



***C*ontrast**

2018

*"Walking towards the cliff overhanging
the river, I call out to the stone,
and the stone
calls back, its voice hunting among the rubble
for my ears."*

—Galway Kinnell

Contrast Literary
Magazine

Editors:

Tyler Van Dyke

Katy Kissel

Advisor:

Dr. Kate Dobson

Cover Photograph:

Linda Wood

Editorial Board:

Emma Driban

Katy Kissel

Tara Salvati

Spencer Secrest

Stefan Specian

Marya Topina

Tyler Van Dyke

Nathan Wright

Rachel Zanoni

Table of Content

Prose (fiction and nonfiction)

Clark, Colleen

Gerald's Monday Blues 32

New Years Kiss 19

Driban, Emma

A Frightful First Date 101

Topina, Marya

Forgotten Fears 117

Kaleidoscope 46

Mr. Linden's Library 41

Serendipity 26

Van Dyke, Tyler

Instant (of) Identity 88

Wilmer, Jared

Of Silence, and Sacred Sorrow 59

Poetry

Bortz, Darby

Tempest 31

The Hunt 71

Buchheim, Joanna

That Day. 54

Clark, Colleen

Uphill 77

Driban, Emma

Brittle Fingers 78

Storm 51

Granger, Kyle

Inside Counts 111

Taste 38

Hahn, Kirsten

Avarice 36

Hutchinson, Kaylan

<i>Emily, But She'll Disagree</i>	58
<i>A Return</i>	23
<i>A Warning</i>	56

Kendrick, Andrew

<i>Definitions of Poetry</i>	40
------------------------------	----

Mondoro, Anna

<i>Never Forget</i>	114
---------------------	-----

Specian, Stefan

<i>Cast From the Nest</i>	84
<i>Deer Leap</i>	12
<i>Margitsziget</i>	25

Summerlin, Jacob

<i>Burger King, Burned Out</i>	81
<i>In Dependence</i>	85

Thomson, Hannah

<i>Ephemera</i>	13
-----------------	----

Topina, Marya

A Thousand Slivers 74

Red Lace Gown 16

Tempest in a Teapot 11

Van Dyke, Tyler

Close 120

Wilmer, Jared

Lost Train of Thought 100

Wood, Linda

To the People that are Tired 115

Art

Bernier, Shannon

A Whole World 80

Floating Fungi 30

Driban, Emma,

My Frosty Shade 18

Reflection 73

Evans, Sheila

Overpour 45

Still Life 99

Jones, Abigail

Blue Garden Shed 76

Self Portrait 50

Nepini, Jonathan

Abstract (still life) 24

Cedar Point 37

Thomson, Hannah

Railroad 87

Topina, Marya

Tuckered Out 113

Wishful Thinking 83

Van Dyke, Tyler

Wall Free World 110

Metro 59

Wood, Linda

Expanse 53

To the People that are Tired 115

Zanoni, Rachel

Untitled 14

Poetry

1st : Marya Topina, *Tempest in a Teapot*

2nd : Stefan Specian, *Margitsziget*

3rd : Kaylan Hutchison, *Emily, But She'll Disagree*

Prose

1st : Marya Topina, *Kaleidoscope*

2nd : Jared Wilmer, *Of Silence, and Sacred Sorrow*

3rd : Driban, Emma, *Frightful First Date*

Art

1st : Jonathan Nepini, *Abstract*

2nd : Abigail Jones, *Self Portrait*

3rd : Hannah Thomson, *Railroad*

Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

We are thrilled to present to you this year's issue of the Contrast Literary Magazine. I hesitate to make yet another reference to the college's sesquicentennial anniversary, but I cannot help but feel that to no small degree this year's magazine represents a culmination of the one hundred fifty years of literary and artistic history that have been an integral part of the McDaniel community.

Contrast is the voice hunting among the rubble, the response to our fears, our hopes, and our desires. It is a passionate affirmation of all these things: a symbol of solidarity and an opportunity to make out of the most sharply contrastive moments of our lives something not only beautiful but also something to which we can all relate.

We invite you to wander through the pages of this magazine and reflect on these brief snapshots of each other's lives and minds. Look over them and find in them a sympathetic response to something deeper within yourself. Allow yourself to feel the whole gamut of human emotion with us: happiness, sadness, anger, grief, fear—all these things creep through these pages with the hope that you might happen upon them.

Without further ado, we welcome you to the 2018 edition of the Contrast Literary magazine.

—Tyler Van Dyke and Katy Kissel

Tempest in a Teapot

Marya Topina

They say storms in teacups
Don't mean anything.
But they clearly haven't burnt their tongues
Swallowing the harsh lies that you've brewed
And they haven't had to stir in
Heaping spoonfuls of reveries
Just to sweeten the bitter aftertaste
Of the insult that's been steeping for far too long.

And you just sit and watch those boiling waves
Brim over the teacup edge and crash
Down into the saucer
Staining the white cloth napkin of our lives
While my mind is spinning with each turn of the spoon
My heart is dissolving with each sugar cube
My world is chaos like the churning splash of milk you refused
Creamer can't smooth over deception
And the spoon you tap against your mug
Rap rap rap-taps out the unsteady beat
Of my fluttering pulse.

But the biscuits are crumbling
And your mother's best china is chinked
Not so fine after all
Just like the crack in your calm façade
This is no afternoon tea party
This is heartbreak.

Deer Leap

Stefan Specian

The forest extended for miles to me, an incomprehensible expanse I could not yet comprehend – I was still too young to know that the forest ended, and transformed into an encroaching suburban development – too young to know it would burn up thanks to a classmate's erstwhile bonfire – too young to see the high school beer cans in the crevices of the rocks overlooking the majestic pond, rimmed by even more lovely forest and quaint lake homes – what use had I for such ruinous things?

I could run down the trail, in my Patagonia fleece and with wild, windblown hair, chasing the infinite rock wall, seeing I could reach its end, as my dad ran behind trying to catch me – I'd climb a boulder and play, king of a vast kingdom, a solitary land of moss covered trees and dirt paths, ancient cellars returned to nature and bogs with cat-tails that seemed impenetrable – a land of my own, that to rule for even a moment was the most magical thing of all.

Ephemera

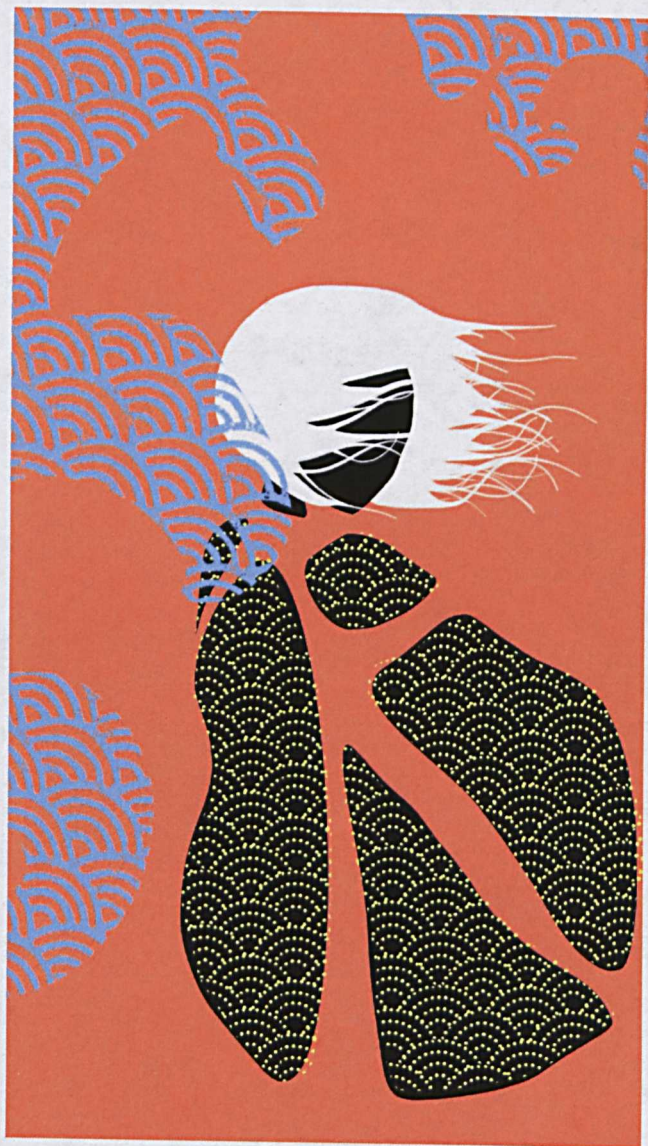
Hannah Thomson

an Empty Playground,
overgrown
 with weeds.
wind blowing
 the rusted swings,
paint peeling on the Merry-go-round
leaving the dark steel
to contrast the bright yellow and red.

the swings squeak
 as they move
back
 and
 forth.
and seesaws stand alone
 with rusted handles
 on the weathered grey wood.

Untitled

Rachel Zaroni



To the People that are Tired

Linda Wood

I'd like to give a shout out to the people that are tired
To the people whose eyelids are anchors
To the people who could spend all their free time napping if they could
Well worn pillows and well warmed blankets
We rest with reckless abandon
We cherish the times where we don't have to open our eyes
Golden dust sits willingly around our lids
There's things we don't want to see, to hear, to feel, to fear
We are envious of the pain embedded in experiences when it is us who
 should be the ones in bed
Us with the covers over our head
Us taking comfort in silence instead
Of the noise that consumes us and fills us with dread
When we're not asleep we want to be dead
How else could we cope with the joy we can't feel but hear it echoing
 through every room we encounter
Surrounded and consumed whole with endless, pitiless, ignorant noise
Laughter with sharp screeching
Smiles with blaring sirens
Happiness is never quiet to us
To the people that are tired
To the people that are sick of their ears and would like to pretend they
 didn't have them You're not the only one hitting snooze

Red Lace Gown

Marya Topina

She stands-
Pale skin, dull eyes.
Shrouded in misery,
Draped in red lace.

The crimson threads
Entwine her arms,
Criss-crossing to form
A gown of despair.

So carefully crafted,
Each line its own story.
So many tears shed
While shaping this cloth.

This beautiful garment
Seems fully complete.
Yet she continues to add
To the intricate weave.

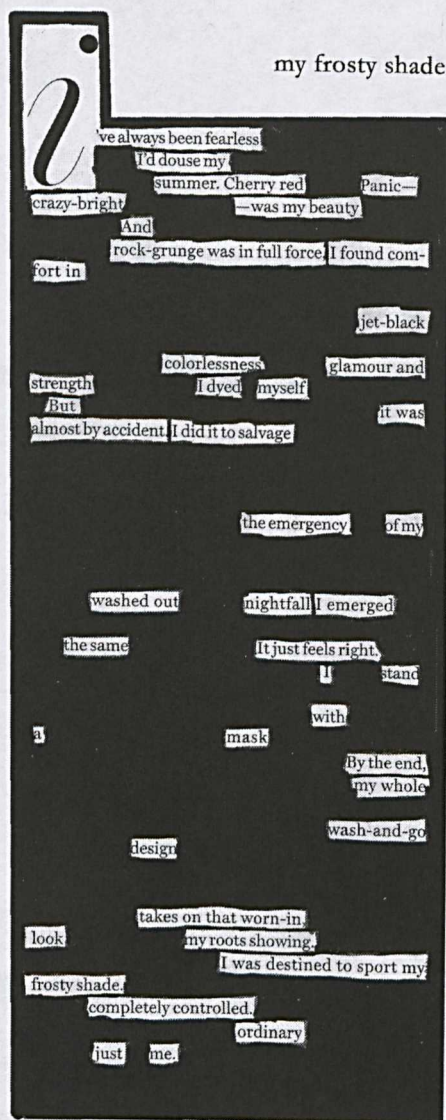
Plaiting, knitting, a blur
Of nimble fingers fast
At work as scarlet drops
Merge with clear, salt beads.

A few days pass, the fabric
Dries. New strands appear,
Replacing those worn and
Faded – lost.

And so she lives,
Never quite pleased,
Always changing the
Pattern in her dress.

my frosty shade

Emma Driban



New Years Kiss

Colleen Clark

Times Square looked like the line at Walmart on Black Friday. People pushed into each other in every direction; he worried that the howling wind would push them all over like dominos. Even though it was well into night time, the lights were blinding. The shouting people and the car horns filled the night air and ricocheted through the buildings. C.J. could make out some pop songs in the distance, echoing from stages where celebrities were pretending to perform. Music was playing from multiple loud speakers around him; the melodies clashed with the night sounds to create a new song of the city.

“C.J., can you believe it!” His loud New York accented mother shouted, it was her solo atop the new tune.

“Yeah,” He sighed, “we are really in it now.”

C.J. knew she had been looking forward to this night for a long time. He took out a Kleenex from his coat pocket and wiped his ever-running nose. The family had been slowly tip-toeing towards the front metal gate that was holding people back a safe distance from the center stage on which there was an NBC news team leading the countdown.

“Oh, look at them up there! They look so good in person!” Said his mother, who knew all of the anchor names and life stories. Watching their morning coffee talk was her ritual.

Although C.J. had lived in the city for years now, he stayed there after going to college at NYU. He made sure to never come to downtown these times, too much commotion. Before he graduated, Jenny had always

nagged him to come. She agreed, and they watched it on T.V., cuddled together on their secondhand old grey couch, even if she really wanted to be downtown. That's where he wished he was. But this year his mother kidnapped him; this year they wouldn't have him be alone tonight. He knew. He wanted a cigarette.

His mother's long navy coat was covered in raindrops from the mist, her mink hat was matting down. She was chattering with C. J.'s father about wanting a good view. His brother, Jed, was holding his little girl, Rose, on his shoulders— so that she could see the big shiny ball. Jed held her tiny moccasined feet and swayed back and forth in the wind. Melissa, his wife, kissed his frosted cheek. She had red knitted earmuffs. Her red lipstick left a mark on his cheek. Jed was charmed and met this discovery with a laugh.

C.J. was more worried about strangers getting their midnight make out saliva all over him and in the air. The man crammed next to C.J. had a loud squeaky voice, a big runny nose, and smelled like cigarettes. So did his wife. Or maybe everything smelled like cigarettes because he wanted cigarettes. But, he didn't want cigarettes, he wanted Jenny. He had only started smoking after she'd left. It seemed like everyone around him was in love. It seemed that all of the people around him were hugging and kissing, getting ready. His father even combed his hair when he got ready for tonight. His parents seemed to be in a perpetual honeymoon phase and it was sickening. Young couples with matching hats and matching smiles swooned at each other while C.J. cursed fate, but mostly Jenny, for leaving him alone tonight.

He distracted himself with little Rose while the world seemed to fall in love with itself around him. Sometimes kids say the funniest things. Jed's girl screamed out, "Look, it's Scooby Doo!" at a large inflatable elephant. C.J. chuckled. He realized he hadn't laughed in a while.

Turning his head, he saw the large Nivea posters and sellers on the street that had to make sure everyone got their “perfectly lubricated nights kiss.” C.J. just wanted to stay home and drink only to go to sleep early. He told his mom to go without him. She would not let him spend the night alone.

She knew her son.

Her mother was hungry. She had said a thousand times, but the family had run out of reasons to wait. Hot dog stands meant losing your spot in line, so Melanee offered to go, she took orders and turned, losing herself in the crowd of strange breath and bundled up people. Jed bounced up and down, baby on his back. His mother got her hot dog. She quieted and fueled her frozen blood.

Five minutes left, good timing. Jed got in position next to his wife. His father held onto his mother's arm. C.J. looked up at the lights in the city, at the posters of people in love, and he closed his eyes. He sighed and looked down around at all of the smiling faces and laughing, loving people. The lights seemed to only flash pink and red. The songs were all love songs. He wanted a cigarette. He bummed one from the smoker next to him and lights up. The inhale burned his throat and it calmed him. He knew his parents hated it but wouldn't say anything.

In movies the main character always kisses his girl when the ball drops. C.J. wanted his girl. Jenny was already engaged to someone new; it hadn't been a year since they broke up, but she was getting married. He'd even been invited to the wedding, but he knew he couldn't go. His friends told him to get over it, so he stopped talking about it. Now it was a year later. C.J. sipped his hot tea in the thermos he brought

One minute left. People were drinking out of flasks around him. Girls were flirting with boys they already had wrapped around their mittened fingers.

“Look Rosie!” Jed points a gloved finger at the countdown numbers on the biggest screen of them all. The screen started to flash, the crowd started to scream.

“FIVE!”

He wanted to go. C.J. closed his eyes and took a deep breath of air full of pizza and hot chocolate. Jenny loved hot chocolate.

“FOUR!”

He wanted to go to a bar.

“THREE!”

“Here we go” He said to himself.

“TWO!”

He wanted to text Jenny something stupid.

“ONE!”

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

A Return

Kaylan Hutchison

A ghost,
he came back warm and solid
I was still stained
still had a backache and a heaviness around my neck
even after a full trip around the sun

A mythological creature,
I had already killed him
No longer were my sweater cuffs dampened
no longer did I dig myself into the Earth as I walked
I had reached the end of it

An apparition,
I tried to breathe silently
As roots lifted my heels
and made heavy my eyelids
I had to hold still

I could call it Spring
but I won't

Abstract (still life)

Jonathan Nepini



Margitsziget

Stefan Specian

Nighttime on the Danube shore, calm waters cut by the slow, rumbling boats – we sat on a bucking dock, watching as the waves sloshed onto the edge, dodging it before it soaked through our socks; the night illuminated by the lights of the riverside hotels and restaurants, and the river cruise ballroom chandeliers, full of tourists sipping cocktails and flirting beneath the smog filled Hungarian sky.

We walked into the pitch-black ruins, laughing and scaring each other, guided by the phone flashlights held before us like torches, examining the graffiti and decay – in that Margaret Island night we were children again, exploring and playing, escaping the anxieties that lay before us the next morning.

Our feet crunched the chestnuts on the path, dropped by trees above that hid busts within their groves, their faces staring out at us as we passed, their rusting visages a testament to a history long passed – the late fall leaves blew on the wind, flying in solemn circles on the breeze, like aging dancers, taking their last bow upon an empty, unseen stage.

An hour later we stood upon a bridge, the island to our backs, the light post tops covered by mobs of pigeons – cars zipped past at lightning speeds, as we pondered how we would make it home and laughed at how far that we had come.

Serendipity

Marya Topina

A seemingly normal day began to unfold before her as she perched upon the bench. Mothers struggling with screaming children, couples entangled in each other's limbs, and groups of nonchalant teenagers strolled through the mall around her. The girl simply sat and watched, disappointed with the world and the people inhabiting it.

Checking the cell phone in her hand for the umpteenth time, she sighed. A perfect day for reading was being wasted on that bench, waiting for a superficial friend amidst a crowd of even more superficial people. She didn't want to be here at all. Getting out of bed and leaving the house was a mistake, but at least it pleased her mother. She sighed once more. The girl was considering the idea of leaving. She even began to formulate an excuse to tell her friend, when she suddenly paused.

A boy was watching her.

Oh, she was well used to the stares, the disapproving glares, even the hurried averting of eyes that most individuals gave her. In fact, the hatred, fear, misunderstanding, and disgust that were so often expressed towards her now rolled off her like rain on a window. She continued to express herself through the dark makeup and rainbow-colored hair, the black clothing and heavy boots, and carried herself with an air of contempt that shouted "BACK OFF" to everyone within a ten foot radius. Most everyone got the message loud and clear. But not this boy.

He gazed upon her with gentle eyes full of awe, the slight smile giving away his appreciation. He stared at her as though that one look was the only lifeline he had—if he dared turn his eyes away, he would be lost and would most certainly perish. She was the whole world, and nothing else mattered. No one had ever looked at her like that before.

She stared back, the warm blush creeping across her cheekbones like the rosy fingers of dawn. Once he noticed her gaze upon him, that irresistible

smile widened even further. She ducked her head, checked her phone once more, and looked in the other direction. And yet something made her turn towards him, a feeling she couldn't resist. He was still staring.

Faced with a new situation, she was at a loss for words, let alone coherent thoughts. What would he do next? What should she do? The girl wiped her sweaty palms on the ripped stockings she wore and tried her best to still her rapid heartbeat. Racing thoughts spun through her mind and she was left breathless. Daring herself to raise her gaze towards the boy yet again, she was shocked to see that he was approaching her. He slid effortlessly onto the bench beside her.

And those eyes, those deep green pools of emotion now so close to her, only intensified her feelings. She felt electrified, every hair was standing on end and she could not possibly turn away. She was lost to the universe. Those eyes of his were all that mattered now.

He spoke, and his voice consumed her mind with multiple pleasant images. All at once, she was on a cloud, safe in its misty embrace. She was floating in every imaginable satisfying sensation, watching the falling stars in the sky around her. She felt protected, like she had never felt before. And even those shooting stars couldn't bring her back to earth.

He had a name, a story, a reason for being right there beside her, right now in this moment they shared. And each new piece of information was welcomed with eager ears. She listened with rapt fascination, her hunger for more barely concealed. She did not want him to stop talking, to stop looking at her like that. She didn't want that attractive gap-toothed smile to disappear and fade away.

All at once these feelings scared her. The girl realized this was dangerous territory. She could not afford to be enchanted by this dashing stranger. She was barely surviving on her own and dragging down someone this charming along with her... It wasn't fair, to say the least. She pulled her already long sleeves further down, hiding her story of pain and lonely nights spent fearing the next day. She looked forward to oblivion, and she didn't want this boy to convince her otherwise. No, falling for him was out of the question.

And yet she could not resist. Something about him struck a chord within her, resonating throughout her whole being as a sweet note of possibility. The girl never trusted anyone, especially people she didn't know that well. How was it that this boy was able to set her at ease so quickly? These conflicting emotions struggled within her, battling for the right to claim her mind. She was on the brink of something, on the verge of simply letting go and taking a risk into the unknown.

Her soul closed its eyes and took that step off the cliff, hoping against all odds that it would be caught at the bottom in the safe arms of this boy.

The girl gave him her phone number.

She expected feelings of regret, thoughts that would beat her up for such stupidity. She braced herself for the bloody nose of defeat, the bruise that would mostly likely blossom on her heart. None of it came. She allowed herself a small hint of a smile, relief washing over her like the first rain shower in spring.

His next words took her by surprise. He confessed he was extremely anxious walking up to her, and even more apprehensive about asking for her number. He let her see through the crack of his confident demeanor. Inside was the image of a nervous boy with a silly crush on a beautiful stranger, fearful of rejection. He thought she was out of his league. Hoping to reassure him and give in to the temptation of letting her hair down a little, she allowed herself to flirt ever so slightly.

"Why would you be scared? I don't bite..." here she snuck a sly look at him, "unless you're into that sort of thing." The reaction was gratifying: his smile took over his face and he immediately declared that she was "a keeper." Her ever present blush deepened a shade or two.

As is always the saddening case, all good moments eventually come to an end. After exchanging a few more words of bashful flirtation, the two were forced to part ways. His family called for him, and her friend was bound to arrive at any moment.

Facing the issue of appropriate goodbyes, the girl and boy decided to embrace. She simply melted in his arms. Never before had she felt so safe, so reluctant to let go. Everything felt so right with him. Their only barrier

was the shy hesitancy with which they approached each other, fearful of hurting the other. Yet the two teenagers felt this would soon fade into a comfortable interaction only strengthened with time.

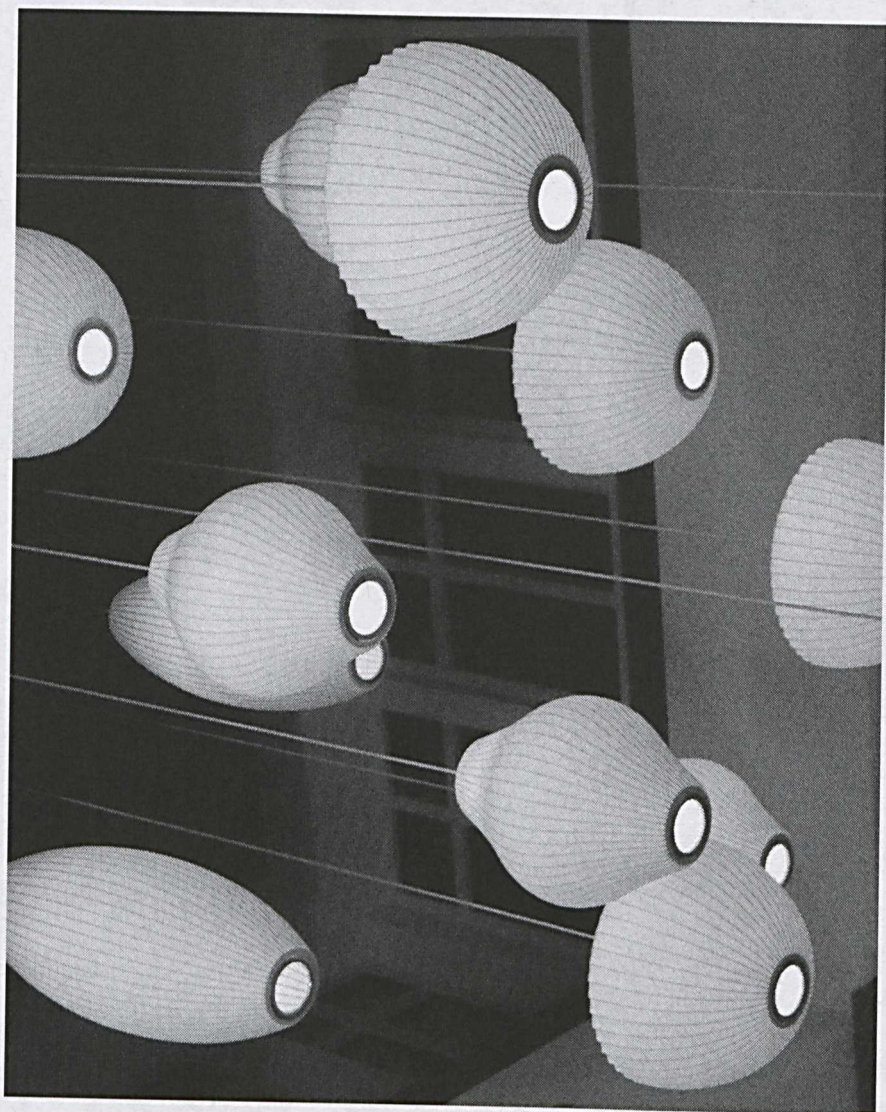
She turned away, took a few steps, and looked over her shoulder to see if he had looked back to check the same. They locked gazes and it felt as though the girl was experiencing their first encounter all over again. That electrifying feeling did not even waver once. The farther he walked away, the stronger a taut cord between them grew.

She felt a connection to this boy. She couldn't explain it, couldn't place her overwhelming emotions into words. All she knew was that all of a sudden she felt a strong desire inside herself. For the first time in forever, she wanted to live. The girl wanted to wake up the next day and see what was in store for her. With that short conversation, the boy had given her hope. And she couldn't possibly thank him enough. A bright future stretched before her, sparkling with the fresh excitement of possibilities. No longer was she lost and alone—he had found her and saved her effortlessly.

With this thought, the girl smiled as wide as she could and experienced her first feeling of genuine happiness in a very long time. The world didn't seem so bad after all.

Floating Fungi

Shannon Bernier



Tempest

Darby Bortz

They say she walks with power – hell, she glides
head held high. Epitome of temptress.
Be her or be with her wish passersby
staring hungry-eyed. Open mouths ooze this

poison. Whispers charge the air. Brand her mouth
lush and eyes dark fire. Her touch lightning
to stop your heart and somehow still rouse
its beat. Thunder in your ears, deafening.

Yet, she's won no companion. Those who've dared
dance in her storm quit in search of clear skies.
Find solace substituting sweet liquor
for her. They say it's a more controlled high.

Now discarded, who will love disaster,
submit to her will, and be her master?

Gerald's Monday Blues

Colleen Clark

Gerald sipped his third cup of coffee of the day. He was writing a long scolding essay to one of his inferiors. Another client lost to incompetent workers. In his angry typing and simultaneous sipping, some of the black coffee dripped from his travel coffee mug and onto his white button-down.

“Shhiitt.” Gerald whispered to himself.

He had a meeting with his inferior, John, in ten minutes. He huffed as he rose out of his swivel desk chair. He took one look down at his stain and immediately regretted it – his hefty stomach now blocked his view to his toes. Not a day went by without Janet telling him to lose the weight.

Gerald trudged out of his office and down the short hall to the men's restroom. Once at the sink, he splashed water on his stain and rubbed at it with some cheap toilet paper, the whole time avoiding his reflection. After wiping the brown stain until it was just a water stain, he turned and headed back to his office. He was sweating. It was from the coffee, that is what he told himself, denying the source being the minimal physical movement he just performed.

There were photos of a family on his desk, a beautiful, middle aged red-haired woman stood behind two blonde girls of similar frame and build. Gerald's daughters smiled large, their teeth shining, which contrasted Janet's soft insincere smile. Gerald sat and took a tissue off of his desk to wipe his greasy forehead. He pushed a few strands of black hair back into place, over his shiny bald spot. Gerald hated Mondays.

Gerald checked his email in the time remaining before his meeting. One email from Amazon confirming a shipment of pens. He was excited for those. A payment notice from his bowling club, he was late with his dues. That didn't matter, he hadn't been in months. Then one from his mother, requesting that he call Aunt Shirley. He wouldn't. Another email from Janet:

Just sign the papers. — J.

That was all it said.

A timid knock on the door prevented Gerald from diving down a deep rabbit hole of self-introspection and regret. He cleared his throat.

"Come in."

John walked in, pushing his glasses up over his nose and adjusting his shirt. He sat down in the chair across from Gerald's desk. John waited, knowing not to speak first. This wasn't nearly his first time in the principal's office.

"I assume you know why I called this meeting?" Gerald bossed.

"Well, it must be about the Jefferson's open house."

"You mean the open house that never happened? There is no excuse for this in my office. If a client is scheduled for an open house, their time is more important than yours. You must never cancel on a client last minute. You clearly don't know how to prioritize and this is not a new occurrence. This is your last warning."

"I had an emergency sir," He looked down. "I'm sorry, it was a family emergency —"

Gerald cut him off. "I don't care what it was. Put this job first or you are done here. Get out of my office!"

John quickly stood and shuffled out of the door. He wiped a tear away as he rushed down the hall back to his cubicle. Gerald sipped his coffee, it was cold.

He hated guys like John and their tailored suits. He hated their fresh cologne and their toned muscles. Gerald hated their healthy lives and the energy they always had. They were just the kind of men Janet seemed to prefer.

Gerald closed some open browsers on his desktop. The most recent search included a Wikihow on "How to Save a Marriage." Gerald closed this browser with particular gusto and a quick grunt when clicked. Gerald knew that to save his marriage would require more energy and effort than what he could provide. He knew he lost her for the same reason. Gerald had stopped caring, stopped making the kids' lunches. He stopped surprising Janet, – to focus on his job – he had said. But the thing was, after he got the promotion, he didn't go back to normal. The energy never returned.

That even, was years past. Gerald felt he was too far gone to start to try and fix his life. He was content in his job position and happy with stunted growth. This was the job that he wanted, the one his whole life he had been working for. He didn't want to work for a raise, he didn't want to change his diet. He didn't even care if Janet was cheating on him, Gerald would stay and pretend he didn't care. Gerald would do anything as long as she stayed with him.

He knew it was too late. He could do nothing but delay the process kicking and screaming. That is what he had been doing, but now the divorce was real. Gerald took a thick envelope out of the mail pile. He knew what it was. The brown envelope had a distinct scent of heartbreak. With a letter opener he ripped open the envelope. For a moment he imagined what Janet would think if instead he had applied that same

pressure to his wrist. He quickly dismissed that thought, she would still leave.

Gerald uncharacteristically didn't read a single word of the thick stack of papers. He flipped to where it clearly said to sign. He picked up his favorite old silver pen, pressed it to the line, and he did what he knew he had been destined to do his whole life: he gave up.

Avarice

Kirsten Hahn

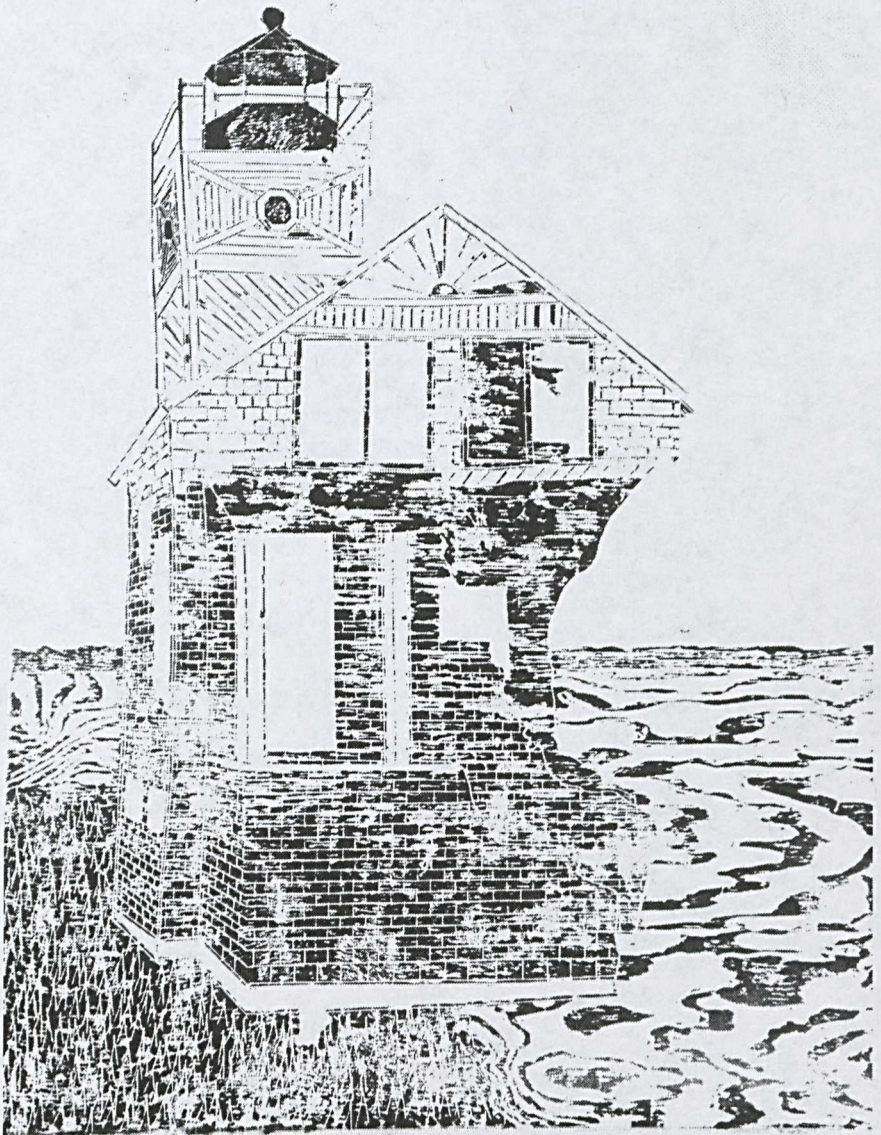
It creeps into the hearts of men,
A murky ink that stains the world,
Crushing souls with mortar and pestle,
Infecting rich and poor alike,
Its grip strangling and unyielding.

It tears friendship into shreds,
A monster with utter destruction in its wake,
A looming smog above the populace,
Thriving on selfish human nature,
Its breath suffocating passerby.

It falters, though, at compassion,
A coward in the face of care,
Dying at the hands of generosity,
Kindness smiting it without a glance,
The world renewed by benevolence.

Cedar Point

Jonathan Nepini



Taste

Kyle Granger

Your name
tastes like
Cigarettes.

It used to
taste like adventure
and laughter
and a smile.

Your name
tastes like
I'm drowning,
like I drank
the ocean.

It used to
taste like strawberries.

Your name
tastes like
broken promises:
jagged and covered
in blood.

It used to
taste like
Forever.

Your name
tastes like
Withdrawal.

It used to
taste like
it would never end.

Your name
tastes like
giving up.

Definitions of Poetry

Andrew Kendrick

I.

Poetry is a comet
Soaring through the sky,
Aimless and unrestrained,
Its own guide onto the path
Of the heavens.

II.

Poetry is the subterranean, the
Authenticity of God, manifested
In the many wonders of the world.

III.

Poetry is eternal communion
With the universal consciousness
That embraces us all tenderly.

IV.

Poetry is the diapason of the multiverse,
Infinite and vast,
Beauteous and soothing for all
Souls that yearn to embrace the Light.

V.

Poetry is answering the call
Of the divinity,
To put forth the forces
Of life into words;
'tis a primordial urge

Mr. Linden's Library

Marya Topina

Crack! Snap! The spine of the book tore apart as the pages began turning by themselves. It protested from the abrupt rude handling. Faster and faster the pages turned, until at last they settled on the exact center of the book, and lay still and quiet for a second. Then, with a creak and a groan, the book completely fell apart as a long green vine began making its way out from the depths of the tome.

He had warned her about the book, but now it was too late, for the girl was fast asleep, oblivious to all the action occurring right beside her. Soon more vines appeared from within the book and began sprouting leaves and small red flowers along the stems. Hungrily, they wrapped around the girl's pale wrists and continued to entwine themselves with her body. Still more vines sprang out from the remnants of the book and latched onto the girl's arms and legs, but she remained asleep, peaceful as ever.

Before long, her whole body was enfolded within thousands of the thick ropes and when at last the girl did wake up, the plant covering her mouth cut off the scream on her lips.

Finally, the twisting vines came to a halt and lay still, trapping the young girl. The only parts of her body that could be seen were the two fearful, darting brown eyes scanning the room. Quickly glancing around, hoping, wishing for an escape, the girl let her gaze settle upon the torn pages of the library book. The crisis at hand forgotten, the girl stared at the destroyed book and an unpleasant thought crossed her mind.

"Ooh, Mr. Linden won't be happy when I return the book. He told me it was special!"

Suddenly remembering that she might not even get a chance to return the remnants of the book, the girl promptly burst into tears. He had warned her and she was foolish enough to leave the book open during the night, doing exactly what he forbade! She was stupid, oh so stupid!

After a minute or so of this self-berating and sobbing fiasco, the girl took the few shaky breaths that the thick vines covering her face would allow and tried to calm down.

“Now, let’s think about this,” she deliberated in her mind, “What was it that Mr. Linden said about this book? How can I possibly free myself?!” And she thought back to this afternoon when she had received the book...

It had been an exceptionally great day and it seemed that everything had gone just as it should. Even the sunny weather had suited her joyful mood! Entering Mr. Linden’s library, she had decided to gather up her courage and ask about the mysterious book she always noticed lying on the shelf behind his desk. Seeing as though nothing had gone wrong that day, the girl had thought it wouldn’t hurt to finally ask to see it. Mr. Linden had only smiled and told the child:

“You may have this book on one condition. You must answer the following question truthfully. If you do not lie, the book shall be yours for a week.”

“Yeah, I’ll answer your question truthfully, promise!” the girl had not believed her ears. It was so easy to finally be allowed to read the unusual book!

“Ah, I see you are eager to read it. But first, tell me. Do you believe in magic?”

“Mr. Linden, in case you haven’t noticed, I am ten years old. I’m way too old for such things!”

Heatedly, the indignant girl had responded without considering her answer, but then stared up at Mr. Linden as his expectant smile turned into a sad one.

Mr. Linden sadly shook his head and said:

“You are ready for this book. However, I warn you: this book contains knowledge and a power like none other. Promise me that you will use it with caution, for the consequences are terrible!”

And the girl had promised, thinking the old man was just trying to scare her. She had grabbed the book and ran home, eager to start reading it. Once she did, the girl couldn't tear her gaze away from the enchanting pages before her. For the book told of dragons and knights, wizards and princesses, curses and fairies, monsters and heroes! The tales in the book opened up a whole new world for her, explaining magic like never before. But in the end, before falling asleep with the open book on the bed beside her, the girl had never truly believed in the entertaining stories she thought were just fairytales.

As the girl thought back on the previous day's activities, searching for an answer about the book, she had frantically squirmed and wriggled in her bounds, but to no prevail. And as she paused in her unsuccessful efforts, the girl felt a peculiar sensation. It felt...no, she was probably just imagining things. For a moment, the girl thought she had felt the vines pulsating against her skin, just as though they were *tightening*! There it was again! As the vines shifted and drew closer around her, the girl attempted yet another shriek. She sobbed, knowing her end was near as the vines closed around her throat.

The girl remembered kind Mr. Linden, smiling as she asked for the mysterious book. How he had asked her if she believed. Suddenly, the girl had an idea. Before the vines had time to completely wrap around her

throat, she moved her head and in the small space provided, the girl was able to utter the two words:

“I believe...”

Almost immediately, the vines slid off of the girl like snakes and retreated back into the book. Laughing with relief, the girl flexed her fingers and stretched her body. Picking up the now whole book, the girl placed it on her bedside table – being careful to firmly close it – and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, the girl returned the book as soon as she could. As she parted her lips to tell Mr. Linden what had happened, he interrupted her: “Shhh. No, no, my dear. Let your adventures stay yours.” And with a wink, Mr. Linden placed the book back on the shelf.

Overpour

Sheila Evans



Kaleidoscope

Marya Topina

Kristy was always a kaleidoscope of color. I first met her in middle school through a mutual friend. As soon as I saw her, I knew she was special. Kristy filled up the room with color. Her hair was blue and purple and pink at the time, and when she smiled, the colors of her hair were amplified and seemed to radiate out as a rainbow-hued aura, extending into the furthest corners of the room. I was smitten. We were good friends, despite the fact that she was a year older and we did not share any classes.

I only realized a year later, at the beginning of eighth grade, that I was bisexual. Kristy was off in high school by that point and I no longer saw her every day. We stayed in touch through social media and texting. She had a boyfriend her freshman year. When I entered high school, I was thrust into the frenzied dating orgy that is teenage affection. After a series of flings, I had my first serious relationship. Julian and I lasted for eight months before I broke it off. I then had my first girlfriend, Lindsay. She moved away after a month or so, and so my attention turned back to Kristy, who had flirted with me even when I was with Julian.

She had taught me to dye my hair different colors, urging me to displease the middle school administration with my rebellious green locks. Now in high school, we both sported different colors, a constantly shifting and changing palette of hues. We were the most colorful couple. Kristy and I met as often as we could. The first time I went over to her house, I got so nervous at the thought of kissing her, I started picking at the skin of my lips. I was soon bleeding all over the place and the idea of landing a kiss was out of the question.

She came over to my house, too. My mother refused to call Kristy anything other than “your friend.” My coming out story in eighth grade involved an awkward note passed to my mother, followed by a long lecture about my confusion and search for identity. To this day, my mother still asserts that my bisexuality is “just a phase.” She refused to acknowledge my affection towards Kristy, and instead came up with excuses as to why she didn’t like my girlfriend. Kristy caused too much commotion when she came over. Kristy wasn’t punctual. Kristy’s laugh was too loud and annoying.

The first time I kissed Kristy, she laughed for so long and so hard, my heart melted with pleasure while my mother must have clenched her fists in annoyance in the other room. Our sweet kisses continued to be interrupted by uncontrollable fits of giggles.

I never dared tell my father about my attraction to girls. He viewed homosexuality on the same level as having sex with animals. Perhaps my mom told him about my “phase,” but I never outright spoke about it with him. In my parents’ eyes, Kristy remained just a friend that was too loud and disruptive to come back to the house. So we met in coffee shops and at her house and after school and went for walks in the woods instead.

Our romance was a beautiful thing. Looking through old pictures, I see the rainbow of color that was our relationship. I remember our matching turquoise tops, leaning close together to watch a movie on her small laptop. I remember finding several strands of her fiery red hair on my sweater after she had left. The hairs clung to my sweater like blood and smelled like cinnamon. I remember the way her purple hair caught the light as we walked in the autumn woods together. Our relationship was beautiful and bright. Colorful beyond belief. But fleeting. She soon found interest in a boy at her school, and I struggled to stay in touch due to my restrictive parents. Kristy is the only ex I still talked with after the relationship ended. She was more of a friend than anything else. Always

supportive, always willing to offer advice or a random suggestion to do something crazy. Kristy lit up my world even after we stopped dating.

Of course we continued to talk though. We loved each other, but we both felt the need for other romances. The relationship never ended as a stark cutting off of emotion. It simply morphed into something else, more universal and welcoming. Rather than shutting off the lights between us, we experienced the golden hour of dawn, when the sunlight is faint, but touches everything with a warm hazy glow. I never felt hurt with Kristy, even as she loved others. All through high school, I would always check up on Kristy. What color is your hair now? Do you want to get some coffee or tea this weekend? What's stressing you out the most right now?

Kristy was always a part of my life, despite the odds. My parents didn't want me to see her. We were rejected in public for being a lesbian couple. We attended different high schools. And we even met despite all odds. She was adopted from Vietnam as an infant. My parents moved from Russia to start a family. Yet somehow we both ended up in little old Highland, Maryland, searching for our true identities and always trying to find the light in this world.

Kristy ended up pursuing her artistic talent. She got into the art program at VCU and painted her way through a successful first year. I was finishing up my senior year in high school and hoping to pursue English and writing. We always dreamed of creating something together. I used to write poems inspired by her paintings. Although we went our separate ways, we still stayed in touch and tried to see each other. Kristy remained the poignant, spunky girl that I always loved. And Kristy always loved me. My heart grew stronger with the years spent receiving Kristy's affection. But hers failed her.

On July 27th, 2016, Kristin Marie Dunbar died suddenly in her Virginia apartment. It was less than a month until her 19th birthday, and just two days before we had planned to meet for tea. The autopsy revealed cardiac dysrhythmia associated with borderline myocarditis. Just like that, my

kaleidoscope of color, my punk rock partner in crime, my dear sweet Kristy was gone.

Her family held a celebration of life to laugh and cry and remember together. I went, and cried more than I laughed. All the loving people in her life gathered to remember together. I wanted to stand up and shout “I loved her, too! I kissed her smiling face as she serenaded me on the ukulele. I watched her artistry improve as she painted my eyes, over and over again until she got the swirl of green and gray hues just right. I wrote poems comparing her to a thousand rainbows. I loved her and I still love her and she was ripped away from me, too.”

But I sat quietly and listened to her childhood friends talk about girl scouts and her family list her many talents with charcoal, paintbrushes, and oil pastels. I wanted to share less surface level things. I wanted to talk about the endless quirks and idiosyncrasies that made Kristy unlike anyone else in the world. I wanted to explore the ways the image of Kristy was different from when she went by Kris or Kristin. I wanted to draw connections between the color of her hair and the mood she was in. I wanted to see which parts of her soul she had shared with different people. Instead, I left early, went home, and completely shaved off all my blue hair.

Self Portrait

Abigail Jones



Storm

Emma Driban

A series of Haikus and Tankas

I.

Ominous stratus,
why do you darken the day
with harsh promises?

II.

One moment clear, then,
 like the ever-changing tide,
they come rushing in.
Clouds flow across the gray sky,
covering it with black grief.

III.

Rain pummels the ground.
 Like the cracking of a whip,
thunder strikes my ears.

IV.

The nimbostratus,
 like a heavy wool blanket,
puts out the bright fire
of the day, once full of sun,
turning it all into ash.

V.

The crash of lightning,
splitting still-growing trees, too
soon, ending their youth.

VI.

Smothering the day,
suffocating the vibrant
joy that filled the air,
cruelly shredding it like the
razor sharp claws of a beast.

Expanse

Linda Wood



That Day.

Joanna Buchheim

He kissed
You on the head
The last time that day.
He said
I love you, baby.
The last time that day.
He got
Into his car & left
The last time that day.
You chased
After the car & screamed
The first time that day.
You thought
“My fault, My Fault”
The entirety of the day.
You cried
Until the tears stopped
And you couldn’t cry anymore.
After years
Of the blame game,
You stopped that one day.
You looked
At the mirror again
And said this that day:
“You did
Nothing to make him
To leave on that day.
You aren’t
To blame for him

Leaving on that day.”
You realized
That you were just
A child on that day.
You were
Just a child who
Had to grow up quickly.
You now
Still think about him
But you don’t need him.
You thank
God for him, Dad,
Leaving for the last time.
You cried
Like you never did
The last time that day.
You smiled
Because you never did
The first time that day.
You finally
Stood free from his
Shackles that he left behind.
You never
Thought he'd try to
Come back again one day.
You never
Thought you'd be able
To say no that day.
But you
Did say no for
The first time that day.

A Warning

Kaylan Hutchison

I will soak in what you whisper in my ear
ring myself out on your bed
And then eat off your plate
I will become a moving shrine
That climbs into pants you leave on the floor
That kisses you back
That uses your shoulders for sweet leverage

My retrograde will turn you

I will deduce you to a granular level
And then sift you over a countertop
I will usher in an era of favors
I will inherit an ancestral greed
I will walk
All over
You

Metro

Tyler Van Dyke



For Emily, But She'll Disagree

Kaylan Hutchison

Moving to a 90's beat
that's full of gray air hit by harsh sunlight beams that melt
onto the bedspread like watercolor
The same kind of 90's beat
you wear in your wrists when you write and tear up grass and
hold people's chins in your hand
to get a good look at them
The same 90's beat, even,
that you dress in, loose and patterned, and smelling like the
house you grew up in
that you eat, licking your thumb, index, and middle finger
when you finish those dinosaur chicken nuggets that I'm
pretty sure I cooked all the way
but that don't look like they do on the box
that you step on when you walk, like a cartoon, bouncing,
moving forward on a road
that keeps reeling on and on
that you stare at, when you're trying to fall asleep, and then
again for a long time when you wake because you'd rather not
get out of bed
faces in the sheets
the bobbing branch outside the window
the way the back of your nails feel against the bumps on your
headboard
cool

Of Silence, and Sacred Sorrow

Jared Wilmer

In his mind, his body was screaming. Screaming down, and down, rushing towards that final blackness that comes at the end of a long fall. In the moment before facing that unalterable conclusion, there was a brief glimpse of light. He was fortunate, not all people have the chance to hit pause the instant before their own death scene. Even so, the accumulated speed and energy of such a long fall must be counteracted with an equally brutal force.

Was he fortunate? He tried to tell himself he was. The thought stuck like trying to apply an old sticker. Eventually, the edges curled back and it drifted towards the floor.

It is a strange undertaking to reflect on your own mind. It is especially strange when you cannot trust the reflections. They are, like all reflections, only doppelgangers of reality. When the original images fade slowly over time, like the yellowing pages of a book, how can you comprehend the change?

He woke from the anesthesia, slowly floating through a fog that abruptly ended in a cascade of light. The darkness before was only an imperfect memory. It sat on the edge of his mind, where he dangled his toes in it. The dull ache brought him back.

That, and the nurse's voice.

"We were wondering when you were going to come back to us."

Come back? Come back from...?

His mind ticked on, like a clock that had just finished being wound.

Yes...I am in the hospital...my first treatment, he thought.

He moved his head to find the source of the voice. The muscles in his neck felt like they had been removed, tenderized, and then re-inserted by some self-conscious mad scientist who felt he needed to over-tighten the connectors just to be sure. His nose found the sterile smells of alcohol swabs and bleached floors. Among them was the apathetic smell of cleanliness that always comes with places where they have your billing information on file.

When I reflect back on those close, tumultuous, suffocating moments that lead me to where I ended up, to the place where I am, I am filled with a sense of distant longing. A longing not unlike the desire to return to a warm bed upon waking to a cold morning. There is something safe about death.

In its permanence. In its equality.

Our lives, like great equations, are balanced by death. Death has no judgement for what came before, only that it did and that it must end.

The dream of death to which he drifted off to sleep earlier that morning was like sinking into warm sheets.

His eyes blinked open, slightly disappointed that they were called back into service yet again.

"Why don't you try to sit up," she said.

It was more a command than a request. She raised his body alert in the gurney to match the alertness that had been thrust upon his mind. He was in a different room. He guessed it was some sort of recovery room. He

felt as if he had travelled a cosmically vast distance. The operating room, if can it be called an operating room, was far away now, hazy in the past like those stifling moments that prepared him for the uncertainty of this one. Inside the spaces of his head and between the bones of his jaw, the reality of what he had just done reverberated like some penitent dirge for the dead. He wanted to imagine the details of his dream but they were already being carried off and placed into the cold ground.

“Sit up. That’s better,” she said.

Him, better?

If only it were so easy as sitting up. He hated those people. Happy people. The people that didn’t have to try. For them it was just sitting up out of bed. For him, it was like digging himself out of his own grave.

“I’ll tell them to pull their car around,” she said over her shoulder as she walked through the door.

No. He wanted to melt back into the darkness. He wanted to disappear back behind that doorway in his mind that kept him safe from all these moving lights, moving things, and moving people.

Her words wound their way back into silence.

I can still feel it, even now. That thunderous, humming depth of feeling. Nighttime eternities of desperation. And yet, there is beauty in it. Color becomes so much more vivid when you live in never-ending grey. The color is what causes the pain. It’s not the grey. It aches when you see the color, knowing that it’s only a glimpse, something you can’t take with you. Beauty flows and ebbs, in and out of lives around mine, so much that it becomes ordinary. It is the long, hopeless, silence that is terrifying, knowing that the world will be without color for you, and to sit, alone, confident in the fact that its absence this time might be all you can take.

To sit in darkness, separated from anyone by unfathomable depths, your soul, if there ever was such a thing, teetering on the brink of a primordial emptiness. To know, from your core, from the very center of your being, a feeling so strong it becomes tangible:

You are alone.

“Try to stand up.”

She was back. She had snuck back into the room while he stumbled in the solitary blackness of his mind. He tried to stand but the room spun around him, one light chasing the other. The light danced for him now. It's a shame it never did before.

She returned with a wheelchair.

“Take your time. It's not a race.”

He raised his face to hers. It was the first time he had noticed a smile in an eternity. After long enough, people's faces begin to reflect your own feelings. For him, their faces were empty. Their eyes hollow, shadowy portals to the nothingness within. Just like his. We all become different versions of the same great tragedy.

Slow down. It's too much at once.

You want it too badly. All the beauty of this moment will be lost.

To a blind audience.

To time.

They cannot comprehend it. Is it beautiful if only you see it that way? If so, should you waste your time in telling this story? Sometimes, I stand

motionless, horrified by it all. And sometimes, insanity dangles in front of my face like a toy on a string. And, like a mischievous child, I want to play with it. It is mine after all.

He shuffled into the room where it would happen, like an old prisoner, shackled and committed to what would happen there. They took his jewelry and his watch. None of this mattered, time did not matter to him. They set aside the shiny symbols of a past life, processing him like those that had lost possession of their bodies, convicts and cadavers.

A prick in his arm, pins and needles. The burning seeps into his arm like blood into a cold limb recently pinched. And suddenly, he breathes in sharply, as if he were unexpectedly dunked under icy water. He goes darkly into solitude, and time

stretches out, clinging to him as someone holds onto their lover the night before they go off to war. He lives in the grey stillness. He imagines small sparks twinkling, dazzling in the deep crevices of his brain. At a great distance, the lights flare and dance. His mind becomes silent, far-away heat lightning in the late summer. Erupting out the gloom, one wrathful crack, and titanic tremors wrack his body.

I recall to mind some ancient and forgotten river, ensconced in the mist. I drift along the banks and brush against echoes of drums in the distance and the words of Kurtz:

“The horror. The horror.”

It is the emptiness that is frightening. Not the emptiness without but the emptiness within. We carry the emptiness within us like pots of water. Silence and solitude passed on from one to the next, for all time. And so, I floated into my own heart of darkness.

I have never seen myself have a seizure. I was never conscious the moment that my mind lit up on the EEG machine. So, I was never able to observe the moment of transformation, the moment where the biochemistry of my brain changed permanently. It happened deep inside my mind. I was as blind to it as the people who operated on me.

I have been asked by people, "why would you put yourself through that"? It is difficult to understand until you equate it to something else. You may have heard the story of the guy who got his arm trapped under a boulder while he was climbing. It was the one where the guy cut off his own arm. Remember now? It's very much like that. It was as if my arm was trapped under a boulder and I would die unless I cut it off. Death or prosthesis. Sitting back from that decision, cutting your arm off seems rational. In that moment, it is anything from rational.

It's desperation.

Like the guy with his arm trapped under a boulder, I acted out of sheer desperation. Much later, when I began to deal with the reality of my decision, I thought:

Maybe I will be lucky and find a great prosthetic brain.

The drive to the hospital was silent.

I suppose it would have been strange if it had been full of conversation. What can you really say? What do you say to someone who doesn't care if they wake up afterwards? What do you say to someone who may not even wake up? And I don't mean they are dead. Let me explain. Medical procedures are not created equal. Heart surgery is not brain surgery. With heart surgery, you are always going to wake up and still be the same you. With brain surgery, when you start poking and prodding around up there, you can't guarantee that the person you put to sleep is going to be the person you wake up.

Try to imagine your mind as a house.

Now, try to think about all the stuff that you do to your house to make it your home. Picture coming home one day and finding that someone has come in and changed everything. New floors, carpet, paint colors, furniture, decorations, lighting. They've even totally redone the floorplan. The only thing that remains the same is the outside.

Now, imagine the house as your mind.

Sometimes it is as simple as opening a cabinet and reaching for a plate but finding a box of bran flakes. Other times it is like walking out your front door but instead of fresh air and sunlight you find yourself in the dark, the sound of a hollow metallic *tung* in your ears, your knee screaming in pain, and the taunting smell of dryer sheets in your nose. But the worst times feel like waking up in the middle of the night from a nightmare and stumbling in the dark to get a drink of water. You reach for the light only to find yourself grasping at empty space, feeling a strange sense of vertigo, being pulled forward into the blackness like a hapless sailor over the edge of world, and tumbling down a flight of stairs.

Most of the trips to and from the hospital were silent.

Words literally escaped me. My brain was like a computer with a shitty internet connection. It was always slow and most of the time it was spotty. I would grasp for a word and all I would get in return was:

Loading...

Loading...

Loading...

Fuck you...

Still Loading...

I would stare off into space with vacant eyes that betrayed the truth about my mind; somebody hacked into my mind and moved the contents of my vocabulary folder to "Photos of Summer Vacation 2007".

The nurse placed her arm around his shoulders and then under his arm.

"Try to stand up."

He could smell her as she leaned in to help him stand. Nurses always seem to smell the same. Maybe it's because they all use the same soap. I guess they learn in nursing school what soap they have to use, he thought.

His mind wandered. It didn't actively form questions or coherent thoughts. His mind was more like an empty space where an occasional thought floated in through an open window. The thoughts passed briefly through a ray of sunlight like tiny specs of dust and were whisked away into the darkness by a sudden gust of wind.

She pulled up.

"I am going to need your help. Push with your legs."

He pushed with his legs. His head swam and he sat down hard.

"Don't move. I'm going to get a wheelchair."

Get a wheelchair...

Get a wheelchair?

Did I tell you this part before? If I did, I apologize. If I didn't, you need to know I have problems with my memory. The treatments effect your short-term memory. So, sometimes I won't know if I told you something already. Even if something is a completely new experience it may still feel like I have done it before. It really makes you appreciate why con artists go after the elderly. They are just easier to fool. It's sad, but it's true.

The nurse rolled in a wheelchair. It was one of the nice ones. The kind that don't fold up. He had always thought it strange that someone decided to put chrome finish on wheelchairs. Maybe the shiny finish is there to distract people from the fact that they are trapped. Maybe the correctional industry should use this idea. Chrome prison bars. Perfect.

Our minds, tapestries submerged in cold water, the colors and edges warped, bent, and blurred. Each memory bleeding into the next until there can be no distinction between one and the other. And like our tapestries, we slowly drown and bend and blur until our minds distort and break. Tiny lines become great fissures. You, me, past, present, all things slip and collapse into the spaces.

He flipped on his TV. He was looking forward to watching the weekly episode of his show. The clock read 9:00. All the good shows start at 9:00. A sense of anticipation filled him. The recap of last week's episode started. Distress slowly crept into his mind. He recognized none of it.

There is no way that he missed an episode. He had watched each one like clockwork, he thought.

A sickening sense of doubt began to leak into his gut. His face flushed. It felt like sitting down only to find that someone has stolen the chair out from under you. It felt like that moment of uncertainty when you hang in space, the moment of doubt that feels like a kick in the stomach, that moment before the helpless fall. Sometimes the doubt is worse than the

knowledge of the impending impact with the floor. There is sense of safety in the certainty. Even if it is the inevitability of pain.

I am terrified by the beauty and immensity of the universe.

We observe our own lives. A continuous stream of images glued together and connected by our minds. In truth, there is no connection. It is a necessary fiction created to deal with the reality of the meaninglessness of it all. Our memory fades and past images are redacted, dissolved into the vast vacuum of space. We forget. In our forgetting, we whittle away pieces of reality. Tiny pieces of ourselves cut away, falling out of existence.

We are all wandering around in the dark, alone, crying, and stooping, trying to pick up the pieces. They leak through our fingers like water.

The saddest part of our story is that many of us walk blindly through life, confident in the fact that what we see is the truth. We all have our own special mythologies we sell ourselves. We have to lie.

How do you rebuild a mind? How do you create meaning? No, that's not the right word. Meaning is not created, it's manufactured. It doesn't burst forth from

nothingness. It is sourced from the infinite perceptions of consciousness. I imagine it is like the creation of a star. The elements float in the darkness of oblivion and coalesce under tremendous pressure. At first, everything swirls in the silence and then, the darkness peels back, a tiny flame. Light. Meaning. Purpose. It grows and builds in a momentous cascade. I close my eyes and I am overwhelmed. I am penetrated by the light.

I did not choose when my existence became meaningful, just as a star does not choose to flash into life.

I believe our minds are equipped with features to protect their own interest. But, like any machinery, our minds can be worn down over time, forced to act against their own will. My mind was worn down until it broke. The machinery slowed to a halt, dust collected on the gears and ruin overtook me.

And then the heavens opened, lighting arced down and awoke the sleeping golem.

Blasts of trumpets and lights in the sky.

I awoke and suddenly my life, my existence, became dear to me and I was afraid to die.

Right now, as the reader, you are projecting yourself into my mind. All writing is an exercise in empathy. The writer must empathize with the reader and the reader must empathize with the characters. Without empathy, the whole process is empty. Right now, you are trying to see through my eyes, feel what I feel. You are making yourself an active observer and in doing so, parts of you blend into me. Your own thoughts and experiences color and shape my story. My thoughts are filtered through your memories. The only difference between you and me is that you chose to step into my mind.

I never chose this. He did.

He reached for the wheelchair as a blind man reaches for a hot stove. Attached to it was an enormous burden.

Hope.

If he took hold of the chair, it meant that he was alive. The thought of being alive was profoundly horrifying. It meant that he had not given up. It meant that the awful, soulless, self-annihilating darkness he had felt so many times before could return. What madman would choose to travel

back to the doorstep of hell and inferno and begin the descent again?
What madman indeed. Perhaps madness is the prerequisite for what he
was attempting, for it certainly isn't hope.

The Hunt

Darby Bortz

An hour before dawn we drag ourselves
down to the waiting boat.
The smell – gasoline
and fresh lead paint
shakes me awake.
I hope for sun on the water,
rare in the rainy season.

Two hours upriver
finds forest undisturbed,
greeted by thousand year old trees.
I shed my neon life vest
anxious to abandon
the motor's deafening hum
and the wide brown river.

We leave footprints and camera traps
always hoping to catch a cat.
our guide follows a trail
I can't see. Too busy looking
everywhere, at everything
bathed in green.
The air tastes like life
sweet sweat and earth.

Not long and I smell rain
and –
something – else –
Wait. Mechanic grinding. Black

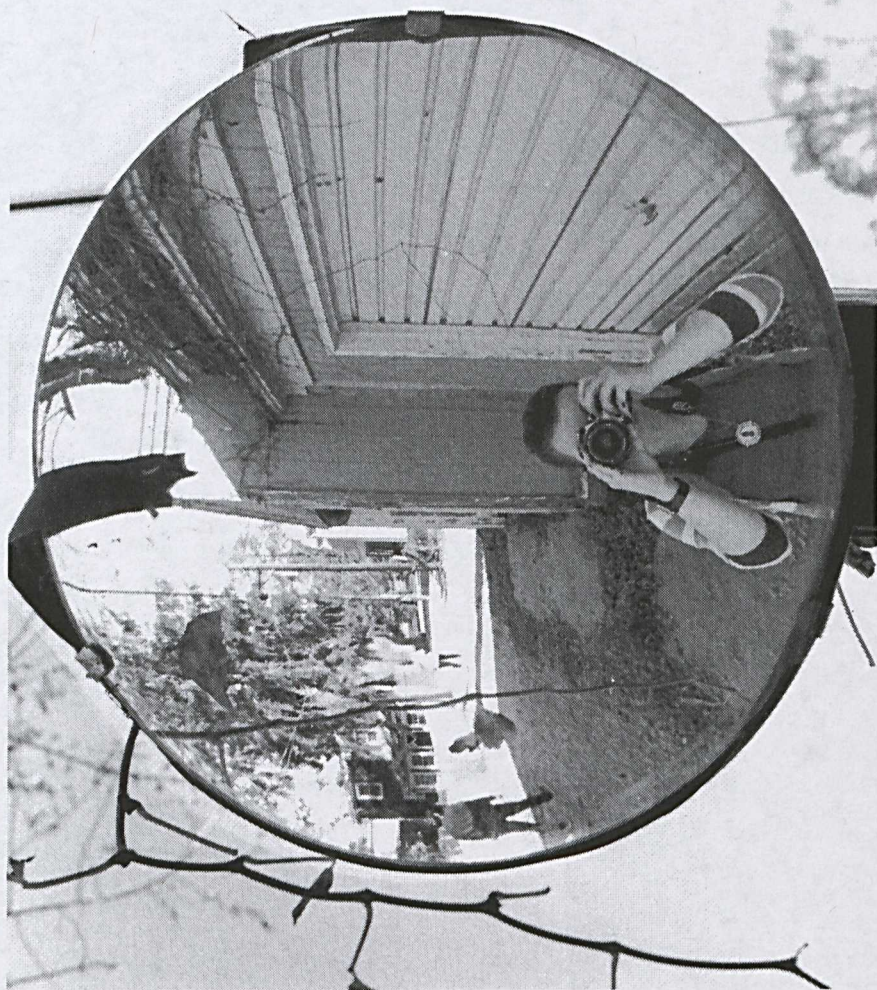
smoke swells above the tree line.
Our guide stops dead.
Five steps more and we're in
a clearing. The only green beaten back
miles into the distance.

Charred trees litter the ground like bodies
of fallen soldiers. Pale,
ash smothered faces still recognizable.
Here's Lupuna.
Here lies Wimba.
Castaña's left standing – illegal to chop down,
not illegal to leave alone in a charred field
to die alone from the sun's torture.

The chainsaw stops
Voices come running. Run.
Run!

Reflection

Emma Driban



A Thousand Slivers

Marya Topina

Shards of my soul
Break away,
Shattering with a ringing note
Just like the glass
Of a broken mirror.

The cracked pieces
Reflect tender thoughts and
Exultant memories as
I gather the scattered remains
And try in vain to gaze
At the essence within.

My vision clouded,
I grasp at the smashed splinters,
Ignoring the red, liquid heat
Seeping into the grooves
Of the glass's ice-cold edges.

I press my closed fist closer –
Closer to my heart,
Willing the sections to
Warm and mold back together,
To become what was lost –
A beautiful, radiant whole.

But alas,
The warmth has vanished
For eternity and a day,
Leaving me with worthless
Glimmers of the past.

A sigh,
An unclenched palm,
My soul flits free
And shatters into
Yet a thousand more slivers
Dancing at my feet.

Blue Garden Shed

Abigail Jones



Uphill

Colleen Clark

Lace the boots of Confidence
Prep the heartache in your pack
Let's hike the once known mountain
To discover love we lack

The path seems a perpetual loop
One step, two step, ticks the clock
The hills that play, harshen to cliff
The river, now cold dry rock

Long past the summit sank
Suddenly my shoes have shrank
Legs now ache
Breath stops short
Lost not found
A misplaced foot pulls all to ground

Down, down, I roll to stop
There you loom, far at the top
Paralyzed by legs of lead
Or was it the words unsaid?
The pack has burst, sticking me like glue
I knew before, this day was through

No fight left, or a word to say
I must descend a separate way

Brittle Fingers

Emma Driban

How should I feel,
lying under the gray brewing clouds,
waiting for the rain
to trail across my face like fingers
caressing the corners, a soothing smile?
What does it mean that they leave

me feeling restless? The leaves
rustle on the trees framing the field
like ruffled feathers on a bird. No smile
is carved on my face. My mind is too clouded
with what-ifs that slip through my fingers
like a leaky roof letting in the coming rain.

It will come down in torrents, the rain,
bombarding my gentle frame, leaving
me to cling to the dirt, to dig my fingers
into the sodden soil, just so I feel
that I can't be washed away. And the clouds
look down at me with mocking smiles,

degrading, derogatory, damnatory smiles.
They darken the skies with their thunderous reign,
those unforgiving, churlish, monarchical clouds.
They demand subordination, demand that I leave,
demand that I flee the flooding field.
Exiled through the trees with branches like fingers,

I run from that place on numb legs, with numb fingers
tearing at the stray hairs trapped in the corners of my
nonexistent smile.

Lightning streaks the sky with jagged veins and I feel
the pummeling on my shoulders of the rain
like bullets. Though I try frantically to leave,
I am followed by the unrelenting clouds.

Dark masses fill the space in my head, crashing clouds
bringing storms that drip from my fingertips
like calcium bicarbonate from stalactites, leaving
me empty inside, the once flowing waters used up. I try to smile
but I can't seem to control my expressions. I can't rein
in my emotions. I can no longer feel.

So I am left, a slave to the glowering clouds,
unsure of how I am supposed to feel and unable to smile,
clutching at my hollowed chest with brittle fingers,
standing in the rain.

A Whole World

Shannon Bernier



Burger King, Burned Out

Jacob Summerlin

On the way home from Burger King
straw in my timid mouth, clenching
my eyes shut—
Hoping that if I sipped loud enough
the clamoring of ice
would overpower the roaring
of jagged voices in the front seat.

Mom knew Dad's blueprint—
each insult was designed to bruise him,
and he tried punching her words out of thin air
to avoid them from
sinking into his flesh.

My baby sister's bangs
couldn't shield her tiny eyes
from witnessing Mom make calculated
incisions during Dad's open-heart surgery
in the living room.

My mother made sure to leave nothing intact
toppling over dressers, shredding up
BB&T checkbooks to make confetti
for the surprise party she threw that day,
celebrating the long anticipated
surrender.

Snarling in each other's faces,
my parents lost sight of mine.
They were so explosive that
shrapnel flew into their ears

and all they could hear is each other and the
same exhausted thoughts; I could no longer hear myself
Pleading, and pleading until
the door swung open.

The Burger King crown slipped off my head
when that strange officer scooped me into his quiet arms
Securing me in the backseat while sirens
wailed a swan song above me.

Interrupted by Mom banging on the window,
her pleas bounced off the thick glass
and fell to the callous asphalt
like her guilty tears.

Wishful Thinking

Marya Topina



Cast From the Nest

Stefan Specian

You fell, young and still unable to fly away, and sat
in the grass, quivering, chirping softly – you knew nothing of
what lay ahead, just the never-ending present.

We go out as confused as when we came, the magnitude
of the thing too vast, too distant – and you had no
priests, imams, rabbis in your world to explain.

I watched you two days, scaring your mother with
a broomstick, in gloved hands lifting you into the
nest, frightened she'd attack me in the process.

Each morning she'd cast you out, with the callous,
unfeeling push her nature decreed – you'd sit again
in the tall grass, a grey speck in a strange jungle.

On the last morning, I awoke to find you stiff,
sent on your way by the sudden chill – it took me an
hour to move you to your final resting place in the garden.

Your mother looked on, remorseless as she
would, your brother still warm beneath her wing –
when she left I destroyed her nesting perch.

In Dependence

Jacob Summerlin

"Guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism."

—George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796

Every night
I open my chest
to glare at my contents.
To stare at my unmotivated
and hazy lungs,
and scrutinize my beaten
and bruised kidneys.
To peer at my sluggish
and sinking stomach
and gaze
upon my abandoned
appendix,
which is alone
and unnecessary,
like me.

Every night
I open my chest
to glare at my contents.
To examine my tired
and choking spleen
and ogle
my sour and irate pancreas.
To gawk
at my inconsistent

and urgent bladder
and grimace
at my broken
heart,
which withers
and shrinks
with every passing night.

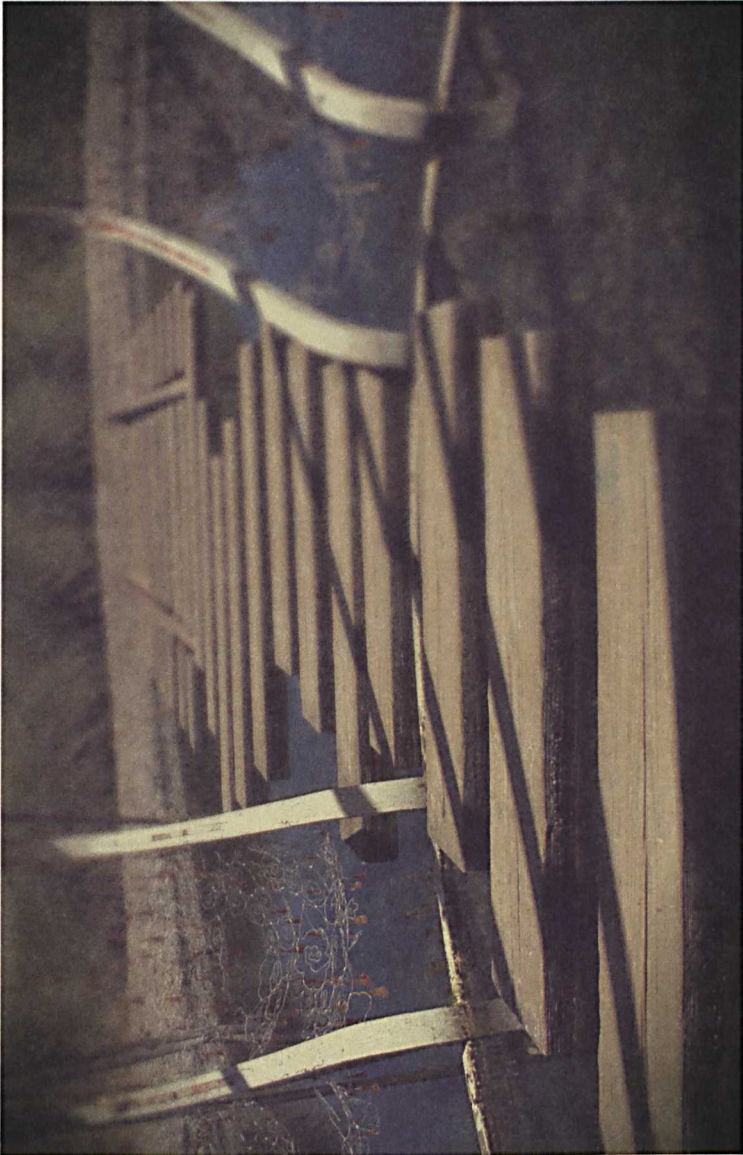
Every single night
I open my chest
to glare at my disgusting contents,
becoming more and more
nauseated
from years
of watching my organs be crushed.

My elements
have been exhausted,
as has my patience
with my flaws.

They say
it's what's inside that counts;
what does that
make
me?

Railroad

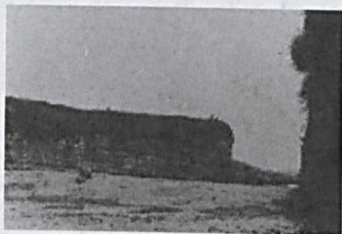
Hannah Thomson



instant (of) identity

Tyler Van Dyke

preface.



i was four when i took my first photograph. i took my father's camera—an old ae-1, olympics edition, i think my dad got it at a used store, probably cost a fortune then but i think it wasn't even eighty bucks which i guess was a lot then especially when he didn't have a full time job and was subbing in how many different school districts and coaching too and he and my mom had two kids to feed—only two then, years before my surprise brother was even an idea—and photographed two women sitting on the beach, well it wasn't a *real* beach it was a lake back home, not even a real lake one of those man-made lakes from damming up a river, apparently they used to use the lake to collect ice for

massive ice houses and small ice chests in people's homes but now that y'know modern technology is a thing and we have these things called refrigerators well what else would you do with a now useless manmade water features other than continue to exploit middle class americans and make it a recreational beach-lake-thing that families who can't afford to go out and get a hotel by the real beach can just spend the day at in the beautiful appalachians surrounded by screaming youths, suntanning babes, and overweight men watching the suntanning babes.

oh, yeah, that's actually not the photograph i took. jokes on you i guess. the real photograph is in a family album somewhere—my mom put it in, probably because she thought it was cute or funny or something but at the very least it was always a conversation starter when grandparents or aunts or uncles looked though an album of smiley kids and a perfect family and then suddenly bam two women sunbathing on the beach (oh yeah i forgot to

mention they were stretched out on towels in bikinis)—but anyway i couldn't get the actual picture because i never go home so i just threw that one in as a placeholder and most of you probably didn't even noticed or were at least a little bit confused because well that doesn't exactly

look like appalachia but i mean it's there it fit the description and well it's what i *said* it was.

that photo, by the way, was in santa cruz. a lovely place to visit, but i'd never stay there. i went to that beach with a love that lasted about as long as the summer did. sometimes she still watches my snap stories. sometimes i hope her psychopath of a father finally gets kicked out of the house.

i do that a lot with photos though.

not that extreme. i never *lie*.

but if a photo makes it *look* like my family hasn't fallen to shit, then hell, why not let that representation stand? it's not the photo's fault. it had no choice, really.

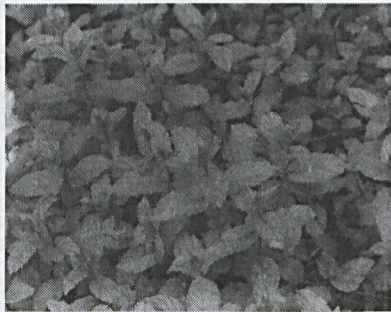
anyway, i guess that's what this book is "about"—the big "so what" as we call it at the writing center—the "why the fuck are you still reading this and dear god how long do either of us have to keep up the façade that either of us care and that this won't end up in someone's drawer for thirty years until someone else decides

one of us has been hoarding shit for too long and just *threw* it away."

there are no rules for you to follow when you're reading this, not like Egger's book—though i invite you to make some up, so long as you stick

with them the entire time. if you *were* to have a rule while you're reading this, i would suggest that you go off into a room by yourself, turn on some music (i would suggest richard edwards' *pity party*), take a lighter (*not* a match, mind you, that would require two hands), and when you start reading, flick on the lighter and light the last page. The ensuing panic fueling a need to read through as much as you can before all of it disappears forever might just mimic the perpetual existential dread that lurks in the shadows of every photograph i've ever developed.

*i. stage four:
crossing the threshold*



we finished building our new
house in two thousand six and
moved in on may thirty-first. we
woke up on april fool's day.

what i didn't realize then
was that when you build a house
you have to clear away *everything*,
and not just the stuff directly
underneath the house but pretty
much our entire yard was
converted to an overgrown field
to a vast, blowing sea of

dirt.

just dirt.

that was it.

so we planted. a lot. we
have beautiful gardens now and
a yard that sometimes is more
grass than it is dandelions but i
kind of like them and my
grandfather used to tell me that
he loved dandelion wine so
maybe someday i'll try to make
that. my mom wanted a fresh
herb garden. she bought
cilantro basil chives oregano
parsley and all sorts of other
herbs and planted them right
off of our back porch.

"i'm going to the home and
garden store what kind of herbs
to you want for the garden?"

"anything?"

"anything."

"i love mint."

that summer we grew
cilantro basil chives oregano
parsley all sorts of other herbs

and mint.

four summers later, without
the tending of their diligent
steward, the

cilantro
died. the basil
died. the chives
died. the oregano the parsley
the other
herbs all
died.

there was only mint.

that was the first photo i printed
in the independent study i
started in tenth grade. the
darkroom had basically been a
closet for the twenty odd years
prior to my descent inside. it
was the same equipment my dad
used when he was in high
school, before that school was
leveled and the new building
was constructed. it was one of
the few things they brought
with them from the old
building. they're gone now. all
sent to the scrapyard.

thanks to a last minute
phone call from an old teacher
and a drive to the high school
for the first time in years, one
enlarger survived. it's in my
closet, waiting until i have a little
more money, a little more time.

that picture overflows.
there's no more room in the
frame, so much so that there's
really no focus (among all the
other criticism i could tell you
about).

but there's a lot missing in
that photograph.

mostly talent.

ii. read: poe's lov'd alone

two years after my mom died
my grandfather was diagnosed
with colon cancer my aunt died
of ovarian cancer and my uncle
died of leukemia.

my girlfriend broke up with me
the next fall because she said i
was too sad but that's okay
because my senior year of high
school her stepmom her name
was wendy beauchat and wasn't
it kinda funny that her
stepmom's name was the same
as your mom's name and she
has a stepmom because her
mom died too but they didn't
know her mom was going to die
not that you really did either
because your mom never told
you *quite* how bad things were
that the chemo didn't work
radiation didn't surgery just
didn't *work* but maybe you
should have seen the signs a kid
never wants to see the signs
though because that's just not
how it works but anyway she
was an attorney and was

arrested for embezzling six
million dollars from her clients.

guess i dodged a bullet on
that one cuz she was pretty
crazy herself.

anyway at this point my
father had remarried and my
sister had been kicked out of
the house (again) but this would
be the last time she got kicked
out because they'd stop talking
to each other after that and
sometimes she'd come over for
the holidays but it would be
kind of awkward and
sometimes they'd get each other
gifts and sometimes they'd just
fight so for the most part they

just don't really interact which is
okay because even though you
thought it was it's really not so
bad looking at two different
sections in the crowd when you
graduate or give a presentation
it's just kind of your life now
and you learn that you can't rely
on your family as a unit so you
focus on the relationships with
the individuals and keeping
those alive.

it works out.

you mostly feel bad for
your little brother, who was six
when your mom died and
probably doesn't really have any
memories of her or what your
family used to be like before
everyone died or stopped
talking to each other but
probably *just kinda has this feeling*
that things really aren't

supposed to be this way even
though it's all he's ever known.

he just kinda goes with it.

sometimes you hear him
crying at night and you want to
do something about it but
you've already tried remember
that time all the times you tried
there was the cafe there was
christmas there was always
something wrong something
never worked out someone
always got angry wanted things
their way time doesn't make
things better time is the enemy
time pulls them apart makes
them forget why they're

fighting why they should try
again.

you just kinda go with it.

but that's years from now.

in the morning you ruffle
his hair while he eats a pop tart
and tell him he needs to stop
eating so many pop tarts. he just
shrugs and asks if you want to
play wii and you say maybe later
because its fall and i found
some old film from that
independent study you did last
year and if you asked mr. dwyer
he'd probably let you back into
the darkroom and i needed a
break from writing papers about
poe for college scholarships.

this was the first roll of
film that i used as a series. the
photographs on their own are
mediocre at best, with a few *not-
so-bad* shots dropped here and
there to inspire just enough
confidence to keep shooting,

but each photograph is
incomplete without the rest of
the photographs being
presented with it; they're
dependent on each other. you
can't take out the shitty ones
either because you need that to
see what it was like.

don't trust a photographer
to tell you what it was like.

don't let a photographer show
you, either.



when i was in middle
school the neighbor girl and i
made a clubhouse out of one of
the rooms in the old barn. we
cleaned it up as best we could

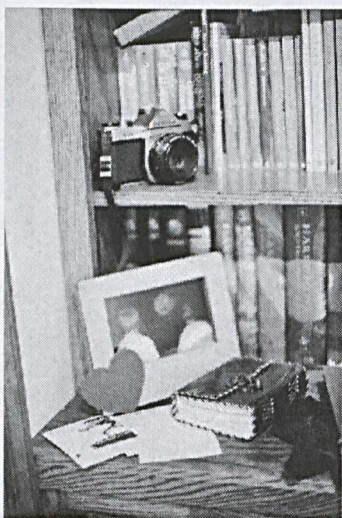
and even found an old window pane and put it where a window clearly ought to have gone. i guess we didn't clean it too well cuz that summer i had to go to the doctor for inhaling mold spores.

a couple years later i guess the wind blew in the window or something.

i also took a picture of the clouds

so i could see them
without demons

iii. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBd4pcW6t2M>



i couldn't sleep so i turned my bedroom into a studio. it fit the part pretty well it was attic space above the garage that my father finished for me to move into when he and kathleen got married because there weren't enough rooms in the house anymore which was a funny

thing to say because erika had already been kicked out so there was enough room but that bedroom just kinda stayed empty for a long time almost like he was holding out for something he'd never commit to fixing.

it's a home office now.

i didn't even have a flash or a tripod but when i finally developed it i loved how shitty it looked. nothing was right. everything was under-exposed or blurred or just *really fucked up* because i had found some film that was a couple years old—*color*—that my father gave me cuz he didn't use film anymore and all the colors got distorted and grainy and all those fucked up accidents almost look like they had been done on purpose and i hoped that maybe the rest of the world was like that too.

a photograph was no longer an isolated experience. the instant only existed insofar as it was an instant of representing more than any image could ever hope to hold. i didn't realize it then but i clawed for it anyway because deep down i knew what i wanted it to do i wanted everything to stop i wanted to catch it and bring it all together and definitively absolutely say without a fraction or hesitation of doubt that all of these photos all of the shit in my room and even the shit i photographed outside all of it was really just a desperate

struggle to capture to represent myself.

nancy gave me *fear and trembling* that year for my graduation. i read it during senior week.

i stopped taking photographs for a while.

i was leaving.

i took all the photographs i had taken and posted them into one large collage on one of the walls that protruded at a weird angle in my room. of course i brought a few with me, but none of the series photographs. just the ones that looked nice, the ones that existed for themselves in a kind of vapid way but at least looked nice.

i posted all the rest into the collage on my old room.

and then i left

and i don't think

i left anything behind.



*iv. watch: bojack horseman, season 2,
episode 9, 22:49-23:08*

my father is not a perfect man
and sometimes it helps just to
remind myself of this fact.

my father was only ever
cruel to me once. but
sometimes once is all it takes i
guess to know, to really *know*
deep down that derrida was
right and all love is narcissistic
and no one really knows how to
deal with grief and sometimes
you just need a little alcohol
because you can't stop feeling
but maybe that loosens your
tongue a little more than you
might like and maybe you get in
a fight with your son and turn
off the phone because you're
tired of listening to the same
plea for reconciliation and
maybe he pulled the 'mom
wouldn't be proud of this' card
because he knew that it would
cut a little deeper than it needed
to and he was angry too and
hurt because after all these years
he was finally starting to see that
maybe things *weren't* going to
get better and that's really
fucked up because that's not
how things *work* that's not what
grieving families *do* that's now
how this was supposed to *happen*
none of this was supposed to
happen what *happened* how did
this *happen* after all these years i
still don't fucking know but i
know that that night was the
beginning of the end.

i was the one who broke up
with her this time.

i didn't know what i
wanted.

i told her i wasn't in a place
to be in a relationship right now

my shit was too fucked up
and frankly sometimes she was
just too focused on her own
problems to give two shits
about mine or let me give half a
shit about my own so i shoved it
all under a rug until someone lit
the rug on fire and now shits on
fire and now i don't know how
to deal with it because i'm not
even sure if i can go home
maybe this is it maybe i'm about
to get kicked out too where
would i go what would i do
breathe breathe breathe breathe
breathe breathe i can't i can't
breathe breathe breathe just
breathe i still can't breathe i
can't just breathe just breathe i
can't breathe just breathe

breathe

breathe

breathe

breathe.

i think i'll skip class

tomorrow.

i think george harrison
took one of the first bathroom
selfies with an old brownie box
camera.

they're really an art

people don't just 'take a
selfie'

selfies a curated

planned meticulously

shot

reshot

filtered

deleted

reshot again

maybe it's good enough

now

at least i don't have a
double chin in this one.
sent.

it has nothing to do with
self entitlement or self
infatuation or self fetishization
or any of that.

we just want to be sure of
one thing when everything else
gets thrown off.

when everything is crooked
off balance

fucked. up.

because you know what?

no matter what angle the
rest of the frame is at, the
camera is never off-kilter.

i couldn't find myself in my
makeshift studio anymore

i couldn't find myself in
dead
lifeless
photographs.

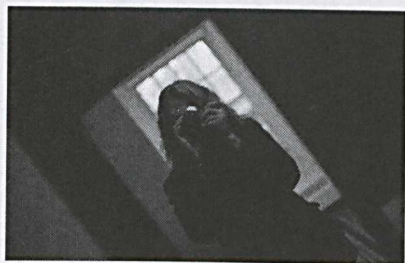
but my body
the epicenter of
impermanence

there was something there.
something that could be
captured.

photographic self
portraiture is the most exposing
form of art ever. period. end of
discussion. so says i.

you tell yourself its the
realist representation of
yourself because its a

photograph right it's gotta be
real authentic accurate true
objective *right?*



what the fuck does that
photograph say?

nothing.

you can't even see my face.

you can't even see a
background

foreground

just a somewhat
androgynous figure in a coat
holding a camera over their face.

you want more.
you need more.

but that's all there is.

click
epilogue.

if you were hoping that by
now our little would have come
to a cute little conclusion about
how all these little snapshots

have a happy resolution and left
me a better person, well
that makes two of us.

i haven't been home in a
while.

for the past year i've either
been on campus, in budapest, or
in california. sure i'll go home
for the holidays but there's
nothing really keeping me there
anymore, except maybe my
brother.

my sister is getting married
in april. i'm the justice of the
peace, thanks to the universal
life church.

at this point, my father
probably isn't going.

but even if he did, i doubt
my sister would let him walk her
down the aisle.

life is a special kind of
suffering.

it's not just a suffering of
impermanence.

it's not just a suffering of
attachment to the self.

no one wants to be
themselves.

we assume roles, play
characters, participate in social
contracts and scripts and its
only in the capacity of these

parts that we ask for anything
more.

any other time we want
nothing to do with ourselves. we
escape, into cyberia or drugs or
some ungodly combination of
the two.

we suffer because despite
all these things
no matter what happens
for good or ill

we walk on the echoes of
empty streets
we talk with the shadows
of broken souls
and when we look up to
God and ask him why
why the pain
the death the
suffering,
he only shrugs his
shoulders
and says,
'well, why not?'

when i think of myself i
think of this picture. i made it
myself. there's no on in it but
me. but i'm not the subject—i'm
really only in the background.
life grows on around me.

form is indistinct. there's
enough to identify a figure, but
distortion renders the stature
beyond recognition.

before my mom died one
of her friends came to visit
because she didn't realize just

how bad things were and i guess
my father called and told her
and she was over pretty quick
even though she lived pretty far
away.

i was taking the trash out
when she got here. i was crying
because my mother would never
say anything to me ever again. it
wasn't her fault. she tried, i
know she did. but trying only
gets you so far i guess. i guess
not having cancer gets you the
rest of the way.

tracy didn't realize why i
was crying until she got to my
mom's room. we let them have
a moment together.

i think tracy expected my
mom to be down on her luck,
tired, but still responsive, still
coherent.



i walked tracy out to her car
when she left.

she turned to me. she was
crying.

'you have your mother's
eyes.'

she got in her car and
drove away, and i cried.

my mother had bright
green eyes.

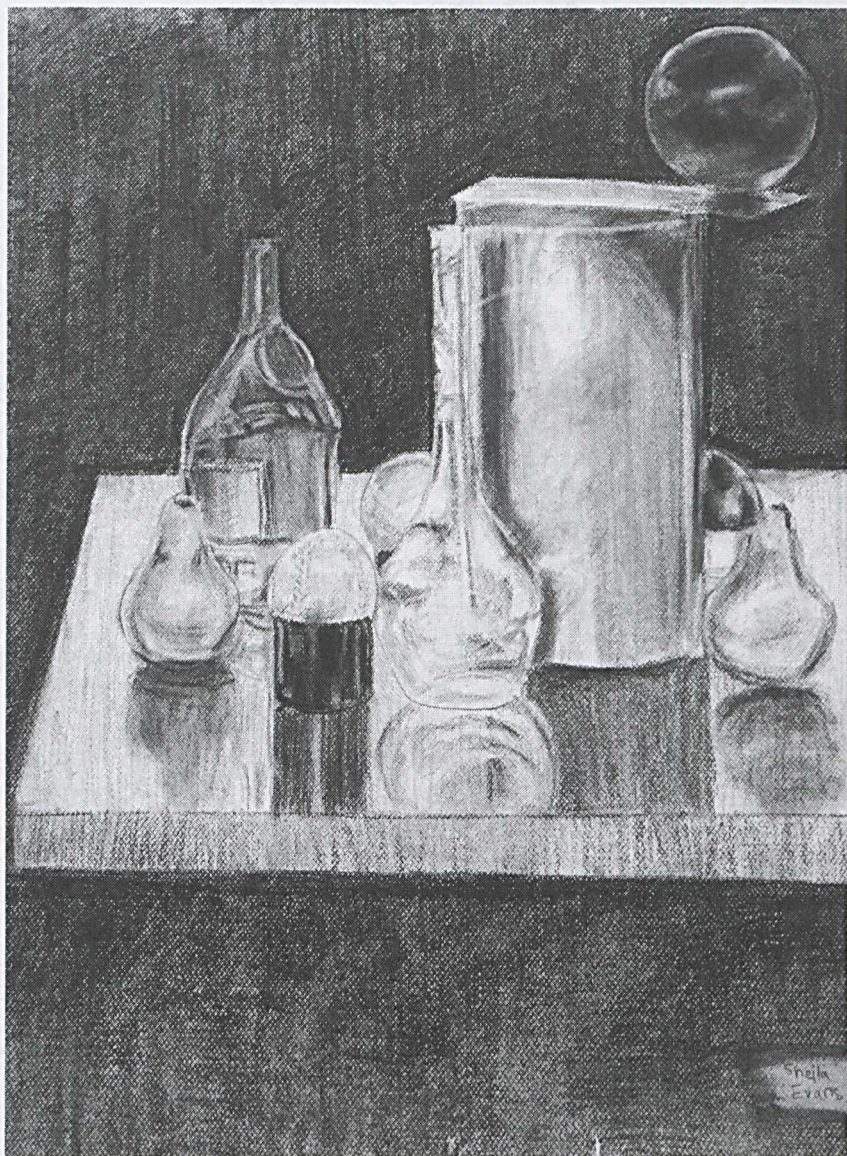
my eyes are grey.

i used to think she meant
that they had the little sparkle
of brilliance, the hint of joy, and
the flash of vibrance that were
always in my mother's eyes.

but maybe she only saw in
my eyes what was left in my
mother's—a dull stare, empty,
but still there.

Still Life

Sheila Evans



Lost Train of Thought

Jared Wilmer

Pressed close, my thoughts jostle and bump,
Stifling awkward admissions of occasion,
Gasping for air like passengers on a crowded train.
They *lean* jealously towards opaque windows,
For stolen glimpses of stations that have passed in the night.
The lights flic-ker and dim,
Breathless anticipation of some unexpected,

Jolt

That will surprise them into grotesquely alert postures,
A moment on the cusp of sensation that never comes,
And forcibly shrug back into sliding acquiescence.
The clack, clack, claue overrides the droning
Of moments lost to time,
And closed-in spaces at great distance.
Powerful vibrations drive down their languid limbs,
Backwards, forwards, swaying to some noiseless groan,
Intoning their contempt for me.

A Frightful First Date

Emma Driban

bzzzz bzzzz

We'll pick you up at 6

The words glow on the tiny screen of my flip phone, making my stomach churn. I can't decide if I'm more nervous or excited.

Ryan has been one of my best friends all through middle school and we spent a lot of time together over the summer before starting ninth grade. He is my only friend from school that lives in the neighborhood. That means that he is the only one within walking distance from my home in our small yet oddly spread out hometown of Hockessin. Houses are packed close together within the development, but you have to cross 'major' roads, if you can call them major, to get from neighborhood to neighborhood. Twisting turning roads with speed limits over 40 MPH meant you have to really be sure the coast was clear or risk getting mowed down by speeding cars, busy trying to get out of the all-consuming black hole that is suburban Delaware.

Just a month into high school and I'm already seeing less and less of Ryan, when, out of nowhere, he asks me on a date. I admit, I'm a little surprised. I'd never really thought of him like that; he's always so quiet and mild, definitely not an easy person to read. Despite all that, I readily agree to the date, glad to have a chance to see him after those few weeks of radio silence. Since we've already known each other for a while, we have already gone to a lot of the local hang-out spots, bowling and movie theatres, the standard stuff, and I'm craving something a little more exotic.

The leaves are just starting to change color, letting us know that my favorite time of the year is just around the corner. October is the best month because it's a great excuse for horror movie marathons and eating lots of candy. Naturally, for me at least, I want to do something spooky in honor of the upcoming Halloween. At first Ryan is a little hesitant, but after a little convincing, I am able to talk him into going to Frightland.

Frightland might just be Delaware's biggest attraction, aside from the beaches of course, but I'm talking about northern Delaware. It sits on 1300 acres and has been named a *Scariest Haunted Attraction in America* by Forbes and Huffington Post. 350 acres of the land are used for the attractions, but a lot of the rest has been deemed unsafe for visitors because of its 'rich' history. Buildings burned to the ground, hangings, and medical experiments are only some of the stitches in the wild tapestry of the farm's past. All of this has been incorporated into the attractions, adding an unnerving layer of authenticity.

Being a lover of all things horror, I am totally psyched to go to Frightland for the first time, but Ryan has some reservations.

You're sure it's not going to be too scary?

I roll my eyes at the screen and start tapping the keypad. *Isn't that the point of a haunted amusement park?*

It takes him a few minutes to text back. I'm sure he's trying to decide what to do with that.

I guess so... But my mom wants me to take Hannah and Alli... Will they be ok?

I groan. Mrs. Schroeder is asking us to take his 10-year-old sister and her friend along with us on our date. Hannah's great, she likes scary movies and laughs right along with me at the cheesy decorations every Halloween

when we take her trick-or-treating, but I thought it was just going to be me and Ryan.

Hannah will be just fine, I'm sure... I haven't met Alli, so you'll have to decide that.

Brent's sister, is all he replies.

Hahaha knowing Brent she'll be just fine.

At last, he agrees and tells me what time his mom will pick me up in her steely gray minivan.

Three hours later, the car pulls into my cul-de-sac and I hop in, waving good-bye to my mother, promises of "I'll text you along the way" flying from my mouth when I know there won't be good enough signal to keep them. Ryan gives me a nervous smile in greeting and Hannah shakes the back of my seat in excitement. The air is thick with tension, both good and bad.

We start the 30-minute drive south to Frightland, making uncomfortable small talk about the weather and school work. Finally, we drive past the rust-laden gates and into a muddy parking lot. His mom pulls to a stop and turns around to wish us a good time and to warn us to make good choices. The four of us file out of the minivan and wave Mrs. Schroeder off, assuring her that we'll be on our best behavior.

Turning to face the park, we are greeted by the eerie sneer of a skull shaped silo peering out of weeds and tall grass. In my excitement I almost miss Ryan's groan of unhappiness. Almost.

Like me, Hannah and Alli are excited and can't wait to get in and get started. In the car we formulated a plan based on the map I printed before leaving my house.

"As soon as we get our wristbands we should head right over to the haunted hay ride in the farthest corner. We can make our way to the exit from there, besides I think the scariest parts are in that section," I say, determined to get the best bang for my buck. Those Frightland tickets don't come cheap. We have to drop \$40 each so we can get the whole experience. Two months of yard work and dishes down the drain.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Ryan replies, not sounding overly enthused. "What are we waiting for?" exclaims Hannah, nearly jumping up and down.

We get our passes and start to weave our way to the long line for the hayride, wet grass clinging to our sneakers. Once we get there, a sign states that the wait will be nearly 30 minutes from the point at which we stand, but that, in the meantime, we should enjoy the live entertainment. The aforementioned live entertainment is not so entertaining. Some bad screamo cover band is up on the stage, wailing on the drums and shrieking about knives or something like that. Hannah and Alli are happily talking about the things we're going to see, but when I look over at Ryan, the little blond hairs on his arms are already standing up, and not because it's cold out. I can tell that he's already regretting coming here.

"Let's make a game of all this," I suggest.

"What do you mean?" he asks uncertainly, the green lighting making him look queasy.

"Every time we see something from a major horror movie, like a little girl with long dark hair or a masked guy with a chainsaw, and point it out to the other person we get a point. Whoever has the least points has to buy the other person funnel cake before we leave."

He chuckles a little, but I can still see the uneasiness in his blue eyes. "I think I can manage that."

The line moves quicker than we expect because a lot of people ahead of us give up on waiting and leave. Within 15 minutes we are sitting down on the wagon. Ryan is starting to look like he's really going to be sick. I nudge him with my elbow.

"Just remember it's all fake. I'm sure we'll see tags on their costumes and stuff like that," I whisper, trying to put him at ease.

He just nods.

It's really starting to hit me that this was a mistake. I guess I'm a bad judge of what's really frightening because I don't scare easy. Ryan, on the other hand, clearly does.

I hardly pay attention to the things going on around us, I just vaguely hear Hannah and Alli screaming in delight next to me each time an actor pops out to scare us with fake axes and bloody plastic eyeballs falling from their faces. I'm too busy checking to see that Ryan hasn't passed out. I think he's ok, with his eyes practically glued shut and his shallow breaths coming out in little puffs.

We're ushered off the wagon by a lanky, butcher knife wielding man in a shitty William Shatner mask.

"C'mon!" I bust out laughing, "That's straight out of *Halloween!*" Ryan barely acknowledges me, and I regret that I've said anything. It's not worth pointing these things out, it won't help.

The actors steer us into the first building. From the research I did before leaving my house, I know this is the barn where original owner's daughter hung herself 200 years ago. I think about bringing this up, but change my mind, when I see the panic on Ryan's face. Every time someone moves into his periphery he flinches... this is not going to be a good night.

"I'm afraid so," I reply, truly worried about him.

Finally, he speaks up, "Let's just get this over with."

I look at the grim expression on his face and just nod, leading the group into the next building, the name of the attraction etched in a stone sign by the entrance. *Fear.*

Stepping through the threshold we are immediately plunged in darkness. Nyctophobia. I feel Ryan's hand close over mine and I can actually feel his pulse quicken. This is going to be torture for both of us.

We feel our way across the big empty room, until my fingers brush against what feels like a curtain of vines. Stumbling our way through the entrance, still in complete darkness, I start feeling things brush against my ankles. Every now and then, a harsh hiss and rattle shatter the fragile silence. Ophidiophobia. Ryan's gotten so close that I can feel his breath on my neck. With one hand still clutched in his vicelike grasp and the other in front of me, feeling the way, I lead us to the next section.

At first I am confused. I feel a wall like the inflated floor of a bounce house in front of me, and I can't figure out how to get around it, until I find a narrow slit.

Oh no... we have to go through it.

"Make a chain," I instruct them, and make sure they all link hands. I force my way into the tight space, dragging Ryan behind me, taking care not to loosen my grip on his sweating hand. The ballooning walls press in on us from all sides. Claustrophobia.

I can't see or hear a thing, and I know Ryan can't because at this point his head is pressed firmly into my shoulder as he tries to block out the world. Finally, I start to notice a little light breaking up the darkness.

When we emerge from the pillowy depths of claustrophobia, our eyes are assaulted by the unforgiving lights and bright colors. Men dressed in orange wigs and red noses, wide bloody smiles painted on their faces, guffaw and cackle in our faces. Coulrophobia. Ryan whimpers in my ear. The gaggle of idiots approaches us and I literally shove them out of the way, bringing my foot down hard on the too-big shoe of one of the clown that tries to get in my way. I can hear the actor's protestations and Hannah and Alli's laughter at his pain. No one likes clowns.

Finally, we reach the end of the maze-like building and, upon seeing the door, Ryan rushes past me toward some bushes and empties the contents his stomach on the sodden grass.

"I think you should probably call your mom," I say to Hannah.

"You might be right," she replies, wrinkling her nose at the acrid smell of bile mixing with wet earth.

As Hannah pulls out her phone, I turn to Alli and say, "Watch him," pointing to Ryan, who is still hunched over in the shrubs.

I jog over to a food vendor and buy a water bottle. When I get back to our little group, Ryan is sitting on the ground with his head between his knees. I force the water bottle into his hands.

"Drink."

"Thanks," he murmurs, not looking at me, his cheeks blazing red.

I feel so guilty. I so selfishly wanted to come here and I thought this would be fun. We go trick-or-treating together every year and watch scary movies all the time. I guess I never noticed how much he hated all that. Mrs. Schroeder shows up ten minutes later and we all pile into the car. She tries to ask how it was, but our noncommittal answers clue her in that it did not go well. After that, it's a quiet ride back to Hockessin.

We get to my house and I thank Mrs. Schroeder for the ride.

Turning to Ryan, I say, "Text me tomorrow?"

"Sure, yeah," he mutters.

I don't believe him.

The next time I text him is three days before Halloween when I ask if we're going trick-or-treating. He doesn't reply. When I see Hannah on the bus the next day I, ask her about it.

"He's not coming this year," is all she says.

"Oh, okay." And that's that.

I wish I hadn't been so oblivious and that I hadn't pushed my own selfish desires. We should have just gone bowling again.

Wall Free World

Tyler Van Dyke



Inside Counts

Kyle Granger

Every night
I open my chest
to glare at my contents.
To stare at my unmotivated
and hazy lungs,
and scrutinize my beaten
and bruised kidneys.
To peer at my sluggish
and sinking stomach
and gaze
upon my abandoned
appendix,
which is alone
and unnecessary,
like me.

Every night
I open my chest
to glare at my contents.
To examine my tired
and choking spleen
and ogle
my sour and irate pancreas.
To gawk
at my inconsistent
and urgent bladder
and grimace
at my broken
heart,
which withers
and shrinks
with every passing night.

Every single night

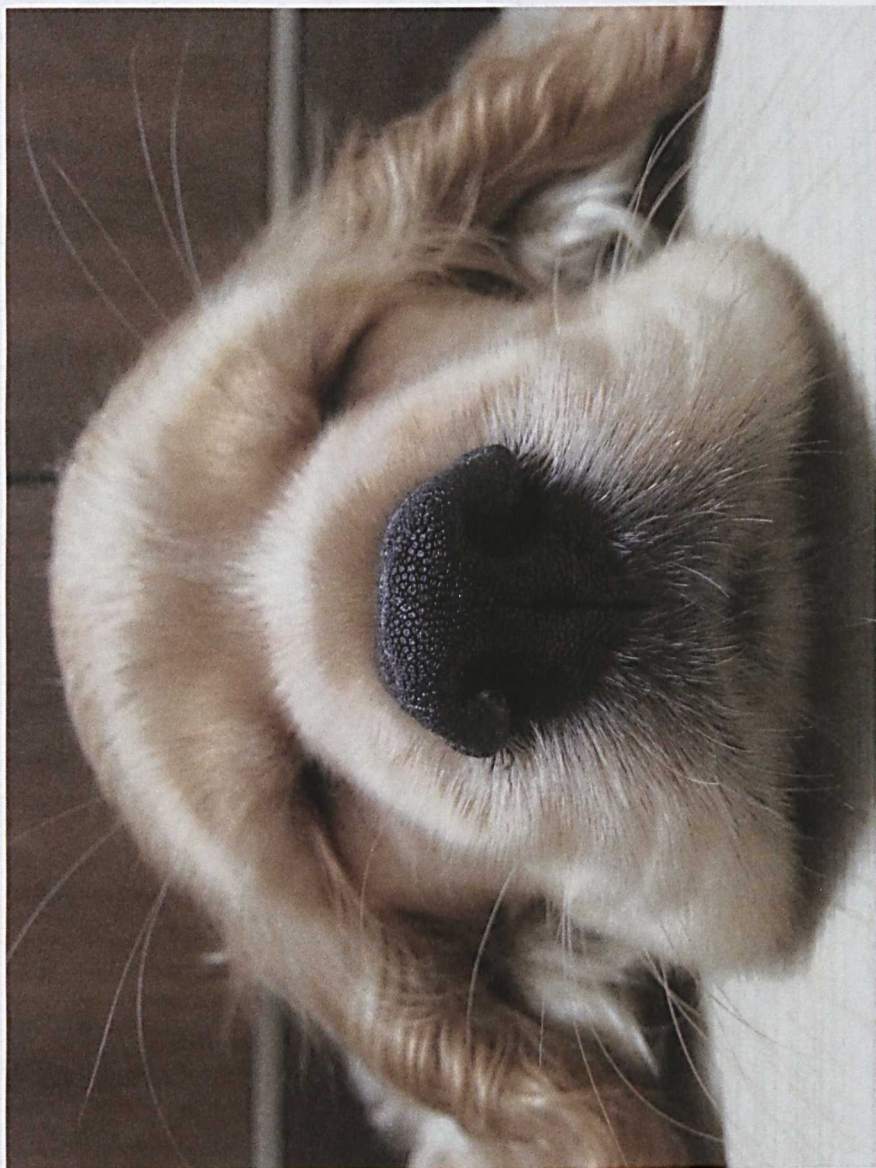
I open my chest
to glare at my disgusting contents,
becoming more and more
nauseated
from years
of watching my organs be crushed.

My elements
have been exhausted,
as has my patience
with my flaws.

They say
it's what's inside that counts;
what does that
make
me?

Tuckered Out

Marya Topina



Never Forget

Anna Mondoro

Flashbacks.

To times of hurt

To times of pain

To places where I never

Want you to be again.

Flashbacks.

To nights on end

To nights so cold

To when you bore the burden none

Should ever have to hold.

Flashbacks.

To what you heard

To what they said

To every little harmful lie

They put inside your head.

Flashbacks.

To the despair

To all the fear

To begging you to please,

Not believe a word you hear.

Flashbacks.

They stick with me

They come for me at night
I shudder to think of what could be
If you had lost the fight.

Flashbacks.
Keep me wary
And light the fear again
Cuz you could still be fighting
Perhaps the battle didn't end...

Flashbacks.
They remind me
Just how much I care for you
And anytime you're hurting
My heart is aching too.

Flashbacks.
Well, they're here to stay
They just won't leave me be
But there are some things that you should know
If you are still not free:

I may not know
What's going on
Or what you're going through,
But I'm always here
If you need help
Or you don't know what to do.

I know I'll never
Quite understand
What the pain you feel is like,
But for what it's worth,

To spare you,
I would lay down my life.

For I can see
So clearly
Just how beautiful you are.
You have a light
That can't be dimmed,
Or smothered by the dark.

So if you're
Looking for a reason
Or just need someone to care,
Call me, text me, anything.
If you need me,
I'll be there.

Forgotten Fears

Marya Topina

I opened my eyes and glanced towards my bedroom door. Was my little brother planning to play a prank on me? No, he wouldn't be able to make such a noise. I still my breath, willing everything to be quiet. There it was again! A quiet moaning, almost sobbing, was coming from under my bed.

I tried to reassure myself that it was just my cat, Alice, so I clucked my tongue and patted the bed beside me. But no furry head popped out from the darkness.

Then, feeling extremely ridiculous, I leaned over the edge of the bed and whispered, "A-are you alright?"

I nearly fell onto the floor from shock when a raspy voice answered, "Of course not!"

Regaining my composure, I got up to turn on the lights, then lay down in front of my bed. Before I had a chance to ask who was there, a small tuft of brown hair darted out to meet me. A pair of large, sad eyes looked up at me, and then the creature fully emerged from his hiding place.

I gasped, for his small torso was laced with scars. His stubby arms and legs had evident teeth marks on them, and he was missing a good chunk of left ear. But if it weren't for his battered appearance, the animal would have appeared quite comical.

"W-who are you?"

The creature sadly shook his head, plopped down to a sitting position beside me, and began his story.

"You might not remember me, but I am your very own Monster. I am Bartholomew the 32nd, but you can me Bartie. For generations, my family has looked over the people in this house. And I was assigned to you."

"So I was right when I thought there was a monster under my bed! No one ever believed me!"

If it was possible, Bartie looked even sadder than before. His floppy ears sagged and he lowered his head in defeat.

"But you didn't believe in me either. Ever since you went to the upper classes of elementary school, you stopped believing."

"Oh, Bartie. I thought it was just a childish fear!"

He bristled, all at once taking on the appearance of an angered teddy bear. That is, he was mad, but still adorable.

"I never wanted you to be afraid! I thought if you suspected that someone was there, you would be excited and would want to play with me! But my mistakes drove you away..."

Bartie's eyes filled with tears and he sniffled. I felt so guilty and ashamed. I wanted to give him a giant bear hug for every one of my faults.

"Is there anything I can do, Bartie?"

He wiped his nose with his stout paw and nodded miserably.

"Your cat thinks that I'm her play toy. She sharpens her claws on me, chews on my arms and legs, and even scares away the spiders that I have to eat to survive. Don't let her near me anymore, okay?"

I gasped in horror. No wonder Alice enjoyed my room so much! She had the best of toys here, torturing Bartie. Looking at the poor beast, I couldn't say no. But I could see that this wasn't all he wanted to tell me.

"And, please. Don't forget about me. I might have failed from the beginning, but that doesn't mean we can't play now, right?"

"But of course! I'll never forget you, Bartie."

He me a watery smile, and then made as though to crawl back under the bed.

"Wait! Do you want to sleep on top tonight? I'm sure it's a lot more comfortable with pillows and a blanket."

Bartie's face lit up with excitement and he jumped up on the pillow, curling into a small ball. I smiled, tucking in the cute guy.

"Good night, Bartie," I whispered to the already fast asleep creature, "Sweet dreams."

close

Tyler Van Dyke

let me be close to you.
so close
that I cannot tell
if the quiet groanings
of the body
belong to mine
or yours.

