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Westminster College



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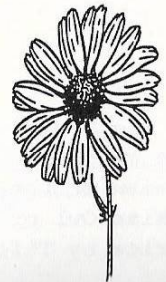


Table of Contents

Poetry

Who Am I? by Jacob Holtgraewe.....	04
Children by Veronica Lake.....	04
Unrequited Insanity by Christian Jones	12
Clown Painting by Joseph Manuel Nieves	13
Edited by Veronica Lake	13
I Believe by Claire Aydelotte	14
My Arrogant Mental Tendencies by Jefferson Spears	21
Technology by Jacob Holtgraewe	22
Pleasure/Pain by Jefferson Spears	22
Lost Love by Jacob Holtgraewe	30
Dad by Lea Uthe	30
The Step by Maria Donovan	31
Cycles by Bongiwe Shongwe	32
After the Typhoon by Jan Michael Ramirez.....	32
Ode to the Man by Derrick Starks.....	53
Ode to the Presidents by Allison Wright	54
The Book by Riley Hughes	56
Trapped in Memory by Bongiwe Shongwe	57
Dear Sister by Talaysia Ruff	58
Who are We by Talaysia Ruff	60
I Wanted to Tell You a Story by Bongiwe Shongwe	61
Mother Who? by Talaysia Ruff	62
On the Way Home by Mei Du	67
Loving a Fast-Car Man by Stephanie Jackson	68
The Golden Mean by Joseph Manuel Nieves	68
RAINBOWS by Jan Michael Ramirez	76

Graphics

Into the Woods with an Elephant by Suravi Shrestha	33
Green and Red by Mei Du	34
Invasion of the Chicago Streetlamps by Jan Michael Ramirez	34
The Wise Owl of Westminster by Tiara Pettijohn	35
Beatrice by Tiffany Crawford	36

The Wheel by Tiffany Crawford	36
Smiles that Don't Reach the Eyes by Hannah Domino	37
Dystopian Chicago by Jan Michael Ramirez	38
Sunset in DC by Suravi Shrestha	38
Longing for Hope by Suravi Shrestha	39
BeYOUTiful by Tiara Pettijohn	40
You See by Mei Du	40
Columns of Westminster by Tiara Pettijohn	41
The Gulf by Tiffany Crawford	41
Rose in Bloom by Cassandra Beahler	42
Paddy Fynn by Kate Crawford	42
New Mexico by Tiffany Crawford.....	43
Bleeding Sunset by Jan Michael Ramirez	43
In the Pasture by Hannah Domino	44
The Old Mansion by Mei Du	44
Darren Criss by Cassandra Beahler	45
When You Don't Understand Something, Take a Look at it from a Different Perspective by Tiara Pettijohn	46
After a Rain by Mei Du	46
Raindrops Upon Stinson Creek by Tiara Pettijohn.....	47
Maastricht, My Home by Kate Crawford	47
The Other Arch by Suravi Shrestha	48

Prose

Choice and Consequence by Emma Kliethermes	05
Perfect by Emily Kesel	15
I'm Sorry for Your Loss by Joseph Manuel Nieves	23
The Art of Disillusionment by Sydney Franklin	49
What I Learned from Dad by Lea Uthe	63
Blank Pages by Ali Veatch	70
Lightning Strikes by Emily Kesel	77
This is Your Brain on Drugs by Tim Aldred	79



Who Am I?

Jacob Holtgraewe

1st Place: Poetry

I am not what I am today,
nor what I was yesterday,
for simply I am what I am not.
Thus I am not what you see,
instead, what I aspire to be.
I am never truly one.
I am ever changing.
What you see today,
is not what you will see tomorrow.
And who I was when I wrote this
line,
is not the same me that wrote this
one.
I am not who I am now,
rather, who I will one day become.

Children

Veronica Lake

A ball of maternal joy, but
my
frustration
bouncing continuously,
rapidly, frantically!

"Do this."
But that
is done.

"How many—"
A mother?
I could never be.

Patience never desired me
Screaming, chasing
Cleaning, caring?

The melodic laughter
only soothes
while it lasts

Their screams!

My screams,
of "SILENCE!"

Pools of tears mirror now;
my guilt,
and soon to be
my desperation

My panic
consumes whatever
motherly bond

That holds us—
That keeps me from—
SMACK!

Patience never desired me,
A mother?
I could never be.



Choice and Consequence

Emma Kliethermes

1st Place: Prose

"Welcome to hell, Eric Thompson."

My name is Eric. When I was 15 years old, I made a deal with the devil. In exchange for my soul, he would grant me a happy and carefree life. At the time, I was moving from house to house; bumping around in the foster care system. All I wanted was stability. I wanted someone to love me and appreciate me. So I shook hands with the devil and sealed my fate.

Now, I am a recently deceased man. I left behind a wife, two sons, a daughter, and seven grandchildren. 70 years of happiness, money, success, and love. My whole family thought I was a good man. Well, look where good men end up.

The devil, well the fallen angel Lucifer, didn't look like any sort of demon I had ever seen in drawings or on TV. He was angelic. Tall, muscular, long raven black hair. The only evidence of his true nature laid within his eyes; dark, rust colored, red eyes. However, when he came all those years ago to make the deal, he dressed in a designer black suit with a red tie. Today, he wore a maroon suit and no tie. He could fit right in with rich businessmen and successful lawyers who worked in big office buildings. I guess I know where those men end up too.

"Now come on Eric, don't be shy. Take a look around, this is your home for all eternity now," Lucifer explained. Lucifer was a master manipulator. He could take the holiest of men and tempt them into damnation with just his voice and hypnotic eyes. I remember how his voice sounded as smooth and thick as honey dripping from a hive. But his words were not all sweet. If his deal did not interest you, the way his eyes bored into you and stripped you of everything that made you unique would make you uncomfortable enough to take his offer. I imagine in his eyes, all humans are just as intelligent and courageous as the simple-minded insect.

That's when I decided to finally open my eyes, well if I still have eyes; being a soul is confusing. As soon as the elevator had stopped from our journey from the hospital where I died down to hell, I had shut them. I wasn't ready to face the fire. I wasn't ready to feel the horror, the pain, and agony. But when I squinted them open, they shot open as I stood there, shocked. This could not be hell. It looks like I'm in a fancy hotel, like one you would find in Las Vegas; but older.

"Right now hell is modeled after a 1940's Vegas strip hotel. I can't recall the name exactly, but this is what the lobby looked like," Lucifer explained. He always seemed to be able to read my thoughts. I don't like that. I ignored my dislike for Lucifer's lack of privacy and admired the beautiful lobby. The floor was covered with a lush dark gold carpet and the walls were donned with gold tinted mirrors. There was a fountain in the middle of the lobby made of marble and the statue was of some guy with a trident. One of those ancient Greek or Roman gods? I turned my attention to the furniture, exquisite high-end chairs and sofas scattered around all colored gold with a darker gold trimming. I wandered finally to the front desk, a grand wooden masterpiece of mahogany. Then I noticed a plaque behind the desk.

"Seven floors, guaranteed to make your stay an enjoyable one," I read. A grand hotel with only seven floors? Shouldn't there be more?

"Seven is my favorite number. And I assure you, seven floors are enough for all my...guests. Everyone finds a floor they are more than happy to spend the rest of eternity on and the floors can stretch on for as long as there are people to fill them. Don't worry, there is enough room for you Eric," Lucifer poked my chest as he made his way to a gold elevator in the back of the lobby. I followed him and stepped inside. The elevator panel had the numbers one through seven written as Roman numerals, but then next to each floor number was a letter. Lucifer pressed the first button, I S, and a moment later the doors opened to reveal the first floor.

I had been expecting hotel rooms, but that is not what I saw as Lucifer and I strode out of the elevator. I was greeted by an endless field of people relaxing. Women and men, all ages and all sizes were lying on beds, sitting in recliners, and lounging in beanbag chairs. No one was standing up or in an upright position that I could see.

"What is there to do on this floor?" I asked, turning to Lucifer confused.

"Do," he scoffed, "why nothing of course. All of these people didn't do anything in their lives, so why should they do anything now?"

"So, they just...laze around for all eternity." Could people really be that lazy?

"Yes, you see doing things requires effort and drive and these people lack it." Lucifer spun on his heel and started back towards the elevator. "Let's keep moving Eric, I have a feeling this is not the floor for you."

The second floor was marked II L. When the elevator dinged open, I was glad to see that this time there were actual hotel rooms. We stepped into an endless hallway with

hotel rooms running along both sides. But this floor seemed to pulse with a certain mood. The lights were dim and soft jazz music met my ears as we stood in the empty hallway.

"So what's so special about this floor?"

"People who stay on this floor loved one thing in life so much they could never separate from it in death. If you listen carefully, you can hear what makes this floor so, ah, pleasing for many of my guests." I did as he suggested and after beat or two, I heard faint noises of a queer kind of happiness; squeals of delight, moans of ecstasy, and screams of pleasure. As soon as I heard them, I turned around and practically ran into the elevator doors in my rush to get off this floor. If I still had my body, I would have been blushing like a shy schoolgirl. Lucifer just laughed and we stepped into the elevator to reach our next destination: III G.

Before the doors even opened I could smell something delicious. The aroma reminded me of my favorite meal, my wife's homemade lasagna. The doors glided open and I inhaled a huge breath of food nirvana. This floor was an all you can eat buffet that stretched on as far as my eyes could see. I walked down the aisles of food and had to step around some disturbingly obese people. Everyone was as round as an overinflated ball and waddled around eating food off their plates while searching for more. The sights and smells made me both hungry and slightly mortified at the same time.

"Did these people gain this weight since they died?" I questioned as I watched one woman devour an entire rack of ribs in just a few bites. She looked as though she weighed about 600 pounds, 700 tops.

"No. The image your soul takes when you die is based on what age each person was when their fate was set in stone and what their true selves looked like. The moment someone fully gives in to their darkest desire, or in cases like yours, the moment I make a deal with someone; his or her soul is bound for hell and that is how they appear here. But that makes up only a part of the condition your soul is in when it reaches hell. The other side to consider is what someone's ultimate form looks like. So not all of these people were this large in life, but these people's insatiable appetites reflected on their souls, making their truest forms so...fat."

"Oh." I looked down at myself for the first time. Lucifer was right. As far as I could tell, I looked like my 15-year-old self. I felt my face and was amazed I was not greeted by the rough leathery feel of my wrinkled face I should have. Instead it was smooth with the softness of youth. I was even wearing my favorite blue jeans and flannel shirt, an outfit I wore almost every day during my younger years. I gave my attention back to the amazing food before me, but then I

looked around all the people here. I didn't fit in, I was too skinny. I guess as much as I loved food in life, I didn't love it enough to stay on this floor.

"On to the fourth floor then." Lucifer escorted me back to the elevator and pushed the button labeled IV E. I didn't know what to expect now. The first three floors were each so different. Floor one was a field of lazing husks of people, the second contained an endless hallway filled with secret pleasures, and then the third had been a paradise for the morbidly obese; an all you can eat buffet that you could gorge on for eternity. But once the sight that greeted me as the elevator doors opened to the fourth floor, I found myself strangely curious. It was a giant room full of mirrors, men in designer tuxedos and suits, and women wearing the most beautiful dresses I had ever seen. As we wandered in, I noticed everyone was performing the same routine. One person would walk up to another and each would squint and judge each other before nervously shifting their gaze away to find someone else to scrutinize. I walked past one lady who was a famous celebrity who died about 20 years ago.

"What is this place?" I inquired, bewildered, as I turned to see if I could spot anyone else I might recognize.

"Those who were on top, but never quite good enough find their place on this floor. Each person here believed he or she was perfect. But, deep down, they all feared those who could compete with them and that fear translated into jealousy."

"That explains all the celebrities," I remarked. "I don't think I belong here, I've always known I'm not a perfect man."

"As you wish." Lucifer ushered me to the elevator. Once we were inside, he asked me if I wanted to push the button for the next floor. I hesitated before punching the V G button and just a moment passed before the doors opened yet again.

"Oh my gosh," I stuttered as I stared in awe at the glittering landscape of gold, jewels, and paper money of all kinds. My mouth hung open and I stood rooted in the elevator for who knows how long before Lucifer coughed and broke the spell. Once inside the wonderland of riches, I noticed people trying to shove massive piles of it together to form miniature mountains. As one man went to pick up some rubies the size of my fist, a woman crept away from her pile to take a massive diamond off his pile. However, the man must have known this might happen because he quickly caught the woman and they fought over the diamond.

"Why would they fight? There are plenty of jewels to go around; can't the woman just find another diamond?" I asked. Their fight ended when the man punched the woman in the face and she hung her head in defeat and shuffled back to her

equally large stack of treasures.

"Oh, these are the people who always wanted more. Rich or poor, they were never satisfied with what they had and craved more. This need still drives them, and one can never have enough or too much of anything."

"I love gold and money as much as the next guy, but I don't feel the need to go around punching ladies in the face over one silly diamond."

"Yes, I don't believe this place suits you either. Shall we go then?" A part of me really wanted to make a gold angel in the golden coins covering the floor, but I resigned to follow Lucifer back to the elevator.

Floor number six or VI W was even more out of place than the other floors I had seen so far. When the elevator doors opened, loud heavy metal music and a giant spotlight hit us as we stepped out. There were cheering, screaming people surrounding wrestling rings in separate groups. I tried counting how many fights were happening, but I lost count after 35. There seemed to be two kinds of people here; those who yelled and punched their fists into the air to encourage the men or women in the rings or those were actually throwing the punches.

"Is this the WWE floor?" I joked. Lucifer cracked a smile, but his eyes never left the fight we had walked up to. Inside the ring was a young man, maybe in his 20's and an older man who only had one arm. Each man fought so ferociously, punching, kicking, and even biting each other. It seemed like they were trying to kill each other.

"The ones who make their home on this floor are full of uncontrollable rage. These are the bullies and the fighters of the world; trying to burn off their anger, but only fanning the flames instead of dousing them." I watched as the man with one arm managed to lock his legs around the younger man's throat and he squeezed until his opponent passed out. The crowd went wild and another man immediately went to take the fallen's place for the next round. I guess it's a good thing everyone here is already dead, or these people would be killing each other. I walked away from the sounds of grunting and the yells for blood and went to wait at the elevator for Lucifer. He joined me about a minute later and we climbed inside the elevator to travel to the final floor, lucky number seven.

Floor VII P looked like it was another room full of mirrors at first, until I realized that the walls were lined with glass cases. I walked along one wall and looked inside the various displays. Each one contained a name and a trophy, award, artwork, or some prize that must have meant something to the person who owned each one.

"Does every person have a special case?"

"Yes. There is one for you too Eric, if you find it." As soon as the words left Lucifer's lips I started walking with more purpose, scanning each name plate for my name. What would be inside the case? I had an inkling I knew, but I needed to see it.

After a few minutes I found my name plate. I slowly lifted my eyes to gaze inside the case and grinned. Inside was the first song I ever composed. My first big hit. When I was younger, the only solace I could find from moving in and out of houses left and right was music; especially the piano. My mother had taught me how to play a little before she died when I was 8-years-old. By the time I was a teenager, I was pretty good and I could write music too. But I was a foster care kid living in New Jersey, I was never going to get anywhere in life. That's when I met Lucifer and everything changed.

"Love My Lies, I've always thought that was such a wonderful title. This is the song that gave you fame and fortune. Doesn't it feel so wonderful to see it again?" I didn't pay Lucifer any mind as I pressed my face to the cool glass and stared at lovingly. "I think we found your floor Eric," Lucifer announced. I turned toward him and felt an ache from being separated from my greatest success again.

"What do you mean, what's the story on this floor?"

"Didn't you pay any attention to your surroundings before you charged in here in search of your case? Of course you didn't. Look around and pay attention this time. Where is everyone?" I concentrated and cast my gaze around me and finally noticed people. They were so faint; I could barely see them unless I stared directly at one person. Everyone had their faces pressed against their glass case and didn't move.

"What are they doing?" I whispered, terrified.

"These people are consumed with their greatest success in life. Each person here felt so strongly about their achievement, they can't bear to let it go. Don't you get it Eric? Your greatest success was your music. You have never been able to move on from that feeling of self-importance. Deep down, you are as vain as all of these people," Lucifer spread out his hands in a sweeping gesture.

I shook my head. Could his words hold any truth? Am I doomed to fade into my success and to stay stuck there for all eternity?

"Maybe I belong on a different floor then," I gasped, desperate. I did not want to become one of those ghostly souls, the thought made me more fearful than any other sight I had witnessed in this hotel.

"And which floor would that be? The first is for the lazy and you worked too hard in life to just lay down for all time.

The second is for those who could not part from their most wicked desire and you never felt that kind of madness for any one thing Eric. The third floor is belongs to those who could never quell their appetites, quench their thirst; not always for food, but for something and they could never find any satisfaction. Despite your troubles, you were satisfied with the life I made possible for you. On the fourth floor, the ones who let their jealousy put them into their grave find their home among the mirrors and the competitive atmosphere, but you never felt jealous enough to let it control your life. The fifth floor is for the one who needed more and more and more and let their hunger for more money manage their life. You loved money Eric, don't try to deny it, but you did not love it above everything else making that floor an ill fit for you. And finally on the sixth floor, we found those who let their anger and rage lead them down dangerous and unloving paths. No such fury ever filled your veins so you would never find your place amongst the fighting and the chaos. That leaves us with this floor Eric, the one for those so consumed with their own success, they fade into that fake bliss like a fog being lifted by the morning sun. You may be able to lie to yourself about your true nature Eric, but you cannot lie to me."

I processed what he revealed and knew it was the truth. Lucifer may be many evil things, but he always tells the truth. Maybe my music was one real success, but could I really be that shallow?

"But what about my wife, my family, my home? Aren't those successes too?"

Lucifer laughed, "Oh Eric, stop pretending to be so naïve. Think about it. Did anything ever compare to how you felt when you played the piano or wrote music? Really, take your time, I'm not going anywhere." A chair materialized and Lucifer sat down and watched with his unblinking red eyes as I debated succumbing to the truth. I loved my family and my life, I really did; but when it was just me and a piano, working together to bring a new sound into the world; I never felt more complete and happy. Did that mean I treasured my music more than the people who loved me? What kind of man did that make me?

"I wrote music to support those I loved and to give them a good life."

Lucifer scoffed, "Right. I've known you your entire life Eric, and you've always been arrogant when it came to your music. You played simply because you were the best around and all the attention was on you for a few brief minutes for a change. But don't worry, I won't crucify you for being conceited Eric; everyone on this floor let their arrogance control their lives. You know you belong here."

He was right. He has always been right, since the day I met him. His deal rang in my ears as I remembered how he convinced me to give up my soul for a better life. Don't you want the whole world to know who you are Eric? Don't you want your music to live on forever and for your name to be as infamous as Beethoven? Shame and defeat were the only emotions I felt when just a few moments earlier I had felt so honored to have my music in a display case for all to see. But it was only really there for me to see. So this was the fate of a famous musician? This is the thanks I get for doing everything right as far as my success and family went? They were all alive and still clung to the foolish idea that I was this great man. I may have played the part of the good man in life, but all that was left of that man is dead and only my true form remains. Was I was always destined to end up here, on the top floor of the hell hotel? Maybe before I took the deal, I had a chance at something better; but I cast those hopes aside the moment I accepted Lucifer's offer. When I was 15 years old, I made a choice and now, 70 years later, I was finally facing the consequences.

Hell was not about torture or pain like everyone believes. It was a place that stripped you of any goodness or humanity until only one single, dark sin remained.

And my sin is pride.



Unrequited Insanity

Christian Jones

I fear the madness and the asylum.
The walls close in; my heart bursts in my chest.
When I think of you whilst trapped in Bedlam,
I can't tell if I'm cursed or if I'm blessed.
Your image appears in every shadow,
Tempting me with your smile, driving me mad.
Your absence makes my life feel so hollow,
Filling me with sorrow ne'er before had.
Is your voice as beautiful as I think,
Or is my madness clouding my senses?
This longing will only make my heart sink,
As I can never be with you as is...

Though I do not know if this love is true,
My heart tells me I want to be with you.

Clown Painting

Joseph Manuel Nieves

I stole the painting you love
from the cyber cafe we worked in.
The one that looks like it was painted
to the sounds of the seventies.
An assortment of all the ugliest
oranges, carved into the shape
of a frumpy clown on a crumpled
donkey half his size.

I stole it to remember
the late nights with nothing to do
but caffeinate and greet the waves
of college students and porn addicts
who sat in dim corners
and donned headphones
like cloaking devices.

The sticky, speechless afternoons
walking to your house,
watching your wild tufts
of hair bleed into dusk.
The backyard slasher screening that
sent

your calloused hand searching.
I stole it to have something.
Even him. His head and hands
draped in that sickly, intrusive green,
his face angled in shame.
MERCY! inscribed over his head
like an epitaph.

I stole him when the place closed.
He reminds me
of lazy mornings
missing you in the days
after you had, in the hall
where it hung, kissed me in a way
that stung like getting fired
and quitting at the same time.

Edited

Veronica Lake

Look at me!
eyes wide-
face close-
to the lens of
deception.

Aren't I gorgeous?
Why don't you
tell me
what you
think about my
filter.



I Believe

Claire Aydelotte

I believe in autumn, in the leaves changing, in dying,
I believe in books like Wuthering Heights, which draw the
rainy darkness out of the heart, into the eyes
I believe in contradiction
I believe I bruise easily, and I like that, my muscles, sore
under cotton feel stronger after
I believe most people don't think about getting to know a
human being down to their core, intellectual, spiritual,
beating insides.
I believe in spirituality.
I believe in primal instincts, basic functions.
I believe touch is vital to survival. And surviving calms me.
And I believe that sensation, against skin... is irreplaceable.
I believe in physicality.
I believe everyone craves controlled sorrow sometimes, to sit
on a Nebraska flat road your whole life is no way to live.
I believe I have just as much darkness as light inside me.
I believe in the little things.
I believe in rain so I can crawl inside myself and explore
where I left off, months ago.
I believe in myself to fulfill my growth that society has
set, but I believe in not showing them, I believe in teasing
society.
I believe in social detox.
I believe in passion as my faith to fall back on
I believe passion sits deep in my belly, able to irrupt in
seconds, and its grasp on my brains functions a little too
tight.
I believe in reciting my previous addresses like you recite
your religious texts.
I believe I have nothing to hide.
I believe in myself to be as strong as everyone says I am.
I don't believe in institutions, pinning students down as
incapable of social growth compared to others, when they don't
know anything about them, except in this one boxed room.
I believe in bravery, and my own backbone.
I believe the bad is recounted more than the good.
And I believe if you recognized any of this, or heard between
my lines, we should be properly introduced.



Perfect

Emily Kesel

This is gonna hurt like hell when I get home.

Every pitch I throw intensifies the throbbing in my
shoulder exponentially. My right arm has been through a lot in
the last couple of months. It's carried the team all the way
here and is starting to feel the burn of all the stress it's
been under. But right now I can't focus on the pain. Now I
have to focus on the batter waiting for my pitch. I let my arm
dangle in front of me as I lean forward and stare into Cart-
er's crotch to get the sign.

He puts down three taped fingers. A changeup. Not this
time. This guy's already proven he can't take the heat, and
I'm not going to give him anything he can take. The bill of my
cap wiggles slightly as I shake off his sign.

He tries again. One finger pointed toward his left thigh.
Inside fastball. There you go, Carter. I make a slight nod with
my chin and straighten up on the mound, gripping the seams of
the ball for a heater. I step back with my left foot, bringing
my glove and the ball behind my head, then kick and fire.

The fastball rises as it zips past the batter, and he
chops at it to no avail. Strike three, son. You're out. Just
like the twenty-three batters before you. The eighth inning
ends and my teammates praise me as we jog to the third base
dugout. Coach slaps me on the butt as I file in. "You're on fire
out there, boy. Look just like your old man did the day we won
it all." Coach can't tell, but his words make my blood run
hot. He doesn't mean anything by them, of course, and I know
that everyone old enough here is probably thinking the same
thing that he is.

The last time our school won the state championship was
twenty-two years ago, when my dad and Coach were seniors on
the team. Dad was the star pitcher back then, leading the team
through an undefeated season to the title. It was his shin-
ing moment of glory. To this day, the newspaper clippings
that followed his streak of greatness are prominently framed
and displayed in our basement, along with all his medals and
trophies. He's left no room for my awards because of his re-
fusal to acknowledge that decades have passed since his heyday
and that he missed his shot at the pros to have his only son.
Being a grocery store manager is a far cry from being a big
league pitcher, and he'll never let me forget it.

As I make my way through the dugout to retrieve my hel-
met and batting gloves, everyone is giving me lots of space.
That tends to happen when a pitcher has a perfect game going.
I don't need the space, but I'll take it. With everyone

avoiding me as if I have suddenly developed leprosy, navigating the dugout is much easier. I gather my helmet, gloves, and bat then wait in the on-deck circle while the opposing pitcher finishes his warm-up tosses.

I look quickly to the bleachers behind home plate, where my father's butt is parked in its usual spot. Three rows up, slightly shifted toward the right-handed batter's box so he can play umpire while I pitch. As usual, his arms are crossed and he wears a scowl under his pristine ball cap. He never applauds or cheers. Just sits there passing judgment on the game like the baseball god he believes himself to be. It's not how he normally acts in public, but everyone knows that he's a different man when it comes to this sport. No one has ever questioned that.

My mother is seated several rows higher, next to Carter's mom, where she's safe from having to associate with him. I'll never know what she once saw in him, but whatever it was has since disappeared. I just wish she would have realized sooner that it's not worth it to try to act like he's still that man.

I guess if I were to look at him objectively and think about how he would have been in his glory days, I can see what might have been attractive for her. He was, and still is, strong and intimidating. His shoulders are almost twice as broad as a regular man's and his arms remind me of Mark McGwire's during his steroid days. His hair is dark black but showing more flecks of gray these days, as is his beard, but his light blue eyes still seem to see right through people. Despite his intimidating physique, though, people are drawn to him. He's always smiling at strangers and is full of exciting stories that hold everyone's attention. People trust him within minutes of meeting him. I wish they didn't. I wish they could see what Mom and I see. Maybe then it wouldn't be such a mystery when we finally leave him.

When she married the man, Mom must have thought that he could provide her with a great combination of safety and fun. She was wrong on both counts. I can't remember too many times when I saw my mother smile because of something my dad said or did. He's put other things on her face, but never a smile. If it weren't for her, I would have stopped putting up with his crap a long time ago.

Even though I am pitching a perfect game, we do not have this championship all wrapped up. Our offense apparently missed the bus this morning, because we have not had a base runner get past second. I have hit singles in each of my first two trips to the plate but have been stranded both times when the guys behind me failed to follow up.

I dig into the dirt of the batter's box with my right

foot, tap my bat on the back tip of the plate, and then bring my left foot in as well. I wave my bat back and forth as the pitcher winds up. He fires a fastball. Most likely it was meant to just brush the inside corner, but as it comes in, it rises higher and higher until it is hurtling straight for my chin.

In the split second it takes for the ball to travel sixty feet, I am ten years old again, in the back yard with my father, learning how to get hit by a pitch to get on base. "It only hurts for a little bit," he says as he fires another pitch straight at my rib cage. "Be a man, Jake. Rub some dirt on it."

I spin out of the box just before this guy's fastball can shatter my jaw. My father and I obviously have different ideas of what it means to be a man. I think it means knowing when to stand there and take it, and when to get the hell out of the way.

Normal heart rate restored, I stare back out at the pitcher, who gets the sign he wants and then fires another fastball, this time over the outside part of the strike zone. I let the pitch come over the plate a bit before smacking it the other way down the right field line. I tear out of the box, thinking two all the way, until I see the right fielder bobble the ball, and Coach is screaming for me to go for third. As I near the bag, he signals for me to get down, and I slide headfirst, clutching the base with my left hand just before the third baseman applies the tag to my backside.

Coach pounds my helmet with delight as I dust myself off and stand on the bag. Unlike my father, who is the only one of our fans not going crazy, he claps loudly and yells encouragement to Carter, our next batter. As I take my lead off of third, I reach up my hand to adjust my helmet and notice the bruise on my arm peeking out from underneath my shirt-sleeve. Not for the first time in my life, I tug the sleeve farther down my arm to cover the black and blue splotch. Those are the easy ones to cover. A black eye is a different story. The first time I got one of those, my mother tried to cover it with makeup, like she does with hers.

"Forget that, Mom," I'd said. "Let's just leave while we can."

"No, Jake. He's just going through a stressful time. It'll get better."

All these years later it must still be a stressful time. But we're not going to use that excuse for him much longer.

Carter doesn't manage to put the ball in play and bring me home. And neither do the next two guys. Their three strikeouts end the top of the ninth, and we're still scoreless.

In the eighteen years of my life, I have never once heard my father say that he is proud of me. Not when I hit my first home run in Little League. Not when I won the seventh grade spelling bee. Not earlier this year when I was offered a full-ride scholarship to play baseball for a great school. My father prefers pointing out shortcomings to praising accomplishments. Bending the rules. Cutting corners. Second place. Anything less than perfection. Those are Dad's least favorite things. But he's always more than happy to talk about them. And to use whatever means necessary to make sure they don't happen again.

As I walk out to the mound for the bottom of the ninth, I am aware of how easy it would be to get the next three hitters out, as I have done the whole game. We would go into extra innings and eventually our offense would figure out a way to push a run across. I can keep their guys off the bases as long as needed, even with a sore arm. It occurred to me a long time ago that I control this game. I didn't come into it expecting to be so dominant, but I haven't made a mistake all day. I have been in control since the first pitch, and I will be in control until the last.

Would you be proud of me then, Dad? If I can finally be perfect? If I can do the thing you did that's the source of all the pride you have in yourself? Something tells me yes. If I can keep getting these guys out and we can score a run, we'll claim the state title. I laugh to myself as I try to picture what it would look like for him to stand up and cheer for me. The thought is ridiculous.

Their seventh hitter digs into the left-handed batter's box to lead off the inning. He has speed so his hitting style is to try to slap the ball while running toward first. So far he's grounded weakly to third and attempted a bunt that Carter came out of his crouch to handle like a pro. I don't want to give him anything over the plate where he can get the big part of the bat on it, so I plan to jam him with fastballs inside. He swings and misses at the first one, almost spinning out of his cleats, a little too eager to break up my perfecto. My next pitch is even farther inside, and he barely makes contact with the handle of his bat. The ball trickles right back out to me, and I easily field it and toss it to first. The throw beats him by five steps.

One down.

The eighth place hitter is the exact opposite of the last guy. As a catcher, he doesn't move very fast, but he has power and can hit to all fields. The fact that he hits in the eighth place is a testament to how stacked their lineup is. Not that it has mattered today. He is just as eager as

his teammate, giving it all in his first two attempts at hitting the fastball and fouling one back to the fence behind the plate. He's right on my fastball. Time to change things up. Carter puts down three fingers again and this time I nod. I wind up, kick, and throw in the exact same manner as the first two pitches, but the ball is fifteen miles an hour slower in getting to the plate this time. He could have swung and missed twice before it ever got to him.

Two down.

I circle the mound while the infielders toss the ball around before giving it back to me. Our fans are standing now, most of them applauding and praising me. Mom is beaming with delight. But not Dad. As I rub some dirt on the ball, I look directly at him with one eyebrow raised questioningly. The scowl is gone and it has been replaced by a look I have rarely seen before. His eyes are slightly squinted and the corners of his mouth are beginning to drift upward. He is not smiling, but he looks as though he is amused by what is happening on the field. Could he be confirming my previous guess that he may finally be proud of me when I finish this game and be more perfect than he ever was?

The stadium announcer's voice echoes through the park, naming their pinch hitter. Despite their pitcher's great performance thus far, they're pulling him in hopes that this guy can end the game here or at least start a rally for a run. The pinch hitter is a big guy - he probably had to have his uniform specially made to account for his excess bulk around his middle - and he waddles to the plate nervously gripping his bat. As a non-starter, he's obviously not their best hitter, but I'm willing to bet that he's got a little pop in his swing because of his size.

As the big fella steps in and pounds the plate with his bat, Carter gives me a smile and an encouraging nod before descending back into his squat. I return his gesture and look in for his sign. He knows the fastballs have been working all day without losing any speed, so he calls for one inside. I nod and deliver it. Big Fella watches it zip past his meaty thighs for strike one.

I glance at Dad. He nods his head approvingly and my mouth almost falls open in disbelief. I am making history here.

Our crowd grows even louder. Big Fella looks down the line to his third base coach for encouragement then settles back into the box. Carter calls for another fastball, this time outside, hoping Big Fella will chase it. He does - way behind it - and he's down to his last strike.

Dad has uncrossed his arms and joined the rest of the crowd in standing. One elbow rests in the palm of his other

hand as he nervously bites at a knuckle. Even though the game wouldn't end if I get Big Fella to strike out, I still would have pitched nine innings of perfect baseball. In a championship game. Even my father, who has never been proud of anyone but himself, has to stand up and acknowledge that the feat I am about to accomplish is incredible.

All I have to do is get him out. I'm one pitch away from becoming a bigger hero than my father ever dreamed I could be. If I make the right one, he'll finally, for the first time in my life, praise me for a job well done. He'll see me as a man. He'll let me live in peace rather than in fear. If I make the right pitch, I'll be perfect. And he'll be proud of me.

The roar of the crowd is almost deafening now, but as an experienced pitcher I can tune it out. The only voice I hear is my mother's, shouting words of praise and encouragement. I look at her and I can see how happy she is. The next pitch doesn't matter at all to her. At the end of the day and even when we are no longer with him, she will still be happy for me, happier than she's ever been because of him. He is the one whose emotions are riding on this pitch. I know what has to be done.

I suddenly feel the sting of every shot he's ever taken at me, the actual blows and the biting words of disgust and disappointment. I feel the rage that comes from watching him do the same to her. I take a second to let all wash over me. I relish it.

I am in control.

I am in control.

Long before Big Fella steps back in and Carter flashes the sign, I know what I am going to do. Carter's two fingers down indicating a curveball are exactly what I expect, and I nod.

All right, Big Fella. Here's your chance. I'm gonna need you to take it.

I grip the ball for a curveball like I have a million times before. I come set, lift my arms over my head, and deliver with the same motion as the last two pitches, as every pitch. The ball leaves my hand and sails toward Carter's mitt waiting at the bottom of the strike zone where the pitch should end up after it breaks.

But it doesn't break.

Instead, my first imperfect pitch hangs over the sweet spot of the strike zone, and Big Fella takes his chance. His swing makes solid contact, and the ball jumps off his bat. I turn and watch it sail over my head. Over the infield. Over the outfield. Over the fence.

Big Fella all but skips around the bases, a state

champion and a hero. As he crosses the plate and jumps into the huddle of his screaming teammates, I am not watching.

I am looking straight at my father, who knows exactly what I've done. His scowl has returned permanently. I smile in return.

This is gonna hurt like hell when I get home.



My Arrogant Mental Tendencies

Jefferson Spears

All day I sit and think my high thoughts
My low desires permeating through my brain
As I argue with others and tie their words into knots
Because I tolerate no affront to my pensive train
Challenge me and watch the rebuttals rain
You'd best come prepared for an intellectual fight
I'll watch your emotional energies strain
As my thoughts flow endlessly into the night

I wonder what the next challenger has brought
Will it be novel or the same old refrain?
Perhaps today will be the day where some insight is caught
I do hate when the discourse is boring and plain
Do no others seek philosophical gain?
It turns out the objector this time wasn't so bright
As she tried to hold back her emotional pain
As my thoughts flow endlessly into the night

I think of all of the harsh lessons I've taught
The numerous people scared off through trials put forth in vain
And I wonder if perhaps it has all been for naught
Did they henceforth make sure their positions could sustain
A rigorous questioning before they choose to retain?
Or did they simply run off in fright
Of the man whose rationality waged a brutal campaign?
As my thoughts flow endlessly into the night

I sit in the lonely mental kingdom I reign
And realize the bleak future I've written outright
As I scream to the vacuum, going slowly insane
As my thoughts flow endlessly into the night.

Technology

Jacob Holtgraewe

Men, women, children,
stolen without permission.
Thieves aren't just in the form of people,
but in what takes the realness out of them.
Cell phones, tablets, devices,
steal time, attention, and interaction.
Lost in a world that is not real,
deeper into the depths of technology we plummet.
We laugh at what society has become,
but we created the monster.
Somewhere, life as we knew it changed.
Facebook friends mattered more than real ones,
Apps became the new basketballs,
Fingers on a screen became the new crayons,
and social media became the only form of interaction.
Technology progressed,
as living digressed.
Ipad at age 6,
Cell phone at 8,
And brainless at 10.
It is true that technology advanced the world,
but in doing so, stole the soul.

Pleasure/Pain

Jefferson Spears

Whistles from dead winds serve to make me numb;
Not one of the sensations that I seek.
I guess I'll warm amongst my fellow scum.

Perhaps the gloss of life has lost its peak
And left me without a single farewell,
Although it's just myself that makes me weak,

For I would rather vacation in hell
Than lose my will to any but myself.
So here I'll stay, just locked inside this shell.

So I will build a hedonistic pelf
In search of true experiential wealth.



I'm Sorry for Your Loss

Joseph Manuel Nieves

2nd Place: Prose

Daniel Newmeyer threw his cigarette down on the asphalt in the parking lot of the plaza and opened the passenger-side door of his mid-sized sedan. He bent down and tucked a bulky shopping bag under the seat and closed the door. Coming over to the driver's side, he pulled the bill of his cap own against the early spring sun and looked across the street for a place to buy some cigarettes. Only ten left in his pack. He needed more to get through the day. He slid his hands over his scratchy face and rubbed his eyes. It felt like a long time since Daniel had been able to sleep much. Four months ago his eighteen year-old son, Alex, shot and killed seven of his classmates and two teachers with a shotgun before putting a nine millimeter round through his own head.

Daniel came home for lunch that day when his wife, Patti, called him on his cell. She was crying, panicked. There had been an incident at Alex's school. A shooter. Alex was missing, he hadn't shown up for class that morning. Daniel ran, phone in hand, to his son's bedroom door and pounded on it.

"Alex? Are you in there?" He opened the door and entered. The room was cluttered and dark, the heavy curtains drawn closed, as they usually were. His son wasn't there. His backpack sat, left behind, in his desk chair.

"Patti, he's not here."

His wife sobbed hard on the other end of the line.

"Daniel," she cried. "Where is he?"

Three hours later a police officer came by their house and they knew. Patti screamed. Daniel just stared, stern-faced, like he didn't understand what the cop had said. But he didn't argue. He didn't say it must have been a mistake or insist it couldn't have been Alex. He just lowered his eyes and nodded, considering the new world that had been presented to him.

In the weeks that followed their home grew strange and uncomfortable. It was almost like they didn't recognize any of its components, including each other. A non-stop parade of police investigators and school officials came to question them. Clicking cameras flashed for days anytime they came or left, accompanied by reporters hounding them, wanting a quote from the people who created that monster that killed all those people. But they didn't have any answers. Patti couldn't take it, and Daniel felt her drifting from him everytime he told a journalist or a detective in that placid way that he didn't know where Alex got the guns. That he was depressed, but not

violent. That no, he never suspected his son was capable of something like this.

The gulf between them grew until finally, eight weeks after the incident, Patti packed a bag and stood with it by the front door.

Daniel leaned against the sofa with one hand in his pocket and said from someplace far away, "When are you going to come back?" It was another question she couldn't answer.

Daniel got in his car and headed over to the plaza across the road. It was a quiet morning, the silenced pierced only by the rumble of the motor. He learned to keep the radio off. They just asked the questions he asked himself all the time. Why did Alex do it? What could've been done to prevent it? What kind of asshole parents don't know their son is a psychologically damaged person about to snap and hurt other people? He pulled his car into a parking spot in front of the empty storefront and killed the engine. A big "Space Available" sign hung in the window. He walked into the drugstore, got in line, and peered behind the counter for his brand. Above the racks, a flatscreen television played some depression medication commercial.

"How can I help you, honey?"

Daniel looked at the cashier for the first time. She was a large woman with thick blond curls that fell on each side of her face like stage curtains.

"Uh, yeah. Those Pall Malls. The red pack," he said. He grabbed a lighter from a stand on the counter. "And this, too."

The television returned to some news coverage of teenagers and their parents laying flowers along a tall, black iron fence. Many of them were crying. The program cut to another shot of a building. It was Alex's high school. Over the footage, an anchorperson was saying, "Families and friends of the victims are gathered this morning at Brookdale High School, four months to the day after 18 year-old Alex Newmeyer brutally gunned down nine people, including seven students."

"Hmph," the cashier snorted. "Good riddance." Daniel reeled on his heels and placed his hands on the counter to steady himself.

"I'm sorry. It's just..." She leaned in a little and looked into Daniel's eyes and said, "What a piece of you-know-what. Can you believe some people in this world?" She turned around to grab the Pall Malls.

"Richard and Darlene Burns lost their 17 year-old daughter, Sarah, that day," the television said as the program cut to a middle-aged couple. The woman, Darlene, was red-eyed and miserable. Richard stood behind her in a tan coat, shoulders slumped. He wouldn't look at the reporter or

his wife.

"I just don't know how a person can be so cruel," Darlene said. Her brow furrowed in a tight knot over burning eyes. She was talking about Alex. Daniel frowned, trying but unable to remember his son that way. He wasn't cruel. Right? He played a cornstalk in his school's Thanksgiving play when he was five.

On screen, for a brief moment, Richard Burns looked up into the camera. His face was deeply lined and gaunt. His thinning hair waved in disheveled wisps on top of his head. There was something in his eyes. Judgment?

"Can you even imagine?" the cashier said. She had grabbed his cigarettes, but stood with her back to him, watching the screen. "Those poor people."

His face flushed. "How much for the cigarettes?"

She turned and looked at him. He avoided her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey." She laughed and waved the pack around. "I'm just standing around with them. It just tears me up to see people suffering just because some sick," she held a hand up next to her mouth and whispered the next word, "a-hole wanted to feel like a big man."

She rang him up. His hands shook and he had to pull everything out of his pocket to get to the folded bills. He put his keys down on the counter, grabbed the money, and plucked out a ten to hand to her. She took it and gave him a suspicious look he pretended not to notice. He grabbed his cigarettes and the lighter, and as he waited for his change he heard his name coming from the television. His face jerked up. On the screen was a photo of him and Patti. Underneath it, a banner read: *Did they know?*

The cashier saw Daniel's face change and turned to see for herself. When she saw the photo she let out a shriek and snapped her head back around and her wide eyes locked onto his and narrowed into a sharp, derisive look. It was a look that said, You did this. Daniel broke from her gaze. He wanted to say something to defend himself. To defend his son. But he couldn't. All these months later and he still didn't know anything. He looked up at her again, his eyes stinging, defiant against her bullshit accusatory glare.

"Fuck you," he said, and left.

Outside it was brighter, but still cold. He walked to his car, taking deep breaths as he felt for his keys in his pocket. They weren't there. He'd left them in store.

"Shit!" he yelled, and kicked the driver's side door. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" He stood there for a moment leaning into his palms on the window frame, his body quaking. He reached up and rubbed his eyes again. He was so tired. He glanced over at the looming "Space Available" sign. He knew this spot. It used to be a martial arts gym. Two years ago he'd enrolled

Alex in a Taekwondo class here after he found a boxcutter with blood crusted on the end of it sitting on his son's bathroom counter. It was a plea. An invitation for intervention. Were there others? Had he somehow missed them? He thought of Alex in his cornstalk costume, then imagined him sitting on the toilet, huddled over himself with the blade in his hands. What had happened in between? Where had Daniel been?

When he had confronted his son about it, Alex just collapsed in a little pile on his bed.

"What's going on, Alex?"

His son let his head fall forward, hiding his sullen face behind a long mess of hair the way he hid his thin frame under baggy clothes. He stared with fragile eyes at the wall.

"Alex, talk to me. I can't help you unless you tell me what the problem is."

"I just," Alex started, hesitating.

"Just what?" "I... I've lost my faith in people."

Daniel's face twisted, as if tasting something sour.

"You lost your faith in people?"

It was more of an accusation than a question. What's wrong with you? Alex turned away.

"I just don't get it. You're so smart. You're talented, funny. You do well in school, you're a good kid. What is so bad in your life right now? Life isn't that hard, Alex."

Alex shrank even smaller. He looked older than he was. Every comment made him flinch. Daniel couldn't understand it. He had been present for Alex's entire life. Surely, he was the authority here. Patti said it was a phase. If he didn't know then she must. Maybe he just needed more to do. A few weeks later he started classes at the gym. It made a difference. He spent more time outside his room. He started helping Patti with dinner like he used to. He smiled. After a couple months, though, the gym went under and they never found a replacement. The lessons had been so expensive.

Daniel pulled the door of the drugstore open and walked inside. The cashier was speaking in excited tones to a group of her co-workers. Some customers also gathered around the register to listen. Daniel couldn't hear what she was saying except the words "abuse at home." Her audience all looked at once at him as he approached the counter. His keys were still there. He picked them up, and was about to leave when he caught the eye of the cashier. She looked petrified, her hands clasped over her mouth.

"What do you think I've done?" he asked her. She said nothing.

"You think I'm responsible for this? What could I have done differently? Can you tell me that? Can any of you tell me that? How do you keep your children safe and alive? That's supposed to be the easy part, right? The part you're not

gonna completely fuck up. Then someday you get a phone call. One day someone you love does something like this. You all think you're so goddamned great. Think you got it all figured out. What do you know? Huh? Who are you when this happens?"

They had no answers. Daniel left the store, got back in his car, and headed home. Picking up the cigarettes, he peeled the plastic film off, then plucked one out with his teeth. He lit it and pulled hard. His nerves melted under the rush of nicotine. His fingertips tingled and his head swooned. It was a familiar feeling. He and Patti had both quit when their first son was born. They wanted to set a good example for their children.

He pulled into his empty driveway and shut the car off. With the cigarette hanging from his lip, he looked around out the windows at his neighborhood. No one was out. He reached down under the passenger seat and grabbed the bag, then climbed out of the car. The sky was clear and blue and the air was warming up. Daniel entered his house, walked straight passed the kitchen and the living room, down the hall to Alex's room. It was hardly the same. The police had confiscated most of his son's belongings as "evidence." All that remained were a bare mattress and an empty bookshelf and desk. Daniel didn't know what they'd find in all those things. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. Had Alex written about him? Had he blamed him for all this? Was he to blame? Maybe he could've been more available. Listened more. Maybe he could have taken Alex to the movies more or out to dinner more. There must have been something more he could have done that would have prevented this.

He reached into the bag and pulled out a dark gray, hard plastic case. There was a buckle on the front of it with a slot to slide in a lock. At this point, Daniel didn't need to be so careful. He opened it. Inside was a black, nine millimeter pistol. The same kind, according to the news reports, that Alex had used. He pulled it out and looked at it. He'd never held a gun and was surprised at how heavy it felt in his hand. He tried to imagine, to his morbid surprise, how heavy a shotgun would feel. It took him a second to figure out how to eject the magazine, and when he finally managed to it fell away and clanked loudly on the tile floor. Daniel reached down and picked it up and studied it. It looked like some sort of terrible Pez dispenser. He reached back into the bag and pulled out a small box of rounds, opened it, and selected a single, shiny bullet. He rolled the brass casing between his thumb and forefinger for a moment, and then pushed the bullet into place and slipped the magazine back into the handle. When he pulled back on the slide he shuddered. He tried to imagine how Alex must have felt, pitiful in that final moment. Did he

regret what he did? Had he planned for it to end that way? He started weeping, the gun trembling in his hand, as he thought about his cruel, terrible son, and all the anger and self-hatred that Daniel had fatally downplayed.

The doorbell rang.

Shit. Who could it be? A reporter looking for a response after the vigil at the school this morning? Was it Patti? He tucked the gun under the mattress and shoved the box of rounds and the case under the bed. The doorbell rang again.

"I'm coming!" he shouted, wiping his eyes on his sleeves as he made his way to the front of the house. He opened it to find, not a reporter or his wife, but the man from the news program. He stood, taller than expected, in his same tan coat, with his lined, gaunt face growing out under those unruly wisps.

"Hi, Mr. Newmeyer," he said. "You don't know me, but I'm--"

"You're Sarah Burns' father." The man's eyes welled at his daughter's name.

"Richard. I saw you on the news."

"Yeah, well. I, uh, I'm sorry to just drop by like this. I just... I know this is going to sound crazy, maybe, but I j-just w-wanted to," he couldn't finish the thought. His head dropped down into his hands.

Daniel's stomach smouldered with pity and shame as he watched Sarah's father. He gripped the doorknob tightly and tried to imagine what had brought this man to his doorstep. Should he be afraid? If Richard had come here to kill him, maybe that was a good thing.

Richard straightened and took a deep breath. He wiped his eyes on the back of his hand and said, "I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry for your loss."

Daniel's hand fell from the doorknob.

"I used to see you and your son at the martial arts place. Sarah had been taking dance classes at the studio next door since she was... six? Seven? Yeah, seven. She did ballet. For a while, anyway. Then it was jazz for a few years. But then that wasn't cool anymore. Then it was hip hop dancing, you know, like on TV. She saw it on one of those reality contest shows. Sometimes I feel like I forget which one she doing at time- when... you know. I think that it was jazz and then I have to tell myself, 'No, no, it was hip hop.' And then I start to get angry with myself, you know? I start wondering how it's possible for me to forget something like that. How could I forget any of it?"

Daniel was crying without realizing it. "I am so, so sorry, Richard."

But Richard just waved a dismissive hand, as if swatting at a fly. "That's not-" he started, shaking his head,

but stopped. "I know. Thank you. I just wanted to say, you and Alex used to come out of that gym and I could tell- you always had your arm around him, you know? You were smiling. I used to think, 'Now there's a good dad.'"

"I really thought he was okay," Daniel said, pleading. "I just thought he needed to work through some things. That he'd snap out of it! I thought he was going to be fine, I swear to God!"

"I'm sure you did. It's just," he let out a sigh through his nostrils, as if bracing himself. He looked up into Daniel's eyes. It was the same look Daniel had seen earlier, only now he understood it. Not judgment. Resignation. "We can't ever really know someone, can we?"

Daniel thought about this. "He was such a quiet baby. You know, you hear about parents who never get any sleep. Their babies cry all through the night. Alex never did that. He just... I used to spend so much time just watching him. Trying to figure out what he was going through, what he was thinking. I always assumed that he would just tell me if something was wrong."

Richard gave a pensive look and nodded. "Take care, Daniel."

After he left, Daniel closed the door and walked back through his empty house. He was exhausted. He walked passed the living room where Patti measured Alex for his costume, passed the kitchen where he told his mother all about his first crush while they made dinner together, passed the bathroom where he used to cut himself. Passed the room where he planned all those terrible things. Passed the gun and the box of rounds. He entered into his bedroom, where he was when he first heard what happened, pulled back the covers of his bed, and collapsed into a deep, dreamless sleep.

It was late when Daniel pulled up to the school. He had slept well into the night. Candles had been lit along the fence surrounding the campus, and as Daniel, carrying a brown paper bag, made his way along the now deserted sidewalk he saw pictures of each of the dead students surrounded by flowers. A few of the deceased's loved ones had erected little wooden crosses draped with rosaries. Tears streamed down his face as he looked at each one. When he reached the end of the vigil he stopped, and reached into the bag. He pulled out a green costume, folded neatly with its stringy leaf hands tucked under it, and set it on ground. He placed the yellow corn headpiece next to it, said goodbye to his cruel, mixed up son, and walked back to his car.

Lost Love

Jacob Holtgraewe

3rd Place: Poetry

In the bar after hours,
a man sits alone.
Beard old,
scotch even older.
Weary eyes tell a story,
one that of which travels down roads of sorrow.
The laughter, the love, it all lives,
but he cannot find it.
Weathered jean jacket bears the brunt of his lost love,
spends its nights draped on the lonely bar stool.
Drink brings life to his chilled body,
warmth that she used to fulfil.
Scotch long gone,
stare cannot be broken into the bottom of the glass.
With drink, and in heart,
nothingness remains.
He orders yet another.

Dad

Lea Uthe

2nd Place: Poetry

There's an empty place,
an empty space
where you should be.

There's a hole in our family
that can never be filled
no matter how hard we try.

A gap in the pictures
that will always be there;
it leaves us incomplete.

It's hard to believe
it's been three years
since our last embrace.

I want to see your grin -
crooked, but so sincere.
Your sense of humor, wry and
dry.

I want to listen to your voice,
you rarely raised it in anger -
always passive-aggressive.

You were always there for us.
A shoulder to lean on,
a strong, silent support.

I want to hear your laugh.
It was rare, which made it
All the more precious.

But the only way
to do that now,
is in my own mind.

And it's not the same,
and it never will be;
until we're reunited.

So for now I'll keep on missing
you,
and someday we'll meet again.



The Step

Maria Donovan

Coal smoke, blue sky, harsh music surrounds her
cacophony of rails and chuffs and trains.
Flat green plains dotted by brown livestock
framed by the wood panels as the coach flashes past.
She keeps a straight back, even though her pins bury into her
scalp.
Sweat beads up on her forehead against her new straw hat.
Gripping the worn leather handles of her carpetbag,
She looks without seeing the other passengers or the world
outside.
Multiple scenes streak through her vision.
The warmth and multitude of her family back east,
Tears, embraces and stomach knots at the train station,
The chaos of changing trains in Chicago,
The bent-edged, yellowed picture of her new school awaiting
her.
The conductor's yells echo, startling her into action.
She stands up and presses out the wrinkles on her travel
skirt.
The train jerks, shudders and comes to an abrupt stop.
She steps down tentatively and looks around at her new world.
Stately buildings lining the Front Street,
Cowboys and businessmen hurrying past.
The rustic and earthy smell of livestock mixes
with the metallic perfume of machinery.
At the arched entrance to the station, she looks
down the street at the unblocked visage of the domed capitol.
She breathes deeply and places a brave smile on her face.
Holding her bag and swan necked umbrella, she takes a step.



Cycles

Bongiwe Shongwe

When into a deep abyss
my shattered being falls,
when all round brightly shines
the light of devouring flames-
their fangs like suction tubes
disabling my defences-
all the wisdom of clichés,
some of phoenixes and flames,
others of light and tunnels,
loses all prior substance
as do robust, angry waves
to sailors caught in the tides.
Even in such instances
a pair of inviting arms
rewinding the rod that draws
me to the engulfing flames
on whose trail resurgence thrives.
Ahead race the light beams
pulling me out of the depths
of once entrapping tunnels.
Hope is never lost. Clichés.

After the Typhoon

-to the victims of Typhoon Haiyan

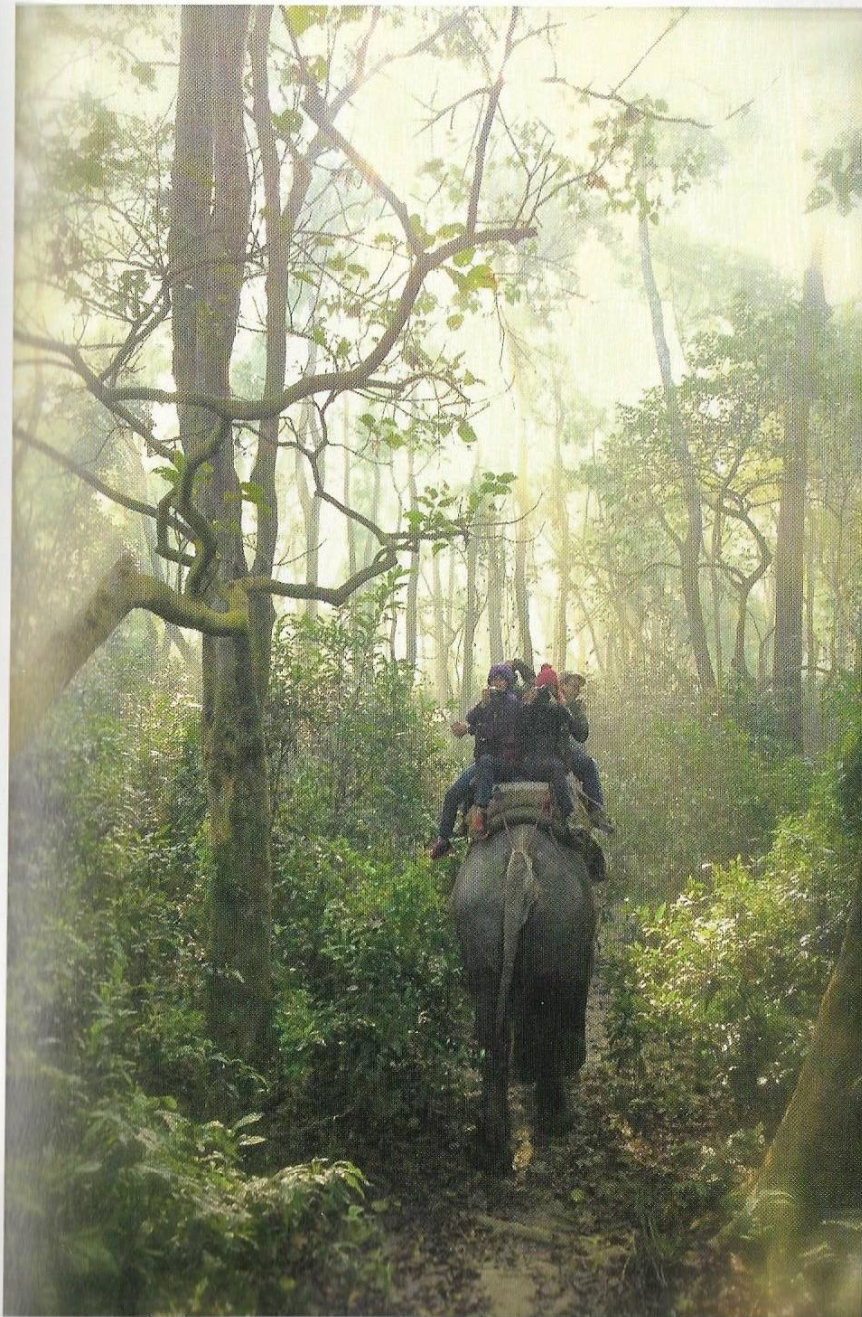
Jan Michael Ramirez

This farce plays on, whilst fearfully we stare,
Comes spiralling once more o'er flimsy shores,
As cities fall to bombs of livid air,
And bodies stain the streets like open sores.
She takes the stage, beset by tragic pains,
A nation's tears that from her eyes accrue,
And rises slow, to pick at what remains.
"What will to live!" her leaders crow anew--
--And leave her, to her starving, naked fear.
No stronger homes for her will they defray.
They'll toss at her some dried food, as they sneer:
"Remember us, come next Election Day."
It's done. The world applauds, and we forget.
This coming play should be our biggest yet.

Into the Woods with an Elephant

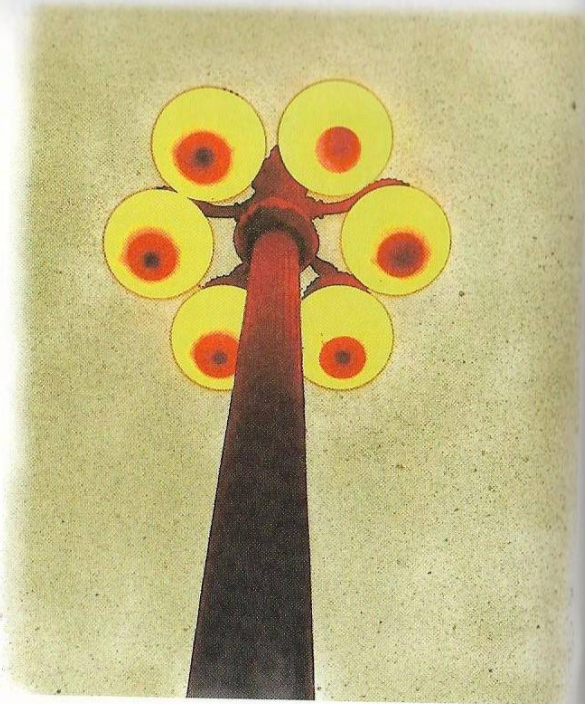
Suravi Shrestha

1st Place: Graphics



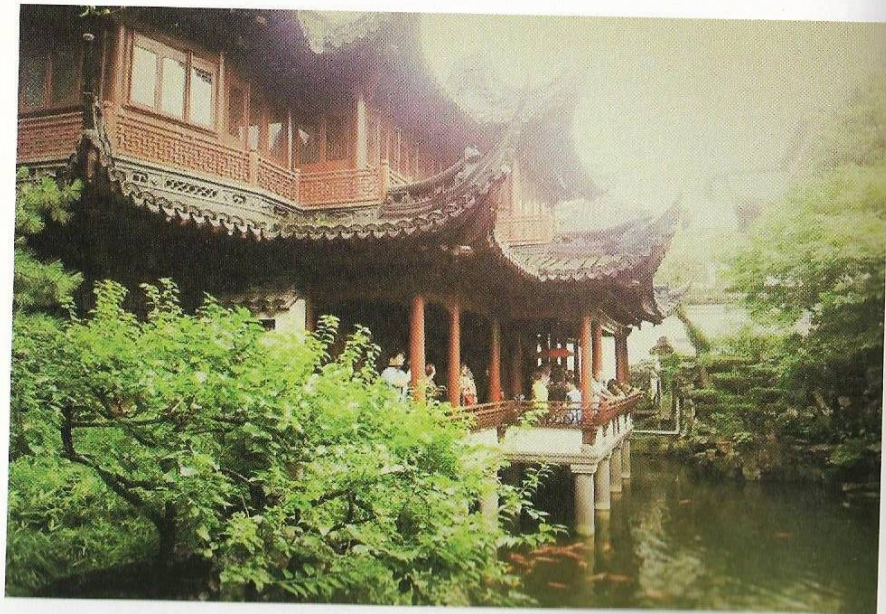
**Invasion of
the Chicago
Streetlamps**

Jan Michael
Ramirez



Green and Red

Mei Du

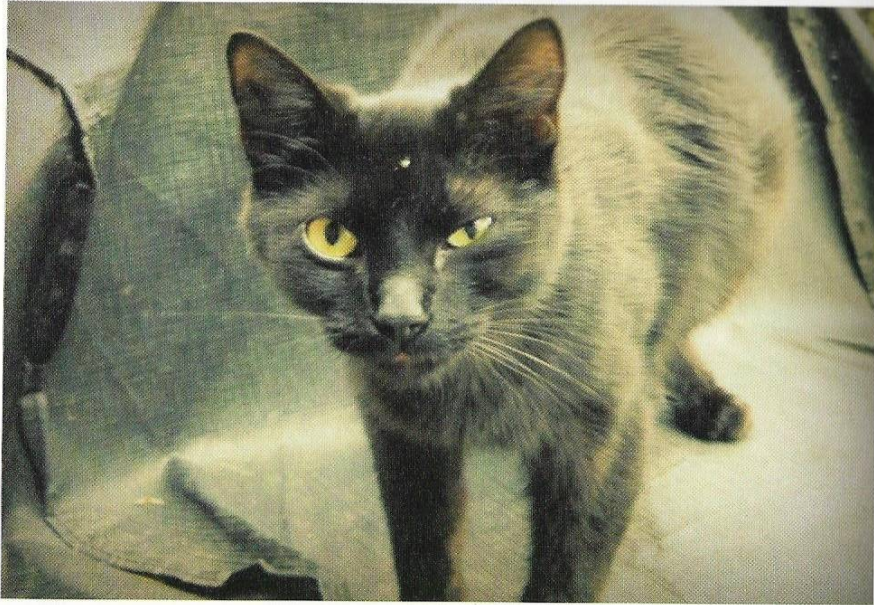


The Wise Owl of Westminster

Tiara Pettijohn



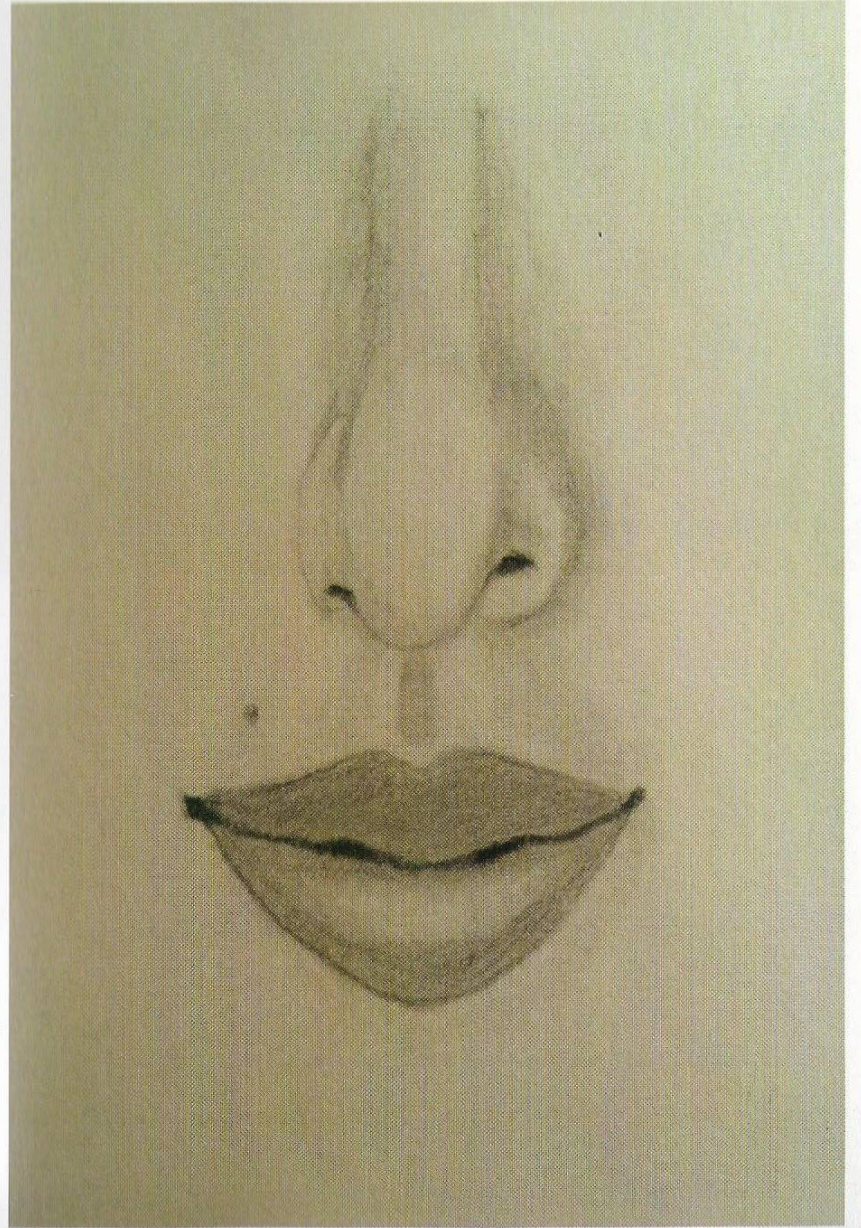
Beatrice
Tiffany Crawford



The Wheel
Tiffany Crawford



Smiles that Don't Reach the Eyes
Hannah Domino



Dystopian Chicago

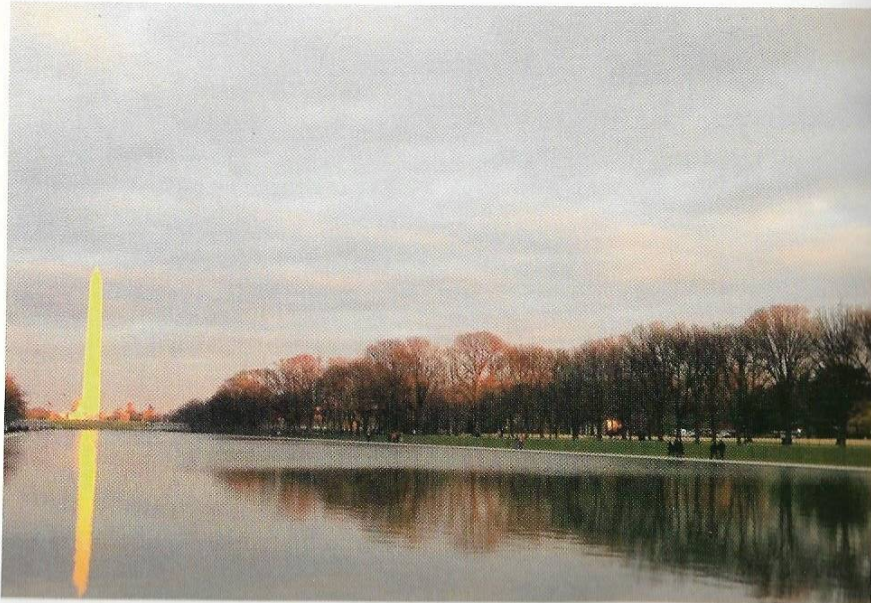
Jan Michael Ramirez

3rd Place: Graphics



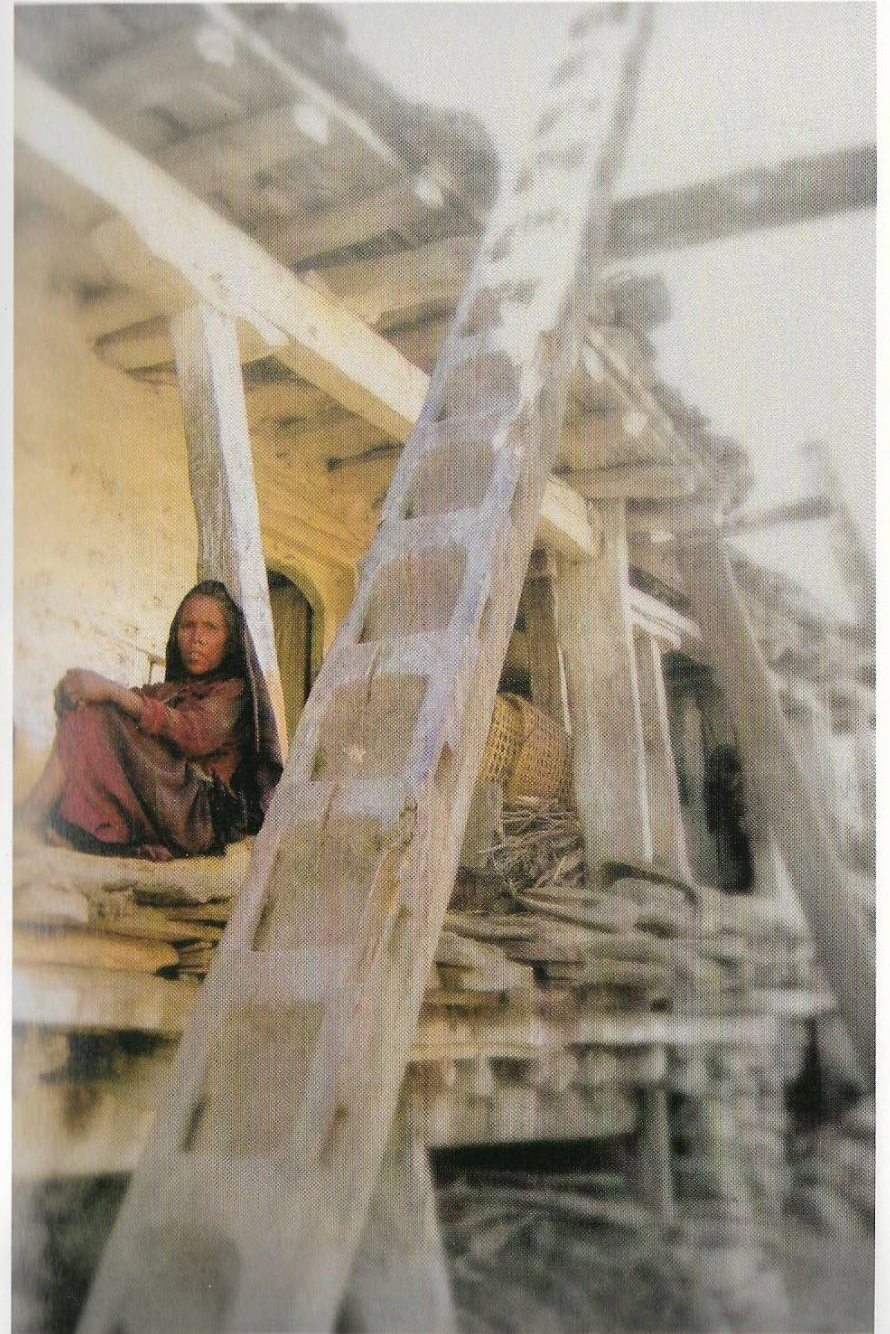
Sunset in DC

Suravi Shrestha

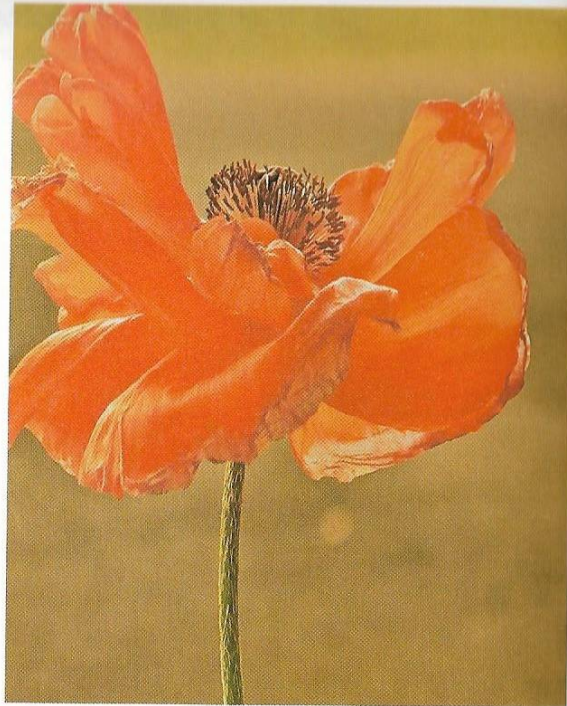


Longing for Hope

Suravi Shrestha



BeYOUtiful
Tiara Pettijohn



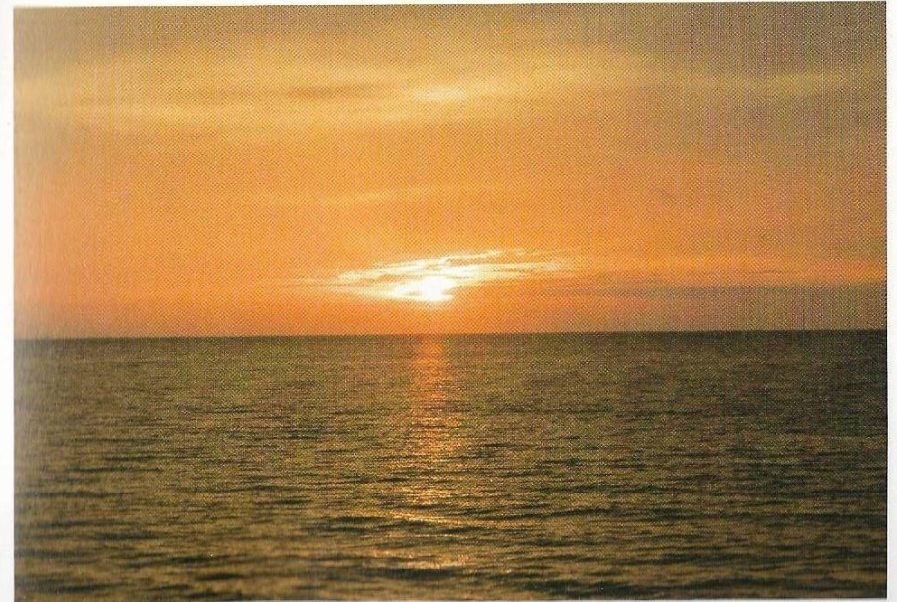
You See
Mei Du
2nd Place: Graphics



Columns of Westminster
Tiara Pettijohn



The Gulf
Tiffany Crawford



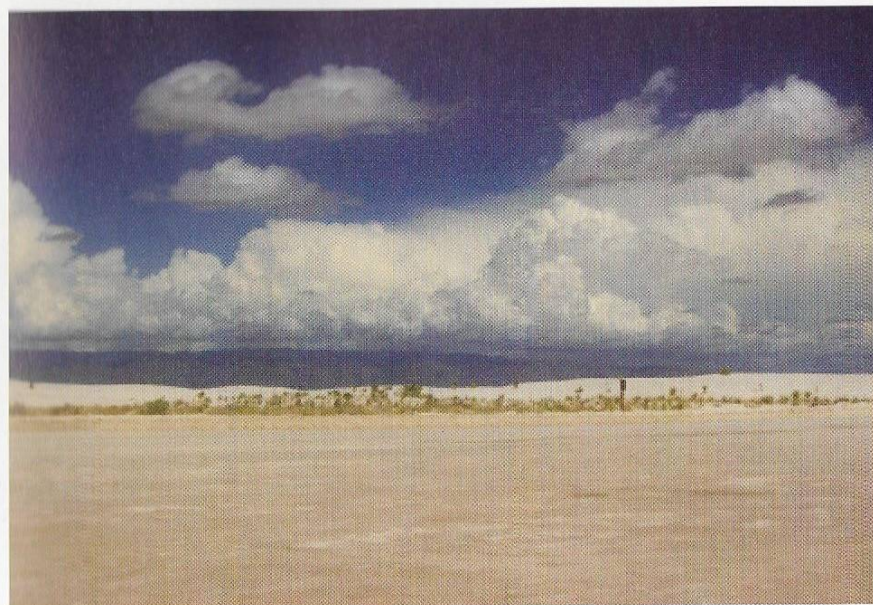
Rose in Bloom
Cassandra Beahler



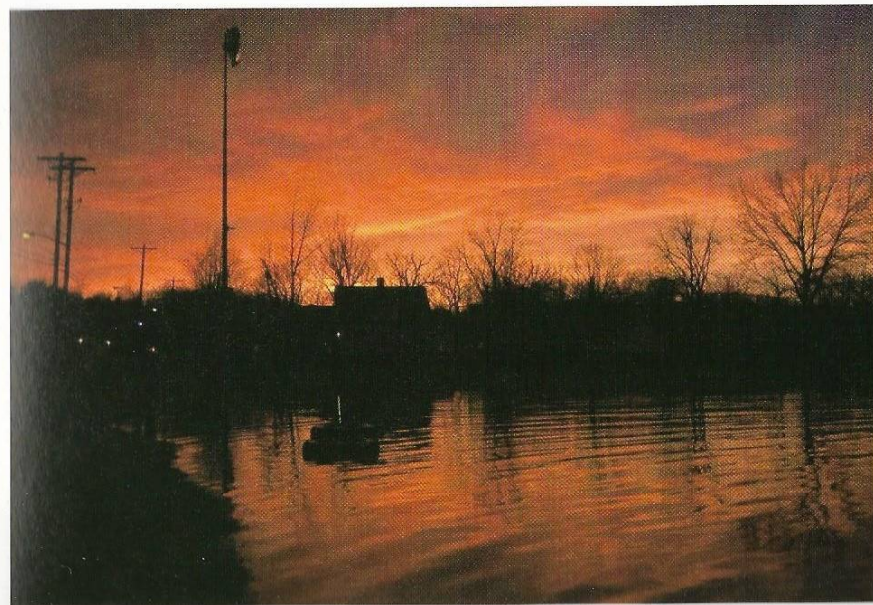
Paddy Fynn
Kate Crawford



New Mexico
Tiffany Crawford



Bleeding Sunset
Jan Michael Ramirez



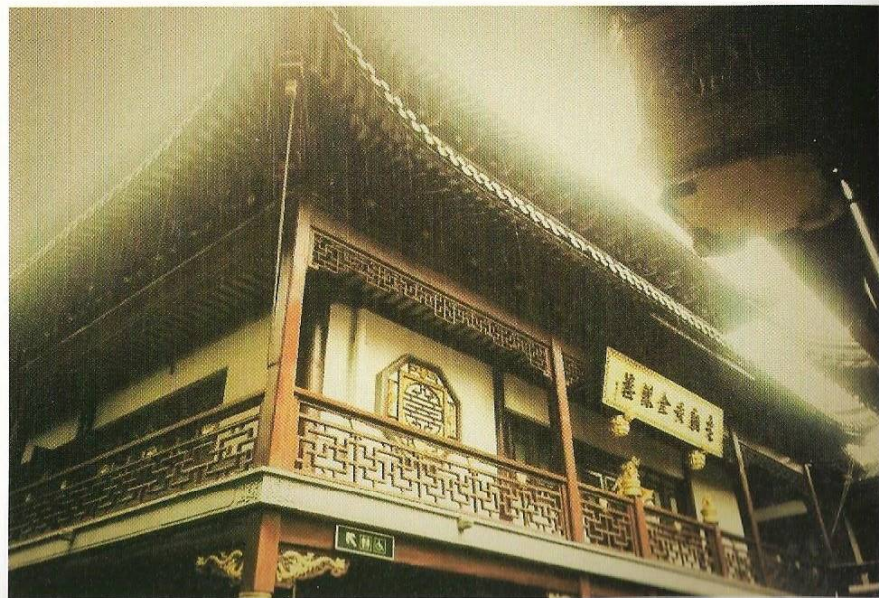
In the Pasture

Hannah Domino



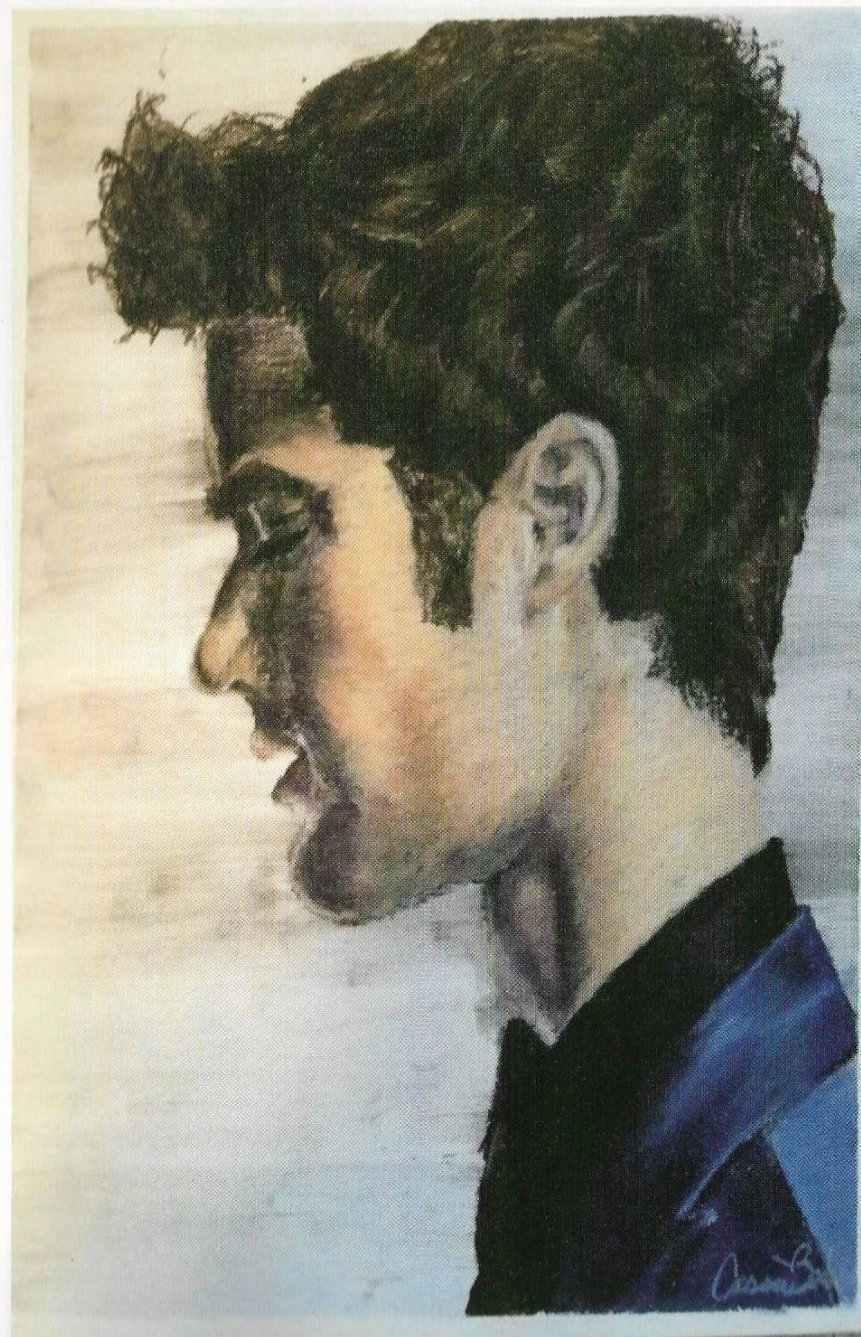
The Old Mansion

Mei Du



Darren Criss

Cassandra Beahler



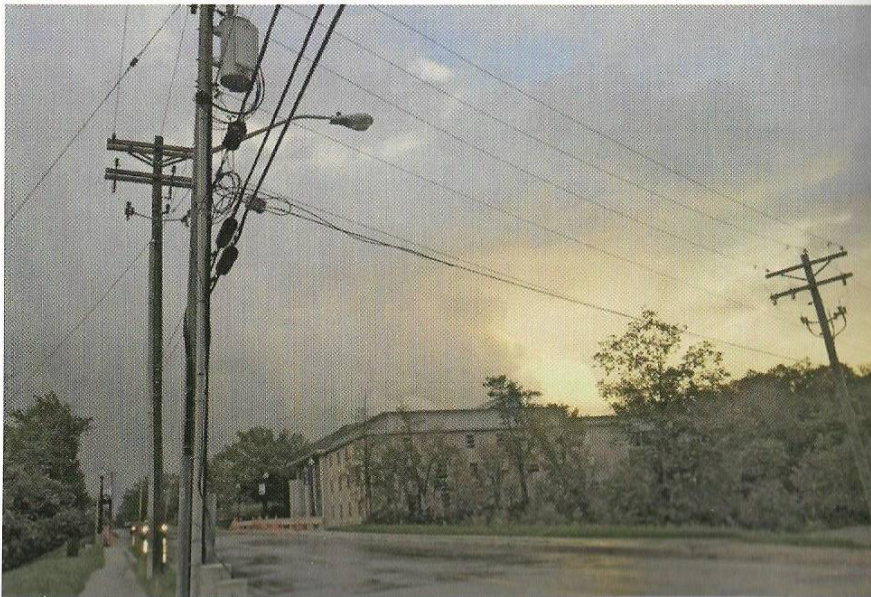
When You Do Not Understand Something, Take
a Look from a Different Perspective

Tiara Pettijohn
3rd Place: Graphics



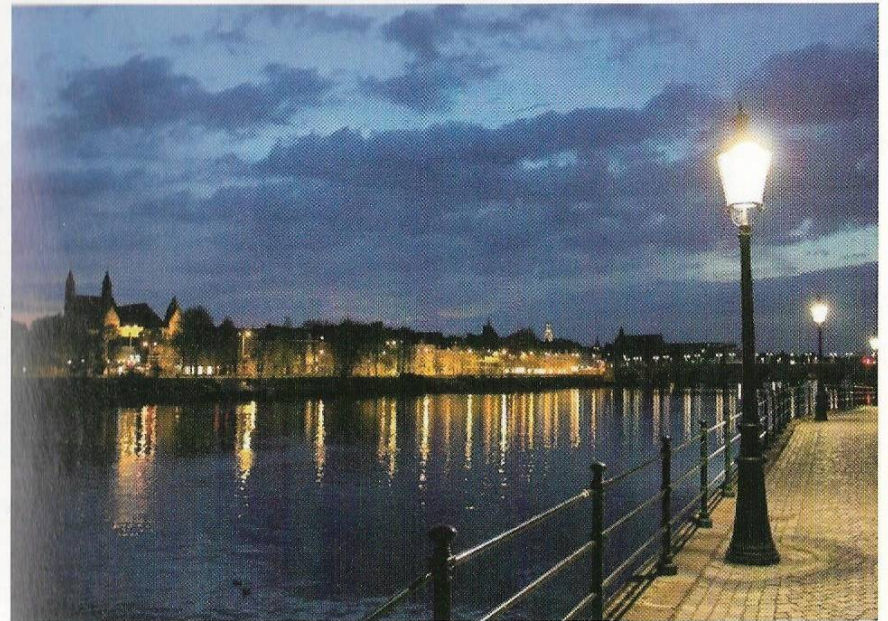
After a Rain

Mei Du



Maastricht, My Home

Kate Crawford



Raindrops Upon Stinson Creek

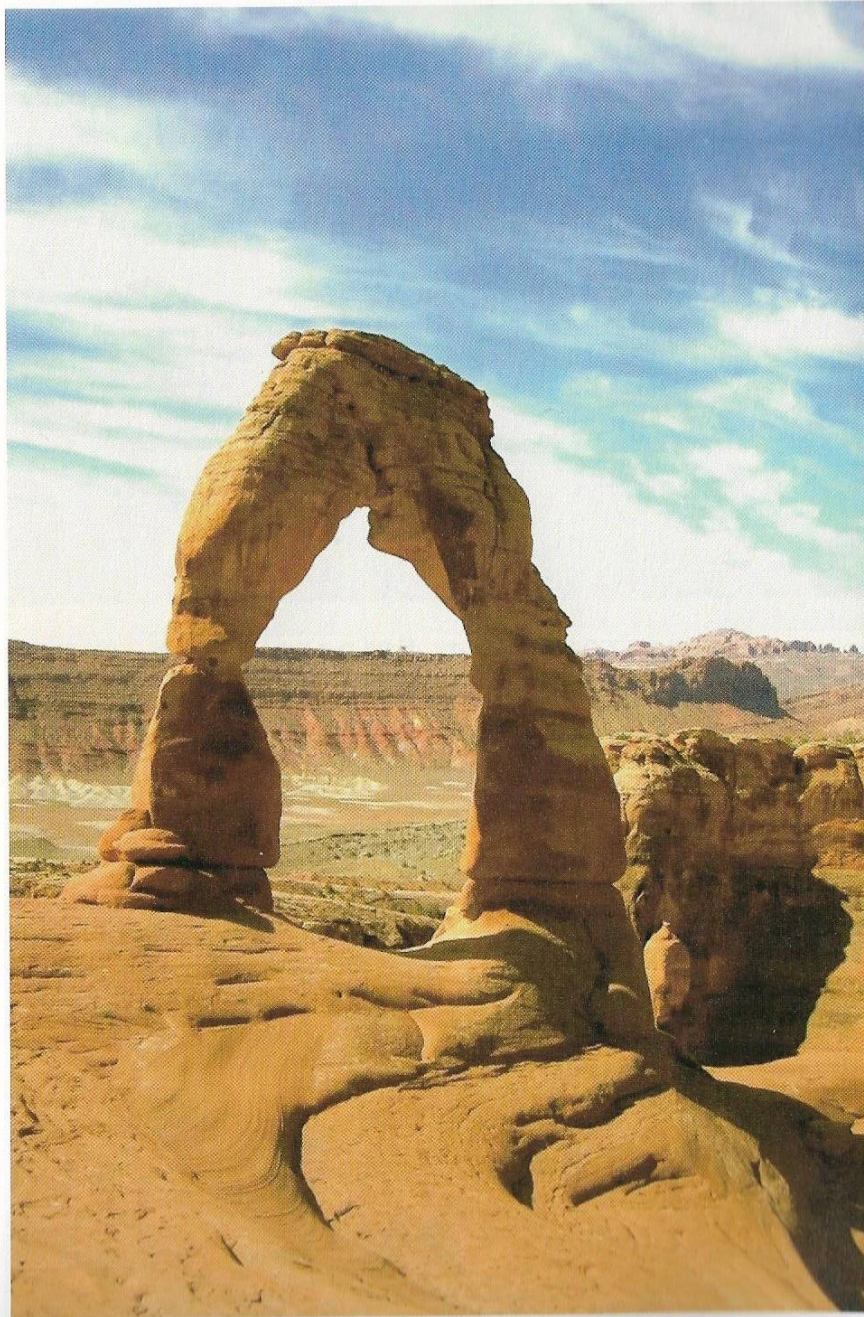
Tiara Pettijohn



The Other Arch

Suravi Shrestha

3rd Place: Graphics



The Art of Disillusionment

Sydney Franklin

As Reem walked to Presbyterian Manor, the crisp morning air danced through her auburn hair and the sunlight kissed her cheeks. On her way to work with an elderly woman, a woman she had yet to meet, Reem's excitement grew at the thought of doing art projects with a 'cute little old lady,' as she'd put it the day before. Emmy rolled out of bed way too early and greeted the day with her usual attitude.

"Now, nurse, why's this 'lil girl comin' again?"

Emmy had been told once each day leading up to Reem's first visit, and twice yesterday, that Reem was visiting weekly to do an art project with Emmy as a part of her senior thesis study on the effects of Art Therapy.

"Emmy, please try and act like you enjoy life today," the nurse replied. "Reem is coming to do art with you - pretend to be happy about it."

As she stepped up to the glass door, Reem punched in the code that she was instructed to use once she arrived.

"Sixteen seventy-three, sixteen seventy-three," she repeated to herself. Reem hit the star key and the latch on the door unfastened. She sauntered through the doorway and navigated the corridor to Room 213. As she peered through the open door, she saw a stout, round woman sitting in a rocking chair in the corner of the room. The woman's gray hair was pulled into a neat bun at the top of her head and her glasses were perched upon her nose; she was wearing a purple and green knitted sweater, brown corduroy pants, and black loafers.

"Ella Marie?"

Reem walked through the doorway and the woman's grimace could have made a flower wilt in sadness. The woman's eyes moved slowly from the yarn and needles in hand to Reem's dainty figure standing in the front of the room.

"Emmy. No one's called me Ella Marie since my momma died back in '79. Let's get this show on the road. Bingo starts at two"

Reem was up for the challenge that Emmy appeared to present because after all, she thought to herself, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? Reem pulled out two canvases and a set of acrylic paints.

"I thought today we could just get to know each other--"

"Oh, did you now?"

"Well, yes. I heard you're from Louisiana--"

"You heard right."

"--and I'm from Texas. I figured we could talk about our hometowns and draw what we think each one looks like ... I mean

... I've never been to Louisiana, so I thought it might be fun. Does that sound okay?"

Emmy grunted and extended one aged, but perfectly manicured hand out towards Reem., "Hand it here."

Reem gave her a canvas and she offered to go first. As Emmy peered over her bifocals, Reem could tell that she wasn't going to be able to get much more than the occasional retort out of this seasoned, 'charming,' old woman.

Reem, knowing that at this point in the semester it was too late to change her thesis study, returned each week with more reluctance than she'd had the week before. And as unhappy about the art projects as Emmy had been before they began, she started to see Reem's weekly visits as an interruption to her daily schedule.

Reem's visits with Emmy over the next few weeks dragged by slower than time does when waiting for Christmas in July. It seemed as though the pattern of monotony that characterized their visits would remain unchanged, and then one Wednesday both Reem and Emmy were proven wrong.

Reem stopped into Presbyterian Manor out of the sweltering afternoon sun and Emmy was seated in the Puzzle Room off to the left of the foyer.

"Afternoon, hun. We're doing a puzzle today. I'm tired of painting."

Emmy motioned for Reem to sit across from her and Reem mentally began to change her plan for the day; she did not know how she was going to start conversation over a puzzle of all things with this usually reticent old woman. Over the last two visits Emmy had begun to offer more than a couple sentences, but she definitely needed some prompting.

"So... how was your week?"

"Fine," Emmy sighed as she pushed two pieces together to form what appeared to be the body of a tiger. "I got to go to the grocery store."

"What did you get?" Reem handed Emmy a piece that contained the tiger's head.

"Oh, just some ingredients to bake cobbler - peach this week. They had 'em on sale for seven cents. The peaches, that is." Emmy glanced up at Reem and then her attention was back on the puzzle.

"Is it your recipe?" Reem inhaled a sharp breath at the look she received from Emmy next. She tossed her previous question around in her mind and wondered if it could have been offensive in any way. Reem generally attempted to stay on the surface level of conversations, but maybe asking about Emmy's recipe struck a sensitive cord.

Emmy continued to put pieces in place and Reem, with Emmy's unspoken permission, moved away from the topic of the

Peach Cobbler recipe.

"So... how was your ride to the store? Did you see the new park they built on Main?"

Emmy's hazel eyes could cut through steel, and they almost cut Reem. With her attention once again on the puzzle, Emmy snapped the last piece of the tiger into place and made an announcement.

"All finished," she exclaimed as she stood up and walked down the hall in the direction of her room. Following behind, Reem tried once more to connect with the mystery in front of her.

"Do you like to read, Emmy?"

The two walked through the doorway of Emmy's room. Emmy slipped off her pants and crawled into bed as the grandfather in the corner struck four, cueing, unbeknownst to Reem, Emmy's evening nap.

"Ya know, you have a funny way of tryin' to get me to talk?" Emmy gathered her hair up into a tousled bun and urged Reem, "pull the curtains on your way out, ya hear?"

Reem turned towards the door and tallied four unanswered questions for the day, which she had to admit was less than the usual ten, and pulled the paisley curtains closed over the windows that look out into the garden. Just as she was crossing the threshold into freedom she halted at the sound of her name creeping past the lips of someone that she didn't think would ever remember it.

"Reem?"

"Ma'am?" She spun around.

"The ride to the store was smoother than usual; I heard they've almost got the road fixed up. I did see the new park—we can go sometime, I'd like that. And I don't really read too much anymore because my eyes have gotten so bad, but I love being read to."

Reem smiled from ear to ear at this breakthrough, "I'll see you next week, Emmy," even let out a silent laugh as she continued towards the door.

"Oh, Reem? One more thing—"

Reem stopped.

"It was my Momma's."

Reem turned out the lights and walked home basking in the evening sun and the successes of that day's visit with Emmy.

A month or so rolled by and, in preparation for her last visit with her new friend, Reem collected each of her visit reflection journals into a scrapbook for Emmy. She tied the bow around the entire book and headed off to Presbyterian Manor for the last time.

When she arrived in Room 213, the empty bed brought

Reem to tears. She immediately knew what the sight before her indicated, but she just couldn't bring herself to ask the nurse at the desk in the hall. As she attempted to stop the tears from flowing, she grabbed a few Kleenex, laid the scrapbook at the edge of the bed, and sat down while her eye caught a glimpse of a bright red piece of paper, with her name, on it lying on the nightstand:

Reem,

Too much is given and thus much is required when you are blessed and highly favored like you are, my child. Your intelligence, beauty, and persistence often reminded me of my own daughter when she was your age. If you are reading this letter, it means that unfortunately, I have lost my long, hard-fought battle to cancer. I chose not to go through chemo because it was in the early stages when they first found it, but it has since worsened. If each of us were to say, one person does not make a difference, there would be no love and peace on Earth. Might I just say, you have made a difference. The past few months with you were not how I imagined my last few months on Earth would be, but I have loved every minute of my time with you. When you look back at all the long days and short nights you'll have over the course of your life, never regret the ones that were due to helping others. I challenge you to be crazy enough to think you can change the world because you'll be the one who does. Go out into the world and conquer it knowing that God will never put more on you than you can bear. I wish you all the best in your endeavors as you pursue your Art Therapy degree. May God continue to bless you for many more years to come. I love you, my darling.

*Thoughtfully yours,
Ella Marie Jordan*

Ode to the Man

Derrick Starks

Ode to the man
Who doesn't know beauty
Only the lies of the women's outside
The fabrications that she paints on
Pity him
For he has never known a sunrise or set
For his life lies in-between
The decorativeness of dew
On the morning's tulip
Will forever elude him
And the moon's light
Casted back onto him
From his lovers eyes
Will forever
Be a conundrum
For he doesn't know
His heart is the key



Ode to the man
Who doesn't know music
For he will never understand the beauty of a
symphony
To see colors flowing
From your lover's voice
Gray and blue
Putting feelings into perspective
Sending you to the grave
Drowning you slowly
With her Siren ways
Because once his head
Is filled with the beauty of her call
Lies and all

Blinded by the storm
muted by the wind
Adrift at sea
He is lost
For he doesn't know
His heart is his compass
And that is all that he needs

Ode to the man
Who doesn't know love
Or the beauty and music that surrounds it
How can ones heart

be so cold
Calloused by mistrust and misuse
But he sees the purity of snow
And he knows there is life underneath
Spring will come
It always does
Lets get the roses in your heart to bloom
But it was no use
For she was afraid
And tarnished what he thought love meant
That image of purity
Now stained with red
Forever beating in her chest
For he didn't know,
Her heart was an empty field
Not suited to bloom
For his heart
Was not the nourishment

Ode to the man
Who does not know

Ode to the Presidents

Allison Wright

George Washington and Martha started it all
when he stepped forward and accepted America's call.
We need a President and not a King,
a first lady and never again a queen.

After eight years of him government changed once again,
and John Adams then took over.

He turned the key to the white house of dreams.
He established the Presidents home forever.

Jefferson, the third could be heard
From St. Louis to the pacific,
But decided, did he to leave from his epitaph
The very years he held presidential office.

What can I say of men Oh so very great?
Men like the James M's. and Adams times two.
Who gave way to the hero, Andrew Jackson, three cheers
To the man who cancelled the debt and made all the native
Americans uproot.

The executives knew that they would carry through
even when the rain sent Harrison under.
But before that could be Van Buren reigned he,
the eighth man to be a care giver of our nation,

John Tyler came next, the fifteen kids he doth bred,
the Tyler of the Tippecanoe election.
Polk ushered in California and Mexico,
then Zach Taylor claimed the oval office.

As tensions grew Millard F. and Franklin P.
struggled to guarantee peace to the nation.
Buchanan wanted out, a lonely man who sat about
and told the emancipator, "See you later."

Abe Lincoln was true to the causes of truth
and the Legislative considered Johnson a fool.
Grant entered the scene a civil war general's dream
and Hayes finished the spat and reconstruction dissolved with
that.

In eighteen eighty one, Garfield could not carry on,
after he was shot at a train station.
At the funeral for he, Arthur donned one of the
Eighty pairs of pants he kept in his closet.

Grover Cleveland was the first to marry while at work.
Harrison found electricity quite shocking.
But McKinley took Guam, Roosevelt completed work in Panama
And Taft had to buy a new bathtub.

In the world view its concludes that Wilson fought through
and emerged World War One the leader. Harding didn't make it
through letting Coolidge guide the nation through many years of
prohibition.

When the stock market tumbled and fears were in full throttle,
Hoover's policy was not the ideal recovery model.
So Roosevelt stepped up and in over a decade made up,
the nation to be stronger than before, while also entering a
war.

Then Truman and his bomb, ended all that was wrong,
while his beloved Bess begged him to stay back in Missouri.
Eisenhower, from Kansas, was the very man to direct us
into the era of space and exploration.

Jackie Kennedy, the dear, lost the man she held near
before facing a round of social revolutions.
Lyndon Baines J. signed the Civil Rights act to stay
before Richard Nixon could proclaim his innocence on national
television.

Gerald Ford patched the seams.
Jimmy Carter had a dream,
and Ronald Reagan, he was an actor.
The still wall tumbled down with the final help of George Senior.

Next of these men was Billy Clinton, our friend,
the president of the 1990s.
So, as know you do know of the forty two Joes
who have led our nation to this century

In 2001, Bush asked everyone,
"Are you with us or against us?"
But, now we will fight, for our freedom is our right
and as Americans we will endeavor to let no one take that.

Change came a knocking, and the people started talking
about the new man on the block.
Obama was sworn in and only time will tell the end
of what his legacy will say about him.

So now we have reached the end
listing some of the astounding men who have led our very nation.
So I hope you can see, it is not every he, or one day she,
who deserves to be, the commander in chief.

The Book

Riley Hughes

This little black book is my inspiration.
With dedication and ostracization, rhymes flow freely like riv-
ers of time,
Creating lyrical masterpieces, shifting in the sands that
shine,
This is my secret masterpiece my little pot of gold,
The feelings poured in till my body feels brittle and old.
The genius that is myself, these stories seldom told,
But mainly the rhymes and emotions coming from the brain un-
fold.
As my Wernicke's evokes a sense of fear and passion that
chokes,
Squeezing the air from your lungs until you've broke.

You begin to think in your head, what's coming next, what's
going to be said?

Let's start with this simple analytical theory
On how this world can seem so bleak and dreary.
Why can't we just get it going, get this life on the road?
I'm sick of this; it's old. We just don't even know. What
comes here has got to go.

The thoughts in my mind not permissible to speak,
Glass half empty; this world's gone bleak, gone black, sun's
out and gone back.

Flown across, the other stars, brighter than the tomorrows to
come

When the sun is gone and then something lacks.

It's the reason I spit these words on this page.

This pen is my weapon and my music my sage.

The eraser rarely hits as my thoughts pour from it.

My mind blank most of the time, spews out words that rhyme,

But always flow so well together you'd think they shine,

Brighter than a beacon that beckons calling ships, boats of
verses to reckon

Take shore, drop anchor; fill these pages with works of anger,
Works of beauty, stories that will cross that "T"

Dot that "I" give you a reason to live, a reason to die.

Fear not for this little black book is not to fear,

But tis your guide as you make your way through the chasm of
life and fear.

Write, speak, give a reason to stand up and fight

Write your message on the little black book's inside.

Trapped in Memory

Bongiwe Shongwe

I hear it, the soft jingle of the rain,
falling to the tune of my humming heart,
welcomed by the earnest arms of nature,
journeying forth on the lavish terrain.

At work are the elements of great art
held in the memory of a picture.

Eyes, they zoom in on the crumbling picture;
dust particles trailing down like dry rain,
drapes slither over the Romantic art
carved and shaped into a sharp-edged heart,
a mirror image of Spartan terrain
where brave is the divine call of nature.

Peeling off coats to reveal their nature;
wiping off years of shade from the picture;
trudging alone on soul-branding terrain,
where even the purity of the rain
has no power to cleanse the sunken heart.
Life, once again, a mysterious art.

Once considered to be nostalgic art,
eons of toil label it as nature.
This wrenching screaming of the bleeding heart,
rusting in the acid of the picture
as the smoke swells, and prospers in the rain
as the surface changes to smudged terrain.

Decisive eruptions swamp the terrain
meandering so gracefully-- pure art.
Purified by the tears of crystal rain,
from crimson to emerald turns nature
as wounds dissipate in the picture
of the jubilant singing of the heart.

Fear threatens to imprison the heart
parched for the memory of lost terrain,
whilst the colors drain from the picture.
With unparalleled faith in the new art
fervent litanies rise towards nature
guided by the hand of the mighty rain.

My heart sojourns to admire the art;
its nature reflected in the picture.
The blazing rain as firm as the terrain.

Dear Sister

Talaysia Ruff

Dear sister
Why did this happen to us?
Dear sister
I thought I lost you
Dear sister
Why does she beat you?
Dear sister
Are you okay
Dear sister
Just know that I'm here
Dear sister
Pray for guidance

Dear sister
I can't wait to see you
Dear sister
Did you know that I love you?
Dear sister
Do you have a bed yet?
Dear sister
Do you eat every day?
Dear sister
I'll pay for you to go to college
Dear sister
When your old enough runaway with me
Dear sister
It won't be long
Dear sister
Why does she hate us?
Dear sister
Dear sister
Dear sister
Did you know that I dream of your freedom?
Did you know that I breakdown when I think of you?
Do you remember when I used to kiss your squishy cheeks?
Dear sister
I pray
I pray for our unity
Dear sister
I love you
Dear sister
I'll do anything for you
I'll get anything you need
I'll be there whenever I can
Dear sister
Our love is like evergreen
All of our trials trapped in our memory
Dear sister
Do you still have those bruises?
Dear sister
I still have my mine
Dear sister
Do you cry at night?
Dear sister
Do you ever think of giving up?
Dear sister
I'll heal your wounds
I'll love you unconditionally
I'll love you like you were my own
I'll love you
Because you are my sister

Dear sister
I hate that were so far apart
Dear sister
You know that I care
My absence
I hate that
My love
You'll get that
Dear sister
Dear sister
Dear sister

Who are We

Talaysia Ruff

They, get sexually assaulted
They, get raped
They, have periods
They, nurture and produce babies
Society, calls them names
Men, exploit them for fame
We, can make the change

They, get beaten
They, are so small and fragile
They, often get mistreated
Society, uses them for propaganda
Communities, ignore the problem
America, still hasn't made the change

They, have a lot of pressure
They, are the providers
They, are the builders
Society, labels them by their actions
We, participate in the negativity
The world ignores the need for change

Who are we?
We are the sons
We are the fathers
We are the wives
We are the mothers
We are the children
We are the sisters
We are the rape victims

We are the foster children
We are the exploiters
We are the exploited
We are Americans
We are the judged
We are the judgers

Who are we?
Who are we?
I won't ask you so you tell me

I Wanted to Tell You a Story

Bongiwe Shongwe

I wanted to tell you a story,
but your ear was not mine to have.
I wanted to let you in,
but your foot never moved towards the door.
I wanted to play with you,
but your hands were too busy fiddling with other things.
Trifles.
Trifles were what they were fiddling with.
I wanted to read you a poem,
but your mind would not process the words.
I wanted to show you a picture,
but your eyes had no appreciation for the light.
I wanted to sing you a song.
but I knew it would not be to your liking.
Meaning.
Meaning is what went against your liking.
I wanted to share my seat with you,
but the cushion was too bare.
I wanted to walk with you,
but hand-in-hand was off-limits.
I wanted to talk to you,
but you were never truly available.
Time.
Time is what was never available.



Mother Who?

Talaysia Ruff

My tears fell like dominoes
Those lashes felt like fire
Told me to bend over and touch my toes
Was hurting me part of your desire

Told them I was dead, but yet here I am alive
My sister doesn't have a bed and you continue lie
I remember the first time you, I believe I was 5
Social worker asked me could she take me for a drive

Split me sister from me to a separate foster home
If we didn't get back together I knew I'd always be alone
She's my better half, I'm the yin and she's the yang
One day we'll be famous then we can gloat about our fame

These people don't understand the quality of my education
If don't get my degree then I'll be in a bad situation
No bed to sleep and no food on the table
I don't have a mom to talk to and keep me stable

14 years and I'm running away from home
Cops caught me slammed me on the car and then my mouth began
to foam

The city of St. Louis definitely no place to be
Every day I turn on the news I see a member of my family

18 years old and here I am in college
Poor education systems deprived of good knowledge
Always feeling like I have to prove myself
If I was a book I'd be the last one on the shelf

Nobody has had a childhood quite like mine
I try to keep a smile so that they all think I'm fine
And every now and then I let a single tear fall
Everybody says before you walk you have to crawl

Mother

Mother who?

The person who made the bottom of my soul blue

Mother

Mother who?

What I Learned from Dad

Lea Uthe

Russell was born February 3, 1959. He was the second of three children and grew up in rural Missouri. I always hear stories about how they didn't have indoor plumbing until he was seven. By the time we met he was already 34, married to his high school sweetheart, and the loving father of two - I made three.

My earliest memories of him are from when I was three or four and was still at home during the day. Dad would come home to eat lunch since he worked in town at the time. He would always leave his bottle of Mountain Dew sitting at the end of the table and I, very stealthily in my mind, would swipe the bottle and run back to my room to have a sip of it. At the time I thought he never noticed me, but looking back he must have laughed at my 'sneak attacks.' As he got ready to go back to work he would say, "Goodbye sweetpea." I would reply, "Goodbye big guy." Sometime we would do the "See you later alligator/ in a while crocodile" thing.

My dad was never a fancy guy. I honestly can't remember him ever wearing a suit and tie. A dress shirt and nice pants were the extent of his dressing up. Usually he wore a plain t-shirt with a long-sleeved work shirt over it and a pair of blue jeans. And any shirt he wore had to have a chest pocket for him to put his pens, Sharpies, and candy in. Dad loved to tease us and make us squawk. His favorite thing was to give us wet willies, sticking his slobbery fingers in our ears, and even mom wasn't safe. She would exclaim, "Russell!" and he would just grin at her. He was also a big fan of potty humor and liked to make us kids pull his finger. Again, he would just grin as everyone else was disgusted. It amused him to gross us out. Whenever we went somewhere as a family, dad had to drive. He drove to all the basketball games my brother played in and my sister cheered for. He drove us on our family vacations, to Florida, Minnesota, and South Dakota, and never let anyone take over for him. When he drove he always played classic rock, that's the only kind of music he listened to, and he had a lot of shirts with the logo of his favorite station, KSHE 95, on it. Looking back at pictures, it's fun to try and count how many times he wore KSHE shirts.

When I was younger, dad would smoke as he drove and the smell of the cigarettes would always make me nauseous. For a long time I associated classic rock with the smell of cigarettes and that nauseous feeling and I didn't like to listen to it. As I got older, I gained an appreciation for it. Dad always had a bottle of Mountain Dew with him. As he drove he never put it in the cup holder, he always held it between his

legs. Dad was a big supporter of the high school sports teams. He went to all the basketball and volleyball games my older brother and sister participated in. He even came to Fulton to see one of my brother's friends play college ball at Westminster. I think that was the first time I had ever heard of the college.

My dad was a very smart man, but his parents never encouraged him to go to college so high school was the extent of his learning. He had a real aptitude for math. When I was ten, we went on vacation to Minnesota and stopped in Chicago for a couple days. We spent one day in the Field Museum and I bought a bouncy ball from their gift shop, which they placed in a little paper sack. We headed outside and it had started to pour. The rain was just coming down and streaming along the ground. The paper sack got wet and broke and my bouncy ball went bouncing away. Using his crazy math skills, my dad was able to calculate where the water would carry my bouncy ball and he and my brother went running after it. This was one of the only times I remember my dad running. He was 6'4" and had really long legs, so he moved quickly. They found the bouncy ball and I still have it somewhere in my room.

Dad was a man of simple tastes. He was of pure German descent on both sides so he grew up on homemade meals that were more about the sweet and sour, and not about the spicy. Spicy foods and my dad didn't mix; we used to joke that ketchup made him break out in a sweat. He was just like Grandpa Uthe who ate his spaghetti noodles without sauce. And it wasn't even a spicy sauce, Grandma Uthe put sugar in it! Unfortunately I seem to have taken after my Uthe side when it comes to what my taste buds can handle.

He always had to be active. While my mom, who's a teacher, and I looked forward to snow days, dad dreaded them. He hated being cooped up in the house; he went stir-crazy. Dad would pace around the house and glare out the window at the snow. You would think he would be content to watch some TV and relax, but when dad sat down he went to sleep. My mom still tells the story of taking my brother to the movie theater for his 6th birthday to see Aladdin and my dad falling asleep in the middle of it. That was the last time he went to the movie theater. If dad was going to watch TV, he preferred the History Channel or National Geographic. Even in his down time he wanted to learn. As a child, we only had four TV channels. So going on vacation also meant getting to watch TV we usually wouldn't. I remember on one trip, wanting to watch cartoons, but dad had control of the remote. So instead we watched a documentary about the building of Hoover Dam. As a kid, I was bored out of my skull, but as I got older I started to enjoy the documentaries more.

Dad preferred to spend his time working. When he wasn't at work he went out to the farm, to work on a project, or he went and did odd jobs for people in the community. My dad was a welder for most of his life, but in reality he was a jack of all trades. He made the basketball racks for the school that are still being used. He built a slide, swing set, and merry-go-round for a park. He even made hand breaks that he donated to the P.E.T. Project which is an organization based in Columbia, Missouri dedicated to making hand-cranked wheelchairs to send all over the world to people in need.

Dad was a very quiet man. When we were young, he was freer with his affection and it was easier for him to show us kids how much he loved us. As we got older he became a bit more closed off and it was harder for him to express his feelings. He came by it honestly. His dad, Grandpa Uthe, would never hug us as we were getting ready to leave my grandparents' house. Instead, he gave us high-fives. I never doubted that my dad loved us, but it was easier for him to show it than say it.

I always saw my dad as strong and invincible, so when he was diagnosed with lung cancer the summer between my junior and senior years of high school, my first thought was, 'He'll beat this.' I had known people who had had cancer and survived and I was sure my dad would be one of them. Those first few months he continued to work around his chemo treatments and didn't let it slow him down. It wasn't until that Christmas that I realized how bad it was. My mom's friend came over to the house and they were talking and I was sitting in the next room working on a puzzle. Hearing my mom say that the outcome didn't look good and that the cancer was already stage four filled me with dread. I continued to work on the puzzle with my head down so no one would see the tears in my eyes.

The summer after my senior year was when things took a turn for the worse. The treatments were making dad sick, but he needed them to beat back the cancer. He finally lost his hair and his appetite was smaller which wasn't good because my dad was a bean pole to begin with. He got weaker and fell in the yard. Watching the strongest man I knew stumble was one of the hardest things to see. It got to the point where someone had to walk with Dad to make sure he didn't fall and eventually he was confined to bed. The cancer spread to his other organs, his bones, and his brain. Dad made the decision to stop treatment and went on hospice.

Surrounded by his family, Russell passed away on September 15, 2011 at 9:45pm. I know that dad is still with us and watching over us. Still, it's not the same. There are so many things that he hasn't been there for and that he won't be there for. He wasn't there for the birth of his first

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granddaughter. They were taking pictures of Ella with all her grandparents and I couldn't help but think, "We're missing someone." He won't be there to see me graduate this spring and he won't walk me down the aisle when I get married. We'll never have a father - daughter dance and his grandchildren will only know him through stories and pictures. He won't be there for any more birthdays, or barbeques, or anniversaries. No more hugs, and laughs, and funny stories.

I see dad in the strangest places. Walking through the personal care section of Wal-Mart and I see the Irish Spring that dad always used. Driving in my car and listening to classic rock, I picture him with his Mountain Dew. They've started putting out the boxes of chocolate-covered cherries in Wal-Mart and I remember how everyone always gave him several boxes for Christmas, enough to last him the whole year. I see construction work and I remember how dad always wanted to check out the machinery. On one vacation everyone else went to the Green Bay Packers Museum while dad went to investigate the new stadium they were building. I use Carmex for my chapped lips and remember that it was dad's favorite brand too. I'm reminded of him every day and I'm glad. I never want to forget anything.

The lessons my dad taught me were never spoken aloud; he taught by example. He taught me to be generous in every aspect of my life, with my time and my efforts. I learned that money wasn't everything, sometimes the simple things are best and that humility and modesty are vital traits. He taught me that learning never ends and getting an education is important. Always be there for friends and family and don't slack off on the job, always give 110 percent. The strength my dad showed in his last months was amazing. He survived longer than the doctors said he would and he didn't let the cancer stop him from living a normal life. If there is anything I hope I got from my dad, it is his strength of will and quiet perseverance to keep fighting no matter the odds.

On the Way Home

Mei Du

Small rain
falls down from the sky.
The dusk air has not yet changed the fact that cars
are still few on the street,
and the street lights
are still pending for a darkened night.

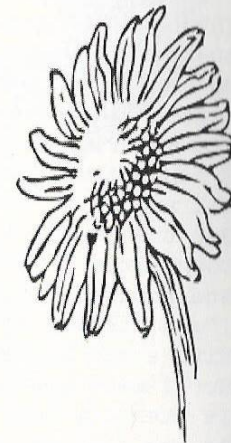
I walked in the dusk air of the night.
My hair got wet with the rain.
The lights
are on. The sky
draws closer. Horns after horns, the street
became crowded with the rush of cars.

The cars
stopped for the traffic signal in the night.
I picked up my pace to cross the street,
because nobody is not in a hurry. The rain
becomes heavy. From the sky
the raindrops hit my glasses, and blur the head lights.

I took off my glasses, and all I could see is red and yellow
spots of lights,
moving with the running cars.
The sky
went into a dark blue. The night
finally falls. The rain
pours down, soaked my face, as well as the whole street.

I walked along the street,
with feet stepping into water where rested the lights,
with clothes heavy on shoulder due to the weight of rain.
with cars
Lined up and moved by in the dark night,
with eyes searching for the sky.

I peer through the rain at the sky.
upper there cross the street
stands the building where I live. The cold night
is never cold anymore, when I saw the dim light
shining through the window of my room. Cars
are still rushing, but let them be rushing. I stare at my
window in the rain.



Loving a Fast-Car Man

Stephanie Jackson

Palms fastened to a wrench again, twisting
A heart tender by each bended wrist.
He doesn't see me above the stains or
Fractured windshield, but I watch him
Through the cracks. Jeans frayed and knuckles
Busted, I know I'll feel his love for
Me—under calloused hands and snags on
Cotton sweaters—when the garage lights switch
Off to bring eager skin over the edge.
I suppose marriage doesn't smell of
Oil and burnt rubber years,
But that's our love to me: Trails of worn-
Down tires on blacktop country roads
And knotted curls from 60-mile-per-hour airs.
I'm a dreamy, desperate woman in love
With a man already devoted to another.
He'll make engines purr as I shiver
In eternity hours and wait for his heart
At the tick of night, when the hood is down
And his heedfulness is mine.
It isn't easy to love a man already in love
With fast cars and lead-footed days,
I'll admit; and it's true in the same way,
He'll say, of loving a backmarker girl.
I suppose love is not known through
Dial-in dates and gasoline hugs, but
It's the type I'll always know:
A future of swollen fingers rotating my
Tires for me, and cooking legs on summer-
Leather seats—a passenger whose stomach still
Coils when you buckle her close.

The Golden Mean

Joseph Manuel Nieves

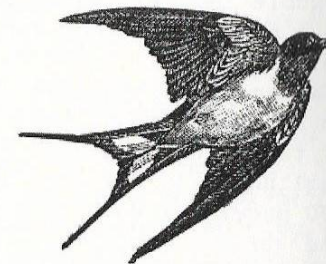
1.

Aristotle must have second-guessed himself
when he started getting hate mail
from his greatest pupil. The king of kings
no longer able to tell beast and plant
from friend, lashing out in fits
of megaloeudaimonia

to rend his mentor marble-still.
In the halls of the Lyceum, did he wonder then
if the golden mean couldn't scale
to levels of conquest, where weeping and delusion
are the appropriate responses?

2.

We all have paper name plates
so the veterans will know who we are.
We're all drinking coffee
because that's what people do
when it's early. We smile at them
and pretend to be comfortable
in our suits while men who've been shot at
shot up, left bleeding, buried, dead, found Jesus,
ask us for money, because they'll never be
the last homeless vets.
A new suit asks about safety training.



3.

Alexander took a copy of The Iliad
everywhere he went. It was a warning-
inaction leads to suffering. When he marched
to the edge of the world and wept he must have
tasted that last wine on his mentor's words
and turned his back to Athenian breezes,
chilling like the tidings of Antilochus.
Victory was the warrant of his upbringing.
It's easy to see how arete
could be confused with proficiency.
Ability is not a mandate.

4.

As each of these non-profit agencies presents
the best version of me listens close.
There is an evaluation form
which I'm supposed to use
to weigh the needs the of the myriad destitute.
There's a logical sense to it,
there has to be, or we'd be swallowed whole
by all the upturned hands in this city.
I am no conquering demigod
or hegemon's successor.
All I can do is listen and circle numbers.

Blank Pages

Ali Veatch

The library has never been so empty. I always have trouble finding a table that I actually like, one that's close to a big window, but not too close to a vent because I'll get cold. But today I get my favorite table surrounded by windows and a broken light above forcing me to focus. There are no students around today to distract me from the inevitable, writing a short story. Although I have declared myself an English major and for the most part enjoy reading on average 200 pages per week from three different novels, two textbooks, and various articles, I always have trouble when it comes to writing my own words. I can read and criticize trailer park novels, classics, and even dystopian books to no end, but I cannot sit down and write a story of my own. Over an hour has gone by and all I have managed to do is bother my friend and creative writer, Jake, who is three hours away and his endless encouragement and helpfulness is becoming increasingly annoying because with every suggestion he gives, the more incompetent I feel. I have never failed a paper in my life, let alone a class, and if I don't sit down and magically become creative, I will not be wearing a blue robe and hat in roughly eight months, I will be signing up for a victory lap semester, praying my parents don't kill me for wasting their money. I can picture it now:

"How could you fail your writing class? Did you not even try?" says dear old mom staring daggers at me with her sea foam green eyes, the same ones that scolded me for drawing on the walls with crayon when I was little.

"I don't know, mom, I tried, I swear. You come up with a story in your head and then try putting pen to paper!" I retaliate, knowing that it will only further my punishment of the silent treatment.

"You're the one who wanted to double-major, you're the one who signed up for the class, not me! How could you make it to senior year and then fail one of the most important classes? You told your father and I that you were doing fine, what the heck happened?"

On and on we would go, bickering to no avail and only ending up more mad at each other, which would be awkward, because if I fail this class and therefore fail to graduate, I will inevitably move back home. I know that if I called my mom right now, her reinforcement and attempts to be helpful would be even more annoying than Jake's, so once again, I am left with only myself and a blank word document. Microsoft Office's most used program is waiting for me to taint its eggshell white virtual pages with my horrific grammar and a poorly

thought-out storyline.

The last week or so I have been brainstorming what to write about, but each idea has become increasingly far-fetched and I can't bring myself to actually write these things down for I am not a fan of public humiliation in the form of a peer review workshop. Annoyed, I decide to try and calm down by reviewing, for like the tenth time, stories from creative writing journals for inspiration.

The story I keep looking at is in a non-traditional form. My eyes keep scanning the pages, intrigued by the layout. The author must really like texting, because he even added a "time sent" on each text. Back and forth the author goes, having a conversation until one person stops replying, indicating death or a breakup, I'm not sure which. I think I like this story because it reminds me of the diary books I used to read as a child. The ones with American immigrants and such who tell stories through a journal. That would be cool, although I don't think I would have anything to write about to a journal, but I mail letters to my grandpa a lot, so maybe I could do something with that, but make it in the future..

"Dear Grandpa,

I hope all is well with you today. I know the weather up here is kind of crummy, but hopefully it doesn't come your way. I know it's been a while since I last visited. I often think of driving down for the day, but you know how it is. The kids are so busy with their soccer games and ballet recitals, I wish you could come and see them. They are getting so big. The next time we come up for a visit, hopefully soon, you should take them up in the plane. Remember how I used to get motion sickness all the time, yet insisted you take me up in the sky? You were always patient with me and I know that now. Please stay patient with me, I know I should call more.

Love always,

Little Julia."

Writing letters is easy, but what do I say? Would I keep talking about the weather, or should the grandpa fall ill? I always have a tough time deciding between what could be realistic and what is just too dramatic, I hate having drama simply for the sake of drama. Maybe the grandpa could write back and have some sort of memory problem? That could be interesting. Unfortunately, I don't think I know enough about mental illness to pull that off. Add that to something I need to learn more about, along with how to not fail this paper and consequently my class.

My second brainstorming session tempted me to write, unsurprisingly, about college romance.

Grasping for a concrete detail to catch my reader's attention I imagine writing about my current heart throb's ice-blue eyes, very cliché, I know. I'm sure the story would have gone something like this: "His eyes sparkled more now, in the sunrise coming from his curtain-less windows, than they had last night when I showed up in my over-sized T-shirt and running shorts. I liked to sleep naked when I was alone, but I guess it was worth putting on a sports bra and bottoms to be able to feel someone's warmth next to me while I sleep. It had been so long since my heart had warmed up to someone besides the man who brought my Domino's pizza to my door every Friday night, so my flirting techniques were a little rusty. Now that I think about it, over-sized clothes and a freshly showered face were probably not the most attractive things to wear to a boy's room at 11:00 p.m., but nonetheless, I had gotten my wish and slept over. As I stared deeply into his glacier eyes, I knew that this one was different, this time around I would not have my heart broken and mourn with a bottle in my hand for over a year. This time, I would fall madly in love and never look back..."

On and on my story would go until I became bored with it myself. Who really wants to read about college hookups and awkward dates? Not me, and certainly not the rest of my classmates who would of course stare at me and wonder why my life was so boring that all I could write about was the cliché of a budding romance. It's seriously embarrassing to sit here and have to think of what makes my life or my creative thoughts more interesting than others.

As the library begins to fill with a few dedicated students, I notice one girl with a massive backpack, the thing must weigh more than she does. What the heck kind of homework does she have that could take that many books? I creep on her as she starts heading toward an empty table. Wobbling more than walking, the girl trips on a trashcan someone filled with ice cream and the melted liquid gets in her shoe, poor girl. I try to stifle a laugh. I'm usually the one embarrassing myself in public, constantly tormented for being such a nerd. But if I'm such a nerd, why can't I write a short story with ease? How about I try and write about one of my most embarrassing nerd problems. Yeah, that's it. I could write a story about a girl with a fear of needles having to get allergy shots every week. That could be funny, a little sad, yet informational! Plus, I could totally make it fiction by adding things that don't or didn't actually happen to me and making it third person, for example: "Marie had been a healthy baby of 6lbs. 11oz. and passed her wellness check-ups with flying colors the first three years of her life. However, one day when Marie had just turned four years old, she would not stop

screaming. Her parents immediately went to the doctor who informed them that their precious daughter would have a long-standing battle with ear-tubes. Now, this was not the worst thing that could have happened, but as the years progressed, Marie got more and more ear infections accompanied by pneumonia and even a collapsed lung. Searching frantically for answers, her desperate and tired mother and father took Marie to an allergist, a very last resort, for their health insurance was about to run dry. As the doctor violently stabbed Marie's back with all sorts of allergens, a redness like the burning of a campfire engrossed Marie's backside and she fainted from the pain. With a diagnosis of severe allergies, Marie's life turned upside down. She would have to get three shots a week for the rest of her life, causing her hours of feeling faint and random pangs of nausea forever..."

The drama would, of course, continue for Marie in my little story. I was always told when I write to have conflict, to draw in the audience, to play on sympathies and to use big words such as "engrossed" to make a statement bolder. However, I cannot see myself writing numerous pages about needles and serums, which is just not appealing to anyone. No one cares to read about something as minute as bad allergies, they want to read about teenagers with cancer or unplanned pregnancies. How am I supposed to get an A on a story about allergies? I can't, so it's back to brainstorming.

I look up and notice that some students have completed their homework and others have just arrived, and here I am, still sitting, still failing as the melted ice cream starts to congeal on that girl's leg. Ew. Before I set myself up for disappointment with yet another bad idea, I go and treat myself to a gourmet coffee. I mean, I have been sitting in the library for over three hours and haven't even checked my Twitter account, so I deserve a reward, right? Also, coffee is a stimulant, so when my dad calls me and asks why I spent so much at Starbucks, I can say without hesitating,

"It's for academic purposes, Dad, don't you want me to do well in school?"

"Of course I do, but you have got to start balancing your money more efficiently," he says with a concerned fatherly tone I know way too well.

"I know, Daddy, but you know I am only doing my best. I haven't failed you yet, have I?"

My dad is a business/finance person, so he probably wouldn't pick up on the emphasis of the word "yet" in our conversation, but I mark its importance for our later discussion about why I have to stay an extra semester to take a writing class I couldn't pass. My dad would probably remind me that if I hadn't spent so much time in the line for

coffee, I probably could have done better in class, but I can't live without coffee. As I stand in line I notice some guys I don't know. One is well-dressed, Ralph Lauren polo, khakis, Sperry's and all, a typical rich kid with Mom and Dad paying for all of his weekend fun. The other isn't quite as well-dressed and his eyes are redder than the others', the good eye drops too much money to bother with. His tomato eyes dart around the coffee shop, mostly empty except for me and a few others. I watch behind my sunglasses as he and frat star walk in the same direction from opposite ways. Frat guy opens his mailbox, sticks his hand in, but doesn't pull anything out and walks away. Tomato eyes walks up a minute later, opens the same mailbox and pulls out a tiny plastic bag that he immediately shoves in his pocket. So that's it. The reason to his red eyes. God, I am so glad I've never tried any of that crap, I hear it's addictive. Too bad I don't know enough about drugs to write a story.

As I slowly meander my way back to the library, I form another idea. What if I write about a girl who is addicted to coffee? It wouldn't be so far-fetched from my life but it may be intriguing enough for others to read. I personally have a dependency on caffeine, and have since high school, but I wonder what it would be like to actually be non-functioning without sweet black beans crushed into pieces and filtered through steaming water...I take a sip and start to type: "I'm waiting in line for the fourth time today. It's around 2:00p.m., so I don't understand why the line is so long right now. I bet the people in front of me don't even order real coffee. It's probably just fake shit with a bunch of added sugar and flavorings, a bunch of punks who don't even need the sugar, but just want to look cool in class with their cream-topped drinks. Don't they understand that I NEED this? There should be a separate line for people who just want the best, darkest coffee, like me, and a line for idiots who are too relaxed for my liking. My hands start to shake, but I can't tell if it is from frustration or because it is now 2:10 P.M., approximately eight minutes past the normal time where bitter warmth hits my greedy lips."

Okay, so stream of consciousness writing can be fun, and intriguing, but what point am I making? Should the guy start punching people in line to get his coffee? Or should he pass out from lack of sleep and be admitted to an admissions facility? The facility thing may be a little out there, but I need an interesting plot, right? And why am I asking myself so many questions? I get up to go to the bathroom and stretch my legs. As I walk around I notice students completing assignments, printing them off, and walking home. Either that, or taking breaks from tedious work by checking

Facebook, a luxury I do not have today.

Maybe if I had paid more attention in my psychology class, I could actually have concrete details of mental illness to write about. I mean technically I have credit for a child psychology course, but that was a joke. I have never myself suffered from any sort of mental ailment, but a lot of girls my age suffer from depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. Maybe I could get into that type of character? Or better yet, observe a girl who is bulimic, yes! Conflict and description, I better put my candy bar down to type this one out..."She rises in the morning with dark bags under eyes, not necessarily from lack of sleep. Her pale white skin is almost reflective, or transparent, depending on the type of lighting she is under. Her calcium-deprived bones start to pop as she does her morning stretches, but not too intensely, muscle adds pounds to the scale. Her saggy skin carries her to the bathroom, only to urinate this time, it's too early for her usual bathroom routine. After dark yellow stains the toilet, the girl makes her way into the kitchen. She makes five eggs, four slices of bacon, one slice of toast, and down a cup of coffee as her roommates complain to her about how they wish their metabolisms were as fast as her. Smiling and nodding, the girl says she is going to go take a shower. Turning the shower radio on along with the loud sounds of water hitting an empty tub, her mouth opens, instinctively knowing what to do to rid herself of any and all calories."

Alright, so this idea may actually work! I can see myself writing about this skinny chick for a while, maybe get into a little bit of background story of why she doesn't want to eat. Maybe she started out at anorexic, but her roommates were catching on and she didn't want to be reported to the health staff. But what about her childhood? It seems that all issues like this stem from something horrific. Could her dad have been abusive? No, that's too intense. I don't like writing about violence. What if she had been a pageant girl and lost to someone skinnier than her? I would probably stop eating for that...not. Actually, I've heard a lot of stories about pressure to be skinny, usually from a mother to a daughter. I could write a flashback to when the girl was little and her mom called her chubby. Either that or the kids on the playground would always make her play the role of monster in games because she was always biggest. Why didn't I think of this idea earlier? Okay, so she had a bad childhood, she feels bad about herself, and then she starts to develop a disorder, then what? Does someone find out about it? Does she die from throwing up too much? I hate writing about sad things, so how about she gets the help she needs and triumphs into a successful lifestyle? That would be a good ending, but would that be too

boring? Probably. All of my ideas are starting off strong and then become boring before I can even get myself to type them out.

Still staring at a blank page with the pulsing cursor tormenting me by the second, I hesitantly look around. From my favorite library table, I can see about six other tables, all empty except for one. The last five hours have lead students to do their accounting homework, answer math problems, read a few chapters, and write some short research essays. They have packed up, walked home, and are probably taking naps. I could use a serious nap, but no, I am still here. I am still in the library without a creative bone in my body, staring at a blank screen that demands creativity.



RAINBOWS

-in memoriam Nelson Mandela, 1918 - 2013

Jan Michael Ramirez

3rd Place: Poetry

On summer nights you might relive history
from the hisses of garden sprinklers,
from the sodden force of cold water
unfurling its outrage on flower buds,
that stand yet, unbowed in their fragrance,
like activists in the prime of their strength,
cut down by indiscriminate water cannons
from a discriminating state, whose logic
scarred wintry laws into lawmakers' souls.

Yet look closer on these watery bars;
blink and miss it, but look for a rainbow,
thin but proud and faint yet defiant,
held prisoner by mere water droplets,
yet smiling through an icy, steely hail;
and wonder how we misconceive water
as a force for isolation or confinement -
for the truth is, thirst knows no species,
no gender, no faith, and no colour,
and though we think rivers as dividers,
they unite all creatures in the slaking
of a common thirst. Without water,
it kills us evenly, with no favours-
so to fancy some men above others,
as to think men above other creatures,
is just that-a fancy, and an excuse.

And on mornings when storms break the earth,
when the sprinklers have faded to silence,
and your rainbow has long dissipated,
just you wait-for heaven's sprinklers to abate,
for the humid air to lift from sleeping minds
that long had dried in the shrivelling heat,
as a mourning veil might part for a smile.
See, there stands your Rainbow, revived now,
now flush with the hues of liberation,
now grander in its sunny serenity, in its gaze
upon newly open, newly fragrant blooms.



Lightning Strikes

Emily Kesel

The bomb explodes.

Despite my training, my first instinct is to run as fast as I can in the opposite direction. I want no part of that. But as a soldier, I am obligated to go toward it. To help those who were close enough to be injured.

Besides, bombs are like lightning. They never strike the same place twice. What would be the point of that, right?

My gun still held tightly in both hands, I sprint down the street toward the flaming cars and screaming people. This part of the city is supposed to be quiet, and today was supposed to be a normal patrol. But things out here don't always go according to plan.

I slow down when I see one of my buddies on the ground, writhing in pain. He must have taken a hunk of shrapnel through the shoulder because he clutches it with his opposite hand, wincing as he tries to stop his blood from gushing all over the dirt street. I start to bend down to try to help him, but he waves me on.

"I'm fine, you idiot! Go help them!" He gestures to a young boy and girl about fifty yards down the street. The

girl lies in a bloody heap on the ground, still alive, and the boy stands over her, clutching something in his hand. I run to them.

The sight of these children - neither of them can be more than ten years old - brings me back to my first week out here, when I first started to wonder if this was where I really belonged. I had stood by and watched as one of my squad members put a round through the head of a boy no older than this one. Because he was carrying a gun. This isn't what I signed up for, I remember thinking. I came here to serve my country, to protect our freedom, and I couldn't see how killing a child fit into that.

Since then, not much of what we have done seems to have fit into that, either.

As I reach the little girl, the boy backs away from us nervously. His gray shirt is two sizes too big, and his eyes stare anxiously at the gun in my hands. He shoves whatever he's holding deep into his pocket. I lay my gun on the ground as I kneel to examine the girl's wounds. He comes closer again.

"Is this your sister?" I ask the boy. His mouth and eyes are open wide as he nods. I look over her injuries. She's also taken some shrapnel, but to her shin. Not a fatal wound, but I need to get her to help soon or she could lose the leg. I take off my helmet and remove the handkerchief I've been using to keep the sun off my neck. I tie it around her leg, attempting to cut off the blood flow.

I'm relieved by the rumble of a trio of humvees coming our way. They mean reinforcements, and that I won't have to carry the bleeding girl quite so far. I smile encouragingly at the boy. "It's gonna be okay, see? Tell her it's gonna be okay," I tell him, but his eyes are following the vehicles.

"I can't tell her that," he replies, still with far-away eyes.

"Why not?"

"Because," he says, "it would be a lie."

As the first two trucks pass to let off more soldiers and a third stops next to us, his hand slowly, shakily drifts back into his pocket. From it he pulls out a small device with a single button. Then he lifts his oversized shirt and I see why he said what he did. He's strapped with another bomb.

This isn't what I signed up for.

As I desperately lunge toward his hand holding the trigger, his small finger casually slides over the button.

I guess I was wrong. Lightning really can strike the same place twice.



This is Your Brain on Drugs

Tim Aldred

3rd Place: Prose

Used to be this famous anti-drug PSA where a really fed-up guy, who happens to be doing a spot-on impersonation of your dad at all of his most unreasonable and angry moments, cracks an egg on a hot frying pan. He tells you the fried, fucked-up looking egg is your brain on drugs, and asks if you have any questions. You're not supposed to have any questions. Everything's supposed to be real crystal-clear, and even if it weren't, he's exactly the sort of guy who'd call you a little shit know-it-all for trying to understand better.

Around 2008, there was another PSA by the Partnership for a Drug Free America done in homage to the famous fried-egg, where model/actress Rachel Leigh Cook goes ape-shit in a kitchen swinging a frying pan with both hands like she's the reincarnate of the Sultan of Swat, geeking on amphetamines and set loose in a children's batting cage. It's so parody worthy that even the anarchist crank show Robot Chicken did a bit on it in their pilot episode.

"This is your brain when you snort heroin," Rachel explains before slamming the cast-iron skillet down, splattering the egg on the counter.

"Wait. It's not over yet," she says as she cocks back.

"This is what your family goes through!" Whoom, the pan goes whirling around and Slam, goes the sink.

"And your friends!" Pow, down, goes the clock.

"Your self-respect!" Shatter, go the plates and the glasses.

"And your future!"

When there's nothing left to break, and nothing left for heroin to ruin, Cook's left standing alone on top of piles of ruin and broken glass. The camera jump-cuts to her heart-breaking, beautiful face as she pushes undone hair out of her eyes.

"Any questions?"

And goddamn right you've got questions; who in the hell snorts heroin? Not you, not your friends, probably not any child still tuned in to the world enough to watch cartoons in that 3-3:30 after-school slot. The only person you can imagine snorting heroin is a junkie so down and out they can't even find used needles. But as you look into eyes like black volcanic glass you realize that public health is not the issue at hand, nobody's supposed to learn anything. Nobody really thought this commercial would dissuade kids from casually snorting heroin.

This particular filmed psychotic breakdown is meant to shame a ghost, which is the closest thing to extrajudicial punishment that video ads on network channels can achieve.

For all the yelling and smashing and breaking, the surprise is there lies underneath the wrecked tragedy of the destruction an exposed seam of anger and contempt against those who at one point reached a royally fucked-up moment in their relationship with the Afghan poppy and never moved on. How dare those little lost boys and girls have the audacity to get hooked on dangerous drugs.

Bring down the hammer, bring down the skillet, make some noise, let people know how pissed you can be. You've got a cause that's just, and a wrath that's pure and endless. And because you're saying the same thing that the police and the clergy and the teachers and congressmen are saying, albeit at a different volume, you're allowed to produce a commercial and bring in a beautiful actress to make a sharp and pointy mess on screen you'll hire somebody else to clean up. You get to take a stand against something that everyone in the world has acknowledged as bad and feel like you've made a difference. The difference is that everybody else who cares respects the problem enough to realize there are complexities and nuances to the phenomena of youth recreational and abusive drug use in America that can't be smashed and crushed like plates on a drying rack, or cooked away like an egg on a frying pan.

This is my brain on drugs?

This is your brain on a moral crusade.