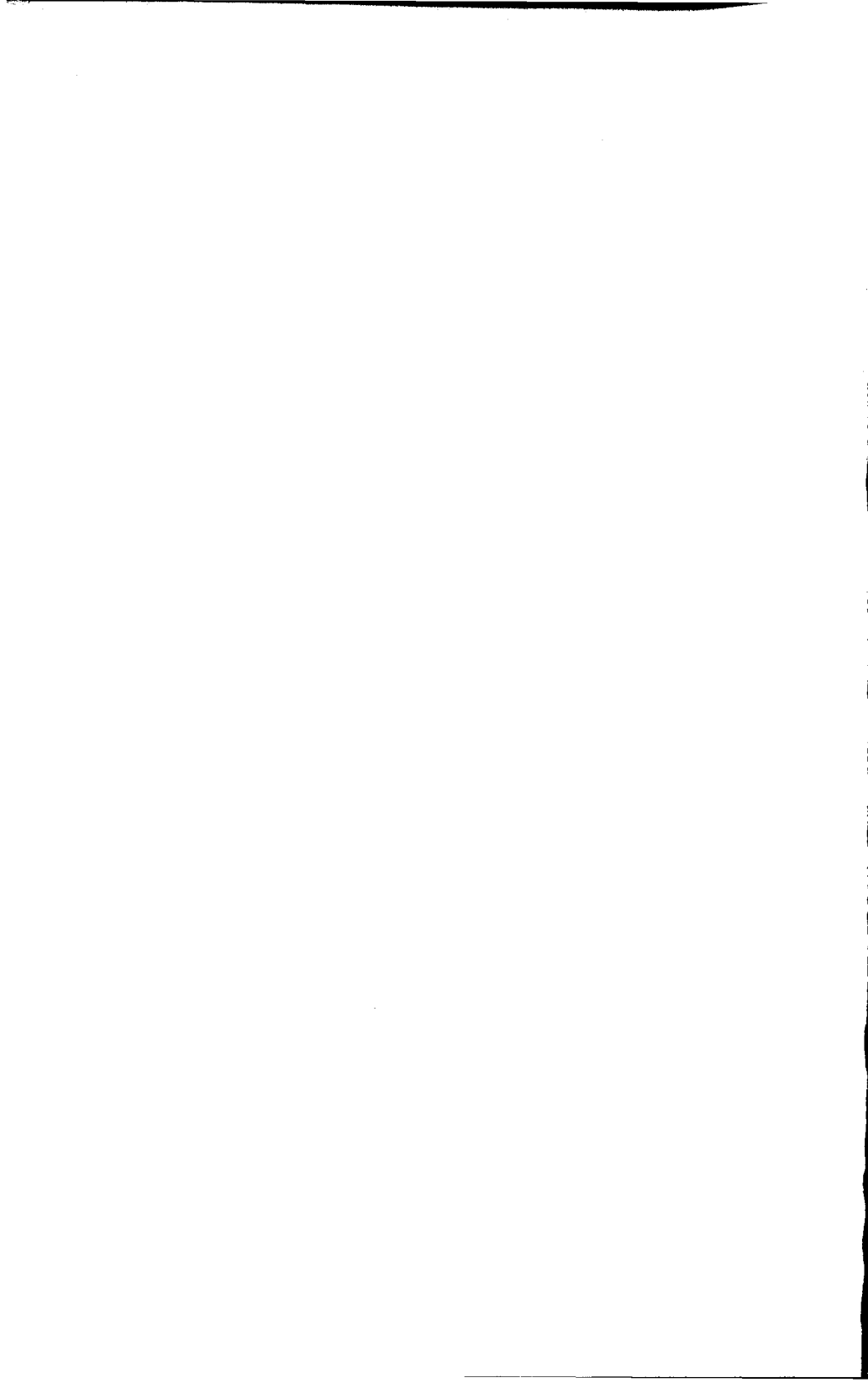


# Colors





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*Dedicated to Virginia Reeves*

## Legend of Colors

Anonymous

As in his shallow pan  
the prospector sifts the grey silt, filtering  
from the muddy sand and rubble  
the precious, golden  
flecks, the colors of his avid  
searching; so  
the authors of the following  
pages have aspired to distill  
from the drear and commonplace  
dross of raw reality and everyday  
experience of their colors, transmuted through  
literary experience into the gold of transcendent  
self-expression.

## Table of Contents

Dearest Uncle	
- Abigail Dolan.....	7
I Remember	
- Abigail Dolan.....	8
Woman of the Corn	
- Ali Everts.....	9
Zombies at Night	
- Ali Everts.....	12
Imaginary	
- Audrey Walker.....	13
Shroud	
- Bennet Long.....	15
An Ode to My Memories	
- Brett Charlton.....	15
Unplucked	
- Brett Charlton.....	17
Egg	
- Cassandra Offt.....	18
Playing at the World	
- Cassandra Offt.....	20
Daisy Petals	
- Cassie Drinkall.....	30
Ryan Gosling: An Ode to the Bathroom Stall	
- Connor Hague.....	31
Blood and Mascara	
- Connor Smith.....	34
Contracts with God	
- Doaa Mohaisen.....	43
The Bullet	
- Doaa Mohaisen.....	48
Turning 20	
- Doaa Mohaisen.....	51

1939	
- Valerie Do.....	54
Neptune	
- Valerie Do.....	55
Fred	
- Isabella Geraghty.....	56
Under the Big Sky	
- Kristina McGee.....	57
Time Never Stops	
- Kristina McGee.....	57
'I Cry at the End of Titanic' and Other Lies	
- Meghan Fellows.....	59
Follow Me	
- Meghan Fellows.....	61
Ghost Cat	
- Rhiannon Sturgess.....	71
Losing	
- Rhiannon Sturgess.....	72
Ben and Jerry's	
- Samantha Reed.....	83
Both Eyes Open	
- Samantha Reed.....	89
Solitude	
- Sarina Crews.....	92
If My Heart Was a Candle	
- Tommy Le.....	94
A Reasonable Price	
- Virginia Reeves.....	95
Su Corazón	
- William French.....	99

## Dearest Uncle

Abigail Dolan

My memories keep veering  
to Labor Day weekend. The lengthy phone calls leading  
up to it, ringing with promises of reunion. Hesitant  
I rightfully was in believing you were parting  
the city glory and flying home to me.

The night of your *supposed*  
arrival, I found myself slumped in the beaten  
rocking chair on the front porch. Shivering  
like an idiot in a fraying blanket. Plentiful  
attempts were made in showing ignorance  
to your tardiness. I counted  
the trees that lined the curved  
road, the stars that played peak-a-boo, and  
the times that you shamelessly  
lied to me and I shamelessly in believed you.

Hours treaded on, I pondered if  
my hope will last.  
Bobbing head, heavy eyelids, I was convinced  
you had found a more exciting adventure.

Your arms around my stiff body, gentle  
kiss on my forehead, the wait was worth it.

Holiday came and went, laughs drowned out  
the impending departure. You were beckoned  
to the skies once again. With a pact to return,

you walked away.

Another year passed and your phone  
now disconnected. Mother's in the kitchen,  
broke in a million pieces. Father lost a friend,  
but whiskey is holding his hand. Sister is shaken,  
screaming why and Brother is silently crying inside.

As for me,  
the rocking chair is where I'll be.

### **I Remember**

Abigail Dolan

	I remember
The night I didn't want to go home.	
	I remember
The night I made you pull into the empty parking lot.	
	I remember
The night where I couldn't remember if the stars were out due to your smile	
	I remember
The silent thumping of the rain failing	
	I remember
The warmth the palm of your hand had	
	I remember
Closing my eyes, not wanting time to pass	
	I remember
You punching my arm, turning toward me screaming the lyrics of your heart	
	I remember
My delay to join you because I didn't want to interrupt a wreck less masterpiece	

The strength of your force as you tugged me out of the car to dance  
I remember

Spinning in circles, round and round  
I remember

Dancing to the beat of your heart  
I remember

Coming home soaked listening to mother's tone of warning  
I remember

The sinking of my gut, knowing it wasn't going to last.  
I remember

Crying on the front steps  
I wish I didn't remember

YOU.

### **Woman of the Corn**

Ali Everts

How expensive is a taser?  
because the mace spray won't hold him off long  
and it's haunting my hands so that they shake like ghosts.  
Am I already a ghost? Am I already dead?  
Am I living in a horror movie?

Pop Pop.

One shot to the stomach.

One shot to the head.

Daddy, where are you now?

I don't think this is a mess you can get me out of.

Like all those times in high school,

you drove four hours to the city.

Found me beat up

And threatened to kill those guys.

Pop Pop.

One shot to the stomach.

One shot to the head.

Now, I climb mountains,

I retreat to nature,

I laugh and I feel unbreakable,

I pump iron til 2am,

I rip my outside so my insides won't show.

Pop Pop.

One shot to the stomach.

One shot to the head.

I run marathons.

I have two beautiful children.

I got married to superman.

Dressed up as a woman who is safe.

Pop Pop.

One shot to the stomach.

One shot to the head.

But that morning,  
Crash went the back door,  
heavy were his footsteps up the carpeted floor.

How expensive is a taser?  
because this mace spray in my hand won't hold him off long  
I'm already in so much debt.  
Oh dear, that's expensive.  
I guess the mace will have to do.  
I have always survived before.  
Dressed up as a woman who is safe.  
It always worked  
before.

He is whispering my name.  
But it's too loud and I run to the closet  
and it's haunting my hands so that they shake like useless daggers.

Pop Pop.  
One shot to the stomach.  
One shot to the head.

My girls.  
My two girls are safe with their dad.  
But, I can't help but cry  
and my tears drop like marbles  
must have been too loud,  
crashing against the floor.  
Because he heard me in the closet, in my bedroom.  
And my hands shook because the mace  
the mace was across the room.

And boots on the carpet stopped and

Pop Pop.

One shot to the stomach.

One shot to the head.

## **Zombies at Night**

Ali Everts

Night shift in the ER is moody.

She's magic with a lick of mischief.

She's cold and empty, moving at turtle speed with a clock's precision.

She guides people to her quiet, sad beds and promises she'll comfort them.

Women who eat batteries once a week, two AA's, three AAA's and one D.

Grandpa's who accidently give their allergic grandsons peanuts.

Zombie-grey men with liver disease who will die this winter.

Night shift winks her eye at the dad who can't deal with his teenage daughter and her talking back to her new step-mom.

So he brings her in and lies that she is suicidal.

And here comes mischief:

Bare feet slap faux wood floors, slap slap, slap slap...

A turning head sees the teenage daughter using leg muscles to sprint.

Wild-eyed nurses follow.

Words leave my lips and run into the phone's receiver, "Security".

Tears crawl like fast ants down her drenched cheeks.

Her brown hair hasn't been brushed today and her lips look bitten.

But Night makes her quick.

Bare feet slap all the way down the hall, to the clear double doors, make a different slap as they touch the sidewalk outside, sprint over the helipad, race across the grass, through the parking lot, across Highland Blvd. and finally touch prickly bumper crop fields.

Night shift, she fuels our adrenaline.

She has split-personality disorder.

One moment she's cool cucumber and the next,  
a redneck veteran wielding his shotgun at the doctor.

She pulls our eyes closed and opens them with fear.

But, eventually a head could turn in the opposite direction and see the teenage daughter hugging a wild eyed nurse, lined by security guards, bare feet slowly slapping the floor boards back to her room, back to her bed, back to heavy-eyed sleep, while girlfriends stroke their motorcycle-crazy boyfriend's head, three drunks snore softly, grandsons lay in their grandfather's arms and the sun makes a gentle rise above the mountains.

## **Imaginary**

Audrey Walker

I met you when imagination was just blooming,

A bubbling and dangerous landscape.

You created me out of the sticks and stones

in your mind, and we delved into the mystery.

We stormed castles and fought foul beasts,

a team unstoppable, unbreakable.

You ran through the park and the grass below your feet

turned into a grand field, a prince atop his noble steed.

I rode with you, right up to the shores of the vast unknown.  
Now, you were lost at sea, and there was only you and me.  
As the waves came crashing down, I told you to be strong.

We felt ourselves overcome by the dark, chilling waves,  
and when your head broke the surface of the water  
your mother told you to stop making such a mess in the tub.

I was there when you first boarded the school bus,  
fearful of the new, yellow monster that loomed outside.  
It was merely another beast to be slain, conquered  
just like the vengeful homework that threatened us.

But we shifted, the vast adventures were drawing to a close.  
There was no more room for you and me,  
and I knew it was for the best, for the future was counting on it.

I took your hand in the depths of your dreams,  
It was a struggle to smile past the knowing tears  
as we recounted the vivid memories that never happened.  
You will go, and you will grow stronger than any knight that ever was,  
this I am sure of.

Many years had passed before you had even bothered to pause,  
gazing into the bathroom mirror at your own aging reflection.  
Those eyes bore into the image staring back at you,  
And as you look deeper, searching fruitlessly,

You'll realize that I'm not even there.

## **Shroud**

Bennett Long

Can you taste the breath in the breeze,  
Sighing like two spirits loving?  
Ascending like saints to the skeletal trees,  
Where noble pines fade into nothing.

On their crowns gilt silver rain,  
A sea of fog which breathes abyss,  
Mouthing memory of some misten name,  
Every falling drop a kiss.

Rivers of sentiment nourish those trees,  
That line green blades well tread,  
They speak of foreign lands and seas,  
Where leads the path ahead.

## **An Ode to My Memories**

Brett Charlton

When blazing days of summer  
transformed into cool brisk nights,  
sitting under the starlit sky with my friends  
was all I longed for. To let out full-bellied laughs  
and not having a care in the world.  
Those are the times

I miss most. When our time  
was boundless and the summer  
beckoned for adventure. The world  
seemed simpler, nights  
no longer cut short, and laughs  
became louder. My friends

genuine and irreplaceable, were the friends  
I wanted by my side when times  
were burdensome. They could always make me laugh  
even when I knew summer  
was ending and we would have to spend our nights  
hundreds of miles apart. Our worlds

were changing. The world  
we knew was fading, and though we promised to remain friends,  
the thought of separation keeps me awake at night.  
I replay memories in my head of a time  
when we lived for summer,  
and I can still hear the echoes of our laughs.

I miss the sincerity of our boisterous laughs  
when the weight of the world  
wasn't on our shoulders, when school had just ended and summer  
was just beginning. When we could spend every day with our friends  
and not worry about being home on time  
because we had nowhere to be and could stay out all night.

Before we knew it, our last idle night  
had come and gone, our last laughs  
were shared, and it was our time

to face the real world  
and find new people to call friends.  
But never to forget memories forged during our last summer.

So here's to those nights and our ever changing world,  
to never ending laughs, my best friends  
and the good times still to come. Here's to next summer.

### **Unplucked**

Brett Charlton

It sits in the corner with six strings  
Never plucked,  
To its left a turntable on a blue stand  
Collecting dust,  
To the right, a tin hamper with trash needing  
Rid of.  
A black and white John Lennon poster  
Hangs above,  
With vibrant lights casting shadows on  
Her walls.  
Others see her supply of unused things  
Thinking her world is so small;  
They fail to look past the materials and see  
The fragments  
She hides. Her heart beaten and bruised, the

## Absence

Of normality has taken its toll. Her Mother  
Leaving home,  
Father struggling to stay afloat. Both beginning  
To face the unknown  
World of separation. A marriage now shattered  
Sending shards  
In all directions, slicing gashes into the  
Different parts  
Of their children's existence. Lives out of tune, from  
Love untouched,  
A guitar remains quietly in a corner with strings  
Unplucked.

## Egg

Cassandra Offt

A wide-eyed child takes a first breath of Spring  
as chirping birds fly on a backdrop of blue.  
She senses the germination of plants taking root  
beneath her readily freed and unmarred feet.  
By chance she spies in the whispering leaves  
a tangled knot of a bird's nest emerging  
  
from creation. With the help of the wind's further emerging,  
the girl's imagination is ignited. She is driven to spring  
forward with fervor and look up into the leaves,  
and beyond that into the highest canopy, painted blue.

But her next step is halted by something at her feet,  
an object tangled in the tree's mighty root

that would soon decay and help to feed the root  
of the tree from which it came. The truth emerging  
in her mind, she bends down to the thing sitting at her feet  
and in wonderment is sure such a treasure is only found in Spring.  
An oblong sphere with an outer coat of pale blue,  
this egg fell from its home in the treetop leaves

to join his brethren, as all in the trees must leave  
and in the season, take their own root,  
once again to grow and reach toward the blue.  
In the haste of youth to hurry the bird's emerging,  
the girl who holds such fragile life awaits it to spring  
to newly formed and untried feet

which will look different than her feet  
but connect them as his fall does to the leaves.  
So in her hurry, egg does break and bird does spring  
out, but a small yellow thing unready for emerging,  
with feet and beak and a single eye of brilliant blue,

unready to see the chance to fly into that blue  
sky high above him. She stands above but so near at her feet,  
as the truth that life, as well as death, are both emerging,  
and turning her eyes away, she leaves.

But in her youthful mind the image has taken root  
to change her view of life and death and Spring.

Finding herself ready for emerging she thought of the leaves

and eye and egg and sky of blue, changing the course of her feet from their root to find a new path upon which they could spring.

## **Playing at the World**

Cassandra Offt

Kendal watched his father put on the leather jacket that had hung on the second hook just inside the chain-locked front door. This was the third apartment he'd tried to call home in the last two years. Standing just behind the doorframe, Kendal watched his father straighten up his collar and snatch his keys off the table, shoving his phone into his back pocket. It had been the buzzing of his dad's phone that had brought Kendal out, a conditioned response at that sound.

"You leaving, Dad?" Kendal cleared his throat, trying to make his voice sound deeper.

Kendal stood with his shoulders back and his chin out. His dad paused, looking at the boy with a strange, distant gaze, that made his son squirm.

"Just for a little while," said his father.

Nodding slowly, Kendal rocked back onto his heels, his hands jammed deep into the pockets of his ragged jeans. They were his favorite pair he had worn as often as he could for as long as he could, and the cuffs were already above the top of his formerly white tennis shoes.

"Okay." Kendal nodded. "I'll take care of Josh."

"Good man." his father chewed the words before they were spoken. Putting his hand on Kendal's shoulder, his father nodded curtly. Their eyes, both a graying cadet-blue framed in dark lashes, held for a moment before Kendal's father took his hand away.

"See you soon, Dad." Kendal pressed his lips together in the firm line of steadfast determination he saw so often on his father's weathered face.

John Browning had once been handsome, but the years and his lifestyle had grayed his temples and his beard, cracked his skin with wrinkles and browned it with sun, and weighed down his shoulders so he didn't stand quite as tall as he used to. Without glancing back, he stepped out into the chilled, October night and breathed in the crispness of the raw air. Behind him, Kendal shut the door with a sharp thud and slid the chain quickly into place.

Kendal moved over to the window and gazed out as his father descended the steps and walked toward the car. It was old and well-loved, but his father wouldn't dare sell it. Too many memories, he told Kendal one day when asked about it. Kendal figured it was the same attachment that led Josh to hide his blue dinosaur in the back of his closet rather than let his father take the comfort object away.

Kendal turned and trod slowly down the dim hallway. On the wall to his right were five framed photographs they took with them to every apartment which were always hung up within the day they moved in. The first was a picture of himself at five, just after his little brother had been born, with a swaddled Josh lying in his arms. Kendal smiled at that one. The next was of him and his father, each holding an antler of a bloodied buck they'd killed together. It was from their first hunt, almost three years ago. His smile softened then, and he paused before moving onto the next one. That one had four people in it, the two boys in smaller versions of their father's black suit, and their mother in her favorite pink dress. Kendal stood in front of his father with Josh in their mother's lap. She was beautiful, which Kendal had always known without ever having to be told.

Next was his parents' wedding picture with a young couple under an arch of ivy and white roses, his father smiling with all his teeth as he hadn't for quite some time. His mother looked perfect in all white, and this is how he remembered her, even though he wasn't yet a thought when the photograph had captured that single moment. Kendal felt a sting in his eyes that he quickly blinked away, looking instead to the next picture. It was of himself in a pair of overalls when he wasn't even a year old, laughing with only a couple teeth peeking through his exposed gums.

Just past the wall splashed with memories was a door, gaping open with darkness inside. Kendal pushed it open a little more so that the shaft of light making its way from the kitchen fell onto the foot of the bed in the far corner. He could barely make out the bump of his little brother under the plain, gray comforter. Josh's chest slowly rose and fell in the easy, unhindered existence of sleep. It had only been a month since their father had permanently extinguished the nightlight that had always lit the brother's bedroom. Josh had fought it for the first few nights, lying awake for hours yet stubbornly refusing to cry, until John's will won out over that of his younger son's. The boys slept in darkness.

Kendal left the door where it was and walked quietly into the small living room opposite the dining room. The green and brown couch was new to them. Kendal had spotted it dumped on the sidewalk as he and his father drove past just after they'd moved into the new apartment, but the overstuffed chair was a familiar piece in their residences. Kicking off his tennis shoes, he slid into the chair and grabbed the remote off the wide arm. Kendal kicked up the footrest, watching television as the clock ticked away the seconds later and later into the night.

Kendal let the water fill up the bowl and spill over the edges, taking the remaining cereal flakes with it

"Why can't I have ice cream, Kendal?" Josh's high voice demanded from his seat at the small, dining room table.

Sighing, Kendal turned to his brother. "Because you already had Frosted Flakes. That's enough sugar and you know it."

Josh pouted and looked back at the bowl with a shallow pool of lukewarm milk and a couple saturated flakes. His older brother took up the dish and shoved it into the sink right next to the identical blue bowl. Kendal looked over at the clock on the microwave, the green numbers reading 9:23.

"When is Dad coming back?" asked Josh.

Kendal turned off the water. "Soon. Now go brush your teeth."

Josh caved under Kendal's early-morning, sterling gaze. The younger slid off his chair and padded off toward the bathroom. Kendal's shoulders drooped and he leaned against the counter. He'd stayed up too late the night before and he knew it; he'd known it the entire time, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to go to sleep. When Kendal had finally convinced himself to get in bed, he stayed up listening to Josh's breathing, strangely comforted by his little brother's presence.

"I'm done!" came Josh's voice as he darted back into the kitchen.

"That was like thirty seconds!" cried Kendal, looking to his brother's blank face.

Kendal sighed heavily and ruffled the brown curls of his brother's hair.

"Fine. Go watch some TV or something, okay?" Kendal instructed him.

Josh smiled brightly. "Are you going to come watch with me?"

“In a minute,” he gently pushed his brother by the shoulders toward the living room and Josh walked quickly away.

Kendal walked down the hall and past their bedroom. The next room was hemmed by a closed door with a gold doorknob, over which Kendal’s hand hovered for a second. He grabbed it firmly and Kendal swung the door open. Flicking on the light-switch, Kendal was blinded by the cool, fluorescent light which flooded the room as he stepped inside. It had only a single bed with corners perfectly tucked and a nightstand with a lamp, a couple books, and a half-empty glass of water.

Kendal sat down on the edge of the bed, careful not to undo the tucked sheets. He opened the second drawer and the first thing to catch his eye was a .45 handgun with a half-empty box of bullets beside it. Passing quickly over those, Kendal lifted up the King James’ Bible, aged by the years but not by use. Lodged between the yellowing pages that stuck together, somewhere in Psalms, he found what was searching for. It was a small picture from a polaroid camera, with an undeveloped ring of white around the edges. In the center of the frame was a bald woman in a hospital gown, with a big smile on her sallow face.

Setting the book aside, Kendal held the photograph lightly between his fingertips. He shook it a little, hoping that after all that time, more of the picture could show up. Kendal didn’t react when nothing new appeared in the place of the white edges, as the frame still infringed on the subject. He opened the Bible up again, the pages easily falling open to the broken place in the spine. As Kendal tucked the picture into the crook of the spine, he read some of the words.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me,” he heard echo in his head. The pastor had said that verse over the black coffin as they lowered it into the ground, and that image was burned in Kendal’s mind.

He rose slowly, walking out of the room, turning out the light and shutting the door quickly behind him. Kendal made his way toward the sound of Saturday morning cartoons and the lilting laughter of his little brother. The sight of Josh nearly doubled over with his fit of giggling as an animated cat chased an animated mouse made Kendal smile. Josh didn’t seem to notice his brother until Kendal walked in front of him and sat down in the armchair.

“That’s *Dad’s* spot!” cried Josh.

Kendal replied sharply, “Well Dad’s not here.”

Josh frowned, his little dark eyebrows knitting tightly together and Kendal let out a quick puff of air in response.

“It’s okay, Josh. It’ll be our little secret, okay?” Kendal offered his little brother a chance to conspire about something.

“Okay,” he nodded eagerly.

Kendal flicked his head at the screen as he leaned over the far side of the chair, grasping for one of the magazines his father kept for absent-minded reading. He pulled up one and thumbed it open to a random page, setting the house in a kind of ease of routine that settled him and his younger brother.

For the third time that hour, Kendal looked at the clock. It was 4:42 and he sat on the edge of the chair, his feet bouncing his leg up and down as his little brother scraped the bottom of his bowl with the spoon. The sound grated against his ears. Josh had wanted to eat at the coffee table in the living room, and after an argument that lasted longer than it took the microwave to heat the macaroni noodles, Kendal caved to his little brother’s wishes. All day had been like that. Josh didn’t want to shower or gather his laundry or do any of his schoolwork, and Kendal didn’t have the energy to make him. At first he tried to do things like they were done when their father was there, when his commanding voice would boom through all five rooms of the apartment, but it was no use. Kendal felt that dizzying spiral of being out of control that was strangely familiar.

As Josh took his last bite of the instant macaroni and cheese as Kendal glanced at the phone. But it hadn’t rung, and it didn’t ring. It never rang. His father’s cell phone would buzz at all hours of the day and night, and he would disappear, just like this time. But no one ever called on the landline at any of their recent apartments. Abruptly, Josh shoved his bowl away as he stood up and turned to walk out of the living room.

“Where are you going?” Kendal called after him.

“Bathroom!” Josh hollered as he rounded the corner at breakneck speed.

“Take your dishes to the skink!” cried Kendal, but there was no response.

Kendal stood slowly, groaning inwardly with mental exhaustion as he picked up his brother’s dirty dish. On his way to the kitchen, he saw out of the corner of his eye that Josh had

left the light on in their bedroom. Kendal set the bowl down in the sink, with the other two still left from earlier that day.

As he grabbed the dish soap from under the sink, he mumbled, "What's the use? They'll just be dirty again tomorrow."

He washed the dishes anyway, scrubbing them out with his fingers because he hadn't bothered to grab the scrubbing brush. Josh came walking back toward the living room and Kendal glanced over at him.

"Hey, can you turn off the light?" Kendal asked him.

His little brother blinked, then reached up to pull down the switch linked to the light above Kendal's head.

"Not this one," Kendal snapped. "Turn it back on!"

"Sorry," said Josh quietly, flicking it back on.

"The one in our bedroom. The one you left on earlier," Kendal grabbed a towel and started to dry one of the bowls.

"Okay," Josh replied, then disappeared from the doorway.

Kendal stacked the three washed and dried bowls in each other and put them up on the second shelf of the cupboard, the one he had to strain to reach. He dried the silverware and tossed them in the drawer to the left in their assorted pile. They had lost the plastic thing that separated the silverware by type in the last move, gone into some mythic, middle-space with Josh's blue tennis shoes and his father's gray tie. Kendal guessed that was where his missing red sock was as well, and the dog piece from the Monopoly game that had been gone over a year. Of course, Kendal had always been suspicious that Josh had done something with that one.

The drawer creaked on its rollers as Kendal shut it and walked toward the chained door. His backpack hung on the third hook, next to the empty one where his father's coat always hung, and the first one that had never had anything on it. He grabbed his brother's backpack as well and casually tossed both onto the kitchen table. Leaning back on his heels, Kendal called down the dark hallway to his brother. Though Josh had gone down to their room to turn off the light, he instead found something else that captured his attention for the moment.

Kendal unzipped his backpack and dug through the masses of papers until he found his science folder. Mrs. McKenzie had informed him that he needed to stay on top of his homework because his "lack of commitment out of class shows". That meant he was staring down a double-

sided page all about classifying rocks by size, color, shape, and various other physical properties. He started to draw lines matching certain drawings to other properties when his little brother sauntered in with action figure in each hand.

"It's time to do homework," Kendal said when he spotted his brother's toys.

"But I want to play," pouted Josh.

"Sorry," Kendal shrugged. "I'll help you with your homework, but you've got to get it done. You know how Dad got the last time your teacher asked to see him because you weren't doing your homework."

Josh frowned but climbed up into the chair adjacent to his brother's. His words had been no idle threat, and Kendal knew they would move his brother to action. Kendal kept one eye on him as he opened his backpack and the other eye on his work as he moved to the second section. That called for him to define each type of rock: sedimentary, metamorphic, and igneous. Scribbling something about sand and dirt for sedimentary, Kendal watched Josh remove his only folder from its place in his Batman backpack. Kendal looked at his brother incredulously as Josh yanked all the papers from the side labeled "Leave Home" in a writing that was most certainly not Josh's. Josh shoved the stack to the center of the table.

"What's that?" asked Kendal, pointing to an orange slip of paper sticking out of the other side of the folder, the side marked "Bring Back".

"It's for the field trip on Friday. Dad has to sign it," Josh informed him.

"Well give it to me," Kendal held out his hand.

Josh obeyed. Kendal could feel Josh's eyes on him carefully as he grabbed a pen, made a few strokes, and handed the paper back. The signature on the given line wasn't a perfect likeness of their father's, but Kendal smiled with pride anyway. It was close enough.

"You didn't even read it," Josh mumbled as he shoved it back in his folder.

"You get to go on the field trip now, don't you?" Kendal demanded. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

Josh shrugged silently, fixing his eyes on his page of subtraction problems, as Kendal started to group pictures of rocks together by property.

There wasn't much of a view out the window of the kitchen since the perpendicular row of apartments took up most of the frame, but it was enough to sufficiently distract Kendal from his work.

"Can I go watch TV?" asked Josh quickly.

"Are you done with your homework?" Kendal broke his gaze with the squat skyline.

Josh nodded readily.

"Fine," Kendal conceded.

His little brother scrambled with unabashed excitement out of the kitchen and back to the living room. Kendal penned the last few answers, and though he would have put money on them being wrong, he tucked his homework away. The grade was a problem for another day. Kendal zipped his backpack up and for a moment, just looked a disarray Josh had left. The papers were haphazardly scattered, the folder stuck out of Josh's backpack, and the chair was out halfway into the room.

Straightening the papers, Kendal noticed they all had little green stamps with "WOW!" or little red stamps with "GREAT!" at the top, and he left them on the table for their father to marvel over when he got home. He picked up both backpacks and walked out.

The light in the hallway came from the dim glow of the television, and from the ajar door of their bedroom. Kendal shoved their backpacks onto their hooks and stamped into the living room.

"What did I tell you about the light?" Kendal demanded of his little brother.

Josh craned his neck up as his brother stood over him. "I forgot."

Kendal's jaw set and his mouth made a hard, thin line.

"Are you mad?" said Josh quickly. Then he added, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Kendal replied just as fast. "Just do it when I tell you next time."

He went down to their bedroom exclusively to turn off the light, but he grabbed his coat off the back of his chair as well. Kendal slipped it on and leaned into the living room.

"I'm leaving," Kendal said flatly.

His little brother turned his large, childish eyes up toward him. "Why?"

Kendal paused, then spoke, "I'll be home in time to help you take your medicine. By eight. Okay?"

Josh nodded quickly.

“Don’t get in trouble while I’m gone, and lock the door behind me,” he reached in his pocket to find the key on a shoelace amid a couple quarters and a stray gum wrapper. Kendal pulled on the key’s string like a necklace.

Sliding off the couch, Josh followed him to the door and Kendal left. He zipped up his jacket against the cold and scampered down the steps, setting out down the street without a destination in mind. Turning the first corner he found, Kendal walked with the hurried pace of someone determined to get some distance. Kendal barely looked up from his shoes as he put one foot after the other until he lost track of how long or how far he’d walked. He figured that meant he was sufficiently far from that apartment to be able to breathe again.

As he looked up, he saw a house that looked eerily familiar. It was a light green with white trim, and a big window in the front that looked into the dining room. Kendal paused on the sidewalk, gazing at a family sitting down for dinner. There was a pretty, dark-haired mother with a baby in pink on her hip, and a husband in a suit, smiling at a boy who was younger than Josh.

Kicking a rock next to his shoe, Kendal turned away from the pristine picture and walked again. He took the next block just as quickly as he had the others, and he came upon the movie theater that was showing some new superhero movie he’d heard the boys at school talking about. Thumbing the quarters in his pocket, Kendal bit one side of his lip and glanced at the clock inside the glass doors. 7:35. He hesitated with a glance back the direction he had come from, staring down the dark street lit only by the occasional street lamp casting a small glow. He wasn’t afraid of the darkness or of the cold, but he was afraid of walking by that house, of going back to his apartment.

Kendal reached out and grabbed the handle of the door and walked in. Loitering a moment in the lobby, he watched the employees carefully until they all looked away and he could walk directly inside.

The clock in the theater told Kendal it was 9:42 when he left. It made his stomach tight to see those numbers. Shoving his hands into the pockets of his coat, Kendal walked back toward the apartment. He reached up to his neck and hooked his thumb around the lace, pulling the key out of his shirt and wrapping his hand tightly around it. The ridges of the golden-bronze key dug into the soft flesh of his palm and they left impressions when he released his hold. The further he walked, the faster his feet needed to go, and he quickly broke into a run.

Kendal ran past the house with the perfect family, the lights now off, and ran past all the places he hadn't bothered to look at as he walked there. He turned the corner sharply and caught sight of the apartments. Bounding up the steps, Kendal came to an abrupt stop in front and yanked the key off his neck. He tried once, but the key didn't fit, so he flipped it upside-down and tried again, this time with success. It caught and unlatched the lock as Kendal grabbed the doorknob to push open the door.

He put his weight against the door as the chain pulled taught and held. Kendal cursed the stupid chain and Josh and himself as he jiggled the door as if that would make it give.

"Come on," he mumbled, pleading with the door to cave. "Josh!"

There was no answer as Kendal slid his hand through the small crack and tried to maneuver the chain out of its locked position, but it was no use.

"Josh!" this time he yelled.

"I'm coming," came the small voice of his little brother.

The older boy's lungs felt like they had never breathed before when he let out all the air, pulling his hand back from the door. From inside, Josh shut it and reached high above his head to undo the second lock. Kendal stepped inside the instant Josh pulled open the door.

"You weren't back," Josh rubbed his eyes, his cheeks pink as he yawned deeply.

"Did you take your medicine?" Kendal asked quickly.

Josh nodded. "At eight. I remembered because you weren't here. Then I got tired."

Kendal shut the door and shook his head, breathing quickly out of his nose. "You're a good kid, Josh. I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"It's okay," he shrugged. "Can I watch some more TV?"

"That's good with me," Kendal tousled his little brother's hair and watched Josh walk slowly back to the living room.

Pulling off his jacket, Kendal shoved the key back into the pocket and hung it up on the first hook.

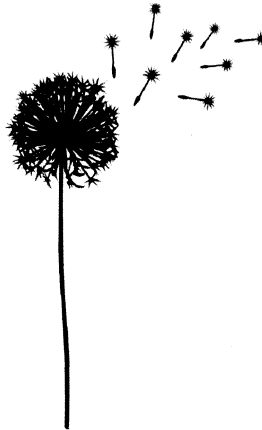
**Daisy Petals**  
Cassie Drinkall

What a silly thing it is, to blow dandelion tufts  
into  
the  
breeze,  
Only to watch them drift back  
to the earth like tiny lazy clouds.

And what an even sillier thing it is to murmur a special wish  
or a secret *desire*,  
as if the seedlings could somehow conjure a miracle.

We can't possibly believe in such nonsense.  
So why is it that your name finds its way into my conscience  
and  
d  
a  
n  
c  
e  
s

across my lips  
when I pluck daisy petals and send seedlings whirling?



## Ryan Gosling: An Ode to the Bathroom Stall

Connor Hague

There is an unspoken, implicit sacredness  
In the bathroom.

Whether you're camping out on the porcelain throne for half an hour in the comfort of your own  
home

Or within the plastic pink stall sanctuary of the communal, first floor Whizz Palace,

You do not violate the bliss-

nay

- the *sanctity* of the bathroom.

So imagine my disbelief when I retreat to my linoleum cave, third stall on the left,

hunched over my naked knees, ass *literally* out,

when I look up,

I am eye level Ryan Gosling's memetastic, black and white nipples taped to the stall door.

The caption beneath his printed torso reads:

**"I like my girls like I like my Bible..... Fully covered."**

First:

I am in the middle of riding the Porcelain Pony.

Ryan Gosling, I'm just chillin' on my Chamber Pot and you're choosing *now* to tell me to cover

up?

Because my pants are around my ankles, man, you caught me at a bad time.

Second:

Ryan, you're telling me to cover up while you flex your well-oiled pecs like you're the male

consensus on women's clothing?

I'm not saying you *can't* like me when I'm "covered up",

But do you really think I'm covering up for you?

Third:

What does that even mean?

**"Fully covered"**

You need to know a girl's verses backwards and forwards,

**fully covered** in a PowerPoint presentation,

Or you like your bibles *literally* to have a cover on them?

Because either way we swing here,

I call bullshit on you, Ryan Gosling.

Now let's get one thing straight.

I wasn't allowed to wear a bikini until I was seventeen years old,  
because my mom said boys and men would look at and think about me differently.

That the curves of my body,

the sight of my belly button

would give off an idea about me as a woman, and

That there will be consequences and thoughts and perceptions

attached to me with the strings of my string bikini, but

*That is the risk I was willing to take*

*That is the risk I wanted to take*

And *that* is where we are lacking:

**Being an independent woman**

isn't donning a burkini for a day at the beach

OR

frolicking ass naked along the waves-

FREEDOM lies in having the **choice**  
EQUALITY means having it **without judgment.**

I am sick of people  
but especially men  
telling me how to act and who to be and what to wear  
to deserve their respect

And you know what, Ryan, I am done entertaining  
People who acknowledge the glitz of a sparkly dress  
But not the human being inside of it,  
I'm done apologizing for wearing  
sweats to class,  
heels to breakfast,  
pants to a wedding-

I can't weave my family and my beliefs and my ideas into material,  
But they run through my bloodstream and exist on my skin  
Or was I supposed to cover those up too?

What I wear is not who I am  
Who I Am is Who I Am  
And my *clothing* is IRRELEVANT  
**So fuck you, Ryan Gosling.**

I didn't cry in department store changing rooms,  
Fight to love my reflection,  
Convince myself that I'm more than just flesh and fabric,  
Start dressing my reverence the way *I* choose to revere it,  
Just to get here and be told I should be "fully covered"

I thought a Bible without a cover still had God in its pages  
And I thought prayers without words were still answered,  
And I *know* that I am no less holy  
when I wear a bikini than when my friend wears her hijab.

So thank you, Ryan Gosling.  
For violating the sanctity of the bathroom,  
And trying to make me believe that I am less.

You have made it quite clear that if I'm not "fully covered"  
I don't deserve your love or your attention or your respect.  
I thought being a human being ensured most of those already.

## **Blood and Mascara**

Connor Smith

Yeah, I knew Jennifer, Adam, and Collin. I was just staying the night at Collin's house when it all went down. What they did would have happened whether I was there or not, I was just there to watch, to observe, at least that's what it felt like. I really wasn't that involved, honest. Sometimes I wish I could have done more, but this was high school and I really was not that engaged back then. I was better at just watching. I doubt I had any lasting impression on any of them, especially Jennifer. I'm not the best at comforting people, and I hardly knew what to say in a situation like that. She mostly just cried on the couch, clutching that bag of frozen carrots to her face. Oh god, she cried for such a long time. I've never been more worried about someone in my life. I just knew her from school, you know? It's not like we had ever talked before. But that night, my heart was breaking watching a part of her die right before my eyes. That's what was happening, she was dying right in front of me. Well, you know not *really* dying. But I don't

know how else to put it. I mean, I don't have any experiences with death, my grandparents are all alive, and my aunts and uncles are all healthy and well... Well, that's not true, my dog died when I was a little kid, it was when I was in third grade, so that would make me ten years old, right? My dog's name was just Dog, or Mutt, or Dumb Dog. We never really got around to giving him a real name, even though we had him for, what, seven or eight years before he died. I cried really hard then, and my mom was really worried about me. Now, I know what she felt then, my mom that is. I think. I'm not sure. She didn't think I could hear her talking to my dad, but I could. They were always really bad about that, talking about private things even though I could hear them. They talked about taking me to the hospital, maybe to see a therapist or something. Can you believe that? I must have been a mess if that's what they thought was best for me. Thinking about going to the hospital made me cry even harder. My mom must have felt so helpless; the hospital must have seemed like a feasible option. Shit, I guess that's how I felt that night too, with Jennifer. I just wanted to *do* something, and I know that's how Collin felt. But he actually did something about it. See, I'm a pretty sensitive kid. Or at least I was back then, in third grade. I was sensitive in high school too, but this is back about the dog. This is important too. I would always cry about the smallest things. One night, I accidentally ripped my favorite stuffed animal's arm off. His name was Patches; he was a rabbit that my aunt had made for me for my first birthday. For a while, when I was younger we were inseparable, and then I ripped his arm off on accident. I was distraught, it was just awful, and at that age, I believed it was the worst anyone had ever felt in the history of mankind. My mom of course fixed Patches up, and she showed me how to do it too. She made it into a learning experience, so that I could do it myself in the future. But I can't even begin to describe to you how awful I felt while was fixing Patches up. Every time the needle dipped into his cloth skin, I felt it on my own arm. Every time she pulled the thread tight, my stomach constricted into a knot. But eventually Patches was all fixed up, and I could breathe again. I was very careful with Patches for a while after that, I would do everything in my power to keep him clean and in one piece. But that didn't last forever, nothing really does. Shit, look, this just reminds me of that night, you know?

See, I was thinking of Patches while I watched Jennifer sob into that slowly thawing bag of carrots. I had given her the bag of carrots and a blanket, as a desperate means of consolation. She was lying on the couch across from me, you know, and I watched her cry across the coffee table. Well, yeah the table was in the middle of these two white couches. Collin's parents were

pretty loaded. "Two white couches in their living room" loaded. Middle class. Yup. My mind had gone off on a tangent ya know, thinking about my own damn problems or whatever. Yeah, I tend to do that, zone out and wander through my memories, especially when confronted with...things I don't really understand. I felt slightly guilty for thinking of my own shit at a time like that. I guess it's a coping mechanism or whatever. Strangely enough, I didn't cry at all that night. There was so much going on around me, so much hurt and anger, but I never cried. Is that weird? Maybe I was too shocked, trying to wrap my head around what was happening? Of course, I had no real idea what was happening, so maybe I couldn't really comprehend at the time the magnitude of the situation. See, like I said, Jennifer and I weren't really friends, more like acquaintances. We went to different schools, and I had met her through Collin at a football game. It was our homecoming game, you know, the whole crosstown rivalry thing, so the whole school had turned out to watch our team lose. Our high school is the artsy-school, and we pretty much suck at all things sports-related. Collin had invited me to go to the game and then maybe spend the night, go to some of the after parties, get out and meet people. I think he brings me to that kind of stuff to make him look like the cool kid. 'Cause he's not the coolest kid or anything, but he definitely has more friends than I do. So, he would bring me to these parties and then I just knew he would be talking about me to all his cooler friends, about how lame I was and how I never got out, and how he was such a good friend for bringing me to this party that I never would have been invited to. I overheard him saying something along those lines to Jennifer at the football game. She was standing with a group of girls in the bleachers below Collin and I. They were the girls that were pretty enough to be cheerleaders, but didn't have the self-confidence to get out there and perform. Jennifer was definitely pretty like that, but she didn't have the background to do cheerleading at a public school. See, she was new in town; she had come from a school on the West side of the state, something private and fancy. It was one of those schools that had a uniform, like a shirt and tie kind of deal. It was the kind of school where they still teach Latin, and almost everyone goes to college. We don't have a school like that here; it's just the two public schools and one small, you know, "alternative" high school. And we all spend more energy talking about how we are going to get out of town instead of actually doing what we should to ya know...get out. At least, that's the best way I know how to describe it. So, Collin introduced us, but Jennifer and I didn't have much in common to talk about when we first met, and we had even less to talk about that night. Shit...She was just crying on the couch for so long.

When Collin first brought her into the house, I was in shock. I had been in the basement playing some old Nintendo games, Collin had left a while ago, he said there was something he had to go do. Yeah, we were both down there spread out on the floor playing video games, and he got this phone call. He looked at his phone, and I saw out of the corner of my eye that the number confused him. He answered it and within seconds he was on his feet asking a string of questions while he ran up the stairs. He just went off: "What's wrong? Where are you? What happened?" I yelled after him what the hell was going on, kinda joking, but he wasn't listening to me, just said he had to go. I didn't know how serious it was then. Collin was out the door in less than a minute. The quiet that settled on the house after such a flurry of activity was eerie. I settled back down in the basement, muttering to myself about what an ass Collin was. He does that sometimes, gets so caught up in the moment that he just leaves, runs off. We were at a party together once over the summer, and he spent most of the evening talking to these upperclassmen. When they said they were leaving Collin just walked right out with them, he was deep in conversation with this tall blond track runner, and I don't think he even realized that they were all leaving the house. The next morning, Collin told me at school that he had ditched that group at a traffic light, when he saw some friends he knew from the school across town pulled up across the intersection. He simply got out of the car and walked across the street to get in their car. Collin just does stuff like that, without thinking. Impulsive, manic, I guess not too serious to be manic, but definitely impulsive...yeah that's Collin. Anyway, about an hour later I heard the door open and Collin yell down for me. I jumped up; something about the tone of his voice made me immediately nervous. When he called my name it was like a shot of adrenaline. I ran upstairs as fast as I could, and met them in the entryway. Collin was holding the door for Jennifer and she walked into the house with her head up but swaying, and her lips were quivering. Her face was a mess. My god her face... Her left eye was swollen and purple. There was blood and mascara dripping off her nose and running in black rivers down her face. Four thick, red lines. Knuckles, a first in relief on her left cheek and dried blood in the corner of her mouth. She looked slowly around the room and her empty gaze settled on me. We locked eyes for only a moment, but it was a moment that I will remember forever, I'll never forget those dark, cloudy, blue eyes. I felt ice grip my soul and dullness pass over my mind. It was like the world stopped moving, and I was forced to look into these dark pits full of agony, pain, and betrayal. I only saw the horror of that night. She was drowning before my eyes in sadness and she looked as if she

had aged twenty years in an hour. More than anything, I saw just how tired she was. I had to look away. At this, it was like the weight of all sorrow came down on her shoulders. She began to cry then, thick choking sobs. I fumbled with my cell phone and started to call 911, but Collin stepped forward and stopped me. He shook his head and told me to grab something from the freezer. I nodded dumbly, but walked into the kitchen with purpose. I had no sense of what was happening at that moment; but, shit, it seemed like Collin was in charge and he knew what to do. I found myself staring into the fridge for much longer than necessary, deliberating over which bag of frozen food to bring out to the living room. Should I bring the carrots, the peas, or the mixed vegetables? Like I usually do in situations like this, I fell into my own thoughts, struggling to grasp for something normal. The peas would be malleable, and would probably feel more like an ice pack. No one likes mixed vegetables, so I probably shouldn't use those. Besides if she was drunk at all, the sight of the bag might make her vomit. Suddenly the mental image of Jennifer throwing up all over Collin's mother's off-white couch sprang into my mind. No, I would definitely not use the mixed vegetables. But the carrots...I heard a groan from the living room and a loud sob, almost a scream. Without another thought, I grabbed the carrots and ran around the corner back to the living room. I juggled the carrots to my off hand and grabbed a blanket from the hall closet before coming back to where Jennifer was now lying on the couch crying loudly. I looked blankly from her to Collin, who was pacing back and forth in front of the couch. He glared at me then, and the look in his eyes was one of undiluted hatred. Look, I am usually a very easy going guy, and I like to think that Collin is too. I mean, we have been in our fair share of scrapes with other kids, especially in middle school. But they were the ones who always started it. Collin has even told me time and again that he would never go into the military, even if they would pay for his school or whatever. Like, he thinks of himself as a pacifist, and has always said that he does not like to fight. But the look in his eyes, it was the cold inhuman look, the lights weren't on in there, his pupils were black and wide. He wanted to fight, needed to vent this rage. I'd never seen anything like it before in him. I was obviously worried about him. Quietly, I tried to get his attention, and I said his name, you know, under my breath kinda. I didn't want to startle him. But he just turned his back to me; he was alone with his wrath looking out the window now. For a moment, I was paralyzed with indecision, I felt like things were moving too fast, there was too much information to process and something was about to break. I had to really get a grip on myself and stop to focus on one thing at a time, right? What else could

I have done? So I stepped into the living room and laid the blanket over Jennifer's legs and gently placed the frozen carrots on her face. I reached to take her hand and she flinched at my touch. I tried again but she wailed and lashed out at me with a scream. I stumbled back almost knocking into the coffee table. I looked up at Collin for help, but he was gone, moving toward the front door, with slow but steady strides. I quickly got up, ran to his side, and grasped at his arm. He looked fiercely at my offending hand on his shirtsleeve, then slowly and with a menace that sent a shiver down my back, up at my face. I feebly let go, and a silence grew between the two of us. I looked down at the ground, real nervous, and asked Collin where he was going. He nodded toward Jennifer, but kept his eyes on the top of my head. He said he was going to Adam's house. I looked up, startled. Adam was Jennifer's boyfriend, they had been dating for a while now. I wasn't sure how long at the time, but I later found out that they had been going out for three months that week. Well, I guess I should say Adam was her ex-boyfriend by that point. It was not too much of a leap to guess now where the bruises on Jennifer's face had come from. Look, I knew Adam the same way I knew Jennifer - really not that well. I had played basketball with him a few times last summer and we saw each other every once and awhile downtown. But he seemed pretty normal. I mean, as normal as a teenager can be. I never heard of any family problems, it's not like we ever saw him kicking dogs or yelling at little kids. I don't know why he beat the shit out of her, I don't know what made him do it. But no one deserves that kind of shit...well, maybe Adam deserved what was coming for him, but I'm not sure if I totally believe that. Shit, I probably do. Anyway, I told Collin he didn't have to do this, but, yeah I honestly didn't believe that myself. He kept his gaze on me for a few more seconds, then turned and slowly grabbed a coat off the hooks by the door. I took a step to block the door. I mumbled something about how much trouble he would be in, I told him to think about the cops, the law. He said nothing, but began to put his coat on. I desperately tried one last time. "What are you trying to prove?" My voice sounded soft and wrong as it tumbled past my lips into the silent entryway. The clock ticked. Collin's eyes settled on me again and they were cold, hard and jet-black. "This is not for me. This is for her. This is justice." With that he reached past me for the door, and he was gone into the night. I didn't watch him leave, but I heard the car door slam, and the engine turn. I guess I just let him go. My last question was still ringing in my ears, it had come out of nowhere. I didn't even register the words as I said them out loud. I stood in the doorway, contemplating this wholly abstract idea of justice and how that apparent virtue was

going to be played out in reality during the next few hours. It felt cold and strange in the visceral now of that night. Now, look, I've thought a lot about Collin and why he did what he did, and I'm still not sure if I get it. But I do not that he did NOT do it for Jennifer. He was doing this from some weird idea of right and wrong, some old fashioned idea of goodness of...what's the word...chivalry? I think in his mind Jennifer could have been any damn person. She was just his damsel in distress, not a living hurting person, but an idea of duty. This was just something he was compelled to do. Anyway, after he left, I walked back to the couch and saw her there with her head buried in the pillows. Jennifer was...is, I should say, very attractive. And my brain went down a strange path after Collin left. Not in a weird way, please don't think that I'm some sort of sicko rapist or something, but hell I am a teenager. My hormones got the best of me and some not too savory mental pictures flashed across my brain. I dispelled them easily enough, but it rattled me, I mean it was really weird, right? How could I be thinking about her like that, now of all times, after what she had been through that night? I mean I have given Collin a lot of shit in my mind about not thinking about Jennifer as Jennifer, but maybe I'm more mad at myself for doing the same shit. I tried to distract myself, look away you know. My mind raced back through the corridors of my thoughts, looking for some memory to distract myself from the ideas in my stupid hormone-addled brain.

And then I was back in my bedroom, I was with Lexi and my parents were gone for the weekend. Lexi was my girlfriend two summers back, so the summer after my freshman year. She really was something special, she really didn't have to be dating a guy like me. I had called her to come over and spend the night. We had been going out for a month and two weeks at that point and things looked pretty solid for the rest of the summer. I was worried about the night though, because every time we would make out or "go at it", things would escalate a little more every time. Like, we had a routine built up. We would start to kiss, then we would really get into that, and then I would start to take her shirt off. From there we would touch a little more of each other every time. Hands were moving down below the belt line and we were starting to touch the softer parts of each other's bodies. And this would happen every time; we would get closer to this unspoken goal. I was more than a little worried about what would happen if we spent the night together and there was nothing to stop us from going through with what we were both secretly wishing for. So when we started kissing there, in an empty house, the TV quietly entertaining no one, I was filled with this wild and altogether new fear. I was afraid of this thing I was hoping

for, and the consequences lying beyond what was going to happen next. Soon, though the power of the moment overpowered my quibbling conscience. We kissed for a while there on the couch, following that untaught but understood script. I asked her if she wanted to go upstairs to my room, and she following her part to the letter, agreed with a smile and only the faintest hint of hesitation. So, I held her hand and led her slowly through the house, full of gray shadows and dark outlines. We went upstairs, stopping to kiss twice, at the bottom of the stairs and again right outside my bedroom. Finally I picked her up and gently tossed her onto my bed. She landed softly, laughing, on top of Patches. She asked, "Who is this little guy?" those words exactly. But I ignored the question, grabbing the stuffed animal and tossing it onto the floor. With a smile, I got in the bed with her. We began to rush through our normal routine, neither of us stopping or slowing the other down. All of the sudden, we were both wearing only our most private layers of clothing and laying together breathing heavily. The silence rang in my ears. A few minutes later, it was over, the great struggle to lose our innocence was won. And I was tired. My thoughts were racing, I felt so happy and yet...and yet I wanted to be alone. I felt wrong. My breathing quickened. Lexi asked what was wrong, but I could not answer. My childhood was flashing before my eyes, the enormity of the act welled up within me. I realized I was crying. A sob rattled my body, and then Lexi was on top of me hugging me, asking what was wrong but I couldn't answer. I was somewhere else, panic held my tongue as my racing thoughts plunged forward heedless of my immediate surroundings. In another world I felt a tear drop from Lexi's face onto my chest. She said something incomprehensible to me, as if it were in another language. I was sweating and shaking, staring at the ceiling. I felt Lexi get up off me. She asked if I was ok, that I do remember, but I could not say yes. She was upset, I could sense it...I...She....She left. That's all. I don't even know why I'm talking about that, it's not important...I don't even remember the color of her eyes.

The harsh reality of that memory snapped me back to the present, this harsh present consisting of a confused and hurt girl sprawled on a couch in front of me. I sat on the floor in front of the couch, and I said nothing, I just sat there, as close as I felt comfortable being, which was really not that close. Shit, I didn't say a goddamn thing, and that has stuck with me, I'll tell you what. I was too wrapped up with coping, even though she was coping with so much more. The clock ticked on the wall, and I just started out the window watching for Collin's headlights in the driveway. Jennifer cried for a long time. Shit, it was such a long time...Headlights in the

window, tires on the pavement. A door shut and I heard the ragged cough. The door opened and there he was, the big damn hero. His shirt was ripped, his coat was gone, and he had a bloody nose, yeah. But what really got me were his hands. Blood on his hands. Swollen knuckles, bruised wrists. Broken fingers, marred skin. Blood on his hands...He coughed again and stepped into the bathroom. Water ran. I sat on the floor. Observing or whatever. Jennifer was silent then, believe it or not I think she fell asleep. Collin emerged from the bathroom, shirtless with fingers wrapped in athletic tape and a garbage bag in his hand, I saw a wet pink through the white plastic. I asked him what happened, and he shook his head. I was scared. Yeah I'll admit it I was scared then for Adam. Collin looked like he had seen something that night...he looked like he had seen something die. He motioned for me to move. But I was angry then, I was mad at him for leaving, for just running off without thinking. So, I stood up off the floor and blocked him. I asked firmly, what the hell did you do? Collin...he smiled then a broken cracked smile but damn if that face doesn't haunt me. Not just the broken nose and fat lip, but the smile. He said harshly "I took care of him...beat him pretty bad..." and damn it I thought he was proud of what he did then. "He'll live...made sure he was still breathing..." He said that quietly under his breath. But I hardly heard him. I slumped down onto the coffee table. Collin stepped past me and shook Jennifer. She groaned again and rolled over. Collin gently lifted her up into a sitting position and guided her off the couch. With one hand, he led her in front of her towards the stairs. He tossed the garbage bag to me, told me to fill it up with anything that had blood on it. We ended up tossing out our clothes and, uh, two of the couch pillows. I never heard anything about it later, but I doubt Collin told his parents where they were. After a little tidying, I ran up the stairs after Collin and Jennifer, I reached the door of Collins room and looked in just as Collin was throwing a large stuffed lion off his bed. It looked worn and ratty, with discolored fur around its head and stitches everywhere. It looked like he had had it for a while. He stepped over the stuffed animal to help Jennifer lay down in his bed and I watched him lay the blankets over her. I realized I was crying...So yeah, I guess I lied before, I did cry that night, but only when I saw the lion on the floor and Collin with broken fingers taped together pulling a blanket over a battered young girl. More than anything Collin looked...tired. And, yeah, we slept on the couches in the living room that night.. Collin said he wanted to be by the front door. Anyway, I heard him get up in the middle of the night and saw the bathroom light come on. He ran the water to try to cover the noise...but shit, he cried too. Cried for a long damn time. Look, shit, we were just kids, we

weren't heroes, we weren't fighters... this is not how it's supposed to be, ya know? This doesn't happen to kids like us. We had good grades, our parents loved us, yeah we weren't perfect or whatever, but come on. I bet Jennifer's family had two white couches in their living room too. We have these ideas built up in our heads of how things are and how they are supposed to be. Ideas of "Justice" and shit, of right and wrong, of that goddamn chivalry shit. Look, there are consequences to everything, maybe that's that justice shit. Collin and I regret a lot of that night I think, but for different reasons. There are *consequences*, man, and we didn't even do nothing too wrong. Sometimes those consequences are, like, retribution for being an asshole. But it goes both ways. Like, even though Collin never got "caught" or anything, there were still consequences for him and I'm not talking about his broken fingers. What I'm trying to say is that things like this don't have to happen, but we let them, hell, some of us run head first into them... We just watch.... I just watched.

### **Contracts with God**

Doaa Mohaisen

***When my parents taught me what they thought would become a foundational lesson, it never crossed their minds I would turn into a pretty good bargainer at the age of eight.***

"God is always with you" was my parent's mantra, which they said would help me through whatever challenges I faced, as they weren't usually around. I learned at a young age to send my wishes and prayers to God and it wasn't long before I started to bargain and make small contracts with him. I would crouch somewhere, close my eyes, hold my breath, place my hands over my mouth to ensure no one can hear or interfere, and then whisper a request into my palm straight to God's ears.

I made my first contract with God when I was eight. I had awoken with a hoarse voice on the day of a school trip, and I was devastated that I couldn't sing and chant with my classmates. I imagined myself sitting alone while my friends had fun. Instinctively, I found a corner on the bus, crouched where no one could see me, and promised God that I wouldn't miss *salat* (prayer) or tell a lie for at least two days if he would just make my voice work. That seemed like a fair trade to me. For extra incentive, I promised God that I also would be nice to my sister.

It worked! In no time, I was part of my rowdy class on the trip. Although I tried, I didn't fully keep my end of the bargain. That didn't prevent me from making more deals with God, though. To make up for my previous shortcoming, I would just make more elaborate promises.

When Mom and Dad had a row, I made a new bargain for my parents' speedy reconciliation in return for one full week of daily *salats*, no lying and no fighting with my sister. I did the same when I had exams. The more contracts I made and the more my pleas were fulfilled, the more I believed God was undoubtedly with me. I thought that was what deepened my faith. But I was wrong.

### **Faith came when God abandoned me. It took me five years to realize it.**

In December of 2008, Israel began bombing us, and God was nowhere to be found. Neither my *salats* nor my contracts were helpful. I was on my way home after having taken a final exam when the earth suddenly turned into hell. The neighborhood where I live, Shijaiya, is close to the Israeli border. From our roof, I can see clusters of Israeli homes on land that once was my people's before they were forced out. You can also see vast empty lands, abandoned by their Palestinian owners who could not hold out against persistent sniper killings. There's even a sniper's bullet still stuck in my parents' window, shot toward my mom that month when she tried to look out during one of the attacks. Thankfully, the gunman missed.

Every bomb sounded like it would be the one to take our lives away. Every flash of light and thunderbolt seemed so close that I hid under the blankets and put three pillows over my head. But the sounds easily penetrated all those covers, going straight to my heart. I asked God to take me too if anything happened to my family. I remembered the *Hadeeth* [quote of the Prophet Muhammad] in which three men were stuck in a cave and each one started talking about his

good deeds so that God would help him. I gave it a shot and started counting the good things I did in my life. I realized I had done bad things too, and asked God to forgive me for the times I bullied a classmate, went to a friend's house without telling my mother, took two *shekels* instead of one to school, called my math teacher names, caught an injured bird and put it in a tube, peeked into my sister's diary, kicked a boy who called me short, told Mom it was my brother who ate the Eid cookies, suspected a friend, and the times I put Mom's make-up on my face when she was out. I prayed God would forgive my sins and be with me in my hour of need. But I never knew if I was able to communicate with Him the way I used to when I was younger. I almost lost my faith.

My parents were afraid too, mostly for our safety. Twelve days into the unrelenting explosions, we were all depleted and emotionally shattered by fear. My parents told my eldest brother to take me to grandpa's house, located in the middle of Gaza and assumed to be a little safer. There were no cars so we had to walk, praying to be ignored by the Israeli drones above us. We had no idea what might happen, yet we walked and walked because we had faith. When we arrived at grandpa's house, I almost fainted. It was heaven. My uncle got me a glass of water, which I drank in silence. I slept that night, finally.

That first major bombing campaign in my life changed me, enlightened me. I suppose it was a loss of innocence to realize that praying for eternity cannot change reality; no bargain with God could bring back my two cousins during that assault. Nor could it bring back my cousin Hamza, who was killed in another, later Israeli bombing campaign in the summer of 2014. That attack lasted for 51 days. Fifty-one days of death, terror, insomnia, counting the dead, explosions, bombs, flashlights. It started during Ramadan [a month of fasting by Muslims to commemorate the revelation of the Quran by the prophet Muhammad]. Death became a daily reality while we were fasting. Ramadan ended, *Eid El-Fitr* [the festival marking the end of Ramadan] came and went, and death was still present everywhere.

We couldn't reach Hamza's house due to the fire caused by the bombing, so we weren't there to comfort my aunt Zinat, his mother. Hamza's death was confirmed after two days and Dad had to wait for a ceasefire to go to his sister and soothe her. He didn't utter a word when he came back. *Allah Yerhamu* [may God have mercy on him] was all he could say for days after he had finally

pulled himself together. I believe when martyrs go to heaven, they keep an eye on us. Hamza is somewhere there, praying for us the way we pray for him.

Before I got to know death personally, I grieved for Sirius, a character from my favorite series, Harry Potter. But all I had to do was go back a couple of pages and find him there, alive. When a wall or an entire house falls in Harry Potter, the characters can simply cast the levitation charm (*wingardium leviosa*) or the freezing charm (*Immobulus*) and flee! After the successive Israeli attacks began in 2014, I started reading Harry Potter obsessively over and over, all seven books, even when I had exams. After Sirius' death, Harry tries to find a way to get him back, but it all was in vain. Somehow, even in fiction, your loved ones don't come back.

Hamza was my auntie's eldest son, the light of her eyes now extinguished. I would stare at the whiteness of the ceiling, hearing the whizzing of gunfire and missiles beyond the walls of my room, and imagine my aunt's tiny body turning into a skeleton from grief. It's nearly a fact that the first son is the closest to his mother. I prayed Hamza's death was some sort of a rumor and he might be able to find his way back somehow and say, "surprise!" Then we would yell and tell him how bad his joke was. But my requests, my pleas, my bargains for Hamza, though desperate and honest, were futile, just like the other wishes I made when other family and friends were killed in previous Israeli assaults.

My aunt's house, which was about eight meters away from ours, was leveled to the ground the same day we evacuated Shijaiya. There's nothing left of it now except for a few boulders and rocks. They couldn't save anything out from the rubble. Nothing. It took my aunt's husband eight years to build a home for his family. But one rocket from one bomb ruthlessly destroyed, in seconds, years of hard work and memories of their lives together. That meant they had nothing belonging to Hamza to cherish. No worn shirt still smelling of him. No letters, comb, diary or keychain. Nothing.

When we were forced to flee Shijaiya that summer of 2014, I selfishly prayed our house would be spared. Before leaving, I wished I had a magical bag like the one Hermione made when she, Harry and Ron ran from the death eaters' attack during Bill and Fleur's wedding. She was able to put all their stuff in a tiny bag. I wanted that bag more than anything in the world at that moment,

so I could keep safe all the favorite things that defined my life. We were lucky to find our home later mostly intact. Israel destroyed more than 20,000 houses that summer.

In one way or another, God tests one's faith when He imposes hard circumstances. In the same way, I was tested to see whether I would still believe in Him or turn my back when there was too much to handle. Those critical moments proved who I am. I discovered He never abandoned me, but it was me who surrendered to despair every now and then. I'm not ashamed of the fact that when I prayed for the first time, it was out of fear that if I didn't, I would be punished somehow. Even my sister teased me that day. But the more I prayed, the more it became a heavenly relationship. I don't deny my moments of anger and protest; I had my share of these. Nevertheless, I feel for that very reason I became closer to God. I think this is the kind of faith that gives my aunt a reason to wake up every morning and face a world without Hamza.

It terrifies me how talking about my auntie's razed house has become matter of fact. People turned into numbers, and the landscape of neighborhoods, life, people, homes, buildings and markets turned into rubble that we quantified with statistics. Would my last 18 years shrink to a mere number one day? The idea makes me shiver from head to toe. For a while, I tried to remember how my auntie's house looked. How many windows were there? Which door led to the kitchen? Were there any stickers on Iman's closet? Was it Reham who slept beside the window? What was the walls' color? It feels like a betrayal to forget, but I forgot. I pass near the rubble every day now, and it's just wreckage without memory. I selfishly thank God that our home was spared.

When my aunt finally came to visit us, she tried hard to avoid talking about anything related to the bombing that killed her son, but we all knew it was inevitable. I sat opposite to her, observing. Her voice was normal at the beginning, but when she mentioned Hamza, it started to shake. The façade she was wearing, holding back her tears, started to melt and reveal my vulnerable auntie. Tears pooled in her eyes.

I never reconciled with the idea of death. Many talk about accepting death as a part of life. But I can't accept that. Hamza should have lived, married, had babies and named his first son after his father. He was older than me, so I never got to know him well. In that room, with my auntie, I

wished I had spent more time with him. Sometimes, loss feels absurd. How can someone be here one moment and gone the next, never coming back? I'm not sure I'll ever accept that. So I will continue to try to make contracts with God.

### **The Bullet**

Doaa Mohaisen

I NEVER KNEW. I never knew that death could be very slow! But I've come to believe that after a bullet penetrated my room's window and passed near my head. I could hear its sharp whistle and see every single detail of its yellowish body. The bullet missed me, hit the wall, and disappeared, leaving a small hole the size of my eye. I cautiously got closer, approached the hole, but couldn't take my eyes off it or see anything else. A cold feeling in my stomach slowly crept up. I got sick. I felt a ripping feeling inside my body; the feeling of an awful pain clawing its way forward to emerge in a shiver. It was fear. Fear in my stomach, fear in my throat, fear in my veins. I soon realized that puke was not a matter of my digestive system, which I believe is solid as a rock, but a matter of fear invading my entire body.

It all started earlier that day. I was on my way home when I heard a mixture of shouts, gunfire, and bombs. I wasn't afraid because Mom had told me the whole story of those bombs. People were just celebrating. When I arrived home that day, Mom was crying. I wasn't surprised, as she always cries whenever she hears those sounds. When she recognized me staring at her, she took me to her lap and cried harder. Dad wasn't there. Although I didn't have many memories about him, I missed his presence dreadfully. When grandma had told me that I inherited his brown almond-shape eyes and dark curly hair, I couldn't help staring at the mirror imagining him, trying to envision how he spoke, walked, smelled, and how his face looked like when he got angry or sad. My classmates were once talking about their fathers' jobs, so I got zealous and told them that my Dad is a traveler who collects valuable treasures from mysterious places and is going to get me many splendid presents when he comes back. They were impressed; I realized that from their twinkling eyes.

They bombarded me with questions afterwards and I was, to my own amazement, able to create new stories about his claimed travels. Dad actually hasn't arrived home since the last time I heard the same sounds. That was three years ago. I was four years old. Mom thought I had forgotten, but I just pretended, for the last time I asked her if Dad was coming home, she froze for a moment and told me to play with my new toys.

My room is full of toys. I have many stuffed animals: rabbits, dogs, goats, bears and even lions my size. Mom always brings them when she goes shopping. Pink stickers are everywhere seen. But what Mom doesn't understand is that I detest toys! I never play with them! I like playing hopscotch and hide-and seek with Ahmed and Ali in the street, but Mom never allows me to. I do try to sneak out of the house once or twice on weekends, but she can catch me before half an hour passes. I like Ahmed and Ali to a degree Mom cannot imagine.

It was a scary night. That bullet was not at all something to be expected. I wished I could ask Mom for a hug, but I was too embarrassed to do so at such a late hour after what had happened in the last time I slept beside her. Ahmed and Ali had always laughed at my reaction when we heard the bombs. I always crouched, sobbed and trembled back and forth. They used to laugh, point their fingers at me, and call me a chicken.

The sounds were loud that night. I couldn't sleep, so I turned on the light and picked a paper to draw. I tried to imagine those bombs; how they were launched and what their colors were. The bombs sounded like they were very close-by. Everything happened quickly after that one moment. A sharp sound crossed the air. I saw it. Yellow and fast. I froze, turned off the light and hid under the blanket. In the dark, I started searching for the hole and imagining my eye settling there. The bullet occupied my thoughts. I could not sleep while knowing that the bullet was hiding somewhere, waiting a second chance. When my notions darkened, I wanted to run out of the room to ask Mom about the incident. What happened to those celebrating people? Why were there bullets in the middle of the night? Shivering with fear, I couldn't sleep until dawn and had one of my worst nightmares. Telling Mom was not an option at all.

Despite all my fears and nightmares, I decided not to tell anyone about the hole and the bullet, especially my Mom who keeps tabs on me. She always asks me if I need her help when I eat or get dressed for school. She even wanted to come with me on my first day at school, but I refused.

Her concerns seem endless which annoys me. I thought keeping everything a secret was in a way or another an announcement of growing up though this announcement was clear only to me.

The next morning, I covered the hole with a sticker, but that did not stop me from continually checking it and finding it there. I asked God to make me forget all about the bullet and the hole, but after hours of praying, I decided that what had happened to me was a result of something I did; a punishment because I had done something wrong. My teacher always tells us that we will get what we deserve if we lie or steal; God's hand will interfere and we will be punished justly. I started recalling all the stories grandma had told me about those little children who didn't obey adults. They always end up having a donkey's tail or eaten by ogres. I counted the times I had insulted my classmates and the times I had gotten on my mother's nerves. Well, I deserved it! My punishment was a hiding bullet and a hole.

I decided that telling someone would release my fear. I eagerly wanted to tell Ahmed and Ali. I wanted to brag about it. They always boast about their adventures with the children from neighboring street. I had my own story and wanted to tell them! I tried to memorize the way I was going to tell Ahmed and Ali about the bullet. 'I saw it with my naked eyes but didn't feel afraid. I didn't even tell Mom!' I would say. I decided that taking them to my room wasn't a bad idea either, so I wanted to practice there. I went to where the hole was, but I got utterly shocked when I couldn't find it! I searched for it for more than twenty times but it was all in vain! I couldn't stand the idea that the bullet and the hole were gone. That seemed like a bad omen! I ran to Mom and told her everything even though telling her had been my last option. She stared at my face, studying it for a while, and laughed! She didn't stop even though she almost dropped the dishes she was holding. She laughed harder! Furious and betrayed, I told her everything again hoping she would understand how serious the situation was. I knew in my heart of hearts that Dad would have understood. I knew that he had been travelling somewhere, and a hiding bullet was a plain matter. I rearranged my words in a last despairing attempt to get her to believe me, but she laughed even louder. I stomped my feet, dashed to the door, and yelled releasing all the anger I had:

- The bullet is free and seeking revenge!

## Turning 20

Doaa Mohaisen

I asked one of my best friends two days before my 20th birthday, "What would you do if you were depressed?"

"I'd talk to you, Doaa," he replied.

Although it was sweet of him to think that, something inside of me said, "I don't want that role anymore. I'm fed up with being the cheerful person people depend on to pull them out of temporary depression or the one they'd call when they are having a bad time."

Another friend called me a "crisis friend," and I knew that was too much for me to handle. I am always having to suppress my feelings for the sake of others. At times when I feel like all I want is to cry and be hugged, I have to listen to my friends rant and soothe them. When I do happen to mention that I'm feeling down, my friends are shocked; they forget that I'm human and moan, "you have changed!" That makes me rarely open up to anyone.

Living in Gaza means experiencing depression; we long for things other people take for granted—like electricity all day long and potable water. If you give in to your depression, you'll drown in an endless circle of doubt and fear. Sometimes I think some depression is positive, because it can push you forward if you learn to "use" your negative feelings productively. But that's only sometimes.

Thomas Chatterton, an English poet who wrote under the identity of a 15th century monk named Thomas Rowley, was 17 and 9 months when he committed suicide in 1770. (What can I say? I'm an English literature major...) Chatterton felt alienated not only from society but also from the people in his immediate circle. He held grudges against people in authority as well, since he held them responsible for making people's lives miserable. I can relate to that; none of our political leaders represent Palestinians well, and we are surrounded by oppressive governments in Egypt and Israel.

The young poet was not regarded as intelligent and no one believed his poetry was his own. That was too much for him to bear and he ended his life with poison. Today, however, he is regarded as the first English Romantic poet—an icon. Isn't it ironic?

I just turned 20 myself, and as my birthday approached, I found suicide dominating my thoughts. Why not end my life now, before I turn 20? Just like Chatterton? It felt like I had

nothing to lose. I've been trapped for 20 years in a space of less than 365 km, with the electricity off most of the time and the possibility of a new war each time a clash occurs between Israeli and Hamas forces on the border. A friend of mine laughed hysterically when I told him my idea. He said my age is only a number and doesn't really matter. But I said no, it does. Why couldn't he see the fine line between 19 and 20 and what it meant to me?

Once my birthday came, I realized I had spent 20 years on this earth, yet I am not convinced I still have much to do in my life or that better things are coming. There is no evidence at all that the blockade on Gaza will lift any time soon, allowing travel in and out, and jobs to be created. I don't usually cry about the past, but I'm worried about a future of repeated scenarios. I'm worried I'll be 30 and living through the same power outages, lack of water, shortage of jobs and fear of war. I would like to imagine a life in which I don't care about these things. But I couldn't.

Now my birthday is past and I'm 20 and my friend teased me, saying, "Hey, you made it; congrats!" I wasn't in the mood to accept any felicitations. With each post on Facebook, with each message, with each call, I knew it was real. I'm officially 20.

I'm not happy though. I had been so afraid of entering my 20s; I spent so much time reflecting on it, the way we foolishly do when we want something to happen and at the same we don't. Another friend called and reminded me again that it's the age of the soul that matters. I knew she was right but still, something inside made me feel awkward.

I feel nostalgic. What distinguishes one human being from another is his/her memories; whenever we feel nostalgic, we're actually experiencing a feeling of longing for ourselves, for what we used to be. I feel that right now. I miss me terribly. I miss being 16. My friend keeps reminding me that I'm traveling soon to the United States (for a semester-long study-abroad program) and this should make me joyful. But I am not. I can't. I have heard many stories about Israel refusing to give permits to Gazans for no reason, and of Jordan prohibiting us from entering to fly out of the Amman airport. I know I've never held a gun in my hand or worked with military resistance forces, but I know many others who are "innocent" as well and have not been allowed to exit. I picture an Israeli officer looking at my photo, disliking it and just because he's a bit moody that morning or maybe had a fight with his wife, he decides to reject my request to leave.

I haven't seen my older brother, who lives in Saudi Arabia, for two years; he can't risk coming back and losing his scholarship when he can't leave again. He had to say happy birthday through a voice message on Facebook, since the power was off that day and we couldn't talk by Skype. On my birthday, I went to sleep at 7 p.m. since the power was off and there was no way to celebrate. I'm 20 and I have never seen another part of the world except this 365 km of Gaza. I'm 20 and all I have been thinking of is the most painless and quickest way to end my life. I'm 20 and lonely.

I had a dream in which a friend took my hand and dragged me to a cliff and asked me to jump. I told her we might die if we jump, but she jumped and left me, so I had to follow. A friend of mine recently said, "Doaa, you repeat the word *fear* too much. Have you ever noticed that?"

If I died now, I'd never do all of the crazy things in my dreams--things that seem mundane, but are difficult here in Gaza, like learning to play the violin, and running down the street as fast as I can and screaming. Now the question is whether I can find the courage to go on, to believe that I can somehow make them happen. And whether I can discover once again the joy I used to get from the crazy kids laughing in the streets, swearing at each other; the sunset; the lovely chats with my friends; delving into a book and falling asleep before I realize it; stargazing; running down the street when it's dark; and getting up in the morning and being *alive*. I feel I haven't done anything worthy and if I do die (now that I have lost the only chance available to die at 19 and follow Chatterton's romantic example), I'll just be a part of the void. I want to be more than that.

*June 5, 2016*

1939

Valerie Do

A yellowed letter  
written in elegant script,  
tucked away  
in a book with a cross.

Its fine ink bleeds  
across the page—  
partially smudged.  
Traces of water,  
perhaps tears,  
dot the everlasting message:  
“I’ll wait for you,  
Love always,  
Lucy.”

The creases along the letter  
prominent and slightly torn,  
now held within the embrace  
of boney carpals  
beneath the ground.

Etched onto the cold, glass marble  
“Here lies John and Lucy Darwin  
1918-1988—death by old age.”

## Neptune

Valerie Do

Basking beneath the glowing  
sun, embraced by the warmth  
of the clear skies and glorious land,  
I succumb to my surroundings.

Atop the grainy, white sand,  
Hugging the soles of my callused feet,  
lazy waters roll  
in and out—bringing salty components  
dwelling within to the shore.

Underneath that glimmering,  
smooth, surface, aquamarine,  
so still—providing  
a lulling getaway—resides  
the golden horse-drawn chariot's  
owner. Peace is but an illusion.

Whims of a ruler once revered,  
turns the, once calm, tides  
to roaring waves. Turbulent,  
foamy waters, dark and ravaging  
reflect the ominous clouds whirling  
above. Thunderous claps resound  
as his clenched hands grip  
the fork that decides all.

Once his wrath subsides,

peace returns unblemished by disdain.

**Fred**

Isabella Geraghty

Ten years ago in a place far away,  
I met you and your grey, white, and black fur.  
I said, "That one!" and made a pact that day  
to share my life with you while you just purred.

I recall you waking me in the morn,  
my eyes hungry for sleep; your eyes staring  
impatiently. You being so stubborn  
during the aggravating house training

Then I left you all alone there at home  
where I could've stayed and watched over you.  
A creature of the night made me lonesome,  
as I cried on my floor miles from the truth.

They don't see why you are still on my mind,  
but I was your human and you were mine.

## **Under the Big Sky**

Kristina McGee

I'm mountains of royalty standing tall with pride  
and fertile valleys filled with blood red fruits.  
I'm sunrises that bleed gold onto the ground  
and sunsets that burn gentle pinks and violent oranges into the sky.  
I'm tall Ponderosa Pines, plum Bitterroots,  
and the gentle swaying of Bluebunch Wheatgrass.  
I'm raging rivers, cascading streams,  
and every natural hot spring.  
I'm a curious grizzly, a song of the meadowlark,  
and the miniscule fry of a Cutthroat.  
I'm deathly cold winters that wrack the body with shivers  
and scorching summers that set the hills ablaze.  
I'm from the wings of a blessed Mourning Cloak Butterfly  
and the bones of a duck-like dinosaur,  
I'm the blue glass Sapphire,  
and the swirling grays and whites of an Agate.  
I'm Oro y Plata,  
the winter of 1889.  
Within myself Montana resides.

## **Time Never Stops**

Kristina McGee

Tick Tock  
Tick Tock

I watch that old, ratty, dusty clock bend  
time like magic. Yet time is magic and magic  
is memories. Memories from a time long ago,  
childhood, adolescence, young adulthood.  
Memory of the word before this one.  
Each one swirls in the vortex that is your brain.  
Each one spoken by that little voice.  
You know, the one inside your head?  
The one only you can hear.  
Your voice.  
Your memories.  
Your time.

Tick Tock.  
Tick Tock.

I hate that damn old clock!  
The one that proves each second of my life,  
withering away. Each little movement of the pendulum bob  
as it moves back and forth, back and forth. Should be calm,  
calm as a gentle wave, a gentle note. Instead it thrashes  
like that of a storm and whirls the hurricane of voices in my brain.  
They won't stop, they never do. Those voices,  
the ones in my head.  
Only I can hear them.  
My voice.  
My Memories.  
My time.

We spent all of our time around that clock,

it constantly ticked and always tocked.

The silence now is louder than before.

Our hearts are torn and the pain is excruciating.

I want that sound, I want the voices in my head  
to move again. That beautiful relic of times past,  
that voice inside my head has ceased to be.

Then it starts again, the sound now appreciated,  
that old clock loved once more.

Our voice.

Our Memories.

Our time.

### **'I Cry at the End of Titanic' and Other Lies**

Meghan Fellows

It seems incredibly stupid to fall in love.

To babble on about the moon  
and his (not even that blue) eyes  
lit up by stars. It's stupid to cry  
in the darkness of an empty room  
listening to "My Heart

Will Go On". It's laughable to let your heart  
become vulnerable. To let love  
force its way in and make room  
for some cliché bullshit about the moon  
and his thick, wavy dark hair. Silly to cry  
from red, bloodshot, dried out eyes.

It's ridiculous to think your eyes

can actually see what's in his heart  
and to assume that yes, he does cry  
at the end of Titanic. He talks about love  
at first sight and how romantic it is that the moon  
you see from your room,

is the same moon he sees from his room.  
You tell yourself that his eyes  
are more of a dull navy. You tell yourself the moon  
is just a rock, and a rock is not romantic. His heart,  
of course, can't actually be seen, and love  
at first sight doesn't make you cry

just like he doesn't cry  
at the end of Titanic. You have no room  
for his glistening pectorals in your life, or his love  
for kids and puppies. It's so dumb that your eyes  
light up when you see him and your heart  
feels like it's on the moon:

being squeezed to death from lack of oxygen on said moon.  
You want to scream and yell and cry  
and blame your dumbass heart  
for being dumb. You want to listen to Celine Dion in your room  
and lay on your bed and close your eyes  
and dream about falling in love.

His deep blue eyes legitimately make you want to cry  
as you gaze at the moon through the window of your room,  
and tell your heart how stupid it was to fall in love.

## Follow Me

Meghan Fellows

He sits across from me, the firelight periodically blurring out his profile. Certainly not a boy, but not quite yet a man. His face is clean shaven and his honey brown hair is wavy across his broad forehead. Looking into his eyes, I find them to be brown and welcoming and weak. I found him at around sundown. Usually I would stay far away, but the numbness from my toes had started to spread to my ankles and I valued my feet more than trusting a stranger. For now. He's unusually talkative for the situation we're in, babbling on about the weather and his supplies and if I need any more canned soup. After the what feels like the hundredth time I tell him that I'm fine, a period of silence falls. I set my bowl of soup down, preparing for the worst. Silence has never been good when talking to strangers.

"Do you believe in God?"

In a second I'm on my feet with my gun pointed at his face. He jumps up, bringing his hands to his ears as a sign of surrender.

"Whoa, hey, it was just a question."

"Oh cut the bullshit," I snap, "You know exactly what that question means now."

"It doesn't mean what you think it means. Not for me, at least."

"That's sweet. So I should smile, put my gun down and we can sit by the fire and make grand plans to take back the world hand in hand?"

"No, I didn't expect any of that. I was honestly just curious. And I'd ask you again but your actions have made your answer pretty clear."

"Don't flatter yourself, I point a gun at everyone I meet."

"You must be fun at parties."

The click of the gun makes him wince.

"Ok, ok, I'm sorry, I—"

"Stop. Talking. You're clearly one of them, and I am clearly not, so one of us is leaving here alive and one of us isn't."

The boy—man—looks pained.

"Does it have to end in death?"

I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

"Why? Afraid you're going to hell?"

“Don’t be cruel. Even now, *especially* now, it’s not nice to joke about.”

“When the world and people I thought I knew turn against me and kill everyone I know and love, I have every right to be cruel. Now, empty your pockets.”

He slowly does what I tell him, revealing in his upturned hands a first aid kit, an extremely shiny penny, and a pocket bible.

“Will you put your gun down now? I’ve done what you asked, and after all this is *my* camp and I’m *letting* you stay here.”

His words seem muffled, far away. My mind is reeling. I was so sure he was one of them, and the bible would have confirmed it. What’s throwing me is the first aid kit. They don’t believe in medicine of any kind. If someone gets sick or hurt, especially one who’s not like them, it is by God’s will and no one is to intervene. He can’t be rebellious; any rebels are cut down at the first sign of defiance. Is it possible he’s unsure? In the middle? If so, how is he still alive? And *now* what am I supposed to do?

I shake myself out of my reverie, repositioning my gun. He starts, having somewhat relaxed for a moment. The look in his eyes concerns me. He has no weapon, no logical way to beat me without risking his life, and yet he looks at me as if I’m the one who should be worried.

“Get down on the ground.”

He pauses, looks at the ground, and then back up at me.

“No.”

“*No?*”

“Look, I know that you point a gun at everyone you meet, and you think you’re so cool, and not afraid of anything, but I can tell you’re hesitant and you don’t seem like the kind of person who’ll take someone’s life without knowing all the facts so please, *please* just put the gun down.”

I’ve never been good at acting, and I know he can tell that he’s right just by looking at me. But I’m not giving in that easily.

“How do I know you won’t attack me as soon as I put my gun down?”

“With what, the needle in the first aid kit? I have no weapon. You have a gun. If I try anything, which I don’t plan to, we both know that you’ll probably shoot me before I move two feet.”

I lower my gun.

“Do not make me regret this or I swear I will kill you without a second thought.”

He could be a Follower and I could have just made the biggest mistake of my life, but what was I supposed to do? Stand there with my gun pointed at him all night until he confesses and I shoot him? I’ve realized that with apocalypses come many gray areas. The decisions you make not only decide if you live or die, but what kind of person you are. It’s funny, the society we’ve always known has collapsed, and instead of reverting to animal survival instincts, we’re still driven by our thoughts and feelings and our obsession with what other people will think of us.

We go back to sit down by the fire. We eye each other with no less suspicion than before, but the atmosphere is a little more relaxed. We no longer have to pretend to be adults who make decisions on whether or not to kill someone; we can be two kids sitting by a campfire, terrified of the world we never thought could exist but have been thrown in to.

“So how did it happen for you?” he asks, his hesitant voice breaking the silence.

It’s an interesting but surprisingly accurate way to phrase the question. If you look at the big picture, the same thing happened to all of us. But in each individual is a terrifying story waiting to be turned into an apocalyptic novel. How did it happen for me?

I was 19. I say that like I’m 30 looking back on when I was young and foolish, when in reality I’m just a year older. It’s like those billboards that tell you to be prepared for tornadoes. You know, the ones that have the same picture of the house Monday through Thursday and then on Friday the house is just a pile of lumber? That’s how everything happens, really. Everything is normal until, very suddenly, it’s not. When they started growing in numbers, no one thought much of it. They weren’t one of the big religious groups like Catholic or Christian or Muslim or Buddhist. Everyone brushed them off as just another crazy religious group. People made jokes about Kool-Aid, and said they hoped that it was just a phase, like they were talking about their thirteen-year old’s haircut.

They called themselves “The Followers”. Maybe that should’ve sent up a red flag simply because that name is creepy as hell. Their faith spread like wildfire, attracting every bat shit crazy person in the United States. They believed in following what the Bible said blindly (with a few added rules), no questions asked. They grew in popularity, and no one stopped them. Freedom of religion and all that. In addition to not believing in medicine, they believed atheists,

LGBT people, divorcees and anyone who helped them should be “purged”. This particular list goes on and on, but I never paid close attention the Bible.

I was eating Cheerios when I found out. Weird, right? It was a Saturday, and me and my dad were watching reruns of *The Bachelor*. My older sister, Kate, came up behind us, and I knew something was wrong by the sound of her footsteps. While she’d usually stumble blindly downstairs in search of the coffee pot, this time, her footsteps were sure.

“Have you guys seen the news?”

“No, but I can tell you who got the rose.”

She smacked the back of my head and made a noise of disgust.

“This shit is serious. Remember the Followers? They destroyed Batesville.”

“Destroyed Batesville? What does that even mean? Where even is Batesville?”

“Batesville Arkansas. Wiped off the map. Their entire population, over 10,000 people, gone.”

My dad switches to *Good Morning America*, and none of us are prepared for what we see. While I expected an explosion, or some type of nuclear disaster, the camera’s views shows a perfectly intact town. Nothing’s destroyed or out of order. The only thing out of place is the dead bodies covering just about every surface.

“Oh, my...” My dad’s voice fades away as we all sit in silence.

“How did they kill them?” I ask.

“They shot everyone who went against what they believed in, and anyone who stood in their way. They’re saying that the time to cleanse has come and this was merely a warning.”

“To show what they’re capable of. Join us or die. It’s happened time and time again.” My dad was a historian, and at times like this, he tended to either blurt out facts or relate everything back to an event that had already happened.

It wasn’t like in the movies. People didn’t storm in our front door and take us to the headquarters. My family wasn’t dragged off kicking and screaming while I cried, held back by an unsmiling soldier. Life went on as normal. The people responsible for the Batesville killings were found and executed. There were a few other sporadic radical events, but they soon went away too. It seemed like a small terrifying moment, something that people would look back on and consider a tragedy, but not think about for more than a couple minutes. It wasn’t until almost six months later that things started to go downhill.

"Anything new on the news?" My dad called as he walked in the door.

"Same old, same old. Oh, they changed reporters again."

He frowned slightly.

"That's too bad. Are there any of the original ones left?"

"Ummmm.... No I think she was the last."

"And not just on CNN", Kate added. "We've been watching all the other stations and they have completely new teams."

"They must be doing a cleanse. But instead of like a juice cleanse, a newscaster cleanse."

My sister giggled and threw a pillow at my head."

"Or maybe they got sick of inaccurate weather reports and stories about conjoined twins."

My dad's frown deepened, and he started tugging on his ear, something he did when he was on thinking, and usually when he was on the brink of figuring something out. He turned and left the room, my sister and I right on his heels. He had a book off the shelf and opened as soon as he entered his office.

"When was the last time you saw something tragic on the news? A mass murder, and accident, anything?", he asked us without looking up.

"I-I don't know," Kate stammered.

"Dad, what's going on?"

When he finally looked up, his face was pale.

"It's all here. They have control of the news stations. Think about it. All new anchors, no bad news, that never happens! It's like what Hitler did during World War II, that's why so few people knew about what was happening in the concentration camps, he had people everywhere! If the Followers are only letting us see what they want us to see, who knows what they could actually be doing?!"

"How do you know it's the Followers?"

He sighed, the sigh that all parents do, the one where they run one hand over their face and look at you like answering is going to take ten years off their life.

"Technically, I'm not supposed to tell you this, but if we're right, no one will give a damn about rules anymore. We've been tracking the Followers ever since Batesville. They wanted the historians specifically involved because they feared the Followers would follow the

path of other radicals, and they have. There used to be reports coming in every day about who they killed and where, but the reports have started to go down over the past few months. I'm going back to work to see if we can figure this out. I don't mean to sound dramatic, but I don't know how this is going to end. There's no time for lengthy good-bye's. I love you both. Take care of each other."

As my dad's car drove away, the door blew open with a bang. Looking back on it, the symbolism astounds me.

"So your dad knew before everyone else did?"

His voice starts out soft, getting stronger as I come back to reality.

"Yeah." I clear my throat.

There's a pause, pregnant with the question he's too afraid to ask but we both know he'll ask anyway, which seems ridiculous because we both know the answer.

"Are he and your sister..."

"My dad's dead. He was one of the 'examples' they killed to prove their strength. My sister and I got separated when they raided our house. I went back to find her, but she was gone."

The fire crackles, sending sparks up to the impending blackness of the night sky. They fade quickly, their lights going out to camouflage with the velvety dark. We've both fallen silent now. It's well past nightfall, and I feel my eyes getting heavy. No matter what the outside situation is, we're still ruled by biology. The boy-man, as I've decided to call him, gets up from the fire slowly, gauging my reaction. For not the first time that night, and by the looks of it, not the last, my gun is pointed at his face. I'd gotten weak, talking about my dad and my sister and getting lost in my mind, reliving it. I have no time to dwell on memories. It's too dangerous. This time, instead of wincing or starting or putting his hands up, boy-man rolls his eyes.

"What are you just gonna point that at me every time I move?"

"Yes."

"You have your work cut out for you then; I'm very twitchy."

His face twists into this weird looking lopsided grin as he waits for me to laugh. I don't.

"Right. Anyway, I have some sleeping bags? If you want one?"

"Where did you get sleeping bags?"

"My family tried to get away when we first heard. We packed a trailer full of 'necessities', as my dad called them, but we were, uh, run off the road by everyone else wanting

to leave. The rest of my... family went to go find help, and they never came back. I hid the trailer in the woods over there.”

After I got over the fact that he hid an entire trailer in the woods and motioned for him to go get the sleeping bags, I realized that he had been talking strangely. His story wasn't exactly normal, but I'd believe anything at this point. Then again, who gave a damn how he got where he was. Clearly, there were more important things to worry about than whether or not his story checked out. He comes traipsing back out of the woods with two sleeping bags and handed one of them to me with a smile.

“This'll keep you nice and toasty.”

“Toasty? *Toasty?*”

“What's wrong with toasty?”

“You sound like somebody's eighty-year-old grandma tucking them in under a flowery yellow quilt. And why are you so goddamn happy all the time?”

“I'm not going to apologize for being happy. I just think it's better to look on the bright side of things.”

“Just shut up,” I snap. I've had enough of this kid and his end of an infomercial personality. It's like he's blocked out all the negativity, you know like the millions of deaths and the fact that our country has been taken over by a bunch of psychopaths, and chose to focus on how pretty the leaves are in the fall. I burrow down in the stale smelling sleeping bag, and put my gun just outside it, safety on, but still pointed at him. Yeah I don't trust the guy, but I'm also not dumb enough to sleep with a gun, safety on or off. As I try and slow my breathing, I start grouping people. I've done it ever since I was little; I guess you could call it a coping mechanism. I start with a number of groups, and then fit people into them. It always comforted me, that no matter who you were, or how many people there were in the world, everyone had a place, everyone fit into at least one, if not many groups. This time I decided to do post-apocalyptic groups. There were four: The Machines, The Town Criers, The Runners, and the White Suburban Moms.

The White Suburban Moms are the epitome of those wooden signs you find in craft stores. ‘Life every day like it's your last.’ ‘Life is not measured by the amount of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.’ ‘Life is short, break the rules. Forgive quickly, kiss slowly. Love truly. Laugh uncontrollably and never regret anything that makes you

smile.' Really vomit in your mouth kind of stuff. These people tell old flames they've always loved them and have wild passionate we-could-die-tomorrow sex. They go on road trips and go streaking and make bucket lists and visit family and patch relationships and accept death with open arms.

Then you've got the runners. There's not a lot to these people, and the name is pretty self-explanatory. As soon as everything goes to shit, they're gone. Maybe some of them made it out alive, maybe they didn't. There's no way to tell.

Then you have the town criers. They're usually the scientists, doctors, historians and government officials of the world. Remember the guy you see in office buildings with his untucked shirt and askew glasses who keeps dropping his papers and no one listens to him? Yeah. They believe it is their duty to tell everyone what's happening. Screw secrecy, the people have a right to know. They were the best out of the four. And they were killed the fastest.

The last are the machines. The past is the past. The future is unknown. All they care about is staying alive another day. They kill a lot because they don't trust anyone. There's no reasoning with them. The only person they look out for is themselves.

Dad was a town crier. Boy-man, snoring softly across the fire, is a white suburban mom and a runner. I don't know what I am. And I don't want to think about now.

△ △ △

I awake in a panic like I have for the last month. An entire group of religious crazies kill a ton of people and want to convert the rest and I don't wake up smiling with the sun on my face? Shocking. My gun is already in my hand, and I reflect on that for a moment. Here in post-apocalyptic America, we don't have security blankets, we have security guns. Fantastic. Boy-man smiles hesitantly in my direction and slides over a plate of eggs and something else. I've learned not to question it. I nod a silent thank you, and eat with one hand, gun in the other. At least he's not grinning now; I don't think I could stomach that this early in the morning.

We eat in silence, and I think about what's going to happen after this. After I lost Kate, I had stumbled blindly around the woods for about a week. They had cleared out most of the towns, and the 'true believers' were all relocated to their capital in Kansas. They'd built it in the exact center of the United States. I certainly couldn't go in there alone, and scrambled-egg-making lumberjack and his trailer weren't exactly the saving grace I was looking for. But I had to try. As cheesy as it sounds, she was all I had left. That's another thing about not only post-

apocalyptic America, but change in general. As human beings, we cling on to every remnant and reminder of the life we left behind, and we convince ourselves that it was better, when really it was just familiar. Familiarity gives us a sense that we have control, that not everything's out of our hands, that we can still change the world. It's ridiculous and stupid and whimsical, but it's something. I'd heard rumors that Canada was safe, that they had an army, and that they didn't believe in what the Followers were doing. It wasn't much but it was something.

With a destination in mind, I move on to what I'm going to do with him. It's not like I can get up, shake his hand, thank him for the hospitality and go on my merry way. I can't take him with me either. If I have to spend another day with his interminable positivity, I will kill him. If he's a Follower I won't feel bad about it. But if he isn't, I have another existential crisis on my hands, and I've already dealt with enough for a lifetime.

"I'm not a Follower."

My head jerks up in surprise.

"What?" Had I been thinking out loud?

"I'm not a follower. I know that's what you're trying to figure out and I thought I'd make it easier for you."

"So I'm just supposed to believe you?"

"I have a first aid kit," he says like this is the most obvious thing in the world.

"You also have a bible."

He stops for a minute and looks down.

"I know you weren't telling the truth before, about your family? I'm guessing the bible has something to do with that them, and I get that it's a touchy subject, but you're not going anywhere until I know the full story."

Maybe it was harsh, but I've never been good at the whole sympathy thing.

"The bible was my mom's. I keep it because it's the only thing I have of hers."

"Congratulations, you told me nothing."

"Well that's all I'm going to tell."

"Well I can't leave until I know if you're one of them, so start talking!"

We're both standing now, and as our voices get louder, I start to talk with my gun instead of my hands. Gone is the grinning Boy-man who gave me canned soup and a sleeping bag. He's

angry, angrier than I've seen anyone in a while. People wear fear like a second skin, but no one lives long enough to be angry.

"You don't get to tell me what to do or who to be!" he yells. "You talk to me like I'm one of them, like I personally killed your family! You act like this whole thing is black and white, like everyone has the same circumstances! The Followers come in and kill your family and you're sad! It's not as simple as that!"

His face has gone red, and he's screaming as he comes closer to me.

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like if your family was one of them?! How about your entire family? My dad gave me up to them because he didn't like that I was gay and had finally found a legal way of curing me! And my brothers, my 'family' stood there and let him do it! I didn't end up in the woods because I was in a car accident, I ran here because I was running for my life! So don't accuse me of being one of them. Don't you dare accuse me."

He sits down on the ground beside the dying fire. All the life, the flame, the spark has gone out of it, and all that's left are some charred, dusty remains. And me, the badass with the gun, the one who isn't afraid of anything, the one who has the upper hand and doesn't feel sympathy for anyone, I sit there in silence, and feel my heart splinter into a million pieces. The gun drops from my hand, and I sit down slowly beside him. His eyes burn with tears unwilling to be shed. We sit there in silence, unspoken words and apologies flowing between us. Sometimes, what you mean doesn't need to be said. We know each other's stories. We're entwined in a contradictory spiral, getting closer to allies and farther from enemies with each breath.

"I was thinking Canada," I say, breaking the silence.

"Canada?"

I nod, and turn to look at him. The twitch in the corner of his mouth hints at the return of his stupid grin.

"I'm Brian," he declares, sticking his hand out.

I give a weak smile of my own, and return the handshake.

"Jacob," I reply.

We turn back to the fire, and from the dust of white ashes, come a glow of red.

## Ghost Cat

Rhiannon Sturgess

For a fraction in time, you see it. The next,  
gone from your searching eyes.  
But not you from its. The orbs are inescapable,  
a blanket of barbed wire  
that cannot be felt, but itches like the presence  
of fiber-thin lacerations  
criss-crossing every inch of your skin.  
Keep walking. Feet forward, eyes everywhere but.  
The silence rings discordant in the forest, dampened only  
by the white flurry of falling snow  
whose journey to earth drowns and diminishes every decibel  
your starving ears ache with straining to decipher.  
Snowflakes kiss the earth, disguising  
Potential footfall within the trees,  
whose thick and twisted branches shroud  
your spectral follower. The ghost cat  
floats soundlessly beside, behind, and above,  
as you attempt to dissemble fear  
with feigned, sickly assurance. Blood pulses  
desperately in your ears, drumming in your chest  
as you approach the freedom of the forest's edge.  
One, two, three steps farther away from tempted fate  
and closer to the bright and noisy world.  
You turn backward abruptly, eagerly search the shadows, the trees—  
and find nothing.  
There was no encounter;  
no happening outside of the opportunity to live another day,

thankful for the generosity of the gods  
and a phantom's lack of appetite.

## **Losing**

Rhiannon Sturgess

Eddy's old, seasoned arms strain with the effort, but he manages to lift the load onto the rail of steady crawling teeth. They gently grip and guide it up and away from his gloved hands, and he walks back to retrieve another bale. The twine has imprinted thick grooves into his leathery palms, and bits of alfalfa stick to the frayed edges of his checkered flannel. He heaves another off the tailgate with his right arm, swinging its far end near and slipping his left hand beneath the orange string. Bowlegged, he carries the dry bundle back to the machine and heaves it onto the moving spikes, making sure its narrow end leads, lest it get held up in the loft window.

His wife Janet is up there waiting to stack along the old, dusty walls the bales he sends up. Sweat breaks on his wrinkled brow when he returns with another load to send up the track. Harvest was unfruitful this year. The two would barely manage to scrape by. Shading his eyes from the noon sun, he squints into the window at his wife who is waiting for a bale to complete its journey up. This isn't usually her job, he remembers, but it'd be difficult to complete alone. He turns on his heel, goes back for the last one. After it reaches the top, Janet grabs it by the twine and tugs it alongside the rest. She looks thoughtfully at the stacks. They would normally sit four or five high, but in her aging years Janet is unable to replicate. The hay swells deep into the center of the loft and sits about three high.

She tucks silvery strands behind her ears and wipes her dewy forehead with the back of a gloved hand, wondering how Raymond was able to stand this work in his thick Carhartt jacket. That jacket: always covered in splatters of mud, paint, and most recently, spiky white dog hairs. When he had helped her and Eddy renovate their living room, it also sported flecks of drywall. A weak smile visits her lined face as she remembers the days from not that long ago and refuses

incoming tears with vigorous blinks. She shakes the feelings down her arms and out her fingertips before climbing down the worn rungs and stepping onto the barn floor.

Eddy meets her at the door, opens it with the deep creak of aging hinges, and offers her a flask of lemonade. She accepts graciously.

"All done," he says. He recalls that last year, baling wouldn't yet be finished hours from now. Janet, knowing as much herself, marks Eddy's enduring expression and sets her own thin lips in a straight line. They're making toward the dusty, dented Ford when Eddy halts and then turns back.

"I forgot about the loose hay; you head on back to the house," he says over his shoulder. "I'll meet you there in a bit."

Slowly, he treads up the four crooked steps and reenters. Tired feet shuffle to the far side of the barn, and his weary, distant eyes find the pitchfork leaned up against the shutters. He grips the wooden handle and drags it toward the small pile of hay in the corner. He remembers when Raymond gave him the tool a few Christmases ago.

"Better than that other rusty piece of crap," he had said.

He swings the fork around, standing it up on its end, and stares at the spikes. Running his fingers over a smooth surface, he finds it cold and unsettling. His thoughts return to that Christmas. Suddenly, the top-heavy tool slips from his grasp and hits the barn floor with an echoing blow. He jumps and falters as the noise reverberates across the walls and among the rafters. The lot of pigeons that had gathered atop them explode in a flurry of feathers and shoot out the loft window to escape the acoustic assault while the old man stares at the floor where the fork had fallen.

"Just like the crack of a gunshot," he thinks. "A tool in the hands, and the crack of a gunshot."

It is then that he notices the stiff bird lying in the hay pile near his feet. Its plumage is grainy; the eyes still-shining orbs, but vacant as they reflect the pale stream of sunlight. He soaks in the sight, noticing the aviator's tiny talons engaged in a frozen grapple with the another as if clutching onto something invisible. They are curled, held tight against a white belly. Eddy turns his head away, looks out the west window up to the house. Disturbed, and a bit pale, he leaves the chore for the next day. He picks up the pitchfork, leans it up against the shutters, and ambles down barn stairs, forgetting to close the door behind him.

Eddy heaves heavy feet through the thriving foxtail that had overtaken the barnyard, and spots Buster nose-deep in something near the root cellar. Eddy always thought his son's bull terrier was a homely looking creature, with its long face and beady eyes, but he looks at the dog with fondness, remembering how proud Raymond was when he finally trained the pup to not bark at passing traffic. He wonders what the dog is sniffing at so adamantly, and hustles forward to discover a raccoon carcass laying between clumps of weeds.

"Buster, get," he gives the dog a gentle tape with the side of his boot, not wanting him to contract anything from the vermin. The dog gazes up at him, tongue lolling and eyes squinting in the setting sun, proud of his discovery. The old man makes a mental note to take him in for a rabies vaccination his next run to town; he isn't sure if Raymond had already, but the dog's collar bore no tag.

"Come on, its supptime." He steps up the hill with Buster zig-zagging behind him. They enter through the backdoor to find Janet boiling corn on the stove top. She meets his thoughtful eyes with her own as Eddy sits down at the little round table and kicks off his heavy boots. They meet the floor bluntly, and clumps of dried mud scatter across the linoleum. Buster trots forward to explore their contents.

Janet is strategizing ways to stretch their canned goods to next season when Eddy asks her, "That package in the mail this morning, was that his uniform?"

She looks across the counter, locking his gaze. "Yes. His tags are in there as well. A plaque. Don't know what it means, though. You probably would."

He gives a slow nod and looks back at the dog.

"There's a dead coon down by the cellar. Figured I'd take the dog in to get his rabies vaccination next I go in."

Janet is buttering bread, staring down as the creamy white melts into the porous grain. "Did Ray not get him the shot?"

"No tag to say. Better safe than sorry."

"I reckon. There were some rats out in the garden too; found them when I was weeding yesterday. I really hope it isn't an outbreak. I know that Ted said there was a funny-actin' fox getting at his chicken coop not too long ago. Remember him saying that?"

"Yeah, I remember."

Janet brings their plates to the table and Eddy pours each of them a glass of milk. They have become accustomed to enjoying a meager meal, and each knows as well as the other why they aren't eating as heartily as before. Times change, as they will, and with changing times come adaptive routines. A stroke of poor crop turnout can turn a farm on its head within weeks. The couple had seen unsuccessful harvests before, but none were comparable to this. The unforgiving heat and aging irrigation systems are a wicked force to reckon with, and Eddy and Janet cannot afford to hire the farmhands they need to climb back to fruitful productivity. The farmer and his wife are caught in a vicious cycle, and the next step forward is foggy and uncertain.

"You know," Janet says softly between bites, "they're saying that the west coast has been treating folks well. You know my cousin, Barb? Her boy and his wife took to Oregon and have themselves a nice little orchard. Say that caring for the fruit trees ain't half the work of a farm." They eat in silence for a few more minutes. Janet knows that Eddy is reluctant to leave the farm, especially during such dire times; that's his stubborn, hard-working attitude at play. His family owned the land since they first immigrated to America. The old oak beneath their feet were set and stained by hard Polish hands. The round table upon which they ate was brought over from across the Atlantic. The walls around them lent an ear to generations of jokes and riddles, felt the laughter of his family. The house, the land, they both had a history too rich and strong for Eddy to simply pack up and leave for the west coast. Janet knows as much, and it pains her to think of leaving, too, but she recognizes a hard truth: they can't keep up with this much longer. Furthermore, she thinks that leaving the farm might help them cope with Raymond's death. The house, the barn, the land—they all whisper his name. While Buster is a warm, breathing, lively reminder of the son they once had, the property seems to taunt her senses, daring her to remember the little boy she raised on the farm. Forgetting Raymond is impossibly unimaginable, but she wonders how long she can cope with the perpetual haunting. A change of scenery might make it easier for her to heal.

"An orchard, huh?" Eddy picks at what's left on his cob. "Well, that's something to think about."

"Yes, it is." Janet shifts in her seat. "Eddy, I don't want you to feel like you need to something you don't want to, it's just that I don't know how—"

"I know, Janet. I know."

“Okay.”

They finish their supper, and Eddy clear the table, bringing the dishes to the sink to wash. He fills the sink up halfway with lukewarm water. Rubbing a rag across the weathered ceramic, he imagines life away from the farm. He knows the crop trade well. He and Janet had lived no other way for years, as she had also come from a farming family. He wonders exactly how different raising fruit trees might be from tending the corn and potatoes, how different from haying the fields. A distressed gasp jerks him back from his visions.

“Oh, Eddy, come here, look! Buster!”

He takes long strides back to the table, and looks under it where the dog had been napping. He immediately notices an erratic twitching in his legs, some sort of muscle spasm.

“Buster, hey now...” He sighs and kneels down to shake the dog awake, as often a dog’s dream can manifest in this way of sleep-running. His shakes do nothing. It is then that Eddy sees Buster’s eyes, wide with worry, are staring back at him. All the while, his legs continue to shake and his tongue lolls, exposing a film of foam around his lips.

“Oh God, Eddy do something! Is he having a seizure? Oh Lord!”

Eddy is shocked. His thick hands grope at the remaining hair on his balding head “I—I don’t know! What *do* you do!?” Then, as suddenly as it began, Buster’s body calms and he lays still. The vigorous rise and fall of ribs show the dog regaining his breath. The couple stare down at him as his eyes point straight forward, exhausted from the ordeal. A stretch of silence ensues, and Janet looks to her husband for direction.

Eddy stands from his crouch. “We’re gonna have to take him in tomorrow. Probably shouldn’t chance a wait any longer.” The couple gaze down at him a few moments longer.

“Yes, that’s good. Tomorrow morning.”

It was still dark when the old house creaks to life. Well before the sun could grace the eastern mountains, Janet had awoken with gusto, swinging into action in the kitchen. The two-hour drive into town makes customary some sort of breakfast, small as it may be. The frozen, thick slices of maple bacon the couple had saved from the last farmer’s market feed the cast iron skillet, and Janet goes out to the coop to retrieve two fresh eggs.

The chilled morning air greets her briskly, and she tightens the hose coat around her frail torso. Having slipped on Eddy's large boots for the trip, her gait is cumbersome but focused. The door the coop opens with hushed squeak, and she can hear the awakened hens cooing softly from inside. They hop sleepily from their hay nests once Janet enters, their little heads bobbing confusedly. Her eyes search for the warm glow of white eggs in the dim lighting, and find three. She grabs the first two, and they are rather large. She rolls them in her palms and feels the warmth of them leave. Rolling them in her palms, still, she hears the clucking of chickens behind her. Restless to be away from their nests so early in the morning, they are impatient to get back to the warmth. Janet grabs the third egg, closing the coop behind her.

Back in the kitchen, she breaks the thin shells over the edge of the skillet, letting their contents spill besides the sizzling bacon. The smell of cooking food rouses Buster from his blanket in the corner. He seems to be acting pretty normal today, and Janet notes his sleepy face as he stretches his hind legs, then his front. She smiles, hopeful, and flips the bacon.

Eddy throws on what he has always called his town pants—the only pair of jeans not worn for work—and shoulders on an insulating flannel. He knows all too well to never underestimate the effects of the morning chill. Leaving the bedroom, Eddy takes in the warm aroma of cooking food in the kitchen. Grateful, he enters the room to confirm Janet working away upon the stove.

"That smells delicious," he says before giving his wife light peck on the cheek. Like Janet, Eddy notices that Buster is acting fairly normal, and is hopeful about how the town trip may go. The dog receives his breakfast as well: some dried food with a gravy sauce on top. They feel that Buster deserves a more-special-than-usual breakfast as well before his big trip. Oblivious to it all, Buster washes down his bowl greedily, tail wagging back and forth. After everyone's breakfast is complete, Eddy heads out to start the old beater. It's always best to let it warm up a touch, lest the windshield be too frosty to see through clearly in the cold dawn. Janet brings out Buster's blanket out to the truck, settling it in the cab seat between hers and Eddy's.

"The truck's plenty warm by now, shouldn't waste too much gas," Eddy says after a few minutes of waiting. Suddenly nervous for the veterinarian's verdict, Janet nods in agreement.

"Come on then Buster. Time for a trip!"

The couple head out to load into the pick-up, and Eddy scoops up Buster, handing him off to Janet when she takes her seat. He's a dense dog for being so small, but she swings him over her

lap and onto his blanket in the middle. Once Eddy is behind the wheel, the little family pulls out of the washboard driveway. Buster, who isn't accustomed to riding anywhere but in the bed of the truck, is on high-alert, ears perked forward and nose pointed straight down the road. Janet giggles at the sight of him, Eddy's little co-pilot. The old man lets a smile touch his face, too, at the sight of the odd little dog. For a moment, both he and his wife forget the reason why they're going into town at all.

The drive is peaceful enough, despite the uncomfortable nudge at the back of Eddy's mind that the old truck might not make it. The two enjoy the period of silence; it is strange to be free of duties, if even for two hours. Conscious of the vibrating dashboard and eyes fixed on the road, Eddy remembers back to the days when he and his brothers would wake up at dawn and work till night. Back then, the acres spanning the property were plump-full of every harvest Eddy had thought imaginable: cabbage, beet, carrot, asparagus, rhubarb, spinach, chive, potato—his family had harvested obscene amounts every year. Ma had helped with the planning, as did his sisters, but, he remembers, their specialties had lay in the selling. The girls would all load up into his father's work truck and head into town for the weekend, sleeping at the inn between days, to sell vegetables at the farmer's market. His family had made a very pretty penny at the farmer's market, as most of the locals in town knew of them and found them plenty friendly. The girls, he remembers, would do their hair up in fancy braids and would scrub some of Ma's rouge to brighten up their cheeks. His father would just laugh and proclaim, "Oh, just you wait until your mother finds out! She'll whip your other cheeks just as red!" Eddy chuckles to remember when his youngest sister paraded around with the money she had made selling an impressive number of beets, all on her own. She had sold more than any of the other girls, probably because, as his father had pointed out, her cheeks were the color of beets, all bright and pink. The whole family had laughed heartily that day.

"Oh, hun, you were supposed to take a left there," Janet said, pointing back behind the truck.

"Oh, I'm sorry dear. Here, we'll turn around up here. I was just remembering the farmer's market, when I was just a boy. Do you remember how packed those places used to be? I remember packing the back of our father's pickup with all sorts of stuff—we packed it to the brim. I couldn't believe all the girls could still pile in after we were done loading it up."

"Oh, you don't even know the start. My sisters and I actually had to lay down between the corn sacks in the bed of the truck. There was no room anywhere else!" The couple laughs fondly at old memories, and it is only until they pull into the vet clinic that a sobering acknowledgement comes over them. Exiting the truck, Eddy strides across to the other side, his town pants straight at the seam. He opens the door for Janet, who climbs down from the height of her seat, and he reaches across to secure Buster in his outstretched arms.

Buster is ill at ease, having never made a trip into town before. All of the new sights, sounds, and scents seem to be overwhelming and he holds his ears flat to the back of his skull. His tail is tucked between trembling legs.

"Come on now Buster, it'll be okay." Eddy isn't sure if he's lying to the dog or not, and his stomach drops at the thought. Entering the clinic, the trio are greeted by a soft waft of sterile-smelling air. The smiling woman at the front desk greeted them warmly and gave them some paperwork to fill out.

"Regularly wormed...ear mites, tooth tartar, I don't know, what sorts of questions are these?" Eddy threw up his hands in exasperation.

"Here, I'll finish that." Janet knows how much Eddy hates paperwork. When the veterinarian comes out to see them, he takes one look at Buster and grins.

"Folks, you've got a fine looking bull terrier right there. I didn't know people around here had an appreciation for the breed! Where'd you get him? Certainly not locally." Janet and Eddy exchange glances, bewildered by the man's robust demeanor.

"He's our son's, sir." Eddy replied.

"Ah, taking care of the kid's kids, huh? Follow me right this way... Mr. and Mrs?"

"Janet."

"Eddy."

"Right. This way, folks. Let's take a look at that pooch." The man leads them down a short hallway decorated with pictures of happy-looking cats and dogs. Once they enter a room with a large metal table in the middle, the man lifts Buster from the ground and sets him upon the table's cold surface. Buster's tail is between his legs, and he's shaking slightly. Janet rubs one of his soft, pointed ears between her thumb and finger to comfort him, as he licks at her wrist. Eddy begins by telling the man of his concerns about rabies, relaying the numerous discoveries of dead animals on the property. He recounts the night Buster seized below the table

and how his mouth foamed up at the edges. All the while the veterinarian nodded his head, and the further Eddy went, the grimmer the man's expression became.

"I see. Well folks, I'll tell you two things. First off, you're right to take the dog in and get him checked out. All of these incidents are big indicators of the early stages of rabies virus. Second, you folks aren't the first to bring in a sick pup. Animal control reports have indicated to us that there might be a pretty significant breakout in the area. Now, seeing as you folks live well out of town, I can't say for certain whether or not your area has been effected or not. I'm going to take a blood sample from ol' Buster here, just to see if these symptoms might have arisen from a different sort of sickness. You see, I can't actually say for certain whether or not Buster has rabies unless he passes. The brain, that's where you have to look to know for sure. But like I said, a blood test that indicates a different sort of illness, that's something we can work with." Janet's purses her lips and keeps stroking the dog's ear as the man gets the blood he needs. When he leaves to run the tests, she turns to Eddy.

"So he can't even tell us if it is rabies, not for certain? What if he's got it? What are we going to do? Oh, Eddy I just can't bear to think of it." Tears enter the brims of her eyes, threatening to overflow.

"Now, now, let's not think like that. I could easily be something completely treatable, something quite simple."

They wait in silence of the man to return, and Buster rests his head up on Janet's lap. A time goes by, and when the veterinarian does return with papers in hand, Eddy stands up from his chair, says nothing. The man tells the couple that the results should be done by the following day.

"Do you have a telephone at home?" he asks. Eddy gives him the number, and the man continues to explain that some diseases, but not many, exude symptoms very similar to those of rabies, and most people get the two confused and give their dog a quick way out without knowing the better.

"We can hold him here at the clinic for you, if you'd like. We have a 10 day holding plan for cases like this, just in case you don't want him putting other animals or people at risk."

"That won't be necessary, but thank you, sir."

With that, the trio head back out the door and load up into the truck. The drive back home is far less indulgent, as both Janet and Eddy have on their minds the weight of what might come

of their beloved dog. Buster, oblivious, is joyous to be back in familiar territory once they pull into the driveway. The couple and their dog have a meager dinner that afternoon, and turn in early for the night. The older they get, the more tiresome drives into town become. They tuck their weary bones into bed and rest as well as they can until morning.

Eddy awakes to Janet crying for him in the kitchen.

He had overslept.

"It's Buster again!" He stumbles out of bed, makes his way out the bedroom. Then he sees, Buster is shaking all over, and he's stumbling into the walls.

"Oh Eddy, no no no no." Janet is hysterical as she watches her husband head for the gun safe. He unlocks it and retrieves mercy for the poor beast.

"Just wait, let's just wait until we get the call!"

"Janet, look at him. We can't wait—God he's suffering; I can't stand the sight of it."

Janet holds her face in her hands, sobbing. She is sick with the feeling of losing her son again, and she feels the old wounds rip open once more. She watches as Eddy herds Buster out the door and into the morning light. There, on the front porch, Buster drops and becomes relaxed once more, just like that first night. With his free arm, Eddy scoops him up and treks down the hill to the barnyard.

Janet watches from the kitchen window, her eyes red with grief as Eddy places his small, unmoving white bundle to the ground.

He raises the gun.

He aims.

His shoulders are shaking.

Janet looks away.

Then, nothing.

There is no bang to speak of her husband's conviction. She looks back out the window, at the barnyard. There, on the ground with the dog, her husband lays, hands over the back of his neck, his body wracked with sobs. Buster raises a weak need to lick the top of Eddy's head, and Janet breathes a sick sight of relief.

At that exact moment, the telephone rings. She rushes to the kitchen to answer.

“Hello? Yes, this is her. You did? Well that’s soon, I wasn’t expecting... Oh? Oh! Well we will come in right away to pick that up. Yes ma’am. Thank you so much.” She rushes to the door, ecstatic, and shouts out, “Eddy, it was the clinic! The blood tests came back! Eddy come back up here, bring Buster!”

Eddy looks up from his place on the ground, and his heart skips a beat with relief at the worlds his wife speaks. Buster’s tail wags softly. The two make it back to the house and are greeted by Janet’s enthusiastic embrace.

“It’s called Encephalatis, Eddy. It’s a disease, not a good one, but it’s treatable. Said it was probably a tic that got ‘em.”

“And treatment?”

“Yes, we can pick it up the medications as soon as possible!”

“Oh thank God.”

“Thank God.”

Buster, still weak on the floor, wags his tail with the vigor he can muster. Janet smiles at the sight, relieved beyond imagination, and tears of happiness stream down unrepressed. Gratefully, Eddy returns the rifle to its case and comes back to wrap his arms around Raymond’s dog he had never wanted to lose.

Together, the three stand silent in the kitchen, the one built with strong, Polish hands.

“Janet, you mentioned Oregon the other day, the orchards. I was thinking, maybe that would be a good thing to look into.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Buster could probably use some change of scenery. Damn tics, and what not. I’m sure Oregon doesn’t have tics.”

## Ben & Jerry's

By Samantha Reed

### Week Two

Having a night class sucked, period. Having a night class on a Monday was the closest thing to hell besides finals week – and finals week wasn't all that bad if you won the class registration lottery. I could handle an 8 am final. Heck, I could destroy getting my ass out of bed and to class on time.

Staying awake in a class with a full stomach while the brilliant crimson, magenta, and honey of the sky was brutally ripped apart by the shadows was a different matter entirely.

The class was restless. Over in the corner, Tamsin was meticulously blowing bubbles out of her gum. The peppermint was nauseating even from across the room. In our other classes together, she sat beside me and avoided the gum. She knew it gave me headaches. Just like the one building its crescendo between my brows.

Westley, who had taken Tamsin's resident seat beside me, was tapping his pen against the edge of the table in an impatient, uneven rhythm. If it weren't for his constant moving, I would be asleep by now.

My eyes were impossibly heavy, the weight of my eyelids increasing with every passing second of Professor Laskin's monotonous voice. Last week hadn't been so bad in the grand scheme of things. Syllabus day. The one day of the semester it was actually acceptable to zone out. Today, not so much.

When the clock struck nine, people just started shoving their belongings back into their bags before evacuating as quickly as humanly possible. I was a few seconds behind.

"Hey, Ashton," Westley's voice was a conspiratory whisper, "if you manage to keep your eyes open again next week, I'll keep you out of my snapchat story of miscellaneous damsels in distress."

"Ha ha." I roll my eyes and turn my head to look at him rather than let his broad frame fill my peripheral. It was disorienting. West is expectantly waiting for a reply. "Control your eyebrows, West. No one wants to see your drama face this late."

One of his endearingly fluffy brows is raised all the way to his hair line and it seems to go impossibly higher. "Bitch please. Everyone wants to see my drama face this late. You should

see it after midnight, that's when shit gets real crazy and I bring out the Shakespeare" His dark brows wag again and I punch him in his unfairly hard shoulder.

"Jerk."

"You know you love me." West stands, grabbing the strap of my bag and hoisting it over his back. "Time to put Ash to bed. I'll even tell you a bed time story and make sure the bed bugs don't bite."

I shove my chair back, the legs grinding against the carpet. By the time I'm on my feet, the door is swinging shut and I can just barely make out the West's broad silhouette before it closes.

### Week Ten

Westley is shoving spoonful after spoonful of my ice cream into his face. When he speaks, his mouth is full of a dark chocolate goo I wish I hadn't seen.

"Why does he have to be so fucking mean? I had that test nailed. I know I did. I double checked all the answers and I studied my ass off. Literally, I lost inches and had to buy new jeans. That should be worth something."

I let him rant until his words fail and he leans into my side. Although I can barely support him, I wrap my arm around his waist anyways. "It's going to be alright, West. One bad grade won't kill you. Trust me, you should see the last exam I had in Accounting. It was a nightmare."

Another spoonful goes in, but the sacrifice of my favorite Ben and Jerry's is one I am willing to make. Especially for Westley. Only for West.

I let my hand drift slowly across his lower back, hoping he doesn't notice the slight tremor of my fingers. Even though he has been to my room nearly every day after class since we first met, tonight is different. I can feel it deep within my gut.

I give some of my weight to his side, tucking my head down into his arm. The spoonfuls stop and I find myself gazing suddenly into eyes the color of fading grass. I think they're beautiful. I think he is beautiful.

West smiles at me, and for a moment everything fades and all I can do is focus on the soft looking stubble surrounding his lips. I want to feel it on my skin.

I tear my gaze away at the last moment. It is a foolish desire, and I am no fool. At least, I try not to be.

With Westley, it is easy. It's easier to smile, to focus on the good rather than the crushing weight of all the assignments I have to do but have yet to start. It's easy to forget that I can't have him and that he will never look at me the same way as I look at him. It's easy to hand over my favorite ice cream, the very same flavor I screamed at my roommate for moving around the freezer, without so much as a second nasty thought.

Saying I didn't think about it at all would be a lie. I was mesmerized as it moved from carton to lips.

"Ash," he starts, "do you think Laskin will let me retake it? Or at least do something to boost my grade."

"Sure thing." I reassure him. "He'd be an asshole not to. You just have to ask. The worst he can do is say no." I lightly nudge him, causing him to look down once again. "Besides, if he does say no, we still have other assignments and two more exams to fix your grade. I'll even study with you this time."

"You're not sick of me yet?" Westley teases.

"I bite my thumb at you, Sir."

This gets a laugh, one of the deep belly laughs that send tingles running down my spine.

"Now who is bringing the drama?"

"I learned from the best." I lightly tug him down closer to me and press a kiss to his cheek. I have to pretend as though the very motion of it doesn't scorch every cell in my body. That the feeling of my lips on the sharp prickle of his skin doesn't take my breath away or set my mouth ablaze.

It is the best kind of torture: being in love with someone who will never in a million years love you back.

### **Week Eight**

"So, how'd it go?" I pounce on Westley the moment he walks out the door. I finished before him, but I didn't mind staying behind to wait. Our time together after class on Monday has become routine. It's one of the only times I get to keep him all to myself.

West looks up from the floor, his pale green hues meeting mine. The expression within them turns my stomach on its head. But then his eyes shift – a change as quick as lightning – and he smiles.

“I fucking crushed it, Ash.”

I can't help but laugh. “Of course you did, you big oaf. Now for some celebratory episodes of Supernatural and Ben & Jerry's?” I phrase it as question, even though I know he will say yes.

His look says it all. *Do you really have to ask that? Hurry the fuck up.*

It's standard dialogue at this point. I ask, he says yes. I ask, he just waits for me to move because I'm half his size and it takes me twice as long. We've got it down to a system.

“Come on, short stack.” He rushes past me; the breeze he creates with sheer mass slapping light blonde strands of hair straight into my mouth.

I sputter, spitting the hair from my lips. I hate it when he does that. No, that's a lie. I love it when he does that. I love it when he does anything. I love the way he smiles; the way he says my name with that tilt of his head. I love his eyes and how they light up when he talks about the newest edition of Captain America or The New Avengers. I love him. Plain and simple, just like Ben & Jerrys.

### **Week Five**

The soothing, heavy weight of a leather jacket settles around my shoulders. I know it's leather because it smells like him, and it's the only one he ever wears to class.

“Forget your coat?” Westley asks, crossing his arms over his chest. I can see goosebumps prickle the tan skin of his forearms, now bare.

“I didn't think it would be this cold out. It wasn't as bad when I left.”

“Welcome to Montana.” He laughs, slinging one of his arms over my shoulders and pulling until I'm tucked into his side.

I fight the urge to tense. I've never been this close to a guy, at least, I haven't been this close in a long time. West looks down at me and smiles, just a slight curve of his lips that perfectly pulls at the dimple in his left cheek.

“Want to know what the best thing about cold weather is?”

“What's that, West?” I ask, falling in step beside him as he moves down the stairs. His warmth is comforting, wrapping around me much like the jacket he so recently sacrificed.

“Ice Cream.”

“You're shitting me, right?” I laugh, purposefully bumping my shoulders into his side. It causes him to huff, and I feel the slightest sense of satisfaction.

“No I am not, ‘shitting you’, as you so eloquently put it young missy.” Though I can’t see his face from this angle, I imagine his brows wag. I glance up and catch the descent out of the corner of my eye. I smile. “The best time to get ice cream is when it’s cold. Why, you may ask? Because all of the good shit’s still there. Everyone’s too much of a bitch to eat it.”

“Well then, we shall devour it for them. Their loss.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

“Really? You had to go all Princess Bride on me *Westley*.”

His laughter echoes around us, penetrating the stars that have taken over the sky. In that moment, I imagine it is just the two of us off on some grand adventure. I like picturing us that way. Over these past few weeks, we’d gotten closer. He had permanently switched to Tamsin’s chair and was now my resident partner in crime. The first time we had hung out was only the third time I had met him. He offered to walk me back to my room, and we’d been inseparable since – at least after class.

By the time we reach his room, Westley’s skin is ice cold and his cheeks had stolen all of the color from his lips. I feel guilty for taking his jacket, almost. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the way his scent clung to the fabric – it was just as warm and welcoming as he was: like the gentle smoke of a campfire. I would have been happy never to give it back.

He motions for me to sit, and I do, taking up space on the surprisingly large couch he has shoved into his dorm. Westley rustles around in the freezer of his mini fridge for a moment before returning and plopping down beside me. He now holds two spoons and a pint of my favorite Ben & Jerrys: Karamel Sutra.

We devour it in what feels like seconds, but it truly an eternity. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

### **Week Fifteen**

“All problems can be fixed with ice cream, my love.” Westley bows, adding his usual dramatic flourish. Today, though, it is just not the same.

“That’s not true, especially right now. Can’t I just curl up on your couch with your blankets instead?” My voice sounds whiny, even to me. And if I noticed, West definitely did.

"Nope." He pops his P. "If you're coming with me, I will water board you with ice cream until you put a smile on that beautiful face of yours that I love so much."

I stop, causing West to stumble once he realizes I am no longer beside him.

"I wish you wouldn't do that." I tell him.

His face falls, his eyes pinching together as his lips purse. I have to force myself not to stare. "Do what?" His is an air of feigned innocence.

"Call me beautiful and tell me you love me if you don't mean it."

"But I do—"

"No, West," I stop him, "you don't. You love me like you love ice cream. I make you happy, but you don't, you know, *love* me."

"Where is this coming from, Ashton? What's to say I don't, you know, *love* you?" He never uses my full name. Not anymore.

West invades my body as he steps closer, eliminating the distance I had so carefully crafted. It is all I can do to keep breathing, and even then the nearness of him is suffocating and squeezes the air from my lungs.

I choke on my own tongue, unable to speak. I shouldn't have said anything. He is waiting for me. I feel his gaze upon my face though I refuse to meet his eyes. They will be my undoing. There is only so much of myself I have left to give.

And so I give it.

"I've been in love with you for weeks." My words are rushed, inaudible, and searing. "I love you. Not as a friend, though you are the most amazing friend I could ever have. I've long since moved past that. I love you. If you don't want to see me after this, that's fine. I'll be okay eventually. But I needed to say it.... I couldn't keep it in any longer."

By the time I finish, Westley's face is the color of the stones beneath my boots. I never should have said anything. I should have stopped this the moment my feelings changed, and now I am too far gone. I turn to leave.

"It's alright, Ash." His words stop me. My feet sinking into the ground and planting as firm as the roots of the tree we stand beneath. "I should have done this long ago."

And then I am spinning, and his lips are on mine, and we fall into something sweeter than the best of Ben & Jerry's.

## Both Eyes Open

Samantha Reed

“Can you see my hand?” My professor asks, again. “How about if I move it over here? Or here?” I respond with nothing more than a shake of my head.

Over the years, this reaction to my blindness has become commonplace. When I tell people I have no sight from my right eye, they either stick their hands out, put their faces by my cheek, or ask me how many fingers they are holding up. I don’t know what’s worse: the genuine enthusiasm and curiosity shown by those questioning me or my inability to react with anything beyond a nod of my head and another exasperated sigh.

It wasn’t always this way. In fact, I didn’t discover my blindness until after third grade. The discovery happened slowly – a variation of minor cataclysmic events preceding the explosion.



The impact of leather upon my jaw sent me sprawling to the ground. The palms of my hands burned. The missing layers of skin were invisible against the stark blackness of the asphalt.

At first, I wasn’t sure what happened. One moment I was walking back to the classroom, lunch box slamming into my thigh. The next, I was on the ground while cobalt and orange dots danced across my vision and my body sang an aria of ache.

The tether ball hit me square in the jaw and I never saw it coming.

I lost a tooth that day, as well as being gifted my first concussion.

I had been hit unawares before. I remember it clearly, even now.

That day, I was sitting on the top level of the bleachers. I was fascinated by the girl before me: her leg swung over the bar as she flipped and spun herself with reckless freedom and trust in her body. She moved so quickly she blurred before my eyes... well, eye.

I didn’t see it coming, but I heard it. A sharp, piercing whistle tickled my ears seconds before I was shoved off the bleachers and into the wood chips below. They thirsted for my blood and they had a feast. The rouge kickball hit me in the back of the head; I never saw who kicked it and they never apologized or came to help. I had scabs across my forehead for months – three distinct battle scars evenly spaced across my skin. My classmates called me a Klingon for weeks.



My family didn't know I was blind in one eye because I memorized the eye charts. I failed the vision tests that the school gave me until I discovered my new mantra: E, F P, T O Z, L E P D, etc. When the school recommended I visit an Optometrist, I was ready. I played my role and I played it well, and I continued to play it for a year.

A regular check-up changed everything. I had my lines. The lights dimmed and the curtain opened. I was at center stage. The crowd fell silent and the room was under my control. My hollow lines echoed in the stillness that followed my performance.

My mother asked me what I saw, and I delivered again. And again. The same sequences of letters or pictures, for I had memorized the picture chart as well.

The light flickered. The Optometrist removed the patch from my eye. The screen was blank.

It had been blank the entire time.



I remember being so proud of my glasses. I joined an exclusive club and I finally belonged somewhere. I remember.

They were simple, my glasses. A delicate black frame encircled one protective lens and a matching corrective sibling. I was so proud of my glasses. Then I went back to school.

That was the first time I had ever been called four-eyes. People started waving their hands in front of my face, asking if I could see it. They move closer, can I see them now? It was a daily chorus in a symphony of ignorant curiosity I was not prepared to handle.

I remember. One group in particular – I don't remember their names but I can still see their faces. They would corner me every day, call me four-eyes every time I stepped out of the classroom. They would throw things at me and laugh when I couldn't catch it. They thought themselves hilarious.

It took weeks for me to admit to my parents why I would come home and tear the glasses off my face and cry.

I switched to contacts shortly thereafter. That didn't last long, either.



Something no one tells you about being blind in one eye is vision training. After we found out, my parents and the Optometrist held out hope that I might be able to strengthen the

eye through my sheer force of will alone.

I would come home from school, rip off my glasses, and an eye-patch would take their place. You see, I had to put this patch over my good eye and try to do things while blind. I had to do my homework when I couldn't even make out the numbers. I tried to watch my favorite television shows on Cartoon Network and I would collapse in tears of frustration because TiVo hadn't been invented yet and I would miss everything. My mom would try to cheer me up with an ice cream Sunday. I couldn't get my spoon into the bowl, I missed every time.

I remember sitting in front of the television, listening to Code Name Kids Next Door or Powerpuff Girls and willing myself with all my might to see. It wasn't sugar, spice, and everything nice. All I saw was darkness, and I let it swallow me whole.



I run into things all the time. Corners, countertops, chairs. I try and turn to the right and I slam my shoulder into the wall. I thought I had cleared it; I guess I was wrong. I do this all the time.

I can pass myself off as normal most of the time, though my glasses invoke the notion of something amiss. I was at the grocery store with my dad, right before the end of break. I'd had the foolish notion of holding the basket on my right arm. Basket, meet shelving unit. They became best friends faster than butter melts during a Southern California summer.

I have little to no depth perception, something people either ignore or tend to forget. Throw something at the blind girl, laugh when she doesn't catch it. Laugh when she drops something she thought she placed on the table. Laugh when she runs into someone or something because she thought she could clear it or simply didn't see, and, oops – cleanup on aisle four! Laugh, laugh, laugh. Maybe crack a smile. It's funny. Too bad I don't see the fun in it.



Last semester was a first for me. I'm used to the usual "how many fingers" response. This one was new. It started off like usual. My roommate's brother found out I was blind. He went through the normal routine of can you see this? How about now? Tell me when you can see my hand. I didn't think much of the fascination.

There had been previous rounds of these interactions. A cycle coming round and round again, the questions never changing.

Last semester was the first time someone crowded against my back, gently placed their

chin on my shoulder, and asked me to tell them when I could see their nose. Curiosity leaves no room for personal space. There is a sublime difference between the literal feeling of someone breathing down your neck and the imagined oppressive force which usually sparks the feeling.

Last semester held two firsts. Cradled them. Coddled them.

Last semester illuminated the vastness of human curiosity. After learning of just how far he needed to lean into me before I could see him, my roommate's brother filled himself with determination to scare me. He would try to sneak up behind me when I was walking. He would try to sneak up behind me while I held conversation. He tried everything he could think of, until he suddenly remembered a seemingly insignificant yet monumental piece of information. I was blind in my right eye.

I was eating dinner, the fork poised half-way to my mouth, when my friends fell silent. They're a quiet bunch, and dinner isn't usually filled with conversation. The suffocating density of the silence stole the normalcy from that moment.

I didn't understand why my friends laughed so suddenly. My quiet friends were filling the space around us with giggles of surprise and shock and possibly guilt. I didn't see what was so funny.

Not until I tilted my head slightly to the right and found an intruding face mere inches from my own.

I didn't scream. I choked on my food. He laughed. They all laughed while I couldn't breathe. They're my friends. They're still my friends.

## **Solitude**

Sarina Crews

From the comfort of the sofa  
I watch fingers of dim morning  
light creep between vertical  
slats on blinds closing out the day.

Particles of dust float in ethereal  
beams, while the house sits stoic-  
ally against the fragile quiet.

These stolen moments, fortify  
me for the waking hours. I rise  
on feet tired from abuse, follow-  
ing the welcome aroma of coffee  
brewing. Inky black liquid, alchemized  
by velvety ribbons of milk, mimic  
the sky outside as tendrils of sunlight  
appear on the horizon, mixing with darkness  
to tuck twinkling stars behind an azure blanket.

Begrudgingly, the house groans awake  
with the rumbling of the furnace, coming  
out of nights' dormancy. In a distant room  
an alarm signals the end of sleep causing  
the dog to stir. Languidly she ascends the  
stairs—click, click, click, on wooden tread  
as one paw follows the other. Yawning child-  
ren are close behind, rubbing tired eyes  
against a now fiercely bright day.

Savoring the last bitter drops in my mug,  
I mourn the end of my solitary haven.

## If My Heart Was a Candle

Tommy Le

If my heart was a candle,  
what scent would it have?  
Perhaps an old book  
with a hint of cut grass.  
The calm of the rain  
and smoke from a wood stove.  
Would it be the color of my soul?  
Would my soul even have a color?  
A color unimaginable,  
and a scent so bizarre?  
If my heart was a candle,  
I would never let it burn.  
Not in fear of a short life...  
Not in fear of the unexpected.  
-Although the smell may be pleasant;  
the flame may be beautiful,  
someone is going to get burned,  
and when it is all said and done,  
what is left?  
Something unrecognizable?  
A remnant of the past?  
A memory of what was  
or what could have been?  
Everyone wishes for more time,  
but I wish I could freeze time.  
I wish I could hold on to the moments,  
the ones that mean the most,  
the moments when I felt most human.

If my heart was a candle,  
who would lite it?  
Who would extinguish it?  
Who would gaze at it?  
Who would smell it's aroma?  
Who would know it exists,  
before it burns out?  
Who.  
If my heart was a candle,  
who would I be?

### **A Reasonable Price**

Virginia Reeves

The last time I picked Hallie up at the airport, she was wearing a dress that must have been fifty years old, beige fabric stained at the armpits, ratty at the hem—a straight boxy thing that would've been a nightshirt if not for the decorative navy rick-rack at the neck.

"You hate my dress, don't you?" she said before saying hello, before meeting my eyes. "*You'd never wear such a thing.*" She was good at mocking my voice, so long practiced in her fifteen years. Even her first words as a baby harbored a bite, "Mama," slipping out like an indictment, something I was doing wrong.

"I wouldn't wear it, but it looks nice on you."

"No it doesn't."

"What are doing in it, then?"

"It cost a dollar, and no one had to die to make it."

Her birthday had been the Thursday before, celebrated with her father and stepmother and the two young half-sisters she lived with through the school year. She flew to see me three or

four times during those nine months, then came to stay for the summers, long visits that crisped us both with their heat and expectations.

“I have reservations at the sushi restaurant you like.”

She looked out the car window, squinting her eyes. “I don’t eat fish anymore.” Her face was angry and disgusted. It seemed I’d mistakenly picked up the wrong person, a seventy-year-old woman marveling at the wayward path the world had taken. “Look at all these roads,” she might have said. “All this concrete. I remember when this was pasture land, back when this country grew its own food.”

“Stop looking at me,” she said, even though her head was turned away.

\*

I’d piled presents on her bed at home, her bedroom at my house a strange hollow space I kept away from when she wasn’t there; it’s a guest room now. She let out a small, “Oh,” when she saw them, and, “I told you I didn’t want anything.”

“But I never listen, do I?”

“You don’t.” She walked slowly to her bed and lifted a box. It held a shirt from the craft fair, hand-made, hand-embroidered by a Guatemalan woman. I’d paid more than a reasonable price. I wanted her to read the shirt’s tag, but she put the box down and picked up another.

“You’ll like that first one.”

She shook her head. Hallie has my mother’s pale creamy skin (mine is just pale), and it looked even lighter against her old dress. Out of the car, without the bulk of her backpack, I realized she was smaller too, skinnier, her body a jumble of sticks inside a sack, tiny calves falling out of the bottom, dirty canvas sneakers on her small feet.

“Are you sick, Hallie?”

“Knock it off, Mom.” She shook the box. “Will I like this one?”

“Yes,” I said. “I think so.”

She’d chosen my favorite, a knee-length shirt-dress from a vintage consignment shop. It didn’t have tags and may have been homemade (perfect!), its fabric a soft green, its buttons pearly flowers, a sash belt at its waist, deep pockets on the front.

When she got the box open, she sighed, pinching the dress at its shoulders, lifting it like something hot or filthy.

“How much did you pay for this?”

“I got it at a consignment shop,” I said. “Used, just the way you like them.”

“Don’t.”

“Would you try it on? Please?”

She sighed again, but took the dress to her bathroom, closing the door behind her. There is a birthmark on Hallie’s right shoulder, the shape of New Hampshire, about an inch long, a mole on her left hip, a small scatter-shot of freckles between her shoulder blades. She hadn’t changed in front of me for years. Even in the summers, she’d taken to staying covered, her body swathed in light linen shirts and pants whenever we went to the beach. She’d quit swimming—water pollution and UV exposure—and I’d wave to her from the surf, though she’d never see, her head tipped to the book in her lap, her body dark in the shadows of my new enormous umbrella.

The bathroom door opened and a different girl stepped out than the one that’d gone in. She is really quite lovely, my daughter, with her father’s green eyes and her grandmother’s skin, hair that used to streak blond in the sun thick to her shoulders, a sharp serious nose and wide lips.

“Look at you,” I said.

She smiled, the first of the visit. Then she blushed and shoved her hands in the pockets, embarrassed to be happy with something I’d picked, and then her face changed completely, an expression I couldn’t place—surprise, anger, fear?—her left hand drawing out a small envelope from the dress pocket.

“What is this?” she asked. “Did you put *money* in the pocket?” She stared at the envelope and before I could respond, she shouted, “That’s so like you. You get this great used dress—shopping *responsibly* for once—and then you have to ruin it by putting money in the pocket.”

She threw the envelope on the ground between us.

“I don’t know what that is,” I said.

“Don’t lie.”

“I really don’t. I bought that dress used, like I told you. *Responsibly*. And God knows I’ve learned never to give you cash.”

We stared at the envelope, the size of a small greeting card. She picked it up. “It’s not sealed.” She turned it over in her hands. Her lips were pursed, her eyes big. She looked like the fifteen-year-old girl I’d have wanted her to be, pretty and excited, anticipation drawing her forward, that beautiful dress, that young, healthy face.

Her fingers brought photos out from the envelope. My reflexes were too slow to grab them before she looked at them, though I had the inclination to wrest them from her hands. She'd looked at both—there were only two—before I got to her, the envelope and the pictures tipping from her fingers as she backed away.

“Honey,” I said. “Hallie.”

I wasn't prepared for the skinny old woman I saw lying on a bed, Hallie's dress fanned out from her hips, the sash cinched at her waist, those pearly buttons gleaming, bright as the woman's white hair. Her right hand was caught in an incomplete gesture; she may have been preparing to wave or to shoo something away. In the second photo, she was curled on her side, her back to the camera, her legs swallowed in the fabric of the dress, only her wrinkled feet poking from the hem.

There was nothing violent, nothing obscene, nothing really wrong with either photo, but I felt certain of their indecency.

The bathroom door clicked. Hallie emerged a minute later in the dress she'd been wearing, her face again the washed-out tone of its fabric, her eyes aged with disappointment, her body too thin, too small.

“The dress looked beautiful on you.”

“I don't want it,” she said, and then: “Do you think that woman's all right?”

I looked at her, my daughter, and then to the photos. How was I to know what was and what wasn't all right? I couldn't tell if my daughter was all right, and she was in the room, right in front of me. Were I to photograph her in that sack of a dress and stuff the photos in an envelope, then slip them into the dress's seamed-in pockets for some vintage clothes hunter to find later, what would that person see? An old teenage girl, starving herself for ideals? Or the lovely girl I'd seen in the green dress?

\*

Hallie eventually opened the rest of her presents. She took only the Guatemalan shirt with her. I told her I'd return the green dress to the shop and tell them about the photos, but instead I hung it in my closet, way in the back. It's still there.

Hallie didn't come the next summer, nor the one after, and her visits through the school year dried up as well. She'll graduate from college soon. Our relationship exists in cards around the holidays and rare phone conversations. We are not close. On the occasions that I miss her,

however, I find myself in my closet, that green dress in front of me, those photos in my hands, and I realize it's her—Hallie—on the bed, my own daughter lifting her hand to wave me off before she turns away.

### **Su Corazón**

William French

The tenant, love, had left her house, and left nothing but sorrow in her stead. Without love, Fallon thought, the lights did not burn as brightly in the Su Corazón apartments. Even the walls, once vibrant and colorful, seemed to take on a much more melancholy hue. No longer did the jovial noises of gathering friends spill from its windows into the streets below. Instead, only the mutterings of mice could be heard if one listened intently enough.

The conversations of these wretched creatures was usually trivial. They would sometimes talk about the proper techniques of gnawing and gnashing and munching on food. Other times, their chats would turn toward their disgust of cats and hawks, of locked drawers and empty cupboards, of poisons and of ruses, and sometimes of him. Their frantic banter on this particular night, however, was cut short by the loud snap of a trap and the drizzle of rain.

Shaken from his reverie, Fallon sat up to see the struggling mouse, caught in the snare he had set earlier that day. The creature desperately clawed and twisted and violently shook before slumping motionless to the floor. Satisfied, Fallon slunk back into bed, his thoughts wandering back to Magdalene. If only he could have devised such a trap for her heart, then maybe she too would still be his.

The advent of their relationship had blossomed after an inebriated night at a local pub. Fallon was a peddler of passions, temptations and impossible promises—all of which Magdalene eagerly tendered her whole self for. For the last six years, she had offered to him the very libations of her love. It was her love that had given him life, the stitching that pieced together his

sinews, his heart, his broken soul. Without this love, Fallon felt as if he would fall apart, and collapse into the nothingness that filled his chest.

Fallon reached over and plucked the note lying on his bed stand. Although he had already memorized each stroke of the pen, he could not help but read it over and over again. The messy handwriting scrawled upon the parchment detailed Magdalene's reasons for leaving. She had met someone named Michael, moved into the city, was sorry for the short notice, but she could no longer be with him. Fallon's face contorted into grotesque shapes as he ripped his eyes from the page. Angrily, he crumpled up the paper into one big wad, and tossed it onto the floor.

Outside, the storm in its final throes sputtered its last upon the panes. Flinging his legs over the worn mattress, Fallon got up and slid to the window, pulling the drapery aside. Beyond the mosaic of watery worlds spangled across the glass, Fallon could make out the flickering lights of the city. They were brighter there, it seemed—far brighter than the single street lamp outside the Su Corazón, whose meager glow was all but quenched by the blanketing darkness. Fallon looked at them for a long while, until a fluttering moth, seeking reprieve from the rain under the low hanging eaves, caught his attention.

The little moth danced happily amongst the creepers and the grime, her velvety wings beating enthusiastically in the night. After some time, the little moth began to grow tired, and landed on a gossamer cobweb strung between the pitched slats of the gable. The web was decorated in tiny convoluted rain droplets that captured the paltry light in a way that made it look speckled with diamonds. The crown jewel of the piece was, of course, the elegant silver moth, set in its center.

Noticing his guest, another shape crept out of the shadows and onto the precipice of the web. The spider was long and black, a patchwork of ugly parts grafted onto a cruel body. Its legion of black eyes and terrible limbs glinted in the light as it inched toward the center of the web.

Realizing the error in her decision, the little moth desperately flapped her tiny wings, but the fetters of silk made it impossible to break free. An ever meticulous tailor, the spider soon set about his dread work. First, he dressed the little moth in an elegant gown woven from his finest silk. Afterward, he stepped back to assess his toils. Not yet pleased, he added layer after layer, burying the struggling creature under a thick, membranous coat. Once he had finished, all Fallon could see was an ugly white lump where the moth had once been.

Feelings of intense hatred began to fester and breed deep within the bowels of Fallon's brain. Why couldn't Magdalene have been like the moth, belonging to him forever? He cast his gaze across the room to her portrait, still sitting in high on his shelf. Inside the picture, the brilliant blue galaxies of Magdalene's eyes stared kindly back at him. Even after all that had happened, the angelic nature of her design still took his breath away. She laid on a bed of lush green grass in a simple sun dress, head bowed, arms flung far to her sides. Light brown freckles dotted the near perfect canvas of her skin and her head was bathed in the pool of her sun bleached hair. Around her stood the verdant boscage of the apple orchard where he had taken her on their fifth anniversary, only to discover that she had developed an allergy for the fruit. While it had been a source of laughter before, now their memories seemed to him like a disease, an infirmity to which there was no antidote. He rushed over, grasped the picture's lacquered wood frame marred by embossments of hearts and flowers and other deplorable figures, and cast it against the wall. As it shattered, Magdalene's likeness escaped from the glass tomb, and gently floated to the floor below.

"Art wasn't supposed to look nice; it was supposed  
to make you *feel* something."

- Rainbow Rowell