

Department: Oakwood



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OAKWOOD | 2015

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ANITA (SARKEES) BAHR AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTOR

JOE SCHATZ

Anita (Sarkees) Bahr has been a long-time supporter of South Dakota State University's English Department, and especially *Oakwood*. Thanks to her contributions, *Oakwood* will continue to provide an excellent opportunity for young SDSU artists to publish their pieces in this journal.

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This Fear of Mine

Haley Bradshaw

I have this wild fear of waking up one morning in my past.
Waking up and smelling the musty, familiar scent of too-sweet
perfume wafting its way from my makeshift dorm closet to my
wannabe-anyone-but-me clothes. It's as if I'm 19 again, freshly
pimpled from my last why-am-I-in-college anxiety attack.

I have this crazy fear of waking up one morning in my past.
Waking up and seeing my scratched Blackberry illuminate next
to me. An incoming text from an ex-lover. The guy that pretends
to treat you like the princess you always thought you ought to be
but forces you down the next. The one you thought loved you?

I have this impossible fear of waking up one morning in my past.
Waking up and facing the doomed dread lurking within your flesh,
hating a part of yourself because someone said you're going to hell for
your new tattoo. Facing the hatred of people tempting you to run for the
sweet taste of death with every ounce of strength you have left.

I have this deathly fear of waking up one morning in my past.
Waking up and knowing it's going to take 1460 days to get to where
I am this very day. Before I figure out why you don't cut your unruly,
curly hair short, why you don't take words at their face value, and
why you would ever deserve the person who loves you now.

I never want to face this fear and wake up in my past.
Waking up and having to start from the beginning again. I don't
want a second chance to fix what is already right. I've learned
the hard way and loved even harder. This one time I'll embrace
the old cliché saying, "the past has made me who I am today."



Bottled Up
Ashley Plummer
Graphite Drawing



Winter Berries
Roberta Forman
Photograph

The Best Artwork

Leah Alsaker

Wintery flecks float through the frosty air,
each flake a fleck of sparkling diamonds
that floats and glimmers with more colors
than any painting. It clothes the frozen Earth
in more elegance than swirls of lace and beads of pearls.

Gazing out from a frost-framed window, a young writer tries to capture
it in words, but each word falls inadequate on the page,
creating a mere shadow of the beauty that glitters before her.

With an artful swirl, God sends a gust of winter wind,
rearranging each flake and creating new lacy swirls
that twinkle in the morning light.
Shades of darkness and light intertwine
in a silent song of beauty.

11 or 12 Things I Know About My Brother

Haley Wilson

A Father's Waltz

He can be seen in his living room in front of the gaping eye of the television, toes melding with carpet as he stands next to a six-year-old lacking front teeth, wearing a Hello Kitty nightgown. He passes her the sleek black remote and looks on proudly as she surpasses the music station playing Hannah Montana in favor of a Jimmy Buffet song. She climbs onto his long feet and they begin.

The Pool

He is ten years old, and spends his days learning the delicate art of cribbage and every note of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" music video. He watches cartoons near a grandfather in wide brown glasses picking at a plate of cherries, writing poetry. The sun later beats down on him as he stands outside a public swimming pool, dressed in sopping swim trunks and a Chicago Bulls t-shirt. A towel wilts around his neck as he waits while a grandfather circles the town in a tan Oldsmobile, forgetful of where to go and unable to retrace his steps.

The Bird

On a high school trip in Pierre, South Dakota, he lurks on elegant sidewalks in cahoots with a friend. They evade the Capitol building, careening near the river's edge in search of a target. It is sighted: a fat black goose, marching along the grass a bit slower than the others. He runs, ensnaring feathers and

squawks in his arms. The accomplice opens the back door of a forbidden yellow bus to a rival town, a team that beat them the previous week in basketball. The captive is released, the door is sealed, and he lies in wait with a front row seat for sweet revenge.

A Criticism

He sits slumped in a cold, metal chair at conferences, bored. Across the table, the frizzy-haired band teacher slides her glasses along her nose and spits to his parents, "Your son pawned his saxophone. He pawned school property. He could have been a great player, too."

Listening In

Overhear him whisper to his newborn son swaddled in a knit cap, "And watch this, Roethlisburger is about to make a huge fumble." They rock in a blue hospital recliner painted with moonlight. 9:04 p.m., age 20.

Self-Criticism

"I didn't want to go to school anymore, I was just done. And then I almost chopped my finger off working overtime on an assembly line at the factory and thought to myself, 'I think I'll go to college.'"

Fantasies

Always one fantasy. He is a child perched on Cookie-Monster-blue carpet in front of a long wooden toy box. Amongst the faded Batman and Robin figures, the pristine baseball cards, the battered roller blades, he lifts the dusty yellow lid, and eyes his collection: stickers. Logos of every Major League Baseball team in America.

The Job

In a packed arena in an armada of polyester gowns for the class of 2002, his name is called. His tall frame paces through the aisles to the stage, and he closes his fingers around the last diploma. Two months later, his cell phone blares a concerto, ringing with an offer. On a sunny afternoon in April, he stands in a new suit in a giant stadium at center field, family in tow. The fake crisp grass crunches underfoot as he stares with wide eyes at 45,000 empty seats soon to be filled. A massive scoreboard bears the logo, "Milwaukee Brewers." He takes family in hand and swings his briefcase over his shoulder. "Let me show you my new office."

The Legend

He is known for an afternoon of absence. 10 years old. 10 miles walked. He was left unattended with a best friend on a balmy, summer afternoon. The boys' mothers went into town for the craft show and returned to an empty house and a note on the table. "Went out for food," with initials following. Frantic phone calls, and the women jumped in a maroon Honda and began the hunt. The fugitives were discovered at a bar 10 miles away on the lake. He was nursing a can of Coke at a pool table, breathing in the sacred smell of incoming French fries. 10 miles for 10 wings of chicken. He was indignant when the mothers arrived with steam spewing from their ears: "But I didn't even get my food yet."

The Legend

He stands in crisp khakis and a frantic grin. Behind him are rows upon rows of computers: lights, cords, keyboards, action. His tentative arm is draped over a withered old man with a steady smile. "Hammering" Hank Aaron says it was nice to meet him. The camera flashes, and the photo rests on a cluttered desk lined with similar treasures. All baseball, all smiles.

Irony

He is 13 years old, fresh from a detention. He trudges up the front steps of his home and passes his parents a report card. Next to the column sternly marked "Computers" is a stern, black F. He takes a seat and the scolding wafts into his ears. "You are smart enough," they tell him. "You just need to care."

The Dream

His Blackberry erupts in a jingle as he slings a black laptop bag over his broad shoulder. The boss on the other line awards him a bonus and invites him for a company round of golf. He fluently discusses pixels, RBIs, computer parts, work hours. Later that night, he pulls in to a driveway and walks through summer haze to his backyard. His wife sits on the bronze deck, reading, and greets him with a smile. A redheaded girl and boy unearth an autographed baseball and toss it back and forth beneath the sun. He is home.



Peacock
Miranda Schwanke
Photograph

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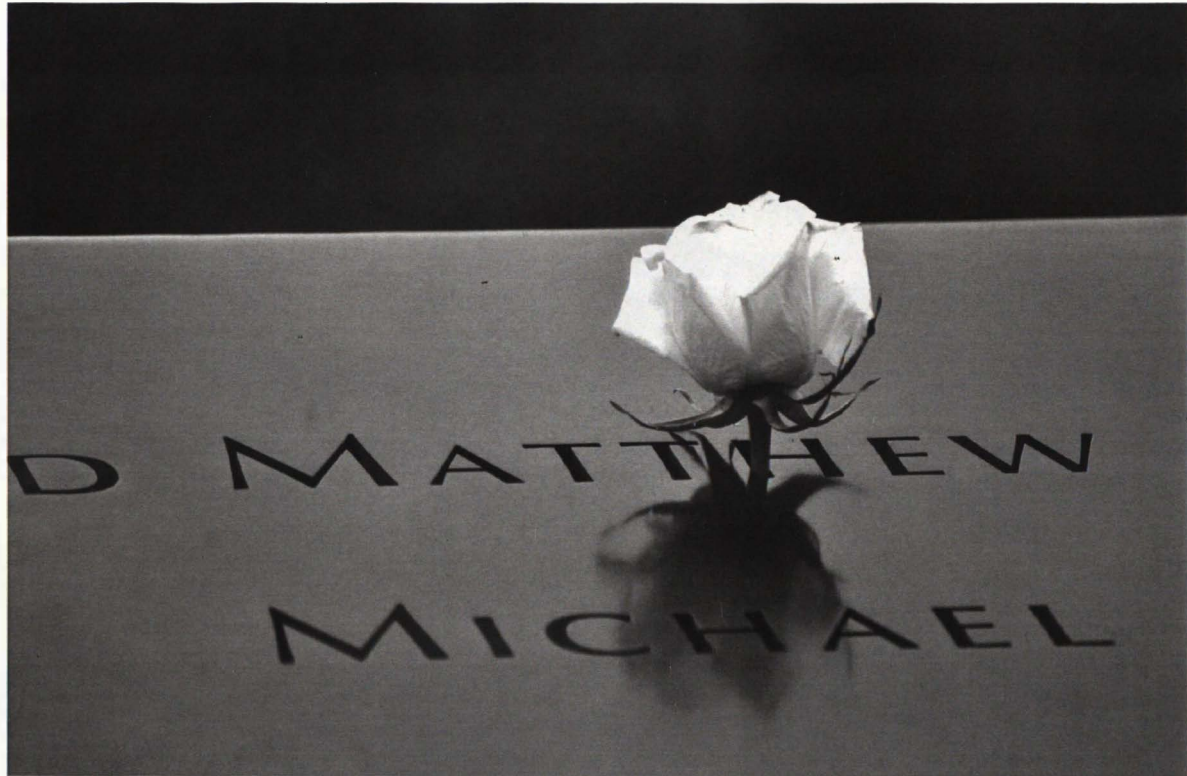


Untitled
Morgan Goche
Mixed Media

Companions

Alexis Becker

Scarred brown leather, blemished
by years of use – scratches and gouges
caused by tripped-over barbed
wire and jagged rocks. Mosaic
stains of soapy manure from washing
quirky calves in cool morning air.
Yellow scored string with browns
and whites. Metallic hooks, securing
crude leather and limp cloth to ankles.
*Loop the bunny around the bush. Bring
him into the burrow,* Mom's whispered
instructions echo in my ears. Titanium
toes, stronger than steal, light as air-popped
corn, protecting decorated pigs from two
tons of pressure. Pocks incrust blemished
boots like imperfect divots on shapely shoulders;
scars from childhood illnesses. Protected
toes stopped brother's drill, (the price
to pay for his help); thank the heavens
ten polished toes remain. Discolored
companions wait, ready for unpredictable
adventures across open expanses of dusty
yards and gravel covered driveways.



9/11

Roberta Forman
Photograph

Funerals

Spenser Kavanaugh

The procession continued its slow march towards the open box at the end of the impromptu aisle, flanked on either side by an impressive amount of black-clothed onlookers. A slow, cacophonous dirge issued from the mouths of those in attendance, their almost correct pitches accenting the ever-present undercurrents of the blubbing handful of older men and women in the front row, a watery melody floating atop the thick and clumsy clanging of so many voices.

The casket stood at the end of this aisle, front half propped open to display a massive collection of flowers – mostly carnations and an assortment of roses – accompanied by a single, collagen-filled

body, the woman's face appearing like some kind of surrealist painting due to the fantastic colors and sheer amount of makeup present on her face. Her lips, perhaps having received less attention from the undertaker or maybe as a request of the family to respect her dislike of lipstick, were a dull bluish purple color, the only visible part of her not shaded by deft hands fond of striking contrast. Even so, many of her features were either washed out or completely obscured by the ridiculous amounts of flower petals with whom she shared the stately coffin.

The people of the procession, slowly making their way to the casket in a ceremonial demonstration of paying their final respects, trudged on through the bright day. Unfortunately, the weather had not cooperated with the otherwise flawlessly executed

atmosphere of crippling sadness and, in place of a nicely overcast day and a constant pitter-pattering of slow rainfall, the sun hung almost directly over the flowers and the woman, burning unabashedly and making the patrons quite uncomfortable. The whole scene, thus, was ruined.

Those who knew the deceased answered every question as they always did: so-and-so was such a great man/woman; we'll really miss him/her; he/she had such a full life; I know I should be celebrating his/her accomplishments but it's just such a tragedy, ya know? After such a proclamation they would return to the lingering groups of fellow mourners, gathering around the refreshments laid out or perhaps the mound of recently tilled dirt itself. They would then proceed to complain about how hot it was, or plan what they would do with the rest of their day, or chatter idly about work or the game last night.

Markus rolled his eyes. The burial was over, the sobbing had receded now to a minimum, and there wasn't any compelling reason for him to remain anymore. He looked down at the modest pamphlet containing a brief biography of the woman buried. Margaret E. Banks. She had apparently been a school teacher for some years. The particularly vocal in their grief had been her children and, the loudest, one of her granddaughters. He turned his head, taking one last look over the cemetery and the ever dwindling levels of people still lingering about while they waited to say goodbye to the family and give them condolences. Most of the family looking harried and wrung out. Markus tossed the obituary in a nearby wastepaper basket as he strode back to his car.

"You have to stop."

"Last week was much better. More immediate family. Unexpected. It was raining too. No, last week

was perfect. This one was just... too expected, too normal. Everyone was ready for it."

"Markus, I'm serious. Normal people think this kind of thing is weird."

"Well then Alice, it's a huge blessing that you are anything but normal." His grin was met only by a glare and the loud sipping of her latte on Alice's part. Midafternoon usually saw to the complete abandonment of the pair's favorite coffee shop and today was no different. Markus had his laptop out between them, the halfway-made obituary pulled up on the screen. Alice alternated between glancing at the book she had brought with her, gazing around the empty shop, and – this her favorite pastime – telling Markus to get a new hobby.

"I mean, couldn't you just bird watch or something? Or we could go to bad horror films and make fun of them."

"Do you think something like 'may her memory continue instructing us for years to come' sounds a little callous or completely callous? I feel like people will think I'm insulting her, which, fair, her funeral was dreadfully boring. She was probably also dreadfully boring." He paused to sip his coffee and look at the girl across him, her eyes wide with mock terror. "Could I get away with saying that? The paper says the only opinion I can offer is a positive one, but maybe this one time they won't mind."

"You really are a terrible person. You know that, right?" She shook her head and took a large gulp of her latte, nearly finishing it. "And were you even listening to a word I said?"

"Ugh, fine, I'll just leave it at how...nice the ceremony was. The regular mumbo jumbo. And yes. I was, I just chose to ignore you. We already go to the movies as it is. I'm not obsessed with death as you so desperately want me to be. I just happen to like going to funerals. The fact that the paper pays me to do it is just a plus." He finished the last dregs

of his coffee, waving away the waitress as she asked him if he'd like any more. "Well," he glanced at his watch, "we had really best be going now, though. We wouldn't want to be late for normal people things like this movie, would we?"

"You don't get to be normal just because you do normal people things."

"Duly noted." He nodded exaggeratedly before narrowly dodging the halfhearted punch aimed at him by Alice. "Oh, is Barry coming?"

"No, no, he had a...work thing? Or was it his softball team? Anyway, he won't be there."

The two made their way to the exit, Markus attempting to hold the door and Alice shoving him through it before exiting herself. "Good. You should just drop him already. There's clearly nothing there and he's numbingly vapid."

"Oh, right, this from Mr. Romance himself. You don't get to decide who I spend my time with anymore. You had your chance."

"But he's woefully drab and dull, right? Even you have to admit that he has nothing going on for him."

"Well I, he, um...he's pretty to look at, at least!" She crossed her arms before continuing. "Besides, he knows we're not serious or anything." The two left it at that before turning in towards the theatre.

It's all so black. Well, it's almost all black. Everyone is pseudo-black. The son has a bright green tie like a shoot of grass, one of the brothers a teal undershirt, and the husband, stone-faced and clearly broken beyond repair, wears a single, dark red kerchief in his breast pocket, a tiny drop of blood marring his otherwise perfectly black attire.

And no one is well manicured, either. Hair stands at odd angles, shirts arrive untucked and remain as such, mascara and blush applied in a hurry doesn't quite conceal blemishes, though it quickly runs into rivers of

chalky color anyway. A few girls still have fingernail polish in assorted colors on them, chipping off in random places. No one is free of the little things they didn't have time to care about in their rush to get here. Because it's sudden.

It's closed, too. The casket. No one actually wants to see inside, but some linger around it for too long, looking longingly at the box like they wish they could get one last look at her. Or whatever was left of her, that is. Car crash. Drunk driver. Early in the evening, too, so everyone rushed to have an impromptu ceremony. It's hard to glean very much off of the people here, mostly close family and friends and all distraught at the abruptness of it all. They're so sad – actually, truly sad. No one is here to pretend, or to give meaningless condolences, or to get a free meal.

And it's raining, just to top it all off. The best funerals always seem to have the rain. As the priest laments the passing of one of his lambs, extends his blessings and support to the family, I look around the crowd, taking in their faces as they stare equal parts at the talking man and the dismembered woman in a box. Shocked. Speechless. Utterly lost. They're so confused that they can't even describe their confusion, can't even begin to share their sense of complete meaninglessness with anyone else. Why her? Why now? Why at all? Why? The questions don't have any answers, of course, but they still need to think they do.

This is easily the best one yet.

Train Wreck of the Mind

Sarah Ruiz

There are too many people
all playing pretend,
yet secretly we're all aware.
And that's how I know:
I've seen you somewhere.

As we go, the grass gets blurry,
thoughts start forming,
I've seen you somewhere.
Unknown scenes play in my head-
I just don't know where.

The ideas keep flourishing,
their source is unknown.
From the window to your face
I steal a glance, searching for a clue;
Maybe I'll remember the place.

These eyes are not the only ones.
People talk about the man in the train,
but what was your motivation?
Are you taking a train to nowhere?
It's said you wander without a destination.

Each little flashback seems real,
so palpable in my mind.
Same dirty worn-out army jacket,
thick-framed glasses turned yellow by time.
Are you even from this planet?

Minutes pass and the end is near.
Still roaming the confines of my brain,
the thoughts are leaving me restless.
And I wonder if for you
the road is really endless?

The more I look at you sitting there,
peacefully chewing on your cashews
the less vague it becomes.
You're not from around here.
Presence speaks louder than tongues.

Breathing in,
my lungs fill up with peace
as I take the decision
to put the ghost in my head to rest
because you're just an illusion.

Not many acknowledge your existence;
Only those who wander will see.
You travel through time
with one purpose in life
to create a silver lining.

All you are is a muse;
This is the life you have chosen,
in your bags just one goal:
Evoking fire in the heads
of these traveler souls.



Turtle Pond

Roberta Forman
Photograph

Paper-Doll

Daniel Snethen

Mother sewed me a yellow shirt
with little black crickets on it.
I wore it to Colome Elementary School
on the first day of first grade.

One day, a few years later,
our dog Pepper vomited
on the kitchen floor linoleum.
I went to the rag drawer to clean it up
and found my cricket shirt all balled up.

The pocket was badly torn
and only a few buttons remained,
but the crickets still chirped in the golden field
and I snuck my shirt out of the rag drawer
and placed it in my bottom dresser drawer
next to my Superman cape.

Mother died and over the years
I have slowly gone through her effects.
In a Crayola-scribbled box,
I found her childhood paper-dolls
all tattered, torn, and taped.

And I found a paper-doll lad
with sandy hair and a gargantuan grin
sporting a golden yellow shirt
with ebony crickets inked in.



Walking in the Rain
Miranda Schwanke
Ink

Childhood Lost

Haley Wilson

I toil outside in the broiling mid-June heat, under a sticky canopy of sweaty fronds and mosquito-swarmed trees. My oldest friend, Shelby, is next to me, shovel in hand, her yipping Pomeranian circling us like an annoyed shark. I drive my shovel into the earth, then hop onto the ridges and force it down under my weight, metal digging into my flip-flopped feet. Shelby swipes at her clammy forehead, then takes a swig of Gatorade as I douse the humid shadows around us with *Off!* in a feeble attempt to discourage gnats. "We must have been crazy," she mutters as she takes her next turn with the shovel to deepen our growing hole.

"How could two seven year olds have done this?" I agree.

We're frying ourselves in her dad's backyard in a thick pocket of trees. The object of our search should be buried in the second, no, third row of trees. The spidery, wooden limbs claw out like spiked fingers scratching vehemently away at us.

Eleven years earlier, we were wide-eyed kids fascinated by a Britney Spears movie where Britney and a few friends dug themselves a time capsule and opened it years later to see how their friendship had grown. *How cool would that be?* we wondered. No parents were supervising; no other activities came to mind. And so we braided our hair like spies, I perched on Shelby's shoulders to reach the forbidden key to her father's garage, then we smuggled some shovels and away we went.

"We should bury it in a secret place," I vowed as we stomped rebelliously across the parched yard. "And we can't tell anyone, not even Justin!" I warned her, fixing her with a stare. Her current crush and neighbor was NOT to know about this.

"We won't tell anybody," Shelby agreed, chomping away on an Oreo. We were halfway across the yard when we realized we needed things to bury in, code-phrase: "the place."

I sit cross-legged in my lavender bedroom that looks like a Toys R' Us threw up. Aliza is perched next to me on the soft, sand-colored carpet, pointed shoulders drowning in my worn volleyball jersey she found while rummaging merrily through my closet and thoroughly applying lip gloss, just after she'd heard Grandma lecture about the horde of candy wrappers discovered hidden behind the maroon, leather recliner. (Guilty as charged. "Grandma—I was *starving*.")

I laughed when I heard that defense, and felt an ache in my stomach at the same time. I missed the days when smuggled candy meant living dangerously. When your parents were all-knowing. When you'd pretend to be asleep on the couch, just so Daddy would carry you upstairs to bed. When the alphabet was impossible and your big brother was simultaneously too cool and quite possibly the devil. When a mistake landed you in time out. Nowadays, we spend a lot of days in time-out, wishing we could be free to play.

Izzy's hands are now shrouded in nearly every bracelet I own, adding to her ensemble. She clamps a tube of body glitter about a decade past its expiration. It smells like a rank Sharpie marker.

"Can I use this?" Aliza asks, already smearing the blue sparkled contents on her arms and neck. Princess Smurf, ladies and gentleman.

"You might have to take a bath afterwards, Swamp Thing," I laugh. I can already see the fight-or-flight response mounting in her eyes and defiance settling in her indignant jaw.

"Noo," she protests. "That means Grandma will try to brush my hair!" Ah, to fear hygiene again.

"You can take the Barbies in the tub with you," I promise, and all is right with the world again.

Aliza resumes sifting through old totes of nostalgic toys and mementos lodged beneath my bed: a birthday card from a friend now moved away. A faded mermaid doll with gnarled snakes of hair; what I'd always wanted to be, even though I couldn't swim. A ratty teddy bear gleaned from a trip to the hospital. A bedazzled silver wand earned from a Halloween stint as a fairy. A purple beaded bracelet stolen from my sister. It's strange, the things we choose to keep or let go.

The balmy cauldron of sky above us is murky with moonlight, only slightly improved from the scalding, lethargic heat of day. The stars glint above, the neon lime tarp shocking my baked nerves, an icy reprieve. Drenched clumps of hair cling to my cheeks, wiping away my makeup and inhibitions as my foot slips and slides over the slick tarp, then transitions to the sodden grass. I toss a glance over my shoulder, catching Aliza as she lets out a shriek of glee, her pruny feet wheeling her towards watery joy. Her freckled face is bent in concentration as she suddenly folds her limbs on themselves, flopping onto her already-scratched-raw belly. She glides along on her stomach, ankles knit together and dragging along the tarp, body bent like a slight, bikini-clad seal. Aliza tilts her chin upward as she laughs into the sky, slamming her eyelids shut at the exact moment she plows into the end of the slip and slide, a deluge of water cascading over her sopping head.

I'm envious of how she sees. Moments of joy and seeing magic in the world, all strung together. For my niece, life is about Momma surprising her with

"basketti," dancing on the tops of Daddy's giant feet in the living room, picking out the perfect Hello Kitty dress to wear, squawking indignantly when Big Brother pinches her, getting to be a big girl and start school.

Aliza's giggling still, her wrinkled toes donning chipped hot pink polish and propelling her across the yard. She flings herself into her daddy's arms, taking up her rightful throne as she wriggles until she's atop his shoulders, hearing his deep baritone ask, "Having fun, Princess?" She nods, strawberry blonde ringlets swirling around her tiny shoulders, unabashedly hiking up her Dora the Explorer bikini bottoms.

I sifted matter-of-factly through Shelby's room for any trace of us. Pictures were stolen from frames, friendship bracelets peeled from our wrists, favorite stuffed animals gathered because we could. A glass cat figurine I gave Shelby for a birthday, check. A glossy photo of a Halloween dressed as identical angels, check. Notes passed in boring Social Studies class, check. Now the artifacts are distant memories, and memories are just artifacts of what's gone.

"Let's put it in here!" Shelby declared, emerging from the kitchen with a large popcorn tin. "It's metal, so it'll be tough," she explained, thumping her knuckles against the lid with a *ping* for emphasis.

"That's awesome!" I rejoiced. "What do we do with the popcorn?"

Moments later, we tossed popcorn in the neighbor's dumpster, sprinkled it through the corn field near the house, and donated the final pound of cheddary goodness to her foxlike Pomeranian, now tinged powdery orange and bloated.

"We'll need to put the pictures in plastic baggies, since they didn't do that on the movie and everything was dirty," I hypothesized. Shelby made

the final addition of wrapping the rest of the secret contents in a fluffy bath towel to protect our treasure from getting wet, just in case.

We sprawled on the beige carpet on our stomachs, and, since I had the best handwriting, I jotted out our official contract. "We the members of the Weston/Wilson friendship hereby declare that this time capsule will be opened the night we graduate in 2010. No peeking or telling!" (We were off by a year.) We each clumsily scrawled our signatures at the bottom. Shelby then etched a map for each of us: A misshapen rectangle was labeled HOUSE. A dotted line led to TREES. A fat X carved in Sharpie was located vaguely in the blob of scribbles intended to be leaves.

We dug and dug and dug until supertime, our scrawny arms worked until red, calloused hands inlaid with splinters plopped the tin in its massive grave.

Ten years later, it pours graduation night. Neither of us thinks we have a prayer of finding our time capsule in the dark, in the mud, sopping wet.

The next morning I go over to Shelby's and we laugh and reminisce.

"God, how were we so cool?" Shelby reflects as we dig blindly in the trees, pausing every so often to send out text messages. Our maps were lost years ago.

I'm busy untangling a Barbie's faux hair while Aliza is searching for the perfect outfit.

"What should we call her?" I ask, holding up the wild-haired doll in front of Aliza's inquisitive eyes.

A long pause ensues; this is a serious decision.

"Dora," my niece finally concludes, and continues to analyze every tiny article of spangled clothing from long ago and picking at a scab on her sun-tanned shin, earned from a sweaty afternoon of

riding her bike. Aliza softly hums Carly Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe," as she unearths more relics from my past. What ever happened to the musical stylings of *Barney*?

"Is Dora going to go exploring?" I ask, seeing where this name might be going.

"No," Aliza says with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "She's going to school." Her golden-red ringlets waltz as she shakes her head in surprise as if to say, what were you thinking?

"She's going to drive in the pink convertible," Aliza informs me. "I can't wait until I drive. I'm going to drive fast like Daddy does when he's late for work," she dreams. "I'm going to wear makeup like Auntie Emily does, too, on my eyes. Um, can you find the car? I can't fit under the bed," she fudges.

I bury myself face first under my bed, digging through old socks, hair scrunchies, forgotten Where's Waldo books, and tacky 90s eye shadow palettes in search of a car, just so Dora doesn't have to take the bus. I snatch up the car, parked as far away as possible, naturally, and army-crawl my way to freedom, dust bunnies in my hair and the baseboard flattening the backs of my thighs like dough. I wheeze and spit out carpet fuzz, wheeling the car towards Aliza. She immediately wedges Dora, clad in a skintight evening gown for school, behind the wheel.

"Let's go to school!" Aliza trills in her high voice, indicating Dora the not-Explorer is speaking to me. I seize the nearest doll, bite marks littering its right foot from an old cat, and hop my way over to the car.

"I'm ready!" my character says. My voice rises in earnestness and pitch to match hers, and I fall easily into a decade-old habit.

I smile as the nostalgia of this night sinks in, though it's not over yet. Already I know that by tomorrow, I'll be missing this moment: my entire family tossing care to the winds and digging out a slip and slide at 11:00 at night. At what point in life do we decide we're too old for slip and slides, too mature to wake the neighbors with our bursts of laughter, too grown up to be free and just play? We've forgotten how fun a slip and slide can be, how perfect a night with family can become. Do we stop playing because we age, or do we age because we no longer play?

Aliza's azure eyes are gleaming as she chirps, "One more turn for everybody, then next stop: ice cream!" I laugh as my family assents and lines up for one final slip, Aliza using her elbows to plow her way to the front of the tarp. Though it has to end sometime, I think this night, every part of it, might live on forever.

We stand in a cluster, shaking our heads in incredulous awe. "Awesome...just awesome," Cory declares. We're all out of ourselves. We laugh as we pluck grass from between our toes, listening to the chorus of clicking cicadas and the trill of water freefalling to earth. "Slipping in the night!" Aliza twangs in her best rock-star voice as she strikes a diva pose with one pruny index finger pointing at the moon. She giggles and breaks pose, then barrels into the house in search of a sugar rush.

An hour later the hole is two foot deep. We are gray as coal miners.

Two hours later, we've found nothing.

Three hours later, our happy chatter has tapered off.

Four hours later, Shelby's snotty neighbors meander outside to inform us that we are "messing

around" on what is now their property. We explain our predicament; they haughtily inform us these trees will be ripped up a week from now for landscaping. They'll let us know if they find anything. They saunter awfully well for an old couple in Crocs.

Nothing the first day, but there's still hope. Our excavation is cut short for respective dates and jobs.

Day two: we borrow a metal detector from a friend. We wander the entire backyard in dismay. Listening for success that doesn't come. I stop bringing along a camera to document our findings; it's bad luck.

Day three: Shelby and I place a desperate call to our Environmental Science teacher to see how long it takes for aluminum to disintegrate.

Day four: we definitely buried it here, right?

Day five: maybe we should try digging deeper. No, come on. Seven year olds can't dig that deep

Day six: we've now searched the entire patch of the endangered trees. Her neighbors should be paying us to re-landscape. We sit moodily on Shelby's navy plaid couch, guzzling Mountain Dew and trying to understand how the heck our childhood selves have outsmarted us.

Day seven: I have to work. Shelby calls. The trees are gone. Wrenched away and uprooted. Nothing was discovered in their wake.

Day eight: Shelby and I go out for lunch, and try to remember what we even put in that stupid popcorn tin. We attempt looking again every few months, then it's off to college.

We never find our time capsule, now almost twelve years gone. Somehow along the way, the magic of childhood vanished. An age of Lunchables and Barbies, self-drawn tattoos and idolizing the Olsen twins, body glitter and sleepovers was buried with it. Shelby and I see each other occasionally on weekends, discussing boyfriends and class

schedules and phone upgrades. Every so often the question is revisited: Can you ever really find something once it's lost?

"What's your name?" Aliza stage-whispers, the better to keep our conversation from the Barbies. In this age, everything is magic and magic is everything.

"Haley." I answer obliviously at a normal volume, just to see her reaction. It doesn't disappoint.

"No, that's not right! This is pretend. You can be whatever you want, but don't be you!" My fingers grip my unnamed doll tightly, focusing on this notion. Her blue eyes earnest, she continues, "How 'bout I'm the big sister and you're the little sister and your name is Dory?"

The drive to our school is a commute: a crawl through the hallway, down the stairs, a loop around the kitchen, a careful ram into big brother Isaac's ankle when he least suspects it, back up the stairs, and to the space six inches from where we'd begun.

"Are you gonna play with us tomorrow? We're going swimming and to the movies," Aliza asks. The drive downstairs and back has sucked up the final dregs of her attention span, and she drops her Dora voice.

"Sorry, Iz, but I've got to do homework," I say glumly. "Maybe we can do something later once you guys get back."

"But summer's for fun! I don't have to do any color-by-numbers or anything," Aliza explains.

"Yeah, but in summer when you get bigger, you've still got to go to work and do homework and...be a grownup," I finish. I sound lame even to my own ears.

"That sucks," Aliza says.

"Language," I reprimand.

"Um. That wasn't me, that was Dora," Aliza fibs, chocolate smeared cheeks stretching into a grin.

"Did Dora eat all the candy in the living room, too?" I play along.

"Yep. She didn't like Grandma's potatoes," Aliza confirms.

A beat later—

"It's recess time and we're on a trampoline!" she shouts, rocketing Dora into the air and laughing as she thumps satisfyingly into the ceiling, thoughts of grownup-edness and responsibility forgotten.

Aliza's draped in a faded jersey and hand-me-downs, her tiny feet anxious to follow my path; hers is a path paved with bedtime stories and chocolate lips, laughter and make-believe. I veered from that course years ago. Maybe she can lead me back.

In this night, none of us have much more reserve than Aliza. I look on proudly as my 30-year-old brother lumbers forward as soon as his path is clear, his 6'9" frame leaving ghosts of footprints in the cool, slippery grass. Cory drops suddenly onto his stomach once the arc of slip-and-slide water sprinkles his hips. Unlike his daughter, he doesn't glide easily forward. I caw with laughter as the plastic stakes tethering the tarp are wrenched from the mud, Cory rolling forward like a massive sunny human burrito and groaning like a college student faced with 8 a.m. class.

Once the stakes are carefully rammed into their former homes and Cory has untangled himself from our pastime, the game continues. Dad goes next, his mid-50s frame easing tentatively towards the slip and slide. "Get going, old man!" Cory bellows with a fair amount of dignity considering he was stuck in a child's toy just minutes ago. Dad flings himself

onto the slide with surprising agility, the chilled water darkening his greying hair. This combines with a look of pure joy on his face, and he looks younger than usual. He jolts into the base of the slide, grumbling about how he's getting too old for this, but his grin betrays him.

My sister stands at the ready for her turn, bouncing in place and readying herself like she's about to power through a marathon. She pauses, drawing out the moment until Aliza and Cory and all of us are eagerly shrieking at her, "Just go!" She strides forward, collapsing onto her stomach as tentatively as anyone can on a previously faulty tarp. Tangled, red hair blocks her laughing face from mine, but she ends her turn with a power-slide on her scraped knees like she's a Guitar Hero rock god with a rebellious right fist plunged into the air.

I laugh as the chilly hose water cleanses the stress of the day away and my sister is launched into the slide's end zone.

My turn.



Still
Lucas Eide
Photograph

Blue Moon

Jordan Nichols

Abandoned among the lakeside tire-swings and cardboard boxes of old stuffed animals, as the smoky-gray smell of fall dissolves into winter's stabbing cold. I remember a time when these days were welcomed like an old friend, like a stray *mommy can we please keep him* kitten. Holding your gloved hand, wondering at its solidity, strength. Rolling snow speckled with pebbles and pine needles into snowman torsos— an icy snowball caught you off guard.

Long ago, before the thought of childhood pets brought tears to my eyes, when the thought of school quickened my pulse from excitement, when the end of horse camp made me cry — then, life — sleepovers and ghost stories, campfires and birthday cake — held delusions of grandeur, dreams of monumental importance, back when dinosaurs were more than just bones and cemeteries were heart-stopping before they were heartbreaking.

But the world keeps turning, Sunsets paint the sky, and seasons color the earth. I remember my junior prom vividly: Nervous anticipation: sweaty palms as you pinned the purple flower to my dress and smiled into my eyes — the first time I felt beautiful.

Everything must come to an end, I suppose, but now, rebirth — once a staple of belief, cornerstone of faith, crumbles, eroding beneath a steady trickle, a stream of doubt. Like black water, once solid as an iceberg, a glacier of power now melting into tears.

"So take a good look at my face" —

Once upon a time, a place of hope,
now, a graveyard of shadows, home to nights
of tortured sleep and haunting dreams. Do you
still see the same person, the girl who you
introduced to Star Wars and taught to play checkers,
the girl who loved you more than the world?
Or am I now someone else in your eyes?
Trapped in a childhood I never inhabited,
locked out of a world of your creation.

Pinecones

Hannah Koeller

The shed hides behind a row of lush cedars, our favorite escape. Rusted saws and hammers line the walls, while bikes invade our path. A single lightbulb swings back and forth unlit. We hike up the creaky and narrow winding stairway as dust falls from the rafters. Raggedy Ann dolls, with freckles so faded, smile. Pink flowered tea sets ringed with sawdust sit neatly on shelves. The four of us girls gently place the tea cups on the floor. We open the dirty windows, each place a Raggedy Ann in our laps, and sip our imaginary tea. Then, pinecones. Flying through the windows. Hitting our eyes, our mouths, our Raggedy Anns. Leaving brown fragments on our childhood. We scream, drop our teacups, and duck our heads. Someone is crying. Outside, we hear five adolescent boys laughing uncontrollably. Four girls. Five boys. Cousins together again.

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Untitled
Leslie Cope
Acrylic and collage

The Stuff Dreams are Made Of

Robert Myers

Finally, the clock on the wall pointed its slender arrow down – three thirty. One by one the angry machines slowed to a stop as Matt slipped off his headphones. Breathing a relieved sigh, he slid his safety glasses into his shirt pocket and trudged toward the punch clock amidst the line of his sullen coworkers. No one mentioned weekend plans, or anything whatsoever. It was Tuesday and the week weighed heavily upon them.

Matt's fingers moved with renewed vigor as they punched in his code. *Funny how fast you remember a number. Two months. Two months.* He spun around and strode to his locker. In a single motion he had slung his lunch box over his shoulder and was moving toward the door. A stinging wind greeted him with the reminder that fall had turned to winter. In no mood for the weather he jogged to his car, a rusted 16 year old Chevy Blazer. *One more year, bud.* For years he had been saying that and somehow the car had kept with him through college and then the three and a half years since.

A ten minute drive brought him home, or what served as such. The gravel lot of an apartment building had not been a part of his dreams. For a moment he allowed his eyes to close, picturing a spacious country house with no neighbors in sight and a big old mutt rushing to his car to greet him. For a moment he felt the thick black fur and joyful licks, but when he opened his eyes, all was dreary.

Rachel. The thought carried Matt out the car door and into the building where he followed the stairs up to their one bedroom, \$450 a month apartment which took care of one week's pay. He eased the

door open, the fatigue again returning. *Quiet.* He shut the door behind him and laid his lunchbox down beside his shoes as he untied them and then made his way to the bedroom, gently pushing open the door.

A pretty face turned to smile at him, reminding him of when he had first seen the smile, four years ago on the other end of the church pew where sat the young freshman who would over the following months win his heart.

"Hey, how was your day?" questioned Rachel.

A tired smile crept onto his face. She had that effect. "Alright, I guess. Yours?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I passed my exam on infectious diseases," she cheerfully exclaimed. "Now I'm working on lab reports and studying for Cardio Med." She paused, repressing a sigh. "It's going to be another long night. Don't wait up for me."

How long till Christmas? She only studies half the day on vacation. Matt nodded dejectedly. Suddenly he felt unsure of himself and uncomfortable in the room. *Guess three years can't cure that.* After what seemed like minutes he reluctantly withdrew, seeing she had returned to her studies.

Their living room and kitchen seemed particularly empty, even though the sparse furnishings adorning them had recently grown in number. Only last week Rachel and Matt had found a good deal on a couch. Before that, all that filled the living room was a scarred desk in the corner that they had found at a garage sale shortly after moving. It beat the card table they had started with. Upon it sat a three-year old HP laptop, nothing fancy, but enough for Rachel to keep up with her assignments.

Now, Matt made his way toward the desk and sat down, opening the computer. They still had leftovers from Sunday's chili so he wouldn't have to worry too much about dinner tonight. Not finding any new

emails from family or friends, he made his way to Facebook. His eyes brightened at the red message icon. *Hmm, I haven't written anybody lately. I wonder who it's from.* He clicked to open the message. *Ellie.*

Hey Matt,

I know we haven't talked in a while, but I just wanted to let you know. I'm so excited. I just got a job at Yellowstone. I'll be moving out there this week. I got a full time ranger position. This is what I've always dreamed of. I hope you and Rachel are doing good!

*Best,
Ellie.*

Matt leaned back in his chair, taking in the small dimly lit room and imagining the wide open spaces of Wyoming and the job Ellie would have. Then the memory flash hit, clear as yesterday.

He was sitting in his apartment four years ago. He had put it off as long as possible but now he stared at the computer screen, his fingers resting motionless on the keyboard. *Guess what? I have a girlfriend. No, I can't say that. What do I say? I can't hide it forever. It wouldn't be right. What's the big deal anyway? It's not like we're dating or anything. We've never even talked about it. She's not even interested...* He stood up and paced about the living room that would prove larger than any he had rented since. *Maybe she can just see the relationship change on Facebook like everyone else. No, she deserves more.* And so he labored to type the arduous message, typing, erasing, and pausing until the three-sentence message was complete.

Since then they had talked little. Somehow it no longer felt right. He even decided not to invite her to the wedding; after all, she lived three states away. And now, a ghost had returned. Matt's first impulse was to rush over to Rachel in the bedroom and chase away the phantoms, but before he fully rose from the chair he returned to it, feeling suddenly alienated from his wife. *I thought marriage was about being together. We never do anything!*

Instead, he turned to the clock. 4:04. *What to do with my night?* After a moment of indecision he pulled up the Minnesota Works page on his computer. He stared at the openings, willing the screen to show him something new, but it did not. *Guess I can do some cleaning. Maybe then...*

Seen 4:01pm. Ellie watched as the green light next to Matt's name signaling he was online faded to gray, somewhat disappointed, somewhat relieved, and somewhat anxious. She remembered the old days when he would reply the instant he saw the message. *Why did I even write him anyway? Old habit I guess.*

She turned to look at her bags, ready and waiting to be loaded into her Explorer for the next day's trip west – a trip she would be making alone.

Somehow it bothered her more than it used to. Now 25, she was beginning to wonder where everything was headed. Sure, she wouldn't want to trade her job for anything in the world, but what was the point, other than her job? Since graduating, it seemed she had yet to live in any place long enough to find good friends. There had been a couple guys asking her out, but always she had declined. "I'll never date" had been her mantra.

Suddenly, she felt an urge to have a drink. *That's new.*

Half consciously she began to scroll through their

old messages, her brain sneaking in chastisements with every message she saw. The dates in recent years were few and far between, sometimes being months apart, especially around the wedding date when he hadn't written for three months prior to a short and somewhat guilty apology, or so she read it.

Finally she found it – the message that had changed her world and cost her a failed paper and several sleepless nights.

Ellie, you've been a great friend for years and I just wanted to let you know that I've met this girl. We're so much alike and I really think we can make it. It'll be on Facebook one of these days, but I wanted to let you and some other friends and family know first.

Twice she read it, and then a third time. After all, it was short. *What difference does it make anyway? Grr... Life.* She pulled the strands of hair out from her clenched teeth. After absentmindedly staring at the message for a minute more, maybe two, she continued back through the weeks of messages he had sent beforehand, a stretch empty of responses from her. His messages from that time had since shown, in her mind at least, to be deeper than trivial life events and begging for her to help him search through life's questions, many of them relating, some not so subtly, to relationships. *What if...*

Ellie had a sudden urge to listen to "It Could Have Been Me," a song that she couldn't remember liking or even listening to beforehand, but that she had become rather fond of in recent years. A few clicks later its melody began to pour out her speakers.

She glanced at her desk, empty but for a few wildlife books she had left out, at the time excited to

spend her night perusing. Now she picked them up and stuffed them in a backpack. Presently, a message alert disturbed Billy Ray Cyrus' voice. Ellie whirled around and strode to the computer.

Congrats. That does sound really exciting. Maybe someday we'll see you there. Life's alright, I guess. Nothing much new.

Ellie waited. Facebook indicated that he was typing. Soon the icon went away, only to return. Five minutes of this passed. Still, nothing. As more minutes slowly ticked by, Ellie's thoughts raced, wondering what to say. He was still online. Her eyes stayed fixated on the screen. She wondered what he was doing, thinking. *What can I say?* She nearly convulsed with frustration.

Suddenly, he wrote.

Sorry, I guess I don't know what to say. There's just really not that much exciting happening in my life. I don't know... How about you? Anything exciting besides Yellowstone? A vacation sure would be nice. I hate the city. I can't even remember seeing mountains. Know anyone out there? Anything set up?

What do I write? Ellie sat at the computer, fingers on the keys. *What would I have written four years ago?*

I'm sorry you can't be where you want to be. Do you think you can go on vacation sometime? Or maybe go home for Christmas and get away from it? I don't really know much about Yellowstone yet. They helped me find an apartment for now, but I think I might look for a house when I get out there. The job pays pretty

well, and I think I might like the extra space. If I do I'll probably get a dog. There's a shelter around there that I was looking at online.

Send. Ellie looked at what she had written, and then, eyes lit up, began to type.

Rachel rubbed her eyes and tried refocusing. Where was she? *Never mind.* She turned to the clock on the microwave and squinted. 12:26. Matt had gone to bed some two hours ago, or so she guessed. Cardiac terms pulsed through her mind in random spurts. She shook it off. *Focus, Rachel. Is there anything else you need to do tomorrow? Or can you finally go to bed?*

Nothing came to mind. She cast a relieved sigh. Wandering to the kitchen, she spotted Matt's lunch box sitting partially filled on the counter. *What's he got for himself today?* A banana and his water bottle lay inside. She moved to the fridge, finding two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches waiting for him in the morning, but nothing else. *Guess he didn't feel like baking. Hmm, he loves his desserts.* She yawned and then turned to the cupboard, glancing there and then back at the bedroom. Another yawn and she opened the cupboard. Clearly there hadn't been any good deals at the stores lately, for it was rather empty. Still, she spotted flour, sugar, and chocolate chips and so began a small batch of cookies.

An hour later she was done, gently laying a baggy filled with six of them in his lunch pail and quietly slipping the rest into the cookie jar. After stopping by the bathroom to wash up and brush her teeth, she made her way into the dark bedroom, filled with the hum of the fan they used as a noise blocker. She navigated the darkness until her hand felt the edge of their double mattress and then found the covers, sliding them loose.

Her eyes beginning to adjust, Rachel stared at

Matt's head rested on the far pillow, head facing out the west window. She longed to slide next to him and wrap him in her arms, but she refrained, instead carefully sliding into bed on her side so as to not disturb him. From what she could remember, he had seemed rather somber and tired looking lately. He needed his sleep.

Rachel awoke the next morning in a state of panic. Red digits blinked 12:00 on the clock and light poured in from behind the curtains. She glanced over. Matt was gone. How late could it be? She rushed to the bathroom to check her watch. 23 minutes till class. She threw herself into overdrive, racing to look presentable. *No time for food, but maybe a couple cookies.* She laughed – until setting foot in the kitchen where she suddenly stomped her foot in anguish. Matt's lunch pail sat where it had last night on the counter. He didn't have her cookies. He didn't have anything.

The thought of skipping crossed her mind, but she pushed it away. She couldn't. She had to keep pushing so she could graduate and get a job and Matt could quit that stupid job and start the farm he always wanted. *Keep going!*

Somehow she willed herself through the day, and not eating somehow didn't matter so much as long as she imagined Matt doing the same thing. In fact, she found herself proud of it. Finally, at two she gave a relieved sigh as she pulled her backpack over her shoulder and began the eight block walk home. As she walked, she smiled for the first time since finding delight in the idea of eating cookies for breakfast. It was a cool walk and several classmates were always looking to give her rides, but she had always found a special affection for her stubbornness and this gave it a rare outlet. Most of all, it made her feel free. The November winds worked at her hair, trying to wrench the strands loose from her headband. With a laugh Rachel gave them their wish and pulled off the band, letting the wind cast strands of hair where it willed.

Ten minutes later she arrived home. In the window above theirs she noticed Christmas lights. *Maybe over Thanksgiving I can let us have a couple hours to decorate. Let's see. I think I only have three tests that next week. Maybe. I'll have to ask Matt what days he has off.*

Rachel had managed to lose herself in the world of medical drugs for some time before she thought to wonder about Matt. A glance to the bedroom clock reminded her that she had forgotten to set the time when she got home. Retrieving her watch, she was surprised to discover that it was already well past four. *I wonder what he's doing? He normally shops on Thursdays.* She tried to return to her studies, telling herself that any time now she would hear him come in, but it didn't work. Continually the clock drew her gaze as five o'clock drew near. Soon that too passed and her concentration was utterly lost.

She wandered back into the living room and then the kitchen, searching for a note. There was none. Outside was gray and dark, but there was certainly no hint of snow or bad weather. Finally she decided to give him a call if he hadn't come home by a quarter after. The time came and went and so she dialed, only to hear "Proud of the House We Built" play from beneath an ad on the kitchen counter.

Rachel's heart again started to race. She paced about the small apartment, becoming more and more distraught as the walls continually turned her back up with their silent presence. Finally, she made her way to the laptop to check for messages. *Nothing on email. I guess I could... Thank you, Lord! No accidents on the news. Oh, please send him home. Amen!* Her prayer complete, she wandered back to her email, but even the news that she had aced her infectious diseases exam could not lift her spirits. *Now what?* She stood leaning down facing the computer, refusing to sit. Matt was always on time.

Rachel hit the New Tab button at a loss. One of Internet Explorer's suggestions was Facebook and she

took it and found Matt still logged in. The message icon glowed red. Without thinking, she clicked on it.

Seeing Ellie's last "Good night," Rachel glanced over her shoulder and guiltily scrolled up to where their conversation began the night before, chaining her eyes to the screen.

Ellie Chamberlain: How is it? 11/17, 5:04 p.m.

Being married? 11/17, 5:05 p.m.

Matt Smith: Okay, well... It's hard to explain. But it's just special to have someone to come home to, to live your life for someone else. Just having that special connection, being known as a couple. 11/17, 5:11 p.m.

I guess it's not all like that though. Sometimes it's hard. 11/17, 5:14 p.m.

But you've chosen to love someone and you just got to hold on to that or I don't know. There's ups and downs, but the ups make holding together through the downs worth it in the end I guess. 11/17, 5:16 p.m.

Ellie Chamberlain: I've always worried about that. I mean, how does one keep the love going? I guess that's why I have always said I won't ever date. I don't understand it. It all seems so fake. 11/17, 5:18 p.m.

Matt Smith: I'm no expert. I guess we just choose to. And there's always something special there, in the commitment itself. Just find someone who you think you can make it with, who you share the important things with. That's what I did. 11/17, 5:25 p.m.

Ellie Chamberlain: I'll think about it I guess. It worked for you. 11/17, 5:29 p.m.

Matt Smith: Yeah. 11/17, 5:33 p.m.

It's about dinner time. Good luck and safe travels, Ellie. Have fun! 11/17, 5:35 p.m.

Ellie Chamberlain: Thanks! Have a good night! 11/17, 5:38 p.m.

Rachel read and reread before finally hanging her head in frustration and sorrow. The more she read, the more she saw veiled between the lines, fractures Matt covered over with brevity like the final "yeah"—a weak answer to a haunting question.

For uncounted minutes, silence hung over the apartment. Rachel was both aware and unaware of traffic that came and went on a nearby street. *Why does it have to be like this? God, please! Why can't things just work? Why does life? Why...*

Their history flashed before her eyes, from the first time they met to all the times she had declined opportunities to spend time with him, either being too busy, too independent, or just too unsure. And then that day when his suggestion that they have dinner had come so out of the blue that it had caught them both off guard. From then on it had been over as they became irrevocably smitten with each other. Everything had seemed perfect. Somehow they had managed to forge a relationship and when he proposed just four months later, being three years his younger with seven years of schooling ahead didn't seem to matter. The wedding and the honeymoon had been living dreams, but after that Rachel seemed to lose track as the last three years blended together, but for a few exciting exceptions. *Why? If we could only go back! If...*

Rachel turned as a key unlocked the door. In stepped Matt. For a moment, short or long they did not know, they stared at each other seeing in their faces the frustration and sorrow and then in an instant they were together in such an embrace that they could not remember.

"I'm sorry Rach, I'm sorry," sputtered Matt breaking a silence both eternal and instant. "I should have come home...Or said something."

Rachel sniffed, suddenly realizing that she had been tearing up and then allowed a smirk to creep on to her face at a new realization, her eyes

brightening. "You smell like dog."

Matt's face gave way as well, sensing indiscernible emotion, and after a few second of staring into her playfully quizzical look, he started chuckling uncontrollably, releasing pent up emotion in a torrential flood. Suddenly they found themselves on the floor still holding each other.

"So are you going to tell me why you smell like dog," demanded Rachel, trying and failing to look serious.

"Because I was at the animal shelter for the past hour," he stated playfully.

"And you didn't take me," she questioned, still smiling but no longer laughing.

Matt's face suddenly went somber. "You're always busy. You never have time for anything. We can go any time we want, any place you want" He swallowed. "I just want to be with you to have a life together, but we never do. Every night I go to bed you're still studying. All we ever do together is eat and read the Bible." He struggled to take a deep breath. "After work today...I don't know. I couldn't bear to come home to that. I just had to think, but ugh, I don't know. I just wanted to go drink it away at the bar, but--" He let out a sad chuckle. "I'm too damn responsible. I couldn't afford to go drinking. So I just wandered, and suddenly I just wanted a dog."

"I'm sorry," he finally whispered as he stared into her teary eyes.

"I hate studying," breathed Rachel vengefully.

Matt glanced at her in surprise.

"I hate studying," she nodded.

"Why? I thought..."

"Maybe I used to be." She brushed her hair out of her face. "You know how I've always been 'Miss Responsible...' I just want to get you out of here!" She threw her hands out at their apartment. "Get us out of here, on to our dreams. And if I study

hard enough you can quit and we can go live on a farm and I don't know. I just don't want you stuck working there forever."

Matt pulled her tightly to his shoulder and they lay in silent stillness on the floor.

"I love you," he spoke after a moment, voice filled with emotion. "But I'd work anywhere if I could come home to you."

Silence.

"Do you think we started too soon?" murmured Rachel. "Or maybe we shouldn't have... maybe..." She stalled.

Matt glanced at the computer, still displaying his Facebook page. "You saw the messages?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry I..." She froze, suddenly panicking unsure what their conversation might evoke.

Matt leaned back and sighed. "I don't mind. I guess we're private people aren't we?" His lips broke into a contented smile. "I'd marry you again, in a heartbeat," he stated emphatically, turning his head to look into her soft brown eyes, mere inches away. Her eyelids fluttered at the closeness. "I chose you, and there's nothing that could..." he trailed off.

Rachel stared back into his eyes, kindled with love. *Till death do us part*. The words sang through her soul in triumph. They would find a way. "I guess I'd probably say yes," she answered slowly, failing to control her smirk.

"I love you," he whispered again.

"And that's even without cookies," she smirked playfully.

"Cookies?" Matt's eyes brightened momentarily.

"In the kitchen."

Neither of them moved – they didn't feel like it until that moment when their lips moved together.

The Rocky Mountain air greeted Ellie with a certain freshness as she stepped out of her Explorer to face the snowy mountains about her. Excitement now coursed through her veins as she surveyed her new world. *I can't believe it. I never thought...*

The crunch of snow drew her gaze to a young ranger walking towards her. "Are you Ellie?" he called out.

She nodded.

"James Kraft." He reached out his hand and she shook it. "We've been expecting you." He laughed, innocent and free. "It'll be nice to stop being the new guy around here. Can I show you around?"

Ellie stood silent for a moment surveying the world around her. *Give him a chance*. She nodded and smiled. "What's first?"



Untitled
Cailyn Schreurs
Acrylic

I Don't

Spenser Kavanaugh

Erik fusses around me with my mom, fiddling with my clothes and his alike while she hovers, always near. Mostly they just get in each other's way, constantly tripping over one another, apologizing profusely, and then repeating the whole act endlessly. Eventually she finally stops and just stares at me and I stare back, motionless, watching her stare at my reflection in front of me. She says she has to go check on Margret and help her get ready and tend to guests and a whole slew of other things that don't really interest me, so I just give her and her watery eyes a short, stiff hug and she scurries out of the room. It's only a few brief moments of mostly silent fabric-on-fabric before Erik speaks up.

"Jake, you know Margret's great, right?" He's not looking at me, his eyes occupied with his cufflink, but we can see each other through the massive mirror we've been using to get dressed.

"Yeah, she's pretty great." I contemplate how long I can manage to remain in my athletic shorts before Erik gets fed up and forces me to put on the silk sided slacks hanging on one of the racks next to me.

"She's almost done with her residency. Guys fantasize about marrying doctors." He nods, as though reassuring himself about what he's saying. I can't seem to get my bowtie to work properly and, frankly, can't understand why Margret thinks bowties are classier than regular ties.

"Does this little colorful square go in the knot or somewhere else?"

He glances up at my question with a look of absolute confusion on his face before rolling his eyes and shifting over next to me. "God how do you even get through life man? But I'm telling you, Jenny –

she does yoga with Margret – tells me all the time about the cool stuff Margret's family invites her to. They go to real parties. Like uppity high class parties with butlers who bring you finger sandwiches! Chin up." I oblige as his hands wind the thin fabric around my neck, tying it together in the front, or at least attempting to before the knot falls apart with my response.

"Dude, you've gone to parties like that before with me. We've literally had my butler bring us finger sandwiches for no other reason than you thought it was cool."

His hands have stopped, stopped moving and tying but still leaving an almost uncomfortably hot patch where the tips of his fingers still linger on the corners of my collar. He stares for a moment before responding, "Well, yeah, I know, but we were kids. You can't just drag your best friend along to formal dinner events now that you're an adult. And you two are perfect 'cause Margret gets invited, too. You're like a crazy, hot, power couple. You know, the kind no one actually thinks exist in real life? I mean there's already like a thousand people here and the wedding isn't for another couple hours."

"Why do we have to get dressed so early then?"

He rolls his eyes at this, having acquired some kind of silvery chain from somewhere and attempting, fruitlessly, to attach it to something near my unbuttoned undershirt. "Because you and your mom both know that if I don't force you to change at least two hours early for anything, you'll end up not going. Or worse, you'll end up going in sweats. Do you really want to get married in sweats?"

"I don't really want to get married at all." He stops completely now, eyes turning hard.

It's true, though. I don't want to get married, and it's not just Margret. Not really, anyway. There's nothing wrong with her, I just...I don't want this. Whatever this is. I don't want to marry and get old.

And I really don't want to stand here looking over Erik's shoulder at myself, half put together like some work in progress, some ship only half built, only a few wooden ribs and maybe a central mast. The bowtie Erik just did is pretty much the only thing about me finished. My shirt is unbuttoned and untucked, I'm still in shorts, I have no idea where my cumber button thing is, and my suit coat is likely gathering wrinkles somewhere.

"Look bud, I know that you're not totally sold on the whole marriage and stable life thing, but trust me, it'll be good." He's already fully dressed, down to the tie tacks and square of fabric tucked meticulously into his front jacket pocket. He starts buttoning my shirt up. "You'll settle down."

"Yeah." I nod along with him and muster up a false smile that probably doesn't convince him any more than it does me. "Yeah, I guess I will, huh?" And I probably will, in all honesty. I did college, grad school, might go get a doctorate in some frivolous area that no one cares about. I can do this. I can get married and have kids and drink too much and make my family slightly proud. Proudish. At least baseline levels of proud that I've been producing for some time. Erik pats me on the shoulder like he knows I will do it even if I can't.

"There you go, man." He's finished buttoning my shirt. "So yeah, Margret's great, you two look like you should be featured on the cover of every ridiculous high fashion magazine ever made, and this marriage is gonna be the best thing ever. I won't tell you anything about the dress," he leans into me conspiratorially and I can't help but smile genuinely, "bad luck and all, but she looks fine. Super fine. Like, if I were to have—"

"Hey, I am about to marry her you know." He just punches me and laughs.

"All right then, lover boy, go put your pants on.

Your mom will kill me if she comes in here again and you're still wearing shorts."

"Oh, you aren't wearing that, are you, honey?"

I hadn't thought a simple dinner and movie date would be a formal affair, but apparently Margret had different ideas as she stands in the entry to my apartment in a dress just a shade off of formal evening wear. Jeans seemed more than appropriate to me. "I didn't think this was a formal event. We're just going to a movie, aren't we?"

She smiles as she crosses the room, leaning up to place a kiss on my cheek in an actual greeting before continuing. "Oh but Jake, there will be people there, at the restaurant! We don't want them to think we are a bunch of slobs, do we?" I look down at the dark fabric of my shirt and notice nothing slovenly about it. "What about that green shirt you have? The one you wore on our first date? It makes your eyes look so nice and vibrant."

I don't respond aside from a nod, turning to go change into the green shirt that she wants. I hear her call for me to wear the black slacks, but not the ones with pinstripes, as I retreat to my room, rummage around in my closet for the specified clothes. Before I change, I withdraw from my pocket the small box I'd been carrying around for a few weeks.

A ring. Huge to the point of being absurd. Heavy, too, sitting like a weight in pants and breast pockets for almost a month now. My mother claims it's tradition, says it was my grandmother's, but it looks too new for that, far too vogue to have been popular then or to age well at all. I'll probably have to buy another one in twenty years or so when Margret decides this one is too big or too small or silver isn't in anymore.

I wasn't going to ask her tonight, was going to put it off for a little while longer, but I suppose

tonight is as good a night as any, especially since the date is much higher scale than I had originally thought. Margret made the dinner plans, so she probably knows, probably reserved a table at one of the disgustingly expensive places in town and tipped the wait staff off that I'd be asking the big question tonight.

It isn't actually a question, of course. Sure, it ends in a question mark but it's actually just a formalized ritual of sorts, like responses at church. You don't actually consider what the priest said, you just respond with the appropriate phrase, no thought required. I expect the same when I propose: I'll pull out the ring from a champagne glass, because that's how my father did it, and then her eyes will water but not actually tear because that's much harder to fake. I'll kneel, hold up the giant rock like a man seeking supplication, and ask the question. "Will you marry me?"

And Margret will do what she always has done best: she'll act. Her hands will cover her mouth in shock, and she'll look around, right to left, sweeping her whole body to face what will have become an enthralled crowd. She's good at that, good at making a whole room notice her and feel what she's feeling, or at least what she's supposed to be feeling. We've only been formally dating for six and a half months, but this has been coming for much longer.

She won't say yes right away, though. She'll wait, not for a random baby's cry or a waiter to juggle a salad in a near disaster, but for the breath. She'll wait for the collective intake of everyone there, wait for the patrons to want it more than she does. She'll wait for the pseudo-real surrealist suspension of time like in cheesy love movies where only the girl can release the room from the agonizing waiting. Then she'll, of course, say yes, because she has been as much planning for this as our mothers have.

She'll be animated for the rest of the night then,

talking excitedly even through the cheesy love movie that she will have doubtlessly chosen. I won't talk much but will smile at all the right times, because I'm very good at that, and then I'll take her home, give her one chaste kiss, and return to my apartment. Erik will be home by then and we'll play mindless videogames until well past four in the morning when I pass out on the couch until he wakes me up to tell me to go to my own bed or just drags me there himself.

He won't ask me about it, though, won't ask how the proposal went. He already knows how it went, knew how it would go probably before I fully did. Everyone that I know has been waiting for this moment.

"Hello? Ground control to Jake. Are you in there?" He punctuates this with a poke to my forehead. "Is life support still on line? Have you –"

I swat his hand away, noticing that my bowtie has been properly done, my shirt buttoned, cufflinks done up, and my jacket put on. He's waving a belt at me in his left hand when I interrupt his pestering. "Yeah, yeah, I can hear you."

"I figured you'd probably want to put the belt on yourself. You know, so you can at least claim that you did something to get yourself ready." He smiles tentatively as he hands it over. As I thread the belt through my pants, he doesn't shift back but instead puts his hands on my shoulders and looks straight at me. My hands pause, still fiddling with the leather, as I wait for him to tell me to hurry up so I can go get married. "This is going to be okay, okay? Better than okay. It'll be fantastic. And we can still hang out all the time, okay?"

"Yeah. Totally. No worries." I don't actually believe what he says and I doubt he does either, but it's nice to hear either way.

He claps me on the shoulder before turning me

around and pushing me to the door. "Well, let's go get you married then, man."

Later, when the ridiculously long ceremony is fully underway, opening remarks promising chanting and singing and long winded speeches, I finally see her. Everyone stands and turns and the organ plays a far overdone song that no one actually listens to and she steps around the corner, father on her arm, simple, elegant, expensive white dress winding around her as though it had been sewn while she was wearing it. It looks almost exactly as I had envisioned it, Margret having a crippling distaste for anything even remotely flamboyant. As such, the whole wedding was a garish collection of creams and off-whites and her dress was, predictably, the only purely white object in anyone's field of vision.

Everyone turns as they're supposed to when she enters, some gasping, some tearing up, and everyone playing their surprise at Margret's intense beauty as though no one there had ever before seen her. I look first to my mother, who gazes upon my bride with a smug grin, silently patting herself on the back for having orchestrated such a picturesque marriage, but my attention wanders quickly to my side, my eyes meeting Erik's for a moment. Unlike everyone else, he isn't looking forward, but

sideways, back at me instead. He is, uncharacteristically, not smiling, but instead just offers the slightest nod to me and I nod back.

When at last I turn back to Margret processing glacially down the aisle, I see it. I can do this. I can have kids and distance them and drink too much, I can watch as I age and she ages. I can have affairs and then go to breakfast in the morning and act like she isn't doing the same thing. I can remember this moment, when we were young and beautiful and when everyone thought we'd do so well and then watch as the reality sets in, as everything falls apart and our children won't call us by anything other than our first name, as everyone whispers about how dysfunctional we are and we, in turn, whisper about how fucked up all of them are, too. And, of course, I can inherit Jacob's business and run it like he taught me and smoke a disgusting cigar every night.

So, when it's finally time to say our silly oaths of our eternal faithfulness to each other, both of us doubtlessly knowing that the other does not believe for even a second that we will uphold this nonsense, I say it. I say 'I do' and I feel Erik staring at my back and my mom smiling her fake smile and Jacob standing stoically next to her, observing passively as he might a particularly long putt on one of the greens off at the country club. But I say it, I say I do and know that, deep down, I don't.

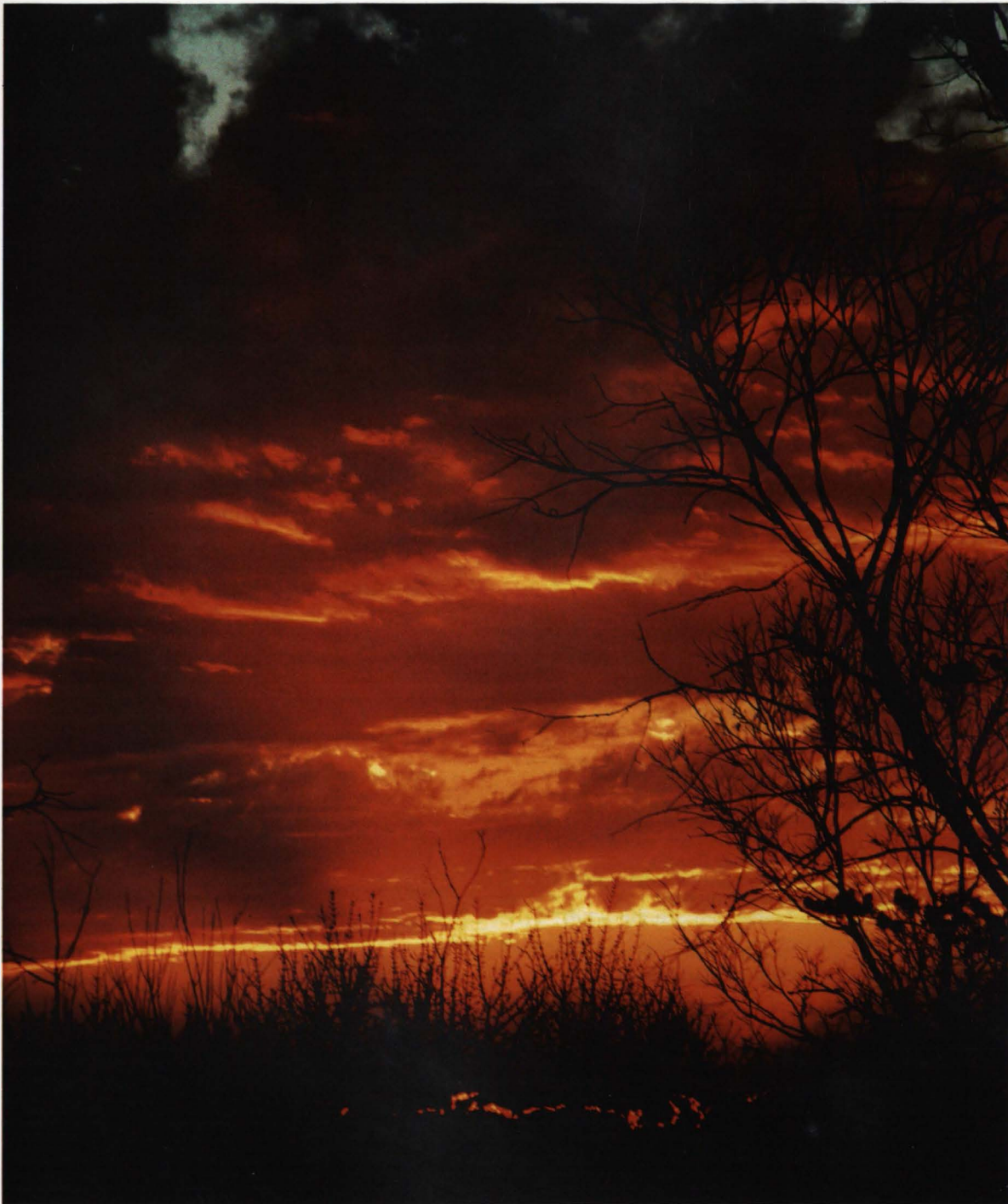


Fall or Winter
Kayla Peterson
Charcoal and pastels

Demons We Knew

Alissa Bogue

A child sits alone in an empty room.
The light flickers dimly above her head,
but she doesn't see her demons lurking.
And as the light grows stronger, they shrink smaller,
hiding themselves in the spaces between her fingers,
in the circles beneath her eyes, and the shadows in her hair.
A fist flies and her innocence shatters like glass on cement,
screams once drowned out by rainbows and optimism,
now swallowed by the ink black silhouette of every nightmare she's ever had.
Eyes filled with light, colored a shade of darkened obscurity.
Hands soft and unscathed turned rough and calloused.
The light is blinding.
Turning the room so bright her eyes burn with the intensity,
walls run together in a searing white hue, while her skin scorches red and angry.
She screams but no one hears her,
fights but without a cause,
fails to gather bearings that are no longer within her reach,
cries tears...no longer her own.
She stands firm in the blazing remnants of past scrapes and cuts.
Every drop of blood pooling in her heart, every begging, pleading whisper,
a constant stream of "You are nothing" "You are worthless."
No love.
No hope.
No light.
A child now a grown human being, with wisdom for her years that should be saved for old age
She walks toward the shining beacon of her freedom,
dragging behind her the baggage of a life lived in fear, and no carry-on.
She lets her grievance fall to the floor, dropping her very soul to the mercy of her demons.
The demons she never knew, the monsters of her subconscious that fed on her empty heart
like lions do the carcass of a fallen gazelle.
She lets them feast and doesn't look behind her,
Not once does she go backwards; she's long surpassed falling for flying.
With wings spread wide she soars, eyes dry and lips upturned.
The room is empty, the light bulb burnt out, a door opened never to be closed again.



Sunset #27
Teresa Hebert
Photograph

I Saw the Death Machine

Joe Schartz

Canto I: The Tremors

10,000 leagues beneath the crust
where human feet have trod,
wallowed the serpent enemy,
the one who wrestles God.

For in his lair of tortured souls,
his carcass shook with mirth;
He sensed beyond his walls of fire
tremors on the Earth.

Tremors, yes! And chaos, too!
He whipped with fiendish glee,
and screeched to iron gates above,
"Fresh souls shall dance with me!"

A servant soul with wicked grin
approached his master there.
He lay prostrate in amber flames
that singed his ghost-white hair.

The Master lashed his servant's soul
who wailed in tearful pain;
Through blackened teeth he tried to speak,
but felt the lash again.

"You are mine!" the Master shrieked,
"Your agonies are just.

Eternity shall burn your heart
and turn your bones to dust."

The tremors, they grew louder still,
the winds of Hellfire blew;

"And dust to dust," the Master breathed,
"your sufferings renew."

And now, the servant, fearing more,
through black-charred lips did cry,
"The tremors that you hear above
will bring souls here to die!"

The Prince of Darkness stayed his whip
and drew his servant near.

"While tripping souls into my lair,
what whispers did you hear?"

"A tempest stirs upon the Earth,"
the servant spake with fear,
"I charmed a boy to kill a duke;
the world shall war this year.

For from this murder shall arise
the pride of every land.
The streets shall flood with crimson blood;
thy vict'ry is at hand!

For cities once stood mountains tall;
they soon shall burn by fire.
And body parts shall take their place,
and rise up ever higher.

O Master! See, this is the world
from which I gladly fled,
that I might bear the news to you,
for God will nigh be dead."

Seized with fiendish ecstasy,
the serpent did explode,
and shrapnel from his fiery burst
sent shocks through his abode.

"At last the God of man shall die!
His kingdom lost will crack the sky,
and slither from this pit will I;
God shall die!"

Canto II: The Voice of Hope

The souls chained to the fire below
did suffer all the more,
as he who leadeth souls astray
approached his dungeon door:

"For through this gate, and leagues above,
the tempest waits for me,
and I shall goad it, tempting men
to eat from Adam's tree."

The serpent cackled merrily
as flame danced in his eyes;
the white-hot embers of his glee
brought forth still louder cries.

And as he turned to leave his lair,
a voice cried from the flame:
"Have mercy on my wicked soul
in holy Jesus' name!"

For though thy pardon I earned not,
I beg my song thee hear!
So shower now upon my head
a single precious tear!"

At this the serpent's scales ran cold,
the voice did stop him so;
"For if I cross the iron gate
the God above shall know.

And she whose heel I strike so hard
shall trample on my head;

The war will end, and God shall be
Alive and not yet dead."

He seized the soul who cried aloud
and breathed on him his rage:
"Tis true, because of souls like you,
I cannot leave my cage;

for who would lash thy supple skin,
or drive spikes through thy thighs?
Or gather blood and boil it hot
to pour into thy eyes?

Then do not fear, O slave of mine!
Your master shall remain!
A thousand years shall bring red tears,
but never ends thy pain."

He drew the slave to black, curled lips
and gently kissed his cheek,
which burned white-hot, began to rot,
and like dead flesh did reek.

The Master pushed the dreadful corpse
to languish down below.
"But if not me, then who," asked he,
"beyond this pit shall go?"

Across the crags and broken rocks
where lost and damned souls flee,
he watched his demons chasing souls
and whipping violently.

He noticed there among the din
a mighty Demon Lord;
in one hand clenched he sinners 12,
the other drove a sword.

And as the demon slew the 12,
the wicked serpent knew,
that in his place should go this face
and all his baleful crew.

"These demons were at Calvary,
and too at Rome and Troy;
I free their spirits once again
to pillage and destroy!"

He called the savage demons five
who curse both dead and those alive,
who lust for souls that still survive,
the demons five!

Canto III: The Death Machine

At the screeching overtones
of trumpet made of bone,
the demons flew to kneel beside
their rancid master's throne.

"O mighty Prince of Darkness, tell,"
began the Demon Lord,
"Why doth thou burn with red-hot joy,
and call us from the horde?"

The serpent, with his fetid mouth,
addressed the demons five:
"Thou shall blood taste and must with haste
upon the Earth arrive.

The tremors up above foretell
of man's impending fall.
As millions turn from God to kill,
you must secure them all.

Every man and every babe
must perish all the same;

Their unrepentant souls shall burn
in my eternal flame.

With Earth destroyed there shall be no
more souls for God to save;
and Heaven's joyful songs shall cease
as damned souls flood my cave.

And with my legion of fresh sins
I shall escape from Hell,
return to Paradise and kill
the God of Israel!

But if one single soul escapes,
thy mission thou shall fail;
and I shall strike thee with the hand
that drove the Roman nail.

Each dream of thine shall I corrupt,
each limb shall I consume,
if thou take less than every life
and drag them to this tomb.

Prepare thee now to take thy flight
beyond these towering walls;
I fashion thee a chariot
to see that each man falls."

With incantations uttered loud,
the serpent burst once more,
bewitching stones and broken bones
to dance upon the floor.

The whirring storm of Hell's debris
turned faster in its place,
and souls too near could not resist
the whirlwind's dark embrace.

Lightning flashed and moaning souls
made songs too loud to hear;
if human eyes had seen these skies
they should have died from fear.

The serpent spell abated then;
the chariot erect
was built from skulls and evil souls
that Heaven did reject.

Its treads were bones and ivory,
its walls were blood and skin,
and eyes from knaves and odious slaves
watched closely from within.

The demons five, they looked with greed
upon the foul scene;
"Behold," the serpent spake to them,
"the invincible Death Machine."

The Demon Lord, he cackled mad,
and flew his death ship, iron clad,
seeking souls from Earth to add,
the demons mad!

Canto IV: In Belleau Wood

For three long years I laid my head
to sleep, and woke the dawn;
in foreign lands I used my hands
to kill, my soul foregone.

My mother from our island home,
she prayed the guns to quell,
but in the trenches, dark and gray,
they never silent fell.

We had been sentenced by a judge
to charge our fellow man;

to take his life, and with a knife,
learn how Cain's sins began.

I killed my first at Neuve Chapelle,
by stabbing in the lung;
my heart cried for the handsome boy
who was so scared and young.

Again I fought at Passchendale
where scarce did I survive;
we wondered, waking every night,
if we were still alive.

In silty Flanders graveyards there
we plowed our trenches deep;
and in the mire I sent prayers dire
for God my soul to keep.

And keep He did, my wounds he healed;
we marched as dead men could,
to gnarled trees beyond the Marne,
a place called Belleau Wood.

Ah, Belleau Wood! The name alone
does make an eerie sound,
and brings me visions of dark blood
in which the years are drowned.

Though I should cease my story here,
I cannot help but go,
and whisper of the canopy
and curses down below.

For twenty days we shifted lines
and warred in heat of June,
haunted by the ghostly shapes
that crawled beneath the moon.

The mud and water of my trench
did sink beneath my skin,
infecting me and welcoming
the long night to begin.

Such horrid scenes entranced my eyes,
that for my end I yearned;
for each mirage was punishment
that my damned soul had earned.

Damned to die! Damned forever
to that pongy trench!
I nearly leaped to face the guns
when a voice called through the stench.

Our captain's voice, so deep and brave:
"This is our final fight!
We must take them by surprise,
and hit them on the right!

So steady, boys! Let's make the noise
that makes them turn away!
For king and country, do your worst!
The war shall end today!"

And charge we did, into the face
of guns and rocket blast,
not turning back for hope that this
fool's charge would be our last.

As stalks of wheat are cut to dry,
our legs beneath us fell;
but water-cooled machine gun nests
could not withhold the swell.

Our foes began to leave their trench,
we caught them on their flank!

When suddenly was heard the word,
"Beware the coming tank!"

Approaching from the hill above,
an armored car appeared;
It belched great clouds of soot and smoke
and toward our battle steered.

Such devastation never was
inflicted there before;
the tank appeared a future weapon
from a future war.

It fired a gun, sending shockwaves
through the shattered wood,
taking lives as only armor
driven by demons could.

My legs had taken bullets now,
beside a stump I laid,
from which I saw the pilot of
the tank that stopped our raid;

His rotten flesh I smelled above
the stench of all the dead;
a helmet from a Roman guard
was perched upon his head.

T'was here I witnessed Satan's work
through gun smoke black and green;
in Belleau Wood beside a stump,
I saw the Death Machine.

The Death Machine, which rood from Hell,
did life erase with every shell,
and cackled mad as each man fell,
the tank from Hell!

Canto V: The Assistance

The hellish smoke which filled my lungs
gave me a painful cough.

It burned my eyes, but still I saw
the filling body trough.

Behind my stump, through wat'ring eyes
I saw both armies gone.

Human guns had yielded to
the cry of Satan's spawn.

The Death Machine, it slaked its thirst
till two were left alive,
and from the belly of the tank
jumped out the demons five.

They fed on flesh of wounded men,
our blood became their food;
they taunted ones who cried for death
while on men's bones they chewed.

What happened to my captain, loved,
I scarce have strength to tell.
With claws and teeth, they pulled him toward
the tank that rose from Hell.

Within the Death Machine they ate
and from the tank they threw,
my captain's body, piece by piece;
into the air he flew.

Their feast now finished, from the tank,
they climbed and ran for me;
my living flesh had drawn them out,
to God, I made my plea!

A beam of light I thought was death
appeared between us now,

and blinded by it, I did wipe
the blood from off my brow.

A Lady there! I saw her clear,
her form draped in a veil,
two archs stood guard on either side;
the fiends began to wail.

Weakened now by gaping wounds,
I asked the Lady there:
"Did my plea to God above
bring answers to my prayer?"

Her tunic whiter than fresh snow,
the Lady spoke to me:
"Your soul was saved by those who gave
my heart a rosary.

The cries of Fatima have reached
my pure and gentle heart;
three children asked my love to shield
a world now torn apart."

The Demon Lord, he shrieked with rage
a vile and evil curse;
my human mind could not discern
the meaning of his verse.

An angel drew his sword of flame,
his wings prepared to fly;
he stood as if to slay them and
rebuked them with a cry:

"How dare thee utter imprecations,
Halt! You sordid worm!
I see her light doth burn your tongue;
my sword shall make thee squirm!"

The Lady held a hand to stop
the angel from attack;
meanwhile I bled into the mud,
watching from my back.

The demons sneered, their leader now
approached the Lady white:
"There there, dear Michael," spake the beast,
"she tells thee not to fight.

We'll leave thee here, if you but give
the life that we are due;"
his bony hand reached out for me;
"Just one more soul will do."

"O Lady, please! Protect me now!"
I shouted, close to death;
"See! I offer up a prayer
with my last dying breath!"

And here my story ends, alas,
my beating heart grew slow;
the Lady blessed me with these words
before her light did go:

"The war shall end, and you shall live;
this world so long depraved
must consecrate its heart to me.
The world shall then be saved."

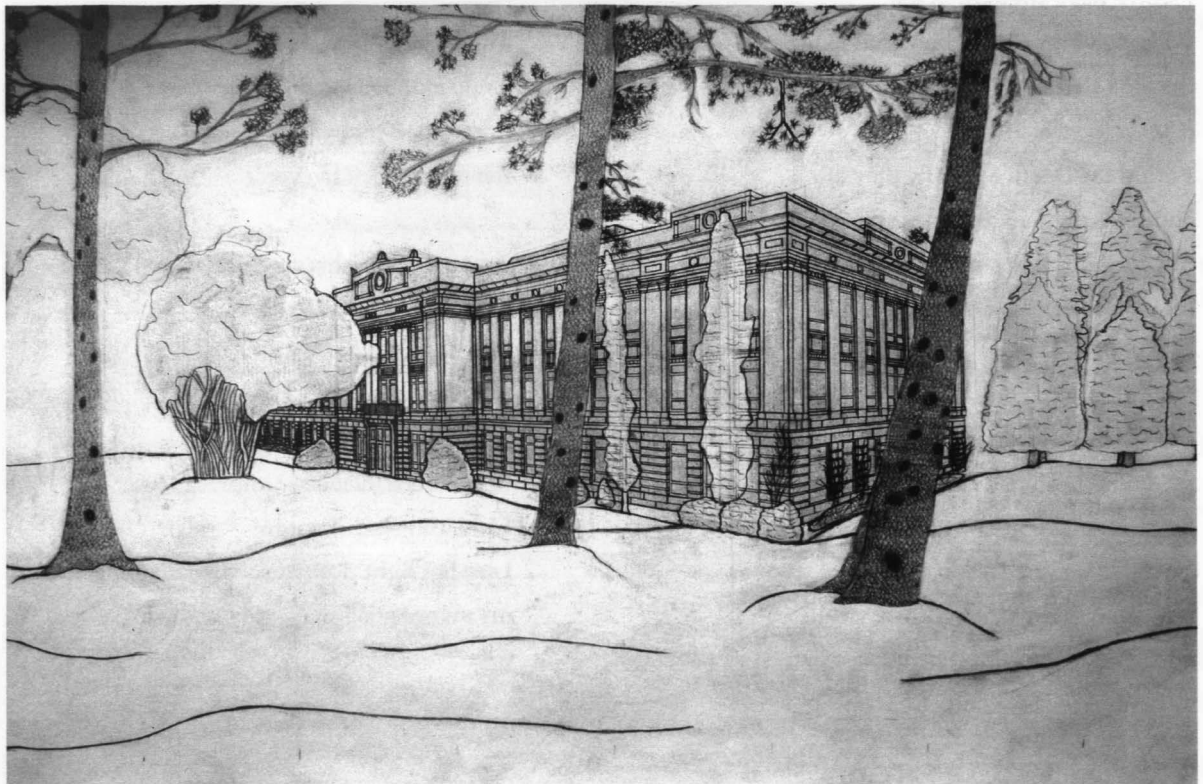
These things in Belleau Wood, I saw,
and one more thing did hear;
despite my crime, these words sublime
were whispered in my ear:

"Thy Soul belongs to God alone,
whom I adore beside His throne.
Tis not for Death Machines to own.
To God alone!"

Untitled

Eli Welu

Graphite Drawing



Badlands - South Unit

Daniel Snethen

Pink, green, yellow, and grey
castles of evolving mud
entomb endless eons
of skeletonized history.

Agatized Fairburn fortifications
eroded from Roentgen-red bands
of Geiger-counter-hot geology
blaze radioactively.

Sun-bleached bones
of beguiled travelers
lay scorched and strewn
where pink-headed vultures feed,

while death lingers on
in paleontological perpetuity
across a landscape
of lifeless desolation.

Yet...

rock wrens thrive,
survive by never drinking—defying death,
never succumbing
to dehydrated desiccation—
singing songs,
serenading foul-smelling
darkling beetles
with their raspy voices,

as the dry gulches yearn
to erode and to grow and to roar
with the falling of Autumn rains.

A Day in the Life of a Pickup Truck

Morgan Erickson

I waited for the deliverance of my dad's white pickup truck. His truck was my ride home, my carrier of bad news, a deathmobile, the family symbol for tardiness, and it was my sled runner—it was mostly my truck full of memories. My dad decided he needed yet another white Ford just three years ago, and it became my ride ever since the day of its purchase. As always, my dad was running a little late, but I did not take my gaze away from the entrance of the school's parking lot. I imagined the moment when I would be heading for home, as I had done before.

The sun bounced off the vibrant white of the clean truck. I jumped up inside the front passenger seat and heaved my bookbag beside me. My bag was stuffed with library books because I had recently discovered my obsession for novels that addressed World War 2. I felt bad for having an interest in a horrific piece of time, but that didn't prevent me from reading.

I swung the car door shut and smiled at my dad. I didn't hear him say his cousin had committed suicide.

"That's a pretty selfish thing to do when you're a father with two kids," my dad said into his cellphone as he shifted the car into drive. I stared at my backpack filled with dark novels, a horrific shock finally hitting me.

He put his foot down on the gas to leave the parking lot; dad didn't explain Craig's death with too much detail. He only added how he was found: Craig's car parked by the bridge. Our white pickup roared as it continued on home. I imagined Craig sitting in-between us, and I hugged my bag on my lap.

As snow began to fall down in goose feather flakes, I looked down at the white speckles on my red coat sleeves. I thought about all of those old

movies, where it begins to snow but it hits the actors and actresses clothes and the snow looked more like dandruff that doesn't intend to melt. I know, now, that the snow in old films never melted because it wasn't snow at all. It was potato flakes. But I am lying to myself. I notice the cold more than the falling snow. I notice the white flakes hit the contrasting black pavement, and dissipate into the surface while my nose runs and turns pink. The ground was mud.

Taylor put on her bright blue coat as the Ford engine roared outside the front door. This winter had been a warm one, and we were going to attempt sledding. It was more mud than snow.

"This coat is new," she told me as her eyes widened in warning; "I told my mom I would not get it dirty."

I contemplated the consequences of her mother's anger, and I thought of how likely that anger would come back to haunt me. "Okay, let's go," I said.

My dad had tied the navy blue plastic sled to the back of the truck with some orange farm rope. The white truck resembled a Dalmatian with its spots of mud. "That's a nice coat you got on there," my dad said as he pointed towards Taylor. "Are you sure you want to wear that?"

We both hopped onto the beaten up sled and giggled in excitement, "Let's go! Let's go!" The pickup roared ahead towards the muddy farmland. And as the field came into reach, my dad turned the wheel and sent our sled flying.

Taylor landed face down in a puddle of mud, her coat looking like a spotted dog.

I heard the familiar sound. I looked up to see the booming truck coming my way. It rounded the corner and grinned as it always does to reveal its silver teeth. "Are you alright, Hun?" I turned around to see Paula, the school secretary, looking from the inside out.

"I'm fine," I replied, "There's my dad right there." She looked in the direction of my pointed finger and retreated further back inside the school. She found me outside knowing that my family always had a tendency to run late.

Every morning us kids would jump out of my father's pickup ten minutes after the start of class—Paula waited in her office, knowing we would need a tardy pass. Every morning that we were late, my mother always came up with a good lie over the phone.

"Oh, Paula," mom would say, "you know...we were on our way, but there were so many snow drifts."

"Morgan's hamster got eaten by one of our cats, and she is just so upset," my mom said when Paula called to complain. It was hard for me to explain to Paula where I got another hamster for "show and tell" the next day.

Fourteen tardies are tough evidence to overrule, however, and the Erickson kids remained infamous for being late.

Dad waited in the car that he kept especially white for Sundays.

The truck continued to show his patience when he drove below the speed limit; the Erickson family rode slowly into town. Church usually started at 9:30 am, and we came rolling in a little before 10.

"Better late than never," my dad would always tell us. He repeated his common phrase as he put the truck in park outside the Gayville Lutheran church. "Looks like a small crowd is showing up today," my dad added at the sight of the parking lot. There were only four other cars parked next to our hefty Ford truck.

"Look," shouted Coach Buffington from the doorway of the church, "the Ericksons are early!" His face was filled with delightful surprise, as if he had found a 100 dollar bill on the ground.

We looked around like lost hounds and Buffington ran excitedly closer. "I told everyone, 'Let's not tell the Ericksons that church is at 10:30 today,'" he blurted out quickly with a smile, "that way they will show up early!"

My brother and I turned away and walked back to the car.

I stepped away from the school's glass doors that were smudged with children's fingerprints, and walked towards my dad's truck.

The cold air had seeped deep into my bones; my toes were all I could think about as they smashed against the pavement, feeling like chunks of ice. I released one strap of my backpack, and then the other, holding it in my frozen hands. I prepared to swing the backpack up into the car and onto my lap. The truck, a little muddy, screeched to an abrupt halt.

I opened the door, lifted my feet, and raised myself into the truck. But before I sat down, I searched the truck's tailgate.

I always remembered to check the tailgate.

The leaves were turning the usual colors of orange and red. Today, as I waited outside for my dad, I had the enjoyment of company from my friends Brittney and Trevor. I was excited not to have to stand alone. "Maybe you guys might want a ride home?" I asked them. They lived in town and could usually walk, but they had decided to wait with me.

"Maybe," the two twins said in unison. A familiar sound echoed throughout the parking lot, and I saw my dad's truck approaching with caution. I attributed this to his being on time for a change.

I ran to the truck with excitement. Step, step, jump. As I began to ask the question of, "Can we give my friends a ride?" my dad quickly interjected.

"I have some bad news," he said. "Your dog Rebel died today." Rebel was more my dad's dog than mine, but the death of a pet always hit me the hardest. My dad, not quite finished, pointed his thumb towards the tailgate, "He's in the back."

Three pairs of eyes looked in the tailgate—it held a dead bloodhound.

The tailgate was clear, and I slammed the door shut. "Slam it with authority," my dad would always say. I didn't hear him tell me that today. I moved my hands near the blast of the hot air. *Finally, heat.* This truck had been many things to me, but now it was a pure sense of salvation. Warming me

from the cold. It took me a while to notice the strange driver beside me; strange simply for being behind the wheel.

"Hey there, sis," my brother yelled with a grin, "I'm here to pick you up."

What I will come to discover is this: the truck will be smashed.

My brother will fall asleep behind the wheel with four other passengers; although they were once beside him, they will be thrown out of the windows. The truck would be covered with specks of mud and have missing silver teeth while it is surrounded by three or four cars—one being an ambulance. I will see the pickup as I drive away from the accident and towards the hospital. And I will drive by the truck's remains without a second glance. My mom will call to tell me that everyone's condition from the accident is still unknown. She will ask me, "What if he had been drinking, Morgan?" But everyone will survive and Parker will walk away from the accident; the only loss being the white pickup truck.

And I will drive up to the hospital parking lot, in my copper Ford Escape. I will swing the door open for my brother with a smile. He will have been waiting, because I will be late. But I will swing the door open and say, "Hey, do you need a ride?"



Power
Lucas Eide
Photograph

Strawbreaker

Joe Schartz

Mama lowered a blue dish into the sink, carefully, methodically like she did every Sunday afternoon. She washed the suds off with her hands, which had been wrinkled by the soapy water and 23 years of being a farmer's wife, and placed it in the other side of the sink to be dried. The window above the countertop sat open a few inches to let the warm March air freshen the kitchen, and she could see grass starting to emerge beneath the tire swing in the yard. She reached beneath the bubbles and fished for a paring knife or a spatula when she heard my footsteps from outside. I bet they were loud, like claps of thunder. She heard me run through the screen door on the front porch, and she saw me, a panting boy up to my arms in blood, fall into the kitchen, hands shaking wildly.

Mama turned, drying her hands on her apron, and heard her son say the most terrifying words in the whole world.

"You need to come talk to Eugene, Mama."

Mama never forgot the way I told her about the last words. She never forgot anything about that day. It stayed with her the way the scent of a spring day stays in your nostrils long after it has died.

Lou, Eugene, and me started off the morning by throwing corn cobs at Doris. We were supposed to be gathering them up and bringing them to the house to burn, but it was funny as hell the way Doris stood there and stared at us. She was an old cow, a smooth-mouthed bitch as Papa called her, which means she has no teeth, and had been on the farm as long as we had. No matter how hard we whipped them--and let me tell you, I can throw a corn cob

with the best of them--she just watched us without caring. We threw them at her sunken rib cage, or even right at her face, and she didn't move a muscle. Didn't even blink.

"How does she do that?" Lou asked.

"I don't know," Eugene answered as he wound one up and caught the bottom of her mouth. "Maybe she can't feel nothin' because all we give her is moldy hay and it's killing her."

"I bet Frank can feel 'em though," Lou said with a grin as he chucked a corn cob at my head. Lucky for him it missed by a hair, but being the oldest and the biggest at 14, I charged for him anyway and tackled him in the mud of the near-empty cow yard. The sunny day had melted most of the snow, so the ground was wet and cold. Lou, our little cousin, 12 years old and nowhere near done growing up, didn't make it to the farm to play very often, so we liked to rough house whenever we got the chance. His name is short for Lewis, but at a young age he demanded to be called Lou, goddamnit, and that was the only way to spell it. He liked to talk that way, Lou did. He used words Papa used down in the machine shed when he smashed his finger with a ball-peen hammer. Those kinds of words.

"Cut it out, you son of a bitch," he yelled as I pounded him in the chest. I didn't punch him as hard as I could though. That's the tough part about being the oldest. You have to know when to back off.

My little brother Eugene, the 11 year-old, wisely kept his distance and continued to throw cobs at both of us while we wrestled. Lou gave up pretty quickly though, and Eugene was throwing those cobs like Cy Young himself, so I let go of Lou to chase after Eugene. He tucked his tail and ran as fast as he could, which worked to his advantage because of his long legs. Lou joined in on the chase and we ran in circles, over gates, and under fences, not really remembering who was chasing who.

Doris stood still, her eyes moving ever so slightly to watch us farm boys forget the world for a while. To this day, I can't remember feeling more free than I did in the muck and the mire of that cow yard. I think you'll agree when I say that it's funny how having nothing makes it easier to be happy with what you've got in life. Of course those thoughts never ran through my head at the time. We ran until our legs grew tired, until we caught our second wind, and wandered around the yard picking up the corn cobs we had scattered everywhere, piling them in the wagon Mama used for barbed wire. When we had piled so many cobs in the wagon that they were spilling over the side, we started for the house, locking the gate behind us in case Doris was pulling the wool over our eyes and she was actually a lively smooth-mouthed bitch.

People nowadays seem to have the wrong idea about what the Depression was like. Sure the dirt was bad, and Mama had to hang wet dish towels, the ones with patterns she stitched herself, on the window to keep us from suffocating. We were kids though, and didn't seem to mind the dirt so much. Or being poor. We might have worn the same overalls three summers in a row, until our ankles showed and our knees poked through, but it's hard to notice being poor when everyone around you is just as bad or worse.

What a lot of people don't understand is how really unlucky people like Mama and Papa were, though. Bad luck follows some people like a stray cat, but, boy, it stuck to my folks like a fly on a hog. They lost their savings in the crash, same as everyone else, but there hadn't been much for savings to begin with. The real trouble on our small farm in Humboldt, South Dakota, started when the corn died. Then the soybeans died the next year. And when Papa said not to worry, a bumper crop of wheat was going to save us, we believed him until

the wheat died too. A new bug, Papa said, one so small you can't see it with your naked eye. Papa called it 'strawbreaker.'

The Depression hadn't ended for us like it had for some people. It just kept coming like a summer rain that you want to stop because it's drowning you, but you can't stop bad luck any more than you can the clouds from filling up. On that March day in 1936, we were as poor as we had ever been, and Eugene and I knew it.

Papa walked out of the house, through the rickety screen door that made it impossible to be sneaky at night. I tell you that door is a loud one and Papa said he would put new hinges on it years ago. I think he decided not to fix it on purpose, seeings how it was a good way to hear when someone came through the door. On a July night the year before, Eugene and I sneaked out to do some midnight fishing with Lou at Lost Lake. We didn't come back with anything more than nightcrawler guts on our hands, but we thought we made it in the clear when we got to the safety of our cotton sheets without getting caught. The next morning Papa cussed us out so hard his face turned red because he said we had been louder than a herd of goddamn weaned bull calves. We knew it was an exaggeration, but the lousy door was almost that bad.

Papa didn't say a word as he pulled his hat to his balding head and made his way to the feed floor of the barn. We stopped talking and laughing, since it seemed to agitate him. I pulled the wagon to the porch and we started to fill our overalls with corn cobs to carry to the wooden box Papa had fashioned in the kitchen. Eugene and Lou started shoving one another so I socked Eugene in the arm and told him to knock it off.

"Things are bad enough around here without you two acting like a couple of hens," I barked.

"Gosh, Frank, we didn't mean nothin'," Eugene said to me as he dumped his cobs in the box. He raised his dirty arms in the air as if to say sorry for being funny.

I'm not sure why I started snapping like that. Just a few minutes before we had been running around in cow manure, chasing each other as equals, and then I suddenly decided to be a stone-faced bully. The older brother in me reared itself more and more in 1936, especially when things got really bad on the farm and I tried to keep Eugene and Lou from making Mama and Papa's somber attitudes even worse. I'm not kidding when I tell you that we were at the end of our rope that year, and laughter became a sore subject.

Every single hog that Papa had raised that year died during the same week. Just like the stalks of wheat that grew thin and dusty and snapped in half under the weight of the South Dakota wind, the pigs went lame, laid down on their sides, and never got up again. The first one to go down made Papa hurt in a bad way. He was beside himself with bitterness that a hog could eat a summer of hard work and then keel over, without giving two thoughts about how throwing in the towel was going to affect our family. An entire pig meant smaller meals. It meant fewer candles. It meant no hinges for the goddamn door. The gilt looked stiff as a board, her legs sticking straight out, her mouth oozing white foam and ground corn. That didn't prepare us for a second pig to die though, and it was Bernadette, no less. When Papa found her next to the water trough, he became sick to his stomach.

I should tell you that Papa refused to let us name the pigs, and Bernadette had been the only exception. It's not that he didn't want us to get attached. We were farm boys, and we had seen our fair share of farm animals end up in a skillet the next morning. I think names more or less annoyed him,

to be honest. But then an old sow, one with pieces missing from her ears after all the fights she'd been in, went lame on Papa in '33. He all but gave up on her, letting her sink deeper and deeper into the mud she had collapsed in. Mama didn't have the heart to let her waste away, though, and every morning she walked down to the feed floor with a tin cup in her hand. Mama watered her, and the dying animal slurped from Mama's hand for hours. The pig didn't have an ounce of strength in her body and couldn't chew whole corn, so Mama mixed ground corn and water into a paste and spoon fed her like an infant. Hell, she probably spent more time feeding that sow than she did Eugene when he was a baby. It was one of the most loving things I've ever seen, I tell you. Truly pathetic, but Mama loved that pig. In all the weeks it took to revive her, the ornery sow never bit Mama's hand. Not once. You could see the gratitude in her eyes, and one day she pulled herself out of the mud and wobbled around the feed floor. Mama named her Bernadette, after her favorite saint. There was only one problem. Bernadette didn't want to eat out of the trough like the other pigs anymore. She still wanted Mama to feed her, and she ran to the gate whenever Mama walked by.

So when Papa found Bernadette's lifeless body on the feed floor, her eyes glazed over in a hazy gray color, her mouth foaming like the first pig that died, Mama sobbed for hours. I didn't know what to do. Maybe if Mama had given birth to a daughter she would have had someone to hold her on days like that.

Two dozen went lame the next day, and Papa muttered the word "polio" under his breath, which smelled like peppermint Schnapps, even in the morning. It was the only booze he could afford. I didn't know what polio was, but on the third day we found out that it wasn't the problem. Farmer George, our neighbor who owned 60 acres to the south,

was having the same problem. Farmer George was a poor farmer, let me tell you, but he swore it was rabies that had killed the hogs, swore on the Bible, and he told Papa we were all going to have to get 21 shots right in the stomach. He might have been bad at everything he did, but Farmer George caught my attention when he mentioned those 21 shots.

Now, you wouldn't have stepped into Farmer George's barn if you had any reason to live. There were more nails on the floor than in the walls, and God knows how his pigs ever survived in there in the first place, but big-bellied Farmer George coaxed a veterinarian from town to walk in and do some blood work on his dead pigs. Before he even had to pull out a needle, the vet told him it was a bad case of pseudorabies.

No need for testing, he had seen it before. So not the real thing, but just as deadly. When Farmer George asked what the treatment was, the vet showed him a .22 revolver from under the seat of his truck. Every one of those pigs is going to die, the vet spat, and he drove away carrying the stink of death with him.

One of Farmer George's pigs had escaped three days prior, poked his head through the wooden boards, and started eating out of our feed trough. Pseudorabies moves through the saliva and can live for days, even in the open air. Every one of Papa's pigs died because Farmer George hadn't kept his troughs full. I have to admit, I was scared to think about what would happen if Farmer George ever breathed the same air as Papa again.

As Eugene and Lou carried the last of the corn cobs from the wagon, I watched Papa's head disappear beneath the hill that sloped toward the barn and the feed floor. Yes, the pigs had died, and Roosevelt hadn't done a goddamn thing about it. It's not that Papa expected him to, because Papa wasn't one to ask for help. He just got tired of reading about

the auto workers in Detroit or the bankers in New York crying about hard times. "They don't know hard times until they watch everything around them die," Papa would say. The wheat fields were hard times. Bernadette's body was hard times.

I noticed an empty Schnapps bottle lying in the yard. It wasn't like Papa to throw things carelessly like that. If Eugene or me had dropped something in the yard, Papa would have told the jackass knuckle dragger who did it to pick it up. I hated to use the word drunk, but that's what Papa was becoming. What else do you call someone who's drunk all of the time?

There is nothing more dangerous than a farmer with nothing to do but look at dead pigs. I mean it. I was scared that Papa was going out of his mind, walking out on the feed floor, standing in the stench of rotting flesh and rotting dreams. He didn't cry or shout or even try to move them off of the uneven concrete. He just stood there among them, as if it were a dilemma that could be solved. But, of course, it couldn't be. Nothing brings back the dead. Which is why I became worried, you see. It's not that he would ever hurt anyone in our family. Papa had never laid more than a loving hand on Mama, Eugene and me. Still, he seemed unpredictable, like the American Legion fellas who came home from the Great War and sat on bar stools at Irving's and drank way too much beer. It's not that they were dangerous. They wouldn't take a swing at you or anything, but you could see something lodged in their minds, and it sat right behind their eyes, whatever it was, because their stares could freeze you cold.

I walked over and picked up the Schnapps bottle, looking over its worn label. Eugene and Lou were scuffling on the porch again. I thought about bringing it inside, but I heard Mama walking out of the house, so I put it inside my pocket.

Mama didn't seem to mind that Eugene and Lou were always busting each other up. I looked at her, and she smiled at me, as if to say, *let them be*. How she could smile while everything around us fell apart, I will never know. But she did.

"Why don't you boys find something to do, hmm? Make me a better slingshot so you can start bagging squirrels this summer," she told us.

"Say, that's a good idea, Mama!" Eugene said with a grin. "I'll make a new slingshot and try it out on Lou here!" They laughed, and even I smiled a little bit. I noticed Mama glance at her palms.

"How are your hands, Mama?" I asked.

"They'll be fine, Frank. Are you boys done with the wagon?"

"Yes, ma'am," I told her. "We'll put it in the machine shed for you."

"Good," she said as we walked off. "I'll need it tomorrow."

You see, a year ago Mama came up with a way to help make ends meet. She didn't hire out for sewing, or knitting, or the things that other women did to pick up some extra money. She wasn't that boring. You wouldn't see her playing canasta with the Altar Society women on Thursday nights, either. She spent the time she didn't use for housekeeping to collect rusty barbed wire. If you think that sounds like a hard way to feed your family, then you aren't missing the mark by much. Every morning she woke while the world outside sat in the pitch black and started walking to nearby farms. Post by post, clip by clip, she dismantled the rusty fences, cut the wire, wound them into giant rolls, and put them in the wagon she pulled behind her. The leather gloves Papa gave her for Christmas didn't last very long, so her hands were always bloody at the end of the day. Still, a few pennies from Jarek, the Polish scrap metal man, was all the reassurance she needed to make her efforts seem worthwhile. A full wagon, the kind that

turned hills into mountains and made her grunt with effort, brought a smile to her face once it had been safely wheeled to Jarek's overgrown scrap garden.

Mama walked back into the house to do dishes, and Eugene asked what we should do. The day was still young. We must have had enough roughhousing for the day, because we just started drawing pictures in the dirt yard. I remember talking with my brother and cousin for quite some time.

Gert, who must have been hunting something in the tree grove by the house, walked across the yard to follow us, his ancient bones barely shuffling him along. Gert was a mix between a border collie and a black lab, if I remember right. He could have had a dozen other bloodlines in him, too. He had been named as a puppy when I was six. Papa brought the mutt home on a winter night in his jacket. He thought it was a female, and named it Gertrude after his sister who had died pretty young back in Wichita. Lou said it was a goddamn ridiculous name, and said his name should be Maggot. Now Maggot is a lousy name if you ask me, and when no one else started calling the dog that, Lou got fed up and gave up on the idea. When everyone found out Gertrude was a boy, we shortened it to Gert since it sounded like the male version, and it stuck. That first night Papa brought him home, on an Easter Monday, there was a terrible blizzard that stacked snow to the roof of our small farmhouse. Papa was younger then, and didn't mind so much when he had to feed pigs in the dark and the bitter cold. He brought little Gert with him, the poor pup, and taught him from the start how to be an ornery farm dog.

Gert wandered about the driveway ditch for a while searching for fresh pocket gopher holes while we talked. When he found a good mound he stuffed his nose in it, chewing through the dirt until he hit a rock or his nose got too big for the hole. He gave up eventually, and, deciding to go hungry like the rest

of us, collapsed in the ditch and watched us.

"They say fish were biting at Lost Lake last week," Lou told us. I might have been older than him, but Lou always knew what was going around. "Jerry Hoffstadter says he caught a big ol' perch."

We all agreed it would be nice to catch a big ol' perch. Then we talked about girls from my confirmation class.

"Tiffany Logan wants to have my children," Lou told us. We burst out laughing. We all agreed it would be nice to kiss Tiffany Logan right on the mouth. Things of that nature filled our conversation. Then Eugene, who was still drawing something in the dirt, said, "Frank, do you still want to be a farmer?"

He looked up at me from his picture. Now there was a kid who had brains. Out of the three of us, if one of us was going to go on to do better things than watch pigs die, it was Eugene. I wanted to tell him no. I was about to tell him to get the hell out of here as soon as he could when we heard a loud swear word from the machine shed.

It was Papa. We craned our necks to see his body lodged under the hood of a 1916 Model T. This was the first work Papa had done since the hog disaster, so I thought maybe it was a good sign. He had started to tear apart that Model T when it went belly up the spring before, but never finished. It was our family's only vehicle, and when he had Ernie Whitmeyer, the mechanic from town, come out and look at it, Ernie said the parts would cost more than \$30. Papa lost his temper and called Ernie an oily goon. He called him a few other names, too. Papa couldn't afford the parts, and if he could, he wouldn't have bothered paying \$30 to that Jewish prick. Papa's words, of course. I'm not even sure if Ernie was in fact Jewish.

At least it was something for Papa to do. He started tossing things aside and replacing them

without much deference to where they had been before. Eugene asked if we should go help, but I thought it would be better to leave him alone to his battle while he clanged and swore at the piece of junk. The engine would start, sputter, and die while Papa mashed his foot to the floor, making it good and hot underneath the hood. Finally, he was looking at the rear pistons when a hose blew and hot oil covered his neck, chin, and bottom left side of his face. Scalding hot oil.

To this day I don't know why Papa deserved the life he lived.

He tried to wipe it off with a rag, but his skin had been terribly burned. He stormed up to the house. Mama told him to go see Doc Wilder, but he told her he wasn't going to pay for it. *She had married his ugly mug in the first place, so how would a burnt mug change things?* he hollered, and he started walking down the driveway while the three of us looked on. The bar was never too far of a walk for Papa.

I wonder if Eugene blames me for not stopping him that day. He looked at me, the older brother, like I should have. Maybe I could have changed things for Papa. But how the hell can you expect that from your 14 year-old son?

I needed something, *anything*, to take their minds off being broke. Off of being poorly clothed, and fed, and everything in between. They needed something to make them smile again. That's when an idea came into my head.

While we had been unloading corn cobs, I had noticed the .22 magnum rifle sitting in the small entry room that led to the kitchen. It was Papa's gun. He used to shoot rabbits and squirrels with it, but he tried not to waste money on bullets anymore. The other night he had used it to shoot at an owl that was making a racket and keeping him up. Who's really to say whether he was being careless or trustworthy by leaving it on a chair where we could see it?

Papa wouldn't be happy if we used his gun, and I knew it, but after all that had happened the past few days, my mind was already made up. I put eight bullets in my pocket next to the Schnapps bottle and picked up the rifle. It's hard to explain how I felt, but I weighed the power in my hands, realizing how dangerous I had become. Lou snatched it right out of my hands and aimed it at me saying, "Hands up, ya German."

"Stop kiddin' around, Lou," I barked. Lou got fired up. He didn't like anyone taking anything out of his hands. In fact, he liked to be the first to try everything, and I normally let him to his ways, but once in a while I had to remind him who was older. I put a bullet into the gun and closed the bolt while Eugene and Lou watched me. They had a faint idea how to load it, but I could tell they were glad I had taken the initiative so they wouldn't have to make fools of themselves. I carried the gun in the position I had seen Papa carry it so many times, and we stepped onto the porch and toward the tree grove. I knew deep down that Eugene and Lou were proud I had decided to take Papa's gun.

Gert picked himself up from his position in the watery ditch and made an effort to follow us to the trees. We made talk like we were dough boys, walking through trenches and dead bodies. We shouted things like "A Hun's over there!" and "Shoot that German in the gut!" I wasn't careless with our ammunition though, and bided my time. I didn't want to waste a single shot. Lou grew impatient. Eugene watched me carefully, the gears turning in his head.

As we neared the end of the tree grove, our walk became slower, more purposeful, and we stopped talking altogether. If anything was there, it was going to bolt once we reached the beginning of the open field. Then it was time to react. I placed my finger more firmly on the trigger as my heart started

to jump up and down. We squinted under rocks and branches and melting snow piles. Just a few more steps, and I would be shooting, so I flipped the safety switch to fire.

Nothing left the grove. We were alone.

I was almost relieved that I didn't have to shoot and miss something in front of them. Lou swore and Eugene sighed. So much for a grand hunt. Lou wanted to carry the gun back to the house, but I gave it to Eugene. He needed to learn how to carry it, anyway.

We reached the end of the grove, and I thought about how sad it was that not even wild animals wanted to live on our farm. They had given up. I told myself that we hadn't.

The farm wasn't completely barren, though, because out of the corner of my eye, I saw a lone rabbit hobbling around by the machine shed. Without saying a word, I pointed, and we froze. It sifted through the snow while we watched. Gert had drifted off, or he would have chased it away. This was our lucky break.

We made ourselves as small as possible and walked toward the rabbit. He raised his ears, realizing there was imminent danger in the air. I could see its eyes grow wide as it observed us, poor stalkers though we were, going in for the kill. He eased a few steps in front of Papa's hay rake, and for a moment, I thought he was going to run. Eugene lifted the gun. I nodded at him. He looked down the sights. The prey froze. I froze. Eugene trembled.

I will never recall what happened to the rabbit. To this day, though, when I look at a hay rake or a square bale, all I can hear is a gunshot followed by a clang of metal. It makes me wince.

Eugene was on the ground before I knew the bullet had ricocheted. He let out a shout, but it wasn't very loud. He was as surprised as we were, and he frowned for a second, touched his face,

putting his fingers in the fresh blood that started to drain from his face. It wasn't a trickle. It was a deluge, flowing like a leak in a highly-pressurized pipe.

The blood pooled so quickly that I couldn't make out where the bullet had entered his face. He had dropped the gun. Lou had screamed. I dropped to my knees next to my brother, and my mind tripped over itself, filling itself with useless words that couldn't adequately explain the terror I felt.

I'm sorry. Let's go back. Let's go back. Let's retrace our steps and put the gun away and then this will never have happened. Jesus Christ, I think it went through his eye. Hold still, Eugene, you're going to be okay. It's not that bad. You're fine.

I took off my shirt and started to wipe the blood off his face. Lou's face had turned ashen. I handed the shirt to Lou and told him to take care of Eugene. I ran for the house.

My mother is a pretty woman. She really is. I think I forgot to tell you that. When I tripped into the kitchen she turned to look at me, and I wish I could have had a picture of that moment before she realized something terrible had happened. It would have been a good picture. In that moment, as blood dripped down my arms and started to dry into the crusty remains of Eugene's life, I just wanted to sit at the table and watch her dry the dishes. That's all I wanted.

But Mama knew right away, and she didn't waste a single second. She ran behind me in her bare feet, out the door, through the muddy yard, to Eugene's body where he fell. The shirt I had given Lou was soaked through. Mama tore off her apron and started to wipe his face. She turned to me and asked me to do the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.

"Run and fetch Doc Wilder," she told me.

Run? Leave my brother? I didn't know if my legs could do it.

But I obeyed. I turned and ran as fast as I could. I had obeyed Mama all my life. I had never told her no. Not once.

I didn't even slow down when I threw up. What if something happened while I was gone? Gert looked up from his spot on a moldy hay pile as I made my way to the end of the driveway.

Would Papa be upset that we wasted a bullet? We promised to play catch with the Lowen boys tomorrow, and they would be awfully mad when they found out Eugene couldn't play. These were the insane thoughts that sifted through my mind. They were the closest thing to normal I could cling to.

I ran five miles to get to Doc Wilder and never slowed down to get there. We rode in his car back to the farm. When he asked me what happened, I told him, "Eugene got shot." I stayed quiet the rest of the ride.

It seems like the trails of dust that vehicles stirred up in our driveway always brought bad news. The tax man. The elevator man. The mortgage man. And now Doc Wilder. And me. That's why to this day, when I come to that farm, I park by the mailbox and walk down the driveway.

When we got to Eugene, our neighbor Mrs. Lowen was there with Mama. They were still wiping the blood away, Lou was crying, and Eugene was shaking. Doc Wilder examined the entry wound. There was no exit. The bullet had entered beneath his left eye and headed for his brain. There was no telling for Doc Wilder how far the bullet went. He took a syringe from his black bag and injected something in my brother's neck.

He didn't live much longer. He died right there, in the mud. In Mama's arms.

You know, I don't really feel like I have to tell

you Mama's last words to Eugene. Just because I've told you this much, don't feel like I owe you that. You'll never know what a kid he was, what a kind and gentle guy my brother was, so I'm not sure what good it would do you.

But you know what, I'm not going to end up on a bar stool, with these words stirring behind my eyes like a dream that never ends. That's not who Eugene would have wanted me to be. So here is what she said. The first thing she did was shhh him like a baby crying in church.

"Shhh, baby, it's alright."

Eugene kept saying he was sorry. That killed me inside.

"Don't be sorry, baby. I'm right here."

He didn't ask if he was going to be alright, or if he was going to die, or any of that. He just kept saying he was sorry, because he was her son, and her loved her, and he knew how she felt.

"I'm sorry, Mama," he said through chattering teeth.

"Don't be sorry. These are my hands, and they're going to hold you tight. Feel them? Right here against your head?"

She rocked him gently in the mud.

"You are my son, Eugene, and I'll love you forever. No matter what you do, I will love you."

If he hadn't lost his sight yet, he was starting to. His face became all confused. Maybe Mama had disappeared out of his left eye, or both eyes. But he could still feel her, I hope.

"That house over there, Eugene. That's where you were born. I washed you in the kitchen sink. And that yard, that's where I watched you play. That barn. That's where I watched you work. And that room--that room upstairs, that's where I taught you--you--your prayers." She had been fairly calm until then, but at that point she broke down and cried, pulling her son closer to her. Eugene and I had

spent many nights fighting in that upper bedroom, stopping only to start our prayers. A lot of rosaries went unfinished as we drifted off to sleep, the fighting having exhausted our young bodies. Mama told us not to worry, though. Guardian angels finish your rosary for you.

"Do you remember your prayers, Eugene?" she asked. He nodded and whimpered. Mama thought about Eugene's soul.

"Hail Mary," she began. She said it a few more times. "Hail Mary...Hail Mary..." but she couldn't make it all the way through. Eugene continued to whimper, helpless, as his own mother watched him bleed out. I knelt down and touched his blood-soaked shirt.

My brother Eugene died right there.

Right before he did, Mama told him, "You're going to be just fine, baby."

Maybe you were expecting her to blame God for taking her son, or to tell him not to leave her. That's not what happened. She comforted him until he took his last breath, because that's what mothers do for their sons.

Just like the stalks of wheat, and the the Model T, and Bernadette, my brother slipped away from us when we needed him most.

I think about the hard times sometimes. I think about Eugene all the time. That day haunts me in my sleep, and while I'm awake, which is worse. Still, I'm glad he made it out of the Depression before I did.

In my mind, there is a place where I go, and Eugene is there, overalls and all, whispering in my ear last words. I feel the urge to cry a little, but it helps me.

It reminds me not to stare at the empty fields of my life, searching for an answer to the questions that cannot be answered.



Old Man
Kayla Collins
Graphite Drawing



Lake Whispering
Mary Berg
Photograph

The Seasons I Spent Digging

Casey Snyder

My pen is a tool wielded like my shovel.
Each carve steadily as I grapple with direction.
Between a Buckeye and Pear I desire, but I am still.
Thunder follows lightning. Impulse outpaces discipline.
Afternoon sunshine explores an old stand's branches.
Unease is the shadows and the glare is lost on me.
The hum of every future is unheard; tools are left behind.
Paper is buried in dust as waves of heat push me away.
My vision tunnels and all is consumed by blue-lit fog.
Nothing is like me now and nothing here will grow.
Time billows away, but my memory slips backward.
Hours, days disappeared, no words left to share.
Light-eyed and spent, my body is too big on Earth.
I crawl half-alive to a window framing an Aspen.
Naked and aimless, I stand to ask it, "Where was I?"

In the hard digging is a smile, but a sense of urgency.
My fire licks in the background. I am not extinguished.
Sunshine splays the Yellowwood as I right myself to see it.
There are rocks to heave and trees to grow and reality to levy.
Each year is a ring of my age. Each stacked rock was my day.
Memory should wear like stone, not sink like clouds.
These tools will not become forgotten paths today.
I write this story and plant another tree before I go.
Now the clear sky stands on stilts and one-day cathedrals.
This life is an annual. Your bloom fades, blades rust, ink dries.
What is left is perennial love or the soft fade of mist forgotten.

O! For the Hour of My Youth

Sawyer Caldwell

O! For the hour of my youth,
a-tumbling through the whispering willow breaks,
boisterous, barbaric, uncouth.

O! For idle fancy and whispered sweet nothings,
perceived in rose-veiled espial,
love, born on some evanescent stirring of spring.

O! For summers undying,
the saccharine balm of unclad bliss,
light of step, unencumbered.

Hark! I hear the skulking tread of the long dark,
portent of impending soul death,
of the icy claw of antiquity.

Neural Blues

Shawn Minor

My spinal cord:
a tangled network,
messages sent
but not received.

Afferent river's flowing synapses:
axon's action potential
detached from a charitable stream.

My legs:
winter's current creeping
beneath an icy surface,
life ceases.

My toes:
false hope flexures,
motor neurons flicker,
fish float belly up.

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See You Then

Haley Wilson

grief noun \ 'grēf\ : keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret; a cause or occasion of keen distress or sorrow. See also: roller skates, shattered glass, and a missing bottle of pills.

Before I paced a pharmacy with frantic feet, before I listened to a busybody brat describe moment by moment of a death she'd heard about, before my grandmother casually mentioned "Victoria's mother asked about you today," before I sang a song in unison with numb lips, before I drove daily past a road marker with pink memorial carnations, I rode a grubby bus with a girl who'd never turn seven years old. To me, she would forever remain the girl with a broken snow-globe. She had mahogany-colored hair, a shy smile, deep dimples, and brown eyes. Afterward, her class kept a photo of Victoria, offering a left-hand profile of her in a green dress. It traversed the classrooms of the school in its mahogany frame year after year, following the class she should have been with as they grew older. *How could one ever move on*, I wondered. Maybe that was the point. She was one year younger than me, but in a small school such hierarchy didn't matter. What did was the bus route you were on. Victoria lived just a few miles away, and regaled me with harrowing tales of her family's sheep farm on our daily route.

"And in the winter we always go snowmobiling," she would announce with relish. Scooting along on a slick path with an exposed car on skis seemed

horrendous to me. I'd much rather sip hot chocolate and designate names for my hundreds of beanie babies, thank you.

1. Shock and Disbelief

Second grade is tiring. Reading the tale of the ugly duckling feels like slogging through tomes, and lunch (chicken nuggets, mashed potatoes, and watery corn) seems decades ago. Two bus routes belong to our school, one led by a youthful driver with rowdy kids sticking gum under seats and holding their heads out the dusty windows to feel the wind in their teeth. An old man who wears gray suspenders every day claims the other route, clutching an intercom in one wrinkled hand to bark that, "I can *see* you in the rearview *mirror!*" He'd also knocked over a record number of mailboxes. But mostly our route is sleepy and subdued. With the scent of musty leather in my nose and my eyelids weighing down like cement, I press my cheek against the cool glass of the window and slip into sleep. Dreams of second-grade concerns jolt away as the bus thunders over a mighty bump near Johnson's corner - the gravel road always expanded this time of year like a winter goose-bump on the earth. I lurch skyward and feel my stomach somersault. The bump of the bus is nothing new, but the cry of shattering glass in the seat to my left echoes.

I peer across the aisle, potholed with candy wrappers and discarded gum. Victoria sits with a soaked lap and stunned face. The snow globe her grandparents brought back for her from vacation lay in a million fragments, the carnage of tiny city buildings trailing damp streaks of water glittering across the olive-green seat. Victoria's hands seep red, and I am fastened to my seat. I do not get up to tell the driver of the accident. I do not move. Blood frightens me, and Mom always tells me glass is dangerous. I stay in my seat. A better friend might bridge the gap between seats, perch in the messy bench

and help to pluck the snowflakes from her frozen fingers. Instead, I watch the driver scrounge up a pristine first-aid kit and tentatively wipe away at the blood on Victoria's hands as all of the other kids stare around the edges of her seat in silence. She never speaks a word.

Despite my failure to clean up the remnants of the minute village, Victoria and I are bus buddies through and through. She visits my house as I demonstrate exactly the right way to balance atop the kitchen table and watch my grandma's hands twirl a ceramic bowl of ingredients into a pan of cookies. I remember the chill breeze of a fall day. The sound as husks of leaves hiss across my backyard as we stand beneath the biggest oak tree in the yard and take turns swaying on a solitary blue swing, one chattering away as the other relies on tiptoes to nudge the swing into motion and take to the sky, shoes painting the clouds into shapes of our choosing.

"You always have the best snacks," I compliment Victoria as she pulls several tupperwares of cheddar Goldfish out of her backpack. We now bear orange mustaches and fingers, caught cheese-handed if any others spy our goods and beg for food. I lick the powder from my fingers with ease--this is the life.

"Guess what?" I prompt. Before Victoria can answer, I dive hands first into my *Bug's Life* backpack and unearth two foil rectangles with neon green swirls.

"Fruit Roll-Ups!" Victoria whispers in excitement. "Yes." The cheesy sea creatures forgotten, we tear into our packages and reveal bundles of misshapen goo.

"Did you see that commercial where the fruit rollups make tattoos on your tongue?" I ask. "I could

have an alien. On my *tongue*," I say.

"That'd be so cool," Victoria says. "Hey, what if we take turns bringing snacks?" she says. "Every day we would have a treat after school."

"Genius! Today's Friday so...do you want to bring treats on Monday?" My brother will have eaten all the good food at home by now, the big meanie.

"Sure," Victoria agrees. Just then, the gears of the bus screech to a halt next to Victoria's mailbox. "See you then," she promises and races away to the front of the bus.

"See you then!" I echo.

I sit in front of a glowing Macbook and type in her name. Before I can click "search" I exit the Internet window. I never saw or visited her grave. Why look now? I meander away, scrub up some dishes, clear out space on the DVR, sort through the avalanche inhabiting my closet, throw out old coupons. Hours later, I'm at the computer once more. Her name, round two. This time, I manage to access the first link. A photo swims before my eyes of a wide headstone. A large heart occupies the center, and lines of engraved text coat the surface of the marble. I squint, fidget my contact lenses around my pupils, zoom in on the screen, but I cannot make out a word other than her name. Why can't I look for her without uncertainty ruminating in my stomach? We'd been friends, hadn't we? On the top right-hand corner, a pair of white roller skates tilts to the side, the laces askew. My eyes widen in shock, fingers sinking from the keyboard onto my lap. Numbness washes over me, and I close the laptop. I know exactly what those skates looked like.

2. Denial

Church is endless. We sing and sing and chant and read and stand and sit and all I want to do is lay down across the blue scratchy cushions that traverse the pews. I pick up a crinkled brown hymnal and admire the gold, old-fashioned handwriting. It looks like the front page of a fairy tale: Haley and the Endless Sermon, perhaps. I lay with my back on the slippery pew and peer at the rafters above my head, looking like an inverted boat. Waiting until Mom and Dad are occupied with looking at the brochure coated in prayers, I seize my moment and snatch the hymnal. I ignore the bars of music and floating lyrics and begin to whisper a grand tale of ogres and princesses, knights and swordfights. My parents don't usually allow this misbehavior. I relish it. Before I know it, the hour is up and I haven't even finished describing the princess's perfect blond hair.

"Mo-om," I protest as we are ushered out of the nave, "I don't want to go to Sunday school."

"Haley-" Mom begins to lecture, but is interrupted.

"Hey, Haley!" my friend Kevin waves me to the front of the church by the altar. "Come here, quick!"

"See you at home!" I blurt at my mother, all defiance forgotten.

I jog to the front rows of seats where we do our singing and the teacher tells us not to yell in the house of God. Shimming into the middle of a pew, I situate myself between my two best friends, Kevin and Shelby. Before I can greet Shelby, Kevin blurts stupid boy things. I'm mad at him for running over my stuffed animal cat Cheeser with his Hot Wheels car last week; he could have hurt her.

"Guess what," he says in a quick breath. "Victoria got into a snowmobile accident and died." The words spill out rapid-fire like air from a popped balloon.

This stupid boy has gone too far. "Nice joke, Kevin," I say. "I'm going to tell the teacher you said that. We're in *church!*" I reprimand.

"It's true," he insists.

"My dad even told me," Shelby confirms.

Suddenly there's a hundred faces looming before me, each classmate sharing the news, all wanting a piece of the headline. This can't be true. It's not true. Victoria and I ride the bus together.

I tear off down the main aisle of the church where my mother waits by the front door. She sets down her purse and pulls me into her arms murmuring, "I know, I know." I cry into her nice church clothes and stumble away from the crowd in a tunnel of tears.

3. Growing awareness

Age 20. I sigh in content as the monotony of work washes over me. The pharmacy, once bustling and flooded with impatient customers, is now a blissful sea of silence. I stand at a counter and file scripts: 404, 405, 406... I glance up at the dusty, plain clock, its hands pointing just after six. Two hours to go. The scrape of pills being slid and counted, then whisked into waiting orange bottles, is the soundtrack of my evening. I hear the scuff of shoes and put aside my task to peer at the front counter. And there she is. Victoria's mother stands before me like a mirage: The Ghost of Friendships Past. My mind flies into overdrive, and I match the woman before me with a memory of a different one standing near a blue pickup truck in my parents' driveway and chatting with my mother as Victoria and I dart across the lawn, kicking up brittle leaves and leaping onto the swings. The woman's eyes crinkle at the sides now, her dark hair now gray on the fringes.

She interrupts my frazzled thoughts, "Hello," she smiles. "I have a prescription for Marina Swendor."

I sidle up to the counter and stammer, "Yes,

for Swendor, s-sure," and stride over to the racks. 110 people die each year from snowmobiling, and her daughter was one of them. The story goes Victoria raced across the road and was struck by an oncoming pickup. Does Marina know me? My nametag bears no surname. Does she recognize me? I'm not the kid from the swings anymore.

My fingers fly over the bags of medications as I hide my face toward the wall, sifting through the alphabet with no luck. It should be here. It's supposed to be right here. For good measure, I peruse the entire "S" section. Nothing.

I straighten up and call toward Marina. "I'm not seeing it. I can check again," my voice wheedles. "Hold on a sec," I request and nearly jog toward the computers. Everywhere I turned, she was there. I stand next to the technician and plead my case. "It should be over there," he insists, fingers tap-dancing over the keyboards.

I power over to Marina, pulse thundering in my veins. "He's looking for it right now," I say. "We're working on it," I repeat. "It'll be just a minute," I assure her, wishing she might reassure me.

"Sure," she answers. "That's just fine, no hurry. I just need to take it by tonight."

Do you know we had a plan? I want to ask. Did she mention me? She promised to see me then and crossed a road the next day without ever reaching the opposite side

"Of course, yeah, I understand, yeah, let me see what I can do," I jabber and return to the computers.

Ten minutes later, the prescription is still missing. I have searched the rack at least a dozen times. "She just really needs it by tonight," I insist to the technician for the third time. He raises his eyebrows in confusion as if to say, *what's your problem?*

I can't tell if she remembers me! I want to scream in response. *That's Victoria's mom over there!*

Within the half hour, we finally solve Marina's dilemma. As the pharmacist finishes up the order, I work to refill every counter's stock of pill bottles as if my life depends on it. Absorbed, I don't realize the order's complete until I see another clerk ring Marina up and wish her a good night. I watch her exit the store and feel disappointment settle in my stomach without knowing why. And just when I think I'm over it, just when I think the past remains in place, the loss creeps up on me all over again.

I own one photo of Valerie and I. Snapped at a candid moment, we stand near the open fridge in my kitchen. The lighting is dim, the photo as uncertain of the memory as I am. I stand closest to the pool of light, my hip cocked at a saucy angle as I stare with exaggerated annoyance at the photographer, most likely my mother. Valerie wears a green jumpsuit and smiles at me, her face in the shadows as I block out the light. Perhaps it wasn't the most Kodak of moments, but it's us.

4. Acceptance

Age 7. I sit on the same old, dingy school bus, full to the brim of chattering kids en route for our annual, end-of-the-year rollerskating party. The principal stands at the front near the steering wheel and tells us to quiet down. She straightens her blue jumper, her hair a cascade of gray frizz. She suggests we sing a song for Victoria. "How about 'You are My Sunshine?'" We substitute "Vic" for "dear" and I like the song, but it doesn't make sense to me. The day is gloomy, our sunshine taken away months ago. The teachers mill around the aisles, passing out framed photographs of Victoria. I grip mine rigidly, lest we hit a bump and the glass shatters like the snow globe.

We arrive at the rink, all strobe lights and shadows and Britney Spears' latest hits. We crunch snow cones, totter on rollerblades unearthed from musty storage closets, and hug the walls in tight circles as the green lights blind our path. Rowdy boys vault across the slick floor, plummeting to the ground to anchor a leg out to a targeted girl of their choice and knocking her down in a mess of limbs before cackling away. I cling to the carpeted wall, shuffling my feet back and forth simultaneously going nowhere. From my post on the circular path, I see a cluster of the braver children darting in the center of the rink like a swarm of mosquitoes. Among all the small figures, I spy the silhouette of a tall man with dark hair. He skates beautifully, switching from one foot to the other, gliding backwards like a bird on the breeze. He soars with eyes closed, letting the music sink into his skin. Victoria's father coasts through the clouds of children tracing figure eights across the arena. Slowly, I unlatch my fingers from the wall, stumble my way into the crowd, and begin to trace a path with no hands.

Age 20. I flit around the laundry room of my parents' home, tossing clothing into colored piles. The washing machine hums a cheery tune, letting me know the first load of reds is soaked and ready for stage two. As I heave a bundle of whites into the machine, I hear my mother laugh behind me in the kitchen.

"Did Dad show you what he found?" she asks.

"Huh?" I mutter, searching in vain for the bottle of detergent.

Mom rounds the corner into the small room smelling strongly of an artificial cotton breeze as I uncap the bottle of detergent. She passes me a small,

palm-sized notebook with a rubber front cover.

"Dad found this in a drawer last week," she explains. "It's pretty funny."

I wander through the house and curl up in a paisley armchair, nose now buried in the neon orange relic. The first entry is a list of my 7-year-old self's favorite musicians, among them Britney Spears, N'Sync, and the Backstreet Boys. I roll my eyes.

The following pages are a series of pitiful sketches: a horse whose hooves resemble wheels, a pig that resembles a dog. Not exactly my forte, even as a child. I flip through the pages to the back cover, the whisper of air fanning my hair into a brief whirl.

Wherever this book has hidden for 13 years was clearly home to hot coffee and clumsy hands. The final pages cling together in a brown clump, sticky with age. Thankfully, the damaged pages are blank. I pry apart the very last page of the tiny notebook—it would be just like me to write "THE END" dramatically, like in a book. Instead, I see a pencil sketching of a grave. A grassy hill hosts crude, spiked flowers and a round headstone in the shape of a ghost. A thick, black cross is carved into the middle of the page next to the headstone. My awkward lettering etched at the top of the page in boxy scrawl, "To Victoria. I miss you a lot."

Five words encompassing a confused time. What else was there to say? She'd gone from a frequent forerunner in my mind to a mystery I wondered about every so often. Sometimes while thinking of her, I'd run full force into the age-old question: Would we have remained friends? I can't answer it. Even with her parents flitting through my memories and making brief cameos when I least expect it, there's no grand epiphany on what the future might have brought if she'd looked both ways, if the driver of the car had been more cautious, if the stars had

been aligned in just the right way, if and if and if. She might have been at college with me. We might have grown up and drifted apart. But she stays with me in a million little ways that never remain gone. Before the pharmacy, before the memorial bench in her

name, before an essay full of relics, before a three-sentence write-up on the local news webpage, before the aisle seat across from me sat empty on a Monday morning, she promised to See Me Then.



Evening Droplets

Teresa Hebert

Photograph

Burdens

Destiny Jorenby

You create a twisted sunset
under which your plot thickens.
Your plot – to watch me as I heave
a large weight onto my shoulders.
Your victory, your crime, or your impossibility?

No one in the world as we know it
knows anything about the struggle of
the lost, hopeful soldier. The soldier fails to relax
as he plods around to no end.
His thoughts stop him from sleeping,
and his many dreams keep him spotted with
insanity. He runs in terror to a great rock;
he takes the rock and continues to run.

And you, you have the nerve to watch.



Untitled

Eli Welu

Ink, charcoal, and graphite

Sand

Hannah Koeller

You brought me sand from
Santiago, and then you
disappeared. Once I held
you close to me, a seashell
in my hands. If you make me let
go now, we'll shatter everywhere.

With hope and sand, we built
our castle tall. "Gravity," autumn
nights in Larson Park, and double
fudge brownie ice cream. You put
your arms around me, and your
warmth feels like the sun.

Hand in hand under the stars,
the tide of our silence ebbed. My
seashell drifted with the waves,
but caught up in the sand. I reach
with wrinkled hands to pull
you back to shore.

The waves crashed down, washed
our castles away. I got sucked underwater,
you made it to the shore. Choking for
breath, I broke the surface to find my
seashell lost. The sand sticks to
my skin, the memories I can't shake.

Reprinted from the 2014 edition of Pasque Petals

Control Freak

Parker Senska

You gave birth to me; you own me. I didn't ask to be born. – my friend Allen

Your black, squish-faced bulldog,
I sit here, quivering,
the squinty eyes of the judges
on me; your words
like frostbite's burn:

"I expect a perfect score from you."

The sharp whistle blows
and I nearly fall
flat on my face
as I stumble forward.
Running for the first hoop,
I calculate the angle
to jump. Leaping
off the ground, I realize
my mistake:
my stubby legs. They knock
the edge of the hoop.
Landing, I feel your eyes pierce
the back of my head like bullets.
I scramble, jumping
through high hoops, zigzagging
between steel-cold poles, crawling
through cramped tunnels.

Dismounting the shaky seesaw, I bound
up on the platform these humans
have marked the finish line.
My searing lungs beg
for air. My trembling
legs tell me to fall
down and sleep right there, but
I know not to show my
imperfections
in front of them.
In front of you.
I force my body to remain
silent; the judges give us
29.9 out of 30.
You smile,
but I see
your clenched teeth. Your
hands wrap firmly around me
as you pick me up. I tense,
but know not to struggle.
Reaching my cage, you toss me
in like a broken
wrench into the trash.



Morning Goodbyes

Haley Bradshaw

Photograph

Hospice

Spenser Kavanaugh

The white-washed halls of this place, gleaming silvered metal shining from every wall, fixture, and cart rolling by. The huge, off-white with dirt linen carts wheeled hurriedly from place to place, each stocked with either a fresh ton of laundered sheets, pillows, and pillow cases or the soiled bolts of cloth coming from rooms of dead and dying people.

The smell, too. I can't stand it, everything too acrid, too antibacterial, the whole odor floating about in a huge cloud like the perpetual paranoia of one procedural problem, one issue that will bring everything crashing down, someone forgetting to wash his hands after every sneeze and cough, someone neglecting to bathe herself in sanitizer every time she rounds a corner.

And then there's the age.

Everyone smells like it and it won't go away. You can't wash it or burn it or beat it out of your clothes. It never leaves, that cloying, faintly sweet scent of death and decaying flesh, of unraveling DNA and equally unraveling wit, of people's tears and their tiredness of hearing prognosis after ever decreasing prognosis. The scent of skin on beds covered in cheap linens, of powdery people chaffing against powdery, thin dressing gowns and their own inability to move. Stagnation enters with each new patient and leaves only when they do, accompanying them and their papery skin to their ultimate place of not moving.

And the beeping. The constant pinging and beeping and bleeping and blurping of an endless array of machinery, screaming constantly to ears deafened by business and lack of sleep, begging for attention. They do not receive it. Attention comes only to those who break the cadence, those whose

beeping dips, slows, and halts, translates instead into a perpetual blaring over otherwise percussive airwaves.

I think I hate the tubes most of all, though, thin, clear plastic ones and their thicker cousins, each leading out of something and into something else. Patient to dialysis bag. Colostomy incision to colon. Mouth to food processor. Lungs to external oxygen supply, occasionally with a detour directly through a person's trachea as though the plastic snake couldn't have the decency to wait and take a few more minutes to enter through a less damaging area.

They're what I remember the most. They're what I see when I close my eyes at night, when I see dark haired and slightly overweight women. The tubes. Protruding from the mouth and throat like a bouquet of poorly fabricated face carnations, hastily constructed and free of any sort of convincing coloration. They color occasionally of course, blood sometimes needing to be drawn, clearish yellow liquids needing to be pumped in, pureed food, green and orange and entirely liquid, sometime needing to be funneled. But for the most part they, in their astounding number and varieties of thickness, remain clear and empty.

And that's how I remember her. That's what I think of when I think of her. I don't see her holding me when I was learning to ride a cheap red bicycle, finally no training wheels. I don't hear her saying that it's ok if I don't like peas in my pasta and that we can just not make them next time. I don't feel her soft, slightly wrinkled hand as she rubs my back and I vomit into a large blue mixing bowl. I just see tubes and chalky skin and closed eyes and a shitty off-white dressing gown with its half inch blue polka dots, doubtlessly worn by countless others like her and doomed to be dawned by many, many more who will follow.

Robot Girl

Alex Morlan

An empty box lies on the ground, a fresh emotional processor.
The robot girl powers on for the first time with new installations.
Start>Files>New Folders>Love>Open>Install.

The little robot girl with hearts in her display looks up, her infrared eyes scan the room.
A man stands in front of her watching patiently. She scans him.
[Eyes: Wide; Mouth: Smiling; Heart rate: Accelerated.]
Her auxiliary microphones detect no noise.

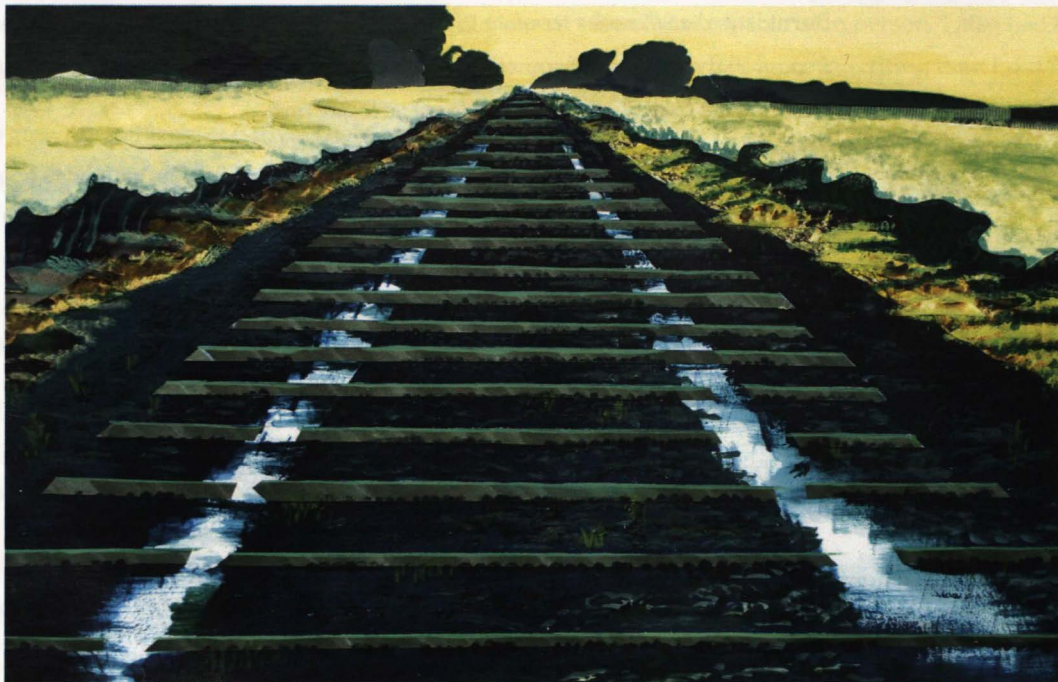
The little robot girl walks; for the first time, her hydraulic legs shake.
Her stomach turns with butterflies; bugs in her code.
She stops in front of the man; he speaks to her.

The little robot girl computes. Her hard drive whirs and stops.
A vocoded "I love you" rings through the air.
She hugs him tight. Her CPU fan turns on to compensate for the warmth.

On the Peaceful Horizons

Natalie Parks

Acrylic and collage



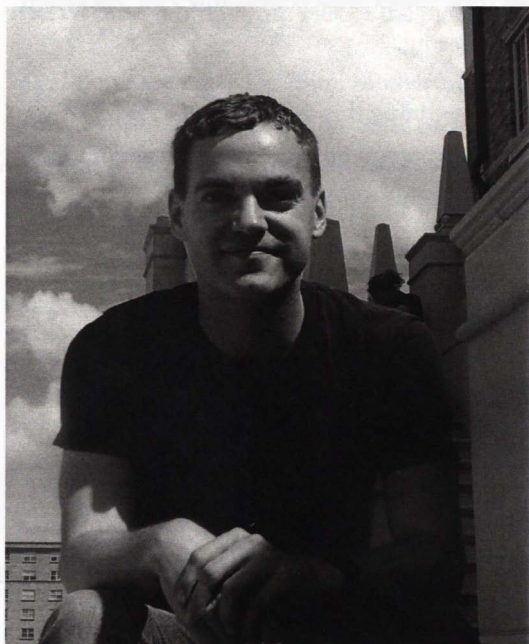
Chronology

Sarah Ruiz

Cautivante; the moment I first saw you
Hypnotized; *fué cómo me dejaste*
Imposible; for me to allure you
Random; *los momentos en que me hablaste*
Desperdiciados; the months I spent pretending to ignore you
Mutual; *se convirtió la atracción*
Fácil; the interaction
Intense; *era la atmósfera que nos rodeaba*
Inesperado; the simple and delicate kiss goodbye
Sinful; *fuleron tus acciones*
Incontrolable; the chemistry between us
Fierce; *las miradas que gritaban lo que existía en el interior*
Fuego; with what we were playing
Burnt; *era cómo íbamos a terminar*
Imposible; the chances of something happening between us
Content; *me sentí al saber que no solo era yo la que cayó*
Satisfecha; the story between you and me.

Great Plains Writers' Conference

2015 Emerging Writer Award - Michael Palmer



Michael Palmer has been named the recipient of the Emerging Writer Award for the 2015 Great Plains Writers' Conference. The Great Plains Writers' Conference, which was founded in 1976 at SDSU, initiated its Emerging Writer Prize in 2013 to support and showcase up-and-coming literary talent in the Upper Great Plains region.

Allison Risseeuw, an English undergraduate student, had the opportunity to interview Palmer about his work and the methods behind his writing.

AR: I'm having trouble finding background information about you. So, to start off, could you give me some information on yourself? Where did you grow up? Where did you attend school?

MP: I grew up in Pleasant Grove, Utah, and attended school as an undergraduate at Utah Valley State College (now Utah Valley University). I got my MFA at the University of Utah before leaving the state and moving to the Texas panhandle (Lubbock), where I currently live.

AR: How did you get started writing? Did you know as a child that you loved to write, or did you develop that passion in college or even after that?

MP: I don't think I really wrote much as a child, though I loved to read. But as a teenager, I loved

to write emails. I still do. I wanted to amuse my friends, and tell them stories with more vividness than I was capable of in person. I also had the courage to talk more in writing than I did in person. Back then, I thought this would be the extent of my writing career—all the same, I wanted to get really good at it. I especially loved trying to think of what would make a specific person laugh. And sometimes when writing I still envision that my audience is one specific friend, just to get words flowing—even if I have to cut some of the inside information later, this is helpful to get moving.

AR: What experiences have helped shape you as a writer?

MP: I feel that I'm very much formed by the place in which I reside; whether that place was the valley

below the Wasatch Mountains, where I grew up, or the wide open plains, where I currently live. Landscape is always at the forefront of my work. Other than place, reading has shaped me as a writer more than anything else. While I've had many wonderful teachers over the years, nothing has taught me how to put a sentence/paragraph/essay together better than reading, as much as I can, from all kinds of sources.

AR: Were you ever published in your college literary journal?

MP: I was! My first publication ever was in the undergraduate journal at Utah Valley University called *Touchstones*. It meant a lot to me to have it published; later I got to work on the same magazine as an editor, work that I loved then and still love to this day. I am a huge advocate of undergraduate literary journals, and I am absolutely thrilled to be appearing in *Oakwood*.

AR: What was your first publication? How did that publication push and inspire you to continue writing and submitting your work?

MP: As I mentioned, my first publication appeared in *Touchstones*. Aside from the fact that it did really encourage me, the less said about it, the better. My first publication outside of my school's literary journal appeared in a journal called *Temenos*, and it didn't come before I'd been rejected from all kinds of places. Writers talk about having a thick skin, and I think this is important, but for me, rejection still hurts my feelings on a personal level. I know it shouldn't, but it does. Partially for that reason, publications always inspire me and make me feel validated—more than they should. Just to clarify, I am not advocating this perspective for anyone—writers need to find a way to believe in their work without being so susceptible to the whims of publication—but unfortunately, this is how I still

often feel, personally. It's all the more rewarding when a piece that's somewhat unconventional formally is picked up. I think that workshops are wonderful, but occasionally I think they work to tidy up and polish work so that it's clean and without flaw, rather than something a bit messy but also more daring.

AR: You're winning this award for "Glossary of West Texas"; can you go more in depth about the inspiration for this work?

MP: I moved to Lubbock, and I was having a hard time shaping my impressions about the place. I was basically just writing them down in a list, sometimes with a lot of underlining, capitalization, and/or exclamation points. Lubbock is a strange place: all sky, wind, and dirt; six hours from any other major city; we have haboobs in the spring. I moved from a mountainous place and had to adjust to the plains; at first it felt like I was living in the middle of the ocean with nowhere to go. I've lived here for five years now, and I really love it. But at the time, I was just trying to make sure of a place that felt so strange and alienating.

AR: Why did you choose the unique format that you did for the piece?

MP: The form came out of the above dilemma of having these impressions, but not much of a conventional chronological narrative with which to shape them—and certainly no resolution. I wanted a form that conveyed bursts, impressions, and glosses, because I felt that better mirrored how I was experiencing the world.

AR: The piece itself is ten pages long. How long did the writing process take?

MP: That's a good question . . . it started with miscellaneous notes, as my writing often does, and I started writing those the day I moved to Lubbock,

in August 2010. I finished the piece last March, so it took nearly four years altogether. However, once I really started trying to find a shape for some of those impressions, it probably took about two years from that point.

AR: What is your favorite part of the piece?

MP: I think the entry for “Sun, Motherfucking” is my favorite entry. I like it partially because I was told in workshop that “motherfucking” was too abrasive a characterization and I should use a different word, and partially because driving west when the sun goes down here is really blinding, like Saul of Tarsus blinding, except with no revelation afterward but perhaps that you are lucky to still be alive. I have excellent vision, and can’t even tell what color the stoplights are sometimes when the sun is bright enough; I have no idea how people continue to drive with that much sun. I’ll often just pull over and wait for the sun to set.

AR: What draws you to writing creative non-fiction instead of, let’s say, poetry?

MP: That’s an interesting question—I’ve been asked why I prefer nonfiction to fiction, but not necessarily poetry. I love poetry; I take a lot of pleasure in reading it, but I guess the simple answer is I never learned to shape my thoughts, feelings and experiences through stanzas. For me, reading poetry is still mostly about pleasure (and occasionally stealing an image); I haven’t delved into the craft in the same way I have with nonfiction. Why that is, I don’t know. As for why nonfiction, I like it because I don’t feel terribly confident that I can know how someone else sees the world, but I like to see other nonfiction writers grappling with and thinking about being alive, and contributing to that conversation.

AR: What does winning the Great Plains Emerging Writer Prize mean to you?

MP: It means a lot to me, sincerely. I’ve really fallen in love with the Great Plains region, after initially being so terrified of it that I thought I was going to lock myself in my house and drink myself to death. I met my fiancée here, and I’ve had some experiences looking at the sky that are as spiritual as a heathen like me is capable of having. It also means a lot because I know the judges understand the region. I especially appreciate that they gave me a shot because I know the Texas panhandle isn’t included in every map of the Great Plains. I think it should be—the landscape up here has way more in common with South Dakota than it does Houston—but I also understand that many Texans see themselves as Texans first, Texans second, Texans forever. Of course, as a transplant to Texas, I don’t so much share that viewpoint, and consider myself a very small part of the Great Plains. I love the region; it’s transformed the way I think about place. So, I’m really, really excited about the prize.

AR: Do you work another job besides writing? If so, how do you balance work and writing?

MP: I am currently the managing editor of Iron Horse Literary Review, and I think editing is a very complementary position for a writer—a lot of the job is just reading, or asking questions to other writers, as you’re doing so wonderfully here. Editing gives you a chance to see what other people are attempting, and reveals to you on a daily basis just how competent most of your peers are—when we publish something I really love, that is not only an incredible feeling, it also inspires me to step up my game, and to try new things.

AR: What is some advice that you would give to young writers starting out writing?

MP: For me, it’s really important to remember to enjoy it, and to read a lot. When I get stressed about writing, sometimes I forget to do both of those

things; I feel behind in the number of publications I have, or the progress of my book, and feel that I only have time for stress-induced writing here and there. Writing is work, and I don't mean to say that it should be leisurely—but for me, at its best, it's always been fun as well as urgent. It goes back to writing emails to my friends—the desire to use my mind to communicate the way thought and experience feels in a way I believe someone else will appreciate.

And as for reading: during times of stress, occasionally I've told myself that I don't really

have time for it. But I have always regretted this misguided mismanagement of priorities. There's always time, and I always feel better afterward; I don't mean that writing necessarily uplifts, or should uplift; I just mean that I like where my mind is when I'm reading, and it's almost always a better place than before I picked the book up.

AR: Finally, what do you like best about writing?

MP: For me, the best part has always been when I come up with something that I'm excited to share.

Excerpt from

Michael Palmer's "A Glossary of West Texas"

Moths

Plague of: In the spring of 2012, moths seemed to grow out of the ground, taking over the city, swooping through the alleys like sparrows. Many of them found the lamplight in my living room. They flickered inside the lamp shade like demented fairies, their bodies a collective crackle as they hurled themselves against the bulb. See also: "Everything is Bigger in Texas," Excess, Mothlight.

Shower of: When I closed my front door, the moths rained out of my awning, onto my head and shoulders.

Mothlight

The shaky light, somewhat reminiscent of an old film reel, created by moths as they spin around and bounce off of lamps. See also: Flicker.

Mountains

In Utah, where I grew up, they are stark and abundant. I never noticed how much I noticed them, until confronted with their complete absence in Lubbock.

Quiet

Inside my small house on the alley, aside from the wind, I often heard silence only. No traffic, no voices; no clanking or noisy plumbing in the house. At first, this led me to drink from desperation, but after a while, I grew so comfortable in it that I would dread having to break it. See also: Loneliness, Luddite.

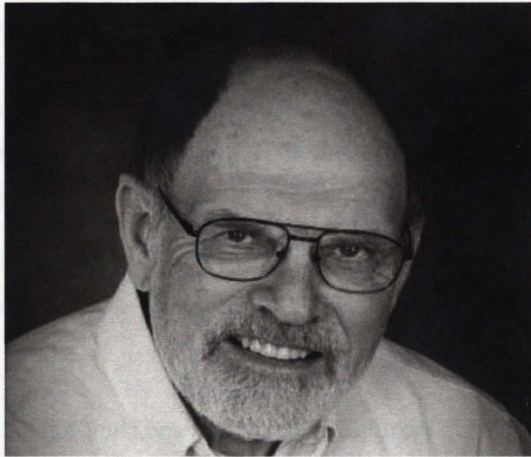
Ogallala Aquifer

A vast underwater aquifer, providing water for significant portions of eight different states, including the panhandle of Texas. Though vast, the aquifer is shallow. Some estimates suggest it will dry up in as few as 25 years.

If so, I don't see how West Texas can continue to burgeon, if it can even survive. This can lead to a feeling that one is living in a ghost town before the ghosts arrive.

Originally published in *Bellingham Review*

Outgoing South Dakota Poet Laureate Interview with David Allan Evans



You grew up in Sioux City, Iowa. What sort of experiences formed the poet you would eventually become?

My identity, starting in grade school, and my status as a person came mainly from sports, especially sprinting, football, baseball, and pole vaulting. But in my early teens I also got some good glimpses of poetry, mostly from my father, who was a voracious reader of Shakespeare, Voltaire, H.L. Mencken, Thomas Wolfe and so many other writers of the past and present, as well as being a serious fan of famous opera singers like Enrico Caruso. He had a record of the great actor John Barrymore reciting Shakespeare soliloquies, which he loved to play. My father had a wonderful memory and he'd recite long passages from Shakespeare, Wolfe, and others, and boom out arias in the basement shower. His love of literature and opera definitely made an impression on me.

But, as I said, my interests and identity were in another direction, and in the 50's in Sioux City, Iowa at least, poetry and sports were not a good mix, especially if you were a jock like me. (To this day I scratch my head at having been an athlete who became—really? a poet?—my bogus

heritage from the conservative 50s. Or if you were an athlete who happened to like poetry, you kept it to yourself (which I did). And yet I began to realize that I couldn't help liking what I was hearing from Shakespeare's characters—even if I didn't understand a whole lot of it at first. And also, just as important: the words and lines began to stick in my memory, and it was surprisingly fun to be able to recite them, if only to myself. In my early teens I began to sort of sneak away from my friends and go to the public library, where, in the record room in the basement, I'd play records of poets and actors reading poetry. The first poem I memorized—I couldn't get enough of it and kept playing it over and over—was DOVER BEACH by Matthew Arnold. I can still recite the whole poem. The reader of the poem was David Allan. I was so taken by his voice that I used my middle name, the same as his last one, when I began to publish poems in my 20s.

And so those were two important categories of experiences that were important in my becoming a poet. My athletic past would give me a lot to think about and write about, for instance, the exuberance of youth and the physical life. And listening to poetry would give me a sort of lyrical and dramatic baseline when I began to write. "The ability to create," said Theodore Roethke, "is related to the ability to remember." Every poem I've written owes something to every poem I've read.

Sports seem to be a common theme in your writing. Could you talk about your early years playing and watching baseball and football and how those experiences affected you?

From a school kid's perspective, there's hardly any better way of achieving status than to become a starter, a first-stringer, on, say, a football or basketball team. It was true in my time and I think it's still true.

So many of the clichés about sports turned out to be true for me. I learned what it's like to succeed at times, and to fail at times; about playing fair and by the rules; about the importance of preparing, through practice and hard work, to do something well; about concentration and focus; about how good and healthy we can feel—and actually are—when we're in shape; about cooperation, being a "team player"; about humility, which comes from the realization that while you might think you're good at something, there's always somebody better; about having to be being really alert and awake to what's going on around you.

Some of those life lessons I got from sports have been useful to me as a poet.

Continuing the sports theme, how do you view sports? What do they do for us as a culture?

Almost everything, I've noticed more and more the older I get, has two sides to it: an upside and a downside. On the one hand, sports and exercise are good for us—all joggers know about the "endorphin high" they achieve after a fairly long, brisk run. Medical doctors are always reminding us of the benefits of exercise and the dangers of a sedentary life. Taking part in sports, and exercise, for sure, can be very healthy. It may be true, as some evolutionary psychologists suggest, that sports are a kind of safety valve for violence and destructive behavior.

On the other hand, there's a dark side to sports: for instance, head injuries and other permanent injuries from violent contact sports; performance-enhancing drugs; out-of-control egos of players as well as spectators; and especially the tendency to over-emphasize sports in school, and to under-emphasize academics and the arts. I'd like to see sports, the arts, and academics combined in schools, after the model of the ancient Greeks.

Another theme in your writing seems to be your father. Could you talk a little bit about your relationship with him and its impact on your writing?

In retrospect, I'm grateful for my father's support of me, especially as an athlete, attending my games when he

wasn't working—even though he spent so little time with me or any of his children since he was so busy with his own writing and reading. And I'm obviously grateful for his great enthusiasm for books and poetry. He gave me my start as a writer. And at the same time I regret that, because he died so young (at 52), he didn't live long enough to see that I was able to do well at other things in my life besides track, football and baseball. I like to think he would've been pleased to know that I became a college teacher and a writer.

After gaining your master's degree you spent two years at Adams State and then moved on to South Dakota State. What inspired you to become a college professor teaching English, and at the time did you know you'd spend nearly 40 years at South Dakota State?

Let's go back a little. At first in college I was thinking of majoring in Phys. Ed. and becoming a coach. My college football career lasted two years and ended unhappily with an injured knee and an injured spirit, leaving me with a sour taste for sports. I wanted to major in biology, but soon realized that I didn't have the necessary hard-science background. And so, knowing I had to major in something, so I could make a living, I began to fall back on my memories of Shakespeare and Wolfe and Matthew Arnold and others, which I'd gotten from my father and the public library records. I started taking more literature courses and I liked them, mostly. I also started to write some poetry. I got a big push from an excellent creative writing teacher in my junior year in college, and I was on my way to an English major.

So when I finished my BA degree, I went off to the U. of Iowa for a master's degree, thinking I'd be teaching some day, and preferably in college.

I left Adams State in 1968 when I was able (in those days anyway) to take my SDSU job on the phone with the then department head, Jack Marken. My wife and I wanted to come back to the Midwest anyway, and here I was, at 28, suddenly an Assistant Professor of English at SDSU. I felt fortunate to have the job and to be working fairly close to

home ground. The job for all those 39 years was definitely a keeper, as fishermen say. I've always enjoyed teaching, so to be able to teach literature and writing, and to be writing as well—this was the perfect job for me.

During your years at South Dakota State it seems like you really helped the English Department become what it is today. First, could you talk a little bit about what inspired you to start the literary magazine which would become *Oakwood*?

I was given the job of taking over the literary magazine at the time, and even forget what it was called. But a very smart and creative student of mine, Doug Cockrell, and I—with help from a few other students for layout—converted the old magazine into something we thought was a new and different magazine, and called it *Oakwood*, which of course is the name of Oakwood Lake, north of Brookings. Without Doug, the new magazine wouldn't have happened.

What sort of challenges did you face in starting up *Oakwood* and how would you describe students' attitudes towards submitting their work?

I remember it being a good challenge: even the layout process, and choosing poems and pictures (in those days, black and white only). We put the magazine together with care, blending the pictures with the writings. We right away thought: why not go beyond the campus for poems and stories, so we solicited work from writers I knew or knew of at the time, as well as from student writers on campus. In those early issues we had contributors from all over the country, including some who would become well known, for instance, Civ Cedering Fox, Albert Goldbarth, R.P. Dickey, and Kathleen Norris.

Certainly SDSU students were excited to be published, and to show their work alongside some outsiders who were publishing all over the country. I think it must've given our students something good as a standard to try to match.

In your experience, what are the benefits to submitting work to college literary magazines?

It's always exciting and helpful for a young writer to get work published so it can be seen by others. After all, you work hard on something that you really believe is worthy of publication, and you want others to read it and say: "Hey, this is good," or "This makes sense to me," or "I've had the same feeling about this and the poet said it for me." We all want to be recognized for the work we do, for something we take very seriously. Over the decades there have been a number of SDSU students who have continued to write beyond graduation and have published their work widely in journals and even in their own books. For instance, Doug Cockrell, Dennis Sampson, Sheryl Nelms, and Chad Robinson. I think they all got started in *Oakwood*.

Switching to another of your accomplishments at SDSU, could you talk about working with Dr. Woodard to start the Great Plains Writers' Conference in 1976?

Chuck and I early on had a shared interest in all kinds of writing, especially poetry, and that first conference came out of our enthusiasm for writers of the region such as Bill Kloefkorn, Ted Kooser, and Dave Etter—writers whose work was good but also came out of places and landscapes and sensibilities that our students in the 70s were familiar with. That first conference lasted three days as I recall, and we not only had readings but panels, and even a keynote talk.

While Chuck and I got the conference going that first year, it was Chuck's energy and enthusiasm and expertise that kept it going. He is the one who deserves by far the most credit for the Great Plains Writers' Conference.

You've certainly been to many other writers' conferences over the years. What is the biggest thing you've gained from those types of events?

What's been helpful to me has been finding a little larger audience to listen to and read my work, meeting other

writers, talking with them, learning from them, and also picking up ideas for new magazines and journals that might publish my work. I always recommend writers' conferences to young writers. I tell them to get around, meet other writers, learn from them, and a writers' conference is just about the best place for these things to happen.

In 1992 you went to China as a Fulbright Scholar. How did that whole experience come about?

I'd been interested in Asian ways ever since I discovered my father's collection of Will Durant's Civilization series of books. One book was OUR ORIENTAL HERITAGE, with wonderful, mysterious-looking, and exotic (to me anyway) pictures of Buddha statues and Chinese landscapes. Also, as a writer, I liked the idea of "less is more," and when I began to read Asian poetry in translation I was also struck by its strong imagery, and sense of place. I became aware of the increasing Asian influx of ideas and attitudes in the 60s, especially from the Zen tradition, thanks to poets like Ginsberg and Snyder, and haiku translations out of Japan. I still prefer to write and read poems that don't take up more than a page, and preferably shorter.

Then in my 40s I took up a Japanese form of karate on the SDSU campus. I learned more about the Zen tradition in those two years I studied and practiced, and so when the opportunity to go to China for a semester on a faculty exchange came up, I jumped on it. My wife Jan and I had a great experience that has led to all sorts of good things for me. My reading for the last decade or so has been mostly books on Asian psychology and philosophy, and I also bring it into classes I teach in a life-long learning program out of Sioux Falls.

What kinds of activities did you do in China and what did you think of the cultural experience?

Teaching, living, and traveling in China gave me a glimpse of the age of human culture, and the great productions that came out of a time when labor was so cheap and

available, and could result in, for instance, the Great Wall of China, and the beautiful and elaborate Buddhist and Taoist temples. And also the contrast between urban and rural life. Here's a country that traditionally has emphasized cooperation instead of the individual, and where it's dangerous to speak your mind if you don't agree with the power structure in Beijing. And I saw how quickly things are changing in China, as the economy gets stronger and the standard of living rises for many Chinese. The old bike lanes and neighborhoods are disappearing. Millions of cars clog the streets, and high-rise apartments are quickly replacing the traditional, face-to-face dwellings where whole families lived for hundreds of years. And air pollution is a day-to-day menace. Today, Shanghai looks and feels like a Western city.

We found the people very welcoming and congenial and curious, and the food terrific. No salad bars—all fresh vegetables and fruit. You still don't see rummage sales in China—things can't be thrown away by most Chinese because they have very little money, and so are forced to repair bike tires and other necessities that we Americans readily throw away.

How would you say your experiences in China affected your writing?

As I said above, I like the less-is-more quality. And I appreciate the Buddhist and Taoist influence among writers and artists that has to do with assuming that everything is not separate but part of the whole. Once we were told by a Chinese artist at his show that a fish appearing in a traditional Chinese painting doesn't have to be immersed in water—it might be just hanging there in an upper corner of the painting. After all, he said, you assume that the fish lives in the water! In American paintings, he told us, there are too many things. And so, a single flower petal to a Chinese painter means not only the whole flower, but all of nature. I find that idea very convincing. It's helped me understand better the great difference between thinking (that is, with abstract concepts) and actually

SEEING. Not only that, but I've found out through my reading that the contemplative tradition of Buddhism—which originated over 2,000 years ago—is quite compatible with what neuroscientists are finding out about the brain, the mind, and human behavior. What I've discovered, beginning with my living and teaching in China, has had a genuine influence on me as a person and as a writer.

Skip ahead to 2002 and you are named Poet Laureate for the state of South Dakota. Talk about that honor and what it has meant for you in the years since?

I've been writing poems for over 50 years, and teaching poetry and poetry writing for almost as long. So the designation of poet laureate was a chance to be even a more official teacher and promoter of poetry. I have felt bound from the outset to promote all kinds of poetry, from nursery rhymes to sonnets to narrative poems to haiku and limericks to cowboy poetry to slam poetry and so-called free verse. That is, any kind of heightened speech. I've tried to encourage people to use their every-day vocabulary, to avoid a special diction. In other words, my interest has been—in workshops I've given, in readings and panel talks, blurbs for poets' books, comments on specific poems submitted to me, and so on—to show anybody who wants to listen that poetry can pretty much come from anybody who has some enthusiasm for saying or hearing or reading something that is well said. Maybe your next-door neighbor, speaking to you over her fence, suddenly finds the right words to tell you something that you both believe is important, or even unimportant—maybe something just funny or crazy-sounding, but something that sounds right. Just finding the perfect word or phrase, maybe suddenly, or maybe over a period of time, say, in the process of revising a poem, taking it through many versions until you feel you've got something that sounds like what you thought you couldn't say so well.

You've worked in different genres, but poetry seems to have been your specialty. What draws you so much to poetry?

So many of my memories, my way of understanding things, my way of relating to others, has to do with what I've read in poems over most of my life. When I have an idea or an image that stays with me for awhile, my inclination is almost always to see what would happen to it if I tried to make a poem from it. Every day of my life I still get up and hang around my computer screen for awhile to see if there's something there that might—just might—work in a poem. I've had this habit for about half a century.

Having spent some time overseas, how would you compare the role of poetry in America to its role in other nations?

It seems that poetry in our country is more of an individual expression than it is in many other countries. In Spanish-speaking countries I understand that poetry is more readily connected to political issues. And that means, for one thing, that poets in such countries (in eastern Europe too, I understand) have more status than American poets in general—that is, their poems are more useful, more valuable because they tend to speak for more people. Not to say that poets in the U.S. haven't written poems of protest, or poems to help us grieve, when it comes to, for instance, national tragedies, like 9-11. And obviously, poetry—wherever and whenever it's been written—has had the power of healing, and helping us understand ourselves and others.

What do you feel is the language of poetry?

Heightened and memorable language, as it's been called by many. Saying something so well that, when you read it or hear it spoken, you can't help remembering it, or part of it, and only in the words used by the poet. Robert Frost said in an essay that the words of poetry, if they're well chosen, stick to you "like cockleburs to your pant legs as you walk in the fields in summer." The language of poetry welcomes paradox and irony, which are so common in our experiences. For instance, William Blake's short poem: "He who binds himself to a joy / does the winged

life destroy, but he who kisses the joy as it flies/lives in Eternity's sunrise." Poetry can keep us aware, keep us awake. That's why it's so often quoted in books about psychology and as well as self-help books.

You've probably been asked this hundreds of times, but which writers have served as your greatest influences over the years?

At least some of the poets who have been very useful to me: Li Bai, Basho, Ryokan, Issa, Rumi, Shakespeare, Housman, Dylan Thomas, Edward Thomas, Walt Whitman, R. S. Thomas, W. B. Yeats, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, W. C. Williams, Mary Oliver, Emily Dickinson, Philip Larkin, Carl Sandburg, Karl Shapiro, Reed Whittemore, Robinson Jeffers, E.A. Robinson, Denise Levertov, R. Frost, Theodore Roethke, James Dickey, Seamus Heaney, Jane Kenyon, Charles Simic.

Lastly, what advice would you give to young writers, be they starting out in poetry or another genre?

Write and write and write, and read and read and read. If you want to be a bull rider, you have to first go to the rodeos and watch the guys ride the bulls, and then, having seen them and studied them, you'll eventually need to get up on a bull and try to stay on until you hear the 8-second buzzer. When it comes to being a poet or writer, you need to read a lot of poetry and fiction and nonfiction, and find individual poems or stories or whatever that you really like—not just what these works say but how they say it—and use those works as a direct influence. Imitate, emulate. Find patterns, models, find phrases and words that work. Verbs and nouns especially. You'll go through a bunch of writers and use their works for your own improvement, and then you'll eventually come to your own way of saying things—your own way of staying on top of a bull, your own way of SEEING—which will be YOUR way. Avoid clichés. Put your strongest words generally at the ends and beginnings of lines or sentences. Be concise.

Also, you'll learn that good writing happens only out of revising, revising, revising. To be better and better at making poems or stories takes work. It's always good to find someone you can appreciate as a reader of your poems, a person who is honest with you as a reader. Maybe that person will exchange poems or stories or nonfiction with you, and you can help each other.

If something doesn't work out, if a poem or story falls flat and there's no rescue, let it go, or set it aside. Maybe it'll work next week or next month or in three years. Or maybe it'll never work, and that's okay too. Don't despair. You've still learned something in the process of trying to make it work. Your failures, as in your day-to-day life, are just as valuable as your successes. Accept them, learn from them. Every time you put a word or phrase down on paper or up on a computer screen, you're learning SOMETHING. Follow it; see where it goes . . . Writing is a process of discovery.

And don't ever give up. Young writers have a tendency to be too sensitive to others' negative or less-than-enthusiastic comments on their work. Don't worry about it: just write. Please yourself first, then see if maybe others like what you're doing with words.

Consider this fact: it's always possible for you to take some words from the vocabulary that you share with millions of others, and put them together in a line or a sentence that has never been seen before! "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Shakespeare). "anyone lived in a pretty how town"(ee cummings). "Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All" (Randall Jarrell). "Hope is a thing with feathers/that perches on the soul." (Emily Dickinson) "When on my bed the moonlight falls" (Tennyson). "I caught a tremendous fish" (Elizabeth Bishop). "Out of the cradle, endlessly rocking" (W. Whitman). "I have just come down from my father" (James Dickey).

Don't ever forget that you too have the chance to say and to make something new—"like eggs laid by tigers" (Dylan Thomas).

Contributor Biographies

LEAH ALSAKER

Leah grew up on a farm in the northeast corner of South Dakota. She is a junior at SDSU and is pursuing a degree in English education with a minor in history and professional writing. She is unsure about her future plans but has a passion for teaching and writing, so she hopes to pursue these fields in the future.

ALEXIS BECKER

Alexis is a senior English major at SDSU. She grew up on a small farm in northwest Iowa and loves all things agricultural. After graduation from SDSU, Alexis plans on attending graduate school to study creative writing and to continue writing far into the future.

MARY BERG

Mary is a psychology major.

ALISSA BOGUE

Alissa is a double major of journalism and mass communication. She loves all things literature. She comes from Aberdeen, South Dakota, which in all practical terms is a cow town if she ever saw one. It may sound a bit cliché, but coming from a small town makes one's dream very big. She hopes to graduate, and use her degree to become a successful news reporter. She plans to move to a city on the coast somewhere and make it big for herself one day. Until then, she just plans on being successful in her classes and enjoying college life.

HALEY BRADSHAW

Haley is in the last semester of her senior year majoring in English writing with a professional writing minor. She spent her childhood in Plano, Texas before moving to the great Midwest. Her passion for writing stems from her everlasting love of endless years of reading. Haley plans on continuing her life after graduation in South Dakota with a full-time career in writing and marketing.

SAWYER CALDWELL

Sawyer is a student at SDSU majoring in English and minoring in Spanish and history. He hails from Brookings, and has lived here his entire life. After graduation, he plans to teach high school English in South Dakota, but will consider Christian ministry opportunities.

KAYLA COLLINS

Kayla is a freshman majoring in Graphic Design with a minor in Entrepreneurial Studies. Montevideo, Minnesota is her home, and she loves it there. She plans on graduating from SDSU and continuing her graphic design journey in her hometown while working for her dad and uncle at the family business. She would like to one day open a business of her own.

LESLIE COPE

Leslie is a graphic design major.

LUCAS EIDE

Lucas is a sophomore agricultural education major at SDSU. He grew up on a farm outside of Clear Lake, South Dakota. Because he came from an agricultural background, he decided to pursue a career that has opportunity for his students and himself. He wants to provide students with the opportunities that agriculture has to offer, but also guide them in a career path that serves their best interest.

MORGAN ERICKSON

Morgan is a senior English major at SDSU. She grew up in Gayville, South Dakota, which is where her love for writing began; she found inspiration for her poetry and nonfiction pieces through her experiences on her family's farm. Morgan hopes to further her education by attending graduate school; ideally, she hopes to continue pursuing her love for creative writing.

ROBERTA FORMAN

Roberta is a senior Graphic Design student. She is from Pierre, South Dakota. She became interested in art at a young age from drawing and painting. Then she became very interested in photography and it is one of her favorite pastimes. She plans to move to Sioux Falls after graduation and intern at Lawrence and Schiller Ad Agency.

MORGAN GOCHE

Morgan is a dairy manufacturing and microbiology major.

TERESA HEBERT

Teresa is a junior majoring in architecture. The beautiful Mankato River Valley in southern Minnesota is her home. After acquiring her degree, she hopes to help those displaced by disasters and disturbances around the world by designing hospitable living residences. She enjoys skiing, science fiction, and tabletop games.

DESTINY JORENBY

Destiny is a sophomore student studying Early Childhood Education with minors in Human Development Family Studies (HDFS) and dance. She is originally from Brookings, South Dakota. She has always called Brookings home. Her passion for working with the underprivileged drives her future career plans and goals, which include possibly working in an orphanage or as an elementary school teacher.

SPENSER KAVANAUGH

Spenser is an English major at SDSU. He is originally from Groton, South Dakota, but his family has since moved to Rapid City. He has always loved writing and language in general so he thought he should submit some of his work. For future goals, he hopes to have an internship this summer and possibly go to graduate school.

HANNAH KOELLER

Hannah is a junior majoring in journalism and mass communications with an emphasis on news editorial journalism. She has two minors: professional writing and film studies. She graduated high school from De Smet, South Dakota, just a short drive from Brookings. In the summer, she will be interning at the 605 Magazine in Sioux Falls where she will create a cohesive blog series and assist in creating content for web and print. She embraces opportunities that come to her in the future, whether in a newsroom, at a newspaper or other publication, or at a marketing firm.

SHAWN MINOR

Shawn is a journalism major.

ALEX MORLAN

Alex studied English at SDSU for two years. He currently lives in his hometown of Weeping Water, Nebraska and works at his local church leading elementary Sunday school classes and high school youth groups. He hopes to be an overseas missionary full time in Nepal and parts of Asia.

ROBERT MYERS

A native of Bear Lake, Michigan, Robert is a senior at South Dakota State where he will graduate with an English writing major. In the coming years he hopes to run marathons and publish novels.

JORDAN NICHOLS

Jordan is an English major.

NATALIE PARKS

Natalie is an interior design major.

KAYLA PETERSON

Kayla is a senior Graphic Design student. From Tea, South Dakota, she originally became interested in art through digital forms rather than traditionally – she spent many years working with programs such as Photoshop, Paint Shop Pro, and working with HTML / CSS. She hopes to get a job in which she can build and design websites, as well as do some freelance work on the side.

ASHLEY PLUMMER

Ashley is currently pursuing a degree in the field of Art Education with plans to graduate in the fall after student teaching. She grew up in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where she plans to live and hopefully teach in the surrounding area in the near future. Her future goals are to continue to grow in her artwork as well as pass on her knowledge through teaching.

SARAH RUIZ

Sarah is an advertising major.

JOE SCHARTZ

Joe is a junior journalism major from Humboldt, South

Dakota, and aspires to be a published novelist. Moments of inspiration frequently occur while running, which is another passion of his, so the culmination of a published novel will likely be the result of many, many miles. He considers it an honor to be published in *Oakwood*.

CAILYN SCHREURS

Cailyn is an interior design major.

MIRANDA SCHWANKE

Miranda is a student currently studying studio arts with an emphasis in animation and Art History. Originally, she is from Watertown, South Dakota, but now calls Brookings her home. Her ultimate future goal, after graduating of course, is to travel to California and work at Pixar or Disney Animation Studios.

PARKER SENSKA

Parker is an English major at SDSU minoring in music. He is from the tiny town of Forestburg, South Dakota, about 90 miles southwest of Brookings. He hopes to someday be a published author and also hopes to compose songs and create story lines for video games.

DANIEL SNETHEN

Daniel is an educator of over 20 years. Snethen attended SDSU in the summer of 1994 to earn credit toward an educational endorsement for working with gifted students. Snethen is native to South Dakota and graduated from Colome High School in 1983. He has spent the past 19 years teaching science and coaching oral interpretation and drama at Little Wound High School in Kyle. Snethen is the current vice-president of the South Dakota State Poetry Society, serves on the South Dakota High School Activities Association Speech Advisory Board and has coached two finalists to the National Poetry Out Loud Competition in Washington, D.C.

CASEY SNYDER

Casey is an undergraduate student in the Plant Science Department majoring in horticulture. Within her major, she has been fortunate enough to study mycology, forestry, and ecology, as well as local food production. She has been living in South Dakota for her entire life. She grew up in Sioux Falls, but home for Casey can be anywhere these days. In the future, Casey intends to grow and educate.

ELI WELU

Eli is an agricultural science major.

HALEY WILSON

Haley is a senior at SDSU majoring in English with a writing specialization and minoring in French. With a hometown of Rutland, South Dakota— a small town largely unheard of— her interest in writing stemmed from her avid love for reading. She first mastered Dr. Suess' "Green Eggs and Ham" and the rest was history. In the future, she hopes to work in the writing field and gain a position in publishing.

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