

The background is a vibrant, abstract composition. The left side is dominated by a rich, textured red. The right side features a mix of light blue and green, with some darker blue and purple tones in the center. The overall effect is a colorful, textured gradient.

COLORS

2015



*When we read,
we start at the beginning
and continue until we reach the end.*

*When we write,
we start in the middle
and fight our way out.*

- Vickie Karp

Colors

Carroll's Literary Magazine

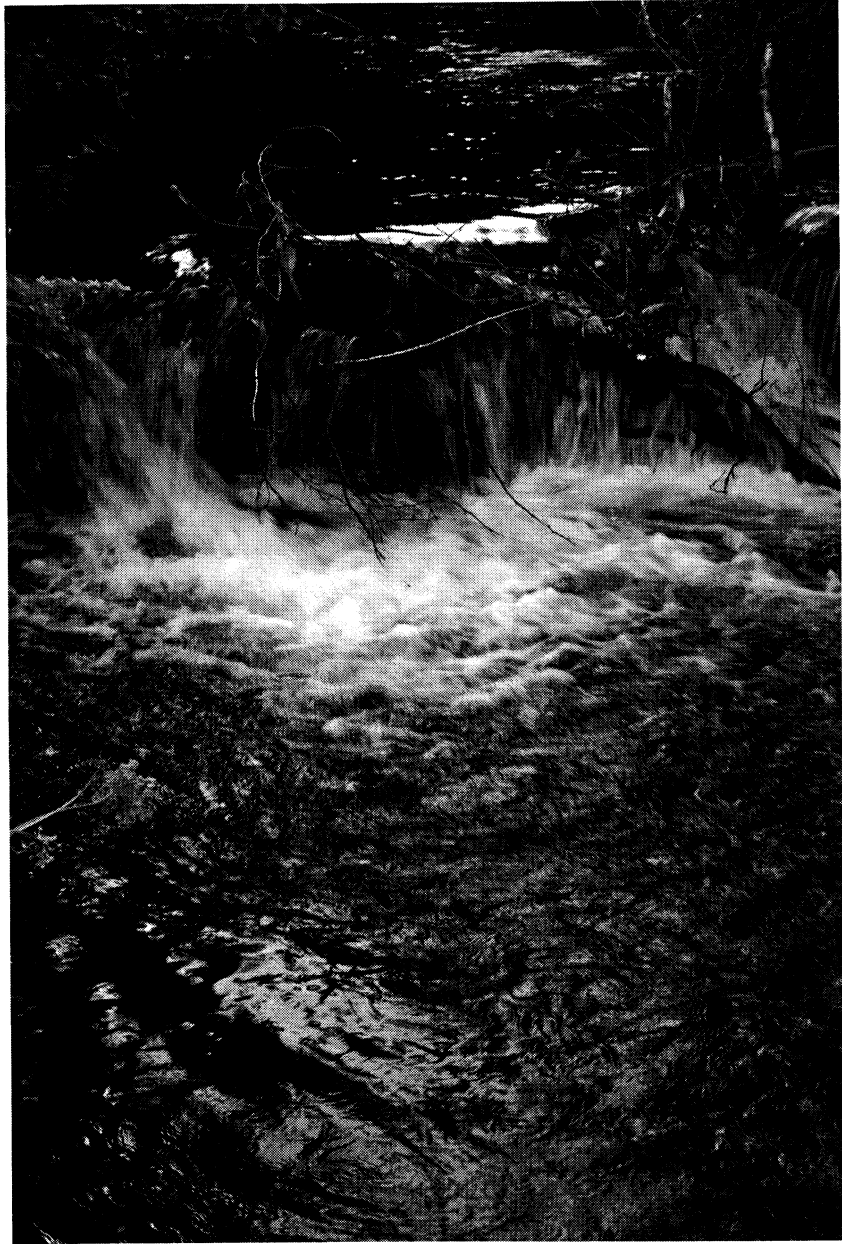
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Legend of Colors

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.

Colors in the Sky

Brenna Kinsey

You forget the little things
sometimes.

The smell of the flowers in your garden,
the taste of the wheat bread in your pantry,
and the constellation of freckles
on your lovers' back.

I was hit by a car once
while walking down Orchard Street,
I flew through the air
and for the first time remembered
the colors of the sky.

Like Shooting a Dog
Katie Gildner

Hours. That was how long I had been sitting in this rigid chair, keeping vigil and waiting for the sun to rise. With every passing moment, I felt myself growing stiffer and colder, but still I waited. I had promised my mom that I would stay with him when she left for the graveyard shift of her third job, and I intended to keep that word, no matter how uncomfortable it made me. Streaks of dawn appeared in the east, and as they flowed through the room with rich rays of gentle gold, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I had been holding. I yawned and stretched, looking around as my surroundings were illuminated by the bright light. The room was in a sad state of disrepair: dust motes clogged the air, the window was cracked and dirty, and the sole piece of furniture – a rusty bed – was falling apart. A fly landed on my bandaged right hand and I vacantly watched as it picked its way over the cotton. I didn't brush it away, though; I didn't want to be responsible for ending such a delicate life.

"You're still here, Matías?" the cracked voice brought me out of my reverie and I blinked, blowing the fly away with a small puff of air and absently rubbing my eyes with unsteady hands. I glanced tiredly down and met the angry, shadow-rimmed eyes of my 13-year-old little brother. He had just awoken in the decrepit bed, his black hair tousled and his cheeks flushed. He was trembling slightly as he held the threadbare blankets tightly around scrawny shoulders and his breaths were jagged – sure signs that he had another fever.

I adjusted with a disgruntled sigh and put an elbow on the armrest of the chair. It wobbled unsteadily beneath me. "Of course I'm still here, Leo," I muttered. "What type of brother would I be if I left you alone?"

Leo's face darkened with a scowl. "Dios mio!" he swore. "I'm not a kid anymore, Matías! You don't have to babysit—" His furious words were abruptly cut off by hacking, unsettling coughs. I watched as he doubled over, his frame racked uncontrollably. When they finally subsided and he looked up at me, his eyes were pained but still full of flickering anger. His breathing now substantially shorter, he panted, "You don't – need – to – watch me!"

Putting forth a casual shrug, I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs. "Calm down, Leo. You know it's not good for you to get upset when you're this sick."

"Don't you dare lecture me about taking care of myself," Leo spat, struggling to a sitting position. His fingers wrung themselves in the stained yellow sheet as he shot me a glare. "Have you looked at yourself recently, Matías? When was the last time you slept?"

My breath caught in my throat and an icy feeling swept through me. "What do you mean?" I asked, hating the sudden tremor that filled my voice.

"You look like hell," my little brother informed me without the slightest hint of hesitation. He stared at me unwaveringly, lying back on his lumpy pillow as the effort of sitting became too much. Bathed in a pool of golden sunlight, he continued to study me. "I know you haven't slept for days and every time you try, you have nightmares."

"I don't know what you're talking about." The denial was pathetic even to my own ears. I couldn't meet my brother's gaze, instead studying a spider web visible through the dusty window. A brightly colored butterfly had been caught by the sticky strands of the web and was struggling to free itself from the ensnaring trap. There were a few moments of silence until Leo finally spoke again, his voice brimming with worry. "What do you keep having nightmares about, Matías?" he asked me. He paused and then in a softer, far more hesitant voice, "Is it about what happened to your hand?"

I jumped to my feet as if electrocuted and stared down at my brother, livid. I was acutely aware of the bright white bandages wrapped around my right hand as I snapped, "It's none of your business." I glared at him for a moment before taking a deep breath and turning away. "I have to go to the bathroom," I said shortly. Before he could even utter a word, I stomped to the bathroom right outside of Leo's bedroom and slammed the door shut behind me. The moment I was alone, the anger melted away and was replaced by the stone cold terror that had been plaguing me for days. I grasped the edges of the discolored sink with white knuckled hands. My breaths became shorter and shorter and I fell backwards, landing on the seat of the toilet. Like everything else in the godforsaken house, it was stained and cracked. I looked at my bandaged hand and all of a sudden, I found myself tearing at the dressings and ripping them off. As the strips of cotton drifted to the floor like feathers, I gazed at what was revealed below.

A deep, jagged cut slashed across my entire right palm. Even though it had been a week since I had gotten it, it has barely healed. If anything, it looked even worse with the edges furiously enflamed and the center a violent dark red. As it pulsed in pain, memories came over me in a terrifying rush of that awful day –

Five minutes. That was how long I had been walking home from school when it began to rain. The overcast sky had been threatening showers all day, so it came as little surprise when the heavens finally burst open with a deluge of water. Pushing up my collar and bracing myself against the cold, I quickened my pace to get out of the torrential downpour. I was so intent on hurrying that I didn't notice the two boys behind me until I had been grabbed and shoved into an alley with such force, I crashed to the ground.

“¿Qué demonios?” I shouted furiously, blinking rain out of my eyes and looking up at the hulking silhouettes of my attackers. My shout quickly died from my lips and was replaced by stunned horror. I knew these boys – every person in my school knew them.

“Watch your mouth,” the bulkier of the two, Alonso, snarled, moving towards me menacingly. Before he could get very far, though, his partner, Ciro, stopped him.

“Tranquilo, Alonso,” Ciro said softly. “Don't forget why we're here.”

Alonso hesitated and then let out a disgruntled sigh, reaching into his pocket and whipping out a switchblade. I anxiously scooted backward, but he only opened it and began to pick at his fingernails. “Hurry up and get this done, Ciro,” he grunted.

Ciro sighed and then glanced at me. “Matías Fernandez, do you know who we are?”

I mutely nodded. Of course I did. These were boys who had killed their first man when they were twelve. Though the police never traced it back to them, everyone in my school knew they were murderers. But it wasn't just murder. Robbing, blackmailing, dealing or selling drugs – it was all in a day's work for these two. Members of La Nuestra Familia, one of the most notorious gangs in the city.

“That saves us time then,” Ciro said pleasantly, smiling as if we were two acquaintances discussing the day's weather over tea. He took a step forward and I scooted backwards again, still in my fallen position on the wet, cold alleyway. “You see, Matías, you've captured our boss's attention – a task quite difficult to do – and he wants you to join La Nuestra Familia.”

“Are you insane?” I demanded, leaping to my feet. “I would rather die than join your gang!”

Ciro sighed and before I could even blink, Alonso was on me with his knife. I fell back with a gasp as he swiped towards my head, raising my hand protectively in the path of his swing. The blade sliced smoothly across the skin of my palm and I cried out at the pain. Alonso stepped back as I landed in a huddle on the ground, staring in mute horror at the massive gash and the blood dripping down my wrist to the pavement below. “I'm afraid this is not optional,” Ciro continued in his same pleasant tone as if nothing has happened. “Once our boss decides to recruit someone, they have no choice in the matter.”

I glanced back upwards and mustered the courage to ask in a feeble whisper, “Porqué?”

“Why?” Ciro echoed. “If you must know, it's because you work at the veterinary office. Our boss sees that as an untapped resource and wants someone on the inside to help smuggle out drugs. However, there are some conditions. You have to prove your loyalty before you are allowed to join.”

An uncomfortable knot twisted my stomach. “By doing?”

“You know the answer to that,” Ciro answered almost chidingly. “It's what we all have to do to join: take a life.”

“No!” I shouted. “I can't kill a person!”

“It's just like shooting a dog, Matías,” Ciro said matter-of-factly, unfazed by my outburst. “Easy and painless. But if that's too much for you, then think of it as a bargain. We know your brother is dying. Despite the fact that your mother works three jobs, you still can't even afford medicine, never mind a visit to the doctor, correct?”

My mouth fell open, too stunned to answer. No one knew just how serious Leo's condition was except for my family. Ciro quickly went on to say, “We'll give you what you need: money, medicine, the best doctors in the city. All you have to do is join us.”

I felt panic beginning to sink in. “What if I refuse?”

“Then your brother will die,” Ciro answered simply. He nodded to Alonso and the two began to leave.

“You have one week, Matías. Decide to live by your foolish moral standards and let Leo die or save your brother.”

The choice is yours.”

The choice is yours...the words echoed through my head relentlessly as I shook the dreadful memory away, coming back to myself in the bathroom. I looked at my palm and then whispered in a quiet, broken voice, “What should I do?”

The only answer my question received was silence.

Three minutes. That was how long it took for him to find me when I left my home. Having said a brisk good bye to a feverish Leo, I was walking down the sidewalk towards work with hands shoved deep into the depths of my pockets and my face buried in the collar of my coat. The day was cool with the bright sunlight rapidly being replaced by looming, dark clouds and a furious wind flinging dead leaves into my face. I hardly noticed my discomfort though – my head was in such a fog. I had been without sleep for days, spending each shadowy night beside my brother and tortured by my unrelenting thoughts. No matter how often I churned the question around in my mind and asked myself what I was going to do, I reached the same wall. And now it had finally come: the deadline. Today, I had to make my decision.

I absently stepped around a beetle crossing the sidewalk and quickened my pace, still lost in my thoughts. On some level, I was relieved that tomorrow this nightmare would be over. But –what if I fell from this nightmare into an even worse one? This question had been plaguing me relentlessly as the deadline closed in. I angrily shook it away now, not wanting to dwell on the possibility. I had to think about Leo. What did it matter if my life became a living hell, so long as my brother was saved? I paused in my trek, staring up at the sky with glassy eyes and letting out a long breath. Clouds were rapidly moving in, chasing away the sunlight with shadows. I watched a small sparrow wheel across the sky, unsteady in its flight as it fought against a vicious gust of wind. “Who am I kidding,” I muttered to myself, casting my gaze away from the light. “I could never kill a person.”

“Is that so? How unfortunate,” the sneer of a voice startled me out of my thoughts and I spun around. There, standing calmly behind me in the center of the sidewalk, was **Ciro**. His arms were folded casually across an immaculate suit, his hair was combed back and his stare was trained unblinkingly on me. As the disappearing sun cast long shadows across his pale complexion and a malevolent grin stole over his face, it occurred to me that I was staring at a demon come to drag me to the pits of hell.

“**Ciro**,” I said with a curt nod. I met for my voice to come out coldly, but instead it sounded wary and strained even to my own ears. I cleared my throat and said in a steadier voice, “What do you want?” Prowling a step forward, **Ciro** dropped his arms. “I came to remind you that today is the final day,” he said. His murky eyes – so dark a brown they were practically black – bore into my own, the gaze so intense that I edged back a step. “Our boss is impatient, **Matías**, and time is running out. Have you made a decision?” I swallowed down my rising panic and took a deep breath, fruitlessly trying to calm my rattled nerves. “I don’t think I can do it,” I confessed. “Please **Ciro**, isn’t there anything else I can do to join besides killing a person?”

I honestly don’t know what I expected from the soft plea. Perhaps I thought that I could appeal to **Ciro**’s humanity, reach his compassion through all of those layers of cruelty and indifference. However, his expression remained as frigid as ever and his eyes were pitiless. “I told you **Matías** – this is the only way. Someone has to die and it can either be your brother or your target.”

“My target?” I echoed, a nervous tremor filling my voice. **Ciro** had never mentioned anything about a target before.

The grin was back on **Ciro**’s face as he said, “Since you weren’t moving forward on your own, our boss decided to assign you a target. You waited too long to choose your own victim, **Matías**.”

I didn’t think it possible, but the already unbearable weight that had plagued me since this whole ordeal began practically doubled. Feeling sick with foreboding, I shakily asked, “Who?”

“The man you work for, **Dr. Martinez**,” **Ciro** answered, drawing each word slowly and firing them at me like bullets. “Our boss approached him this week and offered a partnership. However, he not only refused but threatened to inform the police. We can’t have any of that, so our boss wants you to kill him.” He smiled at me as if he had just told me that I had won the lottery. “It’s easier this way, and painless. Like shooting a dog.”

“Stop saying that!” I shouted, my inner-turmoil manifesting itself as anger. To say I was panicking now would be an understatement. Kill **Dr. Martinez**? The man had given me a job, offered me unwavering support,

and I looked up to him like a father. "It's nothing like shooting a dog!"

"Is that so?" *Ciro* quirked an eyebrow, not at all reacting to my fury. "Both are animals, both are alive, and both are incredibly easy to kill. But I'm not here to force you, just to inform you of your target." He smirked as he said, "I know you'll make the right decision. After all, *Leo's* counting on you."

With that, he calmly turned around and strolled away, whistling as the last of the sun was swallowed by the incoming clouds. I watched him retreat, trembling. Kill *Dr. Martinez*. The words echoed through my head relentlessly. My knees abruptly buckled and I fell forward onto the pavement, scraping my palms and sending pain through my bandaged right hand. I hadn't cried once since this all started, but now the tears came. They filled my vision with a fog and fell down my cheeks, splashing onto the concrete below. Prostrate on the ground, I looked towards the heavens. As the first drops of rain landed on my forehead, a wounded howl burst from me – days of pent up agony and fear put in that single sound.

What was I going to do?

Fifteen minutes. That was how long I had been standing out in the pouring rain, watching the doors across the street and trying to muster the courage to go through them. I was late for my shift, but I couldn't move. I wanted to flee, to run and to never stop moving, yet I was frozen. A bitterly cold wind gusted around me, pushing dripping wet bangs into my eyes. I angrily brushed them away and when I did, a picture of *Leo* flashed through my head. I grasped onto that image as a single thought silenced all others: I have to save my brother.

The moment this crossed my mind, my feet began moving towards the clinic. I let them carry me, disconnected and floating. Perhaps this is all a bad dream, I mused. I'm going to wake up any moment and *Leo* will be perfectly fine.

I entered the clinic, and the cold rain-laced air was replaced by a swath of gentle light and heat. *Señora Pastor* sat behind the front desk as usual, her wavy dark hair brushed back into a ponytail and her blue eyes shielded behind the thick lenses of glasses. She glanced up at me as the door slid shut and frowned. "Por fin, *Matías*," she called, her normally welcoming tone edged with annoyance. "The doctor's been waiting for you! And you're soaking wet!"

I didn't respond, but rather moved mechanically behind the desk and picked up my nametag and coat. Her frown quickly melted away and was replaced with worry when I didn't say a word. She got to her feet as I turned to move back towards the clinic and pulled me to a stop before I could brush past her. Fingers digging into my shoulder, she firmly turned me around and looked into my face searchingly. "What's wrong, *Matías*?" she asked and then in a softer voice, "Did something happen?"

Staring passively into *Señora Pastor's* earnest face was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. God, I wanted to tell her. I wanted to tell her everything that had happened to me so badly that it was suffocating. But I knew doing so could only end in disaster so ignoring my inward screaming, I diverted my gaze and quietly said, "No. I'm fine."

Her eyes narrowed with disbelief, but before she could question me further, I wrenched my shoulder from her grasp and strode away. As I made my way down a dim hallway toward the clinic, I fleetingly wondered if I would be a murderer the next time I came back to the lobby.

The thought sickened me so much that I ran the final few feet. I pushed open the door at the end of the hall and burst into the examination room at full flight. *Dr. Martinez*, who was leaning over a dog, leapt up, startled at my sudden appearance. I froze the second I saw him, all of the wind knocked out of me as if I had just ran into a brick wall. *Dr. Martinez* was nothing but imposing with his chiseled face and heavysset body. Despite his appearance, though, he had the gentlest nature of anyone I'd met. The way he was softly stroking the whimpering mass of fur on the table was proof enough of that. "You're late, *Matías*," he called, quickly overcoming his surprise and returning his attention to the dog. "Did something of importance hold you up?"

I simply nodded, incapable of speech. *Dr. Martinez* glanced up when I didn't verbally respond and frowned. "Is something the matter?" he asked, genuine concern wrapping around his voice. "No," I whispered. The one word response was the most I could manage.

Dr. Martinez's expression bore the same disbelief as *Señora Pastor's*, but he shrugged and didn't pry. "I'm afraid today the work we'll be doing is rather grim," he said, moving his attention from me back to the dog on the examination table. His tone had become apologetic as he went on to say, "We have two different dogs to put down

today. I realize how hard this procedure is for you, Matías, so if you want to leave or take the afternoon off, I can cope on my own.”

I shook my head. “No, that’s alright. I can manage,” I answered, my voice mechanical and detached. Dr. Martinez nodded and I approached the table. The sterile silver counter was smeared with bloodstains and the dog on the surface – who was also covered in blood – panted for breaths between pained whimpers. I say dog, but it was really only a puppy. Incredibly small and young, it stared up at me helplessly through glazed brown eyes. “What happened?” I asked, my voice choked and shaking. “What did he do to get injuries like these?”

“There was another outbreak of gang violence this afternoon and the puppy got in the crossfire,” Dr. Martinez answered. He paused before pinning a tired look on me. “It wasn’t anything he did, Matías, he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“And – we have to put him down?”

Dr. Martinez solemnly nodded. “It’s for the best,” he said gently, climbing to his feet and heading toward the locked cupboard where we kept the pentobarbital. “Though you might not be able to tell by looking at him, he’s in unimaginable pain. Don’t you think it’s best that we bring that suffering to an end? Even if it means death?”

I mutely nodded, watching as he prepared the syringe with the clear poison. It looked so innocent, almost like water. He turned back around, the needle in his hand, and moved to stand next to me. “Keep him calm, Matías,” he instructed quietly. I nodded and began stroking the bloody fur, murmuring words of comfort. The dog looked up at me with pained, foggy eyes, and whined once, nuzzling my hand. My breath hitched. It hurt to watch such a gentle young animal suffering through its final moments of life. It hadn’t done anything wrong. It didn’t deserve to be violently forced from its world and it didn’t deserve what fate had dealt it.

The needle soundlessly sank into the skin as Dr. Martinez injected the poison into the dog. The pants gradually became shorter and shallower, the eyes foggier and more distant until the stillness of death settled over the creature. It was over in a matter of minutes.

Dr. Martinez sat back, a dejected expression stealing over his face. This procedure was just as difficult on him as it was on me. “How do you do it?” I asked unsteadily. “How do you have the strength to take a life?”

Absently stroking his chin, Dr. Martinez considered the question. “I suppose it’s because I know I’m helping the creature,” he eventually answered. “And because I know that the pentobarbital does its work in a quick and painless manner. I don’t see it as killing. I see it as an act of mercy to bring their suffering to an end. And all it takes is the push of syringe.”

I looked away, unable to bear looking at his sincere expression. “If I was suffering, Dr. Martinez, would you do anything to help me?” I asked, my voice soft and congested with emotion.

“Of course, Matías,” he answered without the slightest hint of hesitation. “Why? Is something the matter?”

I shook my head, a sad smile coming over my face as I wiped my eyes. “Not anymore,” I said and then added in a softer voice, “I’ve made my decision.”

Confusion flickered across Dr. Martinez’s face at this statement, but he didn’t press the matter and asked, “Can you get the next syringe ready while I start filling out some paperwork?”

I silently nodded and drifted to the cupboard with the pentobarbital. I picked up one of delicate syringes and ran the glass between my fingers. It was small, as far as guns go. But it would do. My hand trembled as I took out the vial of clear poison and filled the syringe, deliberately putting at least three times more poison than usual into the slender body. My thumb caressed the top – my trigger.

It’s just like shooting a dog, I told myself, stealing a sideways glance at the dead dog on the examination table. I have to do it. I have to save Leo. I have to end this nightmare.

I began to move across the examination room, my vision blurred by tears. Dr. Martinez sat with his back to me and didn’t move. I came to a stop inches behind him, my breathing becoming ragged as a sob caught in my throat. “It’s just like shooting a dog,” I said out loud.

And then I pulled the trigger.

Trees in Limbo

William French

The ebbing light from a waning moon
whet irreverent shadows as they danced
across the hallowed ground.
A graveyard of sorts, full of life but not so alive.

The dead bones of summer were all that were left,
forever shackled to their shallow graves.
Rusted leaves—ornate dresses—now lay in tatters
rotting, withering, bathing the bodies
in sanguine pools of summer's blood.

Veins of frost now crawled up skins of bark,
feeding the ceaseless cadence of winter's beat-less heart.
Long strokes by lifeless limbs painted macabre
portraits upon a starry canvas—of gnarled hands
stretched towards the heavens, praying for
paradise within their temporary hell.

The chandelier of stars then soon faded and dimmed,
their flickering fire quenched, swallowed up by the sun.
Light, at last, spilled into that lamenting forest,
gathering the corpses in a warm embrace
And chasing the yet lingering ice
deep into crevices of shadow.

Mirror

Samantha Reed

Leaves gently fall from amber painted trees,
resting lightly like feathers on Earth's warm, soft dirt.
Brightly colored wild flowers search for the sun's warmth,
straining up towards the dimming sky – like prisoners hunting for escape.
Sunlight slowly disappears behind the rolling hills,
bathing the field in a purple hue.
The warmth is fading,
leaving behind a damp, darkness in its place.
The sweet cries of sparrows transform,
wolves howl, echoing throughout the trees,
an owl cries out who.
The dying light reflects off of the small, silver lake,
it's glass like surface shining bright for all to see.
Looking closely you see a reflection,
Your own face - staring directly at you,
Just like a mirror.
You see yourself, no one else,
though the world is alive around you.

Adventure

Janet Sheehy

One
Drop fell
And others followed
Seeking new adventures.
Pulling
Together a
Puddle is formed.
Babbling
Brooks and
Rushing rivers
Created only because
Of adventurous rain drops.

Double Black

Conor Smith

I look down at the formidable obstacle,
the cold air is biting at my skin.
I take a subtle peek over towards dad,
hoping to find some warm comfort
in a big hairy thumbs up,
yet, all I see are his eyes
glazed over in concentration.

I click my skis together
as my body rattles from the weight
of being so nervous. I think,
“Why the hell is an eight year old
getting ready to go down a double black?”
The day old snow created a shiny sheet
of slick unforgiving ice. Whoopie.

My pride gives me a quick nudge
towards the petrifying ledge,
while my body keeps yanking,
pulling me back. Finally my father says
“Go big, or go home.” No help,
since my life saving ride
was at the bottom of nature’s hurdle anyway.
I inch forward and shut my scared eyes,

and wake up at the bottom of the hill.

Winter

Justin A. Moore

There is a tree in my garden;
her boughs hang heavy
with dark, Unseelie fruit.

And when the dewdrop children dance
their last of the year
Mab breathes on her branches.

Her arboreal fingers clench
that bitter harvest
to rough, greedy bosom.

Soon, the chill undoes her tresses,
the rime cocoons her
kissing her wilted babes.

Those hoary infants, fettered thus
will find no release
till the lacrimose spring.

Green Light

By Kevin C Stewart

The night after the levees broke in New Orleans, a strange vaporous glow appeared above the Indian Mounds on the campus of LSU, casting a shimmer on the nearby live oaks, pines, azaleas, crepe myrtles and red bud bushes. Huey Long Fieldhouse appeared as orange as refinery flames in the background, the water in the rooftop swimming pool warming several degrees, some people claimed, beneath the constant Blackhawks, Kiowa Warriors, and Chinooks that churned the soupy sky between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The light zigzagged like a huge, partially unfolded paper clip, pale green as the undersides of magnolia leaves. It neither dissipated nor drifted away on the breezes. It only undulated slightly, the folds of light accordioning tight and loose, appearing at once as tactile as steam and as abstract to the touch as flashlight beams. The light seemed imbedded in the humidity, like markings on an animal's hide. Even the whirring chopper blades above couldn't make it flicker or flutter.

It took a few days for anyone to look directly at the light. Eventually, a campus maintenance worker distributed welding glasses, which everyone used for several nights, watching the light strangely refract all other light, the halogen street lamps and the strobing flashes from the ambulances, police cars, fire and utility trucks, and National Guard Humvees. The tint in the glasses, though, changed the color of the light to that of antifreeze. So one by one, sweating more so than usual, everyone gradually removed their glasses, not wanting to filter out the light's green authenticity, as if they all knew this was something they may never see again. However, no one would touch it or walk through it, afraid of what it was. Some claimed it was toxic fumes from Exxon to the north, or from some hurricane-demolished chemical plant or refinery to the south or west, blown in like pelicans by Katrina. When Rita blasted Lake Charles and the rest of southwest Louisiana, everyone wondered whether the light might get blown away, too. The morning after Rita, though, the light remained, a stubborn molecular specter.

Some claimed the light was indeed a specter, the ghosts of the tribes whose boundary the mounds supposedly marked. The ghosts had risen up to collect the souls of dead Indians from south Louisiana's tribes, whose members were killed by the hurricanes: the Pointe-au-Chien and the various tribes of the Muscogee—the Terrebonne, the Houma, and the Isle de Jean Charles and the Bayou Lafourche Bands of the Biloxi-Chitimacha Confederations.

Others believed the mounds themselves, with thousands of Indians displaced, were serving their original function, guiding Indians away from the tragedy and destruction, toward safety with other tribes farther inland, to the north and west.

A few people even claimed the mounds were protecting Baton Rouge. They pointed out that Baton Rouge was just to the west of Katrina, just to the east of Rita, barely getting clipped by the ragged saw-toothed counter-clockwise spirals of clouds. To which, other folks countered that, in '92, the mounds didn't do much to deflect Hurricane Andrew, a storm that was said to be perfect, the mathematically symmetrical eye, the clouds coiled tight as cable on a spool, the massive girth. Katrina, someone said, flattened imperfectly on the eastern side, a flaw not indicative of the damage it wreaked.

Before the football games, after the light appeared, no kids annoyed the mounds by sledding the slopes on cardboard, as was pregame custom, beneath the helicopter flyovers. Students no longer studied or read there. The last two people seen on the mounds were there the night before the levees broke in New Orleans. A student with a trumpet stood atop each mound and played "When the Saints Go Marching In" in unison. Since, no one had done so again, nor were guitars strummed, harmonicas blown, fiddles scratched between classes. The Red Stick Ramblers offered no impromptu concerts between the mounds, as they usually did once a week, if they were in town. Girls refused to sun there. Wiccans knelt at the presence of the light over the mounds, but at safe distances. Even Sword Boy, in his hakama and his zori sandals, the front of his head shaved, the rest oiled and pulled into a ponytail, declined climbing the northern-most mound and execute his sword routine and then meditate, as he'd always done since arriving at LSU from Litcher seven or eight years ago. No lusty freshman couples consummated their doomed relationships on those slopes after the bars closed, the chopper chatter droning, the sirens' wailing painting the liquid dark.

Because of the light, the feral cats on campus wouldn't go near the mounds, even during the day, when the light disappeared or maybe just couldn't be seen by human eyes. Water warmed everywhere at night, driving nutria aground. Around LSU lakes and the Mississippi, nutria began foraging during the day, flinching at the choppers and ambulance cries, unused to daylight, to making themselves so vulnerable. Egrets and herons refused to wade the shallow waters. They squabbled and squawked on the crowded, sagging Cyprus branches until they grew too hungry to wait out the light and water temperature, and then they flew to the fringes of the Baton Rouge Parishes. Turtles clung to Cyprus roots, rock outcroppings, and the banks. Only water snakes remained in the lake, now not having to sun first thing. Each morning, catfish, carp, bass, gar and panfish floated belly up, city workers dragging nets between john boats to skim the fish from the surface of the lakes. Each night, Mike the Tiger howled musically from his habitat, his keepers and veterinarians looking on, bewildered by his newfound voice for aria. Music majors detected partial scales in the howls, noticed them jumping up or down an octave. One of their tuners registered his pitch as a B flat.

Then something odd happened. One morning, dozens of geckos, similar in color to the light, lay dead and limp, crowning the mounds in a layer. Flies wouldn't land on them and lay eggs in their carcasses. Crows, egrets, and the feral cats ignored them. Even rats would not venture up the grassy slopes to forage. No one had a credible explanation for this phenomenon. The best guess was the colors, people from animal sciences said; the lizards were attracted to the light's colors. Now they were dead, lying sun-cooked and soft in the humid swampy air.

To everyone's surprise, that night a coyote appeared. She—a veterinarian student with binoculars had confirmed the animal's sex—climbed the northern-most mound and answered, in yips, Mike the Tiger's melodic howls before settling in to eat the dead lizards, the green light alow in her fur. Someone suggested shooting the coyote, but it was decided that she should stay alive, at least long enough to solve the lizard problem. The coyote rarely ventured off the mounds, usually only to drink from the fountain in the Quad. To save her from encounters with students, a galvanized trough was placed as close to the mounds as the groundskeepers were willing to get and then filled with water. Opposite the mounds from the water, the coyote shat and pissed. Groundskeepers, in radiation-protective suits and masks, scooped up the feces with long-handled shovels and dropped it into a yellow and black 55-gallon drum marked "Hazardous Waste."

The next day, her coat holding a vague green sheen, she moved to the other mound and began on those lizards, napping between courses. She seemed to realize she was unthreatened up there, lying about, relaxing in the sun and oblivious to the green light, the heat, the helicopters, the ambulances blaring past, delivering the wounded to the PMAC, which was now nothing more than a M*A*S*H unit and morgue, refrigerated semis in the parking lot, their generators humming as constant as life.

All the while, the dazed and homeless drifted past, afoot or in rattling junkers, with no idea of what they were looking for, what they would find, or where they might find it. The displaced invaded North Gates, hands out. They begged change at the Circle K, in front of Chimes, all up and down Chimes and State Streets, Highland Road—everywhere. Their sad stories rose up and snaked together in the hot briny unyielding sky, a woven rope of desperate language and harried narratives, the first real stories of Katrina, the talking heads and pundits on the televisions in the bars be damned.

But pundit those heads must. No matter. A coyote understands little, if any, punditry. It understands survival and can rationalize the easiest path to it. So, each night, she yipped harmonies with Mike and awaited the lemming-esque pilgrimage of geckos, eating them as they arrived. The next day, she moved to the other mound and devoured the previous night's dead.

Thusly it occurred. For several weeks, the coyote and the geckos grew routine. Her and Mike's songs became as familiar as the quarter-hourly bell tolls from Memorial Tower, the thumping helicopters overhead, the sirens, the dieselly yammering of rescue vehicles and boom trucks—all as unceasing as the influx of displaced Orleans Parishioners, now the Lost Tribe of New Orleans, and their laments, their voices a fraught and saddened music, their stories a new apocalyptic gospel, their wails and cries and sobs lamenting New Orleans. Their now devastated Samaria, the Ninth Ward their Temple, lay ninety miles southeast of them and this light, this eerie green light.

Flathead Lake

Tori Nickol

Drowsy, the sun winks over defiant
peaks that refuse to shed their winter parkas
of snow, looking ridiculous mid-July. Below, the heartbeat
of waves, whoosh-thump, accelerates as the lake awakens.

Breathing life into the groggy paradise, the lake's delighted
laugh bounces through the valleys, trickling
off the outstretched wings of ospreys. Velvet
pines yawn and shake off their blankets of dew.

Alert and excited, the water embraces day. Waves stretch
to mix with the sky, separated only by a quivering
line of pearly foam. Weather-beaten shores exhale
wisps of spongy moss and lacey lilacs.

The heartbeat of waves is unceasing. The landscape moves
of its own accord – unbound, unconquerable, free.
Wind crawls down mountain passes to sing the lake's liberty
cry. Water dances toward the sky, blurring
the line of the horizon, where one ends and one begins.

Forever / Cain the Noctivagant

Justin A. Moore

I wander through a world of smoke.
 People, so fleeting, only shadows
 leaving their manifold marks upon my flesh. Only ashes
 survive them. Each one is a solemn promise,
 destined to be broken—eventually lost;
 swirling motes in the sunbeam of time.

Cain-born; given that sinister gift of time!
 Bribery, sent to heaven on cloying smoke—
 symbol of the highest betrayal. Lost
 clan-brothers, stalking and ravenous, indifferent shadows
 making companions of them all, break those promises.
 No kind wind stirs my uncle's morose ashes.

All the world is stifled with ashes;
 every stone and door darkened with time
 stolen from a brother. Languidly walking the promise
 of the earth, we leave our eddies in the smoke,
 dust, and fire of conflict. We touch and talk to the empty shadows.
 You ephemeral creatures, unseeing and lost,

absorbed by others, never knowing what price we paid—desperately lost!
 Never do you recognize our horrid marks. Our skin is rough, greyed with ashes,
 pallid souls intangible through the monstrous shadows
 of eternity, multiplied by nine, indelible upon time,
 sultry with the blood of sacrifice. Reeking with venomous smoke,
 born of the kindling bodies of our new ransoms, mired by that promise.

Golden stand with the Mobius glass, I count each promise
 passing through his aperture. Forever the sparkles of life drain and glitter, lost
 within as the top fills itself. And yet we dwell without, wraithlike in oppressive smoke,
 twisting ruins of the world, and mundane ashes.
 Lilith-fed, the murderer-sons, marked and unclean, estranged in time;
 strangers! Vagrants in a world where nothing lives but shadows.

Could you murder these quickened shadows?
 Would you gift a cackling vapor with a promise?
 Should an undying, curse-marked son be forgiven, in time?
 I, a wanderer, ragged, fatigued, and lost
 because of my God-marked father. Why? Where are his immortal ashes?
 Will I find his body—his offering—if I follow the ruddy smoke?

My promise is scratched in that grim family of ashes;
 no radiant succor from time for the precious things I've lost,
 just the same rank smoke, and constant companionship of shadows.

Snow White

Ryden Meyer

James McCarthy limps frantically down a crowded cobblestone sidewalk stumbling with every step he takes. With each person he passes eyes follow to observe the strange site of a man wearing only a robe, presumably from a cheap hotel. Those who pass by on either side avoid him and appear to stay as far away as possible. As he stumbles he looks up at the nearest street sign and quickly grabs on to stable his body. The weather has taken the December turn and snowflakes fall on him as he holds onto the metal sign.

The temperature has made the pole painful to the touch. He looks around searching the storefront windows around him for an object he can use. The windows have nothing of use; only oak cabinets and plates that are buy one get one free. A cold gust of air penetrates his robe and brings him back to reality. He begins stumbling again through streets trying to keep his footing on the now lightly snow covered stones. Each step appears to be the one that will cause him to finally collapse; yet he continues to struggle through the decorated pathways. Anxiously looking left and right he notices a small diner with Christmas lights illuminating the doorway. He ducks into the small shop and collapses into a booth. As the waitress walks over he stares out of the window looking towards the street corner.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” asks the waitress in a curious tone.

“Coffee, plain, thanks” replies James with out taking his eyes off the window.

While the waitress walks away James begins to look at the rest of the restaurant. Nothing out of the ordinary, a salad booth on the north wall, tables near the kitchen, a group of people talking a little loud two booths over, which seems to annoy the man in the large black jacket who just walked in.

James wasn't sure what to do at the moment. He knew he had to keep moving, but he was chilled to the bone and the Marriott robe simply wasn't cutting it in this weather. He decided he was going to leave after the coffee had warmed him up. While looking out the window he noticed from the corner of his eye that the man in the black jacket who had previously been sitting close to the kitchen was walking directly towards his booth. Watching him walk over James took in more than his previous scan; the man was tall and skinny. He wore a nice jacket that clearly was in its first winter; it contrasted greatly against his shoes that looked to be about as worn as possible while still being functional to wear. He walked with a sense of intent, but not the purpose of conflict or harm, but rather a sense of conclusion, getting closer and closer to his destination.

James first instinct was to run, but his body quickly refuted that idea. Besides, he didn't recognize this person, and thought it highly unlikely that he was there to kill him. If so he already would have been dead. So why was the man here, and what did he want?

“Mind if I sit here Mr. McCarthy?” said the man in the jacket as he began to sit opposite of James in the booth.

“Who the hell are you?” replied James.

James was attempting to figure out who this man was, something about him made him seem as though he felt he was in control of what ever situation he was in.

“I'll take that as a yes,” he said with a smile that only curved on one side of his face. “And my names Don Jeffries. I work for the FBI, and I believe I could be of some assistance to a man in your position.”

Jeffries was sitting casually against the chipboard booth looking as though he was only half interested in the conversation at hand. There was a small scar running vertically through his right eyebrow, which prevented hair from growing. The scar gave the impression of someone who had been in tight situations.

“FBI huh? I was wondering when you fucks were gonna come knocking on my door, of course the answer was always when ever I had no choice but to open it. So, what do you want?” asked James.

The conversation had made James visibly uncomfortable; he began shifting slightly while looking around the rest of the restaurant, avoiding eye contact with Jeffries.

“It's not really what I want Mr. McCarthy, its more of a question of what we can do for each other.” Said Jeffries.

“Of course it is, so what can we do for each other?”

“Well, Mr. McCarthy, we need information on operation of Snow White.” Said Jeffries while leaning forward and moving his arms that were casually lying across the back of the seat now forward onto the table.

The casual atmosphere that first seemed a staple of Jeffries personality sharply turned with the mention of the operation. James broke away from his eyes aimlessly wondering and immediately focused on the agent; searching his face for some indication he wasn't being serious.

“Fuck off.”

“I thought you would say something to that extent, but in my mind you have two options. Either you can deny my request as eloquently as you already did and walk out of this diner. Facing whatever nifty little situation you've already got yourself into. Or... you can tell me what you know about the little princess and you can walk out of this diner with Me.” said Jeffries with a pleasant smile.

The pleasant nature of Jeffries conversation had returned, but the atmosphere remained tense, as both men sitting at the booth knew the severity of the conversation that harshly contradicted the image of the small diner in which they sat.

“And what makes me walking out of this diner with you any better then walking out on my own?” asked James.

“Mr. McCarthy, I think we both know the likelihood of your ability to survive longer than 5 hours outside of this diner is rather low. But I do think that if you let me hold your hand on the way out, it could be a decent bit higher.” Said Jeffries “You think your little hand holding would save me if I told you that I knew anything about Snow White? Fuck no. I'd be better off dead.”

“Unfortunately for you Mr. McCarthy, I think you may be dead either way,” said Jeffries “So the more relevant question is, how soon would you like to die?”

Two days had passed since agent Jeffries had talked to James in the diner. He ended the conversation by giving James his business card and walking to the door before turning around pointing at the business card and saying,

“Your life line...let me know if you value living more than pride.”

James had been thinking about calling for the past two days, but every time he picked up the phone and dialed, each click sounded like someone pulling back the hammer of loaded gun. He couldn't sign his death sentence so quickly, but he knew something had to be done.

“So? Are you going to go talk to him?” said Tell.

Tell had been one of James closest friends for the past couple of years. He was about average height with a thick build; everyone always compared to a small bulldozer.

James knew that the only way this problem could be mitigated was by going and talking to his illusive boss. The man had always remained present but never approachable to the people who worked at the warehouse. Many people told rumors of his ruthlessness as an employer, the ones who told the rumors often never were seen again.

“Yeah, I think so.”

The place he'd been staying at for the past couple days was a small apartment that Tell owned in the downtown district. It was relatively small and James had been sleeping on a recliner that faced a small TV in the corner of the room. The only reason James brought Tell into the situation was because he knew that no one had ever affiliated the two together.

“Alright man, I know you messed up, but if you're honest he's got to forgive you right?” Tell asked with apprehension.

“That's not how it works and you know it. There's a ten percent chance he even lets me tell him what happened. The reality is that as soon as I get down there he's gonna kill me on the spot.”

“Right, then there's nothing to worry about.”

Tell walked out of the small living room and into his room while James started to get dressed. He knew what he was about to do was going to be dangerous, but he couldn't see a way out that didn't result in him in

prison or dying. He walked to the door, thought of saying something to Tell, decided against it and walked out into the parking lot.

Walking to a small black Ford Cortina James was thinking about how things had gotten so messed up in the past 96 hours. Getting into the car reminded him of the last time he drove away from the warehouse that seemed to change his life in a matter of four sentences. He was now driving back to that same warehouse on the unkempt city roads that hummed loudly while driving on them, as though life was playing a cruel swan song that narrated his coming...what ever was coming.

While driving he recalled the conversation that seemed so harmless at the time.

"I told you, I don't know why you didn't listen to me in the first place."

"Yeah yeah yeah, I heard you the first time, I just don't get the whole point of all the secrets an shit."

Two men in the room next to James were arguing louder than he had come to expect. The rooms were always quiet, with strict rules of each room members never talking to anyone outside of their room. James had stayed about two hours later than usual because he had been late that morning. The two men came in about an hour after close settled in the empty room next to James.

"So...the boss doesn't let anyone in here know who they're giving that information too, or what it is?"

"Yeah, that's the point dumbass, if they don't know who its going to when they get picked up, they can't say where it's going or where its from."

The conversation began to soften in tone when the second male asked in a relative whisper,

"So no one who spreads the information knows their selling out their government?"

"Not a single one."

"And they don't know they're agents of the religion?"

"Nope, and if they did, they wouldn't know for long."

After hearing the last sentence James immediately got up and tried to quietly leave the room. While shutting the door one of the men came bursting out of the room next door.

"Who the hell are you? And what are you doing here so late" asked a man who appeared to be almost as round as he did tall.

"James, McCarthy" James said as calmly as he could "and I was staying late doing some work that I missed this morning."

Both men were now fully out of the room looking both suspicious and nervous. James knew what the next question was going to be before they had even asked.

"You hear anything?"

"What'd you mean...like out of the ordinary?" James said.

"Uh, no. Never mind. Have a good night."

James could feel them both watching him leave the warehouse. He had been doing this sort of thing long enough to know that he couldn't go home. He stopped at a hotel after driving for almost an hour and checked in paying only cash. The second night staying there he had hoped that the situation wasn't as dire as he had first expected. After taking a shower he put on a robe and sat down in the chair facing the window looking over the parking lot from his second story road.

James hadn't been sitting down for five minutes before he saw a black SUV pull into the parking lot. Four men wearing heavy looking jackets entered the hotel. James ran from the room as fast as he could, with out having any time to grab his things or even put on clothes.

A short honk brought James' thoughts back to the moment. He pulled off the road next to a small phone booth now three blocks away from the warehouse. Dialing each number seemed to take a concerted effort on behalf of his shaking hands.

"Hello" the familiar voice of Jeffries answered after two rings.

"I know what Snow White is, and if you can be here in ten minutes, you'll find everything you need to know."

James had never come face to face with the man he worked for. It had always been someone surrounded by bodyguards or seeing a silhouette in the distance. He had an office in the upper right section of the warehouse that you could only get to by walking up a specific set of stairs to a steel door with a peephole. It looked like a suspended fortress above the empty space that should have been filled with shelves and crates but instead was surrounded by rooms.

As he was standing at the bottom of the stairs James ran through the multiple scenarios that could occur. He could be killed upon entrance. He may tell his story and then be killed. He may tell his story and then be let go. Though each scenario had a bright side, the likelihood that he survived seemed minimal. Taking the first step on the wooden stairs James recalled the conversation he had five minutes prior with agent Jeffries.

“Hello”

“I know what Snow White is, and if you can be here in ten minutes, you’ll find everything you need to know.” Said James.

“I was wondering if you’d call.”

“Well I’m calling, I know about Snow White and I’m willing to give you the information, but I need your word that you’ll protect me.”

“Well you have my word Mr. McCarthy.” Replied Jeffries.

Reaching the top of the stairs James took a slow breath and knocked on the door. After close to three seconds the door opened into a small room. There was limited furniture, with a desk closest to the opposite wall facing the door. Two file cabinets were located in the right corner of the room. To the left were two small chairs, one of which was occupied by a large man with a hand placed in his jacket. The man, who James recognized as one of the men he talked to in the warehouse four days ago, closed the door and walked over to the other chair and sat down.

“James McCarthy I assume?”

Sitting behind the desk James was surprised to see that the soft voice came from a rather frail looking woman. She was wearing a small blue blouse with minimal make up and large hoop earrings, along with a curious look on her face.

“Yes...are you...the boss?” James asked.

“Why yes I am, Mary Sue at your service.” Said the woman.

“Well, in that case I need to, uh, tell you what I want.”

“Oh?” said Mary Sue with a smile on her face. “And what might that be?”

The smile on the woman’s face made James shift uncomfortably. James looked over at the two men; both seemed far too comfortable for his own good.

“I know about Snow White, and you know that.” James left a pause after the sentence, but with no response from Mary Sue he continued regardless. “I won’t say anything to anyone, if you forget that it happened.”

Mary Sue stood up after a moment and circled around the desk to stand in front of James.

“Unfortunately, you already have told someone James.”

James looked around the room confused, how could anyone possibly know that he told a Jeffries about Snow White? As James stared blankly at Mary Sue, she walked to the other side of the room and opened the door. Walking through the door was agent Jeffries with his gun drawn.

“Mr. McCarthy, I think we both knew it was going to come to this.”

James was shot twice in the chest before he was able to comprehend the situation that unfolded before him. James McCarthy fell to the floor with a confused look still permeating his face.

Fallen Angel

Amber Gevock

His light is almost out-
but it is enough.
Enough to crawl,
to pull himself
from the rubble of his fall.

The dirt clings
to his fingers, his robes,
to the tips of his wings.
His wings.

They are broken, battered,
by the force of his fall.
Where once there were feathers
there is bone and tattered muscle;
his greatest pride now
becomes his greatest shame.

He screams out his shame,
for all of Creation to hear.
"Forgive me!" he begs;
For mercy he cries,
yet the plea remains unheard.

Inheritance

Tori Nickol

The boy remembered watching from the window, his mother trying to coax life back to the garden. Exhausted, she revealed her face to the sky, sighing prairie wind. Beside him his father squinted into his coffee cup, looking for the answers in his grounds.

In time, his mother's breezy sighs drifted off, breaths swallowed thirstily by the cloudless sky, abandoning meager belongings of a hard life and desperation over the garden. The land huddled empty, save for the pickets that pricked the dehydrated dirt—white crosses,

the farm awaiting resurrection. Through the pane he watched his father till the dirt, a naked brown canvas scarred with loss he refused to admit. Behind the glass, the boy veiled his face behind lacey curtains that still smelled of her, damming useless tears—the way they said the reservoir had cradled water, before the land greedily drained it away.

But that was memory now. Perhaps the wind reminded his mother, who went looking for answers in the sky. Outside his father deafened his ears to the gusts, pushing and shoving dirt, trying to bully the answer out. While the sky kept breathing secrets to stubborn earth, the land remained unyielding, leaving a son stuck in the space between.

Monuments

Ryan Edens

Ruins sit upon a hill, a sentient and ominous presence. A house, once a home now weltered and interred among weathered, smooth stones. It shares its poignant artifacts with crickets and worms entombed in hollow crypts. Mounds of bricks stand like tombstones, silently mourning what they once were. Timbers, glazed and black, lay skeletal, like a fossil half buried. Glass shards engrave earth and rock alike, glowering in dusky illumination; a daily vigil animated by scattered golden beams. The house that was home takes a breath and sighs while the crickets sing the sun to rest.



The Dog that Can Bite

Sabrina Harding

I smashed his head into the truck window.

He had pushed his way on top of me, his hands pinning mine to the door, but my knee was sandwiched between us, and I kicked without really thinking. He fell back, my right hand colliding with his forehead before I told it to, sending his skull into the tinted glass.

It made this solid thump sound, the kind that usually made me wince on TV. There was no wince this time. He was stunned for a moment, the shadows on his face filling in the hollows as he cursed at me. My fake nails clawed at the vinyl of the door, catching on the plastic handle. The relieved whimper that tore from my throat into the cold night air as I spilled into the parking lot was lost in his swearing, my heeled boots giving way as my right hand touched the asphalt like a benediction.

The truck shook behind me as he scrambled across the bench seat, his shirt collar popped from our altercation.

“Baby?” His eyes were hurt, but there was anger in the Jack Daniels depths.

“I said no, and I meant no.” My voice was lower than usual, I sounded more pissed than scared—apparently the bitch who lived inside was awake, black manicured nails tapping along my ribcage excitedly.

He swung a denim wrapped leg out of the door and I took a step back, a sick feeling roiling through my gut like a barbed wire butterfly.

“I’m sorry, Baby, I’m just a little drunk. I didn’t mean anything by it. Get back in the truck, I can’t drive myself home like this.”

I stared at him, sitting in the beat up old Ford, holding his head like his dirty blonde hair was trying to escape, and was suddenly so angry I wanted to hit him again.

I had agreed to a date with this toy boy. I had honestly thought that he might be interested in me as a person after our semester as lab partners in A&P. But here I was, his designated driver at 2am on a Saturday morning. Sure, the party had been fun. Not wow-I-love-this-even-though-I’m-sober fun but better than sitting on Pinterest, so I’d stayed. I’d made small talk for three hours while he took whiskey shots and got less and less attractive.

“Sleep in your car, fuckweasel. And delete my number!” Ignoring his shouts after me, I jogged from the parking lot he’d told me to turn in to. It was in front of the derelict Chinese drive through, about eight blocks from our college dorms. Nights like this made me glad I had picked a smaller city to go to school in. Eight blocks in Detroit would have been hell.

Winter was chasing us down though, the sidewalk lost under burned out leaves. The heels had been a bad idea, but when I hadn’t expected to be walking home.

I should have just left his ass back at the party. I’d had the keys to the truck. That would have destroyed the progress I’ve made, though. I wanted to reform the hugely unlikable walking hemlock I’d been in high school. Being a good person is seriously pathetic shit sometimes.

Under my feet the leaves cried out as I crushed them, my breath coming too fast for my pace. He’d been on top of me. I smashed his head into the truck window.

Jesus, that was so messed up. The butterfly had returned, razor wings cutting into my gut and forcing the inner bitch back against my spine. He had thought I was easy. A slut. The bitch set its wings on fire, my heavily mascaraed eyes fixing on the Holiday gas station sign above me.

Being nice was such a waste of a great personality flaw. Pushing through the dead bushes, the bitch tap-danced gleefully against my vertebrae.

I slammed the door open as best I could, prowling past the mid-twenties bearded guy behind the counter. “Do you sell bats?”

He choked on his coffee and I paused, glaring over my leather-clad shoulder at him.

“Miss? Are you okay?” He leaned over the counter, eyebrows disappearing behind a shaggy mop of black hair.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sudden urge to play baseball.” I spun, adrenaline making my arms dance a nervous jig

around the inferno in my chest.

"Sure, common phenomenon. I think they have a league for it." He took a meaningful look at my shoes and I had the sudden desire to start hurling the beef jerky next to me at him. "Have you been drinking tonight?"

I crossed my arms to keep my hands from the Slim Jims; flicking my head despite the fact my bangs were caught up in my sloppy French braid. "No, I was the DD."

He craned his head to look dramatically out the large windows, streetlamps pooling on the empty street. "How's the 'driving' part of that job coming along?"

Ordinarily I would have appreciated the humor, but tonight not so much. The fiery butterfly was doing laps around my chest, burning the air in my lungs. "Thank you for your concern Gas Station Clerk, but I'm fine. Please leave me alone."

"My name, is Gavin. And I am not a gas station clerk, I am a philosophy major midnighting as a boring guy." He gesture grandly to the counter, as if it was some kind of fortress. I wanted to leap over it and beat him with a jumbo sized Snickers bar. And then find something I could smash a window with.

"You're a philosophy major. You're not midnighting as anything."

Gavin raised a dark eyebrow, grinning a little under his moustache. "You always this friendly when you wanna bat?"

I fought down a smile, the bitch reminding me I had business to attend to. "Look, Gavin, I need a bat. Or a brick. Or a tire iron. Can you be useful?"

"I'm a Philosophy major. I don't do useful."

"Fuck you."

He held both hands up like I was some kind of wild animal. "Seriously, you need an attitude adjustment, Woman."

I paced under the fluorescent lights, my cheeks flushed and a roaring in my ears like an oncoming semi. "What's the point? A bad attitude gets you noticed, a good one gets you used. I would rather be the bitch with the bat than the victim under some track-running pig who can't hold his liquor!"

I was projecting, filling the small warm space with my venom. The anger seeped out of me like a noxious gas, withering any chance I had of picking up some good calming energy from the universe.

"What did you say?"

I tried to force my eyes to refocus through the haze of red. "What?"

Gavin was over the counter in one fluid jump, his black trousers rising up over his high-topped sneakers. "You said something just then. And you meant it. About being a victim?"

"I'm not a victim! Don't you ever—"

"Is that why you wanted the bat?"

I paused, breathing like I had just swum across an ocean. "Huh?"

"Is some track-pig the reason you need a bat?"

He was close enough to grab my wrist, a bad move on his part. The bitch hissed, and I thrashed like a tail-caught cat. I smashed his head into the truck window. My hand raked across Gavin's face and he stumbled backward with a yell, knocking over the display case of Ho-Hos. We stared at each other, me pressed up against the ice cream cooler and he on his ass, total shock written across his face.

"I'm not apologizing," I barked out, scurrying around the cooler to put it between us. My heels clacked on the grey tiles, making the whole thing a little more awkward.

I became aware of Vixen's Edge of a Broken Heart playing over the sound system a little too loud to be standard procedure.

"I will. I'm sorry for grabbing you. And whatever else just went down. But a bat is probably not your answer." Picking himself off the floor, Gavin tilted his head at odd angles to keep his eyes on me, putting one hand then the other in front of him in case I decided to fly at him all nails and banshee screams.

"I'm not saying it wouldn't be satisfying as hell, trust me—"

"No."

His eyebrows went up, and I forced myself to move out from behind the cooler. He retreated a step, which

made the bitch preen herself proudly.

"I'm not going to trust you."

"Look, you're the one who came storming into my peaceful little Holiday. You're the one who yelled about victims and assault. You're the one who just handed me my ass for the first time since freshman football. So don't trust me, that's fine. But be grateful I'm not calling the cops."

I started to take another step, but stopped. Arrested by the thought he might run for the phone. "Why haven't you? Called the cops, I mean."

He shrugged, maneuvering slowly to put the counter between us. His lip was starting to swell a little. "I'm a nice guy."

I laughed bitterly, picking up the white wire display and putting it back on its feet, the battlefield of our altercation littered with candy casualties.

"And how's that life choice working out for you?"

He pushed his hair out of his face, his eyes slightly pained. "It's got its ups and downs."

"And which category does this night fall under?"

Hands still on his head in a mirror of another moment of this night, he regarded me thoughtfully. "Haven't quite decided yet."

A slight shame prickling the edges of my miasma of anger, I wished I had left my hair down so I could use it to hide my face. "What did you mean about the bat?"

"Huh? Oh, it'll get you in as much trouble than it'll get him. You gotta be more subtle sometimes."

I looked at him, a slight smile playing around my lips. He sighed dramatically. "Yeah, subtle doesn't seem to be your thing."

"That phase of my life ended tonight." The statement sounded surprisingly bitter, but I watched his face intensely, curious.

"I'm sorry."

He meant it. This gas station clerk, working the graveyard shift in a small town, cared about me. Maybe being a good person isn't so bad after all.

"Its okay. Well, not really. But it will be. Any suggestions if the bat is out?"

"I'm assuming there isn't going to be a report filed about whatever happened before you burst through my door?"

"Undecided. I want something more immediate than paperwork."

He nodded, pursing his lips like a duck as he regarded himself in the windows. "This bat was for house windows?"

"Truck."

He raised his eyebrows at himself, waving his fingers pedantically. "Is there anyone in said truck?"

I leaned against the counter, fascinated by his fascination as it played across his face and under his beard. "Yeah, passed out in the passenger side."

"Passed out as in—?"

"Jack Daniels bedtime lullaby, and a collision with one of his windows."

Gavin opened his mouth, then closed it again, nodding emphatically to his wavering image. "Not going to ask."

"Good."

"Are you familiar with the DUI procedure here in town?"

"He's asleep."

"Intent to drive," he recited with a flourish as he turned to me, talking over my interjection. "A person in their vehicle in possession of their keys and under the influence can be held liable to the intent to operate a motor vehicle while intoxicated."

"And he's underaged."

"Well that makes it even better." Flicking the phone of the cradle, Gavin dialed three numbers and patted the counter. I jumped up onto it, marveling in the genius I was witnessing.

“Hello operator? Hi there, I’m watching a man who appears to be very drunk try to get into his car.”
 Pause. “Yeah, he keeps dropping the keys and cursing. I would go talk to him, but I have an interview tomorrow and can’t afford a violent confrontation.” Pause. “Of course. My name is William Lloyd and I’m at the corner of-” He looked at me meaningfully and I imitated chopsticks and pointed furiously. “I’m across from that closed down Chinese place off Lyssian. Yep, its -Oh shit, he got the door open. He’s fallen into the truck. I’m going to see if I can-” He hung up.

My stomach had fallen into the knees, and the bitch was bowing to an idol of Gavin she had sculpted out of the remnants of the butterfly wires. Over our heads, Cinderella came on crooning about being nobody’s fool.

“Did that really just happen?”

“Yes. Yes it did.”

“And no one is ever going to know we did it?”

Gavin turned to lean his back against the counter, his shoulder close to mine. “Probably not. Assuming he is in the truck and actually drunk.”

“Oh, he is.”

“Then crazy-ass bat girl, we just committed a small act of good looking like evil.”

“My name is Hannah.”

He held out his hand and I shook it, the rage fading to a happy purr in the back of my mind.

“How did you know that would work?”

“My dad and I used to live in our car. He got a DUI once sleeping in the back seat when the keys were in the ignition. Then they put me in state care, and now I work at a gas station to pay for classes to help me figure out why the world is such a mess.” He grinned at me, white teeth flashing through the well manicured thatch of his facial hair. “When I’m not being harassed by angry she-cats who want to play baseball.”

“Thank you for not asking about— you know.”

He looked away from me, and I turned my head to see our reflections in the windows, two young adults framed against the black of the night between a backwards advertisement for cigarettes and another for cheap beer.

“I told you, I’m a good guy. Most of the time. Want some pizza?”

I nodded, and watched him move toward the glass pizza box in the fluorescent lights. The LED display above the till switched to 2:45am. “How do you keep the balance? I mean, how can you be a good person and still be safe from the screw-ups of the world?”

Balancing cheese and pepperoni slices on paper plates, Gavin gave me a long look before he shrugged an answer. “Take it day by day, I guess. To use an adorable analogy not quite as impressive as Aristotle, it all depends on which dogs bite the hands that feed them, and how many you’re willing to risk starving based on your own fear.”

I looked at our reflections in the windows, a police cruiser with its lights on lighting up my face in reds and blues. “So we just bandage our wounds and try again?”

“Nah,” Gavin set the plates down next to my leg and reached for the candy display, his sneakers dancing between the still-fallen ho-hos. “You bandage your wound and punish the dog that bites.”

I smashed his head into the truck window.

Gavin grinned at me, holding up a Snickers and a PayDay. “Dessert?”

I pointed to the PayDay, and reached for my slice of the pie. “Always.”

Spinoza

Barry First

Of course the labyrinth is of my own making. I turn right and there is pleasure and left, pain. Then the rights and lefts reverse taking me to dead ends. Barreling rain, barricades of fog, steam rising from under my feet.

Day after day I get more confused, but I haven't stopped looking for the light at tunnel's end. Love's a pleasure that I hate to lose, but I'm feelin' the strain. So give me sight women and free my soul—will you let me escape in your arms and drift away?

Beginnin' to think I'm wastin' time.

I don't understand the things I do. The world looks so unkind, but I count on you to carry me through. Thanks for the joy you're givin' me.

Oh What a Night ...I Didn't Even Know Her Name

When the sun rolls down and burns the tar on the roof. And my shoes get so hot that I wish my tired feet were fireproof. Under the boardwalk, down by the sea, on a blanket with my baby that's where I need to be.

Ya know, when a man loves a woman, he can't keep his mind on nothin' else.

He'll fight the world for the good thing he's found. If she's bad he can't see it; he'll even turn his back on his best friend if he puts her down.

Yet, I've got sunshine on a cloudy day; when it's could outside I've got the month of May. I guess you'd ask, what makes me feel this way, nothing but my girl, my girl.

I am talking about passion.

Every time I see you all the rays of the sun are streaming through the waves in your hair, and every star in the sky is taking aim at your eyes, like a spotlight. The beating of my heart is a drum and it's looking for a rhythm like you. You can take the darkness from the pit of the night and turn it into a beacon that is burning infinitely bright.

Fire. Kisses of fire.

Sugar. Oh honey, honey. You are my candy girl, and you got me lovin' you. I just can't believe the loveliness of lovin' you.

No New Year's Day to celebrate, no Valentine hearts to give away, no burst of spring; in fact it's just another ordinary day. No sparkling April rain, no flowers in bloom, no joyous wedding Saturday within the month of June. I am just here to say I love you. I am here to say how much I care.

Oh my love, my darling, I've so hungered for your touch, such a long lonely time.

And time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much. Are you still mine? I need your love, please don't take your love, from me.

Heart of glass.

I thought I saw a woman brought life. She was warm and she showed me what it was to love. But I don't know her anymore.

Nothing's fine, I'm torn. I'm all out of faith. This is how I feel—I'm cold and I'm ashamed, lying naked on the floor. Illusion never changes into something real.

I've gotta take a little time, a little time to think things over.

In my life there's been heartache and pain, and I don't know if I can face it again. I'm going to take a little time, a little time to look around me. I've got nowhere left to hide

It took all the strength I had not to fall apart. I had to mend the pieces of my broken heart. I spent oh so many nights feelin' sorry for myself. I used to cry, but now I hold my head up high. And now you see me, somebody new, not that chained up little person once in love with you. Now I'm savin' all my lovin' for someone who will be lovin' me.

How delightful it is to be in bondage to such emotions as these.

Memento

Justin A. Moore

I pick up her picture from off of my desk,
 vividly I recall
 her, and us, young and together.
 We met, as so many others do, at school
 where attention is cleft
 between learning and attraction.
 She helped me once. That's how these things start, leant in,
 sweet face nearer to mine,
 sable hair draped over my arm—
 she trapped me then, or I trapped her, I was not
 terribly grizzled then;
 fresh, blue, inked numbers on my hand.
 Weeks, eternity, naught cooled our young passions,
 skin was slick, hot, pressing,
 uneven lusts were warm silk sheathed in steel; hard,
 ready, syncopated beats of our hearts' drumming
 were urgent as we held
 and one's lips searched for the other's.
 Days and a year later, I touched her tender,
 life-bearing belly. She
 cradled it with her petite frame,
 struggled our child to the hospital. Salt, iron,
 cold wetness on her skirt
 redolent of days not long gone;
 clean nurses prepare her. Doctors give sterile,
 confident directions—
 long seconds mangle my hands white.
 How any heart could take that! Now my love screamed,
 released new, mewling life,
 carnal ruin; but impotence,
 fey whim, Death, conspired with casual hands,
 robbed and gave favor. Eyes,
 bright and staring. Her brow still warm,
 sweat and ichor kissed and danced on her face,
 I was almost happy.
 Slumbering daughter in my arms,
 blanket-wrapped. Tears make a mournful parody,
 wetted baby's face, mom's
 angelic visage, and my eyes.
 "Daddy!" she cried as I put the picture down—
 her tiny, strong fingers
 clutched my shirt. "Why are you crying?"
 "They're tears of joy, my little memento," soft,
 I reply. With false cheer,
 "Let's go and play."



A Lover's Locket

Ryan Edens

Its golden tomb still holds the ghost of you,
a ghoulish face that stares out hauntingly.
I once did hold the pleasant enough view
that I would carry you, enclosed, with me

confined within a heart, a painted pendant,
and now I entertain the thought to throw
away the key, to close the heart and lock-it,
to save my crooked self the ceaseless sorrow,

that pierces like the point of cupid's dart,
when I behold you from the chamber of
the cold and leaden lump. It is my heart,
and not the golden rock, that holds my love.

But now I've lost the piece I need to fit,
the key, to pry you from my locket.

Find a New Room

Jay Bouchard

If you find you're the smartest person
in the room, find a new room.
Quit blowing your serve
past the bottom of the ladder.
Your ego explodes, the ball
skips past their rackets,
but it's not good for you
and no one is impressed.

Painting the line with your forehand
means nothing if your opponent
lacks the resources to react.
The yellow, felt mark left
clinging to the clay will
be unobserved, dismissed.

Conquering the bunny
hill only brings you
back atop the bunny
hill if you're afraid
of the mountain, of
boarding the lift.

If you long to ski
the steep and the deep,
quit making turns in the face
of beginners. Once your pizza turns
parallel point your tips
toward the powder, and be swallowed.

Be bruised with each descent.
May each mogul rip
you from your bindings
and every turn twist your knee
from its form. Let the snow blind
you and the mountain mangle you.

And once humbled serve and rally
with heavy hitters—your strength
matching theirs, your topspin
sending the ball out their reach,
leaving a noticeable yellow mark
along the court's baseline, an impression.

Then float atop the deepest snows
and carve between the tightest trees,
following only experts, or blazing
fresh tracks. But for God's sake, leave
your intellectual masturbation
behind. Find a new room.

18 years

Brenna Kinsey

I don't need children,
 I have poems to look after.
 More than the government has told me I can support alone.
 Who has time

when a newborn verse cries in its crib upstairs?

A toddler, only a stanza tall, sits in the kitchen and bangs together pots
 and pans. I've been battling the same migraine for days.

A pre-teen poem lurking about, learning how to curse and being impossibly rude;
 they never leave that stage fast enough.
 Moving past petty phased clichés; getting smarter and more creative.

Then you have the teenaged poem, standing in front of the bathroom mirror, covering itself with angst and
 whorish adjectives. Then asking for the car keys.
 You set the limits, the line in the sand. Then slowly learn to trust them,
 That they will come down, settle down, and calm down just enough to get by.

I don't need children.
 I have already felt the relief that comes when
 a poem is ready to leave home.

It'll come home for Thanksgiving, Christmas and stay through New Years.
 Send postcards, the occasional phone call,
 they'll be fine, have good lives.
 Become successful poems and have their own.
 I'll stand still and watch them shine,
 Praying they remember
 their past is just as important as the

present. Two months after another great success by my poems,
 my health will go. By this time I'll be
 aged and frail like they were.
 They'll come to my crisp deathbed, not looking a day older than when they left.
 That's the point,
 My poems living beyond me;
 The wish of every parent.

Under the Dog Park Sun

Michelle Golden

1

Evelyn pulls into her garage and puts the car in park. She sits back against her seat and heaves a sigh. The sun shines through the side window of the garage, bright and cheerful. She pushes the visor to the left to block it out and closes her eyes. She can't believe she just put her daughter on an airplane to Italy. The soft ticking of the engine as it cools counts the moments of her daughter getting farther and farther away. She'd thought returning home from leaving Maddie at college for the first time had been hard, but this—this is worse. College was an hour and a half away; Italy—well, Italy is a whole world away. Evelyn inhales a slow, deep breath. She brushes her hair behind her ears, with sunlight glinting on the few grays that highlight the brown. Grass clippings perfume the garage and almost mask the tang of oil that darkens the floor of the garage from the slow leak in her car. She can hear the dogs barking in the house because they know she's home and are anxious to bathe her in kisses, but she needs to sit here in the car that is already getting uncomfortably warm and have a moment alone. Her baby girl, her sweet angel, was flying to a part of the world Evelyn had never seen, going to experience things that had only been read about in books.

Is it normal or, if not normal, acceptable to envy the life your child has begun when yours seems so boring in comparison? Or is that just me trying to fill up the emptiness with anything handy to stick in there that isn't this strangling feeling of loss? Evelyn grips the gray steering wheel and watches as her knuckles whiten. I won't cry because I'm happy for her and this awesome opportunity to study abroad, and she's 20, Evelyn tries to convince herself as she feels the tears welling up and constricting her throat.

Evelyn thought this feeling of loss should have begun after that first solo drive home, but it was so easy to run up for the day or have Maddie come home for the weekend and, with work to keep her busy during the week, it was easy to pretend nothing had changed. At least that's how she reassured Maddie when she pestered Evelyn to get out of the house after the sun went down.

"Join a group, Mom. Pick up a guy at the library and have a spot of tea. Hit on the nerd sitting next to you when you go to see the new X-Men movie for the third time. Do something!" Maddie encouraged each time they talked on the phone.

"Kidido, I'm a mom. That's all I know how to be. It takes time to step back into the dating world. And it's been so busy at work. And I have to take care of the puppies and take them for walks and love them."

"Mom!" Maddie exclaimed, exasperated. "Quit making excuses. There's a whole new world out there that left grunge and plaid shirts behind them. It's not 1996 anymore. Take the puppies to the dog park and meet some strapping guy. Go browse at the library or join a book club. Do something. Just get out of the house."

What Maddie didn't understand or, more specifically, need to know is that Evelyn is terrified. She'd devoted her life to raising her daughter and it was easier to pretend to still be an active participant in her daughter's life than admit her role had diminished to a supporting character.

And here she is, sitting in her hot car, crying like she's lost her best friend. She'd had Maddie so young; they'd essentially grown up together, just the two of them against the world. And now it was the world Maddie would get to see, at least for these four months and, once she came back from this experience, their relationship will have changed more. Maddie will be even more of an adult. What does a caregiver do when their care is no longer needed? Who do you become when the person you are is no longer relevant to the new situation? How am I still a mom if my baby doesn't need mothering anymore? Evelyn snuffles through her tears and reaches into the gray glove compartment, removes the travel pack of tissues, and blows her nose thoroughly. She takes a deep and shaky breath and tries to steel her mind against the echoing emptiness of the house that's waiting for her.

"Nothing to it but to do it," she said, echoing what had once been her grandpa's call to action. Anything that needed completing got a "Nothing to it but to do it," with a granddaughter tagging along to learn how to do it. Breathing out a hefty sigh, Evelyn takes the keys from the ignition, gets out of the car, and walks into her house to adjust to another new phase of motherhood. She's going to have to get a life of her own.

2

With layovers and the flight time, it wasn't until Sunday afternoon that Maddie called. She'd sent text messages along the way, letting Evelyn know they'd made it to each airport. Having splurged for the global cellular plan, she was reassured they could talk as needed and the time distance allowed.

Evelyn is sitting on her mocha-colored love seat with a lap-full of fluffy puppies, both on their backs with paws in the air, allowing her to rub their bellies. She has the blue curtains pulled against the afternoon sun streaming in, but the windows are open and an occasional breeze billows the curtain enough to let a sunbeam highlight the television. When her cell phone begins to sing Phantom of the Opera, Evelyn pauses Diane Lane, who is clothed in her white dress and riding a moped, and answers the phone with enthusiasm.

"Baby girl! How are you? Did you have a safe flight? Did you get any sleep? I miss you! Are you having fun?" Evelyn yells into the phone.

Laughing, Maddie tries to answer all of her mom's questions. "I'm fine, Mom. Obviously the flight was safe, since we're here. Duh. Your long flight care package was a hit. Kelsie and I slept through your Italian composers CD after gorging on the chocolates. We shared the Oreo and nut packages with the group because everyone was hungry after the meal they gave us. Mom, airplane food sucks."

"Well, it does have a reputation to uphold. But you must be swimming in some kind of pasta sauce by now, right."

"Mmmm, pasta. Not yet, unfortunately. We're supposed to be going once everyone has a chance to settle into their rooms. Kelsie and I are starving for real food though. Do you remember the pictures that came up when we Googled 'foods of Florence'? I'm ready for pizza, piles of pasta, and gelato."

"You're going to make me have to get up and cook, if we don't stop talking about food. Now, tell me about your rooms! Tell me everything!" Evelyn encourages.

"Mom, everything looks like it came out of a painting. The domes and the marble; it's all so beautiful. We're going to eat and then explore after. The rooms are bigger than the dorms, so that's great, and we have this amazing view of the whole city. It's gorgeous. It's a beautiful day to be in Italy!"

A new voice comes over the phone, "Hi Maddie's mom!"

Laughing, Evelyn replies, "Hi Kelsie!" Evelyn smiles. "I don't think I even needed the phone to hear that kiddo. Tell my daughter from another mother 'hi.' Mads, I'm really happy you guys are there together. It will make the trip so much more fun."

"Yeah, and she's a touch of home here." The line is silent for a moment.

"You okay, baby girl?" Evelyn inquired, her voice soft and soothing.

"I miss you, Mom."

Evelyn smiled. "I miss you too. But you're going to have such an awesome time and see truly inspiring things. You'll grow as an artist more than you can even believe. They don't have all those statues of beautiful people for lack of a good view. I expect detailed drawings of the beautiful offspring of Roman gods to fill your sketchbooks. I'm seeing Italy vicariously here. Make good pictures for mommy," Evelyn laughs. That was the phrase she'd used to talk Maddie into going to kindergarten and only worked once Maddie caught a glimpse of the classroom art supplies.

Maddie laughed. There is a commotion in the background and then Maddie's voice fills the phone.

"Mama, I've got to go. We're finally going to go eat. I'll be sure and send you pictures of everything."

"Okay, sweetie. I love you. Be safe."

"I will." Maddie pauses and there's a rustling sound against the phone, and Evelyn knows Maddie has cupped her hand around the bottom of her phone. She whispers, "I miss you, Mommy."

Evelyn closes her eyes and tears trickle down her cheeks, but she smiles and responds, "I miss you too, baby girl. But you're going to have the time of your life. So far. Go enjoy it. I love you so much and I'll be here when you get back."

"Okay. I really gotta go. I love you, Mom! Bye!"

"Love you! Bye, baby girl."

Evelyn waits to hear the line disconnect and then puts down her phone. She looks at Diane Lane, paused and gorgeous in her white dress, taking in the beauty of whatever Italian town she's in to surprise Marcello. She's

always liked this movie because it was about starting over and healing. Starting over means doing things differently than the way you've done things in the past. And seeing the Italian landscape made her feel closer to Mads.

Instead of hitting the play button on the remote, Evelyn turns the television off. She takes a deep breath and gets up from the couch.

"Aurora! Luna! Do you want to go to the dog park? Do you? Yes, you do. Okay, let's get your leashes on! Come on, let's go." Evelyn's little neighborhood dog park may not be filled with the marble likenesses of Roman gods, but there is the cute guy who moved into the duplex down the road. Her neighbor said he's single too. And he has a dog named Atticus. Maybe their puppies should have a play date.

Or maybe not. Geez. Maybe she should just finish the movie. It was a little windy outside and it was relaxing here on the couch. She started to lean back on the cushions, resigning herself to not leaving her house. Atticus and his daddy could wait for another day when it's not so—scary to try something new. But then Evelyn looked down at those puppy-dog eyes and the wagging tails already so excited to go out and run around the dog park. Although it didn't seem like a big deal, Evelyn wondered if this wasn't the moment that could change the trajectory of her life. She could sit here and watch a movie about a woman who left everything she'd ever known behind for a fresh start, or she could go out into the world and try to find her own. Evelyn stood up from the couch, walked to the back door, and took the dogs' harnesses from the hook. She suited up the puppies and clipped their purple leashes to their harnesses. Opening the back door, Evelyn leads her dogs outside and into the late afternoon sunshine. She begins walking toward the dog park, smiling at how excited Maddie was on the phone. She knows she did the right thing by encouraging Maddie to live in the moment and experience everything she possibly could while there. And this trip was something to celebrate, as an amazing beginning of adulthood for her baby girl.

With a heaving sigh, Evelyn turned her focus outward and tried to see the beauty of the afternoon. It's a lovely spring day and the neighborhood tinged golden from the sun as it makes its way toward the horizon. It really is one of her favorite kinds of afternoons, with great indigo clouds along the horizon that make the light from the sun seem even brighter against the trees that have hints of orange and yellow. The puppies are trotting along, tongues out and occasionally sniffing the ground and tracking some scent only they can smell. It's beautiful out here.

Evelyn's phone chimes that a text message has come in. Looping the leashes around her right wrist, she pulls out her phone and accesses the message. It's from Maddie. They must not have had to go far for food, because it's a selfie of Mads and Kelsie and the banquet they're about to start stuffing themselves from. Maddie's long dark hair frames her face, the green eyes she got from Evelyn shaped into crescent moons because her smile is so big. She towers over Kelsie, even sitting down, whose strawberry blonde hair and shorter frame make them look like opposites, even though they're close enough to be sisters. Mads already has a giant bowl of brown gelato in front of her and the caption says "Nutella!" Evelyn laughs out loud. She stops on the side of the road to respond and she takes a picture of the puppies waiting for her to continue walking, panting with those doggy grins that show how happy they are just to be outside. She sends it to Maddie, with the caption, "Grammy is taking us for a walk." Evelyn places her phone back in her pocket and continues walking with the puppies.

About five minutes later, her phone chimes again. She takes it out of her pocket to see the picture of an empty gelato bowl and a heaping plate of pasta with a thick meat sauce. "Puppies, Grammy is going to have to think about some dinner if Mommy keeps sending me all these pictures of nummy food."

She responds to the text, "Looks delicious. Now go eat it. I'll call you before I go to bed. I love you!"

Almost immediately, Maddie's response pops up. It's a kissy face icon, followed by "I love you too!"

Evelyn smiles, puts her phone away, and continues walking. They're almost to the dog park and the girls are getting excited to be off-leash and running around. Their little paws want to run, but Evelyn keeps them from taking off by gathering the slack in their leashes. "We'll get there all in good time, sweeties. All in good time."

Thinking about little puppy steps, gelato, and the possibility of Atticus being out in the yard for her girls to say hi to keeps Evelyn moving. The prospect of dating is terrifying. And exciting. But terrifying. She laughs

at the swirling emotions filling her. I'm happy and sad; scared and excited; nostalgic and longing for something new. I'm an Alanis Morissette song. Maybe I'm really not ready to start dating. Maybe I need to find me, without hiding behind motherhood. What do I want?

Evelyn stopped abruptly. She couldn't remember the last time she had asked what she wanted. It had always been about Maddie. Gladly for Maddie, but now Mads was old enough that she was looking for answers to that question on her twenty-year-old terms. Maybe it was time for Evelyn to start doing the same, on her thirty-six-year-old terms. What does she want to do with the rest of her life? I don't know what I want to do with the rest of my life, but I do know I want to see the world. On my own or with someone, but I want to see it.

Continuing on to the gate of the dog park, Evelyn's mind is filled with pictures from the travel books she's read. London, Paris, Florence, Greece, Scotland. Maybe the sun doesn't have to be a Tuscan one, but I want to see it from somewhere other than the dog park.

She walks the puppies through the gate and closes it behind her. Releasing the puppies from their harnesses, she walks to the benches and sits in the sun. It is nice here though. Maybe this is living in the moment. The puppies find friends and they all run around, barking and playing. The sun warms the left side of her face and she closes her eyes to relish the cool breeze lifting strands of her hair around her face. It's enough. For now, this gorgeous spring day, it's enough.

