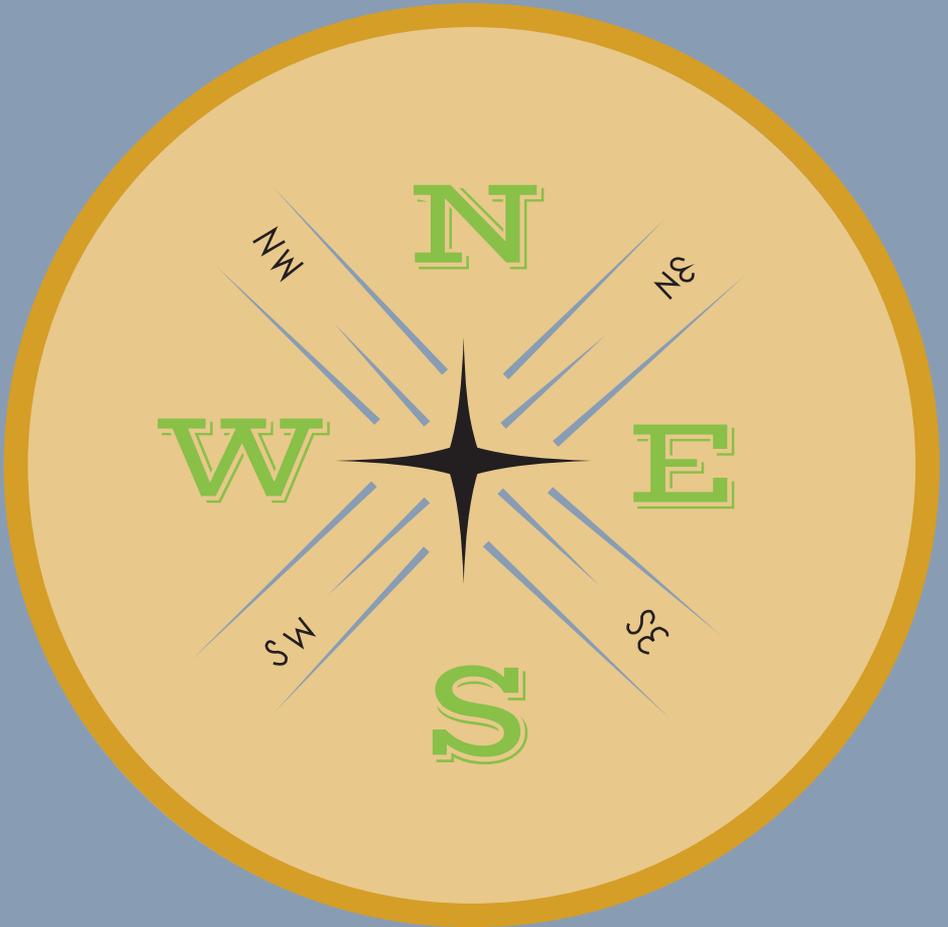


Alchemist Review



2015

Alchemist Review



Alchemist Review

2015 Edition

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The Alchemist Review is a 30-year literary tradition at the University of Illinois Springfield and is an online and print-based journal of literary fiction, poetry, and visual arts dedicated to publishing dynamic works by emerging writers and artists in the University of Illinois Springfield community. With an appreciation for print culture, as well as digital technologies and mixed media, the Alchemist Review provides a forum for collaboration and exploration within the ever-evolving world of literary publishing. The journal is edited by undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Illinois Springfield. All UIS students are invited to share their creative writing projects.

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*For a long time, people made me
feel small.
I turned inwards.
I made myself small.*

Brennend Defense

Shayne Morgan Phillips

Someone who is not my brother digs his heels into the seat of the adjacent wooden chair.
We are in the coffee shop.
The acute angles of his upper and lower legs
Expand – and – contract – in – a – slow – steady – rhythm –
As he calculates the degree to which he can protect his
Places of vitality.

It was a self-defense mechanism

Someone who is not my brother presses his forefinger against his mouth,
A solid attempt to not let a single secret slip.
Shaking palms protect a secret even the keeper cannot breach.

He wouldn't tell anyone

Someone who is not my brother's flex frame limbs stutter –
As he tried to compact into the smallest space amountable.
Insurmountable.
Shoulders – jerk up – one the outside – and
Vulture downward toward the table top.
Avoid eye contact.

It was a self-defense mechanism

Someone who is not my brother stands alone outside the coffee shop.
Two inches of embers wedged between his middle and forefinger
Pressed against his mouth until it begins to burn.
His parchment paper flesh will not go up in flame.
He can't burn himself to death,
But he could burn himself away.

Until he realized

Someone who is not my brother's flex frame limbs straighten out
As he inhales
As his lungs fill to their maximum capacity
As he exhales in a tone wavering lost between a love song and a war cry
His voice echoes outside the coffee shop
As the embers in his fingertips become a fire and he's feeling it.

He embraced big – even unfounded bigness

Someone who is not my brother's flex frame limbs straighten out
As he lifts his arms
As his head tilts back
As he gulps for air
As he tries to cup his hands around the secret he has stumbled upon.

Even UNFOUNDED bigness.

Someone who is not my brother's flex frame limbs straighten out
As he surrenders his palms to the depths of his
Not yet faded denim blue jeans
As he pulls out the already crinkled receipt
He scribbles furiously

He began to write

I am possible tattooed the wall beside his bed that night
I am possible crawled across the inside cover of his favorite notebook.

Sometimes you already have the explosion – but not the size.

You need to be bigger than your body allows you to be.



Chasing Changes

Dominic Walton

The marks she has on her arm betray her
beauty. Their label, unfair, a sinner,
the causality not of a man's failed duty.
The thrill she chases, first a simmer,
her very own hell, now the inferno.
A trapped woman by love, by fear - paralyzed
magic, suspended she believes a spell casts
the sadness endless inside her - a tear
temporary to her eye. The baptism and she starts anew.
She's endured enough, this marks her awakening.
Bloodied, but unbowed, all the poison letted,
the prison breaking that scraped at her and the first
steps the hardest to take, almost a stumble,
she feels like herself, like herself, yes
even if only for a while.



Even a postcard of Grand Canyon can sweep us out of the everyday, fill us with yearning, and call us back to the high country once again. But recent events in the region had left me doubting. Only weeks earlier, a lone female gray wolf, still wearing remnants of an old radio collar, had wandered down from the Rockies and set up housekeeping on the North Rim. Environmentalists cautiously hailed her arrival as the harbinger of a new day for the ecosystem, the return of keystone predators to the wild. School teachers shared the good news with students, preempted the Common Core to share current events in ecology, and threw spontaneous naming parties to welcome the new lupine to Arizona. Children and adults alike celebrated the resiliency of life. The screen writers of *Jurassic Park* were right: life would find a way.

I have to admit, I'd been looking around Grand Canyon Estates—failed subdivision ceded to nature—for some sign of resiliency myself. And I had found it: a pronghorn antelope and her two yearling offspring passed through the creosote brush just yesterday but not for long. Mutant pit bull Fishhead had made loud rumbling noises at them and harangued them away. Muffin the mini-mare watched the antelope depart and blew a loud raspberry their way. Bad non-horses, she seemed to say. Overhead, a raven mimicked her call flawlessly. Always there were flocks of female bluebirds—ostensibly of happiness—their

flight a series of undulating scallops as they fed from shrub to shrub. Forty-nine black range cows and one tan one rearranged themselves in the distance, appearing only to change positions like chess pieces without benefit of walking. Coconino County and I had had more than one conversation about range cattle, by way of a series of emails and letters, the gist of the correspondence informing me that if I could not put up with cattle on my property, I should put up a fence instead, probably a solar electric fence from Home Depot, not too expensive.

Discovering Bewildernes-lite at the Grand Canyon Estates

Judith Bullock

Still, I couldn't help wondering why the county sided with the cattle company on why a one ton bull and his wives should be roaming our subdivision, given that it has been zoned rural residential for "family living and pursuits" since 1981.

The cattle kings had been running cattle on this land for a hundred years, I supposed, reckoning after all that a few grumbling homesteaders were not going to change that. Open range, they repeated like a mantra when I protested the unfairness of it all. Free range. Surely anyone could understand that, meaning even me. As if I had suggested that Jesus was stupid or hanging was cruel. Open range subdivision just made no sense to me; I had trouble getting my mind around it. But the problem was long-standing and severe: our transient, bovine neighbors had rubbed to death nearly every juniper and pinon for miles, nobody had paid any attention, and it had been going on for decades. Maybe that was the problem: people have a hard time noticing essentially invisible processes like overgrazing, mostly because the transformation is so slow and subtle. Now only the gnawed, golden grass remained, along with sage brush and a few other inedible plants.

Like giant locusts, the cattle have reduced the juniper-pinon biome to open plain. Only the fringes of Highway 64, protected from grazing, still host native species: cliff roses, correopsis, and silver sage. Or maybe the plants are only a re-veg. The highway department might have installed them for the benefit of tourists rushing headlong on their two-way collision course to get to the Grand Canyon before sunset. After all, three million people a year visit the canyon each to enjoy the solitude.

Situated between Williams and Tusayan, Grand Canyon Estates is blessed with long sightlines, views of Red Butte and the San Francisco Peaks, and four seasons, but it has lost its full complement of predators: wolves, bears, and mountain lions. This is not to say that their niches are empty. Ranchers here recently boasted that they had shot, poisoned, or trapped six hundred coyotes just west of Highway 64, right across the road from us. Coyote is a trickster in Navajo folklore around here, and the karmic payback is going to be killer.

The idea that wilderness areas are no longer places of refuge for wildlife is not a popular idea, particularly among tourists. More prevalent is the notion that parks are time capsules, preserving a piece of what, say, Grand Canyon looked like hundreds or even thousands of years ago. This view is not new: Until surprisingly recent times, white explorers had never been to the top of Vishnu Temple or Wotan's Throne in the canyon. Since so little was known about these places, and they appeared to be so isolated, scientists speculated that ancient animals—maybe even dinosaurs—still inhabited these remote sanctuaries. Nowadays, when every school child can scour the globe on Google Earth, those early scouts might seem naive. In truth, when climbers did finally ascend these formations, they were dismayed to discover that cattle, horses, and deer had arrived long before white men, grazing over the heights for years on well-worn, if cryptic, trails. (When hiking the canyon, it's easy to fantasize that you are the first person ever to visit a certain place, but suffice to say that native people have probably been everywhere in the

canyon thousands of years before there was an America.) Then as now, the canyon held out its enchantment, and people were sure it held hidden secrets free for the discovery.

Caught up in this same spirit of adventure, park ranger Bert Lauzon in 1938 prepared for a great expedition in response to the claim that travelers had reported sighting miniature horses in Grand Canyon near Supai, some as small as dogs, cut off by a landslide, evidently the work of evolution. Though Lauzon never found his pocket of Darwinian ponies, only some feral pack ponies stunted by poor forage, the fairytale conception of wilderness as separate from the regular world persists. I think of that world-famous icon Smoky the Bear. Originally an orphaned cub rescued from a real forest fire, Smoky now appears—apart from posters and ads—as a six-foot, painted statue, standing on a corner in Williams, Arizona outside the Chamber of Commerce, looking a little like a fatherly, beer-gutted cop with a shovel in his hand. Only you can prevent forest fires,” he almost says, waving an accusing finger, surely remembering the childhood trauma that left him clinging to the burnt bark of a tree. It’s not just that the bear statue in Williams creeps me out: my point is that we Americans love nature caricaturized, even cartoony. Seriously, who can watch Bambi with the kids and not find himself totally in the waterworks? I’m not being flippant here. We really do care about Bambi and Smoky and their miserable childhoods; heck, their adolescent years were so horrific, these critters could qualify as superheroes. (To qualify as a true, mythical hero these days, you have to have had some kind of unique birth or childhood. Think Moses here, floating down the Nile in a basket of reeds or Jesus wrapped in his swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.) Be that as it may, when it comes to the wild, Americans are windshield cowboys, all hat and no cattle, mostly partaking of nature on the Internet via YouTube videos; see Eagle versus Goat, Alligator versus Yak, ad versus nauseum, often portraying one animal killing another, Alien versus Predator.

In some cases though, that windshield is a highly desirable catbird seat; it’s like watching the Super Bowl on HD in your living room while your coworkers tough it out in the nosebleed section of the stadium. I recall visiting Tusayan’s IMAX theater for a feature of the Grand Canyon. I couldn’t believe I was sitting there in a padded seat with wraparound views of the main corridor trails that had nearly dehydrated me in reaching. Even though I wasn’t really there, my heart leaped at the exposition, and I felt that unspoiled, untamed feeling again, even while my legs ached and my muscles burned with the memory. It’s a credit to the power of the human imagination, when you think about it, this ability of ours to escape into what we see and hear. It’s the power behind porn, behind rock concerts, behind the Rocky Horror Picture Show. The real horror, though, is that images of wilderness that are so readily available now may make real nature obsolete. We can “like” the wild on Facebook, and even persuade ourselves that if nature is experiencing a bit of turbulence in some places, she’s still basically okay. The cheap grace of technology may ultimately give us little impetus to return to a deeper and more risky engagement with the wild.

Even though they are necessary, nature reserves present us with a serious philosophical problem: we are so environmentally provincial. The Earth is one place. Our attempts to divide it, even to save it, show that we do not really believe this. If we hold a dichotomous view in which plants and animals can be preserved like so many fur coats in storage, we show that we know nothing of the Earth as a system. Birds and herd animals migrate, global warming shifts ocean currents, and human activity changes ancient rainfall patterns. We have reduced wilderness to a kind of town commons, where Americans keep their wildlife safe within the fold from strangers and dangers.

We homesteaders are no wiser, here in the Estates. When I moved from southern Arizona to the mountains near Grand Canyon, I believed that I had chosen to merge my human life with that of the wild. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our rescue dogs kill rabbits and lizards, our quads crush vegetation, and our generators belch exhaust into the frosty night. Our pooping and pounding and building and burning have only further denuded and degraded the area. We don't live in harmony with nature; we live at the expense of it. And there are more of us every year, homesteaders, hurrying like tourists, who hurry like lemmings, if not by the millions than by the thousands, each of us succumbing to the call, and nobody hears Thoreau or Cousteau or Black Elk speak.

Speaking of Natives, the nearby population is not nearly as allied with sustainable practices as we would like to believe. Some years ago I was teaching a series of texts on Navajo Nation environment to a group of high school students there, when a student posed the question: If things were so bad on Navajo land, just who was in charge of environmental quality on the Nation anyway? After a bit of Internet surfing, we found a contact number for the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency. On impulse, I whipped out my LG TracFone and punched in the number, praying for a signal. A Native woman named Tanya answered in a tired voice. She was a secretary. No, there hadn't been anyone in charge of the NNEPA for three years. Was I interested in the position? I considered the uranium tailings buried under six inches of asphalt in Tuba City an hour from our village. I wasn't. I polled the students. There were no takers. Who in his right mind would want the headaches? Tanya thanked us for our interest. She would write down our questions on a post-it note and stick it to the wall behind her desk for whomever might assume-the-position later. The layer of post-its on the wall, she added, was over two inches thick now. I flipped the phone shut.

"Looks like opportunities in environmental studies are wide open for Native youth," I said brightly, knowing all the while that few members of their families held wage jobs, that those who did were mostly employed by Peabody Coal or the cattle companies. The students themselves subsisted mainly on the federal school lunch program, hot Cheetos, and commodity foods—yes to the sharp cheddar commodity cheese, arguably the best-tasting cheese on the planet; no to the gallon size cans of tuna fish, the fish taboo having its roots in an ancient bad-fish-eating incident that reportedly killed hundreds of Navajo living along a lake.

Nowadays Navajo fed the tuna to their sheep dogs, since there are no commodities for dogs.

Our relationship to nature has become schizophrenic. Witness recent FOX news film footage, in which a news chopper hovers overhead while news crews race down an urban roadway to capture images of a rogue bear galloping through a field near Phoenix. We watch and celebrate: Yep, they're still around, we sigh. It's like a quick trip to the IMAX; it's Alien versus News Crew. We "like" it on Facebook, even as the park service loads up a powerful tranquilizer gun, darts the bear into insensible immobility and spirits it away in a truck to an undisclosed location. Let's face it: nobody embraces wilderness that would tip over a trash can or bite a kid. That would be too wild. What we want is wilderness-lite: Bambi, not a rutting buck on a playground; Smoky, not a real bear crashing through some housewife's hydrangeas. We've come to see nature in terms of deficit, of where it doesn't belong. We don't want it in the park, except maybe for ducks or squirrels, which we will relocate or kill if they annoy us. We don't want it in our yards. Perhaps even Indians don't want it on their reservations-lite, which I say because I saw only one deer, one porcupine (dead along the road) and one antelope in ten years on the rez, even though I explored the mountains extensively on horseback daily. I don't think homesteaders want regular-strength wildlife around either, even though we would say we do if asked, and even though this is where wildlife is supposed to live.

Even though Grand Canyon Estates has few human inhabitants, as a wild place it has been stripped and vanquished, its fauna largely reduced to Black Angus, blue birds, red ants, and ravens. This pattern repeats itself in flora. Since the advent of ranching here, juniper and pinon have been displaced by a handful of invasive, nonnative species. Everything that can be eaten—including a concrete building pad poured by neighboring steaders—has been eaten by the cattle, not completely to the point of moonscape, as is sadly the case on much of Navajo land, but enough to create this vast, open plain of scrub and clump, fit almost exclusively for rabbit, raven, range cow and coyote.

I still see sights here in the Estates that thrill and inspire me. A pair of red-tailed hawks, new to the area, hunt overhead, folding their wings and precision diving to snatch a snake from the mouth of a mouse hole. A great blue heron pumps its wings steadily toward the banks of the earthen cattle tank. Maybe the new nature-lite is exactly what makes wilderness more welcoming to people these days. For instance, I don't expect that my granddaughter will be carried off by a ferocious lion; the Latin root "fer" in "ferocious" literally means that it could "carry" you off! Neither do I lay awake at night listening for the sounds of a wolf tearing Muffin apart in her corral. Because we have our tools of taming. We hack the rabbit brush out of the trail that leads to the greenhouses. We drag the new lane with a chunk of iron train rail to tear out the rocks and smooth the way for our trucks. Grand Canyon is the collateral damage of ranching and us. It is lovely, pastoral even, but it is damaged, probably beyond recovery.

I walked into the Chevron Station at the junction in Valle the other day, where visitors were buying their National Parks Pass. I saw them eying my crumpled cowboy hat, canvas coat, and sturdy boots, and I saw their envy. I was Bambi, I was Smoky. Tourists see the homesteaders as some breed of feral children, not quite civilized as they are, possibly not even as clean. Some of their observations could be accurate. We've become brothers of the ox—or range cow, as it were. And those long sightlines we cherish also mean life in the fish bowl for us, as our lives and homes become objects of study for anyone curious enough to pick up a pair of binoculars or stare out the window of a tour plane. In other words, in our frenzy to objectify wilderness, we have become the objects of study.

And we are worthy of study, because we don't study ourselves enough, and homesteaders can be queer ducks, right from the cradle. When I was a child, we used to play farm. We made tiny paddocks of twigs. We tied threads to insects, carefully freeing them later, sans the occasional leg that we couldn't help. Grasshoppers were horses, because they were prettier than the crickets, who were obviously Angus. We were masters of our universes. I think we're playing farm here on the Estates. The cattle are elk, and the miniature horses are the deer. The dogs are wolves, and the corn stalks are Ponderosa. In our make-believe world, the substitutions are welcome. The cattle hold the scrublands in check. Our Lilliputian horses browse away fuel and protect us from wildfires. Dogs pressure rodent populations, enabling our corn to grow tall and strong and useful. Corn becomes winter fodder for the horses, and we are the wonder-filled beneficiaries of it all.

Tourists can also be filled with wonder, to wit: some time back, local ranchers reported that a bull elk had jumped the fence and moved into a feedlot with nineteen range cows. No doubt it was the ideal situation for the elk. As a legendary jumper, the elk could come and go from the corral at will, though he seldom did, feeding and philandering as he pleased. For a while, locals found the arrangement a fine source of amusement, in a place where not much ever happened. But as time went on, proprietors of Valle businesses—businesses that relied on tourism—began to complain. For example, the amazing show of “unnatural acts” was within plain view of Bedrock City, a unique theme park of sorts where parents could pitch their tents and let their children get up close and personal with giant fiberglass dinosaurs as seen in the cartoon city of Bedrock. I can only imagine the questions kids would think up as they watched Bamm-Bamm the Elkosaurus cheerfully boinking a lonely cow.

Tour pamphlets boasted that Bedrock City was “guaranteed to bring a smile to your face, regardless of whether you are still a kid”, and it did, but for all the wrong reasons. Similarly, the owners of the Planes of Fame Air Museum—dedicated to collecting, restoring, displaying, and preserving aircraft—found no amusement in the elk and cow exhibit, nor upon the educational benefits the unusual relationship conferred on the youth. Likewise, the Grand Canyon Railway, which made its first journey to the South Rim in 1901, still faithfully transported eager tourists to Grand Canyon National Park. But before tourists arrived at the park,

cameras snapped away at the new sight.

Soon the Grand Canyon was in danger of becoming America's second-most recognized spectacle. Finally, in response to general public distress, the National Park Service intervened, capturing the unconventional elk and relocating him to a remote area of the Park, where it was sincerely hoped that he would be libidiously rehabilitated, once again assuming a taste for his own kind. As far as I know, the decision had been made without consulting either the exiled elk or the companionless cows, who had doubtless by this time been sent to slaughter and silenced permanently.

By contrast, our lifestyle in the Estates looks balanced and natural. Seriously. We can't even see that anything is wrong with nature here, and in fact, it all seems very right, even a little bit holy. My greatest concern is that even those of us who live here cannot see the changes, since they have taken place over such a long time that we fail to see the mechanisms of the processes of change. Because change happens so slowly, we do not know the price we are paying. And because we love the safety and security of wilderness-lite, we do not want to know. The power of not knowing is huge. On a regular day, a beef cow does not appear to be worse than a buffalo cow, nor does a dog seem inferior to a wolf. Yet even if all the homesteaders spent the rest of their lives re-vegging and restoring lost species, how would these life forms fare amongst the growing numbers of humans? It's easier on our souls to rationalize, permit, and adapt.

I can't put uranium back in the ground, undo the tyranny of the free range, or reverse the damage done by the tramp and shuffle of three million pairs of boots on the South Rim. I don't blame myself much for global warming or take personal responsibility for biotic impoverishment give or take a few cricket legs. But as a homesteader, I can at least provide a more realistic and less romantic view of wilderness in crisis. It's a fitting time to come forward: Just this week I read in the local paper that the female gray wolf had been shot by a coyote hunter north of Grand Canyon National Park in Utah. We can all sleep a little sounder tonight, safe on our pillows, savoring the taste of bewilderment-lite.



Elephants placidly graze in dappled shade, contentedly caked with mud. Safe in their stature and numbers, they pay no mind to the pride of lions panting beneath an acacia tree. Gargantuan, fat zebras gambol alongside diminutive, spindly-legged gazelles. Kong-sized gorillas menace rhinos large enough to trample the elephants underfoot, and enormous raindrops dig craters that could trap a tiger. The cries of birds the size of jumbo jets pierce the air.

Merging at evenly spaced right angles, silty waterways arrow through the plain. They are populated by wallowing hippos and half-submerged, snaggle-toothed crocodiles. Giraffes spread stilt legs to lower their mouths to the water, all the while keeping a weather eye on the covetous reptiles. Ants the size of boulders hesitate at the water's edge, then turn and choose another route. Over all the action waft the tang of gasoline, the funk of aged motor oil, and the ghost of grass long since cut.

That was my savannah. It existed half in my imagination, half in my father's garage, where I spent many rainy summer days sitting on the concrete just inside the open doors, playing with plastic safari animals. Two brothers and a sister were enough to drive me out of the house, but not enough to make me willing to sit in the rain. I didn't dislike my family, but six people jammed into a small house can be a lot to take. The garage's wide-open double doors meant a dry spot to sit on, next to the wet ground outside, away from the madding crowd. During downpours, the crumbling edges and seams of the concrete foundation became riverbanks and piranha-filled canals cloudy with savannah runoff. Toy beasts breathed, walked, roared. It was an annoyance that not all the safari animals were accurately scaled, but imagination surmounted that. The coolness of the concrete belied the savannah's heat, and the Indiana air certainly was not dry, but it didn't matter. I was a world away, there in that garage.

The Garage

Veronica
Hartman

To anyone else, it was probably just a garage. It was built in the 1920s, some twenty years before my paternal great-grandfather bought the land it stood on. By the time I came along, its white paint had for years been flaking from its wooden bones. Its black-speckled red shingles were peeling off the tarpaper, and sometimes one or two would decorate the yard after a high wind. Daylight was visible between the wall boards, and the roof leaked in a couple places. From a distance, the garage appeared to lean upon itself from all four corners, like a circus tent sagging from the center pole. It didn't look like it would take much to knock it down. But Dad trusted it, so I did, too. Inside its creaky, splintery walls were solitude and safety, no matter how hard the wind blew or the rain fell. Flashing and grumbling, thunderstorms marched across the field and fell upon the garage, only to slink away in defeat.

Playing by myself in the garage as the rain fell, I was alone but not lonely. At any time, someone could (and sometimes did) walk in to do, well, whatever. It was a well-used garage, after all, and the house was less than twenty feet away. But chances were good that the rain would keep everyone away doing chores, watching television, napping, playing, or otherwise occupied indoors. That was the goal; company was irritating, not least because I liked everything just "so" when pretending. I created worlds for me alone, to escape reality. Someone else making noise and moving the pieces around—interrupting the story—was simply not acceptable. I order my life the same way today by surrounding myself with possessions that speak of other people without requiring their actual presence. When I feel the need to be with others, I prefer to be the one controlling who, when, where and for how long. I want to be in charge of the doors in my wall.

The big double doors in the south wall of the garage sagged so badly, they had to be locked if Dad wanted them to stay shut. Usually they stood propped open unless it was very cold and outdoor pets needed extra protection. The “people door” in the east wall was so warped it didn’t shut completely; it stuck in its frame and had to be pushed or pulled hard before it would reopen. In the window next to the people door, four panes of greenish glass lent an aquarium look to everything on the opposite side. Once in a while, I get that underwater feeling when events beyond my control are happening. Sometimes I’m a fish. Sometimes I’m drowning.

Surrounding the window frame, lining the unfinished inside walls, and hanging from the rafters was everything Dad could find a way to nail or string up. Cane poles, rakes, shovels, saws, canoe and kayak paddles, life preservers, coils of rope and hose, sleds, bicycles, fishing nets, buckets, chains, bird feeders, traps and tarps, plastic wading pools, lawn toys—all that and more bristled from every vertical and overhead surface. A countertop ran from the jam of the people door all the way to the far wall. It was piled with tackle boxes, coolers, bottles of oil and antifreeze, and coffee cans full of nails, screws, and odds and ends. The floor was the domain of lawn mowers, outboard and trolling motors on stands, fuel cans, wagons, and anything else too large, too dangerous, or too awkward to hang.

Amid the clutter, one litter of puppies and several generations of cats were born and lived. Mice, squirrels, chipmunks, snakes, toads, birds, bats, opossums and raccoons were frequent visitors and occasionally residents. Only during *“When I had it to myself, the garage could be anyplace I wanted it to be.”*

winter was the garage free of crawling, spinning, wriggling, or flying bugs. It would have been difficult to grow up without learning about non-human life and how to share space with it. Over time, I became more comfortable with the inhuman. They rarely pose problems that aren’t easily solved. It’s generally simple to tell whether they do or don’t like me, and usually they don’t get upset when I’ve had enough of their company and walk away. Personal space is a concept critters seem eerily familiar with.

Inside the garage, I was surrounded by tools, toys, and time. A glance in any direction found something well-worn, well-loved, or both. Not an inch of that garage was unexplored, even the rafters where raccoons occasionally nested. When I had it to myself, the garage could be anyplace I wanted it to be. It was familiar. It was comfortable. It was dependable. It was home. In a way, it was also me.

“My imagination matured and began envisioning the future instead of altering the present.”

Physical space was as much at a premium outside the garage as inside. Along the east wall, Mom grew rhubarb, and a rusty wheelbarrow leaned against the wall on a Volkswagen Beetle-sized patio that faded at the edges into the grass. Along the west wall, Dad stored a canoe and kayaks on handmade wooden racks. Trash cans and plastic recycling barrels squatted on the north side. The double doors took up about two thirds of the south side. It was the only outer wall of the garage that wasn't used for anything, because it faced passing traffic. Perhaps that's how I began to learn to present an acceptable front to the world, even when I'm a total mess inside.

The summer of 1985, I left home at eighteen for what would become a twenty-one-year military career. During those years, I went places, met people, and had experiences I'd never dreamed of back in that garage. I had to step outside my insulated interior on a daily basis. As a buffer against the outside world, I kept as many familiar, comforting objects around as possible, transfer after transfer. I wanted—needed—to be surrounded by them when the door closed behind me at the end of each day. Without that retreat... madness.

Exposure to reality and living in the “now” weren’t particularly kind. My imagination matured and began envisioning the future instead of altering the present. It got harder and harder to imagine simply for the joy of it. That’s what happens to us as the years pile on: wishes really do become horses, we find out we have to take care of the damn things to keep them alive, and all our time is spent mucking out stalls and keeping troughs filled. It finally becomes clear what the geezers meant when they reminisced about the good old days while the kids played on the garage floor. Certainly the girl sitting inches from the rain never considered the possibility that her imagination might be traded in for memories, or that memories would eventually be all she had left of some things.

An oak tree fell on the garage in October 1992, reducing it to a pile of splinters and rusty nails. For a couple of years, the concrete foundation was the only reminder that anything had ever been there. Eventually Dad built another garage, this one attached to the house. The new garage is big enough for two vehicles, at least two mowers, boats, and all the other miscellany the old garage used to hold, plus a scooter and newer things. It’s dependable. It’s safe. As garages go, it’s comfortable. A child playing there on a rainy day might grow up feeling about it the way I felt about the old garage.

But the new garage
is not familiar to me.
Though rhubarb is still my
favorite pie filling, Mom's
is long gone. The new
shingles are gray. When
it rains, I don't get wet
running from the house
to the garage. The rafters
and walls still bristle, but
purposely built storage
hides most of the clutter.
A refrigerator stocked
with beer and soda hums
in the corner. Mice may
run across the floor, but
raccoons do not. Wind
and rain do not make
their way through cracks
and holes in the walls
and roof. The concrete
foundation is seamless,
with uncrumbled edges.
Instead of a dirt driveway,
blacktop flows right up to
the electric doors—doors
that are almost always
kept closed.

While my parents
live, it's unlikely another
child will sit on the dry
side of the doors and play
with safari animals half
in and half out of the
rain. But some day, when
another family lives in
the house and the garage
is so old that its doors
won't shut without help,
perhaps muddy rivers will
once again flow through
imaginary savannah, and
out-of-scale safari animals
will breathe, walk, roar.



He picked her up in a red, '95 Chevy Cavalier.
"Damn. This is the last time I'll be doing this."
He pulled up in front of her house, staying in the car.
"Love is Strange" by Mickey & Sylvia played throughout
the Cavalier. After a minute, the front door opened. A
silhouette emerged and began walking towards the car.
Soon he could see its features more clearly defined as it
walked under the street
light's beam and into the
car. It sat down, and
turned to him.

Goodbye Silhouettes

David P. Garvey

"Hey, what's up?" her usual introduction.
"Hey. Not a whole lot, you?"
"Just working on my drawings."
"Oh yeah? Any good, Picasso?"
"Eh."
"Walk around in the park?" he asked her.
"Sure."
He switched the car into drive and headed to Lincoln
Park, a couple of blocks away. They parked, got out
and started walking around, not holding hands, an
unwelcome change of pace. That bummed him out, but
this was the end.

"So Hank slept in my bed last night. In the middle
of the night, I got up to get a glass of water. I came back
and he was just on my pillow, purring. I tried to move
him gently, whispering in his ear, but then he pounced.
Gave me this," she slid up the sleeve of her jacket,
revealing a light red-streaked imprint of three claw
marks.

"Oof. He's a temperamental one."
"I'll say."
Hands in his pockets and looking down at the
concrete before him, he spoke up. "The other night
Samson was outside, during the storm. We left him
out there for like five minutes. He started barking and
I realized he was still outside. I let him in and he runs
inside. He's going crazy. He jumps up on the table and
starts rolling around, all over those maps I've been
drawing for work. Hours' worth of work, ruined..."

"Oh, no!" she said as she laughed and placed her hand
on his forearm for a brief second. He liked that a lot.

“Damn dogs...”

“How is work anyway?”

“It’s okay. I really don’t like it any more. It’s too stressful. I need an exit strategy, so I can get work somewhere else.”

“He’s lucky to have you.”

“Yeah, I know. Architecture is too much for me though. I don’t even have an interest in it. Hate it.”

“Well, what else would you do?” she asked.

He sighed. “Maybe something with animals, food services, radio station.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah.”

They kept walking, very slowly without saying anything for a couple minutes. They had been talking, so that they could put off the inevitable, but the time came. He stopped walking, but she kept on, not noticing the break. He gently closed his hand around her wrist, stopping her. She turned around with a soft and concerned expression on her face, mouth slightly open.

“Listen,” he started, a cyclist nearly ran into them as he zipped by. “Ass,” he muttered as he followed the cyclist’s rude path with his eyes. He continued, “Look, I think it’s obvious that we haven’t exactly been all that...”

“Yeah...” she said looking down somewhat ashamed.

“I feel like we’re growing apart. It’s not really working anymore, is it?”

Nothing else existed in that moment.

“I know. I obviously didn’t want it to come to this, but you’re right.”

Not much else was said on the matter, nothing of significance. It was understood. They resumed walking.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” he asked her.

“No, not at all,” she responded, unaware of his newfound vice.

“Did you watch True Blood on Sunday?” he asked her, not wanting there to be awkward silence, yet cherishing any interaction with her.

“Yep. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with Sookie.”

“I feel like she always makes the wrong decision and screws up everyone’s lives.”

“Sounds about right to me,” she said.

They kept on walking and eventually sat down at a picnic table under the cool, clear night sky. It was windy and cold. They could see their breath. He put out the cigarette on the table and flicked it towards a nearby trashcan, ricocheting off the side. The cold was getting to them, so they stood up and awkwardly hugged. He closed his eyes, not wanting that moment of embrace to ever end, but it did.

Walking back to the car, they drove back to her place. Sitting there in the car, she unbuckled her seat belt, paused and turned to him. Their eyes locked for a few moments. That gaze. Her eyes. They calmed the roughest of waters and darkest thoughts. Everything was serene save for the loud continuous beat of his heart. Nothing else existed in that moment. Not the world, not time, nothing. It was just him and her. Them.

“Bye, Jimmy...”

“Bye, Katie...”

He grabbed and held her hand one last time. As she exited the car, their fingers slipped away. She walked up to her door, opened it, and stood in the doorway. The silhouette waved as he drove off.

* * *

Months went by. He thought of her frequently, dreamt of her infrequently. The dreams came when she finally had somehow left his mind, even if it was temporary, making it all the more frustrating. He would wonder what she was doing, drawing most likely.

Occasionally they would see each other at parties and talk briefly. Every time he would see her or hear from her, his stomach immediately swarmed with butterflies. It was as if caterpillars were just lying there, dormant. Her presence instantaneously sped up their metamorphosis.

A few months had passed. She had gotten a new boyfriend. His relationships had started and just as quickly ended for him. None of them had filled the void she left in him. He never admitted it, but he was not

over her. He wondered if he ever would be. “Maybe I’m not trying hard enough. I mean, I have to actually try.”

A friend called him up the final night of summer.

“Have you fallen off the face of the earth yet?” his friend asked him.

“Not yet. I’m hanging on to the edge though.”

“Ha. Well, hey, it’s Katie’s going away party tonight, before she moves to California. You should come.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea...I don’t think I should,” he said.

“She would really appreciate it.”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Later that night he met up with his friend who was an aspiring journalist. It was Tom’s last night in town before he began trucker life the next morning. They went to a dive bar downtown, got a couple of draft beers, and sat outside at an iron table.

“I’m not really sure why I’m doing this,” Tom said. “It will pay off my student loans, but I don’t think this has sunken in yet.”

“Well, you’re definitely going to meet some interesting people to write about.”

“Very true,” he said nodding.

“How’s it going with Stacey?” Jimmy asked.

“It’s not. She moved back to Columbia. I see her every once in a while. Something is still there, but it can’t

work. It’s okay though.

What about you?

Seeing anyone?”

He never admitted it, but he was not over her.

Jimmy took a breath

and began to speak, but stopped. Took a breath and began again, “Not really. I mean, I love someone who is moving away.”

“What’s stopping you from telling her how you feel?” Tom asked, furrowing his brow while taking a sip of his draft beer.

“She’s seeing someone else.”

“Who?”

“Katie.”

“Ooooh. I know her. Well, I don’t actually know her, but she’s like extremely beautiful, right?”

“That’s the one.”

There was a silence. Tom broke it by posing the thought, “Well, that’s tough, man. I hope you figure it out. Maybe you could wreck that relationship?”

Jimmy laughed a bit, but responded, “I would have to break up a relationship, start one up, and then sustain it. I have my work cut out for me.”

He paused to consider such the idea. “Nah. I’m not going to mess with her life that way,” he looked down at the glass of beer, its condensation slowly going away.

“There are other fish in the sea,” Tom offered.

“Yeah, but I want that one. I have a very specific taste.”

Tom smiled and shook his head once. “Want to go somewhere else?” he asked him.

“No, I think I want to call it a night. Take me home.”

“Alright, man. It was great seeing you.”

“Likewise. Good luck on the road.”

Tom dropped him off. There he was walking along, after a night of drinking with a friend who he had seen and known for years. Walking inside to the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator, containing several cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon, moldy hot dog buns, and a 12 pack of sliced Colby jack cheese. He sighed.

After drinking two cans, he sat in the wooden armchair in the dimly lit dining room. Staring off into the empty beer can he had been spinning in his hand for several minutes he decided to call his friend, Alyssa, to see if she was still at Katie’s party. Before he called, he wondered if seeing her would be good for him...earlier it had seemed like his mind was set. He would let her go, once and for all. Seemed like the thing to do. They had not been close as of late or talking much at all. She was moving away. She had a boyfriend. It’s not going to be.

Alyssa called and told him to walk over. He began the trek. He packed a can of PBR in his pocket.

His phone rang. Alyssa.

“Hey, where are you?”

“I’m like two blocks away. Almost there. Why?”

“We’re picking you up.”

“Really? I’m almost there.”

“Someone at the party is someone you might not want to see, if you get my drift.”

“Oh...well alright.”

“Do you still want to come?” Alyssa asked him.

“Yeah, sure. I guess. I’m at the corner of Leland and Vine.”

“Stay there.”

Within thirty seconds, the silver van that he expected to see pulled up beside him.

His heart beat faster. He climbed into the car, greeted its three passengers Alyssa, Alyssa’s brother, and Katie. Her brother was in the driver’s seat, Alyssa in the front passenger seat, and Katie in the backseat. His heart seemed to stop. She was radiating beauty. As beautiful and perfect as he remembered, maybe more so.

They said hello. A brief and awkward silence fell between them. She turned to him.

“I heard you didn’t want to come to my party,” she said, teary-eyed, “but I couldn’t leave without saying goodbye,” her voice broke.

He had never seen her like this before. Visibly upset. It made him upset, but he didn’t show it. They talked while she played “Love is Strange” by Mickey & Sylvia on her phone across the back seat. They moved closer to each other.

“I wasn’t sure if it would be a good idea,” he said to her.

“I know. I don’t blame you for thinking that. Are you aware of the situation?”

“Yeah,” she was moving away to California with her boyfriend.

“It’s like a trial run. We’ll see how things go.”

“Sure,” he said quietly and nodded.

“I had to see you again. I care about you. You know that, right?”

“This is going to sound corny, but I want you to be happy,” he said.

“You are my best friend. You know me better than anyone else. I loved you, Jimmy...” The second he heard those words, he looked up. His eyes welled up.

He looked down, shaking his head, then resting it against hers. “I should have said something...” he said under his breath. “I should have said something...” he repeated.

“I didn’t want it to end.”

“I should have said something too...” she said.

It was at that moment that their hands gently brushed and their fingers clasped together in both pairs of hands. He turned his head and looked into her eyes. They seemed to be pulling him slowly towards her as he kept eyeing her lips, but he broke the gaze and approach, looking away.

Former lovers. Both wanting what seemed to be out of grasp, despite the lock they had on each other. He was holding everything that mattered in his hands. Jimmy didn't know what was ahead, but he knew at that moment, she had to be in it.

“Love is Strange” ended. Another moment of silence.

He turned and looked at her, “I never stopped.”

“Neither did I.”

“Don't go.”

“Jimmy...I didn't want it to end like this.”

“I didn't want it to end.”

There was a brief pause of silence.

“I know how hard this must be for you, but I can't be with you. Not right now.”

His eyes were open, but he was looking at nothing. The car stopped in front of his house. He was staring off, processing all that had happened. Although he didn't want it, he finally had it. Closure.

“Goodbye, Katie”

“Goodbye, Jimmy...”

He moved towards the side door. She grabbed and held his hand one last time. Again. As he exited the car, their fingers slipped away. He walked up to the door, opened it, and stood in the doorway. The silhouette waving as it drove off.



Au revoir Renoir,
 And the days of lacing shoes
 to find the faces of friends
 Paint their interests, blend
 Their yellows and blues.

A collection of portraits
 in one place. Identity
 What's around us. Reality
 Not in the worn slipper, but
 A post of mud caked boot.

Like this for its value
 On a phone, not the truth.
 To a stranger it's no less you
 The painter begs you "don't move".

Impress with pictures, interests and lose
 No more sole from wear. The wind blows
 No strays from painted hair. There still
 by the door, pristine as when
 The world saw you, a dancer,
 Subject to a photo-shoot ball. ✦

Bal du Personnalité Mondaine

(1st place, fall contest)

logan Obermeyer

small girl nearly
swallowed whole by polka-
dotted tutu
steps out of worn
cowboy boots
into swirling
inky sea
of sky

the sea of herself
set loose
drifting in waves
liquid against her edges

ragged charges of tidal wind
captained by moon
tug with practiced ease
unraveling
what she
knows

toying with tulle
launching her wide- and
wild-eyed
over crest
into
flight

fancy so-and-sos of
imaginary migration

shoes—like horse
and snow—as
discarded
treasure

stars like sea glass
nestle bright amid
abandoned shells
no longer suitable
dwelling places

no need for land
right now

no need for landing
when floating sings sirenic

vertiginous journey
the way the sky steepers her
dipping and plunging
bobbing her about on
the rails of her own
awareness

the deep breath that
steals her
before dreams
flood
her being

bauble of prayer
rising up
smoke circles and all
lingering in hair
kissing skin

biding time
chained
to the inevitable

**small girl
nearly**
(2nd place, fall contest)

Carly Davis

waiting for the dharma
of interdependent
arising where
(self)
consciousness
fades to black

//

succulent
moment
ripe for
.....

beginning

✦

The witch
has a daughter.

She's surprised.

Witches usually don't have babies, they have cats or slugs or occasionally bundles of needles. She knows this, so she doesn't have anything for a baby, except for a pair of shoes she was using to bind a curse to a certain princess. But this time it is a baby.

The witch doesn't give birth to all of it. Her body hordes the hot and wet and red parts so she ends up giving birth to a little nest of bones. But she loves her Bone.

Bone never cries. She doesn't have a mouth or tongue or vocal chords to cry with. She has no skin to feel the cold or muscles to feel tired or stomach to feel hunger. All she has are little white bones.

Bones (3rd place, fall contest)

Hayley Jacobson

Bone runs and she sounds like a wind chime. Her feet fall on the floor like beads in a rain stick.

She leaps on chairs and does handstands on tables. She has no marrow and her bones are as hollow and light as a bird's.

Bone finds the baby shoes and the witch tells her they're for a cursed princess. Bone's never met a princess or left the witch's house. Bone goes to the witch's closet and finds a lot of shoes. The gold filigreed heels of a duke. The worn leather soles of a shepherd. The slippers of a bed ridden old woman. Her toes shudder in the fabric.

The witch summons the shoemaker.

Bone tries to contain herself. She wraps herself in the witch's fur cloak, hair wrapping around her ribs and tickling her tail bone. Her fingers rattle in gloves. She would have suffocated herself under scarves if she breathed. She spins in front of the witch.

The witch thinks Bone should wait in the bedroom while she talks to the shoemaker.

Bone can't hear the shoemaker. She presses a goblet to the bedroom door but she doesn't have ears.

The witch opens the bedroom door.

The shoemaker kneels beside a chair, blindfolded.

Bone sits slowly; the heavy coat muffles her bones so she sounds like a bag of marbles.

The shoemaker dives into the coat, breathing mouthfuls of fur. The shoemaker remarks that that young lady must be very thin that she's so hard to find in her own clothes. The shoemaker remarks that that was a compliment. The shoemaker remarks that thin is very fashionable these days—

The shoemaker pulls her leg out from the coat, thumb caught between her tibia and fibula. The shoemaker pulls back the blindfold and sees a skeleton pulled from the grave.

The shoemaker names her: Forgive me, Death.

The shoemaker dies.

Bone knows who she really is.

The witch starts taking the shoemaker apart. Eyes can't see her daughter. A tongue can't name her

daughter. A brain can't
know her daughter.

But Bone knows.

And the witch knows that.

The witch takes her
daughter apart. She pours
every piece of her into
a bag and ties it with a
rope weaved from the
shoemaker's hair and
throws the bag on her bed
to use as a pillow.

The witch goes to sleep.

A patella slips out of
the bag, bouncing on the
floor. A clavicle slides
out. A scapula pushes and
pushes until it pops free.

The witch should know
no daughter of hers can be
contained. But the witch
doesn't know her daughter.

The witch's daughter
has nothing but bones,
but what you have isn't all
you are.

The witch's daughter is
Death, flowing onto the floor
like water and evaporating.

The witch lives alone
after her daughter leaves.
She's not surprised. She
asked for too much.
Death gave her mother
everything but her bones.
Witches are greedy. When
she leaves the witch eats
the coat Death wore and
the scarves and the shoes

and the table and the
chairs and the shoemaker.
The witch ate her entire
house until she was
absolutely alone.

Death is never alone.
She doesn't make a lot of
friends but she meets a lot
of people. She travels. She
sounds like a wind storm
through a forest in the fall.
She's so happy that she
nearly shakes herself apart.
And she loves her bones.



I am a deceiver. A trickster. When you
 Look into my eyes, you're blinded by the
 Holy gaze from the Heavens. And It is those golden
 kisses you
 Expect that will comfort you. Nibbling at your
 Skin, but it is my touch you feel. Nipping at your
 Nose. No one likes the cold.
 Blistering and Fierce,
 Never ending in its wrath. And when I give you gentle
 Kisses that surround your feet, it is a ploy. A way for you
 To welcome me, to invite the storm in. I am a deceiver. I
 Am a trickster.

Why is my affection drawn this way?
 Cupid hit me with a crooked arrow.
 Where you want heat, I wrap myself in
 The warm embrace of a blanket of snow. It's
 Coldness, soothing to the touch, away from

The fiery allure of Apollo's eye. This is where
 I belong. Alone and in the darkened venue from
 Which no light can penetrate. His stare is blinding
 And all I want is the cold. All I want is to pull you in
 With me. We can be alone together. In the dark
 And in the cold. I am the icicle that can
 Pierce your heart. Freeze it. You'll feel it's
 Unwelcomed icy grasp clutching you,
 Draining you, until your pallor turns as pale as the
 First fall of snow. I am a deceiver. I am a trickster.



Jack Frost's Lament

Annette Wright

I had been staring at the floor for about an hour when a soft knock at the door broke me out of the stupor that I had been in. Please don't be her, I thought to myself as I got up from the chair. I was slightly wobbly, having just finished my fifth beer of the night, all five of which I had consumed within the past hour. I scrambled around the small living room and quickly gathered the empty beer bottles from the round black table that sat next to the brown leather chair that I had been occupying up until

a few seconds ago. I walked a few feet to the kitchen and tossed the armful of beer bottles in the trashcan, grabbing another one out of the fridge on my way to answer the front door. I wasn't ready to see her; I was so exhausted from all the fighting. The sixth beer in my hand felt like a shield as I opened the front door and saw her standing there. She looked just as beautiful as the day I met her four years ago. I had been out at a bar with

Killing Me

Nicole Holloway

friends when I met her and we started talking. I don't believe in love at first sight, but I wanted her to be mine from the second I saw her. Thinking about it now made me more depressed than I had already been. I took a swig of the beer and stepped aside to let her in as I once again wondered how our life had ended up like this.

"You're here—" I started.

"To get some things," she said, cutting me off.

I realized then how stupid it was to think she was coming back. I had really lost her forever this time. A long swig, followed by a shorter one.

"Why?" I asked. It was a rhetorical question but I knew she'd answer me.

"Why would you ask me 'why?!' You should know better than anyone. You're up, you're down, day in, day out! I've dealt with it for four years because I love you. I'm exhausted."

By the time she finished what she was saying, she was in the bedroom. I could hear drawers opening and closing as she took clothes out and placed them in the empty red suitcase that she had brought over with her. My drunken mind slowly processed what was happening and I walked the eight feet to the bedroom, taking another swig of the beer along the way.

"You had faith in me, in us. You said you'd never leave. You're stronger than I am. Why are you letting this slip right through your fingers?"

My feet stayed planted in the doorway as I looked desperately at her. She stopped in the middle of placing a blue t-shirt into her suitcase and looked up at me.

"I've got nothing left to give you," she replied, and resumed what she was doing. I

examined the empty beer bottle in my right hand. Before I knew it, I was watching in slow motion as the glass bottle flew past her head and hit the wall behind her. The shattered pieces crumbled to the floor; I watched as the last few drops that had remained in the bottle dripped lazily down the beige-colored wall. My eyes

caught hers and I saw the look of disbelief in them. Instead of saying anything, she resumed packing.

I felt fury rising up in me; anger at her lack of empathy. I crossed the threshold into the bedroom and fought the urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. I was seeing red as I balled my right fist up and thrust it at the wall that was still wet with beer.

“ADAM!” she screamed as I punched it one more time, leaving a gaping hole.

I absently looked at my fist, blood now seeping slowly out of my knuckles. It should have been painful, but right now I was too occupied with the sharp ache that was surging through my chest. I instinctively took my left hand and covered my right fist with it before I turned around and saw that she was standing in front of me. Our eyes met and I saw that hers were filled with tears. Suddenly, she turned and left the room. I sat down on the bed and my eyes focused on the hole in the wall that was the size of my fist. When she returned she was holding a first aid kit. I watched, my mind completely blank, as she took supplies out of the first aid kit and began to clean my wound. She wrapped some gauze around my knuckles and looked up at me. The tears in her eyes were still present, but this time they spilled over and down her cheeks.

“I just can’t do this anymore,” she whispered. I just nodded. I had no fight left in me.

I remained in the same spot on the bed while she finished packing the things that she had come for. When she zipped her suitcase shut, I followed her to the front door. Wordlessly, she opened it and closed it behind her.

“Everly...” I spoke her name inaudibly. I stood there staring at the door for what felt like hours, until I was sure that she wasn’t going to walk back through it, and then I made my way back to the bedroom where I laid in the bed for another long and sleepless night.

“You had faith in me, in us. You said you’d never leave. You’re stronger than I am. Why are you letting this slip right through your fingers?”

Shortly after dawn, I got out of the bed and got the tub of spackle, a putty knife, and a trash bag from the hallway closet. When I got back to the bedroom, I got down on my knees and began

picking up the pieces of the broken beer bottle. I heard the front door faintly open and shut, and I looked behind me to see her standing there looking like she hadn’t slept either. Silently, she knelt beside me and started to help me pick up the pieces. I turned my head to look at her, and waited until she looked me in the eye.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I said.

She looked at me for a moment before nodding and standing up. I listened as her footsteps grew fainter; the front door opened and closed again as I finished picking up the remaining pieces of the bottle. I got to my feet to examine the hole in the wall; there were two nearly-parallel patches to the left and right of it. It wasn't the first time that something like this had happened, but I vowed to myself that it would be the last. I had done enough damage, and she didn't deserve it. She didn't have the strength to protect herself from my destructive ways, so I would have to protect her from now on. I knew that it was going to take a lot of strength to stay away from her, but I knew I had to so that she could be okay. I started to patch up the wall, and when I was finished I placed the putty knife and the nearly-full tub of spackle in the trash bag that was still sitting on the ground. I made my way to the kitchen, opened a beer and took a long swig. I leaned against the refrigerator and closed my eyes. The amount of strength that she had held us together for all of this time; I now needed the same amount to keep us apart.



Don't look. Don't you dare.
Don't think about
Red Balloons, either.
Did you look? Oh well.
May as well do both if
you were already doing one.

I am not your friend.
Let me make that
perfectly clear. I am not
on your side. Not ever.
I am a father, a god of all you do,
but I am not your friend.

Go ahead, look at me again.
Am I on your nervous wrist today,
or do I hide inside your pocket?
Why keep me there at all
if your eyes will only seek
me out sooner than later?

The Minute Hand Pokes You in the Eye While You Check the Time

Bobby Bolt

Or am I on the wall today?
Do you see me, because
I certainly see you.
I sit on high and watch you,
my loyal subject forever.
Look at my face, and I'll laugh in yours.

All slaves on their death-march
to eternity like count their steps.
And count you did.
You all counted, and always will.
A quantified misery is still
misery, after all.

Are you late? You often are.
Look closely, and see by how much.
Even closer now, look at the hands.
With what finger do they point?
Enough questions. You've somewhere to be,
And you only have so little of me.



10/1/14

My name is Dr. Michelle Singer. This record was created from recordings made during a three day session with Ben Whitling, 26, at my Lake Tranquil facility. The facility is a cabin designed and built to house both a patient and myself as well as providing therapeutic space in a safe and secluded environment. All recordings were made with the written consent of the patient.

The purpose of this record is to provide an insight into the work Mr. Whitling and I conducted from April 7-9 of this year, for further counseling of Mr. Whitling. This record is being provided to you at the request of Mr. Whitling.

*Thank you for your time.
-Dr. Michelle Singer*

A New Man

Cole Moriarty

Day 1. 12:30 P.M.

“First thing, I want you to know that this isn’t your fault.”

“Yes it is. How could it not be?”

“You were manipulated and lied to. No one is blaming you for what happened.”

“So are you trying to make me feel better by telling me that I’m not responsible because I’m so weak?”

“I think it would be helpful if you stopped thinking of it in terms of strength and weakness.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know that you don’t. That’s what we’re here to work on.”

“I don’t know that that’s true.”

“Why do you think we’re here then?”

“Because I’m radioactive.”

“Ben, you seem frustrated. I think maybe we should take some time so you feel more settled here. I want you to feel comfortable.”

“Whatever.”

“We can take as much time as we need to. How about an hour? We can come back sooner if you’d like.”

“An hour is fine. Am I allowed to go outside?”

“Absolutely, this isn’t a prison.”

1:04 P.M.

“Let’s talk about Abigail.”

“What about her?”

“She hurt you.”

“Abigail doesn’t have anything to do with what happened.”

“I realize that this isn’t easy Ben, we can take this as slowly as we need.”

“Ask me what you want to ask me.”

“How did you feel after she left you?”

“Angry.”

“Come on Ben.”

“I felt like I went through a trash compacter. It was awful, okay? I felt like shit.” “Is that when you met John Herrington?”

“No.”

“Tell me about John.”

“He was as smooth as a knife. I think the term is hyper-masculine.”

“So you thought of him as an alpha male.”

“Yeah, I guess. He was charismatic as hell.”

“Looking back, how do you feel?”

“About what?”

“About your first impression of him.”

“Sadness. Everything spiraled out of that moment. It makes me feel guilty.”

“Why guilty?”

“If I had kept my mouth shut, none of this would have happened.”

“What are you writing?”

“I’m writing that you don’t have perspective.”

“Fuck you.”

“That isn’t productive.”

“Neither is saying that I lack perspective.”

“What do you have a problem with?”

“You think I don’t have perspective, fuck you. I know exactly what happened and what I could have stopped. I could have saved all of them. If I had been a man, they’d all be alive right now.”

“You’re angry Ben.”

“Damn right I’m angry!”

“Who are you angry at?”

“Fuck this.”

“All right we’ll take a break.”

1:41 P.M.

Mr. Whitling and I walked the grounds near the lake.

“I apologize Ben. I think I should have leveled with you about what we’re trying to do here.”

“What are we trying to do here Dr. Singer?”

“Ben, what you’ve been through was awful. You’re going to have to live with it for the rest of your life. The reason we’re here is to get you on the right path. I want to help you to move past the shock you must be feeling. I want to help you live with the ghosts.”

“I hate that you aren’t dumb.”

“I know Ben. Please know that I do understand the magnitude of what I’m asking. I’m doing it for you.”

“Why?”

“You aren’t the only person to get fucked up Ben.”

“Then why do I feel so alone?”

“Ben, there are a lot of people who know what you feel like. But I’m not going to lie to you, there are a lot more people who don’t.”

“That’s depressing.”

“I’m not going to tell you what to think, but I do feel that the truth many not always be pleasant, but it is freeing.”

4:25 P.M.

“How much is the record label paying?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think its relevant Ben. I don’t do this for the money.”

“I just want to know how much it cost for someone to stay around me.”

“Ben, I’ve tried to be respectful of your feelings, all I ask is that you be respectful of mine.”

“So they’re paying you a lot. I’ll probably go broke paying people to stay around me.”

“Is that why you liked being around John?”

“Why do you only seem to want to talk about him?”

“Because you don’t. Ben, we’re going to have to talk about him.”

“I’m not convinced of that.”

“How can I convince you?”

“Excuse me?”

“How long do you think you can go without talking about him?”

“I’m not sure I ever have to talk about him. Is talking about him going to bring my friends back?”

“No Ben, but it’s time you started thinking about saving yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because if you didn’t want to survive you’d be dead already. You’ve made the decision already. That’s a good thing, Ben. But surviving doesn’t just come. I want you to have control over whether this destroys you or not.”

“I don’t think I’m ready.”

“That’s okay Ben. Why don’t you tell me about your band?”

“We have a name you know, t-shirts and everything.”

“I know Ben, I bought one of your albums. I thought it was pretty good.”

“Really? Which one?”

“Hazelnut Disco.”

“Well I’m glad you bought one of the good ones.”

6:42 P.M.

“Do you mind if I ask who you were talking to on the phone?”

“Just this girl I know, why?”

“You seemed very relaxed talking to her.”

“Yeah. I can be myself around her.”

“That’s no small thing Ben.”

“No, I guess not.”

“Tell me about her.”

“She’s a singer in a band out in Chicago. We got drunk backstage once. It was a few years ago, before we got big. I lost touch with her for a while. She reached out to me actually. I’m not sure how, but I got a call from her after I’d been back for a few weeks.”

“When’s the last time you saw her?”

“I haven’t seen her since that gig.”

*Because if you didn’t want to survive
you’d be dead already.*

“Can I give you a piece of advice?”

“Isn’t that what you’re getting paid to do?”

“When we get done here, however long that may take, you should go out and see her.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Ben, you’re not going just for her. Standing in a different city can tell you a lot about yourself.”

“That makes sense I guess.”

“I don’t want to sound alarmist Ben, but I think you’ll find that the desire to be around people who understand what you’ve been through will become quite powerful.”

“So I should just get on a plane and meet some chick I got drunk with a few years ago?”

“Yes, if that chick is one of the few people who is actively seeking you out when everyone else in your life is running away.”

“That’s harsh.”

“No, it’s honest. Ben, I’m not saying that you’re going to marry this girl, but you have a chance to meet someone new, someone who isn’t judging you for who you might have been in the past. I think that’s worth pursuing. Again, this is just my advice.”

“Why would I want to subject someone to me?”

“I’m not going to bullshit you Ben, you’re going to hate yourself for a while. You will do things that are self-destructive. Weather someone can stand you isn’t really something you decide. You should be honest with her, but she’s going to decide for herself weather she wants to be subjected to you.”

“What if she leaves?”

“Then she leaves. I think the question is whether you are willing to take the risk by asking her to stay.”

“Do you think she’ll stay?”

“I don’t know Ben. But I’ll tell you what, there is only one way to find out. It might hurt if she says no, but regret is just as powerful.”

“This got a bit heavy.”



Day 2 10:17 A.M.

“I’m not scared as much as I am depressed.”

“Why is that?”

“Because of how much is wrong with me.”

“What do you think is wrong with you?”

“I’m angry and pissy and I throw tantrums. I barely sleep at night. I hate other people being happy because I can’t feel it. I feel like I’m a corrosive asshole who destroys everyone around me. I feel like everyone I love abandons me.”

“I know that wasn’t easy to say Ben. You have a remarkable ability to articulate how you feel.”

“That doesn’t seem to be much help.”

“It does help Ben. Giving voice to your feelings is incredibly important. Knowing something and saying it out loud are different things.”

“I guess.”

“Ben, I’ve been doing this for a while. I know the difference between acute and prolonged trauma.”

“So watching my friends die wasn’t traumatic enough? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Ben, I don’t think I’ve said that. I don’t think you believe that’s what I said either. I know this is difficult Ben.”

“Ah fuck.”

“What I’m trying to communicate is that you have been through both prolonged and acute trauma. They both manifest themselves in different ways. If you don’t want to talk about John, then we need to talk about the other people who hurt you.”

“Who?”

“Sarah, Emily and all the others.”

“They’re gone.”

“Yes. But they also hurt you. You keep referring to them as your friends, Ben I don’t think they were.”

“How the fuck would you know?”

“I don’t know, not with any certainty. But from where I’m sitting, they look like people who were recruited. They choose John over you. They were wrong, Ben, but I don’t think it makes it hurt any less.”

“Whatever.”

“Please don’t do that Ben.”

“What?”

“Please don’t check out. This is difficult. This is also important.”

“Why are you so adamant on me reliving everything?”

“Ben, we don’t have control over what we remember. The only thing we have control over is whether we choose to make peace with our memories. You may never be comfortable with the ghosts you may live with for the rest of your life. But what I’m trying to help you to do is to help you keep those memories from eating away at your soul.”

“Nothing can stop that now.”

“You can Ben, you can stop it.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s very easy to think that you can’t do anything. There is a difference between living with scars and letting yourself become a shell of who you are right now.”

“I’m too fucked up.”

“Damn it Ben. I have dedicated my life to helping fucked up people. Do you know what I’ve learned?”

“What?”

“There is no such thing as too fucked up, there is just fucked up. It does not matter how much trauma you’ve been through, work and time will make it better. You may not fully heal, but you will learn to live with yourself. Deciding to be better is the first step.”

“But why do I have to open up all these wounds to do that?”

“Because we need to know where they are. We need to fully acknowledge that they exist.”

“I want to. But I don’t know if I can.”

“All right Ben, let’s try something else. Why don’t you take a few hours, maybe take a walk, and write down you feel.”

3:51 P.M.

“Do I have to show you what I wrote?”

“Only if you want to.”

“I’d rather not.”

“I understand. I don’t want you to have to show me anything you don’t feel comfortable sharing me.”

“Thank you.”

“So what would you like to talk about?”

“You said earlier that they weren’t my friends.”

“Ben-”

“No, I understand that they hurt me, I just don’t understand why that means they weren’t my friends. They made some bad choices, but I do believe that they cared about me.”

“That’s a very mature observations.”

“I don’t understand why they did what they did though.”

“Ben, I’ve read everything I could, but all I know are the basic facts. You’re going to have to fill me in on the details.”

“Fuck. All right.”

“What don’t you understand Ben?”

“When everything was going good, it was like a family. I loved Sarah and Emily like they were my sisters, you know? Not romantic, but I loved them. I guess that’s something I can’t let go of. We went to this diner, I guess it must have been L.A., and we got food and someone bought a few bottles of Jack Daniels and we just got drunk off our asses. It was before all the heavy stuff. And it was just fun. We were all happy. We talked about going to Canada to play in the snow. It was just a perfect moment.”

“Is that memory what you’ve been holding on to?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me about what happened when it started getting heavy.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Tell me about Sarah and Emily.”

“They were sisters. Beautiful, just gorgeous. Both of them. They were there before I was there. I don’t think I would have joined if they hadn’t been there.”

“What drew you to them?”

“They were so damn smart. I’m a fairly intelligent person, but they were just so quick. It felt like they knew everything.”

“Is that why you brought them to the studio?”

“So you know about that. Look, in my line of work, there are a lot of people who will tell you how smart and perfect you are. I trusted them, so yeah, I fucking brought them to the goddamn studio.”

“I’m not judging you Ben. I just want to understand.”

“Yeah, ok. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. Please continue.”

“Ok. But yeah, they were so talented. They’re the ones who were always making the paintings John was selling to keep the house afloat.”

“They didn’t ask you for money?”

“No. I always thought that was weird, because I would have given it to them.”

“Do you know why they didn’t ask?”

“They said that the house should be able to be self-sufficient. They expected me to help out whenever we were selling something, but they didn’t want outside money from anyone. I guess looking back, if they had asked me for money, I wouldn’t have stuck around very long.”

“Why is that?”

“Everyone asks for money. You get kind of sick of it. I’ve been cynical about that kind of shit for a long while.”

“That’s fair. I’m guessing that they hurt you very badly.”

“They were just gone. In the wind.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When it got heavy, I stopped seeing them. They’d leave if I walked into a room. They turned their back on me. Complete radio silence.”

“That must have hurt.”

“You bet.”

“Did they ever say anything to you?”

“A few nights before it happened, I went out for a cigarette. Emily was out there. We just stood around for a few minutes smoking, and just as she was about to finish, she turned and looked me in the eyes for the first time in months.”

“Did she say anything?”

“She just said ‘I’m sorry. We still love you, but we were trying to push you away. You need to get the hell out of here while you still can. You can’t save us.’”

“Is that when you left?”

“Yeah. I didn’t mean to leave forever, but I needed to clear my head. God, it was like seeing a ghost.”

“That must have been difficult to live with.”

“Like you have any fucking idea.”

“I do, Ben.”

9:07 P.M.

“-Like I’m going to die.”

“Please slow down. Have a seat. What’s upsetting you?”

“I can’t close my eyes without seeing them.”

“Who?”

“All of them. John, Sarah, Emily, Jenny, Daniel, William. I can’t fucking think straight.”

“Ben, are you sure you want to talk?”

“No. I’m not sure of anything.”

“Okay. First things first, breathe. Ben, deep breaths.”

“Why can’t I get ahold of myself?”

“It’s not your fault Ben.”

“Yes it is! Don’t you understand?”

“No Ben, I don’t.”

“Then you’re fucking useless. I hate this place! Ahhh!”

“It’s going to be all right.”

“Stop fucking saying that! Fuck you!”

“Talk to me Ben.”

“What?”

“Tell me about John.”

“What the hell do you care?”

“I care about you Ben.”

“Why won’t you leave me alone?”

“Because I’m not scared of you Ben.”

“I could beat the shit out of you.”

“No, you couldn’t Ben.”

“Go away.”

“I don’t believe that that’s what you want.”

“How many times do I have to tell you to go fuck yourself before you get it through your head?”

“You came to me Ben.”

“A moment of weakness.”

“I think it was a moment of strength.”

“Huh?”

“It took a lot of guts to come to me. I know what this feels like Ben. I know that you’re trying to push me away before I reject you. But I won’t reject you Ben.”

“Don’t give me anymore bullshit.”

“This isn’t bullshit. I’m making a choice to stay. This isn’t easy. I’m not a fucking robot. But I recognize hurt.”

“You really should leave.”

“Why? So you can prove to yourself that you’re worthless? That you can prove that you don’t deserve to live? I won’t let you push me away because you’re scared.”

“What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“You got hurt Ben. You got hurt by people that you loved. You’ve seen horrible things.”

“Doesn’t that make me a horrible person?”

“It doesn’t have to. You don’t have to be controlled by the places you’ve been and the things you’ve seen.”

“I can’t seem to wake up.”

“You will. One day, you’ll wake up and you’ll touch the scars and it won’t destroy you. It might hurt, hell it might fuck you up for a while, but you’ll put it back in the box and keep going.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?”

“Ben, I’m telling you were you’ll be. I hope you know that doesn’t mean I don’t accept who you are.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“I’m not going anywhere Ben.”

“I feel like there’s a weight in my chest.”

“Have you seen Lawrence of Arabia?”

“That old Peter O’toole movie?”

“Yeah. You ever see it?”

“Years ago.”

“There’s a scene where he holds his hand over an open flame.”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

“The trick, Ben Whitling, is not to mind.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Focus on the hurt. Focus on the vulnerability. You have a right to feel this way. Be here, in this moment, and choose not to mind that it hurts.”

“That doesn’t make it stop hurting.”

“No it doesn’t. You can handle the hurt, you can survive it, if you can separate all the other stuff. You don’t have to feel ashamed, or afraid, or doomed. If you need to think about those things, they can wait until tomorrow. The world isn’t ending tonight.”

“It feels like it is.”

“Yeah, it does. The night can be scary. You don’t have to be alone with the ghosts though.”

“That helps.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

“What now?”

“Would you like to take a walk?”

“I don’t think I can do that. I could go for smoke though.”

“I can stand with you if you’d like.”

“Okay.”

9:19 P.M.

“The sky is beautiful tonight.”

“Helps doesn’t it.”

“What does?”

“Looking at something beautiful.”

“Yeah. It does help. Is this what my life will be like?”

“Sometime. But it won’t always be night like this.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“So do I.”

9:55 P.M.

“I’m sorry Ben, what did you say?”

“I want to talk about John.”

“Are you sure? We’ve done a lot.”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay Ben, I’m listening.”

“He was my father and my brother. I’ve never loved another man besides him.”

“You must have been very close to him.”

“I was. For two years, he was the man with the answers.”

“What changed?”

“I stopped buying that answers he was selling.”

“Why?”

“He wanted me to kill someone.”

“What?”

“I came to the house one night. There was a car I didn’t recognize. I walked in and he found me. He was sweating and nervous. He took me to the basement. There was a man there, he had a hood over his head. He was bleeding out. John held out a gun and told me to shoot him, he told me was dead anyway, that I would just be releasing him from his pain.”

“What did you do?”

“I ran the fuck out of there.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

“I loved these people Dr. Singer.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“I don’t know why I trust you.”

“You have my word, Ben.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what happened.”

“Did it ever happen again?”

“No. I think they got scared. But afterwards I realized they’d done it before. I thought about going to the cops but I didn’t have any proof. And they were my fucking family. Two weeks later they were dead.”

“So this was two months ago?”

*There was a man
there, he had a
hood over his head.
He was bleeding
out. John held out a
gun and told me to
shoot him*

“Yeah, I guess. It feels like two days.”

“You didn’t kill him Ben.”

“No, but I didn’t save him.”

“You’re right. You didn’t. You didn’t save him because you couldn’t save him. He was dead the moment they put a hood over his head. You chose to survive. There is no fault in surviving.”

“I’m not sure.”

“I’ve worked with Iraq and Afghanistan vets. They’ve talked about watching people die and not being able to do a damn thing about it.”

“How’d they live with it?”

“They accepted the truth. You can’t save everyone. It’s not your job to die to save a dead man.”

“That’s harsh.”

“I don’t want to save you Ben, but I feel I have to be honest. Sometime there are only harsh truth’s to cling to. And sometime they’re the difference between living and dying.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m done for the night.”

“You sure? Will you be all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Ben, look at me, can I trust you to be safe tonight?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell me the truth.”

“I’ll survive tonight.”

“Okay Ben.”

*You didn’t kill him Ben...
You chose to survive. There is no
fault in surviving.*



Day 3 9:30 A.M.

“Did you sleep all right?”

“It took me a little while, but yeah, I did.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Before we talk about that. I want to say thank you for dealing with me last night.”

“You’re welcome Ben. You don’t have to deal with this alone.”

“I will though.”

“Why do you say that?”

“We’ll get done here, and then who the fuck will deal with me?”

“You see this Ben? Do you know why I keep it on me? Because my clients can call me whenever they need to. Our relationship ends when you choose to end it, not before.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I usually don’t bring it up until a client leaves here. I don’t want them using it as an excuse to not talk about things we ought to talk about.”

“So why are you telling me?”

“Because you asked and because after last night I don’t think you fit in that category.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“I suppose it is. Ben, I still have questions.”

“About what?”

“You haven’t talked about the night of the fire yet.”

“I don’t think about it a lot. Compared to everything else, it doesn’t seem real.”

“Bullshit.”

“What?”

“Ben, you told me that you loved these people. You chose not to go to the authorities because of that love. I find it difficult to believe that you could have watched them die and not have been affected.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

“You knew they were in the house?”

“Yes.”

“How intense was the fire when you got there?”

“They were dead. I knew they were dead.”

“The police report said you had burns, and that the firefighters had to restrain you from running in.”

“How do you have the police reports?”

“I’m well connected. Please answer my question.”

“I’m not sure how.”

“What were you feeling?”

“Shame I guess. Anger too. It felt like I’d gotten beat up. Like someone punched me in the gut. Fuck that sounds clichéd. I just felt like I was being pulled into the house.”

“How do you feel about it now?”

“I don’t know. I just fucking don’t know.”

“You don’t think about it a lot, don’t you?”

“Every time I close my eyes.”

“How did you know to go to the house that night?”

“John left me a voicemail.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me they knew I had gone to the cops. He said they had all chosen to die rather than let themselves be captured. He said that I should come and watch what I had done.”

“There is something else, isn’t there?”

“Emily sent me a text.”

“What did it say?”

“Help.”

“Oh god Ben. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It isn’t yours either Ben. Please know that. This was the action of a deranged and violent man. This was not your fault.”

“I wish I could believe that.”

“I know it isn’t easy, Can I ask you to do something?”

“I guess.”

“Even if you aren’t able to accept that it isn’t your fault, please just try not judge yourself. This won’t settle in your head for a while. Wait until you are ready to judge yourself fairly.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Ben, I’m sorry. I think I’ve misstated what I meant.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“All I can tell you is that you should be kind to yourself.”

“Why would I deserve that?”

“Because Emily and Sarah wanted you to survive. They were willing to let you hate them so that you could live.”

“Fuck.”

“We don’t need to figure anything out right now.”

“Can we take a break?”

9:45 A.M.

“So now what doc?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve told you all my secrets. Does that mean we’re done now?”

“I truly wish that was all we needed to do, for your sake Ben.”

“So what do we talk about now?”

“Did you like the person you were before you met John?”

“I did at the time. Now though, I can’t stand the thought of who I was.”

“I can understand that. The question becomes, who do you want to be?”

“Someone who doesn’t watch people die.”

“That’s noble Ben. I think that is certainly something you and I can work towards. But I was hoping we could try and start small, if that’s okay with you.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. I guess I want to feel like I’m in control of my life.”

“Okay, let’s explore that. Can you think of anything that would give you a sense of control?”

“No.”

“Can I ask you what your living arrangements are? Back in the world.”

“I’ve been living with Billy since the fire.”

“Billy is your bandmate, correct?”

“Yeah. I needed to be around someone I trusted.”

“Do you have your own place?”

“No. I sold mine when I moved into the house.”

“Are you comfortable going back there?”

“Are you saying I should go somewhere else?”

“Only if you want to. Sometimes having control of one’s living arrangements goes a long way towards making a person feel safe.”

“Let’s assume I want to move out. What would be the best way to do it?”

“Personally, I think I would find a hotel room somewhere and take a few days before I told anyone I was back.”

“Could I get away with that?”

“Sure. I’m not going to tell anyone you aren’t here. I’m the one who contracted the car service so they won’t tell anyone either.”

“Do you think I’d be safe?”

“Do you think you’d be safe? I think you’re the only one who can answer that question.”

“Yeah, that’s fair. I think I’ll be okay.”

“You can always call me if you feel in trouble.”

“Is this how my life goes from now on?”

“Yeah, basically. With time and work though, the good days start to outnumber the bad.”

“I think that’s the first time I’m sure I believe you.”

“I’m glad to hear it Ben.”

“We’re done here, aren’t we?”

“Would you like to be? We don’t have to end until you want to.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“It’ll take a few hours to get everything arranged, so if you want to take some time to yourself and enjoy the scenery, please feel free. We can always start again if you change your mind.”

6:17 P.M. (Phone conversation)

“Is everything all right Ben?”

“Yeah, doc, I’m okay. I just wanted to call and say thank you, for everything.”

“It has been a privilege working with you Ben.”

“I’m taking your advice doc.”

“Which advice is that?”

“I’m about to get on a plane to Chicago. She’s meeting me at the airport.”

“That’s wonderful news Ben.”

“Anyways, I wanted to let you know that I’m doing okay.”

“Hey, Ben, you’re going to make it through this.”

“Thanks doc.”

“Take care Ben.”

“You too doc. I’ll see you when I see you.” ✦

At the shopping quarters of Bandra, women dressed in saris carry woven baskets on their heads, stopping to buy their Sunday vegetables. Potatoes, onions, and spinach rest on grain sacks laid out like table runners on the dusty earth. There are stands of knock-off perfumes and wood carvings of the elephant god. From a distance, I hear the late September dogs.

"I'm buying you a silk sari," he says. "You'll look stunning in it."

"I wouldn't have the occasion to wear it," I say.

"When you wish to think of me, you will wear it."

"You mustn't be silly, Sanjay. We are colleagues, and besides, I am much older than you are. You forget I'm married."

"And you forget I'm not."

Back home, my husband Alex is at Brothers Lounge with bottles of Amstel and a stack of keno tickets. Later, he will reheat Chinese take-out, a rerun of SNL on the TV. The day would fade into another, routinely, tediously. As with all matters of our life.

"Come," Sanjay says. "I want to show you another place."

By rickshaw, we reach the high valley of Lonavla at twilight. The lakes and trees below resemble streaks of sapphire and emerald on a watercolor canvas. I sit close to the cliff's edge. Sanjay sits next to me, his brown legs dangling.

"Which one is your favorite?" Sanjay asks of my hobby, a small art collection.

"The Ballet Rehearsal on Stage."

"Why that one?"

"All of the excitement, and the dancers are free with nothing but air between them. They spin and twirl, with every step evolving into something bigger, greater, something worthwhile." Ahead, a rainbow bounces off the water, a curtain of dazzling color.

"Look at me," he says. Sanjay carefully lifts the fabric of my skirt and places his hand on my bare thigh.

The Sari

Sue Maresch

It ought to have been simple to turn my eyes to him, yet I could not have felt more nervous if I'd stood alone on a dance stage with all of India watching.

"Your eyes are even more amazing in this light," he says. "You're foolish," I reply.

I close my eyes as the fragrant scent of night-flowering jasmine fills the air. Sanjay moves closer to me, and I feel the warmth of his skin. My shoulders sag when he kisses me, and I feel a long forgotten stir in my loins. I am light. Free. When I open my eyes, I see moisture glistening on his lips.

Weeks pass. Alex snores on the couch after watching Sunday football. While hanging his laundered polos in the bedroom closet, I stare at the garment box in the corner like a child feverishly looking through the glass panes at a toy shop. As I open the box, I see the luster of the hand-woven silk, feel it smoothly drape over my shoulders, around my waist.

In the mirror, I begin to twirl like the ballerinas in the Degas painting.



Outside the sun sets, hues of burnt orange, golden
yellow streak
through crooked slits of the broken blinds.
But beauty never looked so hopeless, so empty.

With a heavy head I sit,
shrouded by the disgruntled hope that your chocolate
eyes
will crinkle at me again

As the dim, flickering lights cast a gray shadow on me,
dust fills my eyes, feeble splashes of salty water fall
past my cheeks, onto the rim of my mug.

Hands shaking, lips quivering, eyes tightly shut.
The constant, nagging feeling of pain tugging
harshly on my hands, pulling me further into my pit of
misery.

Faint sounds whisper through the empty room,
the gentle, cool breeze brushes by, chilling
my hands, and I grip the mug tighter for another ounce
of warmth.

It didn't sink in at first. I told them it was impossible,
you were strong, healthy...nothing could stop you,
and as days go by, I can't help but wonder how you're
doing.

Across the side of the mug
reads words scrawled in your writing,
telling lies about the future, a future you're not a part of.

Each day spent together was a gift,
until you were taken away. I grip the handle of my mug
tightly, swallowing the tears that threatened to fall, and
let out a hopeless sigh.

Here lies the shattered glass of our memories, tangled
amongst the lies and corruption
of our shattered past.



Shattered Glass

Rija Khan

I have many names.
With my people it is the same,
Some of them common, some of them plain:
 Human being,
 Woodland tribe,
 Desert dwellers,
And inhabitants of the plains.

But the name I can't explain
Is the one that causes pain;
I am called it all the same.

It is the name by which
Those who hurt us rationalize their disdain:
 Indian Removal,
 Indian Wars,
 Indian fighter,
 Indian giver,
 Indian Affairs.

I don't want to be called Indian anymore.
 I am Cherokee,
 I am Blackfoot,
I am a Child of the Living God,
And my name under heaven
is "Standing Sycamore." ✦

Standing Sycamore

Timothy Nelson

Then She Burned

(1st place, winter contest)

Jaelyn Williams

My tulpa sat on her pedestal
her eyes bore too deep into mine,
a window into my desired soul.
I saw all that she could be,
and then I watched her burn.
She was a concept
I was in love with.
But no matter how hard I tried to transform,
I could not attain her.
The ideal was tied hands behind her
to a pole, like a witch.
Were I better,
I would save her.
were I wiser,
I would run.
There is shame in such denial.
It occurred to me then
as her pieces crumbled,
maybe she never existed at all.



There's a green light shining in the fog
 that makes its presence known
 when the edges of a thought converge
 and quietly atone—

a nightmarish glowing beacon
 that will not dim or die—
 and it glares from the distance
 like an omnipresent eye.

There's a green light shining in the fog,
 impossible to reach,
 and blotting out that light is
 but a story that we teach—

a fantasy, a pipe dream,
 a denial of reality—
 instead we all must deal
 with this abnormality.

There's a green light shining in the fog,
 that ever-present glow.
 Not just there to alert you,
 and it's not at all for show.

It shines through both day and night,
 and it's hard to ignore,
 for it takes you out of everything
 and all that came before.

And still, when it's all disappeared:
 psychopaths and racketeers,
 disturbance, noise that interferes,
 machinery and engineers,
 bones destroyed between two gears,
 hatred, spite that perseveres—

—there's a green light shining in the fog,
 and you can try to push it down.
 But when that faint glow is all you know
 You might as well have drowned.



The Stare

Brendan McRae

Once upon a fateful story
Good and Evil fought for glory.
Their battle, so grand, was forever set in time
By bounded word and gilded spine.
Yet Evil was not dead, only asleep
And now it has begun its awakening creep.
If those darkened in hearts do prevail
Then it's a world of sorrow we shall hail.
In this hour of their need,
Won't the heroes please proceed?

Around the corner Midnight's haunting
To save the day, where's Prince Charming?
In their absence I must try
To set these tales true and right.
So as I tremble with every word
I pray my advice will be heard.

"Run don't walk. The wolf is prowling.
Can't you hear his stomach growling?"
Wider, wider his eyes grow
And with hunger doth his teeth show.
With a pounce, and one big bite
Her life is gone and out of sight.
It's tragic to hear of a rhyme
About a hood cloaked in blood once upon a time.

"Stop! Can't you see the apple's tainted
By the Queen whom thy is so hated."
And with that one dreadful bite
One so fair is now one lost of might.
Skin that was once white as snow
Now the color of death is all it can show.

Third time's the charm, I pray to thee
That I can guide these victims to safety.

"Don't be deceived by a house so sweet
Or it's a bitter end your life will meet.
I know those walls are good to taste
But both of you must make with haste.
Quit eating. Can't you see that's her plan,

The Story Keeper

Annette Wright

To cook you both in a baking pan.”
Now you’re too plump to run away
And into her oven you will stay.

Now all of their fates are sealed and done.
Where have all the good endings gone?
Despair and Depression is all around,
For Innocence has lost and Evil rules the ground.
Have all my efforts been for naught?
As now no stories of hope can be taught.

But wait, there’s more. Can’t you hear?
A whisper of help echoes through the air.
What was lost, was only astray
As the ending struggles to find its way.
Hurry, it’s not too late
To save them all from their fate.
But for them to escape from their slumbering cell
They need your Faith to ring out like a bell.
Hope that the morals of what Fairy Tales teach
Won’t be lost forever and out of reach.

“Careful what you believe from that cat’s smile
For deceit is the nature of the Cheshire.
Keep going, the rabbit hole almost near
Don’t let those shouts stall you with fear.”

“Off with her head,” they’re screaming at you
But it’s too late, you’ve made it through.

Now children can be snuggled safely into bed
Knowing that the villain’s desires are forever dead.
As the story pieces come together,
There can now be a Happily Ever After. ✦

I undress the banana as the dog looks on with an opportunistic hunger. It eyes the banana. Then me. Banana. Me. Back and forth until it steadies her light brown eyes into my own. I realize my dog is gone. Just another daydream vanishing.

I look away, tossing aside the banana peel and droop my shoulders in tiresome defeat. I can feel my eyes are half closed now. I want nothing more than to fall asleep. I feel stuck. Stuck in terminal 7 of an empty and soundless international airport, my flight forever delayed. Not canceled, but continually delayed and fostering false hope for any arrival and return to home.

I miss home. I miss a lot of things. I try to recall what home is, what it felt like, but I just come up with vague and opaque images. I think of her. Before she moved away. I remember when she told me she loved me, but it was too late for us. We never stood a chance. Bad timing. My life in a nutshell.

Maybe I never had a home. I hope this is just a dream, but I know it's not. I let out a sigh. That's all that I seem to be doing lately.

I look up at the board of flight schedules. The arrangement of red letters and numbers indicate everyone here is stranded, except that I'm by myself. I'm everyone and everyone is alone.

I let my eyelids come closer together. They nearly meet each other when I hear someone's voice crack through the PA system, "We are sorry to inform travelers that all flights have been delayed until further notice. Please return tomorrow morning at 10 a.m. so that our customer service representatives can assist you to the best of our abilities. Sorry for the inconvenience and thank you for choosing..."

Stuck in Terminal 7

David P. Garvey

I sigh and stand up. I'm so tired I feel weightless and void of energy. I don't know how I'm awake and semi-functioning. I see the flickering red exit sign hanging above the door. My bag is slumped over my shoulder, tilting me to one side. I make my way to the exit.

Each step seems both like a triumph and defeat. Triumph because I'm still moving forward, defeat because I wonder how much a man can take. The door opens by itself; at least it recognizes I'm important. A cab sits by the edge of the curb with the exhaust pipe billowing out heat.

I knock on the window and the driver motions me to get inside. I climb into the backseat, set my bag down, and lean my head back onto the headrest. Heat, warmth, cozy. This is the best I've felt, maybe the best I've ever felt I tell myself. I find it strange that this comforts me, but I embrace it.

"Where to?" the driver asks.

I mull it over for a minute.

"Home," I say as I close my eyes.

She pauses before she asks, "and where is that?"

"West."

I can tell she's confused, but I hear and feel the car leave the airport. I can tell we're driving faster now. I don't know what lies west, but that's okay for now. At least everyone is not alone.



I want to run away,
To feel the wind blow through my hair.
I don't know where I'm going,
But I can't seem to care.

To roam from place to place
From sea to shining sea,
Taking very few belongings,
Just my daughter and me.

To see the looming mountains
Covered thick with snow;
Or behold the beauty of the valley
That rests far below.

To feel the warmth of the sun
As my feet sink in the sand,
Walking along the beach
With my daughter hand in hand.

To view the sights and wonders
Of a new and distant land,
Appreciating every tree
And building where it stands.

Her eyes wide with wonder
As we roam from place to place,
To experience the world
With a smile upon her face.

So much there to see and do
And we must do it fast
For when we blink our eyes again,
Too much time has passed.

So, hold on tight to mommy's hand
Oh sweet child of mine,
And I promise with all my heart
That we will find the time. ✦

The Traveler

Salli Sullins

What if I open my mouth
and the whole world
falls out or falls in
this inexpressible love
I feel for you
I tremble but I'd never
resist your lips—
exploration
silence broken
tongues convoluted translating
needs unspoken
First sighs
then gasps
next grasps
now singing
Sings so loudly
Can't I quiet
What you've done?



What if I open my mouth

Nelida Ramirez

The lemon rays streak down, licking the awaiting masses
melting the world in their warmth
like so many Dali paintings.

Poised and penning amidst the lilacs and mums
inspiring even the royal horizons
on the canvas of pulp.

A cacophony of emeralds and rubies hums by flitting
from vibrant to vibrant on effervescent
and angelic wings.

Wing Whistle

Elyse Jennings

Immersed in the pureness of the dancing nectar sipper my
pen clatters to ground.

Skimming from perch to twig to roost on the air with unsullied
invisible and propelling limbs.

Attending his recurrent appointments at the rubicund dispenser,
needle confiscating the liqueur.

Away he retreats at the dusking of the long and prosperous
after speaking his thrill and trills – a juxtaposition
of piccolo and flute

The freeness and play of a careless afternoon spent conversing
with a dear comrade over a pint and
chatting up a bard.

Softly in bed is new direction for prose and inspiration
cascading forth as in the morn, with the sun I'll
await my new muse.



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