine shop. Hours seemed to stumble by as he built shelving and labeled every individual product, breathing in all sorts of dead skin cells and other things he tried not think too much about.

Every morning around 10:15 Mary Summers goes for her power-walk. And what power it is. Her frequent visits to the hair salon have paid off; her bright golden hair glistens with the morning dew like an unexpected morning sunrise. Her mind is as fit as her body because she spends all day pushing herself to become better, filling out countless crossword puzzles and avoiding any types of excess sugars in her diet.

Charles checks his watch often in between the customary glances at his newspaper he has picked up at the park gate. He never bothers himself with politics or finances, more finding his niche deep within the comics section on 4D. It is always on 4D except on days when news is slow when it will be on 2B. He believes he knows enough about current events by knowing the difference in thickness of his morning paper.

In between glances at Dagwood and Garfield, Charles will bend the newspaper, acting as if he is about to turn the page to the next invigorating editorial on the president's choice of invading some country in the middle east.

Out of the corner of his eye he can see her coming, but nothing can prepare him for what she is about to say.

"Good morning," Rosemary says with an exuberant smile mid-power-walk.

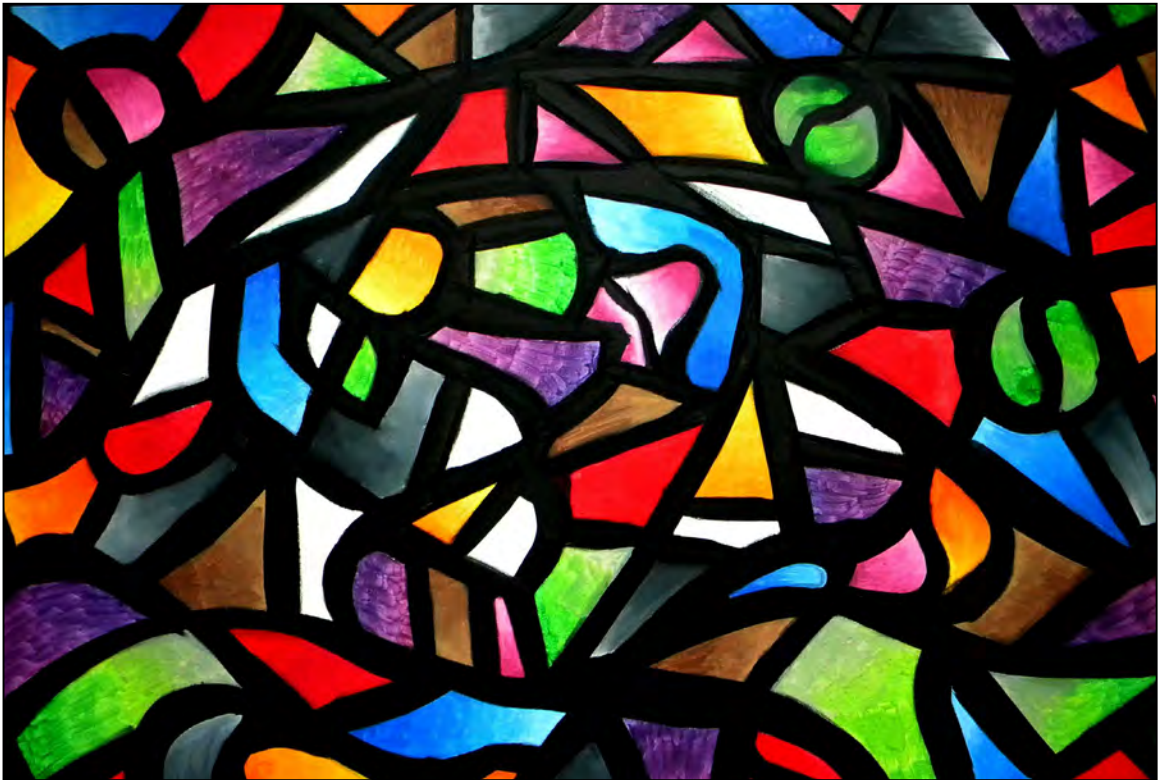
"Morning," Charles stumbles.

It is as if speech itself just left him as a whole. It isn't his fault really; Rosemary's smile has a way of crippling the heart. It's as if every vessel in his weak heart begins to pump twice as hard and fast and fills him with the fatigue and anxiety of jumping from a jet plane. In mere seconds he has flown over Paris' exquisite bakeries, Germany's best draft houses, and China's bustling streets. Each second is a hurricane of happiness; a convoluted mess of emotions.

Disappointment fills him as he watches her continue her daily route: out of the park, to the left corner of 8th street, down by the worst pizza joint ever in existence, up towards city hall, finishing at the library where she will spend the majority of her day.

Charles slowly gets up, and makes his way out of the park towards home, throwing the newspaper into the recycling bin on his way out, looking forward to the moment when he can brush his teeth, sleep, and try again tomorrow.

— *Jared Stepp*



**Hidden Woman** - Lexus Lewis

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