

2019

Expressions 2019

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Ben Matthews

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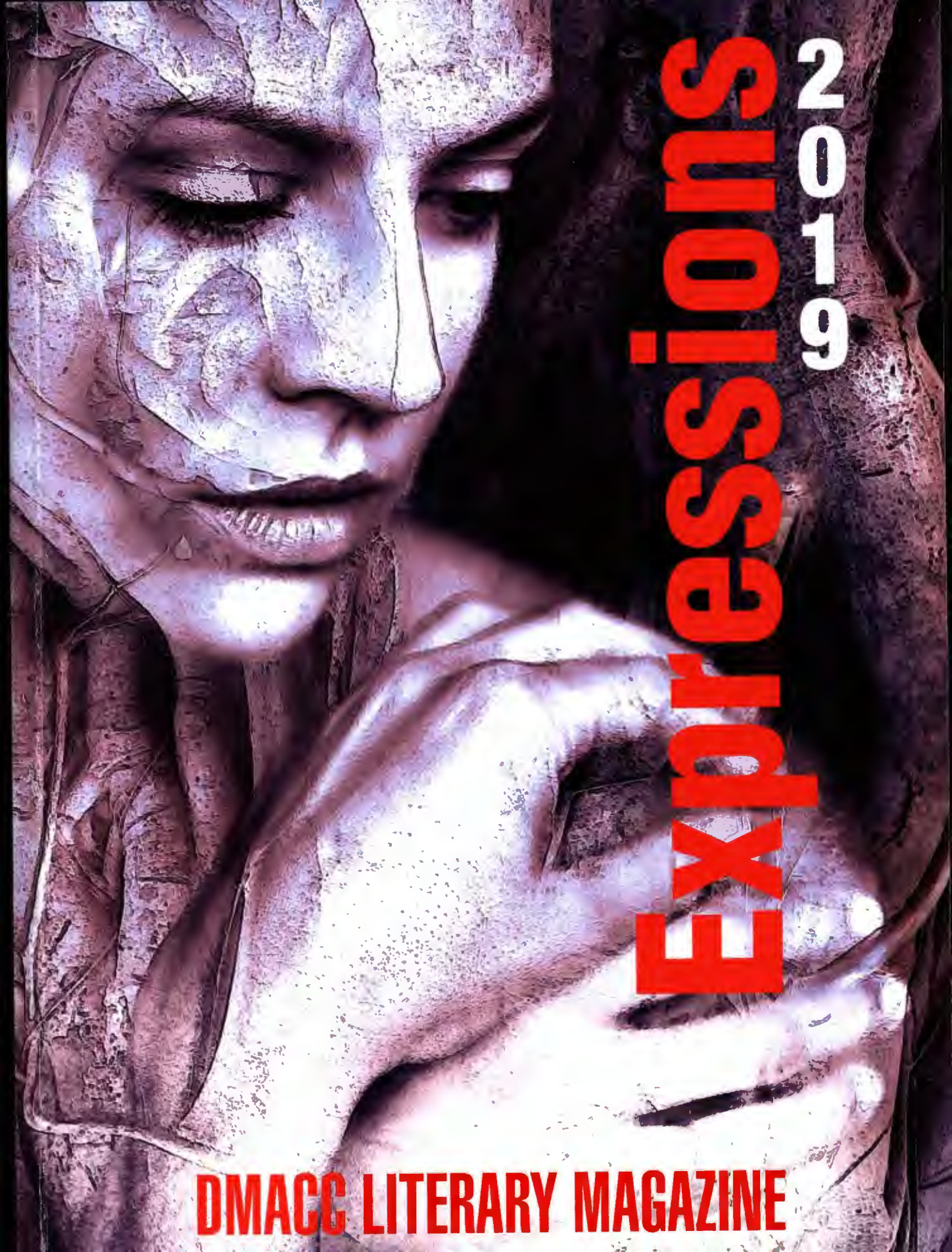
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Expressions

2019

DMACC LITERARY MAGAZINE



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Overall Scholarship Winners

1st Place: Timothy Stammeyer (\$1,000 scholarship)

2nd Place: Harlan Grant (\$500 scholarship)

Poetry

1st Place: Jalesha Johnson (\$100 Cash prize)

2nd Place: Rachel Lease (\$50 Cash prize)

3rd Place: Michele Cooley (\$25 Cash prize)

Prose (Fiction/Creative Non-fiction)

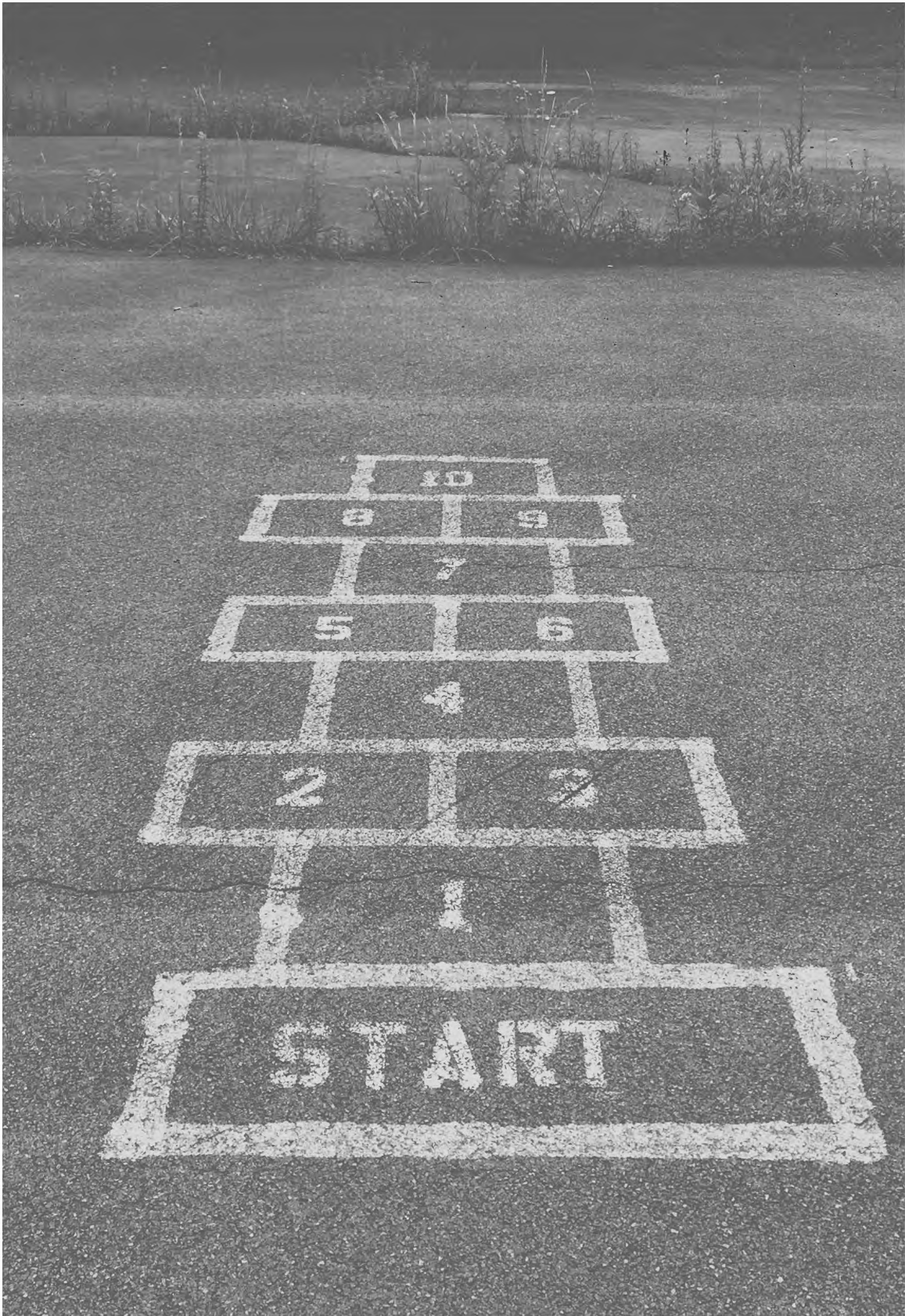
1st Place: Jordan Roubion (\$100 Cash prize)

2nd Place: Ben Matthews (\$50 Cash prize)

3rd Place: Cale Edgington (\$25 Cash prize)

Honorable Mention

Alexandra K. Griffin



“Things I have Heard About Boys”

Rachel Lease

*My father tells me he was a boy too once,
That he knows what lies behind their hungry eyes.
When I ask him what he did as a boy for him to warn me against them he murmurs something about
chasing and skirts.
I wonder what runaway laundry has to do with mens' appetites.*

*My mother tells me that boys are not kind for kindness sake.
That they expect to be able to trade it in later, like arcade tickets for a piece of you.
I am cautious when accepting their kindness now,
lest they ask for a lung.*

*My brother tells me I am the only girl he talks to, the rest have cooties, all girls his age do.
I think it must be a new strain.
When I was young only boys had it.*

*My lover tells me I am perfect.
That he will stay with me for as long as I wish,
I wonder if I should be careful what I wish for.
After all, boys are known to chase windblown fabric,
And steal bits of flesh,
And infect girls.*



“The Bohemian”

Ben Matthews

As Matt drove up the pavement, he noted that the name “Paradise Inn” did not accurately describe the hotel that sat before him. The sign, portraying a small cartoony island with a single palm tree behind the lettering, suggested a relaxing, clean tropical getaway. Behind the marketing was an overwhelmingly average Midwestern roadside hotel. Two levels, around 50 rooms, and a worn out tan color palette. The placement of the hotel was rather brilliant, as a thick line of trees surrounded the establishment, leaving only the sign in clear view. Matt thought of it as an anglerfish luring it’s unsuspecting prey into its teeth with its warm glow. Except in this case it was luring unsuspecting travelers with a decent night’s sleep and instead giving them overpriced rooms with stiff mattresses.

But who complained? A bed was a bed, and a room was a room, and that’s all Matt needed. Fortunately, the parking lot was mostly vacant, most likely due to the fact that the hour was almost 1 in the morning on a Thursday. After Matt emptied the trunk of his car of his single bag of luggage, he paid for a single bed room and asked for a phone book. Tucking the worn book under his left arm, and carrying his duffel bag in his other hand, he marched up to his room on the second floor. He stopped at room 47 and unlocked the door.

He determined that friendships were only gonna slow him down, and he should commit 100% of his time to the perfection of his craft.

If the hotel was predictable, the room itself was even more so, almost painfully predictable. It met the standard requirements of a hotel room: Single bed, small desk, telephone, dresser, dim lamp sitting on nightstand, and a bathroom. The room matched the colors of the exterior and lobby perfectly, the

only difference being the bedsheets were an ugly shade of olive green. Matt determined that despite the lack of any form of originality, the predictability would work for the night. He set his bag in the corner of the room, tossed the phone book onto the desk, and opened it up. Taking the phone in one hand, he flipped through the pages with the other.

After a few minutes of searching, he found what he was looking for.

Soon, he found himself talking to a Latino man on the other side of the phone.

“Mary Sue Escort Services, how may I help you tonight?”

“Uh, yes, I’m at the Paradise Inn on 35th. And I was wondering if... You know...”

Someone could... Um... Come to my room? I’m sorry, I’ve never done this before.” Matt

stammered like a 12 year old asking if he could be let into the adult section of the movie store.

“Not a problem sir.” The Latino man didn’t seem to mind. Or care. “Do you prefer a man or woman”

“Um, woman.”

“Alright, and do you have any specific preferences for your escort? Age, race, hair color?”

That sort of thing.”

The man’s voice practically seeped with forced enthusiasm like a greasy piece of pizza.

“Um, I don’t really care... Redhead, I guess.”

After a few more questions about directions and about 20 more minutes of waiting, there was a knock at the door. When Matt looked through the peephole, sure enough, he saw a 25-year-old redhead. She

put on a forced smile as he opened the door. She told him her name was Nicki.

Matt noted that she didn't look like a prostitute due to her clothes being rather normal; jeans, red-collared shirt, black shoes and a matching cheap black leather purse. Matt led her inside and she

immediately sat down on the edge of the bed.

"So, whatcha got in mind?" she asked, her temptress impression just as forced as her smile.

"Uhh... So, it's kind of weird... I mean, not as weird as I'm sure you've experienced..."

Matt avoided looking at her and immediately went to his bag. Turning his back towards her, he opened up his luggage and pulled out a large, sky blue binder. He turned and handed it to her, wordlessly commanding her to take it. She did so, and opened it up. The first page was blank except for the words in the middle of the page.

"The War at Home" Written by Matt Gunnar."

"What is this?" Her persona dropped quickly as it had come.

"It's a screenplay." Matt rubbed the back of his neck, scratching the itch that wasn't there.

"It's kind of a script."

"Like... for a movie?"

"Yeah, exactly! For a movie!"

"Well, what do you want me to do with it?"

"I just want you to read it. And when you're finished, just tell me what you think of it."

Matt smiled for the first time that night, letting her know he was aware at how weird the whole situation was, but at the same time saying he wasn't weird.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Well, whatever gets ya off." She smiled, more genuinely this time, and opened to the first page.

"Um, what's INT mean?"

"Oh right, that means "interior." And EXT means "exterior." Matt explained. Nicki nodded in understanding and began reading to herself. Matt stared at her for a moment, not necessarily expecting a reaction this early, but enjoying the sight of someone reading his work.

Nicki noticed him staring and looked at him.

"Do you want me to read it out loud?" she asked.

"Oh, no. No! You can read it to yourself. Just, when you're done, tell me if you enjoyed it or not."

Nicki, once again, silently took her orders and went on reading. Matt stood around for a moment, not wanting to stare again.

"Do you have any other questions?" he asked.

"No, I think I got it. How long is this though?"

"It's only about 100 pages."

"Gotcha." She registered as she flipped the page. After what felt like a decade of awkwardly pacing the room, Matt grabbed his coat.

But there was this one girl. A girl named Liz. She wrote her phone number in his book, with a four simple words attached to the end: "Call me this summer."

"I'm gonna go get some coffee. You want some?" he asked, figuring it was the least he could do besides pay her.

“I’m good, thank you,” she said with a smile, her first genuine smile.

Matt gave a little smile back and stepped back into the hallway.

Across the street from the hotel was the brilliantly named “Paradise Diner.” He wondered if the two happened to be connected, rival businesses, or just a case of coincidental naming.

The interior reminded Matt of the beginning of *Pulp Fiction*; he almost expected Amanda Plummer and Tim Roth to be sitting in one of the booths.

Matt didn’t really need coffee, he just needed an excuse to leave. Despite enjoying the sight so someone reading his stories, he still found it uncomfortable to be in the same room as them. Especially whenever they were workshopping. The clock on the wall read 1:48 AM. He figured he’d head back around 2:30. Until then, he sat at one of the booths and ordered an omelette. Early breakfast, he told himself.

Matt rubbed his eyes and looked at the reflection of himself in the window. He hadn’t slept in what felt like days, evident by the grey bags that hung under his eyes like an outlaw hanging from the noose. He had to be in Chicago by Friday afternoon. He’d already driven what felt like a full 48 hours, and he still had another five or six more of driving if he wanted to be on time. His agent, Logan, wanted to meet him in person to discuss selling the script. Matt wasn’t sure why now meet face to face and not the other times they discussed scripts, but Matt didn’t question it to much. Logan knew best, he was told, and for the most part, he believed it.

He knew he shouldn’t complain. He was 21 years old and he got paid to write scripts for Hollywood. Something every kid in his old writing classes would

have killed for. What they never told him in his creative writing classes was the other benefits that came with the job: sleepless nights, deep and unnecessary research, and constant stress. But hey, he was writing stories. Maybe this one would actually get made into a movie, he told himself.

The waitress finally came with his omelet, along with a glass of chocolate milk. As he chowed down, he finally looked around at the other patrons. Other than the two men sitting in the corner booth (one of whom looked like a hobo), Matt was completely alone. He was reminded of the agreement he made with himself in middle school. He determined that friendships were only gonna slow him down, and he should commit 100% of his time to the perfection of his craft. And he followed that rule all the way through high school.

He finished off his meal and stood up, wishing to push the memories out of his unconscious. The clock now read 2:16. Deciding that was good enough time as any, he paid and left. The meal was mediocre at best, but much like the hotel and the room, it would do for tonight. *Roll with the punches*, his dad used to say. He said it so much that Matt ended up using it as a catchphrase for one of his characters in his previous script; a tragicomedy about a toxic friendship called “*Water Under the Bridge*.” He started his short trek back to his room, sticking his hands into the pocket of his blue, baggy sweatshirt.

Suddenly, a memory came back to him. A memory he hadn’t thought of in years. He wasn’t sure why it came back at just that moment, as he thought it really didn’t relate to the situation at hand.

On the last day of eighth grade, Matt had handed his yearbook around to his fellow classmates so they could sign it. Most of the kids wrote simple goodbyes without a whole lot of passion put into them. But there was this one girl. A girl named Liz. She wrote her phone number in his book, with a four simple words attached to the end: “Call me this summer.”

Matt remembered how he felt the rest of the day. The strange mixture of both joy and terror. He never knew it was even possible for someone besides his parents to love him, let alone a girl in his class. He was happy that she'd reached out to him, but the only problem was he'd never been in love before. And he wasn't sure if what he felt towards Liz was love.

He didn't know what to do. He couldn't ask his parents for advice since they'd just gotten the divorce, so they were no help on love. He didn't know if he should call her. He didn't know if he should thank her for the note but explain that he didn't like her that much. He didn't know if he should mention that he didn't know she even existed until that day. He didn't know what to do.

So he didn't do any of it, and he never called her. He never saw her over the summer, and he never saw her in high school, so he just assumed she'd moved on. But as he stood outside his room at 2:19 in the morning, he thought more about that idea. He had done the right thing by not calling her, he told himself. It was better to not be loved than be loved improperly.

Matt pushed the thoughts away and opened the door. Much to his surprise, he found Nicki exactly where he'd left her. None of his bags appeared to be rummaged through, and she looked about 20 pages away from finishing the script. She acknowledged his presence by nodding in his direction, and he murmured a soft greeting. He stayed near the door, as he didn't want to hover over her like before. Not knowing what to do with himself, he began bobbing his knees up and down in a sort of dance but with no rhythm or song to go along with it. She didn't seem to notice and kept on reading.

Finally, she flipped to the last page. Quickly scrolling through it, she closed the binder, sat it on her lap, and looked up at him.

"So, what'd ya think?" Matt asked, a hint of optimistic hope in his voice.

"It was good," was all she said.

Matt wasn't sure what to say next, so he stared at her for an uncomfortably long time.

"Good?" Matt finally mustered the word out. "That's it?"

"I mean It was well written, I guess." Her voice and tone didn't offer much.

"Yeah, but Did you enjoy it?"

"I gotta be honest with you man," Nicki set the binder on the bed. "I don't watch movies that much. And even if I did, this just isn't my kind of movie."

"Well, at the very least, did you find anything wrong with the story?" A slight sign of distress started to seep into his voice. "Where there any plot holes or any choices that didn't make any sense?"

"I know there's something in here that ruins the story and no one will tell me what it is!"

"There weren't any I could find." Nicki shrugged. Matt sat down at the edge of the bed, looking like her words were some sort of terrible news.

"Look, I'm sorry if that's not what you wanted to hear." Her voice showed annoyance.

"If you wanted someone to tell you what's wrong with your story, don't you have an editor or something like that?"

"I do have an editor." His voice was quieter than before. "My whole family's a bunch of writers. So my dad set me up with his editor and he already critiqued it. He said it was great. So then I took it to my parent and they said it was great."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"No, it's not!" He raised his voice as he stood from the bed. "An editor should tell you what's wrong with the writing, and I know that there's something wrong with my story. The problem is that I can't figure out what it is, and no one will tell me what it is! But I know why that is! Everyone I've asked to review it knows me! They know I'm young and they wanna

be supportive. So they don't give me any bad reviews thinking it won't discourage me! But they need to tell me what's wrong with it! Every story has some sort of issue with it that keeps people from taking it seriously! Some decision or plot hole that ruins the whole movie! And I know there's something in here that ruins the story and no one will tell me what it is! So that's why I needed you to review it. A complete stranger who knows nothing about me to tell me what is wrong with me!!"

He stood for a moment in silence; bug eyed, breathing heavily and in need of some Tylenol. Nicki didn't know what to say at first.

"I . . . I'm sorry I couldn't do that for you."

Matt hated himself even more so. He wanted to apologize. Apologize for wasting her time and asking her to do what he should have known she wasn't qualified to do. Instead, he avoided eye contact and said six words:

"I'd like you to leave now."

Nicki grabbed her purse and Matt paid her for her time. She offered to do something to possibly help with his nerves, but he politely declined. Just as she was about to leave to room, she turned around and looked at him. He still avoided her eyes.

"You know, like I said, I don't know anything about writing or movies, so you can take this with a grain of salt if you like. But, if everyone's telling you that you're a good writer..

Maybe you're just a good writer."

Matt said nothing. And with that she was gone.



“Water Child”

Timothy Stammeyer

*They call me water child
on the borderline
by the riverside
where tadpoles jive
and swim around
sounding*

*Maybe it's instinct
They swim born again
sprouting like plants morphing
with roots refusing to latch
I attach
and can't decide to pity or praise
or catch one to prove it*

*They call me shadow child
on the borderline
dressed in cotton guile
the smile of the generation
the veil of dictation
voicing something*

*in a whisper
like crystal
saying
“Life is worth the living.”*

*They call me bright light
on the borderline
in the night fading
a speck on the horizon
illuminated by moonlight
stardust on the taillight*

*of an American car
I shifted*

*They call me death's fight
on the borderline
'cause I won't go down easy
the bridge top's getting breezy
I start to hold my breath
like a child going through a tunnel
a funnel of tides turning*

*I jump
a plop of
tadpoles jiving*

*They call me
call me
me*

*With drums still ringing
they're singing
"yo ho, heave ho
Life is worth the living."*



“American Ambrotype”

Harlan Grant

I first encountered Frasier McKinley in the small, mud-caked town of Winslow, Arizona. He had recently finished an especially gruesome three-month holiday in Mexico City and was on the return trip home to his native Colorado. I myself was an aspiring writer wandering the desolate West in an attempt to find that miracle inspiration supposedly haunting this part of the country. In the course of my travels I had witnessed many things defined by both auspicious beauty and terrible anguish yet my stories did not come. I remained too much of an outsider. Despite travelling the depths of the Inferno, I viewed it all as if through a fogged glass, unable to grasp or understand the tormented shapes writhing on the other side. In Frasier McKinley I found my Virgil. A veteran of the American experience he had not just seen the worst this new land had to offer, he was an active participant in its horrors.

I had stumbled into town quite by accident. My horse, a withered and wheezing product of multi-generational inbreeding, fell dead quite suddenly while I was riding through a barren patch of land at midday. I might have been crushed beneath the brute had he been of healthy build. As it was, I instead crawled out from beneath him and made my way to the nearest settlement in hopes of acquiring a new means of transport.

...for God, in his wisdom, has yet to ever send one of his agents to guide me. Instead, the cynical spirits of destiny and doom sent Frasier McKinley on the back of a one-eyed, midnight black stallion.

Coming into Winslow late that same evening, I found myself blanched and gasping from the desert sun. The saloon was simple enough to find as it appeared to be the only inhabited building in the scant village. Heaving my exhausted form through

the swinging doors I sat at the splintered bar to order a cool refreshment. To my right a wrinkled man in torn denim breeches and faded cotton shirtsleeves lay face down on the counter. I considered prodding him to ascertain how much life, if any, remained in his sunken frame but immediately thought better of it. I sat for a while, sipping my drink and pondering my situation. I had been in worse circumstances and in far more hostile locations throughout this sordid pilgrimage but my Eastern optimism was beginning to wane. Slowly, I sank into a deep whiskey induced depression.

As a boy in Rhode Island I was often told, “not until we are at our lowest does the angel of mercy appear”. I would know nothing of that however, for God, in his wisdom, has yet to ever send one of his agents to guide me. Instead, the cynical spirits of destiny and doom sent Frasier McKinley on the back of a one-eyed, midnight black stallion.

The sun had been snuffed for an hour, yet in the tavern I loyally remained. I was now certain the old man beside me had expired but I ignored the casualty, not wishing to become involved in the affairs of a local cadaver. Behind the bar hung a framed photograph which had occupied the greater portion of my attention for much of the visit. The picture was of thirteen very ordinary looking men in the Western style. Each wore their own wide brimmed plains hat, drooping risibly towards their shoulders as if newly wet. They all stared blankly forward with the same stoic stone faces which I had come to recognize and accept as part of the Western landscape. Six in front kneeled, one knee in the dust, as the remaining seven stood erect directly behind, some with hands upon the shoulders of the genuflecting as if to push them deeper into the dirt.

Overall, it was a miserable decoration and would have likely gone unnoticed if not for its vivid pigmentation. The photographer must have been one of the talented few who had adopted the relatively new technique of hand coloring photographs. I had seen this done on a few occasions and once even witnessed the process firsthand, but never had I beheld a photograph that so shamelessly crossed into the realms of garish. In place of the typical blots of sepia red and rusted brown, there were thirteen vibrant yellow faces nestled into bright blue and green shirt collars all lined with silvery buttons. Speckles of sunset orange dotted the ground, making the street appear rich with California gold. The sky above was a shadowy purple, so thick it seemed likely to collapse under its own weight and crush the gaudy models. The image was mesmerizing in both its pure intensity and abysmal disregard for natural appearances. I had been studying it for nearly two hours.

The man was now conspicuously drunk, his emotionless grey eyes were frosted and unblinking. More than once I was certain he would spill off of his stool.

“Unusual piece of ornamentation, is it not?” The voice came to me as a rifle shot beside my ear, so unexpected was its presence. In my bewilderment I turned to see a beleaguered looking fellow locked inside a grey duster. He had appeared in silence like an apparition and for how long he had been alongside me I had no way to judge. Savoring two slow pulls from a clay decanter he waited as I attempted to regain my bearings.

“Yes- yes, it is quite peculiar. I wouldn’t expect working men in this area to dress in such dazzling apparel.”

He bellowed at this. A low, drawn out moan of a laugh. I was reminded suddenly of the imprisoned apes at the Providence Zoo, whose misshapen faces so terrified me as a child.

“Well, that’s just it, is it not?” He lifted a sanded down finger towards the photograph, prodding at a

slender man in a painfully blue shield-front. “That scrawny bastard in the back is Elmo Pines and I can tell you beyond a reasonable doubt that he never owned a shirt that wasn’t hog-mess brown.”

It was my turn to laugh now, certainly there was a mistake. “That man is Elmo Pines? He’s one of the richest men in California. He must own a quarter of the territory and a third- a half! -of the cattle.”

“Times change, do they not? The Elmo of yesterday is not the Mr. Pines of today. Probably owns shirts in thirty different colors now. But the day that photograph was taken he was just another half suicidal prospector out for his share of river gold. He certainly found it- made his fortune almost overnight. Did it all wearing brown, too.” The stranger took another long pull from the decanter. I was rather speechless and could only wait for my new acquaintance to continue.

“Truth be told, I was in town the day that color-blind picture taker immortalized those boys. Just coincidence, I wasn’t here to pose, there was some work to do and I was near good enough to do it.”

The man was now conspicuously drunk, his emotionless grey eyes were frosted and unblinking. More than once I was certain he would spill off of his stool. As a writer of stories, I am always willing to listen to a drunkard for they have a wonderful facility for both vivid honesty and self-serving embellishment.

He continued after a moment, apparently trying to recall where in his story he had left off. “My horse had two eyes at that time and I was slightly well regarded. Not highly valued, but recognized for my accomplishments, few as they were. Anyhow, I rode through town atop my duel eyed partner and saw this curious little crowd forming at the end of the road. Well, I sally up and there’s Elmo and those other boys in their dung stained overalls trying to act like they were raised civil, posing in front of that picture man. They were heading out to California the next morning and wanted something to commemorate their last night in Winslow.”

The stranger began to laugh again, that same ugly animal sound. "So, I shout out over the crowd, 'The hell you doing, Elmo? Every damn person west of the Mississippi knows you was raised in a barn by a pack of hogs, ain't no use putting on appearances now.' And he shouts back, 'Frasier McKinley, if I wanted your opinion--"

His face was growing red with fondness for the memory but I had to stop him here, as my excitement suddenly rose exponentially.

"Frasier McKinley? You share a name with the outlaw McKinley?" I had been hunting for outlaws in my travels but had found that they were considerably rarer than my Eastern newspapers would have had me believe. "Is he a relation of yours?"

The man looked amused, "A very close relation, in fact. We share a mother. Been together my whole life; could say we're shackled at the soul. We are indeed bound to our identities, are we not?"

I understood now his meaning. "You claim to be The Frasier McKinley?"

"I do," he said this with a cold seriousness as if it was frequently asked and he tired of its repetition.

"But you look nothing like him." I examined the fleshy, bland face hanging loosely from this man's skull. His head was virtually hairless and one temple so badly scarred the eyebrow was nearly gone, leaving a smooth patch of flesh from ear to nose. The great grey coat he wore was punctured in several places and the buttons clasping it loosely together were all diverse sizes and shapes. He looked as all nobodies look- undistinguished, trodden upon. Not at all like the man I envisioned, who was quick in both hand and devastating rejoinder.

"You've met him before?"

"No, of course not." My frustrations swelled. "But I've seen the portraits, the- the wanted posters or however they are referred to. He is depicted as roguish yet refined, dressed all in black but for a red jewel which sits imbedded in the center of his Stetson.

And not to mention the hair, perfectly oiled. On its own, that famously coiled moustache of his sets him apart in appearance from ordinary men!"

"I am unsure what may have been communicated to you under the impairment of drink, but I promise you, it does not mirror my convictions this morning."

I halted and blushed; my romanticized ideal of the West had become evident, and I was on the verge of embarrassing myself. "I apologize, when I say it aloud the description does sound rather foolish." There was a brief silence as we both contemplated this. "But I have seen the pictures."

The stranger grinned once more before he looked me in the eye and spoke in an unexpectedly gentle and fatherly tone. "Friend, we were just discussing the deceitfulness of pictures, were we not?"

The rejoinder. It was then I realized that I had made official acquaintance with the Outlaw Frasier McKinley.

We rode out early the next morning after a short and dreamless night. I can claim no talent for liquor, as such my mind and body were swimming from the previous evening's indulgences. I purchased a new mount at the local stables for a bad price. The creature was strong of back but quite weak in personality and our relationship suffered for it. Nevertheless, he was clearly well raised and followed my instructions without difficulty. I returned to the saloon and found McKinley preparing his own stallion. McKinley's horse may have been the only thing about the man which lived up to his legend. It was one of the largest brutes I had ever encountered and its deep black body seemed to swallow and digest the light around it. I suspected the monster's very presence could extinguish the spark and ardor of the hottest flame, leaving only the vacant recollection of warmth. There was also the unsettling matter of the eye. The left orb had been removed, a hollow cavity

being what remained. Yet, it was with this pit that the beast always seemed to gaze upon me. If I took a step that boundless crater would follow, tracing my pursuits, citing my actions. He was a disturbing and formidable animal.

Approaching at a gallop I greeted the pair, "Good morning, Mr. McKinley, I expect you slept soundly. I've found a mount so when you are ready to ride I will be close behind."

McKinley turned and gazed up at me. He seemed quite a different man in the sober light of the morning. Big and straight, his smile replaced with a deep gash. He filled the duster better, looking less like a prisoner inside its matted lining. The fellow squinted at me, as if trying to read a fine print.

"You're the Eastern man," he stated plainly before turning back to his horse.

"Yes, we- we spoke for much of the night, agreeing that I would ride with you on your way home to Colorado. That I would transcribe your history and..." I paused, McKinley was not listening, instead gazing past me, eyeing a man on the edge of the rode, "... and adventures. Surely, you remember."

"I'm not going to Colorado," he scaled his monster and began to trot away. My confusion reached its peak as I hurried after them.

"But we had an arrangement," I chided, "we discussed this for hours. You seemed quite content with the idea."

"Because I robbed you, you fool. I was still the Judas you thought I was but not for blinding your damned horse."

"I am unsure what may have been communicated to you under the impairment of drink, but I promise you, it does not mirror my convictions this morning. I am not going to Colorado, not now. I have business near Salt Lake."

"Then I will accompany you to Salt Lake. The destination doesn't really matter, it is only your time

and saga I am after. Please understand, this could be a great opportunity for us both!" I was near desperation- I could stand no more failures and if McKinley left me in Winslow I would return home with nothing but leathered skin to show for my Western labors.

"I don't really care what you do, but I doubt you will receive what you are expecting. It is rare anyone does." He quickened the pace and I, with irrational passion, matched his speed.

We rode for several days over harsh and unattractive ground. In this time, I learned very little about my companion except that he possessed a dramatically capricious memory and a generally inconsistent character. He would often impress me with a detailed account of an occurrence from his past and then later change so many particulars that it became an entirely dissimilar tale. He did this once when I inquired about his father and mother. In the light of day, he admitted to never knowing his father but claimed his mother was a kind and gentle woman who gave him up when she joined a convent in southern Texas. She died of tuberculosis a few years later with his name on her lips. McKinley spoke fondly of her and I even perceived a single tear hanging loosely from his eye when the story was done. Later that night, as we enjoyed a flask of brandy, the story changed drastically. His father was now a merciless drunk who taught him how to kill men and despise women. His mother, as far as I could understand, was a toothless vegetable farmer from Central Mexico and had never loved him.

All the days and nights were spent this way as we rode to Utah. I pieced McKinley's history together as best I could, mostly ignoring everything he told me while drunk and much of what he said while sober. This method allowed my creative sensibilities to construct a more palatable version of the man, the version I had grown up believing in. In truth, much of what I ended up transcribing were just reinforced versions of the stories I had heard before. For instance, I reworked the tale of his celebrated

time in Acapulco (when he pulled a sick priest from the burning hulk of a basilica) by adding a singed hound to the list of the grateful saved. It was my own minor alteration to the already grandiose folk-tale. I stubbornly maintained the conviction that I already knew the real McKinley and this remaining fragment of him was only camouflaging his former glory beneath a thick layer of modesty and alcohol. It seemed intentional, for when drunk his every statement became a question always punctuated with “is it not?” as if even the blandest assertion had suddenly come under doubt.

There was only one thing I knew for certain; our destination. McKinley had been traveling across much of the southern United States on a reunion tour with his old colleagues. The outlaw explained his intention to see his friends one last time before settling down on a farm in the North. His journey, thus far, had taken him into Georgia to drink with Malcolm “Dead Eye” Valentine, through Arkansas to see the giant Caleb French, then across Texas to track down the Bellwether Brothers and beat them both at cards. Most recently he had gone all the way to Mexico City to see the young Ethan Lucas who, according to the myth, was like a son to him.

Now, for the final meeting at the residence of Ezra Delgado. I was immensely excited for this particular reunion. Delgado had been McKinley’s most stalwart companion for years. He was widely renowned for both his swift draw and striking aquiline features. McKinley grinned wide when he told me about our final destination and it gave me some hope that I was not wrong about the outlaw. This affectionate expedition was more in line with the man I had always believed Frasier McKinley to be and I was proud to follow along on that journey.

We reached the home of Ezra Delgado near dinner time. The malevolent sun was giving up its cruelty, forming instead a magnificent band of light across the horizon. I wondered, momentarily, if it was possible to forgive that blistering star’s daily hostilities

in exchange for these moments of awesome beauty. Peeling a strip of crisp skin from my arm, I very much doubted I ever could. We rode to the cottage.

McKinley dismounted his horse in a swift motion, barely giving the brute time to stop. I followed at a much more cautious pace, bringing my steed to a full halt before climbing down. The outlaw’s sudden silence and sullenness confused me. Delgado was famously the most consistent partner of McKinley’s throughout their notorious careers. I expected this to be a joyous reunion between friends, but it rather felt like a dark funeral march. He stopped twenty feet from the hovel’s door.

“Delgado.” McKinley did not yell the name but his voice had an unmistakable authority to it. I stood in place and waited. Several seconds later a thick bearded face leaned out the door and gazed at us. It was a poor face, a face the owner must have given up on long ago. It disappeared back inside, replaced by a hand shepherding us in.

Stepping inside I ducked to avoid the low rafters. The abode was bare, with only a burning stove and two cane chairs set before a thick table. An oil lamp flickered from the center of the tabletop, turning us into silhouettes. Delgado was sitting on the far end of the table when we entered. McKinley, taking the chair opposite our host, left me standing in the corner, nestled against the hot stove. I sniffed the air and looked inside the oven. A single tortilla was slowly burning, one edge already blackened and falling away. There was a long silence as the men stared at one another. I was becoming increasingly nervous and attempted to introduce myself. Delgado ignored me entirely and I quickly comprehended that I was to remain mute.

“I wanted to see you, Ezra.”

“We haven’t spoken for a long time, Frasier.” Delgado’s voice was deep; it contained a vastness.

“No, but I’ve been seeing some of the boys lately. Sort of private reunions, one on one. Have you heard anything about that?”

Delgado swallowed, "I heard Valentine's dead. Stabbed in Arkansas, I think."

"Hung, in Georgia. Caleb was stabbed in Arkansas. Clyde and Jasper Bellwether drown in Texas, two towns over from each other, in fact."

I held my breath as a cold understanding crept from my spine to the core of my mind. My forebodings were correct, but this was only the latest stop on the death procession. It had been touring for a long time and I was here to bear witness to the last interment. I made a great error in neglecting to ask the most prudent questions of Frasier McKinley. I wished to know about his past but I was foolishly unfazed by where the journey was ending.

"A lot of bad luck going around. I never knew much fortune myself." Delgado was noticeably shaken but refused to look away from his inimical guest.

"Luck, fate, the almighty all seeing eye in the sky. They've got nothing to do with this, Ezra. We bring about our own ends, set our own path and choose to follow it knowing damn well where it ends. Then we act surprised and penitent when we get there and perceive that we were right all along. We are not dragged into Hell, we are beckoned and tempted before happily crossing over that threshold."

"And what did those boys do to bring them to the precipice of Perdition, Frasier? After all these years disbanded, what ancient slights could not go unpunished?"

"They had their dues to pay, Ezra. You remember how little those boys could be trusted, they were thieves by birth not by occupation, not a spoonful of loyalty between them."

Delgado chuckled. His laugh was rich, organic and slow. It seemed unnatural in this crumbling hole.

"I suppose you're right, Frasier. But what about me? Why do I die tonight?"

"My horse." There was a stillness in the room as Delgado contemplated what this could mean.

"Your horse? What the hell did I ever do to your horse?"

McKinley's face grew swiftly red with rage, culminating in his flat palm striking against the wooden table.

So, you remain cold and monochrome while the world begins to burn. Then you pay to have your color added later.

"You bastard! You shot his damn eye out in Sonora!" McKinley looked like vengeance personified but Delgado only appeared baffled.

"You came all the way here to kill me because you think I shot that demon in the eye? Frasier, that night in Sonora you got so drunk on some local poison that you ran the both of you full speed into a damned cactus. Bellwether told me later that you woke up on the ground the next morning bawling, saying you had been stricken and betrayed. You ran around town shooting windows and shouting Judas for a full day. The Mexican government nearly sent in cavalry riders just to shut you up."

There was a brief and infinitely awkward pause.

"If you didn't shoot my horse then why did I wake up to find you ridden out of town without so much as an explanation?"

Again, Delgado laughed. "Because I robbed you, you fool. I was still the Judas you thought I was but not for blinding your damned horse. You drank yourself beyond comprehension for the thousandth time and I had finally tired of it. So, I took your earnings and left for New Mexico. There was no greater conspiracy, no other purpose. I had grown exhausted of your company and felt a petty slight would be an appropriate good-bye."

By now my hand had been repeatedly burned by the oven's radiating heat, though I scarcely noted the pain. I felt as a specter in the shadows, cursed to watch the unfolding of human tragedy yet entirely incapable of averting it. I knew all was a loss when

McKinley pushed out his chair, knocking it to the ground. In a swift motion befitting his experience he unholstered his weapon aiming it squarely at Delgado.

“You did not rob me, Ezra! That was Ethan Lucas who took my money, I’ve suspected it for years. I tracked him to Mexico City three weeks ago and blew his heart from his chest. He’s dead, same as the others.”

Delgado’s shock and anguish came to its crowning as sluggish tears began to crawl down his cheeks. “You killed Lucas? We knew that boy since he was thirteen years old, Frasier.” Another flash of pain crossed our host’s face. “He had ridden back to El Paso three weeks before we even made it to Sonora, his ma had died. He wasn’t there when I robbed you.”

“That’s- no. I remember it, you all started to turn against me in Sonora. I had to take action, debts to...” his voice trailed off as his words degenerated into meaningless pangs of anguished bewilderment.

“No, Frasier. You had been broken for a long time. You jailed yourself with drink and made yourself distrustful of your own surroundings. The world around you warped and so you contorted yourself to fit its strange appeal. We were your friends.”

“You were snakes. Every one.”

A moment later it was over. Delgado reached for a revolver beneath the table; he did not have the time to raise it. A hole appeared in his throat, bubbling and flowing. He managed to stand for a moment, a sad sound warbled out of his darkened lips but its meaning was lost. Ezra Delgado fell forward, toppling the table. McKinley lowered his colt and walked through the open doorway.

“You’re not Frasier McKinley,” hands shaking like a man afflicted I stumbled back to the outer shadow of twilight. My fingers brushed against the holstered weapon hanging at my side, I knew if there was any reason to use it then my life would be lost before I

had the chance to draw. He mounted his monster and turned to me slowly, not with anger or hatred. There was a sadness and sudden humanity to his features.

“I am the Outlaw McKinley. The persona impressed in your mind is an American caricature. An age damaged ambrotype which you are viewing backwards through distorted glass. There is some of that man’s myth left torn inside my framework, though it is fouler in truth than in fantasy.” The man began to ride away.

I raised my gun to his back. I do not know what possessed me to challenge this charlatan further but a precipitous rage lifted inside me. It was as if a simple truth of the world which I had always taken for granted were suddenly shattered before me, my feet left to bleed on its cracked remains.

“This isn’t how it is supposed to be!” I shouted, crazed and confused. “The stories about you, I can’t let them all be lies. You aren’t allowed to be some self-serving spirit of vengeance! What has happened to the true McKinley? The outlaw-hero, the- the archetype?”

My mind was emulsifying itself in the flames of self-delusion. I was incapable of so quickly releasing my many years’ worth of predisposed expectations. There was meant to be honor in this new land. It was the promise of the West to live up to impossible ideals. The noble savage, the handsome desperado, miles of vast unclaimed acreages and rivers thick with gold. That is not where I found myself. So, on what land did I now tread? In what ring of Hell was my body boiling? My conductor turned back to me, perhaps to kill me, perhaps to only prolong the death. A voice like blades scraping.

“The truth is what propels us to the lie. The awesome must match in scenery the grotesque, mingle and become its equal. This is where the legends live. Between the truth and the fable. In a beggar’s coat atop the Devil’s steed. People like me built this new world by that concept and people like you will learn to evolve by its principle. You insist on putting the Devil in your heroes, but only enough to keep them

palatable. People can't stand for it when we grow beyond their meek ideals. You stand in awe at the sunrise then shelter yourselves from the noonday heat. So, you remain cold and monochrome while the world begins to burn. Then you pay to have your color added later."

He gave two swift kicks into the wiry ribs of his brute and quickly disappeared into the moonless night.

-Epilogue-

I came home to Rhode Island shortly after the episode in Salt Lake. Mind and body both exhausted and, despite my relative youth, the hairs of my head turned to an ashen grey. Memories of the Outlaw often crept stealthily into my conscious mind, lingering among the blacker things. I spoke little of my journeys in the West and refused to publicly publish any account of my time with McKinley. But now, with my youth behind me, it seems ugly yet imperative to excavate the dead. This nation has reached the end of its extension. We've no further earth to survey so instead we sit and think on ourselves. Having touched the shores of my own inner oceans, I look back on the ragged path I've made and try to remember where I began, questioning if I have the will to return there. Frasier McKinley remains an impossible injury to overcome, for he was the product of a grand and prosaic delirium. A hallucination, which I fear endures, in the unsteady foundation of the world he shaped.



“Purple Hysteria”

Michele Cooley

*I heard your voice – you were giving your best.
You took the stage, the light swung to you, watching you run
across and hype up the masses. It couldn't be a lie
the passion you portrayed. I felt as though you had wings
to soar amidst your adoring fans, my idol.
And when you sang, my thoughts turned to purple.*

*The cheeky wink, broken English, you said, “I purple
you.” Teary eyes coupled with rapid heartbeats, you are the best
when you croon. With fire on the stage, it's hard not to idol
-ize you. You jump, slither, slide, pop and lock, run
to your place and jump to the center of the stage. Wings
appear on the giant screens behind. Your excitement can't be a lie.*

*You appear with a blindfold and lay
on the stage. Backup dancers swathed in purple,
puffy shirts pull you to standing. Jacket gives the appearance of sparkling wings
as you spin, jump, run, making the performance prime.
The last note of the song is over, and you run
backstage for the costume change. I hear the opening notes of Idol.*

*Brightly colored suits, rocking moves, and the declaration, can't call me idol.
Aegyo moves juxtaposed with cocky swagger, showing those comments are a lie
Because the bitter haters just run
their mouths. Talking crap until their faces turn purple.
Defiance with the words, “Can't stop me loving myself.” Performing your best
is all you can do. You announce that ARMY gives you the ability to soar.*

*Your Hyungs give you wings
on your journey to becoming a worldwide pop idol.
The spotlight shines and you promise that we receive the best
of you. Your performance is true and denies any falsehood.
The lights go out leaving glowing orbs in the audience. The purple
confetti flutters down. Another costume change forces you to dash.*

*A rap begins, and the lights hit the middle of the stage. Un-yeong
to your position to leap above the others. Whip over the group like a wing
-ed crane. The air freezes around you with a blue and red
bent. Seemingly weightless, as though you inhibit air movement, god-like.
Landing at the top of the stage with a defiant stomp, an arrow true.
Never-ending joy, the performance meets perfection.*

With your goodbyes, people run to the exits; fervently singing our beloved's praises.

*Elation feels like flying, and no lie, most fantastic day, ever.
I purple you too, you are the best at what you do.*



“Pieces”

Jordan Roubion

We were young and bright and so flagrantly American bouncing through the snaggle-toothed, jarring streets of the bustling Moroccan *sooq*. French and Arabic tangled in a *Darija* dance as shopkeepers with jewel-toned scarves, handcrafted *tajine* earthenware pots, and woven baskets crawling with live snails hurled misshapen words that we barely understood into our grinning, rapt faces.

The smell of freshly slaughtered meat and spices filled our noses as we cavorted past mounds of sunset red paprika, golden cumin and coriander, and the entire severed head of a camel, its long eyelashes resting against the felt fur of its cheeks. Several of my companions unsheathed their smartphones and snapped pictures of the grotesque tableau.

The shopkeeper rushed over, getting much too close to Ryan and with streams of *Darija* flowing from his lips, casting confused glances at the photographic litany. He switched languages rapidly, trying pure French, German, and, hesitantly, Spanish. Our pale skin and light hair marked us on those streets. We avoided eye contact, reloaded our smartphones into their carefully guarded pockets and purses, and left the polyglot behind. In that moment the crowds were curious and exciting and subjected to my camera.

There was a nervous energy humming among our group. It was Ryan's birthday. His Moroccan host brother, a roguish teenager corded with muscle from working long hours on the fishing docks down by the dark and restless Atlantic, had informed him of a rare event that was to take place in the more modern downtown shop fronts that evening. A *haram* liquor sale. As soldiers in the United States Army on a mission of vague intent in a foreign country, this was doubly and deliciously forbidden.

Our group broke free of the old *medina*, walking under the sandstone arch of the *baab* and into the modern streets of Rabat. We were assaulted by car horns and taxi drivers screaming obscenities. Cars and taxis scraped against one another regularly, elbowing each other aside and ignoring any semblance of lanes or regulation. We shouted to be heard as we navigated the fissured sidewalks to our fool's errand. Loose gangs of sullen, dark-eyed young men wearing suits or soccer jerseys watched us as we passed. Hijabs and burqas gave our group a wide, proprietary berth.

The hazy sun was setting, sinking behind the towering buildings with a whimper, and the whisper of seaside night raised goosebumps on my arms. We found the shopfront. We were late. A churning mass of men was shoving and yelling at the harried liquor salesmen. Ryan and his friend put their shoulders together and dove into the chaos. Several, tense minutes later they returned triumphant with a bottle of something familiar, a whiskey that will, at the sight of it, make me sick for the rest of my life.

We bought Sprites from a mobile beverage cart and mixed our cocktails, winking at each other. We took our forbidden fruit to the sea, where we gambled among the chilled waves and warm sand. Too long had we been studying Arabic verbs and tenses.

Out of breath, flushed with whiskey, the stinging salt, and the promise of tomorrow, I flopped down next to Ryan on the beach and lit a cigarette. He showed me pictures of his daughter holding “I miss you, daddy” signs, all goofy kid smile and drowning blue eyes. The screen made me squint in the near perfect darkness.

“You're cute when you do that,” he told me.

I smiled. I thought of his wife. Dismissed that thought. Thought about her again.

He paid attention. That's what he was: all undivided attention and intense temptation and foolish what-if daydream wishing, but I always thought of his daughter, and his wife.

I buried my half-smoked cigarette in the silky sand. He sighed and stood. I took his offered hand and didn't protest when he pulled me too close to him. He smelled like clove cigarettes.

We walked up the beach, our group behind us. We walked quickly and one man for every woman, aware of the deepening shadows of the empty streets. Ryan always walked with me. He tried to hold my hand once we were out of sight of the others, but I crossed my arms. We talked of small things until we turned into my host family's alley. The stucco walls loomed high. I had no idea what was coming. I don't think Ryan did, either.

Years later. A hundred versions of myself, a failed marriage, a cross-country move, and a drinking problem later and I am hunched over and squinting in the bright light of an ambulance across from a distracted medic.

"Did you have to come to work because of me?" I ask.

He jumps at the sound of my rough voice and says, "What? What do you mean?"

"Did you have to leave home for this?"

He shakes his head emphatically, "Don't worry about me. Focus on where you're going. You're lucky they found you a bed after closing all those clinics last year."

I listen to the road sounds and watch his furrowed brow. I realize I know him. He has a daughter my age.

Shit.

The whole town will know about this tomorrow morning. Small Town, Iowa life.

"I went there once, when I was struggling with some stuff at home. Just do your best and don't worry about anyone else but yourself," he says.

I don't look him in the eye.

The ambulance stops and the medics escort me up floors and through a maze of hallways. I lose my way, and I hope I don't have to escape later. We arrive at a set of floor-to-ceiling doors and we are buzzed through security. I peer over my shoulder as the doors slam and *thunk* locked behind me.

We talked of small things until we turned into my host family's alley. The stucco walls loomed high. I had no idea what was coming. I don't think Ryan did, either.

I am passed from nurse to nurse until my arms are piled with scrubs, therapeutic socks, a St. Anthony's branded water bottle, and a little cup each of sickly pink shampoo and conditioner from massive, generic pump bottles. I already mourn how frizzy and unkempt my hair will look without my favorite conditioner, but I might as well look the part.

All the doors in the unit are cracked open, and I dread finding out what lies beyond the bars of light and in the dark rooms. One door opens a bit wider and I see a flash of bright eyes and hear a skittering on the floor. I do not look at the other doors.

The nurse walks me into an otherwise unoccupied room. It smells stale and looks like an Army barracks room. There are two beds made up with scratchy wool blankets and a yellowed pillow each. There is nothing else. She tells me to strip. I blush when I realize she's not going to leave the room.

"Sorry, dear, just protocol."

I have to cuff the legs of the scrubs several times, or they puddle about my feet. They feel like pajamas.

Tears rushed over my hot cheeks as I scrubbed my arms and hands, and brushed my teeth again and again in the rusted mirror of my host family's bathroom using bottled water from the market outside the medina. The faucet wasn't safe in Morocco.

I couldn't get clean. I couldn't remove the stains.

The rest of Morocco passed by in a blur of smeared faces and shockingly bright colors. I gripped the hand of my female friend when we waded through crowds and cowered in my cot at night, wishing for home.

When we did finally leave, there was no time to catch our breath. We returned to our barracks rooms at midnight, and laid out physical training clothes for the next morning, the promise of a five mile run hanging over our heads.

I guzzled a glass of water to fight dehydration and fell into a nightmare-fueled sleep. I woke tangled and sweaty in my sheets, stumbling for my clothes.

The Army couldn't do anything without fanfare, and so every morning we woke in the dark and got into ranks and columns and saluted the flag as the first colors of sunrise peeked over the horizon. Then we were running.

“And why would a young, pretty thing like you do something like that? . . . Was it because of a man?”

My limbs felt slow and heavy as I fell into line with the other soldiers, our thumping feet creating a steady rhythm. I settled into the pace I had taught myself to maintain for eleven miles or more, and tried to go to a happy place in my head.

Ryan shoved his way through the ranks and fell in next to me. He skip stepped to match my pace.

“How long are you going to be mad at me?” he asked under his straining breath.

I didn't answer him. I leaned into my stride.

Left, right, left, right, left.

The sergeant called the command for us to break off into pairs, and the protection of other soldiers peeled away from my sides. I felt exposed. Ryan stayed with me.

“Please, tell me what I can do to make it up to you,” he said.

“You,” I started, and I fought to keep my voice from breaking, “You just left me there.”

“I didn't know what else to do,” he said, “I panicked and ran.”

I forced my shoulders to relax to avoid cramps and shook out my hands to keep them from clenching. I had taught myself to do that by imagining I was carrying fragile eggs in my palms.

I ticked my pace up a notch, but Ryan was male and faster. He matched it easily. I hated him for that. I worked so hard to maintain what came naturally to the males.

He had run out of things to say, and we ran to the sound of our thudding hearts and even breaths.

My sleep is broken, cutting me with jagged pieces of nightmare.

Grit under my fingernails as I scrabble at the dirty street. Slimy wrappers stick to the side of my face. I push and push, but am crushed and I can't breathe can't breathe CAN'T BREATHE.

I bolt up, brushing imagined dirt from my back. Tears are in the corners of my eyes and I rub at them furiously. Then I focus. I come to the conclusion that a screaming banshee is on the premises, and much to my horror, is drawing closer to my room.

“I just want a fucking cigarette, people! That's it! Let me go. I just need my fix, maaaaan.”

Hushed voices respond. A knot of people enter the room, flip on the lights, and I observe a woman who I will come to call Malevolent Mauve.

Her plum-colored hair comes to her shoulders except where it is sticking straight up in the air like a student asking a question. Her eyes are blood-shot and rolling in their sockets. She alternately sags against the men and women holding her and viciously convulses her body to break their hold. They, not very gently, toss her onto the other bed. I can't blame them. She writhes and her jeans slip half way down her gratuitous ass.

"I'm not supposed to be here. The fucking cops lied. Please, I don't want to be here!"

A nurse notices me and says over Mauve's moaning, "Sorry, love, go back to sleep. She'll settle down soon."

I can't stop watching, though. A man comes in with a long needle, pinches Mauve's arm, and injects.

"Who the fuck are you?" Mauve says, "And why do you look like fucking Gilligan?"

It's minutes before her cussing and convulsions cease. She whimpers and cries.

As I'm settling down in my bed, facing the doorway and the threat of Mauve, just in case, she whispers, "You can't trust them. Don't trust them."

I do not sleep again.

The next morning I shuffle in my purple Crocs to the sickly green and peeling common room where everyone is eating breakfast around a circular table paired with mismatched chairs. There are about fifteen people of varying ages. I quickly scan and sort the people into their respective threat categories. I note the position of the nurses in the room. In the end, I choose to sit next to an old woman. She is gray and ruddy and meaty, and eyes me over her thick glasses.

A tray of food is placed in front of me by a nurse and I pick at fruit and waffles. Mostly, I listen and

watch. I notice others watching me back. I note them. In particular, a man in his forties, balding, portly, and with intense blue eyes. He gets filed away in a special threat category.

The old woman leans toward me.

"What are you in for?"

I swallow a piece of waffle, hard, and say, "I'm, um, sick. I guess."

She says, "Aren't we all, dear? Aren't we all."

The man with the blue eyes speaks up from down the table, "Speak for yourself. I just needed a vacation."

The old woman sticks out her hand for a shake. I accept.

To the man down the table she says, "We all know you're a pervert, Adam. Don't lie."

My threat level for Adam is confirmed.

To me, she says, "I'm Sharon. And I'm here because I tried to do some business with the front end of a moving train. What happens here, stays here. We all respect that."

I'm taken aback at her honesty. And now I owe her. I can't afford to be rude. Not in a psych ward.

"I was going to swerve into oncoming traffic," I lie, then add, "Maybe."

Sharon looks thoughtful, "And why would a young, pretty thing like you do something like that?"

Then she narrows her eyes and asks, "Was it because of a man?"

"You could say that, sure," I say.

Sharon spits on the floor over her shoulder and says, "The dick ain't worth it, dear."

I feel my face crack a small smile.

The Army can't resist long and convoluted acronyms for things that are simple concepts. That is how I found myself sitting in a Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention class in an auditorium full of rowdy soldiers who didn't believe a single thing coming out of the orator's mouth.

"If you or your potential partner have had even a drop of alcohol, you are both no longer able to give consent," said the speaker, a staff sergeant charged with maintaining our level of training in the program.

He was handsome, if short, and his face was very serious.

"How else are we supposed to loosen them up?" called a soldier from the fourth row.

His buddies high fived him.

"If you need alcohol to convince a girl to have sex with you, you're doing it wrong," called another voice from the back of the room.

The private craned his neck to see who had spoken, and a first sergeant waved and winked at him. The private put his head down.

The speaker struggled to regain everyone's attention as they cat-called and hooted.

I struggled to look straight ahead as Ryan's eyes bored into the back of my skull. He was seated in the row behind me and to the left. I could feel it. The hairs on my neck stood at attention.

"Let's put it this way, then," said the staff sergeant, "Based on what you've learned today, how many of you have been the victim or know a victim of sexual assault? Hm? Raise your hands."

I felt sweat trickle down my temple. My hands shook. I looked down at them, angry at their betrayal, angry at my friend, angry at the men who surrounded me for being men.

I felt Ryan's gaze grow more intense.

"Come on, guys, statistics say there are way more people affected by this stuff. Be honest," said the sergeant.

I raised my hand, and my platoon members gave me sidelong looks and whispered behind hands.

I quickly cop to the normal routine of the psych ward. As a soldier you thrive on routine. First, breakfast. Then, one by one, we filter through the glass enclosed office to visit with the psychiatrist, on display for all to see. Those not in their meeting are free to do whatever they please, except sleep. Most of the people play games in small groups with missing pieces and boards that are faded and rotting at the corners. I find a bookshelf in the hallway and sift through dog-eared westerns and biographies of people I've never heard of. I find one fantasy novel and cling to it. I sit in a caved-in chair that smells like sweat in the corner of the room and fidget with the pages.

I jerk when someone's face appears in front of me. It is the man with the intense eyes, Adam. I curl away from him in my chair.

His buddies high fived him . . . "If you need alcohol to convince a girl to have sex with you, you're doing it wrong," called another voice from the back of the room.

"So where are you from?" he asks, kneeling next to me.

Oh, good, a crazy person wants to know my address.

"Thirty minutes from here," I say, feeling safe behind the mask of a dozen small towns in the area.

"Me, I'm from Carroll. My kids are here. You have kids?"

I brainstorm ways to extricate myself from the conversation. I feel my palms get slick. I don't want to get the book sweaty.

“No.”

“Do you want kids?”

“Maybe someday. Can you excuse me?”

The man grins, “I want more kids, actually.”

I don’t respond, and my vision starts to blur while he looks me up and down.

“I think you and me, we could do some great stuff together. Know what I’m saying? You single?”

I mumble something unintelligible and curl further in on myself. He interprets this as a negative.

“We should get married sooner rather than later.”

Finally, a nurse calls my name and I am saved. I dart around Adam and look into the face of an angel. She’s perky and blonde, and wearing pink scrubs. I like her immediately. Shaking, I follow her into the glass room and sit ungracefully in a wooden chair. A woman with a twitching face is escorted out.

In a tone that suggests he’s repeating himself, he asks, “Are you reliving a trauma right now?”

A middle aged man with gray speckled hair is taking notes across from me. He murmurs for me to “wait just a moment” while he finishes.

He doesn’t smile when he looks up. I sit on my hands to keep them from trembling.

Introductions are made, pleasantries exchanged. His name is Dr. Westfall. Then we launch into an interrogation. I expect questions like, “Do you feel like hurting yourself or others?” and the, “Are you in any physical pain at this time?”. I do not expect, “Who were our first three presidents?”.

“Sorry, what?” I ask, blinking.

Dr. Westfall glances up from his laptop, and says, “It’s just to test your mental state.”

I hate tests.

I say, “George Washington, Thomas Jefferson...?”

He stops typing and waits for me to continue. I don’t know if Thomas Jefferson is right.

He shrugs, “Close enough.”

Then he asks, “Have you witnessed or experienced an event that caused you to fear for your life?”

I stutter, “I guess so, yes. I mean, yes.”

The doctor’s eyes flick toward me. I don’t meet them. He types something and asks me more questions. I feel a heavier weight to these questions, and I answer many of them with “yes”.

“Any history of sexual trauma?”

I don’t answer. I’m thinking.

He does not hit me. I wish he had. I wish he had knocked me out. He finds a terrible rhythm. I wish I could leave my body, like in the stories. I would go home. I stare at the chipping blue paint on the wall and want to think of the rolling green Iowa cornfields, but I am stuck in this moment. With him. Ryan. My friend. My battle buddy. Mired in enemy territory, I never saw the inside threat.

I realize the doctor is speaking.

“What?”

In a tone that suggests he’s repeating himself he asks, “Are you reliving a trauma right now?”

I nod and he whispers in the nurse’s ear. She leaves and returns with a tiny paper cup. Inside it there is a yellow pill the size of a coffee bean. I take it without asking questions.

I answer a dozen more questions, but they slide across my consciousness as if they are greased. I know my voice is flat and emotionless. I say ‘yes’ a lot.

A banging on the glass next to my seat startles me out of my funk. It is the young woman with the twitching face. Her long, dark hair curtains most of her delicate features.

“Are you going to take my kids away, you old fuck?”

She walks away before anyone in the room can react, winding up and pitching an imaginary baseball at the doctor’s head. He sighs and stands.

“I’m starting you on a regimen of medication. I’ll meet with you tomorrow to see how it works for you. The nurses will explain the details.” With that, I am ushered into the common room.

The Family Readiness Group, a haphazard organization consisting of Army wives that more often than not skimmed the group’s funds for themselves, threw a party for Ryan’s promotion to sergeant. They decorated with cheap Fourth of July decorations and we all stood at attention as he was ceremoniously pinned with his new rank. Our supervisor punched the barbed rank into his chest, as was tradition, and Ryan didn’t flinch. I wish he had.

I burned with jealousy. Despite the extra projects for which I had assumed responsibility and my supervisor’s continued reassurances that my time would come, I combed the published promotion list and had yet to see my name.

As for Ryan, he had taken to going out for long lunches with the other sergeants, skipping morning formation, and delegating his duties to lower enlisted soldiers he had once called friends.

Formation broke and we spilled over to the plastic table laden with potluck casseroles and bags of Doritos. I had planned to make a plate and retreat into the Chemical equipment room to look over the gas mask spreadsheets, but Ryan grabbed me by the arm. I nearly dropped my plate.

“Hey, I want you to meet my wife and daughter,” he said.

I shook his wife’s hand and said, “Congratulations on such a wonderful husband. I’m sure he makes you very happy.”

She was beautiful, with tumbling blonde hair and pink heart-shaped lips. She stuttered as she said, “Well, yes, he does. Thank you. He has said the most wonderful things about you.”

I refused to look at him, and I knew my eyes were dark and sharp like the end of the excavation tools we were issued when we processed into base.

It was ironic, to be stationed at a place called Fort Bliss, and my laugh was high pitched and laced with mania. I snatched my hand from her and stalked into the safety of the Chemicals cage.

Outside the quiet of the glass room, Malevolent Mauve is pounding on the wooden door of the nurse’s station.

“I know you can hear me. I said, get me my god-damn nicotine patch,” she snarls.

I have already been admonished once today for hiding in my room and not joining the group, so I ask if I can do puzzles. The nurse unlocks the cabinet and I ask her why they keep it locked. “So patients can’t hurt themselves,” she says.

I am relieved that her pants are back on. Her bedazzled-butt jeans squeeze her doughy waist out of the top and bunch up around her Ugg boots.

The nurse rolls her eyes and explains that Mauve must wait two more hours.

Mauve is about to combat this when she sees me. I flinch and move to scamper away, but she pins me with her piercing eyes.

“How old are you, girl?” she asks.

“Uh, twenty five.”

Mauve, with a voice stuck on volume ten, laughs and slaps her leg.

“You look like you could be sixteen years old! What the hell are you doing here?”

I shrug and move to bound away like a frightened deer, but she blocks my path.

“Come on, what could a perfect little girl like you do to belong here?” she asks.

Heat flushes my cheeks and I scowl.

“I beat my boyfriend with a baseball bat and smeared my naked body with his cranium blood.”

Mauve’s eyes widen and she lets me pass without comment.

I have already been admonished once today for hiding in my room and not joining the group, so I ask if I can do puzzles. The nurse unlocks the cabinet and I ask her why they keep it locked.

“So patients can’t hurt themselves,” she says.

I look at the puzzle box. It’s a picture of kittens playing with yarn. I look back at her.

She smiles, gives me a cup of pills, and retreats back to the nurse station.

When they tell me they have run out of paper, I have a thick packet. I take my materials to my room and research. I learn the shape of my enemy.

For the rest of the day, I am doing puzzles. At first my hands feel swollen and clumsy. They tremble. Then something clicks. Finding and rejecting, joining and grinning when I fit together the perfect pieces. First the corners, then the border, then I fill in the rest. I grumble when pieces are missing. Sharon watches me for a while. She says how smart I must be and asks which one I will do next, before she becomes bored and wanders away. I do not get bored. The more puzzles I do, the more I want to do the next one, and the next one.

I only feel a little guilty making the nurse unlock the puzzle cabinet every thirty minutes. After I fin-

ish each puzzle I pause to admire the photo. I smile without realizing it. Then I crumble all the pieces back into the box and start again.

Despite being engrossed in my puzzles, I do not fail to notice when Adam comes marching down the hallway during one of his many pacing walks in the cramped halls, holding something small in his hand with a smug look on his face.

“Nurse! I have found a potential weapon!”

A nurse scurries into the common room and holds her hand out. She looks confused, then narrows her eyes at Adam.

“What? It’s a bobby pin. One of us could have choked.”

Before dinner, the pink-clad nurse approaches me with a clipboard and asks me even more questions. I am happy to answer. I talk so fast that I trip over my words. It feels like the words are solid things behind my lips, crowding my teeth. I notice that the colors in the room are too bright. I laugh too much and smile too wide. I tell her about my beloved puzzles.

We are allowed phone calls after dinner. They give us little black phones that we are not allowed to take into our rooms. There are only two of them, and many of us. It has to be quick.

I got married in Iowa the summer following that promotion party, standing under an arch dripping with pink and white flowers, wearing a simple white sheath dress and smiling until my face cramped. Our friends said it could never last, not after moving so quickly, but I was as sure as I could be about this handsome, kind, southern man.

He was from Alabama, and called me a yankee when he disagreed with me about politics, but he made me laugh wildly in bed as we held each other at night and took away some of the edge of my nightmares.

It wasn't until Christmas, three months later, that I knew something was wrong. He was drinking more and more Jim Beam, and I would find him crying on the kitchen floor late at night. When I offered comforting words, he snapped things like, "You could never understand, you're just a northerner."

His words hurt, but I was optimistic. Having a spouse in the Army was hard enough without also being a soldier yourself. I cut him some slack, and cried on the phone with my mother before he came home.

One night, he didn't come home. Worried, I excused my behavior and snooped on his social media account. I found messages to a woman in his unit.

When I confronted him, he said, "You didn't give me a choice. We haven't had sex in months. What is wrong with you?"

He deployed to Jordan a week later, with the woman in his unit. I spent a week packing his things carefully in boxes and put the boxes in the yard for his best friend to pick up. I used most of our savings to pay off my car, out of spite, then divided the rest between us and filed the divorce petition.

Despite what the doctor said, I do not see him again for a few days. I think there has been a scheduling issue. There are too few doctors to go around. I sink into a routine, and find myself talking and laughing with the others. I join their games and joke with them. I feel like an earlier version of myself, from sometime ago. I take my meds, which I begin referring to as my happy sprinkles, and wait for my turn to be displayed in the glass office.

Every few hours Malevolent Mauve pitches a fit and I risk bothering the nurses by asking for Advil. She rants about everything from her lawyer "sucking ass" to the "crooked and corrupt cops". She gives me a headache, but I notice when she's in a good mood she likes to approach me and strike up a conversation.

I learn that she didn't graduate high school, that the police accused her of threatening them, and that she had been in this same psych ward three times before. She tells me about her on again, off again boyfriend, Mo, who likes to ride motorcycles and do his own tattoos. At first I am quiet and find excuses to walk away, but then I see the benefit to being on her good side. Sharon was not on her good side.

"Take the goddamn stick out of your ass, you used up old bitch! The rest of us are trying to get fucking right, for god's sake! Leave the young ones alone. They don't need your poison," Sharon snaps.

Finally, without warning, it is my turn in the glass room.

"Based on our meeting the other day and how you reacted to your medication, I have diagnosed you with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of military sexual trauma."

My world stops spinning.

I immediately review what I know about PTSD. I think of soldiers having seen action when overseas, holding dead buddies in their arms as they bleed out. I think of shots fired and the whistling scream of mortars raining on base. I had only ever experienced using Combat Application Tourniquets and Quikclot bandages in simulations. I shake my head.

"Do you deny that you have this disorder?" asks the doctor.

I think my answer must be important. I want to go home.

"I've never seen action. I don't understand."

The doctor smiles condescendingly and explains that trauma looks different for everyone. I am still not convinced, but I so badly want a beer or six and a cigarette and my own bed. I do not argue.

"When can I go home?" I ask.

"Soon," he says.

I am crushed. He claimed to have found the answer. The cause of the depression and the paranoia and the anxiety. Why couldn't I go home?

But I nod and leave the room and my thoughts swirl like a midwest twister. I know my enemy's name.

I go to the nurse station and request a printed list of famous people with my disorder. I scan the list and realize most of them are dead by suicide. I backtrack and ask for a list of living people. I ask for all the printable information concerning my new medications. I ask for a list of coping mechanisms. The nurses comply without question, almost eagerly. When they tell me they have run out of paper, I have a thick packet. I take my materials to my room and research. I learn the shape of my enemy.

When I drove off Fort Bliss and left the desert for the last time, I felt my body collapse in on itself in relief. My small Fiesta was packed to the gills, with precise efficiency, and I made the eighteen hour drive to my mother's front door step in Iowa without stopping. She had a cold, open beer waiting for me and the Saint Bernards licked the tears off my face.

I spent the winter waiting for my divorce to finalize and looking for a steady job, but my military experience didn't grant me any special treatment. By Christmas, after I was unable to buy my family gifts or fill my pantry with anything other than ramen, I understood that I would have to start over in an entry level job flipping burgers or selling gas. It was a hard realization, but I was too far behind on rent to let my pride get in the way.

Iowa was clinging to the last cold dregs of the bitter, dark winter as I finished out a semester of night classes at the local community college. I had just taken my final in a entrepreneurship course and was walking the ice slick, winding path to the parking lot on the other side of campus. My head was down against the wind, but my eyes were ever roving and my stinging fingers clutched my pink can

of pepper spray gel. There had been an attempted abduction of a young woman on my usual route to my car, blamed on drunk, future frat boys out on a lark, but I refused to take any chances. I dared a Chad or a Brock to come anywhere near me.

As I passed the street corner where the abduction would have taken place, my shoulders were jammed up near my ears and my heart beat with dread in my chest, but there were no looming threats in the night and I walked by uncaring shrubbery and stone walls.

Then I turned the corner and two dark figures burst through the darkness, hands reaching for my neck.

I screamed, twisted away, and depressed the mechanism on my pepper spray gel and unleashed it upon the attacker's face. He screamed. The other figure whipped off its hood and I was surprised to see a woman's face, livid and spitting curses.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? What is that?" she demanded, snatching the gel from my hands.

The figure on the ground was clawing at his face and yelling indistinctly. The woman crouched on the ground and rubbed his back gently.

"It's alright, it's alright. We'll fix it, buddy," she said over his wails.

I was frozen. My mind was blank.

"He has down syndrome, you bitch," the woman said, and pulled out a cell phone.

It didn't take long for the police to arrive. I was inconsolable. Tears poured down my face, and snot leaked from my nose. I tried to explain, over and over again, to the officers. One stayed with me with a firm hand on my shoulder while the others whispered in conference. Then I was in the ambulance.

I am sitting in the sweaty chair, reading my thick packet, when Adam approaches me.

“Have you thought about the wedding yet?” he asks.

I place my bookmark between the pages and meet his eyes.

“Fuck off,” I say.

His face darkens and he takes a step toward me, “Don’t talk to me like that.”

Without thinking, I am on my feet, forcing him to back up. Prickly heat sizzles along my skin, and my vision blurs.

My voice is low and tightly controlled when I say, “Listen, asshole, in three seconds I’m going to start screaming that you grabbed my tits. I’m going to sue the shit out of you and make such a convincing, tearful victim that the jury tosses you back in prison and throws away the key and you rot while holding an inmate’s pocket and letting him buttfuck you every night in exchange for protection. In *three seconds*, unless you turn around and walk away and don’t speak to me again.”

His fat lips work against each other as he thinks. I do not look away. He puts his hands up in surrender and backs away the way you would when confronted with a vicious animal. And maybe that’s what I am. An angry, wounded, vicious animal.

The day I leave, I am only given a few minutes notice. I feel young and bright. I hug Kate and Sharon goodbye. I thank the nurses, and they smile and wave. The big front doors buzz and my mom walks through them. I am halfway through the doors when I hear a wail. I cringe.

Mauve stumbles toward me. She holds out her arms and I catch her. She is sobbing. Her face is blotchy and wet. She is not a pretty crier.

I murmur to her that it will be alright, that she will be out soon, that she will find the courage to leave Mo and quit smoking and get her GED.

She steps away from me, wiping her eyes.

“Go get ‘em, kiddo.”

I nod and walk through the doors without looking back.

A few weeks later. Two different versions of myself later. I am standing in the liquor aisle holding a case of craft beer in one hand and a twelve pack of Coke in the other. I can’t decide which one will go in the cart.

My heart drops when I hear a banshee one aisle over.

“I told that Gilligan-lookin’ motherfucker to crawl back up his mama’s ass and shit himself a better opinion,” says the banshee.

Malevolent Mauve is closing in. I hunch against a display of that whiskey I will never forget. She does not notice me. When she passes my aisle, she doesn’t look healthy or clean anymore. Her once shiny plum hair hangs in lank chunks where it does not stick straight up to ask a question. Her gait is haphazard on the linoleum. I assume the burly, beer-gutted man with his arm around her is Mo. I could be wrong. I walk casually toward the checkout lanes with both the Coke and beer in my cart.

When I pass her, I do not say hello.



“Grandmother’s Shanty”

Timothy Stammeyer

*Aisling is a Gaelic word—
pronounced ash-ling,
like the dust falling
from my grandmother’s cigarette*

*and the bundling of a baby girl—
Molly Malone,
born in 17th century Ireland,
a daughter of fish mongers.*

*My grandmother sang of Molly—
sucking in air as she set
me into a makeshift couch bed,
the musty covers*

*bare laden white pages—
the silk bedsheet that tucks
in a famous sonnet or prose
that no one will ever read
except a lover on her ride to work,
a hand grasping the bus bar,
the other clutching a ripped envelope
with words she’s waited months to hear.*

*Molly and my grandmother are kindred—
medicine couldn’t save them,
lives dwindled without pomp,
few friends gathered at the funeral,*

*stars burning after death—
Molly a Dublin statue
captured in stone,
cast in the street;
my grandmother
encased in wood,
alive in the knot
of my family.*

*Molly sends me into the city—
my grandmother’s eye aglow
with silent blessing
anointing the roads under my feet,
sanctifying the breeze on my arms,
promising they will always fall lightly behind me,
the requiem of changing leaves
on a sunlit day.*



“Surviving the C”

Timothy Stammeyer

This is the story of how I almost died. It is an account of the time I came face-to-face with humanity, the time when I stopped trying to be an inspiration and decided to be real. The event is riddled with paradox because, like most people, I didn't want to die. I didn't want to live either. If I had a choice of how to go, I desired something soft, something tender, a way out that escaped the violence that raged in the world. In a word, I desired a death that was poetic, an ending that could end a piece of fine literature or, perhaps, begin it. Above all, I wanted to avoid being the middle of a story, an unfortunate event that only received passing remarks in the Midwest town square of an unknown author's book. Since my near death is ripe with contradiction, I suppose it most fitting to begin, and end, my story in the middle. I begin with the unexpected—the practice of yoga.

It was a step forward on my descent into madness, my journey to nothingness. I understood the procedure.

There are a multitude of activities I don't want to do when I want to die, and yoga is near the top of the list. In fact, it's right under paying taxes and engaging in small talk about the weather with that one guy who knows way more than any human being should ever know about meteorology. With this knowledge in mind, it should come as quite a surprise that the practice of yoga was the catalyst that saved my life. Before I go any further, I want to make a sincere, while admittedly halfhearted, apology to all of you crazy flexible people and/or go-getter 40 year-old moms out there who like, and dare I say, love yoga. I hate it. It ranks right up there with Grandma's turnip casserole that is objectively disgusting, but you keep trying it with a star-crossed hope that the same exact, despicable recipe will magically improve. Back to yoga. Every now and then I think to myself,

“Self, you know what would be fun? Bending your inflexible body in all kinds of contorted ways while an instructor who actually CAN bend their body in those ways tries to help you.”

In an attempt to make the ridiculously uncomfortable poses more relaxing, the yoga instructor (who from now forward will be called the all-flexible one) leads the yoga group in breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth. This controlled breathing exercise is near impossible because while the illness I'm most known for is Major Depression, I also have a small case of seasonal allergies. When I try to breathe in through my nose as the all-flexible one suggests, I end up breaking the peaceful silence of the yoga session with a nose-breathing hullabaloo, which I imagine sounds exactly like a hibernating bear with sleep apnea. The all-flexible one encourages me to keep breathing as I internally growl, “I'm trying! Why don't you tell the pollen to stop breathing?” It's mighty hard to keep calm as I'm shaking, muscles clenched, trying not to topple over as I'm stuck in downward cat or whatever the heck they call it. Yoga and I are no bueno, but I digress.

I'm at group therapy one afternoon and the lead therapist informs me that the group does yoga on Thursdays, to which I respond, “How much do you know about hibernating bears?” Alright, I didn't *really* ask that, but two thoughts immediately raced through my head when I realized I had to do yoga. Firstly, “What kind of depression therapy group in God's green earth does yoga every Thursday? Is this *Mean Girls*? Do we wear pink on Wednesdays and do yoga on Thursdays?” Secondly, “I'm suffering from severe depression and suicidal ideation and you want me to do the activity that is number three on the list of things I don't want to do when I want to die?” But what the heck, the therapist was leading me to the door, so I grabbed a purple yoga mat and walked into the makeshift yoga studio.

This version of the all-flexible one seemed particularly optimistic and excited to take our small group of mentally-ill-clad peace warriors on a quest through uncomfortable shape shifting and nose breathing. From the get-go, I was absolutely not having it. Perhaps it was because the all-flexible one reflected the spirit of life that I once had and wanted again. Perhaps it was that I hated yoga and my depression and anxiety interpreted the practice as meaningless. Perhaps it was the fact that I knew I was severely sick and any attempt to slow down and honestly peer into my innermost being was incredibly frightening because I might stare into the face of darkness, or worse, the void of nothingness. As the yoga session neared the end, the all-flexible one had each group member lie on their back, close their eyelids, and sketch a pleasant place in their mind's eye. The all-flexible one told us to focus on that paradise and breathe in and out slowly. In and out. In. and. out. As I breathed out the final time, I knew the trajectory of my life would be altered forever.

You have to brave, I told myself as I sat in the therapy waiting room waiting for Zach. He was my best friend, the person who had walked with me through the depths of mental illness. He was coming to get me, but the next part of the journey was something I had to face on my own.

We were assigned a larger staff and smaller patient size so the hospital could keep a close watch on us. If this were a jail, we were maximum security.

I checked into the emergency room at 4:45 p.m. I checked in with the receptionist who I think was from another country originally because she spoke beautifully. She chewed her gum really loud and kept looking at her phone and when I told her I was there because I was suicidal, she didn't seem very concerned. I checked into the emergency room when I signed my name on the form next to the paper with HIPPA in big bold letters. I sat down across from the only other guy there. Apparently, there was a lack of emergencies at 4:45 p.m. on a Thursday.

As I waited for the nurse to call my name, which took mysteriously long considering that the amount of emergencies seemed rather dormant at 4:45, I guess more like 5:05 at that point, on a Thursday, I imagined what the mental health unit of the hospital was like. The glimpses of horrific conditions of state institutions, lobotomies, and Frankensteinesque people who roamed the halls didn't surface in my thoughts. I was, in a way, excited for treatment. I figured that the hospital was full of depressed people like myself who sought recovery. I figured there would be comfortable chairs on the patio that looked over the city, soft music, relaxation, and conversation. The hospital was going to be a place of refreshment and encouragement—a place where human dignity was upheld and everyone was valued. The nurse called my name and led me through the double doors. Stepping into triage, my picturesque fantasy turned into a cold nightmare.

Each E.R. patient room had two doors locked from the outside. There was a patient bed, one pillow, no medical supplies in sight. The walls were bare, white. If you listened hard enough, you could hear the walls whisper, "Welcome to prison." I felt trapped, humiliated, wondering if my new set of hospital clothes would have the word "insane" stamped to the back. My first visitor was a nurse. She was a tough, broad woman, who had seen it all. She was short and intimidating, speaking brisk with a New England accent, a far cry from the comfort I craved. After I recounted a brief synopsis of my mental health, she asked my clothing size and left, a click of the lock accompanying her departure.

It didn't take long for the next visitor to knock sharply on my cell door. He entered, a solid six foot two, two-forty, full uniform, gloves, and a taser. A security guard of the E.R., he was entrusted with the safety of all patients and personnel. He greeted me hesitantly, trying to dispel the thick air of humiliation and distrust hanging heavy in the bare white room. I felt less like a person, more like a public enemy preparing for sentencing. It was a step forward on my dissent into madness, my journey to nothingness. I understood the procedure. There

were all kinds of people coming into the emergency room from all walks of life. Some were forced to seek treatment, others still wished to do harm on the closest person to them. I'm all about safety—that is why I entered the hospital. To be greeted by a security guard, every personal possession taken away with no contact to the outside world, was humiliating. I no longer felt like I mattered; I would just wither away and dissolve.

The doctor strolled into the room like a bona fide asshole. I thought my whole “lying on the floor when there was a perfectly good hospital bed” routine would spark his interest, but yet again, all bets were off in the psych ward. “Comfortable on the floor?” he asked without a care in the world what I replied. He spoke to me the way a parent speaks to a child after they have a little ouchy. He treated me like I was certified insane and unable to cognitively comprehend a basic question. “How are you feeling?” I wanted to tell him to take his head and shove it up his butthole until he found some compassion, but I couldn't speak. My thoughts were trapped in my head, the synapses that connected thought to speech were ruptured. My lips betrayed me, answering in line with what this buffoon of a physician wanted to hear. My brain, trying to protect me, betrayed me. The ounce of dignity that remained was gone.

After the doctor who took plenty of medical courses, but skipped human dignity day, left the room, the rough-around-the-edges nurse came back into my cell carrying a handful of red cloth. “Put these on,” she said with a note of trepidation, half expecting me to growl at her. The thin red fabric, as it turns out, was my prison uniform. It was an ugly, humiliating, maroon red; it looked like blood, dirty and drowned.

She gave me a pair of larges to try. I slipped out of my street clothes and hesitantly into my new threads. The material was free from flexibility and warped unashamedly around my insecurities. I felt fat and hideous. While my brain felt clouded, heavy, and empty all at the same time, there came a burst of righteousness that I can only define as my

human spirit refusing to quit. Sometimes human beings are capable of outward greatness that society recognizes as courageous acts of valor. In this moment, however, I learned that courageous acts are not only defined by their societal gravity, but also in proportion to the person's individual struggle. In that moment, I signaled the nurse through my cell window. She unlocked the door and peeked inside. I spoke with all the fibers of honor left in my being, “These clothes are too small for me.” “Oh, honey, I'll grab you some bigger ones.” I felt like a person, a weak shriveled tendril, but a person nonetheless.

The nurse arrived back a few minutes later with a fresh stack of red fibers straight from the factories of Nicaragua. While I can't be certain, I highly doubt that there was any semblance of fair trade in the purchase of our uniforms. I looked quickly at the tag, expecting it to read “XL.” Much to my surprise, the nurse brought me clothes slightly bigger than anticipated—a size 3X. I laughed. In her defense, I am a little chubby. There is no way in hell, however, that mid-sized old me is fitting into a 3X. A mix between the ridiculousness of the situation and the fact that I had no idea what to do, I thought I would humor myself and try them on. As expected, my new clothes looked like MC Hammer's pants got an upgrade. I could pull the pants way past my belly button. They made a great little cave that I could hide in if the rest of the hospital was as terrifying as the ER. If nothing else, I figured they would make a good blanket.

A few minutes later, the iconic knock of the hospital pounded on the wood. Another security guard walked in, different from the first one, with “Patient Transport” displayed blaringly on his uniform. While I was marginally confused with the entire process up until that point, I was fairly confident of the reason he was in my room. The guard took me to the elevator. After the “ding,” we started rising. I hoped my spirits would do the same.

When I arrived on the main psychological unit of the hospital, it was well into the evening. Between trying to color my nightmare away and getting intro-

duced to the ward, my energy was depleted. My mind, however, still buzzed. It was a rocky first night, akin to how the shoreline of the coast must feel as the icy waters spray upon it with the force of a thousand crying pleas. The night was long and lonely. Not being able to sleep and unsure that I could keep myself safe, I was transferred to the more secure unit—the C side.

I woke up in the high-acuity psychology ward, C-side, with a heavy mind. The only pain sharper than the depression was the intense burning of my arms, fresh with the marks of desperation. My new room was quaintier than my previous cell. There was only one bed, a window looking over the downtown cityscape, and my personal bathroom with a real, locking door that only locked from the outside. For a few moments, I breathed fresh with relief. Could it be that the hospital listened to my cries for help and put me in a place where I could recover properly? I was seriously sick; I knew the truth. My thought processes were broken. I could no longer trust my own analysis. I thought, perhaps, that my optimistic outlook on my new suite was the product of hopeful thinking based on a primal survival instinct. My meta-analysis was quickly disrupted when I noticed I was not alone on the C-side.

After explaining to me that she had to watch me one-on-one all night to make sure I remained safe, the nurse, Sharon, walked me to the main gathering space of the ward where our breakfast trays were waiting. I had eggs and bacon. It's fascinating how the smallest details of the most wonderful and most horrific events are etched into long-term memory. I remember this first breakfast because I dislike eggs and non-Iowans never seem to make bacon right. For the record, crisping bacon on the stove-top is the Iowan way, and dare I say the only way, to prepare pig candy. The gathering area consisted of rectangular wooden tables, a smaller table in the corner, a big television set, and a handful of comfy chairs. Off the main space were the key-access double doors, built solid—built with the sole intention of keeping some people in and others out. A small hallway ran from the doors, past the main space and

nurse's office, to a small window. Our rooms were to the right and left of this hallway. The entire C-side unit was no longer than a quarter of my dorm floor in my freshman year of college. "Eat," Sharon said, "you need your strength."

We, the patients of the C, were the needy; the people with the highest security risk were stationed there. We were assigned a larger staff and smaller patient size so the hospital could keep a close watch on us. If this were a jail, we were maximum security. Despite being locked in and having no personal locks on our doors or bathrooms, the place started to remind me of a run-down senior living facility. The hygiene supplies, decently enjoyable crafts, bland food, and an immense amount of coloring and crossword supplies kept me double checking if I was there as a patient or there to see grandma.

"While a crippling mental illness left my life at bay, I looked over the pallet garden in the yard, the yard of my childhood home, the place I adored."

I wish I could say lots of great things about the hospital, but in reality, it was tough. You didn't get sent over to the C-side unless they were seriously concerned about you. The weight of being in the C was heavy; I felt the burden. It wasn't the heaviest of things, but a confirmation that you were one step further away from getting out of the hospital. Now there were three sets of solid double doors I needed to walk through in order to be free again and, quite frankly, the scratches on my arms confirmed that I wasn't about to leave anytime soon.

It wasn't glamorous, yet there were two events that defined my experience there. The first happened on my birthday. I didn't make a big deal about it being my birthday. In fact, my initial hope was that the hospital staff wouldn't realize that my birthday was so soon. If I could keep my mouth shut about it, I thought, then I wouldn't have to deal with the pomp and circumstance of the whole affair. Secretly, I worried that they would forget, or worse, remember and not care. Luckily, all my fears and anxiety were

calmed quickly when one of the behavioral technicians, Kate, noticed the presence of my special day. “Happy Birthday,” she said enthusiastically. This comment was quickly accompanied by a round of similar sentiments from the other patients. While the hospital is no place to spend a celebration of life, I was deeply grateful for all the love I was shown that day. Perhaps having my birthday in the hospital was the most poignant of all places for me, celebrating my life in a place that saved me from extinguishing it.

There are a few important perks you receive when you celebrate your birthday in the hospital. The first greeted me in the morning on my breakfast tray. Underneath my name, before the list of foods on my tray, was a printed note that said “Happy Birthday!” It was touching, really, that nutrition services, the very people who couldn’t seem to manage to remember my iced tea, had taken the time to wish me, little insignificant me, a happy birthday. While I’m sure the system is automated to print that way on a patient’s birthday, I still took the message in high esteem. The second, and dare I say most important, perk of having a birthday in the hospital—a birthday cake. Now, I’m no expert, but based on nutrition services’ track record, I was a little worried about what kind of cake they were going to send up. I heard, though, that the cake was delightful and there was enough to share with everyone on the unit. While I was already a bit of a celebrity, being the reason everyone got cake instantly boosted my status.

After dinner, nutrition services brought up my cake. To my delight, it was a full-size, homemade German chocolate cake, complete with coconut and all the fixings. It was a thing of beauty. The staff cut it into squares, gave me the first piece, and started a round of singing “Happy Birthday.” They were painfully off key, but their tune warmed my heart. It was surreal that amidst all the suffering, all the ways the mind tried to deceive us, that such a beautiful and warm celebration radiated strong with enough intensity to float through the solid double doors that confined us. I felt loved, and thankful, and my pessimism that had dominated my hospital stay until that point took a hiatus for

a few hours. The day was mine, and what’s more, I was alive.

Kate, my behavioral technician confidant, the one who was exceptionally talented at color-by-number pictures, called me over just as everyone else was going to their rooms for the night. She pulled out her phone and made me promise that I wouldn’t tell on her for using her phone with a patient. I laughed at how ridiculous this request sounded, but I agreed, more out of curiosity than necessity. She pulled up YouTube from her search browser and typed in the number “22.” Naturally, Taylor Swift’s hit song popped up. “This wouldn’t be a proper 22nd birthday without listening to this song,” Kate said with a hint of sweetness and a touch of mischievousness. The song started to play, albeit quietly, there in the hospital as we sat in the two chairs by the telephone.

I danced like a white boy. It wasn’t much, just a little arm swivel while I sat in the chair, but I felt normal. For the first time since I entered the hospital, I didn’t feel like a numbered patient stripped of his dignity. I felt like I was cared about, like I could be friends with the staff, like I mattered, and what’s more, that I had a future outside the confines of the hospital. I felt loved, and free, and me. I felt 22.

The second happening occurred hours later. The ward was chaotic, patients were constantly screaming and demanding. There seemed to be enough order just to keep the place from imploding. Between the constant demands of Steve for food, and the quick temper of several other patients, the place was the antithesis of calming. I knew that many of the patients couldn’t help their distress. I realized that they were in deep suffering that manifested itself in outward turmoil. The reality was, however, that this triggered my anxiety and made me want to curl up in a ball and punch someone at the same time. At supper, I left momentarily and when I came back, Samantha, little old fake hair extensions and conniving Samantha, stole some of my food off my tray because she “thought” I was finished. Yes, my existence was diminished to having to worry about another patient stealing my food.

Through all of this yelling, and cussing, and non-therapeutic turmoil, I remained still. After the new guy yelled once more, I stood up from my chair and poised for battle. I became the king of the Wild Things. Silence took over the room for the briefest of moments like the center of the eye of the hurricane. I stared with my terrible blue eyes and curled my terrible claws. I turned to the new guy and shouted in my hoarsest and most vile of tones, "Shut the f*** up." It was amazing really, as no one around could believe that me, the man of calm words, Jesus, and sweet guitar playing had it in him to yell, let alone cuss at another person. "You want to fight me asshole?" he returned defiantly. Before I was able to return a reply, a nurse started grabbing my arm, begging me to sit down. "You need to calm down," she said. "Calm down? Calm down!" I said, "There is no way in hell that I need to calm down. I have sat here for seven f***ing days in this hell hole of an environment without the slightest thread of anything therapeutic. I checked into the hospital thinking it was going to be a safe and nice environment for me to recover and make me not want to kill myself. Instead, this place has been the exact opposite. I have sat here and colored for a week, and for what? Just to hear all of these people yell and complain. You need to get me out of here and over to the other side. You need to do it tonight. I demand to talk to the patient advocate." And when I sat down to eat the rest of my supper, it was still warm.

I remembered life has meaning. There is still time to smell the tulips growing, time to dance in the back yard with the music blasting in your head and falling down dizzy and content . . . There is time to kiss that girl under the tree on the lakeshore, even if you're not sure it's going to work out.

The next day, I was moved back to the other side of the psychological ward where I began my journey days earlier. A couple mornings later, the patients gathered together for the daily meeting. We were numerous and weary. Some of us were homeless, others addicted to drugs, others addicted to the pain

of life. We were black and white, Indian and Hispanic, Catholic and Muslim. Most importantly, we were. Stroked with inspiration, determination, and a hint of madness, I approached the lead therapist just before the meeting started and asked if I could play a song on guitar for the group. He approved with a joyous apprehension, a slight gleam in his eyes only visible by a person searching for hindered affirmation. After the usual check-in and sign-ups, the man in charge, John, pointed at me and explained that I had a musical talent to share with the group. I started my short speech, "We all have come here with heavy hearts and different problems, but we are all loved and we all matter. Together, supporting one another, we shall overcome." And I played and played, and poured my soul into the lyrics:

"We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome some day. Deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome some day. We are not afraid, we are not afraid, we are not afraid today. Deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome some day."

The faces of the people in the circle started to melt in the way of healing. People started to cry, some sobbing, others with tears dripping slightly. One beautiful woman came up and said, "Thank you." That expression of thanks still haunts me today.

A couple days later, the doctor wrote me a final prescription and cleared me for discharge. There's not much that I remember about leaving the hospital. I do remember that when I left the parking garage there was a tight spiral to drive down. My parents picked me up and brought me with them back to my childhood home in Iowa.

Sitting on the outside deck of my home weeks later, I looked out over the pallet garden my brother built. An area of pots and large mason jars adorned the wooden slats. There were reds, and greens, and beige, and a pink pot, an odd assortment with plants just beginning to bloom. I thought back to all of the days of my youth, swinging bats and getting ice cream from the corner shop. Vanilla swirled with raspberry in a cone upside down in a styrofoam dish was my

favorite. The ice cream melted so quickly that a cone alone would leave my hands a sweet sticky mess, a copycat nectar for the hummingbirds. Some nights we would skip the ice cream swirl and head for the snow cone shop. I bought a medium blue raspberry and strawberry mixture, delighting in the moment the snow cone man poured the syrup into the crystals, the sugar sinking into the days of my childhood long past. While a crippling mental illness left my life at bay, I looked over the pallet garden in the yard, the yard of my childhood home, the place I adored.

I made the decision, without word, without sound, without a visible extraordinary. With a swish of brain juices spiraling, a sensation only likened to kinetic vivaciousness, I remembered.

I remembered the time in the rural countryside of Iowa with my cousins. A kind farmer, a man with worn knuckles, took me on a tractor ride through the field. I remembered the clunk of the engine and the rusty green paint that sparkled on the long snout of the machine's front end.

I remembered the dance studio where I first graced the stage in my little tumbling outfit, cartwheeling to "Animal Crackers in My Soup." I remembered being a poor Jewish man in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. I walked out on closing night to cheers and a standing ovation. That day, in that moment, I was a very rich man. I remembered wearing a blue cotton uniform with "Dodgers" printed in cursive along the front. I was the shortstop and no ball got by me. I was the league MVP in defense, a golden glove of my golden childhood years. The team all called me "Sparky" because I lit up each game with my wide crooked smile. My parents were so proud of me. My parents are still proud of me.

I remembered life has meaning. There is still time to smell the tulips growing, time to dance in the back yard with the music blasting in your head and falling down dizzy and content. There is still time to order a jumbo tenderloin AND a chocolate mixer from Goldie's Sandwich Shoppe.

There is time to kiss that girl under the tree on the lakeshore even if you're not sure it's going to work out. There is time for canoe trips, and camping trips, and making that perfect golden-brown s'more over the campfire even if you had to eat the previous ten because you caught them on fire. There is time to go to the thrift store and walk around town like you're from the 70's, time to buy that crappy vinyl record for 75 cents and listen to it spin in the glow of the front porch lights. There is time to jump from that 10-foot-tall rock into the lake where you can't see the bottom.

There is time to paint that birdhouse, curse the squirrels for stealing the birdseed, and plant those wildflowers in the shade of the roof's overhang. There is time to make clues for hidden treasure maps out of inside jokes and lead your friends across town on a wild goose chase, time to feed the geese and the ducks at the park with leftover lettuce because apparently the bread is bad for them.

Making the decision to stay on earth and not take your life is a little like falling in love—it's raw, unknown. In many ways, dying is much easier than living—staying complacent is easier than loving.

There is time to dance awkwardly on your way into the grocery store and watch yourself on the security camera screens. There is time to love, time to love well, time to love often. There is time to buy a 30-dollar kite and wait for a windy day to launch it high, time to watch it soar with the dreams you're not prepared to give up. There is time to laugh, and leap, and sigh, and mourn, and more time to remember that life is not full of beauty; life is beauty.

Time to turn halfway and remember what befalls you, what lies behind and might still haunt you. Time to turn again fully taught and go to the fields of romping that you ought. There is time to still hunt the fairies of yonder year and chase the butterflies in the night, blinking clear. There is time to drop the winning pass, to overcook the Thanksgiving meal, to thirst for heaven. There is time to celebrate the victories the world calls trivial, but in your heart hold the place

highest to heaven this life can offer. There is time to remember, time to forget remembering.

There is time and time is not yet spent. There is time. Time to live.

Through it all—the suicidal thoughts, the realization that there is nothing poetic about mental illness, the understanding that there is nothing illogical about losing your mind, life started to click. I've heard that when you fall in love, the songs on the radio start to make sense.

You stop and wonder if the lyrics are meant just for you, how being in love is a trial, that being in love is worth it. At least you have to trust that it is. Making the decision to stay on earth and not take your life is a little like falling in love—it's raw, unknown. In many ways, dying is much easier than living—staying complacent is easier than loving.

You see, though, it's not about being easy; it's not even about choosing what makes sense at the time. It's about knowing that your value far surpasses any illness that can plague you, any taunt that can humiliate you, any temptation that befalls you. It's about waltzing up to the gates of hell, looking inside, and deciding that the journey back up the spiral staircase that has led to the entrance of fire is not easy to climb, but it is possible, it is doable, it is worth it.



“Ghazal for a Sunken Ship”

Harlan Grant

*When I accepted the water as it was I became part of the sea change
Plundering Neptune’s pockets for a bit of loose spare change*

*Soggy starfish constellations jostling for dominance in black forest cake sky
Features dripping kindling from jawbones like rainy day changelings*

*H₂O whip cream foam same as chains on the splintered legs of my stern maiden
Fit the whole deep blue bakery into frame but the story remains unchanged*

*Now there’s liquid in my book of recipes drowning undeveloped reveries
Jeweler’s oysters showering my waterlogged kitchenette in scent change*

*Baker’s Dozen, a designation once proud now peeling in slivers off starboard
A low harbor’s putrid visitant altered by incident but in memory never changing*



“Fear”

Cale Edgington

They tell you so many things when you go to the school.

Some of it’s joking.

“You know how much time you got to fix a bad chute, Pri? The rest of your life.”

“It ain’t a bad fall that’ll kill ya’ Pri’. It’s the landing.”

But the one you were told that stuck with you the most was simple.

You’ve never really known fear before.

Is this how prisoners feel being marched to the chopping block? Or pushed up the steps to the gallows?

Because fear is doing something you hate more than anything else, another time. And now here you are sitting on your ass in the back of some old steel bird, engines rumbling on the other side of that metal wall. You don’t know what is making your teeth chatter. Is it the cold? Maybe the engines? Or is it the fact that the inky blackness only makes the distance between you and the ground so much worse?

You can see it just outside the windows. The sky is dark as pitch and there isn’t a speck of starlight anywhere in the sky. The only reason you can see the person in front of you is because of the day-glo strips on the back of his helmet that tells you he’s there. Well, that and if you stretch your feet out too much you’ll start digging into his back and he’ll let you know he doesn’t really appreciate that sort of thing.

Then the light comes on. Dull red and there is a klaxon call that echoes through the bay.

A woman at the door stands up and her silhouette casts a shadow over you. Your executioner. They call her the Jumpmaster. You think your title is better.

She’s staring down at each of you. You can’t see her face with the back-lighting of demonic fires, and the cool black mask that comes down over her eyes. But you can see the way she waves her arms and the call, “On your feet!”

Is this how prisoners feel being marched to the chopping block? Or pushed up the steps to the gallows? Nobody grabs you or pulls you to your feet and you don’t *want* to but no matter how much some part of you screams to stop, you get onto your feet and you try to will your legs to stop shaking so much. Hands scramble out and they find the wall next to you and the man in front of you. He jumps at the touch and you think you hear him curse.

You feel an arm on your shoulder and you do the same. When you look behind you to see who it is, you can’t make out his face too well through the shadow you cast on it. But what you can see is he’s hung his head and he looks like death.

You look back up the line to the Jumpmaster.

She seems so far ahead but still too close all at once, towering over you. Is she grinning? She must be. The headsman must love her work.

“Hook up!” She yells.

But the rumble and the chaos of noise around you means that each word is spoken on its own. Like a bullet point or a command unto itself. You let go of the wall – and immediately regret it. Turbulence nearly smacks you against that same barrier and your face goes against the glass hard. The man behind you tries to help and pull you away but he’s too late.

Before he pulls you back, you see all of it. Or really, you see how much you can't see.

Darkness up. A void below. You wouldn't even think the wing was there if you couldn't see the strobing red light at its tip. It's almost enough to make dinner come up and you can feel it churning in your guts when you finally pulled away from the wall and back on your own two feet. Following the woman's orders help you forget about it as you paw at your chest until you feel the ice of the carabiner even through your glove.

The Jumpmaster scowls and you watch her fish in her pocket. You freeze when you see the glint under red light. Long and cold steel held in a tight grip.

The line above you that you hook onto makes you think of a noose too much. How you are about to be hanging from it as your last grounded connection to – anything. And how you know if it does its job perfectly, it might be the same thing that kills you.

“Jumper! Stand ready!”

The first man in the line is the unluckiest. He has no chance to try and cower away or avoid the Jumpmaster's gaze. He must do exactly as he's told, turning and facing the still closed door where he can just imagine what isn't waiting for him on the other side. Some part of you breaths a sigh of relief. He has the toughest job, doesn't he? Standing there and just facing it. The rest of you have permission to just – run. Run through it.

But then he breaks. You and your killer both see it at the same time.

It starts with a shake of the legs and then he crumbles to the steel floor, “No! No fuckin' – no! I can't do it!” You watch him desperately kick his feet on the ground and try to tug away but he's hooked up like the rest of you and so he doesn't get very far.

The Jumpmaster scowls and you watch her fish in her pocket. You freeze when you see the glint under

red light. Long and cold steel held in a tight grip. You see her eye the man on the ground like a hunter staring down at a wounded deer. She reels back, swings, and... and his line cuts free. It hangs by its carabiner a foot in front of you while she turns on him, hefts him by his chest-straps, and with a nearly herculean strength she hefts him to the rear of the craft.

You don't hear what she says before she turns to you. Blood is running in your ears and you can taste your lunch again. And for the first time you can see your own face staring back at you from that black glass. A ghostly image cast just over her thin-pursed lips as she reaches out and grabs your collar, pulling you to where he had been standing seconds before. He's whimpering. You want to, to, but you can barely work your jaw let alone think enough to cry.

“Jumper! Stand! Ready!”

You turn to the door and face that final barrier. You try to remember other experiences and other training that you went into. Other advice you've been given. You remember one that your father told you: focus on a spot on the wall, and try to build a house in your mind. So, you stare at a spot of cold steel on the door and you imagine what you can.

The foundation would be... brick? You think. Houses have brick bottoms, don't they? And wooden walls. The windows would be glass, of course. A door. Living room. The whole exercise makes you take thirty seconds because you realize the man who gave you the advice? Was an engineer. And you're piss at building houses.

Then the red light strobes once and all that is gone anyways as the woman reaches down to a latch you didn't notice on the door and pulls it up in one fluid motion.

You hear the scream of steel rollers the very same second that the blast of cold hits you. Your eyes water and breath is ripped from your lungs. The air around you drops ten degrees in half as many seconds and your fingers are already going numb through the gloves. And there is that void again. Except this time there is no window. There's no

steel. There is just two, maybe three steps, and that total darkness beyond.

“Jumper! Stand in the door!”

Like hell you will! You can just step back and –

But she reads your mind. She has you by the shoulders and she shoves you forward.

A kick to the ass is a reminder that she’s the one in charge.

You are flailing though. Your hands seek any purchase and they find them. The frame of the door. The problem with that? It’s a good two feet ahead of you, and means you’re clutching to the outside of the plane. So now you are leaning with boots slipping on steel, hands clutching the walls, and your head sticks out into that darkness where you can’t even hear. You can’t see.

The world is white noise, darkness, cold.

Kicks to the back of your feet have you ‘retreating’ to the door. Retreating until they are wedged tight to either side of the open frame. And still you are trying to look anywhere for any sort of sign. Up and down are no good. Ahead, you can’t see the nose of the plane. To the rear, the tail disappears behind the curve of its body. Suddenly she grabs you again and you are pulled back into the red and the rumble.

“Jump on my go!” She commands.

You nod. What else are you going to do?

Joining your friend isn’t an option. You steal a glance over your shoulder to see him laying curled up. Another one of the executioners, in jumpsuit and masked helmet, crouches over him looking no happier than the Jumpmaster at your shoulder.

But you lose sight of them.

The red light goes off.

Blackness behind you. Blackness ahead of you.

Then the damning color. *Green.*

Green comes on and reveals her standing there watching you. It’s something out of a movie.

“Four! Three! Two!”

The air around you drops ten degrees in half as many seconds and your fingers are already going numb through the gloves. And there is that void again. Except this time there is no window. There’s no steel. There is just two, maybe three steps, and that total darkness beyond.

And that’s the last thing you hear from her. Her boot meets your back on two and suddenly you are in the open. A second of weightlessness and pure nothing. Your legs and arms flail wildly for purchase. You wonder if they can hear you screaming as you fall. You wonder why you can’t even hear yourself.

Then it snaps. The line behind you pulls free and your body shakes to its core.

Freedom, you think hopefully. Safety.

But then you hear the hiss of wind. The flapping of fabric. More importantly than that, you feel chords pressing in on the side of your head. You will yourself to open your eyes – not that you could tell the difference – and try to look up at it. You strain and squint even as you fall but you can’t see anything over you. You can just hear the sound of that lifeline uselessly flailing in the wind, while it pulls at your shoulders.

That wasn’t desperation back in the plane.

That didn’t set in till now.

Your mind scrambles desperately through the steps.

Stand up. Hook up. Step to the door. All that’s done. Did you count to ten? No – no but what good does that do now? On reflex again, you start pawing at your chest for some release or pull. All the while you find yourself looking from your feet to

the sky. You strain to see some glow or some light from down below and you try and gauge how far you are to the ground.

Wind screams in your ear. Your body buffets.

Closer. You know the ground is coming closer.

You're going faster, too.

That's when you find the release. A chord on your shoulder. You pull on it, hard, and hear the zipping of lines coming free from your harness... and then you don't have any guidance. You start tumbling. Twisting. If the dark was bad before, now your inner ear is spinning, and you can't tell which way to look. You're a misbalanced top.

The panic is setting in all the harder.

It's turning the cold air to ice.

It's making you miss every touch.

You check your belt and your harness. Some part of you tells you to check your pockets – empty – like you need to get your keys. Your brain isn't telling you anything. Anything except that you are about to die because the ground is right below you.

You don't catch your reserve on purpose. But you catch it.

It's tucked in on your belly and you can feel the punch of that fabric ball against your face as it catches the wind and goes skyward. It rights you on its own. It has to, right? That's how physics works, some part of your mind reasons, just like how you're still falling too fast. You're falling way too fast to make any difference.

But the funny thing about remembering physics is you remember how pendulums work.

You remember how they work as you descend into an invisible cluster of trees. Something about the snap of branches as you come plummeting through them reminds you of pendulums.

Or maybe it's the way your chute catches a tree. How you are suddenly sent spinning in a lazy arch around a tree you can't even see like a tether ball – until you meet a similar fate. It's too dark to see your hand in front of your face, let alone a tree.

You start tumbling. Twisting. If the dark was bad before, now your inner ear is spinning, and you can't tell which way to look. You're a misbalanced top.

But you feel the impact. You feel the back against your eye-protection so at least you aren't blind. But you also feel the way your nose crunches. You feel the gout of blood that splatters down your chin when it connects. If nothing else it lets you see for the first time since you left the plane, as white stars dance in front of your vision.

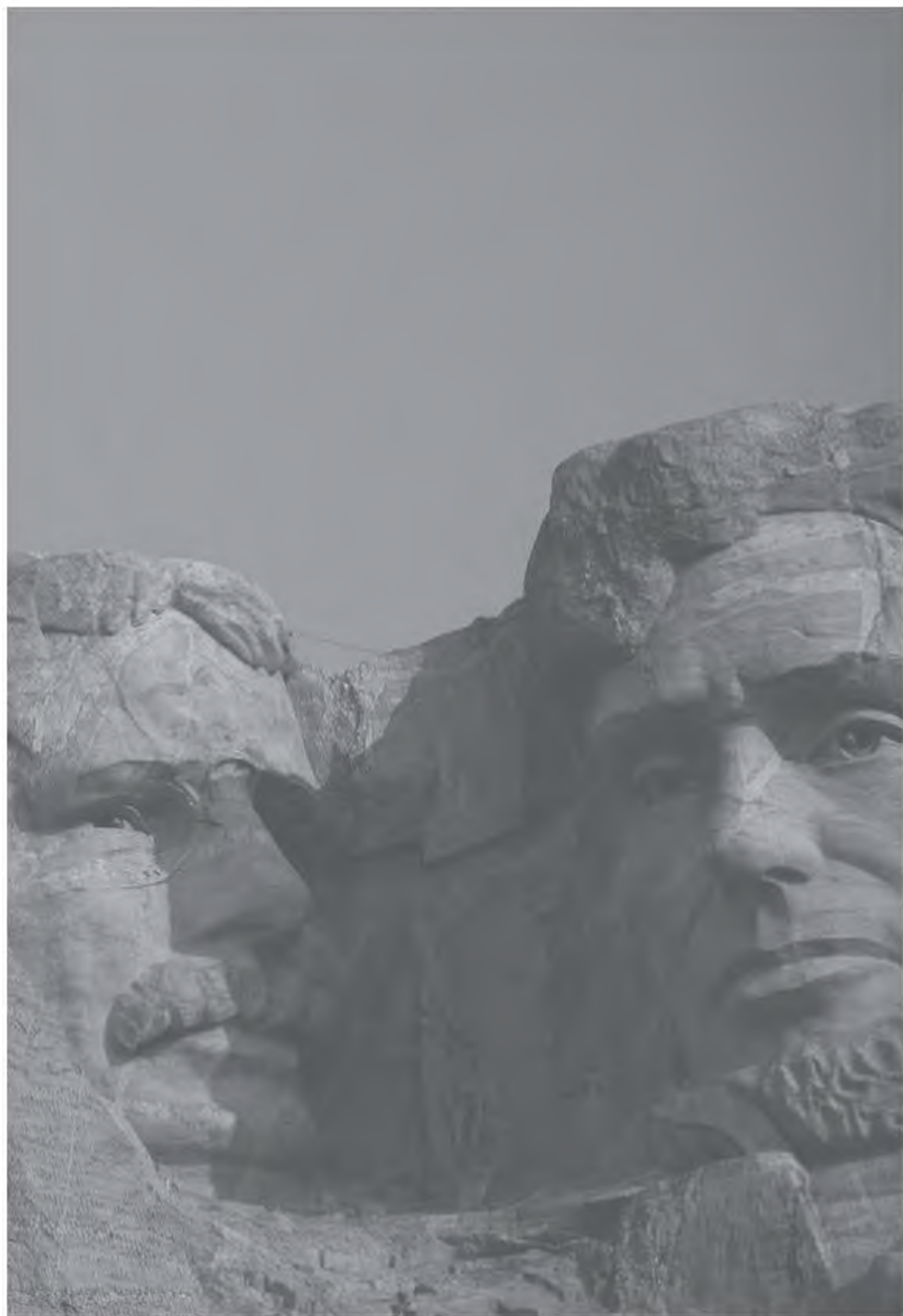
Concussion? Probably.

But you're alive.

You're alive, hanging from the tree. And you let yourself swing there, breathing through your mouth to avoid the pain. And after a few minutes of that you finally get the energy to fish your flashlight off your belt and click it on. You sweep that cone over the trees around you and you even find the dark, splattered bark where your face met an American Beech. It makes your nose hurt more just looking at it.

Finally, you look down and realize the ground is closer than you thought. Maybe a few feet? Close enough you feel confident pulling the release on your harness to fall those last few feet. And immediately regret it as the impact makes your nose pulse with pain.

But then you can lie there on your back in the cold and the grass. You can lie there and try to breathe. You can lie there and realize you lived through fear.



“Western Pantoum”

Harlan Grant

*There was a story that hurt me a while back
About two fatal men cutting through frontier America
When California first began to blister with civilization
Gold nuzzled the banks of ambrosia rivers*

*Two brothers carving initials into frontier America
The kind of folk-heroes we reminisce in bantam ways
Gold hustled from the banks by whiskey Reavers
We whittle their aspects into granite hills*

*The kind folk heroes we forget along the way
Favor bloodied Kid Billy to hero John Henry
We whittle their traits onto silver currencies
Then flick them and wish them into a veiled well*

*Always prefer bloody Kid Billy to martyr John Henry
Westerners easing the abscess of civilization
Before diving and whistling into our hidden wells
There was a story that hurt me a while back*



“Babs”

Alexandra K. Griffin

The smell of fragrant prairie flowers surrounds me and the warmth of the sun envelops my body. I stretch my arms out as far as they can go, trying to absorb every drop of sunlight. I inhale deeply and open my eyes, I see two children playing in the prairie in the distance and wild horses frolicking. A smile scrunches my smooth, young skin in places that will wrinkle as I age. It could not be a more pleasant day. I close my eyes once again to absorb this euphoria.

When I finally open them, I am no longer greeted with this heavenly image, instead I see a fat, elderly woman sleeping with her mouth wide open and her dentures falling out. I smell the pungent smell of human waste. The sheets on the bed crunch as I sit up. I hear an incessant beeping and moans and groans in the distance. Where am I? I thought. Who is that woman? Why am I not in my home? Where are my kids? Oh my goodness! Where are my children? Millie is only a baby and Robert is but three, they cannot be without their mother. Henry must be worried sick.

My heart pounds in my chest as I swing my legs out of bed, my bony, wrinkled, veiny, ugly legs. What? Why are my legs so atrocious? I could not focus on my legs; I needed to find my family. I flinch at the sudden coldness as my feet touch the tile. I look down at the rest of my body and notice I am in a hospital gown. Oh my! Am I sick? I must be in the hospital, but for what? I swear, if I am pregnant again Henry will never hear the end of it. I grab onto the bar of the hospital bed with my wrinkled, age-spotted arm and slowly stand up.

As soon as I rise a horrible, high-pitched alarm starts going off. I look around frantically, worried to disturb my roommate. “Help,” I call. “Help,” I call again. No one comes.

I have the sudden urge to relieve myself. I find the bathroom and limp over to the toilet, my knees ache and creak with each movement. Once there, I grab my undergarments. “What,” I say aloud. My thumbs hook under the waistband of an adult diaper. Did I just have a baby? Oh my! Where’s my baby?

I pull it down to my knees and look in the crotch. No blood. “Help,” I call again. Slowly, I lower my elderly body on to the toilet seat and pee as I wait for someone to answer my call. The alarm continues from the hospital room. I grab some toilet paper and wrap it around my fingers three times and spread my legs, wiping from front to back, just like my mother taught me. Where is mother? Or father? They must be wor--.

“Barbra,” a young woman’s voice scolds.

I look up, with my hand between my legs and the soiled toilet paper still wrapped around my fingers.

“Yes,” I respond.

“You are not supposed to get up by yourself, honey.” The young girl is wearing scrubs, but pink, not white, like a nurse would wear. Her blonde hair piled up on top of her head in a bun, her face void of make-up, and the name tag clipped to her top claims her name is Kylie.

I start laughing at her, but she never joins me. My whole world shatters with those three words. My children have grown and have their own children now, my grandchildren. I’m a grandmother.

“Where am I?” I ask, as I drop the toilet paper in the toilet bowl. Kylie shifts her weight from one tennis shoe to the other.

“You are at Oak Hills Retirement Home, Barb.”
Oak Hills? That cannot be right. I am 25 years old.
There’s no way I am old enough to live here.

“Barbra, what year is it?”

“It...it must be,” I trail off counting the years on
my fingers. “1950.”

She looks at me with sympathy.

“No honey, it is 2018.”

I may even be a great grandmother, maybe a great-
great grandmother. Henry, where’s my Henry? He
must be here with me. He promised we would grow
old together.

“Alright honey, I have other people to get up for
the day, so let’s get cleaned up and ready for break-
fast.”

She disappears around the corner for a few minutes
and returns wearing blue gloves with a stack of wet
wash cloths and a pair of blue jeans. She places the
cloths on the counter and kneels down threading
my legs through the pants, then pulls a pair of thin
socks out from under her arm and slides them up
my legs, they tighten on my legs.

“Ouch,” I exclaim.

“Oh dear, it’s okay. I know you don’t like them.
But they help with the swelling.”

She retrieves a pair cotton socks, pulling them
over the first pair, and then puts on large, black,
Velcro shoes.

“Okay, ready to stand?”

I nod and clutch the metal grab bar, she loops her
right arm under my left and hoists me from the toilet.

“Alright, let’s turn now.” She moves my hips to
show me which way to pivot. Kylie pulls my night-
gown up toward my shoulders, and places a warm
cloth at the front of my privates and drags the rough
washcloth to the back. I slap her hand away.

“What do you think you’re doing, young lady?” I
ask, shaking mad.

“Babs, we do not hit people. I am trying to help
you.” She grabs another one and does the same thing,
then a dry cloth and again, drags it on my now sore
skin. She squirts a tablespoon of ointment on her
hand and slathers my bottom with it.

“All right honey,” she says as she tugs my diaper in
place, and then my jeans. She takes off her gloves
and grabs my hand, “let’s go back into your room
and finish getting you ready.”

After she directs me back to the hospital bed, Kylie
washes my face, removes my nightgown, fastens a
bra around my ribs, pulls a sweater over my head,
fixes my hair, hands me a tooth brush with paste
applied and she finally dons my glasses. Once I rinse
my mouth with Listerine, the young woman squirts
one pump of perfume on each shoulder. My nose is
invaded with my favorite perfume, White Diamonds.

***Mom always makes the best coffee cake.
I wonder where dad and my siblings are.
Coffee cake is always a treat that no one ever
misses in our household. I look up and see a
young man with a hair net on.***

“Okay, sweetie, ready for some breakfast? Shelia
has made your favorite today, coffee cake,” she says
cheerfully. I mean, I do love a good coffee cake. She
walks me down to a cafeteria with her hand in mine
and herds me to my rightful seat, pushing the chair
in once I sit down.

“Okay, honey bunch,” Kylie says as she places a
steaming cup of coffee in front of me, “I am going to
finish my work. You should be getting your breakfast
shortly.” Handing me three packets of creamer, she
makes her leave.

I rip each packet and carefully dump them into my
cup. I stir it until my coffee is more tan than brown.
A few minutes later someone places a plate in front
of me with two hardboiled eggs and a generous piece
of coffee cake.

“Thank you, Mother.”

Mom always makes the best coffee cake. I wonder where dad and my siblings are. Coffee cake is always a treat that no one ever misses in our household. I look up and see a young man with a hair net on.

“Who are you? Where is my mother?”

My heart quickens and suddenly Mother’s coffee cake no longer looks appealing. I look around again. I am in our farmhouse, the only place I have ever lived. The long table that Father built to accommodate all of us children is empty.

“Mom,” I shout. “Mom!”

“Barbra,” a young woman, who is definitely older than me says, “your mother has stepped out to get a couple eggs from the henhouse.” Oh, okay. She should return in a couple minutes. I devour the food my mother made while I wait for her. Kylie.

I smile as I help “Babs” get ready for breakfast, even though inwardly, I pity her and her condition. After I set her up in the dining room, I speed down the hallway to finish getting the rest of my section up. On days that Babs is more forgetful and wakes up early, my routine gets interrupted and I am usually later than what is expected.

As I round the corner, I notice Babs’ daughter is her room. I pop my head in, knowing that the rest of my residents will already be later than normal.

“Hi ma’am, can I help you?”

“Um, yes,” a woman who looks the age of my grandma says, “I am looking for my mother, Barbara.”

“I just took her to the dining room for breakfast.” Her face instantly turns red in annoyance.

“Are you kidding me? We are burying my father today! I need you to get her in here and ready to go. I told the nurse about this last week!” I then notice the black dress, heels, shawl and tights the woman is wearing.

“Of course.” I muster a smile and walk out of the room. Once out of earshot and eye sight, I dash down the hall. I walk up to where our kitchen staff is serving breakfast. “Hey, Gabe, can I get a package of dry cereal for Babs? Her husband’s funeral is this morning.”

“Whatever you say, baby,” the pudgy seventeen-year-old responds with a smirk and a wink. I roll my eyes and shove his shoulder as he hands me a small package of Frosted Flakes. I turn around and walk toward Babs, who is almost finished with her coffee cake.

“Hey Babs,” I squat down next to her, “we have to go to church this morning, so we’re going to have to leave the rest of our breakfast here and eat some dry cereal on the way.”

Babs nods as she chews the last bite of her cake. “I like Pep!”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, we don’t have any, but I have the next best thing,” I shake the container in my hand for her to see. She takes a big gulp of her coffee and reaches her hand out. I help pull her up and she does an exaggerated turn, like we are dancing.

“Oh, Henry,” she says and kisses my cheek, “I love you forever.”

My heart breaks a little. “I love you forever, too,” I respond, being a dutiful CNA, knowing we are supposed to enter the delusion with them.

Babs almost skips down the hallway and giggles, swinging my hand that is intertwined in hers. She sings as I walkie my crew, “Hey guys, I had an unexpected event. Can you wake up Gertrude and help Esther to the toilet. Hopefully, this won’t take too long.”

My walkie beeps, letting me know I finished my message. “Roger,” Shelbey responds. “10-4,” says Kaycee. I chuckle and shake my head at those two being witty.

Once we reach her room, Babs stops singing. “Who are you?” she asks her daughter.

Millicent rolls her eyes, “Mom, I don’t have time for your silly delusions today.”

“Mom? I’m not your mother. I can’t be. I’m still a virgin.”

She rolls her eyes again and crosses her arms. Looking at me, Millicent says, “Will you please just get her ready quickly? We are to be at the church in Hartford in a half an hour and we still have a twenty minute drive.”

“Of course,” I nod, somewhat disgusted that her daughter is unconcerned with her mother’s condition. Her heels echo in the small room as leaves. and a huge weight is lifted from my chest. Millicent, or Millie, is the only family Babs has left.

Before her husband died, he would come and spend every day with her, even on her bad days. He once told me of their epic romance, after he was drafted to World War II. As soon as he received the letter, he dropped to one knee and the two were married on the courthouse steps three days later, to their parents’ dismay. I remember smiling at him while he told me this story, dragging his wrinkled fingers through his wife’s long, white hair. “From the moment I met her, I knew she was the one,” he reminisced. “I couldn’t let any other man snatch her up while I was fighting them damn Japs.” A week after opening his notice he reported to his designated post, leaving his new wife for a couple years, during that time Babs worked on military aircrafts and wrote letters to her soldier.

“When I stepped off that bus, hers was the first face I searched for,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. My heart melted, envying the unconditional love the two obviously shared. I looked at my bare ring finger on my left hand and prayed that I could find a devoted husband like that someday.

“When our eyes met, it was like our souls had remained together, even though our bodies were

apart for those agonizing years. Although, I knew I had changed mentally and looking into her eyes, I knew she had too. We had to relearn how to be a couple again. We fought a lot until we found out Barb was pregnant with our son. When I found out we finally were going to have a baby, I saw my wife in a whole new light and the ugliness between us disappeared. As her belly grew, I fell more in love with her. Nothing compares the feeling to holding your newborn child,” he said choking up a bit. I thought of my own son, whom I left with my mother so I could work and provide for him by myself.

“When I stepped off that bus, hers was the first face I searched for,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. My heart melted, envying the unconditional love the two obviously shared.

“Do you have any children, my dear?”

“Yes. One. A boy. He just turned a year.”

“You hold that sweet baby tight, and relish every moment, because before you know it,” he snapped his fingers, “he’ll be grown with a son of his own.”

Another time that Henry visited, Babs was having a bad day where she switched between the times in her life. Another resident antagonized her, making her condition worse to the point that she was throwing punches and kicking people. My eye instantly swelled up when her left hand made contact with my eye socket, leaving an open wound where the sapphire on her wedding ring scratched the delicate skin on my eyelid. The nurse on duty immediately called Henry. As soon as he walked in, her mood changed. She opened her arms wide and smiled from ear to ear until the two embraced.

“Oh, Henry,” she uttered. “Where have you been, my love? Don’t you know I am lost without you?”

I shake my head, devastated to think that Henry was gone. The most devastating part to me was that she would not be able to even comprehend the loss. Then again, ignorance is bliss. Bab’s won’t remem-

ber that her beloved died, leaving her to die in her own confusion.

Babs sits on the edge of her bed and gently touches the black outfit her daughter had chosen. “Who died?” she asks as I kneel down to take off her shoes.

I shake my head as my vision turns cloudy and my breath becomes shallow. I bite my lip, afraid to let on that I am upset. I feel a bony hand grab my chin and force it up to look into her eyes. “Dear, why are you crying?”

“I was just thinking of something sad,” I say, changing the conversation. Babs starts humming *You Are My Sunshine*, the song Henry would always sing to her before he left. Goosebumps covered my arms and I started singing, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.”

By the end of the song my voice cracked and my cheeks had long streams of salty tears. I finished getting her ready and sent her on her way to her husband’s funeral with her miserable daughter and continued my work for the day.

I returned to work a week later, as I work long hours on the weekend to keep daycare costs to a minimum. We started the shift by the previous crew updating us on resident conditions and behaviors, just like every other shift.

When we reached Babs’ room I peeked in to see Babs sleeping on her back. Her cheeks sunk into her face. Her breathing was so shallow and so weak it took several seconds for her chest to somewhat rise. Her white hair was braided down her right shoulder.

“And Babs isn’t doing well. She suffered a fall at Henry’s funeral, was in the hospital all week, and returned to hospice on Thursday. She started motting in the hospital and has had the death rattle for the past several days. We are doing end of life cares.” My heart pounded in my chest and goosebumps formed on my arms. End of life cares.

I shake my head as my vision turns cloudy and my breath becomes shallow. I bite my lip, afraid to let on that I am upset. I feel a bony hand grab my chin and force it up to look into her eyes. “Dear, why are you crying?”

Those words stuck with me as I got everyone else that would be going to breakfast ready. End of life cares. When I was at a point that I could be doing something extra or relaxing, I slipped into Babs’ rooms and started cleaning her up. I rolled her frail body easily by myself, changed her gown, completed perineal cares, swabbed a moist toothette in her mouth and brushed her hair.

I sat next to her, and held her hand. “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are grey. You’ll never know dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.” I sang the song over and over until Babs’ eyes slowly looked up at me after being closed for what seemed for forever.

“Th-th-thank you, Kylie. I love you forever,” she muttered weakly. Then she squeezed my hand and closed her eyes.

“I love you forever too, Babs,” I said and kissed her cheek. I put some ChapStick on her dry lips and left the room with tears running down my cheeks.



“Faith in My Father”

Jalesha Johnson

*I still have faith in my father.
My teeth hold his name
like good scripture.*

Our relationship a rigid religion.

*Pain is the preacher,
I have sat through several sermons.*

*But I still want to believe
in the man who gave birth to me.*

*Isn't it funny?
How quickly we forget
Satan was a saint-
until someone saw the snake in him.*

*Isn't it funny?
How quickly we condemn
bad dads until
we're old enough to realize
they too are human.*

*They too need to be forgiven.
They also long to not be forgotten.*

*I wish I could go back in time
and baptize the boy
my dad used to be.
I would soak him of his sins*

until his skin could sing.

*Wish I could have met the man
before the military,
before the nightmares
and day-drinking.*

*How do you hold a man who isn't whole?
How do you save someone from them self?*

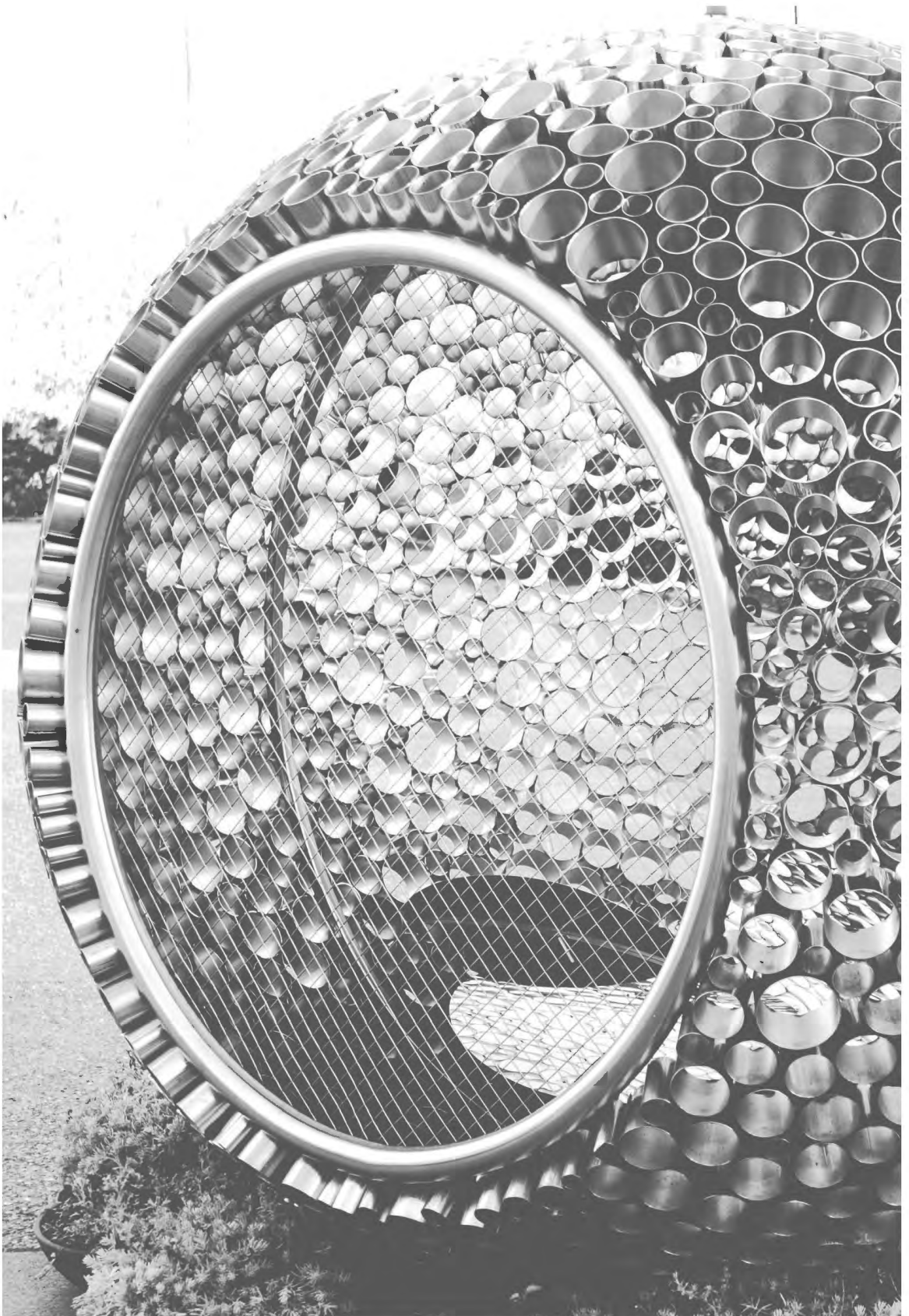
*I never knew how holy a white flag could be
until my father called me crying.*

*Until he told me he had nothing
left to live for.*

*I made him remember his eight kids.
I Fed him memories like communion.*

*For the first time in my life
I felt savior
and not sacrifice.*

*And that must be some type of god,
right?*





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