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Expressions

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2015

Expressions 2015

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Expressions 2015 Awards

First Place Overall

Sierra Holstad, "Pale Blue Eyes"

Second Place Overall

Evan Bittner, "King of the Tree House"

Poetry Awards

First Place

Jeffery Carter, "At Devils Tower with the Boys"

Second Place

Becky Sterns, "Grandma's Closets"

Third Place

Mary Rowan, "Against Him"

Prose Awards

First Place

Lisa Melchert, "Farewell Trip"

Second Place

Hailey Dixon, "Rails"

Third Place

Burt Hixenbaugh, "We Are All Turtles"



“At Devils Tower with the Boys”

Jeffery Carter

This is a holy place of ringing stone
thrust upward into space,
like a hand raised in prayer
and I would make a pilgrimage here,
to experience something of the thinness
between worlds
and to feel the presence of the Ancient,

except that I am charged with watching
these eager boys as they climb the slope,
bounding from boulder to boulder;
they believe, with a blessed naiveté,
that they can conquer the tower
and still they startle at imaginary rattlesnakes.

If I cannot pause to wonder here;
if I cannot divide my attention
between my charges and myself
then I must return.



“King of the Tree House”

Evan Bittner

The year my mother died I was supposed to go to summer camp, but someone decided that the funeral would be held the second week of June, so I was forced to stay home. I think I would've felt better running through the woods and swimming in the lake instead of sitting in a church pew wearing an ill-fitting black suit my dad complained about having to buy. I wasn't sure if I was upset more about losing my mom or about what her death did to me.

“One day things escalated to the point where one threw a dart in the other's eye. Let's just say that they didn't look so identical after that.”

To try and make up for it, my uncle gave me an old guitar that he'd had when he was a kid. I dragged my Mickey Mouse record player up to my tree house and tried to play along with Johnny Cash, but I plucked the strings so hard that within a few days I had broken all of them. I ditched the guitar in the garbage can. No one said any prayers for it or had a visitation when the dump truck came by on a Friday and ferried it off. The only thing I learned from the guitar was that I could take the record player up to the tree house, hook up several yards of extension cord in a daisy chain that led back to house, and no longer have any reason to have to go back inside.

Every morning I assembled my gear. I got a box of cookies, a coke, a stack of comic books, and went up into my tree house all day. The only time Dad bothered me was when he had to lift the extension cords to mow the lawn. He spent a lot of time working on the lawn. Neither of us wanted to be in the house and see things that might conjure foul reminiscence. I sat in my bean bag chair and watched what went on in the neighborhood, or I'd read comics and munch on some cookies. If I started feeling lonely, I'd put on a record and Johnny, Waylon, or Hank would talk to me through the speakers of the Mickey Mouse record player.

Even when there was nothing interesting going on, the neighborhood was always rife with activity. My mom had always loved going to the movies to, in her words, “Get away from everything,” but to me, that everything was good entertainment. The twins next door were always in their yard yelling at each other, and one day things escalated to the point where one threw a dart in the other's eye. Let's just say that they didn't look so identical after that. The old man across the street loved to sit on his porch and whistle at women who walked by. Some called him a creep, but others caught his tune and started whistling back. I understood him. There were lots of pretty girls who wandered around the neighborhood, but the one I had my eyes on the most was the girl in the house behind ours.

She was usually by herself, reading books in her backyard, or riding around on her orange Schwinn that reminded me of a Creamsicle. Her pale legs provided the bit of ice cream on the bottom, even though she spent so much time under the summer sun. Given her height and the way her parents wanted nothing to do with her, I gathered she was a teenager, and therefore I would never have a chance with her. That was fine, though. I liked the view more from the comfort of my tree house. When her parents came home at night, she would retreat inside, and I began to time my return to the house so that it would sync up with her. I never missed anything good this way.

“She was tearing up the comic book as if it had killed her mother and she was throwing the bits of paper in the air where they were scattered in the breeze . . . She flipped a middle finger towards the tree house and disappeared along the side of her house.”

The only downside to watching people is that they have their routines and routines get dull. Soon I realized I had fallen into the same pattern that these people had. I’d read my comic book collection about fifty times over, so I started trading them with the one-eyed twin next door. He was a real Archie aficionado, but he had decent taste in superheroes as well. He lent me a coveted Superman that I saved up for the day when I couldn’t take the neighborhood boredom any longer.

When that day came, it was windy, like a knock-over-your-trashcan kind of windy. The twins’ parents had dressed them in swimsuits and taken them off the beach, the old man was

sitting inside, and the girl behind my house had gone off on a bike ride out of town. I sat back in my bean bag, threw on my favorite Waylon 45, and popped a few cookies in my mouth. I cracked the Superman open like I imagined they opened Tutankhamen’s tomb. It started off well, with a group of bank robbers planning a brilliant scheme, but things changed when they were in a car chase with police and a woman was about to cross the street. Just before the bank robber’s van smacked into her, Superman flew out from the nearest phone booth and whisked her to safety. I shut the comic on that evil panel and flung it out the window. I didn’t keep driveling like that in my tree house. There was no Superman to save people, mothers who get hit by cars in real life.

“Hey!”

The shouting pushed my anger to the side and I was glad it made me forget. I poked my head out the window, hoping someone was shouting at their neighbor because of some hilarious transgression. I knew I would feel a lot better if I could see someone get punched.

But it wasn’t a miscellaneous neighbor shouting at another, it was the girl from the house behind me. Her floral dress was kicking up in the wind and her hair was disheveled. She was waving the Superman in her grip with her eyes pointed at me. “Hey! I think this is yours!”

I’d never heard her shout before, but I didn’t want to hear it anymore. I dove beneath the window and pressed my back up against the wall. I killed Waylon mid-sentence. I hadn’t seen her come back into the neighborhood from her bike ride.

“Hey! Kid in the fucking tree house!”

Do you want this back or not?"

I remained still and silent. I wondered if I could pull up the rope ladder without her noticing.

"Fine, fuck face! Don't answer me!" I heard her shred the comic book with her hands while she grunted. I peeped out the window, trying to keep my head as low as possible. She was tearing up the comic book as if it had killed her mother and she was throwing the bits of paper in the air where they were scattered in the breeze. The pieces flew around her like falling snow and she threw her arms up as if to twirl in it. She flipped a middle finger towards the tree house and disappeared along the side of her house. I sank back under the window, grabbed a cookie, and ate it as quietly as I could.

I avoided hanging out in the tree house for the next few days. I hung around in the house doing the same things I had done in the tree house. I kept my eyes off the pictures on the wall as much as I could. I had forgotten that the speakers in the living room were much louder than the ones in my little Mickey Mouse record player. When the mail man came by to drop off a package, I had to turn the music down, but he heard it and told me to play that Johnny Cash song as loud as it would go so he could hear it through the whole neighborhood. I gladly obliged, but the old man next door came by and told me to turn the racket down.

I searched for the girl out of the living room window every day, but I never saw her hair poking over the fence posts. I was glad to see she was keeping as much distance as I was. I had the blinds drawn and I pretended that I wasn't home. I hoped she would think I'd gone

off to summer camp or something like that. I was hoping she would forget about me. The tree house was calling, but I hid away inside. Unread stacks of the twins' comic books were up there gathering dust, but I had to ignore them. The television was as boring as it ever was. The A-Team was the stupidest show.

My dad started inviting a lady over to dinner a lot. He told me that she'd been over before, but that I'd been up in the tree house during her visits. I wondered how I could have missed her, but then I found out that she was the twins' mother and it wasn't uncommon for me to see her straddling the property line. She started coming over for dinner about twice a week, bringing heaps of mashed potatoes and ham that she told us were left over from her family's own dinner. My dad said that she was bringing us home-cooked meals since my mom wasn't around to cook anymore. This lady was an awful cook. Her potatoes were lumpy and the gravy ran all over the plate, submerging the green beans like coffins in six feet of dirt.

Her name was Helen and at first her meals were just deliveries, but eventually she started setting the table for us and sitting next to my dad while we ate. It was the same place where my mom used to sit. They talked a lot about his job and the lawn. They shared a passion for cultivating showy presentations of grass and perfectly-trimmed hedges. I'd never noticed that the twins' lawn did look a lot like ours. She tried including me in conversation a couple of times, but I only answered in monosyllables. Dad explained that I was shy. He said that all I needed in the world was a good country 45 and sunshine. He didn't know me at all.

One night, after dinner, I was listening to Hank in the living room and watching the muted TV while Helen and my dad cleaned dishes in the kitchen. Even though I had the volume on the stereo up, I could still hear the clinking of the dishes as they were stacked. My dad even thought it'd be funny to stack them in time with the drum beat. After they finished, they stood by the front door and talked for a long time. Helen's hands drifted into his and my dad's eyes lit up. He came over and turned Hank up louder, something that he'd never done before. I looked up at him and he winked at me. He grabbed Helen by the hand and led her back to his bedroom and the door slammed, shaking the house. My Hank record skipped and I ran over to it to inspect the damage. The tremor scratched the record. I took it off the turntable as quickly as I could and slid it back into the sleeve before more damage could be done. I marched over to my dad's bedroom and threw the door open.

"Dad! You scratched my record!"

Helen was the first naked woman that I ever saw. Her body was browned from living through forty years and her boobs sank to her stomach. Her nipples looked like pepperonis on a giant cheese bubble. My dad started screaming. He was in his boxers and he shoved me out of the bedroom while promising to buy me a new one as long as I kept quiet. The door slammed in my face. I knew what they were doing in there. My mom had explained it me a couple of months before, saying that it's what caused babies. I didn't know why my dad wanted to make babies with Helen, but it infuriated me. He actually had forgotten about mom.

I couldn't stand to be inside that house. I threw the blinds open and went out the sliding glass door, not bothering to shut it behind me. I stomped over to the tree house and climbed up into it. On the way up, I noted that my dad hadn't bothered to shut the blinds on his bedroom window. Any idiot in town could see him and Helen on the bed with their arms wrapped around each other and bouncing up and down. I poked my head through the opening in the tree house floor and was met with a shriek.

"What the hell are you doing up here?" she shouted. It was the girl who lived in the house behind us, sitting in a corner of the tree house with her hands clasped around her legs. I was so surprised to find her there that I almost fell off the rope ladder.

"What're you doing up here?" The inside of the tree house was disheveled. My box of cookies was emptied and tossed to the other side where the Mickey Mouse record player was, and my stack of comic books was now a pile scattered across the floor.

"Leave me alone, you little shit!"

"This is my tree house!"

"Who gives a fuck? Get out or I'll pound the living shit out of you!" She unwrapped her arms and sat up on her knees, showing me her clenched fists.

"I'll go tell my dad!"

"I'll beat him up, too. I can handle a whole family of pussies!"

"What does that even mean?"

"What?"

"Pussies! I don't know what that is!"

"Jesus Christ, kid! Don't you know how to swear?" She looked at me and I could see her gnashing her teeth. Her hair, always straight when I gazed at it from afar, was now unkempt with strands flying every which way. "You...I can't believe you don't know what a pussy is. It's another word for wimp. Do you at least know what that means?"

"Of course I do. I'm not an idiot."

"You don't know what a fucking pussy is."

"What're you doing in my tree house?"

"It's none of your business, kid. Just leave me alone. I'll be out by tomorrow, then you can get back to jacking off up here." She settled back against the wall and looked out the window.

"Jesus Christ, kid! Don't you know how to swear?" She looked at me and I could see her gnashing her teeth. Her hair . . . was now unkempt with strands flying every which way."

I pulled myself up the final steps of the rope ladder and sat on the side opposite to her. I figured that 'jacking off' meant sitting around and wasting time, like I had been. "I'm not going anywhere. This is my tree house."

"Come on, kid. I need to be alone for a bit."

"Why?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because it's none of your fucking business, that's why."

"Aren't you being a pussy?" The word felt strange on my lips.

"Shut the fuck up."

I looked at the records I had left in the tree house. I'd taken most of the good ones out when I'd migrated inside, but there were a still few choices left. "Do you like Johnny Cash?"

"God, no."

I picked a good 45 and put it on the Mickey Mouse record player.

"Don't play any music, kid."

"Why? Whenever I'm feeling down, I like listening to records."

"I'm not feeling down."

"Why are you so angry then?"

"God, if I tell you, will you shut the fuck up?"

I nodded.

She sighed and sat up. "My parents are fighting. I don't want to be in the house. Last time, someone called the cops."

"Fighting? Like how?"

"I thought you said you'd shut up."

"I'm sorry. I was just curious. Why'd they call the cops?"

"God, you're so fucking annoying."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to be in my house either."

"Why?"

"My dad's making babies with the neighbor's mom."

"What the fuck?" She shot up from her relaxed pose and looked out the window at my house. She could see my dad and Helen through the window, still bouncing up and down. She started laughing. I didn't know what was so funny about it. "Oh my God, that's hilarious. Look at her; she's like a wet towel. I hope my boobs don't look like that when I'm older. Where's your mom, kid?"

She looked over at me and I shook my head. I hoped she'd get the idea I didn't want to talk about it.

"Oh right, you're that kid. My mom told me about it. Wasn't it a car? I'm sorry. Shit, wasn't that just recently, too? Damn, kid, your dad's an asshole."

I went over to the window by her and looked down at my dad's bedroom. He hadn't looked as happy since before my mom died. His smile was as buoyant as the bed.

The girl kept watching my dad and Helen, her eyes following every move they were making, as if she were taking notes. "My parents don't do that shit anymore."

"Is that why you always go out of town?"

"Huh?"

"When you ride your bike. To get away from your house?"

"How do you know I leave town?"

"Uh, I notice. From up here."

"Bullshit. You watch me, you peeping tom. You really are jacking off up here, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I guess, but I wouldn't call it that."

"Oh yeah? What would you call it, then?"

"I don't know. Not that."

She folded her arms across her breasts, obscuring them from my view. "Well, I'd appreciate it if you didn't do it to me. I'm not a piece of meat, you know. I'm sure there are plenty of other girls for you to ogle."

I hung my head low. "I'm sorry." I didn't know people hated being watched so much.

"I guess it's okay. I mean, my boyfriend tells me he does it to me all the time, but he's supposed to."

Boyfriend. By now, my dad and Helen had switched positions. My dad was on top and he had taken his boxers off. I went away from the

window. I didn't want to see my dad's butt. I went to the other window and looked over at the girl's house. The lights were on in the kitchen, but I didn't see or hear anything.

"Yeah," she said while joining me by my window. "They can fight for a long time."

"You can stay the night up here, if you want."

"Thanks." She brushed her hair with her hands. "I'll probably just wait until later and sneak back in, though."

"Oh, okay."

"Your dad'll probably be done soon."

"Done with what?"

"Fucking that old bag."

I thought that was a weird way to refer to baby making, so I didn't respond. We sat in silence. She watched her house for a bit, but eventually resumed her fetal position and stared off into space. I decided to give her some distance and I sat up in my bean bag. I thought about whether or not Helen was going to be my new mom, but that just made me angrier. I didn't want a new one.

"I climbed down the rope ladder and reentered the house. I bee-lined for my room, shut the door, and turned out all the lights, hoping that my dad would assume I went to bed."

We stayed like that for a long time. Soon, the light shut off in my dad's bedroom and I saw

him talking to Helen out in the front driveway. I looked over at the girl, who had closed her eyes. I figured it was a good time to sneak back into the house. I wanted to see how things went for the girl, but I didn't want to make her angrier. I climbed down the rope ladder and reentered the house. I bee-lined for my room, shut the door, and turned out all the lights, hoping that my dad would assume I went to bed. I looked out my window at the tree house, but I couldn't make out her silhouette. I lay awake in bed for the rest of the night, wondering if the girl was still lurking just beyond the walls.

In the morning, I checked the tree house, but the girl was long gone. My dad found me up there, and he asked me to come down for a talk. He explained what was going on between him and Helen, but I paid little attention. He asked me if I had anything I wanted to say, but I only said something that would get him to stop talking to me. He didn't bring up mom once during our chat.

Helen started coming over and going into the bedroom with my dad more often. It wasn't treated like a taboo anymore. She would drop in at random times throughout the day, wave at me, and ask where my dad was. I'd point to the garage or the bathroom or the kitchen, but I'd never speak a word to her. When she'd leave to look for my dad, I'd run out to the tree house.

I moved all the good records back in, reassembled my comic book stack, and brought a sleeping bag into the tree house on the off chance that Helen would decide to move in with us. Sometimes I saw the girl out in her yard or in her room. I waved at her a few times, but she never waved back. She must've forgotten about the night we'd spent together. She biked

off in the middle of the day like she always did or sat on her deck chairs, but her eyes never turned up to the tree house. I wondered if she'd found a new place to hide when her parents fought. Perhaps under the bridge on the other side of town or at her boyfriend's house. I imagined her sitting in his tree house, shouting about her problems to him. I doubt he'd listen as much as I would.

“I caught up to her in the yard and tugged on her shirt. “Get off me, you pervert! I know exactly what we’re going to do.”

One day though, while I was hiding out during one of Helen and Dad's sessions that was lasting way too long, I saw her climb out of her bedroom window and hop the fence. When she poked her head into the tree house, she saw me and groaned. “Shit. Are they fucking again?”

“What?” I put down my comic book and killed the record player.

“Is that woman with your dad again?” She lingered on the rope ladder, as if waiting to be invited in.

“Oh. Yeah. Are your parents fighting again?”

She nodded. “It's pretty bad. My mom hurled a plate of spaghetti into the wall and stabbed my dad with a fork.”

I laughed, but she didn't laugh back. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. They can get fucking crazy sometimes.”

“Should you call the cops or something?”

“That wouldn't fucking do anything. They'd just fight again tomorrow.”

“Why do they fight so much?”

She sighed and came up into the tree house. She picked the corner furthest away from me and set up shop, curling up into the same ball shape that she had last time. “They hate each other. Same reason most people fight.”

“I don't hate anyone.”

“Wow, cool,” she said. Afterward, she thought about it and her expression changed. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean, you don't hate your dad or the motherfucker that killed your mom?”

“No...”

“Why the fuck not? Jesus Christ, kid.”

“What?”

“If I were you, I'd want to smash your dad and that neighbor lady's heads in the wall.” She started tugging on her perfectly combed hair. Clumps of it came out in her hands. She roused it, throwing it out of its formed rows. It was like desecration to me.

“Don't do that.”

“What?”

"Don't do that to your hair. You're ruining it."

"Does it look like I give two shits? Did you even care about your mom, kid? You think she'd want your dad to be putting it in the neighbor? How can you live with that happening in your goddamned house? Your dad's down in there right now pretending like your mom doesn't exist and all you care about is my hair?" She kept pulling out her hair and dumping it on the tree house floor.

"Why are you getting so angry at me?"

"Because you're just sitting up here and not doing a thing about it! Holing up in this tree house and jacking off to women walking their dogs and listening to shitty music isn't going to solve your fucking problems!"

I threw my hands over my ears so I couldn't hear her yells, but they penetrated my eardrums anyway.

"Oh, don't be such a pussy!"

I heard her say that word and I took my hands off of my ears. "I'm not a pussy! You are! You come up into the tree house just like I do! If it's so easy to fight back, why don't you do it?"

"Oh, that does it, you little shit. I'm going to rip your fucking throat out!" She clenched her fists and gnashed her teeth. She came towards me.

"Why bother? It's not like that's going to bring my mother back or stop your parents! If you're so angry, why don't you go be angry at them?"

She stopped, but didn't unclench her fists. She looked at me and her eyes brightened. "Oh my God. You're right."

"What?"

"That's it, shit-for-brains. It's perfect!" She left the tree house and started down the rope ladder. I ran after her, but I could only go so fast. I caught up to her in the yard and tugged on her shirt. "Get off me, you pervert! I know exactly what we're going to do."

"What?"

"Okay, just shut the fuck up and listen. So, if you walked in on your dad and started yelling at him, he wouldn't do shit. He'd just ground you or put you in time out or whatever the fuck. But I can go tell him to fuck off. Go wait over there by the tree and watch through the window."

"What're you going to do?"

She left me and threw open the sliding glass door, stepping through the opening. She tossed the drapes out of her way and disappeared behind the wall while I went and hid behind the tree. I watched my dad's bedroom, but I took care not to pay attention to what they were doing on the bed.

The door flew open and the girl burst into the room. Helen screamed and I could hear it through the closed window. My dad scrambled off of her, but he was focusing too much on the intruder and fell from the bed. The girl was screaming at them and I could hear every word she said.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Your fucking wife just died and you're putting it in the neighbor! What the fuck kind of person does that? You can shut off your grief, but you can't shut off your fucking cock!" She ran over to the bookshelf and started hurling books off of it and onto the bed. Helen tried to cover herself with the blanket, but a book smacked her in the face. My dad stood back up and started shouting back.

"Who the fuck are you? What're you talking about? Get out of my house or I'll call the cops!" He started pushing the books off the bed, which were piling on top of Helen. The girl pushed the bookshelf over.

"Fuck you, asshole!" she shouted.

It crashed onto the bed and Helen jumped out from underneath the covers. She crashed into my dad and they fell back into the wall. The girl leapt over the bookshelf and ran out the door. My dad pulled himself up and chased after her, but he stopped before he left the bedroom so he could retrieve his underwear. He shouted at Helen to call the police.

The girl came tearing out of the house and she ran straight past me. "Come on, kid!" She had a smile as large as a car. I ran after her, trying to keep up. She leapt the fence with ease, but it took me a couple of seconds. I didn't pause to see if my dad was watching us. I tumbled over the top and crashed into her backyard. The girl was leaning against the fence, catching her breath.

"Was he chasing me?"

I sat up and looked over the fence, trying to keep my head as low as possible. I saw Helen in the bedroom on the phone, but Dad was in the

backyard searching the side of the house and wearing only his boxers. He hadn't seen us jump the fence. "No, no. We're good."

"Thank God," the girl said. "Now it's your turn."

"What?"

"Yeah, go fuck with my parents. The back door's unlocked. Just go in and find them."

"Uh..."

"Come on kid, don't be a pussy."

It was the only word of hers that I understood and I didn't like it. I looked at her and at the house. The kitchen light was still on. I went over to their back door and pushed it open. It led into the kitchen, which was empty. There were smashed bits of plate lying at the foot of the wall, and pasta sauce was splattered everywhere like blood in a horror comic. Spaghetti noodles were dripping down off the wall and a lone fork lay in the middle of the room. I could hear shouting coming from further inside the house. The words I heard were the same ones the girl used a lot.

I went further inside, through an archway and into the living room. The La-Z-Boy was overturned and a group of pictures had fallen off the walls. The voices were coming from down the hall. I crept along, expecting someone to jump out at me. I thought a quick death at that moment would be good, so that way I wouldn't have to go through with the girl's plan.

I went into the bedroom, where I saw her parents shouting at each other from across the

room. The father's face was bruised and the mother clutched her hand like it was hurt. Their shouts had morphed into one ominous sound, resounding through the room and shaking the walls. They didn't notice me as I stepped in between them.

"Hey!" I shouted. The voices stopped and the parents looked down at me. The mom gasped and stepped back and the dad looked as if I was a ghost. "What're you guys doing?" I thought that I was going to say something good and angry, like the girl had shouted at my dad and Helen. I said what I said, thinking I was going to add something long to it that I could shout with a force that would knock both parents on the ground. But I didn't say anything else after that. I couldn't think of anything.

Her parents looked at me and back at each other.

"What are you doing in here, kid?" the father asked.

I tore out of the room and down the hall. I ran into the girl, who was standing at the edge of the living room and listening to everything that had transpired in the bedroom. "You dumbass! You fucked it up! Was that really the best you could do?"

Her parents came out of the bedroom and saw us. I was cowering under the girl, who looked about ready to punch me. The dad looked at her and shouted, "What the hell's going on here, Jenny?"

I looked up at her. She didn't look like a Jennifer.

"Nothing," she said.

"You don't know this kid?" the mom asked.

"Never seen him before. What the fuck's he doing in the house?"

"That's not true!" I shouted. "I'm sorry. I did what I could."

The girl's eyes widened and she shouted, "Shut the fuck up, kid!"

"Tell us what's going on, Jenny," the dad said.

I looked up at her and she had a look on her face that I imagined an animal trapped in a corner would have. I spoke up because I knew she wouldn't. "Why were you guys even fighting? If you guys really hate each other like she says you do, then you shouldn't be married anymore." I pointed at the girl. "She put me up to this. She thought I could walk in and stop you, and I tried."

Neither of her parents said anything. They looked at me and the girl like we were crazy. The dad walked over to us. I could see a blood stain on his shoulder covering up a few tiny holes in his shirt. He looked down at me and clenched his fists. "Get the fuck out of my house."

I didn't go up in the tree house again. After I talked to the cops and explained that I hadn't seen anything, my dad took me aside and told me what had happened. He fudged some of the details that I'd seen with my own eyes, but his message was the same. Helen wouldn't be coming back over to the house anymore. He said that she'd been traumatized by what had happened and that they figured she shouldn't come

back over and be reminded of it all the time. It was easy for her to avoid a bedroom, but it wasn't as easy for me to avoid looking at cars. My dad decided it'd be a good idea to get away from the neighborhood for a while. He spoke about the crazy girl as if she was a ghost, and he wanted to make sure we were gone in case she came back.

"I started by taking the first look in several months at the family portraits. I hated them because they reminded me of times where I'd been forced to sit in front of a camera while wearing ridiculous clothes,"

We rented a cabin by a nearby lake for the final month of summer. I got to run in the woods and swim in the lake. I didn't forget about mom, because I was reminded about how she was really excited for me to go to summer camp. She said that it was an experience I needed to have before I died.

My dad didn't talk about Helen or the lawn during the whole trip, choosing instead to spend time with me. He taught me how to fish and grill burgers. I was terrible at both endeavors, but he never stopped smiling. He looked even happier than he had been with Helen. On our final day in the cabin, he talked about how we needed to live our lives as if mom was still with us. He said time would eventually erode our memory and that we would have to try really hard to make sure mom lived on with us forever.

When we got home, I started by taking the first look in several months at the family portraits. I hated them because they reminded me of times where I'd been forced to sit in front of

a camera while wearing ridiculous clothes, but I finally realized what purpose they served.

I saw the girl again during the fall. She was riding her bike while I was walking home from school, and we nearly crashed into each other on the sidewalk. I asked her how things had been since that night, and she said that it was the first time her dad had ever hit her, but it was also the only time. She was grounded until Christmas, but she said she didn't mind it that much. She'd broken up with her boyfriend, which got me excited for reasons I wasn't sure of. She said that her parents had kept fighting, but now instead of being mad at each other, they were mad at her. They didn't like how she'd told me about their familial problems. They didn't want to look bad.

"They don't do it much anymore," she said. "Fighting, that is. They sleep in separate bedrooms now and hardly talk, but at least they're not fucking stabbing each other."

"I guess that's good," I said.

"Yeah. Do you still watch me up in the tree house?"

"No, I don't go up there much anymore."

"That's a shame. It was a cool place to hang out." That was the last thing she said before she got on her Creamsicle bike and pedaled away.



“Against Him”

Mary Rowan

We are walking through the fresh cut hay and corn fields.

The smell of fall is in the air there is a rolling shadow coming across the fields.

You have Smokey on a chain and the rifle in your arms.

I am asking you “are we going hunting?”

I am carrying a shovel.

You pick a place between the corn field and the wooded area just up from the property line.

You are crying while digging a huge deep hole.

You have Smokey in the rifle sights. Your sister standing beside you bewildered.

You’re left wondering why your father would make you do this. You love Smokey and all the animals. Why did he make you bring your sister?

Mary is settled down now but when she started punching you and screaming not to do this she begged you not to do it while you were still holding the gun.

Father said the dog is not good anymore “he got a taste for blood can’t have him killing chickens or anything else.”

You are standing at the edge of the pond with a sack in your hands. Mary once again is so full of anger towards me and our father wondering why are they doing this she hits me over and over again. You try to explain “Dad said to I have to.”

Why does my father make me do these acts?

It makes you cry when you lower the burlap sack full of puppies into the murky green scum filled pond.

How hard it was to watch the bubbles to finally stop then to go bury them.

You knew if dad would just keep them you could find them a home.

Your love for animals always shone through.

Did not people of these times realize the acts they made their children carry out would affect them for rest their lives?

You were driving on the highway when you spotted that beagle who was trying to make it across the road.

When you brought him home he was shell shocked was not afraid of the road would just lie in the road. Cars would have to stop to move him.



“Pale Blue Eyes”

Sierra Holstad

Together we climbed the dusty stairs of the attic and opened its creaking door. It was one of those rare Sundays when I was off work and he was awake, even after his second consecutive shift at the factory. Carson looked handsome but old, tired as he lumbered up each step, dust rising and settling beneath his feet. I wanted to reach out and take his hand, scratch the downy hair on his neck, straighten the collar of his checkered flannel; somehow it felt inappropriate, as if my fingertips on his skin would be too intimate a gesture, reaching too close to what we had lost over the last few months.

We had put all of our junk and half-unpacked boxes in the attic with extra blankets, an old record player, forgotten Christmas decorations and other odds and ends. We hadn't discussed going through them, but somehow we had discovered that today was the day, the last time our discarded items would wed in the same the space. I hadn't been up there for months. The items were long forgotten in the noise of the last year; my mind had been riddled with lawyers, divorce papers, the empty space that filled the bed at night where he used to lay. The tattered boxes in the attic were the last of the things to be divided before he began his lease in a downtown apartment and I sold our home and made preparations to move back to the time capsule of my mother's house.

When we reached the top of the steps and pried the door open, he went to the box nearest the entrance and I to the farthest. I heard him pop open the first of the flaps with his pocketknife. I slowly peeled the tape off of my own, taking bits of the cardboard with it. Dust rose from within and danced in the light that flooded in from the single window facing the street.

“Oh, look at these,” I said absently. I could feel him behind me, standing too close. Having him so near made me rigid and nervous. I didn't want to misstep, to re-pick wounds that hadn't yet healed and scabbed over.

“. . . somehow it felt inappropriate, as if my fingertips on his skin would be too intimate a gesture, reaching too close to what we had lost over the last few months.”

“Shit, those go way back,” he said as he ran his fingers over the bound edges of tattered record sleeves. He pulled one out and blew the grime off of it.

I took one as well, sliding it from its cozy position between a photo album and a self-help book. I examined the cover as I swept the dust away. It was a Velvet Underground record, bought when we had first begun dating at a used record store in the town where we had both

attended college. It had been old then, released almost twenty years before, but we had both loved it. We played it over and over again, sang along each time it came to "Pale Blue Eyes."

I looked back at him. "Do you remember this?"

"Sometimes I feel so happy, sometimes I feel so sad, sometimes I feel so happy," he sang, a sheepish smile blooming on his face.

"I wrapped my sweater around myself and let the notes, the words, cascade through me; memories clouded my ability to keep moving through our things, to stack them in my pile, his pile, dividing our lives."

Carson took the record from my hands and placed it on the old record player. He found the cord and searched for an outlet. When he finally found one hidden behind a stack of antique picture frames and paintings of lackluster landscape, he plugged it into the wall. I didn't expect it to work, but it came to life and sputtered the first few notes of the song, but played the rest clearly. They echoed through the stuffy, cavernous space.

I felt tears gather at the corner of my eyes. For a moment, all I could see was the tiny brick dorm room where he had told me he loved me for the first time, the ratty area rug where we had kissed, slowly, explored the crests and valleys of our bodies. I saw the sweeping train of my wedding dress, the bright eyes of our son swaddled in blue, asleep in his arms. I wrapped my sweater around myself and let the notes, the words, cascade through me; memories clouded my abil-

ity to keep moving through our things, to stack them in my pile, his pile, dividing our lives.

He took my hand, wrapped his arm around my waist, and we were dancing. I pressed my face into the cotton of his shirt, tears wetting it through. I nuzzled into the nape of his neck as he whispered the words into my ear. I wanted to melt into him, to never part, to forget the smell of the other women that now lingered on his clothes, discard the nights that he failed to come home, overlook the moments when he made me feel small, old, forgotten. I thought that I might be able to forgive him as we swayed.

Then the song ended.

We didn't immediately let go, but slowly we parted. First his arm dropped from my waist, then my hand from his. He took a step back and so did I. Finally he turned, unplugged the record player, and put the record back in the sleeve. He placed it in the stack of things he would take with him.

“Grandma’s Closets”

Becky Sterns

Kerosene lamps

Take me back

Plaid skirts

Dark suits

We snoop

Warm shawls

Colorful scarves

White gloves

Many memories come

Silly hats

Long dresses

Big shoes

Endless beads

Belles are we

Plastic fruit

Card Boxes

Lace curtains

Prayer books

Flower pots

All in Grandma’s closets



“We Are All Turtles”

Burt Hixenbaugh

Sunday, the day that carries the promise of an easy afternoon, when you are neck-deep in the weekend, knowing just a few more jabs will collapse the floor beneath you into Monday. My living room curtains seemed to appreciate the calm breeze suggested to them by an open window, and through this very window I would get my first sign that all was not well in the Hixenbaugh household.

I heard my wife shriek with a sudden start, not the kind that could herald the presence of a wayward spider, or pronounce the possibility of an adorable project she found on Pinterest, but the kind where you know immediately there is something much more grave afoot.

She ran into the house yelling, “Oh my god, there’s a dead big turtle in the back yard!”

“A dead turtle or a big turtle?” I questioned, a man has to know what kind of testudine he is dealing with before he ventures forth.

“A dead turtle!” she stammered, “Max was licking the carcass.”

I sprang to my feet and headed for the kitchen, trying to surmise how a turtle could have belly waddled its way into my backyard. Belly waddling, it’s how I describe the turtilian’s preferred method of motion.

My German Shepherd Max was dutifully sitting on his haunches by the dishwasher with a facial expression I could only decipher as “Hi ya, Dad. I’m sure glad to see you. Guess what I was slappin’ around this afternoon?! P.S., Mom’s pissed.” I made my way past his goofy body language and, after securely shutting the door behind me, entered the back yard to see what all the fuss was about.

“My wife edged out from the doorway, waiting for the verdict . . . I cautioned my wife to look away in case the scene grew any more gruesome.”

In the grass I found the broken figure of the turtle. I have seen some creatures in a bad way in my time, but this poor fella appeared so mangled I honestly couldn’t make out what limbs he may have been missing and what was left intact.

The first wound that jumped out at me was a giant fracture which horizontally split the front lip of his shell’s top plate. It drooped loosely forward, giving the appearance that the only thing keeping it attached was the connective tissue present beneath it. Blood and flesh poked from the crack’s broken seam. This led to me scanning the rest of the shell’s upper plate; various tooth and claw marks spanned its circumference, like some mad creature was insulted by the mere pro-

posal of its original symmetry.

My wife edged out from the doorway, waiting for the verdict. I decided I had to turn it over on its back to finish my survey of the damage, but so far the headless lump devoid of motion did not seem to promise any signs of life. I cautioned my wife to look away in case the scene grew any more gruesome.

The loose plate seemed destined to separate in one anatomically revealing tug as I levered the turtle on its back using a stick. The extent of its injuries became immediately clear. Along with some gore strewn around its shell, what appeared to be a liver lay exposed to the sunlight. I was about to voice my reflexive thought of "damn, that's gross" when the liver and corpse started pulsating.

"Oh my god, it's alive!" I exclaimed

"No way!"

"I see it moving. How can it still be alive?"

"I don't know, do you think Max really did this?"

"I don't know, maybe a bird dropped it from the sky, something big like a stork!"

"A stork? Burt, can we please take this seriously!?"

I do sometimes have a real problem with keeping situations in comedic perspective, so sensing my wife's frustration and panic, and feeling for the turtle's tumultuous plight - I decided to help her hatch a plan to get our new-found reptilian friend the care he so desperately

needed.

"The seventeen-year-old girl at the register's helm looked over our collection of bandages and rubber gloves and cracked her gum once before asking the obvious question"

The turtle's limbs now poked out of all five openings of his shell, two legs, two arms, and thankfully yes a bald and scaly turtilian head. It would seem I had been erroneous in initially declaring it decapitated; to my credit not many animals make a habit of retracting their mugs into their chest cavities. He started belly wobbling away. I grabbed some gardening gloves and put him into a cardboard box we had handy: He wasn't going to have much success with wobbling this one off.

"We have to get him some bandages and stop the bleeding," my wife suggested. I could tell the initial shock was wearing off her and she was gearing into action mode. She works at the Blank Park Zoo, and it is against every one of her moral fibers to sit idly by as an animal suffers. Having no medical supplies on hand, it was decided we should stock up at the nearby Scott's Foods store.

Briskly walking under the blue and red neon sign that smeared its glow on our incoming faces, I couldn't help but take notice of the great disparity between our expressions and those of the store's other patrons. They, with their laughing eyes or lips plateaued with boredom and us with our panicked feet, furrowed brows and quickened breath. It felt as if two worlds were scraping boundaries, and I was determined to steer them from a collision course.

The first sign that made me believe this would not be as easy as I would have hoped came from the quizzical looks cast to us by fellow aisle walkers as we rummaged through the medicine section. Weeding through an assortment of bandages, medical adhesives and disinfectants, one could routinely hear us mutter seemingly severe sentences like:

“Do you think this will help stop his bleeding?”

“Maybe, but his wounds need to breathe”

“We have to hurry up; he’s going to die soon if we take too long!”

Finally, after assembling our remedies, it became time to purchase them and make haste. Arriving at the checkout lane we placed our makeshift trauma kit and frantic demeanors on the conveyor belt and felt our hearts quicken as they slowly droned towards the cashier’s scrutiny. The seventeen-year-old girl at the register’s helm looked over our collection of bandages and rubber gloves and cracked her gum once before asking the obvious question:

“Ummmmm . . . is like everyone alright?”

My poor wife could hardly contain the drama anymore and spilled upon her the story of our injured turtle and murderous dog. This was clearly more than the girl bargained for, as she could only say a small condolence before handing me the receipt, her mental script of everyday niceties lacking any turtle references in its repertoire.

Rushing home we tore the plastic from our bandages, donned our rubber medical gloves and

proceeded to prep our patient for the operation. He had held up well in the small time we had been away, pacing his box with the fervor of an excitable Eeyore. I felt the need to name him, despite all advice to the contrary. I decided that, due to his small stature and enormous plight, I would call him Mr. Frodo.

Holding Mr. Frodo’s damaged body to help stifle the bleeding and keep him steady while my wife applied the bandages, a funny thought crept over me. I imagined I was George Clooney in “ER.” It’s true I have never seen the show and therefore have absolutely no real point of reference, but in my mind’s eye I possessed every bit of medical prowess and charming good looks as I pictured he had in the show . . . if that’s even what he did in the show.

Now that our patient was successfully bandaged, we knew that - while he was in no immediate danger - we still needed to get him to someone who could make a better assessment of his odds. All hope felt lost until I remembered that the son of a friend from work had just started Vet school at Iowa State this year. Taking heed of his guidance we decided to take Mr. Frodo to the Iowa State wildlife clinic, or in Mr. Frodo’s mind “Mount Doom.”

The drive equated to about 45 minutes of reflection as we made our way to Ames. Mr. Frodo belly wobbled in the box periodically as if to demonstrate he was still alive and that there was no need to toss the box out the window and head home prematurely.

Images of the faces I saw at the grocery store welled up in my mind. Caught in their own worlds they could not hope to sympathize with the plight of turtles. Even the people we would

eventually explain ourselves to would not seem to comprehend why we would go so far out of our way to help a wild animal. Several would try to rationalize it asking us, "Was it your turtle?" as if owning a personal stake in a creature's life was the only rational excuse for rendering aid.

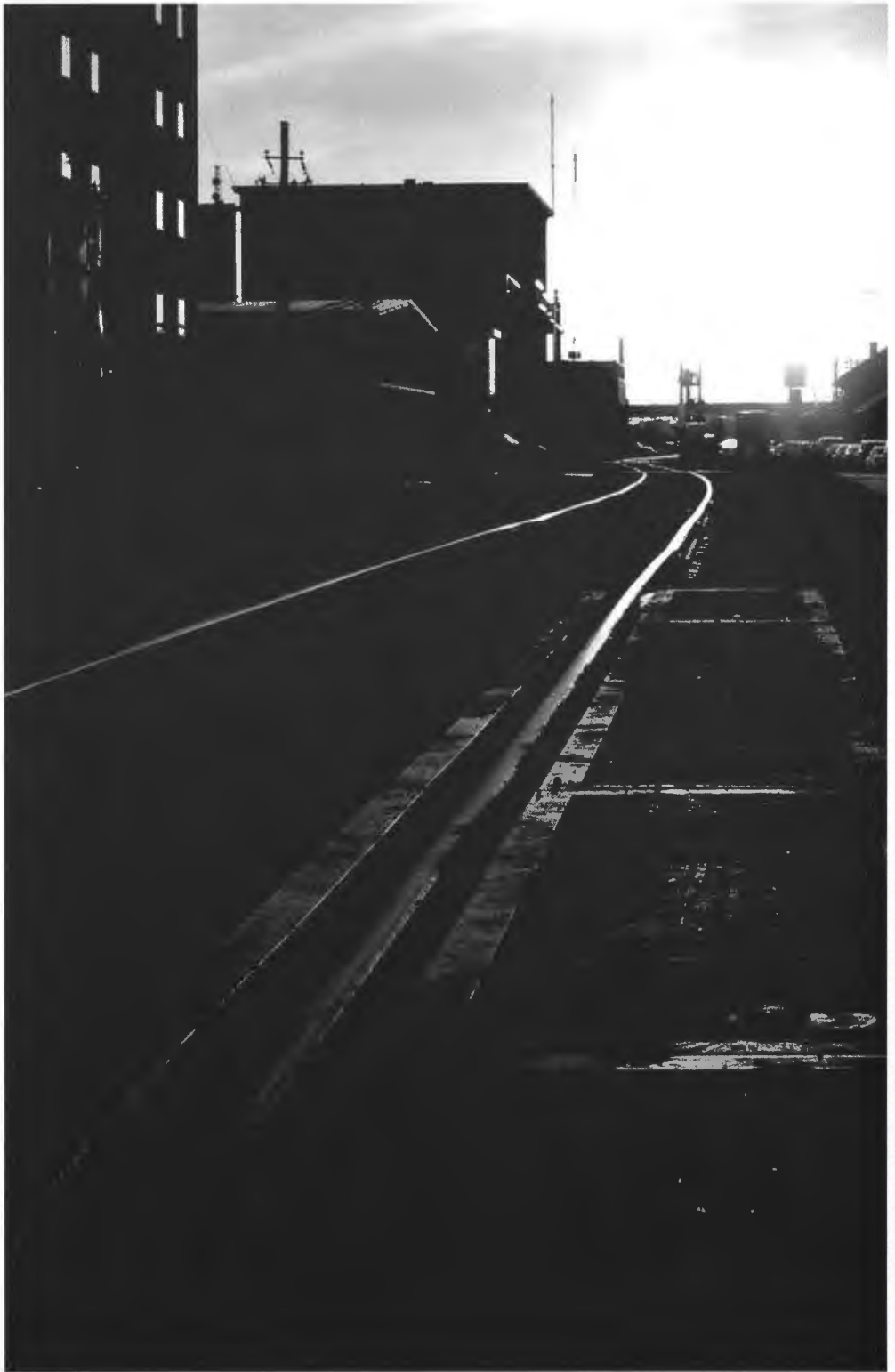
As I hunkered down deeper in thought, I came to the conclusion about the many ways I have more in common with those people than I would care to admit. How many times have I cast a downward glance at the beggars with their humble signs? How many waiters or waitresses have I grieved for some minor infraction, seeing only their flaws and forgetting that there is a person behind the uniform? It's amazing to see the kind of mental gymnastics we will jump through to shield ourselves from having to bear witness to another's discomfort.

The halos of these thoughts finally passed to the other side as the car pulled into the parking lot of the wildlife hospital. I knew this was goodbye to Mr. Frodo and felt good that no matter the outcome I had done all I could do to ensure his survival, having no regrets is such a beautifully rare commodity.

In the nearly deserted lobby an old man with blood stains on his jeans appeared to be waiting for some grisly verdict. One of the vet techs came and took a statement from us, then we were asked to wait for her to fetch someone from the wildlife clinic. The old man peered into the box to see Mr. Frodo looking like a bandaged soldier, belly wobbling about. He listened kindly to our story, then informed us his dog had gotten cut and nothing could stop the bleeding. His heartbroken face told me all I needed to know about how much he cared for the dog.

"It's amazing to see the kind of mental gymnastics we will jump through to shield ourselves from having to bear witness to another's discomfort."

The wildlife tech came and took Mr. Frodo away, but not without thanking us for taking the time to come to his aid and reassuring us they would call and let us know how he fared. On the journey home I could not help but think about the plight of turtles, how it must feel to be a small creature only capable of hiding inside itself for survival. Maybe we are all that way, taking a quick surveying glance before ducking back into the safety of our shells.



“Rails”

Hailey Dixon

I could always tell when a train was coming long before I could see or hear it. The old wooden floor of our home would start to grumble and tickle my feet with vibrations from the rails. The walls would start to tremble, making mother’s knick-knacks dance across the shelves and leaving trails in the dust. When I was young I would pretend they were racing. Father and I would watch the little angel ornaments compete with the porcelain horse and the teacups in their race to the edge of the shelf. We would cheer them on like they were our old friends, making bets on the winner. As the train got closer the glasses in the cupboard and the silverware in the drawers would start to jingle and bump against each other. All of the creaking and clanging would come together in a symphony of anticipation for the train about to rush by. The screech of the steam whistle was the grand finale. The whistle would blow four times as the engine rolled through town. It would pierce through the air making the window panes hum and the photo frame on the wall shake. The other photo frames had jostled off of their mounts, but my favorite photo of mother Jane and me has managed to cling to its spot on the wall all this time.

Mother and I would always dance and sing while we played in the garden. We would eat sweet peas fresh off of the plant and carrots right out of the ground. After we were done working in the garden for the day, Mother would play music for us on the patio and we would

dance, covered in dirt and sweat until our feet were sore. She would grab my hands and twirl me around until I was dizzy. I loved watching Mother’s long, auburn curls swirl around her like flames while she spun me. Her eyes were always glimmering and happy.

“As the train got closer the glasses in the cupboard and the silverware in the drawers would start to jingle and bump against each other. All of the creaking and clanging would come together in a symphony of anticipation for the train about to rush by.”

After our dancing that day we lay down in between the rows of blooming flowers and almost-ripe vegetables to rest. Father heard us giggling and brought little Jane out to lie with us. The three of us sat, soaking up the July sun and watching the fluffy clouds pass over us. We were so busy deciphering the shapes in the sky we didn’t notice Father take our picture. The flash from his new Minolta startled us into another fit of giggles. Father was so proud of that camera; he would go through roll after roll of film shooting everything he saw. He was a photojournalist. He brought us here a few years back so he could document the building of the rails throughout this part of the country. He took photos of us in the garden until the sun went down, then disappeared into the cellar to develop them.

Several hours later I heard Father trudging back up the creaky cellar steps, expecting him to have a whole stack of new photos to show off; he had only one. He rushed over to the wall opposite of where Jane and I were playing and took all the other photo frames down to position the new one as the focal point of the collage. After Father arranged all the old photographs around his newest masterpiece, he called Mother into the room to admire the new arrangement. The photograph was of Mother, Jane, and me giggling and pointing at the cloud figures in the sky; it was our favorite photo Father had ever taken. Jane was lying across Mother's lap in a heap of laughter with her beautiful waist-length braids whisking around in the breeze. Mother had her head thrown back, eyes closed, enjoying the rays of sun soaking into her skin. I was lying on the ground beside the two of them, my feet kicked up in the air in a fit of laughter.

The next month Father left on another photo assignment to document the new rails in the northwestern part of the country. Four months into his assignment, we received a letter that Father had been involved in a derailment and was one of the fifty men unaccounted for. That same winter Mother became sick. Her beautiful ruby hair I had always admired started to turn a ghostly silver, and her big eyes lost the glow that always made me smile.

Now when spring rolls around there are no flowers or vegetables in the garden, just a ghost town of brown and dried up stalks, wilted flower remnants, and wild weeds. There is no more music or dancing on the patio and no more searching for familiar shapes or faces in the sky. The one thing that remains the same is the way our home comes alive when a train is on its way.

“Mother had her head thrown back, eyes closed, enjoying the rays of sun soaking into her skin. I was lying on the ground beside the two of them, my feet kicked up in the air in a fit of laughter.”

Now when the floor boards start to tremble and tickle my feet, I pretend its father tickling me like he used to when he got home from a day of work. When the trinkets start their race I close my eyes and imagine father cheering on his favorite teacup. The jingling from the silverware in the drawer and glasses bumping together in the cupboard reminds me of the sounds of Father and Mother washing and putting away the dishes together every night. When the steam whistle sounds I watch that photo on the wall to make sure it doesn't tumble to the ground like all the others. After all this time I can't believe it still holds its spot without even the slightest disturbance; I think it must be father holding it in its place.

“Farewell Trip”

Lisa Melchert

My husband Mitch and I have traveled to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, every other year for ten years now. Just looking at this picture brings vivid memories of that precise moment when the click and the flash of the camera occurred. The golden and burnt orange sunset behind me was simply breathtaking. Dressed up for a night out at the all-inclusive resort, it appears we are in paradise without a care in the world. The smiles and the embrace reveal the love that is shared between us. The ocean is far off in the background, but I can remember hearing the sound of it. The water in the immediate background was an overflowing pool on the fourth floor that fed a constant waterfall to the ground below. It was simply gorgeous! But there is so much more to this picture, the preparation, the posing, and the thoughts hidden behind our elated faces.

Out of the blue, Mitch said that since we were dressing up for dinner we should get our picture taken from the photo studio. At the time I thought, “Why in the world would we do that?” It was very out of character for him, but I agreed wholeheartedly. On trips past, we had simply asked a passerby to take our photo. Was his intention to give me this memory? This beautiful background, with us as the centerpiece? Those are the things I cannot tell you about this picture, such as the unspoken thoughts and intentions of a man who is severely disabled from a disease called Multiple Sclerosis.

I posed him here looking strong and supporting; it took hours to get him ready for the picture. Between getting him dressed, and endless hurdles, bathroom breaks, resting, it was much work, but we captured the perfect memory of our last trip to Mexico.

“But there is so much more to this picture, the preparation, the posing, and the thoughts hidden behind our elated faces.”

I do not enjoy shopping, but we both needed something fresh and new for this trip. We had gone to a mall in Des Moines the week prior. It is not often I spent money on anything for myself, having four daughters and a limited income. I hit the sale racks in several stores and had no luck. At the final store, I had a handful of sale dresses, but my daughter grabbed a dress and said it was “me.” I added it to the back of the stack. I tried on everything down to the last dress, with no luck, and then I slid into the one my daughter was so eager for me to love. I adjusted and turned to the mirror and the girls and I said, “Yes! This is the dress!” I proceeded to look at the price tag and it was \$100. I instantly said no and began taking it off. Mitch, hearing all the hubbub from outside the dressing room, convinced me to at least let him see it. I stepped out of the dressing room and he started to cry.

He said, "Get it."

I said, "It is \$100."

Tears flowing from his eyes, he said, "Buy that dress, it is beautiful on you."

After much debate, the dress came home with me. This is the dress I am wearing in the photograph.

Mitch's coral-colored shirt that was purchased for this trip would not slide on over his uncompliant arms that were tight from the Multiple Sclerosis. His shorts were an equal battle with his legs locking and convulsing. He was unable to stand so I could pull the shorts up. Exhausted from the process, I allowed him to rest a bit before I began to put on his shoes and socks. I transferred him into bed and without delay his worn-out, afflicted body surrendered to sleep.

I started to reflect on many things. I thought back to the initial symptoms of Mitch's Multiple Sclerosis. I thought about the weeks his left foot began to lag, with the naive thoughts that it was probably just a pinched nerve in his back. After multiple falls and deterioration of the use of his left arm, Mitch finally agreed to go to the doctor. He was instantly referred to a neurologist in Iowa City. He was losing ability very rapidly. One morning he was unable to button a button.

Within the next few weeks his trips over cracks in the sidewalk became falls. Because he had progressed so rapidly they diagnosed him initially with Lou Gehrig's disease. It wasn't until over a year later that they found the clues in his spinal fluid that gave him the label of Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis. This is a severely

degenerative disease that is caused by damage to the myelin sheath of the nerves. There is nothing to stop it, or repair it.

"A funny thing happens when there is a conscious known life expectancy. A person has an entire shift in thinking . . . an awareness of things that were never before important. A much higher value is placed on every month, week, or minute."

Within three years he was in a wheelchair full time and the doctors informed us that his life expectancy will be three to five years after reaching that point. At the time of this trip to Mexico, he had been in a wheelchair full time for over three years.

A funny thing happens when there is a conscious known life expectancy. A person has an entire shift in thinking. With Mitch I could see a softening of his heart. There is an awareness of things that were never before important. A much higher value is placed on every month, week, or minute.

As Mitch's wife, the clock ticked as annoyingly in my mind as it does his. All of his years of working long days with no time to enjoy family shifted most immediately into open days, but with the lack of physical ability to participate. As much as I tried to repress the thoughts of the different steps of this disease and his inevitable death, it was constantly in my mind. I felt scared even in the calmness of the night, as I lay awake listening to his irregular breathing. There is no escape from this monster I have labeled Multiple Sclerosis. It follows me into the laundry room as I soaked soiled clothing. It follows me to the

store as I search for soft foods to feed him so he doesn't choke. It haunts me as I bring my already tired, unrested body to the fitness center every morning at 5 a.m. so that I can continue to get stronger to pick him up and care for him in our home. It follows me to the mailbox as I receive information on Living Wills, and DNR orders. No matter where I try to seek reprieve from this disease and the loss associated with it, it is impossible to find.

I remember sitting in the hotel room, watching him sleep. There were no phones ringing, no children beckoning me to cook, and no girls needing their hair braided. Just silence, with the faint, rhythmic sound of the waves coming through the sliding glass doors. It is not often I let myself "think." I live in mother mode and wife mode. The only time I consider reality is during the wee hours of the night. My mind instantly races to our four daughters: Allison, seventeen; Mallory, Fifteen; Holly, Seven; and Allyssa, four. I have homeschooled them all throughout. On top of being responsible for their education, I have to earn the income for my family. All of the girls are dual-enrolled with the public school system for athletics and music, so we were constantly running. But today . . . today, I had idle minutes. I allowed my mind to wander. To wander to the deep stuff. The stuff that subconsciously gets hidden so that everyday life will continue.

With the gate to my mind wide open and with no one to judge or condemn or pity me, I began to daydream. I looked at other couples and couldn't help but feel that this was unfair, or that I have been deprived or robbed. My plan was to have a strong, healthy man who I would grow old loving and making memories with. I want to be silly, play, tease and run with him. I

crave his 6'4" broad-shouldered frame standing tall, his arms wrapping around me. I long for the intimacy that can only be given by my husband. I desire it as I desire the air I breathe and the food that nourishes me. And in this tropical paradise, with the warm breeze, and the smell of the ocean taunting me, I deem myself a victim and allow several tears to fall.

These are dangerous grounds. But with Mitch's mouth hanging open in his deep slumber, I think about the life I used to anticipate. With four daughters, there will be father-daughter dances, and a proud father walking his girls down the aisle. Mitch was a star athlete, so he was "supposed" to be throwing balls and coaching their teams to the championships. Grandchildren, anniversaries, growing old, going for walks hand-in-hand with the love of my life. Not being . . . a widow.

Constant twitches from the impaired body on the bed in front of me put me back on guard. If he were to see tears of sadness or fear, especially when I have painted the illusion of complete felicity on this vacation, it would be heartbreaking for him. I compose myself immediately, wiping forbidden tears away and stepping out of the weak state I was in. I poise myself with strength that comes from who knows where. I will forge on for this man.

Finally, Mitch awakens. We proceed directly to the photographer. It was obvious that the photographer did not deal with handicapped people very often, because every potential site was an impossibility. I finally say, "The ocean... could you take us to a place where we can see the ocean?" And here we landed. The sound of the ocean is my favorite sound on this earth. On this vacation I longed to feel the water on

my toes and the hot sand on my feet, the roar of the mighty ocean, and the waves striking me. This trip had not yet included any ocean play, no romantic stroll down the beach, hand in hand while the sun was setting. My husband's electric wheelchair was not able to go in the sand. I was so close, yet so far away from the ocean. The sound alone was soothing, but it left a longing.

***“The air is feeling cooler now,
coming off of the water. It is as if I
had stepped off the wooden prison of
the boardwalk into a new land!”***

All a person can tell from that moment in time is that we looked happy and in love. But the reality is this: His arm that is wrapped around my leg had to be physically placed there. It is not a soft, warm touch. His muscles are rigid and tired and heavy. His legs have constant, uncontrollable spasms and were literally bouncing underneath me. He was uncomfortable and I was uncomfortable, but we sacrificed our comfort to create this keepsake.

If you could see what was going through my mind while I smiled and sat lightly upon the feeble lap of my husband, it would reveal, “this will be our last trip here together. This picture will be the ‘Farewell to Mexico’ picture.”

I was happy and thankful for our time together. But you won't see the sadness I was hiding, or the desire for the story of this picture to be different. A part of me was also excited for the mere chance to have a souvenir in hand to share with family and friends upon our return to Iowa to show everyone how “perfect” it was. Maybe I could even trick my own eye and

remember it a little bit more perfect than it was. A married couple, husband and wife, not caretaker and disabled man. The illusion created in this photograph is that of a man and a woman who are in love and sharing an amazing getaway to Mexico. But the memory of the trip is that of being a woman in a foreign country, responsible for the well-being and safety of herself and a full-grown man with no physical abilities.

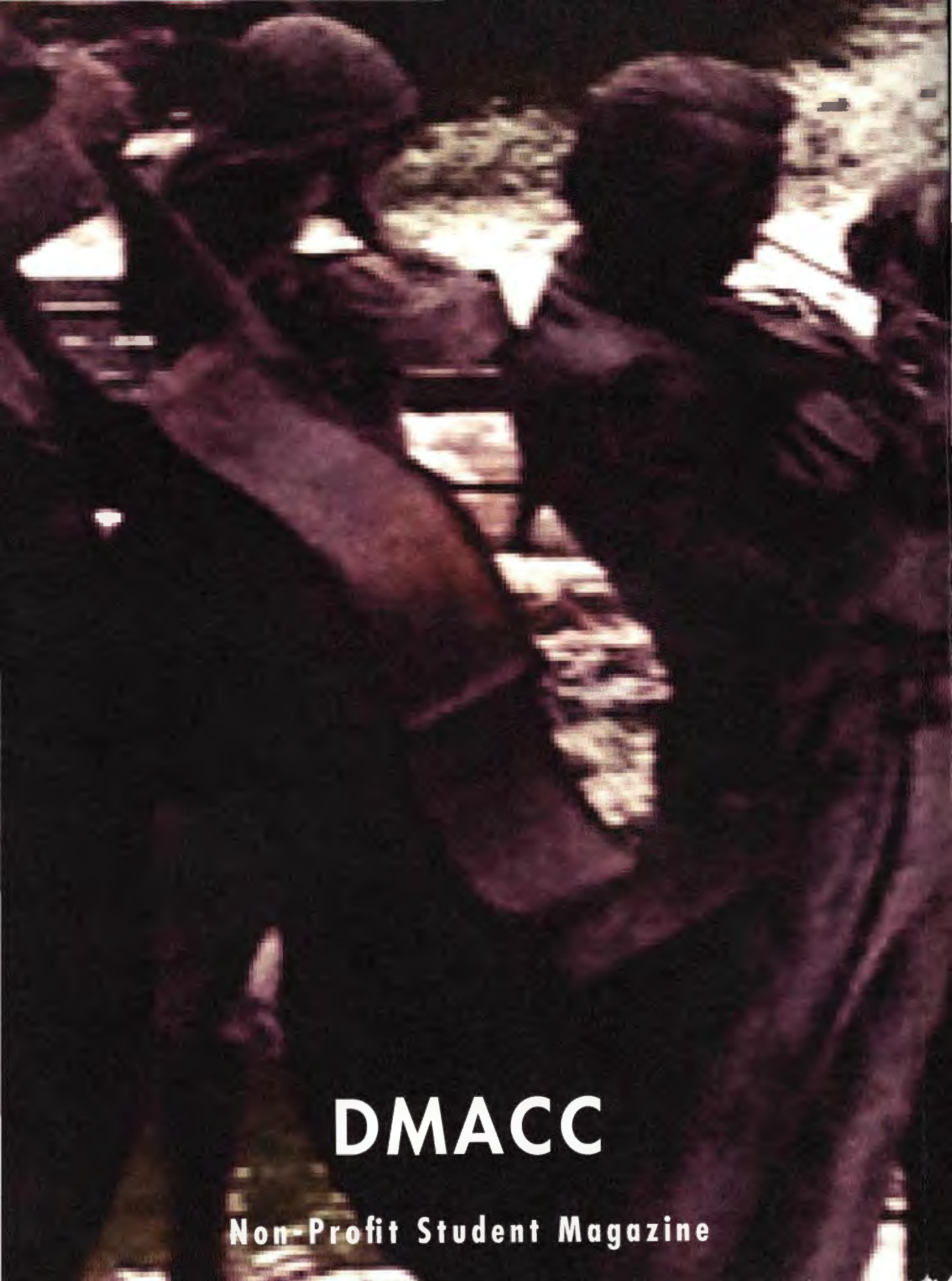
Finally, I slip the sandals from my feet and drop them on the edge of the wooden boardwalk, the boundary line for his electric wheelchair. I step down into the soft, silky white sand. I unthinkingly drop my possessions and begin to run to the ocean. The air is feeling cooler now, coming off of the water. It is as if I had stepped off the wooden prison of the boardwalk into a new land! For this brief moment everything is forgotten, not a care in the world. Just me and the omnipotent body of water before me.

The tide pulls the water back to reveal the flat, untouched wet sand, with tips of ivory seashells pecking through. So I stand with my feet sinking in the cold, wet sand. I patiently await the rush of the tide to return. It arrives. I sink further down in the sand. Reunited. I soak up every sensation, every smell, every feeling, and every sound. I listen to the seagulls as they dance around the sky immediately above my head. Then I hear a faint calling of my name. A louder plea for my attention awakens me.

I open my eyes and sit up in the dark hotel room. I massage the leg cramp from Mitch's spasming leg and readjust him. I turn and look out the sliding glass door and listen to the distant sound of the ocean.



Illustration: Patty Adams-Richards



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