

The Works

The Official Arts Publication
of Sauk Valley Community College

Theme: “Better Left Unsaid”



Fulfillment and Delivery
by Susan Kim

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The Works
2012-2013 Editorial Staff . . .

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Faculty Advisor . . .

Tom Irish

* * * * *

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Poetry

Theme: "Better Left Unsaid"

2012-2013 poetry contest winner:

THE OLD BARN

The red barn stood perched on a slight rise
Pungent hay and golden straw graced its walls
Children's echoing laughter trickled into corners
Keeping time with the swing of thick rope.
My father's blue gaze held waves of green
Undulating against a golden sky.

A dry wind rushes through fields
Pulled taut by a searing sun and cracked
Open by a hundred years of steady plow.
Thunder and rain stir up a whirlwind of hopes--
A black, swirling stream
Eddied by currents of foreclosures.

Now the old barn sits silent,
Weather-beaten gray, broken door.
Lines of quiet despair etch my father's temples
As he stares out the window at frozen fields.

—Deborah Crowson

2012-2013 poetry contest honorable mention:

This Town

I cannot wait to leave for Chicago, to escape from this town, where the autonomy of unambitious malefactors generates a cesspool of malcontent and melancholy, the likes of which, outside of here, can only be found within periphery nations. This notion of “live fast, die young” runs rampant through the troglodytes of this sewer system, and ushers into a more disgraceful ideology of “die before we live,” which is more to say to give up on life and accept whatever becomes of you. While this town does promote inadequacy, one cannot try but to believe, to hope, that outside of this pit there is light, that the days ahead can lead to something greater than the days that have passed. Yet, leaving this town is more of a challenge than fighting cancer, as well as being more malicious and damaging to one’s being; it holds you like quicksand, the harder you fight, the harder it clutches on, pulling you downward, until eventually swallowing you whole, leaving behind only the excrement of one’s failure and easily forgotten past. The only plausible way out is to either end it all before the show is over, like many of the young too often do, or find a hand willing to grasp yours and pull you free of this grotesque, miserable domain. Yet, no hand can be found near me; no stick, no branch, no rope, no root, not even a blade of grass is close enough for me to clamp onto and yank my body clear of the cold, revolting slop within this sty. However, I will continue to swim towards the ever distancing shore, in hope that upon reaching it, I will still muster up enough strength to stand on my own two feet, and upon doing so, walk forward, towards the benevolent future, which my mind dreams will welcome me and help me wash off this stink that I have accrued from so many years of wallowing in the mud and waste that is this town. It’s going to require a large amount of soap.

—Matt Hughes

Fiction

Theme: "Better Left Unsaid"

2012-2013 fiction contest winner:

Cosmonaut

by Waters, David K

"If I should fall, think only this of me: There's some corner of a foreign field that is for ever [sic] England". -Rupert Brooke

Hello. We've never met until now. There is no need for us to use names here, for they are not necessary. What is necessary is for you to know that I am blind. I do not hate you, nor do I love you. You are not my enemy, nor are you my friend. No sir, you just received the short end of the stick. Whether it was God, man, physics, geometry, or just bad timing, something, or someone, determined that your time has come. You and I just simply tried to occupy the same space on a mathematical plane at the same time. And apparently I won; you lost. I am the means that justify your end. In other words: I am the means of your death.

Despite how you may have perceived me in the past, however you may have pictured it, whether it was your denomination, or just your imagination, you will soon learn that there is no heavenly angel here to take you to heaven. Nor is there any sort of dark-cloaked figure with a seethe coming to drag you to hell, because, well, there is none of that here. Surely you must have thought about this, right? After all, a man of your chosen profession must have considered what could happen to a bloke like yourself in this kind of business, correct? Well, despite what you thought, believed in, or envisioned; it is in fact, just you and I; and this very intimate moment alone. Let us begin this terrible experience together, shall we?

I blasted out of the barrel of a Kalashnikov like a Cosmonaut blasting off into outer-space. I am your Sputnik. This is our "Space-race" you see? We are in a struggle to see "who can eliminate who first" using super-sonic projectiles. I am your Apollo Eleven, and you just happen to be the face on my moon. I am your "one small step for man" and two large steps back for mankind.

I have penetrated through the skin and bone of your skull by this time. I'm currently passing through your frontal lobe. This is a whole new experience for me. I've lost some of my momentum during the entry which will allow me to slow down enough for us to spend some time together and get to know one another. This must be the part of your brain that controls your motor skills, is it not? Dose my intrusion not cause you to drop your rifle at this point in time? Am I not causing you to go limp as you violently twist and turn? Is my velocity not a result of science in the form of law by this man you call Newton? Will the destruction of this portion of your brain not cause you to fall a lumbering six feet to the ground? Odd if you think about it; you'll only fall half way to your final resting place. You will still have another six feet to go below ground. Some other instrument or tool is suited to finish that job. The digging of another six feet seems peculiar to me. Why burry you? Are you not a believer in the cycle of life? Are there no other creatures above the ground that could benefit from your death? Why does it just have to be the worms that get to consume you?

I've passed through your frontal lobe and I've changed trajectory. I'm now in the

temporal lobe. This part is a rather curious place to me. It seems that it serves as a filing cabinet for fondness and heart ache. As I continue on I am coming to realize why all of this gray “matters”. For example: what am I seeing now? I have heard of these things before. Are these what you call memories? I am erasing them one by one with my path of destruction. I’m spiraling through them at 2,350 feet per second, but I feel that I need to slow down so that I can take some time with these interesting gems.

I am slowly killing your 8th birthday when you received your favorite “Ghost Busters” toy. I’m eliminating your grandfather’s stories about his lessons learned and moral experience’s that he passed on to you from yesteryears. I’m ripping away your first kiss on prom night with Julie Mayer. I’m tearing through the first time that you made love to “The Reason” you joined the army. It was out of heart ache wasn’t it? The first time you held your daughter is now obliterated. The beauty of your girlfriend’s smile fading into the summer’s night under her star is now deleted in the wake of my havoc. By what do you call her these days? Ah, yes, you call her “Pleiades”.

But that doesn’t really matter anymore, now does it? All of these memories and thoughts have been scattered to the wind. Perhaps your comrade next to you is wearing the memory of your game winning homerun. Or perhaps the ground has been painted with the time you met your best friend in art class. Either way, they’re gone.

But hold on, hold on, wait a minute. I tend to like this memory right here. I have to say, this memory actually makes me glad about what I am doing here. You had an argument with your father just a few months ago. Do you remember? It was just a few days before you came to this country. I have to admit, I admire the quote you yelled at him; how did it go again?

“If this war doesn’t kill me, my drinking will!” You see? Oddly enough, you are indebted to me. I’m doing you a favor. Because of me, you get to die a hero instead of a drunk. You’re welcome.

I’m moving on now. There is only one section left for me to travel through now and that is the Occipital Lobe. Frankly, this part bores me. All it does is control your eye sight. I do wonder however, what was the last thing you saw? Granted, I do not know the conditions you were under when I was sent to meet you. After all, I’ve been kept away in the dark hold of a thirty-round magazine for quite some time now; so perhaps you were in a full battle at this time, or maybe just the victim of a lucky sniper shot. So, you can at least appreciate as to why I am so curious as to what the last thing you saw was. Was it the man who sent me this distance in order to deprive you of life? Perhaps you just saw the muzzle flash that began my expedition? Maybe you just didn’t see me coming at all. Perhaps you were just standing idly by on a foot patrol watching the children play out in the fields, reminiscing about a time when you were that age and had your own innocence. I guess we’ll never know. Well, our time together has come to an end; and so have you. I’m exiting the back of your skull now. Don’t worry about me; I’m sure I’ll find a nice patch of land to bury myself in.

Years from now, when archeologists are trying to learn about this horrific experience, I’ll still be covered with your lineage. That’s one thing I’ll have that you won’t. I’ll be covered with who you were; your memories. They’re mine now, not yours. Don’t worry, we shared something together, and I appreciate that, thank you. And just so you know; I will carry your memories to my grave. Your secrets are safe with me, for I am a good little time capsule. It was nice getting to know you. Goodbye.

2012-2013 fiction contest honorable mention:

Letters Lost
by Matt Hughes

Are you awake? Your eyelids flex and bounce like waves rippling across a pond disturbed by a single pebble; yet, through all their aesthetically swift movements, your eyes still remain closed. Are you dreaming? Nightmares it would seem; your breathing is heavy, quickening with every word that slips from my tongue; you must be running, your pace hastened by the fear of the creature at your back. Is he me? Ah! Your breathing has grown thicker, deeper, hungrier; your baby blue, pin-stripe shirt expands and contracts with such effervescence and persistence; I must be close. Run, my dear Mark, run, for when I chase, I never cease, and leave no time for one to catch its breath. A cold sweat has formed above your brow; yet, it should give you no sense of relaxation nor relief, for even if you could escape me in your fantasy, you will never truly be rid of me. Now I bade you to rise from your slumber and tell me what I need to know...

Open your eyes! Do not sleep, do not doze, and do not let your eyes wander from my own! Keep them steady and wide, I could care less if they're dry, keep them locked onto mine, even if those pomegranate veins come popping out with pain and crimson rivers come pouring from both sides! Let them burn, burn, BURN! For the arid gloss that may spread across your vision is nothing but a tick, a flea, a fly in the eye, and I would hate for you to have to meet the spider.

Ah, you are awake! Magnificent! Maybe now I can obtain the answers in which I so desperately crave. Three weeks have passed Mark. THREE WEEKS! Not a word from her: not a postcard, not a letter, not a note, nothing! This isn't like Valerie; this isn't like my dear, sweet Val. No, something must be wrong, and I am well aware that you know more than you are revealing. How dare you shake your head; your whimpers only fuel my frustrations. Now I have given you plenty of time, and incentive, to tell me the truth, or do you require... deeper stimuli? Well if that is the case, than you only need to ask. Ha! Ha!

You work with her, yes? You know her well? Come now, lose your modesty. I know you two are friends. Quit pretending like you have no idea that her hair is lusciously thick and brown, with curls that spring and sway with every step she takes, just before gently reposing itself upon her soft, covered shoulders; that her eyes resemble that of a single Lilly pad wafting across a shimmering blue pond, surrounded by the largest, smoothest pearl found in the world; that her cheeks glimmer with the powder of an Anthurium, in direct contrast to her skin, glowing pale like the full moon; that her bosom can drive any babe insane, yearning for sustenance, simply by her walking by. No, my dear Mark, you know this just as well as I do. You know every detail, every flaw, every hiccup she makes; so tell me, where is she!

You pretend to be strong, but this is a fool's jest. You withhold this information as though you are protecting someone. Is it her? Or is it me? Tell me... TELL ME! My mind grows weary of playing this game and my blade thirsts for more of your cherry gore. You shouldn't waste my time Mark, for every second of my time equals years of yours, slipping off the razor's edge. Still don't want to tell me? Fine; my knife shall take form of the reaper's scythe. You want to close your eyes? So be it; you shall keep your eyes closed until the end of time, wallowing in the darkest dark, the blackest black, the emptiest of holes, alone... What's that you say? A knock on the door? Who would appear at such an early hour to my abode? Could it be...

"Valerie?"

"Hey Mark, I've got mail for you today. Sorry, it's a bit of a pile, I've been sick and no one has covered my route so... Hey are you feeling alright? You don't look so well..."

"Yeah Val, I'm ok; just feeling... a bit under the weather is all..."

“I’ll say! You look paler than a ghost! You must have caught whatever I had...”

“Yeah... Heh! Heh!”

“So who were you talking to just a moment ago?”

“No one! You must have just heard my television...”

“Oh! Well, alright... I’ll see you later. By the way, you have some blood on your uniform Mark, you should clean that out before you return to work, otherwise you might get written up.”

“Ha well thanks, I’ll see ya.”

A pile of letters? She still loves me...



Content Uncertain
by Susan Kim

An Old Family Recipe

by Nancy Mayfield

Going into the house felt like walking into an ambush.

No telling what she would find.

Marji knew the smell of boiled cabbage and stale cat litter would assault her when she entered the tiny front hall and mushroom into a full-blown stench once she walked into the living room.

A row of dead plants would sit on the kitchen windowsill, brown and wilted, their dry soil matted with dust and cat hair. The brown transistor radio, parts of it worn down to silver, would be blaring from the kitchen table, and the TV in the bedroom would be on full-blast, tuned to the game show of the hour. None of the ancient lamps would be on; just the daylight filtering through the thick layer of grime on the windows would cast a brownish-gray sheen on the room. The floors would be littered with sales fliers from various grocery and drug stores, with notes clipped to them itemizing things that needed to be purchased, usually in bulk. Why on earth one person would, during one shopping trip, need to buy enough toilet paper, paper towels, cans of soup and boxes of crackers to last for six months was beyond Marji. It would just be added to the stash in the basement, which already had enough of the same items to last for a year.

The attack on Marji's senses when she entered this house was always the same. What was unpredictable was Olga's mood. At 96-years-old, she teetered between states of lucidity and lunacy. Whichever way she was tipping made Marji's visits either tolerable – sometimes downright pleasant – or utterly draining.

“Why do you keep going there? Why take the abuse?” her husband would ask her when she returned home from a visit with Olga in tears stemming from anger or hurt or frustration.

“She has no one else.”

“Social services could check on her. There's Meals on Wheels. A nurse could visit. God knows your sister or cousin could go see her once in awhile. Come on Marji. It doesn't have to all be on you.”

But Marji continued making the trip across town once a week to check on the lady at 2103 New York Avenue. The small, white, wood-framed house with a gray-shingled roof formed a perfect square perimeter around the four rooms on the main floor. Olga Skurka had lived there since 1937. Olga was Marji's great aunt. By marriage. To the rest of the family, that last point was critical. If she had been a blood relative, if she'd had some “real” Skurka stock in her bones, things would be different. Or, if she'd simply been nicer, easier to get along with, maybe they wouldn't have written her off. As it was, she was the fodder for many a guffaw at family gatherings, where she wasn't always present because she either wasn't invited or Marji wasn't able to give her a ride.

When Olga was a guest, the conversation when dinner plates were being cleared was whispered in the kitchen, which was always crowded with people because no one wanted to continue to sit at the dining room table with Olga. When Olga was at a party, Marji's hands didn't touch the dishwasher. Her relatives gladly did the dirty work while they let Marji do the heavy lifting – listening to Olga's steady stream of commentary on anything and everything.

The last dish to be cleared from the table was a rectangular Pyrex pan with Olga's signature dish – a gloppy, mint green ambrosia jello mold with pineapple and marshmallows poking through. It never set up quite right, and years ago most people had stopped even putting it on their plates for the sake of appearances.

When someone finally came from the kitchen to remove the mold, Olga would stop dead in her conversation, reach down and pull several plastic butter containers out of her gigantic purse.

“Save some of that for me in here, will you? And I'll take a taste of some ham and

potato salad, whatever you can fit in my containers. Now that mold, you all can divide the rest of it up and take it home. It'll be good for lunch tomorrow. I've been making this recipe for years, and people never get tired of it. It was your uncle's favorite. He had me make a pan every week for him to take to work. They really enjoyed it there. Told him he'd hit the jackpot marrying such a good cook. Of course, my mother was Polish, and she could really cook. She taught me well. Most people say I'm even better than she was, and I ..."

And on and on she'd go. The person who came to retrieve the jello mold would back away toward the kitchen, pan and butter containers in hand, nodding at Aunt Olga until they could step into the safety zone. They would hand the jello to the host, saying, "Guess what? She wants us to take some of this home in a container." The laughter was barely contained.

"Ha! I tried to feed it to the birds last Easter. Even they wouldn't eat it!"

"How does she make it that sickening shade of green!"

And the host, sometimes Marji's mom or an aunt or sister or cousin, would hiss, "This is no good. I'm not giving it to anyone to take home. Just put it in the fridge, and I'll throw it away later."

When Olga wasn't at the party, the conversation turned to her while the plates were being cleared.

"If Olga were here she'd be scraping these leftovers in a napkin and shoving them in her purse. Hoggy Olga."

"Sheesh. You'd think with all her money she could afford to buy some food and not mooch off of us."

"At least we didn't have to suffer through another jello mold. Those things are nasty."

"What a relief not to have to listen to her nonstop talking. God, that woman is enough to make a preacher cuss. I've never heard more complaining."

At this point, Marji would insert something like, "Oh, she's not so bad. She's just old and lonely."

"Well, if she hadn't been so dirty and conniving her whole life, she wouldn't be lonely."

It always came back to the alleged deceit Olga had pulled when she was just 19. The story Marji had always heard was that Olga had tricked her great Uncle Julius into marrying her. It was late July, and Julius was just home from the Army, having earned a purple heart and shrapnel injury in France that turned out to be his ticket home. His brother Frank, home from college on summer break, wanted to show Julius a good time. They frequented the local dance halls, where they could drink whiskey and flirt with the pretty girls, Olga being one of them. Olga became pregnant, which in the 1940s was not an acceptable situation for a churchgoing young lady from a solid family. Supposedly, Olga's father told Julius he would take a shotgun to him unless he did right by his daughter. They were married, and nine months later, there was no baby.

"What happened?" a 13-year-old Marji asked her mom when she first heard this story.

"Well, she said she miscarried. But Emma Krasnik told Grandma that Olga was a real runaround in her day. Kind of wild. She was always going with someone new. All the guys at Danceland knew her. Emma said by the time Olga started dating Uncle Julius she'd had so many abortions that she couldn't get pregnant. She just wanted to trap him into marrying her."

And so that was the legacy of Olga perpetuated as Marji, her siblings and her cousins grew up. Uncle Julius had died years before they were born, and all they knew was that Olga was an albatross to the family.

Years ago, Marji had found a black and white snapshot of Aunt Olga and Uncle Julius in a box of photos in her mother's attic. Marji kept the photo in her top desk drawer, underneath her address book. Occasionally, she'd take it out and stare at it, trying to see any cracks in their faces that would show the betrayal that allegedly accompanied the union of her great aunt and uncle. In the picture, Uncle Julius wore a white sleeveless t-shirt and held a can of Old Style in his right hand. His left arm pulled Aunt Olga close, and he smiled down at her. Her head tilted into his chest, and her smiling eyes were evident even under her thick tortoise shell glasses. She had her arms wrapped around his waist.

They looked like they were in love, Marji thought.

Olga had a stroke at the end of summer, just after her 97th birthday. She stayed in the hospital for five weeks before she could be moved to a nursing home. Marji worked out the details, making frequent trips to Olga's house to look for various documents and to take care of the mountains of paperwork that came with this sort of shift in a person's life. While looking through Olga's desk drawers for a copy of her insurance policy, she'd come across an old manila envelope that was fat from its contents. Inside were letters Olga had exchanged with her long-dead sister Mary that helped Marji piece together a very different story about Olga than the one that had been handed down over the years.

Olga had been pregnant, but the father hadn't been Julius. It had been someone referred to in the letters only as junior. According to what Olga wrote, she never told junior about the pregnancy because she found out he was engaged to someone else. What she had thought was true love was only a summer fling for him. It was Julius, smitten with Olga since they'd danced their first waltz together, who came to her rescue.

Mary advised Olga in her letters to marry Julius:

"Julius loves you, Olga. It is so clear to see when he gazes at you so warmly. His eyes just shine. He is not Skip, but he is the next best thing. Can't you see how this will work out for the best? His war injury makes it impossible for him to have children, which he so badly wants. He is willing to keep this secret, and raise this child as his own. Your baby will have the Skurka name. He will take good care of both of you, and no one else ever needs to know."

So there it was. Julius had been sterile. Olga had been in love. They both wanted a child. Later letters between Mary and Olga revealed a devastating miscarriage in Olga's fourth month that had been so grueling that, as Olga wrote, "the doctor is not sure I can ever carry a baby again."

Along with the letters, Marji had found an old dance card, some scraps of soft flannel material embroidered with a duck and a rattle, and a faded stained recipe card with the ingredients and directions for "His Favorite Mold." She took the recipe card home with her.

While Olga continued to improve during the fall, regaining some of the movement on her left side, she still couldn't speak clearly or walk unassisted. Her doctor didn't think she should leave the nursing home for Thanksgiving, so Marji made arrangements to visit her for the evening meal there after attending the annual family function, to be held this year at her sister's home.

Marji and her husband arrived at the family gathering about 15 minutes before the set dinnertime. As expected, her sister Tina was in full freak-out mode when Marji walked into the kitchen to say hello.

"Oh Marji, finally! I was wondering where you were. I could use some help with the mashed potatoes. And the dish for the cranberries is sitting on the counter next to the toaster. The can opener is right next to it. If you want to do that first, I'll get the hand mixer out for you."

"I didn't bring cranberries this year," Marji said.

"What?" her sister practically screeched. "But you always bring the cranberries. Come on Marji, you know I'm stressed out enough doing dinner this year. The least you could do is pitch in and do your part. But no, you just show up empty-handed. Thanks a lot!"

Tina went to the kitchen sink and started banging pots and pans around. The half dozen other assorted relatives congregated in the kitchen either looked at each other uneasily or turned their attention to some pre-dinner task.

"But I'm not empty-handed," Marji said, pulling the tinfoil off the Pyrex bowl her husband had just brought into the kitchen.

"What the hell?" – her brother-in-law, Brent.

"Is that Hoggy Olga's mold?" – her mother's sister, Aunt Frances.

"No way! Nooooo way!" – her cousin, Gina.

"Well, I'll be damned." – her great uncle, Frank, Julius' younger brother. He had lived out-of-state since he had gone off to college and hadn't been to the family Thanksgiving shindig in years. He seemed oblivious to the mood of the room.

"I haven't seen that jello mold in a long, long time. Oh what a treat this is gonna be! Olga knew it was one of my favorites. I'd have to fight Julius for the last bite every doggone time."

That Olga, she was something! Boy could she dance. It was hard to get on her dance card! But I managed.” He winked.

“So you were friends with Olga too. I hadn’t realized that,” Marji said.

“Oh yeah. I knew her before Julius. I actually introduced them. I dated Olga a few times, but I was getting ready to ship back off to college. I felt a little bad about breaking her heart when I left, but then next thing you know, she and my big brother are engaged.”

Later, when they were all clearing up after dinner, Marji grabbed the Pyrex dish off the dining room table. They’d made the biggest dent in the jello mold that they’d made in years. Marji’s husband had plopped a heaping scoop on his plate, as had Great Uncle Frank. Marji had taken a serving, and a few of her other relatives had tried a spoonful to be polite. Marji’s sister had ignored the dish the entire dinner, purposely refusing to look at it when it was passed to her. She had just sent it on its way to the person on her right. Uncle Frank had a second helping, declaring the jello mold tasted just the way he remembered it.

In fact, as Marji carried the two-thirds empty bowl toward the kitchen, he sidled up to her.

“Say, how ‘bout I get that in a doggie bag?”

“Sorry,” Marji said. “But it’s spoken for.”

The Rush of Progress

My palms rest flat against a chilly slab of concrete
Just before I progress
Halted by my affection for the ethereal air
The ground beneath my fingertips colorless as steel
Eyes consorting with the lofty clouds
Allowing myself to savor the invigorating rush

The bits of conversations I hear consist entirely of air
Their hearts bursting with well-tempered steel
Thoughts obscured by a looming cloud
Minds transfixed on the path of progress
Bustling amongst the flock-like rush
Scouring the earth for something concrete

They wish to expand the leaden cloud
Make reality vanish into the diluted air
Conceal all the treasures they often steal
They lust for the all-consuming rush
Crazed by realm of the concrete
All in the hollow name of progress

Their expressions are minted steel
I chuckle while they anxiously rush
Aching for the thrill of progress
Minds set into place like rigid concrete
Mouths gaping with despair, fear lingering in the air
Settling over the streets in a toxic cloud

Deranged by the thought of progress
They drown the planet in concrete
Moaning at the carnal rush
Floating on a bottomless cloud
Veins coursing with molten steel
Choking from the fumes of stale air

In their perpetual rush
They see nothing past their precious cloud
They seek guidance from the benevolent concrete
Awaiting their throne like the rightful heir
Building for unrestrained progress
In a world crafted out of steel

Blinded by the cloud of progress
The steel drones continue to rush
Exchanging air for concrete

—Brian Guttman



Untitled
by Randall Michael

Darkness

Cold, dark, wet
 I lay in this pool
 of my fallen tears

Shivering, afraid, alone
 no one hears
 my silent screams

Choking, gasping, drowning
 the water rises
 above my head

I let go
 I breathe deep
 only darkness now

—Jennifer S. Williams

Running from the Night

The sky is a dark, void of any white
walking through the cool dark night
my imagination fakes a crack
exposing me to the world under the street light
standing like a metal rod, begging to get struck
I can't tell if there was a flash

Only ever coming out at night
darkness hides the damage of the struck
casting shadows in the dark, avoiding real light.
lightning strikes with a flash
shaking me with its crack
turning my hair a pale wispy white

I have to get home in a flash
stop playing my games, avoiding cracks
darkness catches me in the night
holding me back to get struck
it's force pushed through, ribbons of white
it's warmth engulfs you and burns out other light

I jump to action at thunders crack
haunted as I move by lightings flash
a stripe of light shows white
across the shadowy night
a painting of peace ruined by light
homes light is my only sanctuary from being struck

darkness all around, fueled by each light
it's disguised in shades of purity and white
bringing pain and charcoal with each strike
forcing my deepest structure to shake and crack.
I run with the wind from the flash
it closes in behind me, the night

throwing bolts to hit and strike
I reach for the light
I'm running like the Flash
my skin starts to fade white
I wish I were a knight
who's armor had no crack.

The striking fury of the empty night
force my deepest structure to shake and crack.
My pace quickens, my sight blurs white
running from the elimination of each flash
yet, still using it as my guild, my compass of light
but the bite of light is might be worse than the strike.

—Spencer Aurand

The Raven Knows
by Nancy Mayfield

When the orange leaves begin to blow from the tree branches and make scrapping sounds as they skim across the sidewalk outside my home office window, I can't help but lift my eyes from the clean lines and logical black and white boxes on my computer screen and look out to the street.

It is the same street I have lived on for 45 years. I sit in the same house in which I grew up, having been the sole heir to my parents' sprawling yellow Victorian. It is a house just majestic enough to inspire the creativity I need for my job as a writer and just run down enough to be a constant financial drain.

It is October, and the black wrought-iron fence that separates the property from the rest of the world still provokes the town's children to call my abode the "spooky house." Dried leaves have blown up against the base of the fence, and the pumpkins I've placed strategically on the porch and on a few of the large tree stumps in the front yard complete the picture.

For years, I strapped a large, fake raven to a sturdy tree branch that juts out on the path to the front porch. My shout-out to Poe became a temptation too great for the teen-agers in my neighborhood to resist. I would put the raven out at the start of the Halloween season. Inevitably, it would disappear from its perch in my yard and mysteriously reappear on the courthouse square, or in front of the Bubbleland Laundromat, and once on top of the golden arches of the McDonald's just off the highway. Joe Turner, who had been one of the town's two police officers since I could remember, would return the raven to me each year. "Well, looks like they got your bird again," he'd say, taking it out of the box I think he kept in the police car's trunk solely for the purpose of transporting the raven. One year, he even took the liberty of having a taxidermist friend replace the bird's glass eyes and do a little feather work before he returned it to me. When Joe retired two years ago, I stopped putting the raven out.

The bird now sits in my office – above a doorway actually, but he doesn't say much. He just watches me type away on my keyboard, prepare my manuscripts for delivery to my publisher and spend hours pondering what happened 35 years ago. It was late afternoon on an October day, such as this one. I was 10 years old, and my friend Mona was teasing me because I didn't want to join her on an excursion to explore a long-abandoned church a short distance away. We were sitting on the swing on my front porch, wearing jeans, tennis shoes and light windbreakers. We'd just gotten done with a bike ride through town to look at the different Halloween decorations in people's front yards.

"Baby, baby, baby," she jeered. "You are such a scaredy cat! My two-year-old brother has more guts than you."

Mona and I had what my instructor for my introductory psychology class in college would have labeled a love/hate relationship. Mona was popular and good at sports. She was always picked first when we were choosing sides for dodge ball in gym class. And not only that, she was smart – at math too. And, the icing on the cake was she had shiny blond hair that waved softly, forming a gilded frame for her blue eyes and dimpled smile. Everyone wanted to be her friend. She chose me for some reason. I was the bookworm, the awkward girl who was grudgingly accepted onto a dodge ball team at the end of the selection process when the gym teacher walked up to the six remaining unchosen kids who were trying to look nonchalant. She'd part us into two equal groups with a sweep of her arms and say, "Okay, you three go with team A and you three with team B."

Mona had other friends besides me, and during school, she usually hung with them. It hurt my feelings a little when she was silent in the cafeteria when someone at her table commented on my dorky glasses or my big feet, which I eventually grew into. But I got it. I tried not to cramp her style, but to be completely honest, I did resent her sometimes. It was really afterschool and particularly on weekends that she and I had our own secret world. It was filled with building forts, exploring the small caves on the outskirts of our southern

Indiana town, riding our bikes along the winding dirt paths that lead to the Ohio River, and reading Nancy Drew books to each other by the light of a campfire my dad would build for us in the pit in our backyard. We fancied ourselves detectives. Mona, of course, was Nancy Drew. I was Bess.

Exploring the abandoned church seemed a natural adventure for Mona and me to pursue, except I had been explicitly told by my parents to stay away from it. My parents weren't heavy-handed in their child-rearing techniques, which made their edict have even more impact. They encouraged me to try things and opened up new worlds for me with a constant supply of books from their home library. As they were both teachers – mom taught English Literature and Dad taught history at a state college about 30 miles away – they reveled in and nurtured my natural curiosity in people, places and things. But they were cautious enough to know the old church was no place for kids to hang around.

The crumbling structure had been boarded up, but after years of weather and a lack of attentiveness, it was far from secure. Anyone who wanted to get in need only pry away a rotting piece of plywood with their own two hands. Local lore was that hobos spent the night inside the church, sheltered from the roiling winds and snows of the winter months. They would build a fire in what used to be the baptismal font and warm themselves before they hopped back on a freight car of one of the passing trains. Legend had it that bars of gold were buried deep in the church bowels, and that thieves who had already stripped any precious metal or valuable artifact on the surface, came back routinely to dig for treasure. Behind the weed-strewn churchyard was a set of railroad tracks that were still used, and just a few yards beyond the tracks the land dropped off in a steep ravine that ended at the Ohio River. Those were the things adults worried about.

What frightened me the most were the stories of the ghost of the wife of a riverboat captain who drowned when the grain holds on his boat took on water during a storm. While other crewmembers swam to shore for safety, he stayed with the vessel, fighting to keep it afloat until the end. His body was never found. The legend was that his wife roamed the churchyard and looked out over the river, keeping a vigil for her husband's safe return. It was said that sometimes you could hear her wailing deep into the night. I was afraid of ghosts, but I didn't want to admit that to Mona. She was getting impatient with my reluctance to join her.

"Come on," she pleaded. "What are you afraid of?"

I hesitated, and Mona sensed an opening.

"It's that stupid ghost story, isn't it? You're afraid of the Captain's wife!" she laughed mockingly. "Fine. I'll just go over to Jenny Frasier's. She'll go with me."

Mona hopped off the porch swing and before I could stop her, she was pedaling off to the house of the classmate who was the meanest girl in school. I could just imagine the grief I would get the next day because Mona would most certainly tell Jenny that I wouldn't go with her because I was chicken. It would spread through school like wildfire.

I got on my bike and rode to the church. It was dusky, but I could see Mona's pink bike and Jenny's purple one leaned up against the crumbling steps that led to the padlocked front doors of the church. I could see where Mona and Jenny had climbed up on to one of the thick cement window sills on either side of the steps and pried off a piece of wood just enough to create an opening they could slip through. I got off my bike and let it drop to the ground. My legs felt rubbery as I walked up the steps and hopped onto the windowsill. I scooted through the opening and stepped inside. It was just a short two-foot jump to the floor, and when I landed a cloud of dust engulfed me. I squinted through the haze, looking for the other two girls.

"Mona?" I called.

"Over here," came Mona's voice. They had thought to bring a flashlight, and I followed the beam to where the two girls stood. Jenny looked at me with contempt.

"So, the baby decided to come after all."

Mona looked uncomfortable, but she didn't defend me.

“We found the hobo campsite over there,” she gestured with the flashlight. “Let’s find the steps that lead to the bell tower.”

I fell into line behind them. We came to a small door at the back of the church that was unlocked. Jenny opened it, and Mona shined her flashlight to show a steep set of wooden stairs that probably led up to the tower. Mona moved to start up the stairs, but Jenny grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

“No. Let her go first,” she said, pointing to me. “Unless she’s too afraaaaaaiidd.”

I felt I was going to stop breathing, and my heart raced. I knew I had to do this if I was going to keep Mona for a friend.

“I’m not afraid,” I said, brushing past her and mounting the steps. I turned to Mona and held out my hand. “I’ll need the flashlight.”

Jenny stepped in front of Mona and put out her arm to stop the hand-off of the light. “No, she’ll hold it for you.”

Deep down, I knew what was going to happen, but I went up the stairs anyway. When I had climbed up about eight steps, I heard the door slam. I was engulfed in darkness, and I instinctively turned and started back down the stairs. I slipped on my second step and went down, knocking my head on the banister. I could hear Mona and Jenny giggling as they wedged the doorknob with a piece of wood.

I made it to the bottom of the stairs and tried in vain to open the door.

“Mona,” I screamed, banging on the door with all my strength.

“Wooooo wooooo! The ghost of the river captain’s wife is going to get you!” They shrieked with laughter. “I see her coming now! Bewaaaaaaaare!”

I was crying. I know they could hear my sobs.

“Look out, she’s going to get you!” There were two raps on the door, and then I heard their voices at a distance.

“We need to let her out,” Mona said.

“We will, we will. Just not yet. Let’s go look outside in the churchyard first.”

I stayed in that stairway for what seemed like an hour, alternately pounding on the door and sobbing in a heap on the floor. Spiders fluttered over my face, and I am sure I heard rats scratching in the tower above me. When the door finally opened, Jenny stood with tears streaming down her face, breathing heavily.

“I can’t find Mona. I need you to help me look!”

I shoved her out the way and ran. They weren’t going to fool me again. I got out of that church and pedaled home as fast as I could. I told my parents what had happened. My mom stayed with me, while my dad ran out the door.

“Call Joe Turner at the police station and tell him to get over to the church,” he called behind him.

Later that night, as I lay in my second floor bedroom, I heard my father come in and sit at the kitchen table. I heard my mother put the teakettle on the stove. Above the whistle of the steam and the clink of cups, my father’s voice calmly recounted for my mother what had happened.

He and Joe had gotten to the church about the same time. They found Jenny with a huge gash in her right leg, stumbling down the path, trying to walk her and Mona’s bikes along side her. She was dazed. She told them that after locking me in the stairwell, she and Mona had decided to explore the churchyard and look for more signs of hobos. As they walked near the railroad tracks, Mona had been worried about me and insisted they go back and let me out. Jenny refused and wouldn’t hand over the flashlight, so Mona set off in the dark by herself.

Mona did not come home that night. No one ever saw her again.

All kinds of theories abound about what happened: She was kidnapped by a vagrant and whisked away by freight train; she was murdered, and her remains were buried deep in the surrounding woods; she simply ran away; and, the scenario the police think is most likely, she got disoriented in the dark and fell down the ravine into the river, her body

swept away into the Ohio River and beyond.

Jenny never came back to school, and her family eventually moved to a different town.

With intense therapy and loving guidance from my parents, I returned to some semblance of a normal life. In a weird way, I had a sort of hero status among my peers because I had “been there” when it happened. The general consensus was that I was a victim too, as Joe Turner made sure the real story came out about how I’d been trapped in a stairwell during the entire ordeal. After a few years, people stopped talking about it so much. The church was eventually bulldozed, but nothing of interest turned up. I think about Mona every day and wonder.

Today, I write mysteries. In my stories, the loose ends always tie up nicely. Missing children are found, murderers are put to justice, long-lost relatives are reunited. Every time I write a story, there is closure.

Only the raven knows differently.



Celtic Knot061

by Karen Donohue

Insight

It's not unlike our first kiss,
a moment too brief
to recall the details with certainty,
an unsettled feeling of nearly absolute awareness
welding my youthful passion to an enduring purpose.

All moments before this one became synchronized
with the first and last emotions of joy that I own,
emotions that fitfully slide along the surface of discovery.

No moment is quite real enough to be fully embraced by memory,
and yet, each of moment of insight, like each moment of love,
nudges me closer to mending the interruptions in understanding
made by the splinters of time.

—Charles Atchley

The Scientist

You love to dream of touching truth,
of holding hands with vivid eons.
You feel that knowing life
is only an untying of time.

—Charles Atchley

Koi

Opaque, thick, aqueous solution ominously shrouds the once
cerulean,
serene
water.

The koi fish, spotted in cerise, fuchsia, and byzantium,
vigorously swims through the grim, murky water.
An impenetrable layer covers the water's surface, eclipsing the sun's rays.
Obscured in a shadowed world,
the koi fish exerts all of
its strength to find its balance once again.
Empty shells of former friends ascend
to the darkened surface of the aquatic world,
The caliginous water quickly filters through the koi fish's gills;
fiendishly reaping it to its inevitable end.
The koi fish encounters water harshly showering its kaleidoscope colored backside.
With all of its strength, the koi fish sways
whimsically up the steep cascade,
leaving behind its former home.
Reaching the cascade's mouth,
various hues of lotus flowers veil the water's surface,
with the water's glassy appearance
the koi fish is finally soothed.

—Alejandro Valdes



Untitled

by Val A. Stanley

Pebbles and Puddles

I often sit beside my pond, although it's more a puddle
Recent rains spill over to mud, and covered grass blades protrude
Bare feet hanging in the murk, I grab the nearest pebble
I fire it into the pond from my hand, my palm a pistol
With a soft plink the surface parts
The pebble drops, soon forgotten. Simple pleasure

And even though it rests on the bottom, I find no pleasure
I didn't rid the world of a pebble, simply by tossing it to puddle
I don't remember if the pebble was an issue or only a part
Of a larger picture, a problem from which a pebble could protrude
And where intentions lie, the blame lies not on the pistol
But rather on the person who pitched a pebble

Surely you do not care of the place in which I lay my pebbles
Unless of course my pebbles prevent your pleasure
Where it's possible to perceive you may draw your pistol
And insist I purge the pebbles from your puddle
With your sights drawn; between your lips your tongue protrudes
Until our paths do part

But alas I propose, instead we do our part
To let pass our petty pebbles
And join powers to placate those who protrude
From behind boulders; impediment upon their pleasures
To take pride in all the planet's puddles
And to pocket our pistols

Because in countries ruled by pistols
Either in whole or in part
Where the people no longer have puddles
To drown their measly pebbles
Live lives devoid of simple pleasures
Where the hungriest bellies protrude

On your time I mean not to protrude
But I'd like to see more broken pistols
To introduce again the simplest pleasures
And we both can do our part
To put away our pebbles
And increase our planet's puddles

For peace to protrude we are required to do our part
Pocket our pistols or trade them in for pleasure
And to pluck the pebbles from other's puddles

—Eli Murray

October's Scorn

Marked by the month of decay
Where dead memories have come to lay
Cracked and broken they are falling apart
Resembles that of my tattered heart
The wind blows and they flutter with noise
On this wind, I still hear her voice
The trees stand tall, silent, and bare
Left behind without a thought nor care
Coldness creeps into skin and bone
Awaiting the grey future, unknown
Gaze upon the frozen night sky
Like staring into her beautiful, shimmering eyes
These days engraved deep into my mind
The scars of love long left behind
Left corroded by October's scorn
Cold, barren, and broken I mourn

—Colton Youngren

Oldman Park

by Brian Guttman

With a restless mind, I lied awake once more, endlessly tossing and turning in a blistering apartment. My glass was completely empty, just the same as the bottle of cheap rum that had once filled it to the brim. Listless moments lagged on as I sat still, staring into the drowning heap of noise and flickering images that was my television. After slipping on my dreggy pair of scuffed \$10 running shoes, I slid out the front door of my apartment. Through the corridors of chipped, vomit green paint, I shambled, half-drunk and completely forlorn. I shoved my weight into the solid-steel door leading into my complex; in the process, I nearly tumbled across the threshold and down the stairs. Moments after I regained my footing, I saw the cityscape gazing down at me in scorn.

All around, red- brick tenements came to a slow crumble from years of neglect and disrepair. Meanwhile, dilapidated apartment blocks, such as mine, gaped in horror at their fellow edifices, wondering when their time may come. I directed my attention to what stood before me, Morris T. Oldman Park, it's cast iron gates swinging and clamoring in the wind. The whole scene seemed dreadful as I observed all the shadows pacing to and fro across the lawn. Beyond the veiled plaza sat my destination, the liquor store, a shining beacon in the darkness. I crossed the shoddily paved street and briskly strolled past the damned gates, eyeballs wildly glancing from place to place.

Enveloped in nightfall, I advanced onward down the cement pathway, into the broken down parkland. The benches that lined the path on both sides were beginning to rot and a couple were completely decimated, most likely the work of vandals. Fragments of memories leapt up to trigger the synapses every time I glanced up from my feet, horrific recollections of a prior lifetime. An eternity of moments long past, had once again greeted me with their menacing presence. Leaving me with a pins and needles sensation, as if my nerves were speckled with broken glass. Ah, Oldman park, where the washed-up masses crawled away to burrow themselves into their graves, and wait patiently for the undertaker. The cold and hollow respite harbored within the bounds of your domain knows nothing of earthly restraint. With malevolent intentions, you extend your hands to the outcasted and lost, only to prey upon their livelihoods. Tormenter of the frail, deceiver of the weary, the lurid defiler to whom all dreams fall prey. The wicked Abaddon, who abducted my youth to consume the blissful splendor of my first years.

To think I once called you home; slept on the unwelcoming benches or sometimes the wet ground. For two years, I struggled to leave you, but no matter how hard I tried, I found myself right here again. In your sprawling gardens, I lied for days or sometimes weeks, pricking myself one step closer to that beloved silence. The warming notion of non-existence, the faded and murky in-between to where my soul would sojourn as often as possible. Enduring pain and emaciation, I writhed in the agony of my self-abuse. No more, I sighed, knowing that life had been ended, but was I that much different now? Was living across the street that much better than life on the street? For the sake of material comforts, I already knew the answer, however I couldn't fool myself into believing I had truly come a long way. I still sat in clear sight of my history, facing it every day as I made the bi-daily and sometimes tri-daily round to the spirit shop, in search of a remedy.

I had made my way through the park by the time I came off my mental tangent, the place usually had a very twisted nostalgic feel. At that time, I was standing on the sidewalk, waiting for a breach in traffic. I spotted an opening and bolted through it, making it by mere seconds and evoking a loud honk from the passing driver. Pulling open the door to the liquor store, I shielded my eyes from the blinding fluorescent lighting. I scoured the shelves for a pint of something cheap, and stumbled across a bottle of gin. I hesitated at first but then decided to go for it, I felt like I needed something a little stronger for tonight.

After making the purchase, I slumped down against the wall of the tenement next

door and took a swig from the bottle. The park had been filling my head with thoughts from every position and spectrum imaginable, my brain felt swollen. Images of all the faces I had once known were popping into mind, all the lives taken in that waste. I was the last, and now I was starting to question if this square would be my deathbed as well. I lit a cigarette and took a succession of drags, contemplating the many things that I had been obsessing over all night. Everything felt mundane, but what was worse, was the trapped feeling that accompanied the monotony. It was all my doing, but it was also my choice; my decision whether or not to drag myself into the inferno of desolation and devastation that was Oldman park. The strength within my body had been sapped, my legs felt limp. If I did succumb, there was no doubt I would be trailed back into the cataclysmic hell storm once more. Was that the life I wanted? I wasn't sure, but I knew at my age, there would be no return.

Standing once again and tossing the butt of my cigarette to the ground, I felt a drive vacate the cesspool of my abode. An urge to forge forth, the last will of a dying man, taken by his own madness. The bitter taste of gin lingered on my tongue; everything was bitter now, a bitter eve, in a bitter mood, looking back on a lifetime of bitter memories. "Nada y Pues Nada" I smiled to myself. No more Oldman park. I took one last long gulp and then tossed the pint into the wastebasket. No doubt, some lost soul would find more use of it than I, maybe it would be the drink that drove them to an epiphany. Most likely not. I bowed my head in reverence for whoever that may be, as a silent requiem for the confused and downtrodden. Maybe that faceless person will be the former visage of myself, still shambling through obscurity.

Words

Some words are long,
Some are short.
Words express how we feel,
They describe what we see.

When I think of you,
I think of a lot of words.
I think of happy words,
New words.

I have words to describe you.
They are positive words,
Though sometimes cliché.
I hope to share them with you.

When I think of you,
I think of complicated words,
I think of short words too.
But they all apply to you.

I think of eleemosynary,
I think of smiles.
I like to think of eyes.
Eyes bright as can be.

I like to think of happy.
You make me happy.
We are not friends though.
But we are not unknown.

I think of laughter.
I think of joy.
I see so much good in you.
I see a culmination.

I see a trapped warrior,
Someone who could take the world.
Though you don't let the world faze you,
You don't let it pass you by either.

Words are beautiful.
So are you.
On the outside.
On the inside.

I love you.

—Holly Vrhel

The Geisha

Whisky, women, and heritage.

by Waters, David K

The cherry blossoms were blooming all along the creek that divided Philosopher's Pathway into two banks over the foot hills overlooking Kyoto Japan. It was a late April evening and a cool silent breeze brushed through the cherry tree branches forcing some of the blossoms to break free and descend to earth like a pink snow flurry. I stopped walking to revel in the sight. I took a mental photograph and committed it to memory, a memory to be savored and shared with no one other than myself. This is what I traveled over fifteen-thousand miles for; this one moment, this one sight that most American's only get to see pictures of in books or travel magazines. I wasn't going to settle for a photo in a magazine. I wanted to see it for myself. My eyes, my mental picture, my experience, my memory; picture perfect. I took a deep breath and continued walking as the sun set behind the distant mountains to the west.

I had to get a feel for this city. The day trip was over and now I was on a mission to see what the night life was like. Sure, the culture, the history, and the sights were splendid, but a city's true identity comes out at night. There had to be something wrong with it. Six days in Japan, six days and I hadn't seen one beggar, not one drunken bum; shit, I hadn't even seen trash in the streets. Something had to be lying beneath this city. I just sure as shit hoped that when I found it, it didn't come in the form of a giant mutated lizard caused by nuclear fallout. Something had to give, somewhere there had to be debauchery and disarray, thus making me the perfect candidate to find it and write about it. After all, as an investigative writer, I'm not paid to keep my mouth shut.

I needed a drink. Bars are always the best spot to gather information and for finding trouble, but finding a bar in Kyoto is kind of hard when you can't even read Japanese. As I crossed the bridge over the Takano River I hit pay dirt. A sign simply read in both Japanese and English: "A-Bar." No, really, I'm not making that up. It literally read "A *dash* Bar." I had to chuckle to myself. This was either: irony, poetic-justice, destiny, or all out dumb luck. Perhaps a mixture of all four, but it would have to do. I stopped just in front of the establishment right under the sign. In order to gain entrance to the pub I would have to descend down a flight of stairs below street level; my kind of place.

As I proceeded to the glass doors one of them automatically opened for me by a door man waiting patiently to allow patrons entrance and exit from the establishment. Once through the door I quickly learned that this place was, in fact, the exact opposite of what I was looking for. The pub was softly lit setting the ambiance for an upscale clientele. There was a young couple sitting in the middle of a row of booths along the right hand wall looking at me as if I were some peasant off the street; which in essence, I was. The bar itself was on the left hand side of the room where, at the far end of the bar, two salary men were talking over glasses of bourbon. My attention was distracted by a loud voice off to my left as another salary-man sitting closest to the entrance was exclaiming wildly as if he were telling an amazing story, which he probably was. That's when I saw her.

The salary man was amusing a Geisha girl who was smiling respectfully at the man's loud story. When she saw me walk in, she turned her attention to acknowledge my presence and welcomed me with a warming grin. I stood there mesmerized by her eloquence. My heart skipped a beat, and my vision even faded to black for a split second. I was sucker punched by an aura of delightfulness. I tipped my ball cap to her like a proper "American cowboy" and proceeded to the bar rail to get a drink.

"Herro" The bar keep greeted me as I sat down. "What can I get fo' you?"

"You speak English?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, I rearned in Engrand."

"What were you doing in England?"

“I attended medicar Schoo for six years.”

“Awe, that’s kinda cool. What do you have on tap?” I turned my head and motioned to the brass piping that was extruding up from the center of the rail with eight different taps labeled in Japanese from the brass source.

“Werr, we have Jack Daniars, Yoichi Classic, Jim Beam, Jonny Warker, Canadia-“

“Wait, wait, wait. You’re telling me that you only have whiskey on tap?” The bar tender was looking at me as if I had just crawled out from under a rock. He nodded his head confirming my question. I was astonished to say the least.

“*A bar that only serves whiskey on tap?*” I thought to myself.

To me it seemed as if Heaven, Mecca, Jerusalem, and the Taj mahal came together to have a cluster-fucked-orgy of paradise, *right here*, in this very spot.

“Just whiskey on tap?” I asked again.

“Yes.”

I looked to the sky paying homage, thanking God, Jesus, St. Peter and my great grandmother Mish who died of alcoholism for the opportunity to have found this little gem. I smiled like a homicidal Columbine student in a gun store. Perhaps this was my kind of place after all? It was time to glass up. I ordered the Yoichi Classic. After all, I didn’t travel all the way to Kyoto to get sauced up on the stuff I could get back home.

The whiskey was served straight up on the rocks at the cost of nine-hundred yen. I did the currency exchange rate in my head real quick. By my estimate, I had just purchased a whiskey for almost thirteen American dollars. So be it. I pushed my card across the bar and told the bartender to keep the tab open. I took a deep pull from the glass. It was a smooth mash, bitter with a copper-like taste at first, but sweet with a hint of ginger soon followed as it burned its way down my throat. It wasn’t bad. It also was not particularly good, but not bad. Damn he Japanese and their love for ginger.

I looked the room over again. My wondering eyes seemed to always come back to the Geisha. I tried not to stare at her because staring and eye contact among strangers was considered impolite in Japan, but I couldn’t help it. She was a cultural Jedi Knight. I didn’t know much about Geishas, or their life style, but what I did know is that she began her path to becoming a Geisha around of the age of fifteen. She had been trained in the traditional arts of music, dance, and tea ceremonies. She was the definition of what the word “Hospitality” should be. As a licensed companion and hostess she had to be constantly up to date with current events, world news, and social activities; not to mention she could probably fuck you like an acrobatic contortionist.

The bar’s dim light illuminated off of her yellow kimono giving off an aura that could only be compared to the aurora borealis making her a beacon for all to enjoy her spender. Her hair was done up in one of the seven styles that Geisha’s whore to in order to signify their rank. She sat on her bar stool up right and proper, all the more lady-like than any woman I had ever seen. Her eyes were soft and welcoming, but piercing and controlling, all the while displaying her confident demeanor. She may have been sitting in the corner of the bar listening to some drunken salary man’s rant, who had paid her good money to do so, but *she* was the one in control.

There, sitting just a few feet away from me, was centuries old of living history. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen and it was not because of her physical beauty, but because of what she represented. She was the embodiment of Japan, the catalyst of culture. She was the diamond of all Asia.

She turned her head towards me and shot me a smile from across the bar. I quickly broke eye contact and pretended that I hadn’t been looking at her, as if she were just another fixture, or ornament of the bar’s décor. I looked back over to her. I was a twelve year old smitten all over again. I took another drink of whiskey. Suddenly, the Geisha and the salary-man erupted in laughter. The barkeep walked over to join in on the joke. I took note that all three of them seemed to be looking at me as the laughter calmed down.

“She says you look like Tom Cruise!” The barkeep called over to me, still smiling.

“Hell yeah!” I responded back. “I’m the last Samari all up in this bitch!”

I instantly slapped my hand to my forehead, realizing what I had just said without thinking. Speaking of heritage, culture, and national identity; what did I just say about mine? Oh, look at that; Seppuku is a menu option!

Why Lie?

Rolling hills have nothing on them,
not even the brightest star,
could make their glimmer dull.
They are eighth world wonder to me.

They can be easily passed by,
or can hit me like a bus.
There's something more than just a color,
and a simple shape.

He hates to admit they're something special,
I try to tell him they're my paradise.
He just shrugs me away and says I'm kidding,
But who would lie about those eyes.

The green reminds me of the trees behind us,
where we had our first kiss.
The dress I wore,
when we had the time of our lives.

I love the way they glisten in the summer sun,
almost like emeralds peeking through the mud.
And when he wears my favorite green shirt,
they pop more than the popcorn we had on our first date.

He sees the imperfections of the hint of brown,
I see the sweetest chocolate,
that any girl would love to indulge.
That little streak makes me weak at the knees.

He tells me over and over again, how he wishes he could have mine.
I tell him how they take a piece of my heart every time.
He just smiles, and tells me that I'm kidding.
But with eyes like his, why would I lie?

—Megan Zaban

I
ILLUSORY

If tomorrow was yesterday
I'd buy you that purple dress
Made by the Aztecs
At the marketplace in Santa Fe

The spirit of cliff dwellers
Under the enchanting sun
Ancient desert swelters
Dust upon the trail of lost days
Mirage silhouette of mauve
The image of you never fades

Oh, but to see you in that purple dress
Over tranquil shoulders of gypsum
Lie subtle brunet tresses
Silver and Gold can't bring back
What was never my own
White wing dove over the mesa
The sweet trill of the mockingbird
Has this bird flown?

Vivid palette of my memory banks
Flow to where tomorrow is yesterday

—Val A. Stanley

Once upon a time . . .

We found our home with first love rapture,
in the garden of roses we shared each day.
Then foolish passion . . . and soon thereafter,
gone was tomorrow in our last today.
Gone was our dream . . . but never forgotten.

In the setting sun with feelings to confess,
we meet again in our garden of tears.
A bouquet from home, a gentle caress,
and emotions so strong they span lost years.
Can the day before . . . be today once more?

Embrace these roses and feel the thorns . . .
the beauty, the pain, the beat of my heart.
Will you, dear love . . . my first precious love . . .
also become my last?

—Len Michaels

A Clean, Well-Lighted Eden

by Jacob Pierce

The man walked across the sandy beach towards her. This beach had been a place they had both known well. It was what they had seen outside their vacation home every time they went to the back door. It had looked like your hallmark photo of a beach, it had sand and it had an ocean.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“You don’t know?”

“I wouldn’t ask.” He said.

She turned towards him.

“Are you happy?” She asked

“You really shouldn’t wonder such things without a drink.”

“Be serious for a moment.”

“Happy?” He asked.

She nodded.

“I guess.”

“You should be sure of such things.”

She sat down. Her feet pointed towards the ocean. He sat down next to her in the same fashion. He put his hand on her’s. She did not move hers. She turned and looked at him.

“When was the last time you were happy?” He asked.

“My last film.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

“That was a long time ago.” He said.

“Yes it was.”

“Why then?” He asked.

She looked back towards the ocean. She took her hand away.

“It was simpler.” She said. “We were normal then we had hope.”

She looked towards her stomach and then back towards the ocean. The man stood up, looked down at her, and extended his hand.

“Let’s have a drink.”

She looked up at him.

“Ok.” She said.

She grabbed his hand and came up. The two walked up the beach until they had gotten to their vacation home. Their vacation home was a one story brown home. It had many windows and was brightened many of nights. This night only the kitchen light and the porch light were on. The woman sat in the chair on the porch. There was a table and another chair beside her. He leaned down and her feet pointed towards the ocean once more. The man was standing towards the door leading to the kitchen.

“What do you want my dear?” He asked.

“A margarita is fine.” She said.

He went inside and a few seconds later came out with her margarita in one hand and a bottle of whiskey with the glass to put it in in the other. The glass had ice. He placed all of this on the table in-between them and sat in the chair next to it. He poured himself a glass and took a sip. She took a sip of her’s.

“When did you stop being happy?” She asked.

“I didn’t.”

“There’s no reason to lie.”

“I’m not.”

“Really ?” She asked.

“Yep.”

“Not even after...”

“Nope.”

“Oh.”

They became silent. The man took another sip.

“ I used to be beautifulonce.” She said.

“ You still are.”

“ They said such awful things.”

“Yes.” He said. “ Yes they did.”

Something Doesn't Feel Right

You are a clam left open under the summer sun.

You are snow underneath my finger nail.

You are a contest that has never been won.

You are a shell without a living snail.

You are a jersey after losing the big game.

You are a broken pencil during the test.

You are an effortlessly misplaced name.

You are a bed too firm to support rest.

You are an un-plucked guitar string.

You are a tactician without a battle plan.

You are a bird with a broken wing.

You are an actor self-conscious about your hands.

You are a cradle that cannot rock.

You are a slinky that can no longer bounce.

You are a teacher without chalk.

You are a cat who is too timid to pounce.

You are a wrestler chocked out in a fight.

You are beer from an unsealed can.

I knew that something didn't feel right.

Now I know this was your first time being with a man.

—Matt Hughes

Hurt

The cheerless chords wail on,
At a slow and somber pace.
Note after note,
Adorned in black lace.

The bladed tune slices in again,
A pang of pain is to follow.
My stomach line with glass,
In the dreadful dusk I wallow.

The downpour stains my cheek,
Plummeting from glassy eyes.
Like crystal balls, clear and sleek,
They shatter when they meet demise.

The tortured voice rings out,
A mourner's melody.
With a tone of sustained doubt,
The music plays on in key.

Stale memories appear to haunt me,
They flicker in my mind.
Like sparks from a busted fuse box,
Broken since my heart resigned.

—Brian Guttman

Get Out

I'm angry but not the least bit surprised
I should've seen it coming from the first time
The bill came in the mail and I paid it
We were both kids then
And you haven't grown since
Retreat to that room, you coward
"I'm sorry, I just have to do what's best for me"
As if I haven't been doing that for you for seven months already
And don't tell me that it's my fault
That I should apologize
I don't appreciate your thievery
Fuck off with those lies
I don't want to hear that you're worried about me
Take the couches and table and your stupid tv
You weren't perfect
But at least I wasn't lonely
I didn't mind paying the bills
I gave you everything you asked for
I never would have thought you'd leave me for dead
On mile marker fifty four
But I have three weeks and counting
Then I'm out on my ass
I can't afford to make rent
And heaven forbid I should have to swallow my pride
Call up mom and pops
"Can I have a couple hundred bucks?"

“I got used, ok, I’ll admit it
“You were right, I was wrong
“What’s new with this situation?”
I think I’d rather sleep in the backseat
And when the cold bites my bones
I’ll have you there to blame
Because I grew up
But you stayed the same
So give the landlord your keys
And go crawling back home
Give up on your schooling
And I hope you die
But not of old age
With your paycheck in pocket
Stamped “Minimum Wage”

—Eli Murray



Untitled
by Randall Michael

Together Again

You and I will spindle time's rapier,
 our lambent laughter dancing on each blade,
 our dreams unwounded in the battle.
We will live life as if this universe
 were only one of many
 in which to laugh.

—Charles Atchley

Break Down

Broken cracks forming
Pieces falling all around me
I will not dodge them

—Jacob Pierce

Second Chance

Here again, I sit
from the spot I saw
 the world
I thought I had the answers
I thought I knew it all

Now, where I sit
views out the windows
 the same
Then the world within grasp
Now quickly passes by

Here before, I was you
my life was full
 of promise
Though styles have changed
Conversations remain the same

From where I began
 I sit
No more dreams
 only reality
If simply to say
 choose wisely

—Jennifer S. Williams



Splattered Everywhere

by Andromeda Jones

THE GIRL FROM KANSAS

The last visit my grandmother did not know me.
curled like a crescent moon upon her bed
she moaned her children's names.
I touched her dry white bones with blue veins
shadowing the course of a lifetime.
her breath like a moth's fluttering wings
whispered tales of Blue Mound, Kansas
where she rode above glazed fields,
burnished hair swept back with bright ribbons
the horse's pounding hooves and flaring nostrils
matched the trembling of her heart
the girl from Kansas pauses and listens
to the silken rustle of shaken wheat.

—Deborah Crowson

Satellites

A young Jonny Waterloo calls home.

by Waters, David K

I stood there looking out over the man-made lake of F.O.B Dreamland holding a satellite phone in my hand. This was my first phone call to back home after a month in Iraq and all I had was fifteen minutes. I had just tried calling my mother, who was the first person on the top of my priorities list to call from this god awful hell-hole, but there was no answer. I had forgotten the seven hour time change and remembered that she must have been singing with the church choir when I called. It was odd in hindsight. I was in the holy land, the Ottoman Empire, the place where Eden flourished, and where Jesus walked. And now, what was it? The most dangerous place in the world, senseless killing, war-torn, savagery, and hatred all mixed into one bowl.

I looked back down at the satellite phone in my hand. I was somewhat hesitant to do so, but I punched in a new number and anxiously awaited the dial tone. I began to pace, I always pace when I'm on the phone. The ringtone bounced off of the invisible satellites high over the desert sky and beckoned to a rotary phone in Dixon Illinois. By the fifth ring a voice finally answered.

"Waterloo residence." An older gentlemen's voice said into the receiver, sounding like "Hank Hill", not knowing the origin of the call.

I responded back. "Hey Dad, it's me, Jonny."

"Hello?" He asked again in confusion.

"*Fuck, I forgot about the god-damned time delay!*" I thought as I repeated my greeting. "It's me, Jonny! You're son!" but this time the time delay only interrupted me.

"Jonny! Is that you?" my father asked.

I gave the time delay a few seconds so that it wouldn't interfere with our conversation and allowed him time to receive my last words.

"I know it's you, how ya do'n guy?" He asked excitedly.

"I'm okay Dad, how are things?"

"Well, things are things, noth'n important happen'n here. How ya do'n?"

My father noticed my mood by the tone of my voice through the phone. I was thinking about my first gun fight the night before and how I had almost gotten killed. I didn't want to tell him about it, not like he'd really worry anyhow, so what was the point? After my parent's divorce I was never really close to my father, and now; some jack-hole in the Pentagon thought that putting the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and a few hundred miles of desert between us would be the perfect solution for this deteriorating father and son relationship.

"I'm doing okay Dad." I finally answered.

"Yeah? Where are you?"

"I have no fuck'n clue Dad, a suburb of Bagdad for all I know." (I was actually in Al Fallujah.)

"Well, from what the news tells me, its best you're not this place called Al? Al Fallujah? Is that right?"

"I have no idea Dad, all I know is this place sucks. Fuck this place; holy-land my ass."

"Well;" he paused "so what are you smoking over there?"

My father has always wanted to support my vice for some reason. I can never explain why, perhaps he had a curiosity of how other cultures consume tobacco, or maybe he just thought I couldn't get cigarettes at all, perhaps still; maybe he's trying for that abortion after the seven point six repeating-trimester.

"Well Dad, there is this Haji vendor here that comes around every week and sells cigarettes, cigars, dip, food, an all that fun shit. I can get a carton of French menthols for five

bucks.”

“Eh, French, that sounds horrible”.

“They’re actually not that bad Dad”.

“What brand do ya usually smoke?”

“I still smoke menthols Dad”.

I flashed back to when I was fifteen years old and my father caught me smoking a cigarette out back behind the house. He gave me the riot act. He looked at me with disappointment; not because I had taken up smoking, but because I was smoking menthols. Smoking menthols was obviously a sure sign that he had failed as a parent.

“Yeah, but what kind?”

“Kools”.

“Eh, screw that shit. Okay, I tell ya what, gimme your address and I’ll send you some Kools”.

I pulled out my green leader’s note book from my cargo pocket and fumbled with the huge phone between my ear and shoulder to find my address. As I read off my address to him I already knew what was in store for me. I thought back to when I was in Kosovo. He had said that he would send me a couple cartons of Kools back then as well. Two weeks later, when I received his “care” package, he had sent me three cartons of Lucky Strike non-filters instead. I could only but wonder if he ever listened to me.

“All right, got it”. He said after he repeated the address back to me. “I’ll have ’em in the mail to ya by the end of the week. How long does it take to get mail over there anyways?”

It just dawned on me that I had no idea. The whole month that I had been there I had only received one letter, and that was from my mother.

“I don’t know Dad, weeks perhaps?”

There was a pause

“Well, I’ll get those cigarettes out to ya, as soon as possible, okay Jonny?”

“Alright, Dad; how is everything?”

“Well, like I said nothing important going on here, I’m still going to Sauk to get my CDL. So, how hot is it over there?”

“It’s hot Dad.”

“Like how hot?”

“Like, walk into a sauna fully dressed and weighed down by 55lbs. of gear; okay Dad? It’s fuck’n hot.”

“Alright” he said defensively, “so wadda they have ya do’n over there?” he asked.

I thought back to the night before again, I thought about the gunfight. I thought about how I was almost got killed by an RPG zooming over the hood of my team’s gun-truck. It missed us by a meter. I paused, then I reluctantly answered.

“We’re..... we’re shooting things Dad.”

“Shooting things? He asked with what sounded like astonishment. “Shooting things like what?”

I paused again, hesitant to answer, but then I wasn’t going to lie to my own father.

“Other people Dad.” I answered bluntly and with an irritable tone.

“Oh..... I see.”

There was an even longer pause. I was wrapped up in the night before, and he was wrapped up in how he was going to respond to what I had just said to him. For once I think that my father had just realized that a parent’s worst fear is to out- live their own children, and on top of that, he was wondering what advice he could give his own son who now had more experience than he did.

“Jonny,” He finally spoke, breaking the dead silence. “I love you; you know that right?”

I wanted to say: “No, no Dad; I don’t know that.” But I didn’t say it. I was too busy being blessed to hear him speak those three little words that I had hardly heard him say since I was thirteen years old. I played a ruse.

“What Dad? I couldn’t hear you; there must be some interference with the satellite

phone.”

“I said: I love you son!” he shouted into the phone; as if speaking louder would fix the said problem.

“Twice in one year; twice within ten minutes I got to hear him say those words.” Maybe some jack-hole in the Pentagon had the right idea after all?”

“I love you too Dad.”

ⁱ Forward Operating Base.

ⁱⁱ Al Fallujah is located in the south eastern tip of what was called the Sunni Triangle. Fallujah was known as the “City of Mosques it was the heart of some of the fierce fighting from late 2003 to mid-2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term “Haji” is a derogatory term for an Iraqi or Afghani local national.

^{iv} Rocket Propelled Grenade.

Potent Powdery User of Men
by Anonymous

I lay here, on the chilled, polished wooden floor, in a state of tremor. My eyes flutter to the back of my head replaying the memories like a projector.

The slide starts slowly and steadily, but then the film speeds up and spins out of control. I'm a fifteen year old girl experiencing the enslavement of addiction and agonizing struggle of withdrawals.

I am a heroin addict.

As my head spins, I am sweating bullets. They emerge from my oxygen deprived pores forming a puddle beneath me. I need the numbness. Give me the substance. A herd of buffalo stomp within my heart, charging toward its walls and bringing it through my chest. "Oh, what I'd give for one more bump. Just a bump," my mind begs. All at once I use my, what feels like disintegrating, muscles to spring myself up from that sweat-pooled, lustrous wooden floor. "At least something still has the ability to shine," I utter with great envy.

I must have stood up too fast, because I notice my vision start to blur. I don't care. I don't care about anything anymore, except my great escape. I desperately ransack through everything in sight just to find a trace of that white powdery kryptonite. There isn't much to search through, however, because all that my dad left me is a mattress and a dresser. I slide my hand across a board on my floor and pry it out of place. There's still an old fuse box that I had kept my baggies in once upon a time. I don't see a baggie still in there, but the box is lined with addiction. I frantically tear the top of the box from the bottom and grace my tongue completely around its surface letting each speck of bitter powder melt, mix with my saliva, and trickle down my throat. I cringe, but like oxygen, the smallest pinch of the powder once in my system lets me breathe in deeply and relaxes me.

I open my window to see what I had left in the sill during my prime. There's a stale, menthol cigarette, a box of matches, and coconut incense. It's my very own first aid kit.

I scrape the match forcefully against the box and watch the vibrant orange, blood red, and cobalt blue flame spark up enough for me to take advantage of it. The sound of the match against the box is like chalk on a chalkboard. It's unbearable to most, but in this instance comforting to me. I cup my hands around the flame and with the cigarette squeezed between my lips as if I will never let it go, I light it. Then the flame shrinks until it is gone forever. The smell of sulfur creeps up my nose, gripping on to my nose hairs and caking them with that pleasant aroma. I tip my head back and inhale deeply the tobacco and smooth taste of menthol. Once I can't suck in any more of it I exhale and let the smoke gracefully flow from my nostrils, like water flowing downstream. The smoke swirls around the room, which seems to close in on me with every second that passes. I ignite another match and light the incense. Its tropical fruity fragrance expands throughout the room, filling it from wall to wall. I watch it burn and think about the first time I experienced the warm fuzzies that I once thought were a blessing. Now in fact, I am certain they are a curse.

It was one year prior when I was coming into my freshman year at Dixon High School and had already got asked out by a junior. All the girls were jealous that I managed to get in with the "in crowd" so quickly. I felt confident even going to my first "high school" party. My heart was jumping with excitement as I walked in the door holding Ted's hand. As soon as we got there a guy, zeroed in on Ted, strode straight to us and whispered in his ear. Ted let go of my hand because he was more focused on following his friend. However, he nodded his head motioning for me to follow and stay close. We maneuvered through the crowd of people, past a transparent green funnel with a tube attached to it that I later found out was a beer bong, stepped over the tribal decorated chest withholding a substance that looked like oregano but of course was not, and finally ended up in a room. Aaron softly secured the door and locked it so that we were confined in the room. His girlfriend was hovering like a hunchback over a reflectively clean glass table with a rosewood frame. Aaron

handed Ted the dollar bill next, and he took it nonchalantly as if this were a daily routine. I didn't want to look as though I was beginning to panic; however, I knew even then that if I took part in this "hobby" that there was no going back.

Everything became slow motion. These few people around me. . .who were they? Aaron nudged me, and I snapped out of it. I pinched my fingers around Lincoln. My line was ready on the table. What used to be chunks of white was now crushed into flawless grains. I threw my hair up into a messy bun and plugged my nostril with my knuckle. I stopped for a moment to look at my innocent reflection in the glass. Then, from left to right just as I had learned to read, I sniffed with all my might the potent powdery user of men.

In an instant, an overwhelming current of warmth and electricity raced through my body. I stared at myself in the glass once again after I had committed my sin to see that the innocence was no longer there and I was no longer myself. My eyes were glossy, and my pupils were sucked back into my head letting the turquoise protrude.

Absorbing it in now, as I sit in my room one year later with the burning incense reflecting in my eyes, I am obsessive. Dependent. I ash my cigarette on the windowsill and fall back into the past.

My eyes drooped constantly, and I started to itch all over as if a swarm of mosquitoes had bitten my entire body. However, I couldn't help but to smirk in satisfaction. I followed the leader out of the room of blissful doom. I saw my surroundings in a state of paranoia now, and it seemed as though everyone had their eyes on me when I passed them by. Once separated from the den of sin, I seemed to grasp onto reality with better senses.

"So what do you think of H?" Aaron merely glanced at me with glazed eyes, in his dazed state.

That question still eats away the back of my mind, with all of the images of the self-destructive rollercoaster ride that I had been on. Did I mention, however, that I love rollercoasters; this roller coaster ride was just beginning. As the speed built, the amount of heroin that I consumed daily had increased in multiples. Heroin at school, heroin at home, heroine at the halftime of my soccer games. My blood was pure heroin streaming through my veins. It became so frequent that I began throwing up. The feeling of throwing up on heroin is one of relief with no bad breath or feeling sick yet afterwards. I just light up another cigarette and the buzz is back on.

Shaking it off (for I now feel a bit calmer from the menthol inhaler) I press my cigarette forcefully into the windowsill and watch the last ember of the incense sizzle out. The cigarette doesn't satisfy me long enough, though, because I start to quiver, and my teeth create an ear shattering chatter. I feel the cold sweats engulf my skin and seep into its layers, chilling my organs. The outer layer of my skin is slick and slimy. I clutch my hands together so tightly around my knees that my fingers brighten to a ghostly white and lose circulation. I tuck my face in like a turtle hiding in its shell, thinking that I am going to shelter myself from the devil that has slithered into my body and condemned my soul.

It's too late. I have given myself completely to the possessive serpent.

The lights start to dim around me. A single drop of blood splashes on the floor. My breathing starts to rapidly speed up and grow sharp. The blood is by this time gushing from my nose. My mind is weak and all I can comprehend is Dave Mustaine screaming in my head, "I've seen them crawl from the cradle to the coffin on their knees. They fight a war, but it's fatal. Just one shot to say goodbye. . .one last time to mourn and cry." MY EYES FLICKER, MY BODY STARTS TO CONVULSE, I'M VOMITING ALL OVER MYSELF, CHOKING ON IT. My breathing now shallow. Pull the string. . .click. Lights out...



Celtic Cross 072

by Karen Donohue

Excerpt from "The Break In"
by Kyle Hess

Even under the dim glow of the street light, it was too dark for David to see into his backpack. Crouched on the sidewalk, he buried his arm into his pack, trying to locate his last pack of cigarettes. His friend, Josh, leaned against the light pole. There was a light fog settling, and the thin haze covered the street, squelching out the lights from the houses and lampposts. Finally, David found his cigarettes, and proceeded to smack the small case against his palm. He opened the pack, and the sweet smell of tobacco filled the air around him, hanging heavy in the wet air. Gently pulling the cig out of the case and into his mouth, he reached into his jacket to pull out a zippo. He sparked it, and lit the end of his cigarette and inhaled deeply, the soft crackle of burning paper audible in the still night.

"Hey, are you almost ready?" Josh shifted, anxious to get moving.

David looked back at Josh. "Well, what exactly are we doing?" David bent over to zip up his backpack.

"Don't put that away yet. We should get the tools before we start."

"We've got a few blocks to walk still, and I don't want people to see us with holding hammers and screwdrivers." David grabbed his bag and whipped it over his shoulder. "C'mon, let's get walking."

They both turned to walk down the sidewalk. The smoke from David's cigarette mixed with the fog, creating a light swirl of blue and gray haze that followed the two teenagers as they went.

After a few moments of silence, Josh turned to David. "So... you've done this before?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's not the first time I've been this desperate."

The two walked on for a bit longer, the only sounds heard were their footsteps echoing off of the houses. The air was so still, the fog unmoving. David couldn't help but to think this was the perfect night to do a job like this. No, not a job. An errand. Just a little chore that had to be done. David had to keep thinking that, trying to tell himself that it was necessary. He didn't have a choice this time. Maybe last time, maybe last time he could have done something different. But if he hadn't done it then, he wouldn't have known what to do now. And where would that leave him?

Finally, the two reached the old gas station. The lights on the sign outside flickered, but that was the only source of light around with the cover of the fog. As Josh and David walked up, and David flicked his now dead cigarette. After a few thoughts, he walked over to the butt and picked it up. He didn't want to leave any evidence.

Josh walked to the back, and nervously studied the lock. It was a rusted Masterlock, held to the door with three small extensions. "I have a bad feeling about this, man..."

David soon followed, and began to rummage through his back pack. He pulled out a set of bolt cutters. "Relax. I know they're in the middle of upgrading their security, so it's all shut off. That, and they don't go to the bank on Sunday nights. This should be easy". Just like last time, he thought.

Looking at the lock, David realized he couldn't use regular bolt cutters. The lock was held in place by a few extensions, making it hard to place the cutters anywhere near the hinge to cut it. Looks like he would have to break it the loud way.

David reached back into his pack and took the screwdriver and mallet out. He placed the tip of the screwdriver into the keyhole. With a swing of the hammer, he smashed the flathead into the lock, busting the pins inside. With a slight tug, the lock came undone. David grabbed his bag, and put the tools back inside.

"The door's open." David said, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "Let's go." He opened the door quietly, and slipped in without another sound. Josh, nervously looking over his shoulder, followed David, and with a small click, closed the door behind him.

For Vested Minds

Vested thoughts and tangled minds,
Often detract from the light of day.
In life's great moments, we may find,
All that is gold, is merely clay.

As hours pass, we meet our last,
The bony hand of fate.
If every joy is buried in the past,
What's left to celebrate?

Today is mine, as it is yours,
As we guide the seams of providence.
Happiness isn't earned, but rather acknowledged,
Whenever we have the evidence.

The proof can be elusive, but it depends on how much we allow.
Joy never graces the future, for those who are blind to the now.

—Brian Guttman

Into the Woods
by Marissa Razo

I told my mom that I'm staying with my friends tonight. I lied. Instead, I'm going to spend the night in the woods, alone. Why would I do such a stupid thing like that? Because my friends dared me to, and I guess I want to prove to myself that I'm brave enough. I have to admit, I'm a little nervous, the kind of nervous that makes me feel as if I've swallowed a giant boulder. I've seen the Blair Witch Project, and I know how well that trip turned out to be. Twenty-four hours in the dark surrounded by a bunch of creepy trees all by myself. Yeah, I really am an idiot.

It's three o'clock sharp as I pull my rusty banged up truck to the outskirts of the woods. I grab my pack filled with all the necessary essentials: granola bars, water bottles, a watch, a flashlight, a compass (Ha! As if I know how to use one!), a blanket, and a tent with very detailed instructions. Yes, I'm actually going into the woods without knowing how to use a compass or set up a tent.

I grab my belongings and head out going north. The fall breeze feels wonderful as I crunch my way through the leaf infested ground. Why the hell am I doing this? This isn't fun; the wind howls in agreement.

After aimlessly walking in a straight line for two hours, I decide I've gone far enough and attempt to set up my tent. The bastard puts up a good fight, but a little while later (okay, a it's a lot while later), I win and do a short victory dance that makes me thankful no one is here to see. The sky is pitch black as I settle into the tent and try to eat a granola bar. My stomach is too anxious to finish it though. I want to stick this out, but I'm already terrified. The wind screams, and I can see the shadows of the trees glaring into the tent. Ugh, nature sucks, but I know I can do this; I have to do this. If I just close my eyes and block out the sounds and images, I will be okay. Eventually, I force my eyes shut and start to plot my revenge against my friends. I know this is really my fault. I could've said no, but why blame myself when I can blame other people? Isn't that a rule of life?

Blood curling screams wake me from my sleep. I bolt upright, panting; sweat drips down my body even though I should be freezing. What the hell was that noise? It must've been the wind; it had to be the wind, right? Hands shaking, I unzip the tent and look out, flashlight in hand. I peer out the side, but all I see are those freaking trees; trees with giant claw like branches that look as if they want to snatch me up. Yeah, I don't think so! I zip the tent back up and try to relax, which is hard to do when I'm convulsing with fear.

I grab some water and slowly slip from the bottle. The shadows from outside engulf me, and I feel trapped. Good, this will force me to stay inside the tent and not go running outside like the idiot I am. I cannot rip my eyes away from the shadows; I stare at them like I'm in a trance. I don't even know where they're coming from, but they look like people, dancing all around me. In fact, one of the shadows looks exactly like the outline of a person. "No," I whisper out loud. "Please, no."

Holy shit, I'm going to die, in the middle of the freaking woods, no less. This is just great. A part of me wants to look out and see if my suspicions are correct, but another part of me knows someone is out there and is praying that whoever it is kills me quickly. The figure walks in a circle around the tent, taunting me. Who else would be in the woods at night? No one sane that's for sure. Maybe it's one of my good for nothing friends! Yes, please, please, please let it be one of my friends. I don't particularly want to die tonight.

Once again, I unzip the tent and look out. I don't see anyone. The person, if that's what the shadow really was, is gone. Trembling, I slowly stand up and look around. My flashlight barely brightens the obsidian sky. Nothing is out there but those

goddamn trees. I swear to God I saw something. Sighing in frustration, I crawl back into the tent. I feel like I'm going insane, and all I want is to go home. There's no way I'll be sleeping tonight. My watch says it's a half past one. Fourteen more hours to go before this stupid dare is over.

Shrill laughs ring out all around me making me jump. The laughs get louder and louder coming from every direction. I stomp out of the tent, pissed. Most of my fear is gone, replaced by an intense rage. "This isn't funny! I know people are out here! If you're here to hurt me, then do it and stop messing with my head! If you people are my friends I swear to God I will kill each and every one of you!" Apparently my threats aren't very threatening since nothing happens. "Hello?"

All of a sudden, a person appears in between the trees. Heart pumping I shine my flashlight towards the person's face. Whoever it is is covered head to toe in black. One by one, four more people step out, laughing in unison. Their laughs are like nails on a chalkboard, sounding almost inhuman. They begin to walk towards me, moving like zombies. I scramble into the tent and grab my car keys. The figures move closer, and I take off running, screaming inside. I cry as I run; my tears freezing onto my face. I glance back quickly, but I don't see anything. The tree in front of me comes out of nowhere. I bang my head hard; so hard I begin to lose consciousness. My last thought before slamming into the ground is that I hate trees.

When I wake up, it's morning. Light pours in all around me, making my pounding head hurt even worse. Slightly disoriented, I begin the walk back to my truck. I'm not sure how long it takes me to find the truck; I don't care. The relief I feel when my engine starts is indescribable.

After I get home, I call my friends and tell them what happened. They all swear they weren't in the woods. I choose to believe they're lying. I hope they're lying; they have to be, otherwise I could've died last night. Regardless of the truth, I can say with conviction that I am never, ever going into the woods again, nor will I ever take a dare from one of my friends. I wanted to prove to myself that I'm brave, but I now realize that being scared isn't necessarily a bad thing; sometimes being scared stops you from being a dumbass.

An Unmade Bed

An unmade bed
With sheets of teal
Raised against my back
Like steel

Bare feet touch carpet
Creating quite the strange caper
As my carpet of shag
Feels rough like sand paper

Drops of dew
In my yard of grass
Crunch under my feet
Like glass

Deep in thought
Though it is not my wish
As I walk along
I feel a squish

Looking down
I feel rightly duped
For I have stepped
Where my dog last pooped

—Andrew Ruiz

Plain Jane
by Len Michaels

*Physical beauty is a fleeting illusion of the eye, perishable and without substance.
Plain beauty cannot be seen, only intensely felt in an enduring bond called love.*

Bouncing on the bed, Lisa chortled, "I ran over to John yesterday after the game. I finally got the nerve to say hello and asked if he would like to walk me home. Godddd! He smiled at me, and then we walked together to my house and we like . . . talked forever. When he touched my hand, I about peed in my pants. He's so cute and simply . . . awesome! And he asked me to go with him to the mall after school tomorrow. Wow! I think I'm in love, I just know it."

Lisa and I would soon graduate from Washington middle school and have been inseparable friends for years. We were at that awkward age when girls liked guys, but guys usually wanted nothing to do with them. So we talked about the guys we had crushes on and plotted how we would get them interested in us. Lisa had a crush on John for months. But mostly, we fantasized about romances and kisses that never happened.

This spring Lisa was filling out in the right places and some boys were starting to pay attention. To **her**, that is, not to me. They avoided me. I was the skinny freckle faced kid with braces who was shy and giggled too much and tripped over her own feet. I was dreadfully taller than all the boys in class with a figure as straight as a can of Coke. When I looked into the mirror my Roman nose popped out like Pinocchio. Then there was my oversized lower lip, protruding from a scrawny face framed with stringy off-brown hair. Taking off my ugly framed glasses helped only because I couldn't see as well. I was a mess, and I knew it. Life seemed so unfair.

Lisa said, "Jane, why don't you go with us to the mall tomorrow? I know John won't mind. Hey! He said he talked with you before. You never told me that. But really, I would feel more comfortable with you there. Please?"

I never told Lisa about the several times John and I talked at school about the math course we were taking. Math was my strongest subject and John asked me for help with some of the problems. We hit it off well - too well. We enjoyed doing the math together but something else was happening. I experienced feelings I never felt before.

Fear more than anything forced me to tell John one day, "I'm afraid that I won't have the time to help you with math anymore. There are so many other things that I need to do. I'm sure you'll find someone else to help you. But it's really been fun."

Fun? Our meetings were wonderful! And he seemed so disappointed. But I didn't want to risk losing my best friend. I went into the pits afterwards, regretting what I did.

Lisa's loud voice shattered my daydream, "Well, are you going to go with us or not?"

"Yea, yea sure, if you want me too," I blurted out without thinking.

Darn, now what, I thought to myself. That was a stupid thing to say. How am I going to handle being with John with Lisa there? Somehow I had to keep my feelings hidden.

I was a nervous wreck until the next afternoon. I wore some of my better clothes to school and spent extra time on my hair. Why? This was stupid! I thought of just going home after school. But that wouldn't work. Then everyone would be mad at me. *Just stay cool!*

They were both on the steps of the school waiting for me. Lisa, as usual, started talking a mile a minute. John - he just smiled at me and said nothing. But his smile jumped into my head and gave me goose bumps.

While walking around the mall Lisa did most of the talking. John did his best to keep up with her endless questions, most of which she answered herself. But he kept staring

at me every chance he got with that stupid smile. Several times he tried to drag me into the conversation, but each time I was curt and passed the ball back to Lisa. I felt safer just listening.

As we were leaving, Lisa nudged me and whispered in my ear, "I want John to walk me home – alone." She winked like it was a secret code.

"Hey guys, I got to go. Have to pick up something for my mother. See you later. It's been fun," I lied.

"It was great seeing you again Jane. I miss our old math sessions," the Greek God said, his damn smile ripping me in half. Me? "Miss Cool?" I said nothing and walked away quickly like a big jerk.

High school began with much of the same. Lisa grew even more beautiful. The guys considered her an easy "10", with her cute face, long blond hair and well-proportioned body. She began dating guys that were in the "inner circle" at school and became very popular. John soon became history after Lisa totally flipped out over the quarterback of the football team.

My body on the other hand, remained as straight and sturdy as a telephone pole. My conversations with guys were usually brief, starting and ending with "Hey." I did have two dates my freshman year. One was a hayride debacle with an over-sexed octopus; on the second, the guy that asked me out never showed up. But I still counted it.

I saw John several times in the cafeteria, and his smile still melted me. I was trying to work up the nerve to ask him to the annual hay ride, but Lisa told me he had a steady girlfriend and I chickened out. I avoided him after that, not wanting to be hurt.

Lisa and I spent less time together. Talking about boys became strained as she sensed my discomfort when she talked about her dates. So we talked mostly about school, clothes, movies and the onset of pimples, one of the few calamities we shared.

"Eck! I have a date this weekend and this zit makes me look like a creep," she once said while looking into the mirror. But it was more than pimples that was making my life a disaster.

Each night when I looked into the mirror I saw the same formless bony creature with a homely face – and now with pimples to boot. I felt terrible about myself and usually ended up depressed. No wonder I wasn't popular. So I became more and more reserved at school, keeping to myself.

In the fall of my junior year, Lisa asked, "Hey, the football jocks are having a big party next weekend at my boyfriend's house. If you want I can line you up with Buddy's cousin who's visiting him for the weekend. He goes to Trinity College and I'm told he's a doll."

"I don't know."

"Oh come on, what have you got to lose? We'll all be together at the party. If you don't like him, you can mix with the other kids."

"OK," I said. "What the heck." I guess I was willing to try anything. I was getting tired of being lonely. My only real social event was the monthly Math Club meeting at school.

When Lisa and I arrived at the party, I immediately saw John across the crowded room, made much smaller by noisy kids and the blaring stereo. He didn't see me, but my knees buckled. I didn't know he would be there.

Lisa pulled my arm and shouted, "Come on, I see Buddy in the kitchen." So we pushed our way toward the kitchen.

"Hey," Lisa said, as she planted a kiss on Buddy's lips. "You remember Jane, don't ya?"

"Yea, sure. Hi, Jane! Welcome to the blast. You look great tonight doll." Obviously, he was looking at Lisa with that comment.

"The drinks are in the cooler over there girls, so help yourself."

"Where's your cousin?" Lisa shouted over the noise.

"Hold on, I think he's in the other room. I'll find him and drag him back here."

I started to get nervous since I never went on a blind date before. But they were back

before we finished opening our drinks. *Wow, he's is cute*, I said to myself as I saw the tall dark haired boy standing beside Buddy.

"Lisa . . . Jane, I'd like you to meet my cousin Ed."

"Hey," I said in a squeaky voice. He said something also, but I couldn't hear exactly what. Maybe it wasn't the noise that turned off my hearing, but rather his strained forced smile and squinting eyes. He looked extremely uncomfortable.

Buddy grabbed Lisa and headed for the dance area, hollering over his shoulder, "Why don't you guys get to know each other. Lisa and I are going to 'get down and dirty.'"

So we were left there standing together . . . alone. We took awkward glances at each other for a couple of minutes in the suddenly quiet, noisy room, until Ed finally said, "Hey Lisa, this stuff is running right through me. I'm going to run to the john. Be back in a few." With that he scampered off.

I stood there not sure what to do. I felt hurt, but was I imagining it? I didn't have long to wonder. Even with the noise I could make out what Ed said to Buddy in the next room. "I'm pissed at you man. What were you thinking of? Lining me up with such a loser? That sucks, man."

"Calm down, will you? Just talk to her for a while, maybe dance with her once. Then go off and mingle. Just make an effort. I'd had to do this for my girlfriend. Give me a break, man. Don't let me down. I'll make it up to you."

I only hoped I could get to the bathroom before crying. There, I could compose myself, then tell Lisa I was sick, and leave. That was the plan.

The plan worked until I left the washroom. In the hallway was John, waiting for me.

He smiled and said, "This place is boring me. What do you say we blow this hole and go for a walk?"

I don't remember what I said when John took my hand and we left. But I remember that we walked and we talked for hours. I bared my soul to John telling him things I never even told Lisa. I told him about how I **really** felt. It seemed so natural.

We continued to talk, and share, and then much more . . . through graduation . . . and then all through college. In my relationship with John I found out who I really was. I grew to love John and myself.

Eventually, we ended up teaching at the same school, still talking and growing closer. But the conversation that I will remember forever is when he asked me to marry him and I said "yes!"

The day before our marriage, we were playfully goofing around, and I was jumping and cooing like a monkey just to be silly. I impulsively asked him, "John, do you think I look like a homely monkey?"

"Homely? Don't be silly. I look at you and see a woman in love. A woman in love **is beauty** to the man who loves her. Our love has made your soul blossom like a beautiful flower that draws me like a bee. So come here and give me some of that honey."

The next day I looked in the mirror dressed in my flowing wedding gown having a white patterned veil, fancy lace trim and a long train. My figure looked so full and attractive. My face radiated with a warm glow. There were stars in my eyes, and my smile and large lips looked downright seductive.

Lisa, my Maid of Honor, fussing with my veil said, "Oh Jane, I'm so happy for you. You look so absolutely ravishing." She was right.

John was also right . . . oh so *very right* in every way.



Untitled

by Randall Michael

Dream of The Romantic
by Brian Guttman

I fall back through curtains of dimness onto my cushioned bed, which feels as though it is floating in the starry sky beyond my ceiling. The encircling clouds of disorienting darkness obscure all clarity. Swirling shapes and shadows dance before me like specters caught between dimensions. The universe once again closes the gates to omniscience, my efforts for enlightenment leave me answerless and grasping out for the unobtainable. The result of my labors? Nothing, blanks and holes, all of them wildly dispersed throughout any theory of mine, blotting out the hopes.

Illusion! All of it, the passing images and fleeting moments of a life in swing. The realm we inhabit, merely a screen where our lives are enacted in first-person by remote drones. Horrid vibes surfacing in my psyche, and the turning of my stomach again and again, as it gets kneaded out on coarse stone. My only thought, to wallow in melancholy, pitying myself...pathetic. The festering, slightly nauseous sensation in my gut becomes unbearable. My intestines were crawling like a heap of earthworms; I shoot out of bed and up through the ceiling, through the vacuity of space itself, to come to my senses near a small pond on a transparent midnight.

Tonight, I have no company besides the tranquil and muted wilderness; the soft gusts of wind dance between the solid trunks of elms dating back centuries, far too many years for anyone to recall. The steady melody of a symphony of crickets serenade me with wondrous tunes that gracefully mount the summer breeze resting only to perch at my ears and rattle my cochlea. The chilly air of a September night sends a couple shivers up my spine; glancing at the sky, I admire the spectacle of sparkling stars hanging in shadowy suspension. The moonlight as it reflects down on the surface of a small pond deceives me into thinking is a sizeable pool of silver in front of me. I kneel down to look into the argent lagoon, and see your reflection standing over me. When I turn to face your specter, you vanish behind the pitch veil of this most abnormal night.

In dreams, I catch glimpses of your stunning portrait from light years away, where on earth, I eagerly await your arrival. Across the cosmos, you reside in your domain, the new forged path you now tread. Even from dimensions away, you dazzle me with your finery and exquisite vestments. The eloquent words that escape your lips carry from the farthest reaches of the universe and fascinate me with their bizarre insight. In the echoes of your entrancing wisdom, I find the purely sublime, where the greatest acts of destruction shimmer with incandescent beams of artistry like a supernova. In the deepest entanglements within the fabric of space of time, I find you resting your weary head in a stellar stronghold. It is there you reign over the suns and moons in a cosmological court as constellations bend their knees and trumpet your most eminent presence. On this night, I hail the glorious spirit of the natural world, intrinsic love, the eternal muse, and the infinitum of matter of which we are all a part. Once again, I will lay my head upon my pillow and see only galaxies of majestic purple and red, another place your radiance has graced.



Untitled

by Val A. Stanley

Untitled
by Edward Boesen

Kate stood on her balcony, smoking her first and last cigarette of the day. It was that magical hour before homeowners emerged from behind closed-off courtyards to bleach the sidewalks and after most of the Mardi Gras revelers had dissipated into dark corners to sleep off alcohol. Her uniform hung crisp on a white hanger, snug in the clear plastic of the dry cleaning bag. A lonely black cat, thin but clean, slunk between two parked cars on Burgundy. A train whistle wafted through the air, reminding her how transient this city was, how each day stragglers from points North, runaways and ex-cons and woman fleeing an abusive spouse washed up like silt floating down the Mississippi to make a go of this city. Five years ago, she never would have dreamed such souls would be counted among her friends.

She inhaled deeply, drinking in both cigarette smoke and the early morning air. The street light, lambent, washed the scene before her in the softest glow. The scent of sandalwood shea butter body lotion she had applied after her shower still lingered on her skin. It mingled with the faint smell of petrochemicals and salt air. A feeling of something close to perfect contentment, something approaching a wondrous satisfaction with her life, washed over her. It was not the first time she had felt this sensation, even on this very spot looking out at the colorful facades of Rampart, the mansard roofs and gables and iron wrought gates and grills forming a whimsy in her mind of other places and distant times.

Kate loved being lost in these thoughts. She enjoyed the idea of being the only one awake to capture the Quarter in this curious in between. When an errant stranger passed along the street, she was careful to remain unseen. It was her little game, to never be caught at this hour spying the world below. She was uncharacteristically superstitious about this. She feared being noticed by another pair of eyes would ruin the moment and destroy the feelings this hour evoked in her. She was selfish about this. It was her secret, this comfortable feeling of loneliness. The car that passed was muted, as if respecting her desire for quiet contemplation, its wheels whirring by like a whisper on the cobbled streets.

Back inside, she fixed herself a cup of coffee. Her bare feet traversed the reclaimed wooden floor of her bedroom, the soles picking up no specks of grit thanks to the thorough scrubbing she had given her place the previous day. Keeping her apartment clean was one of her many simple joys.

She applied her make-up, letting the randomness of WWOZ's early morning playlist guide her into a reverie of memories and daydreams. She sometimes had trouble sorting out one from the other, but to compartmentalize them seemed a waste of time. Back outside to finish her coffee, shy crickets politely chirped, keeping her company.

Before long, it was time to put on her uniform and check her image in the large mirror with the faded gold frame she'd found in a particularly run-down shop on Magazine Street. She had propped it against the wall in favor of hanging it, and it was one of the many pieces in her apartment that gave her place a natural French Creole charm. She pulled her chestnut hair, still slightly damp from her shower, up into a pony-tail twist other flight attendants regularly complimented her on, and slipped into her regulation heels.

Her crew bag stood at attention ready for duty by the front door, its contents inside neatly packed. She made her way down the wooden steps, the boards sounding like bones cracking.

The drive to the airport was a comfort to her at this hour. In the unseasonable warmth of February, she sailed down I-10 with her passenger window lowered, the hour still too early to accumulate much traffic. WWOZ often switched formats throughout the day, and now played that kind of jazz that seemed to have no destination, no starting or ending point. It just was. The music provided an appropriate soundtrack to her thoughts.

Finding a spot in the employee parking lot was easy due to her early check-in. She slipped her ID hanging from a lanyard around her neck that hung religiously on her rear-

view mirror while she was not on duty, and took up position at the employee bus stop.

Once in the domicile, she printed a copy of her trip pairing before heading up to the gate, folding and placing it neatly into the flip side of the laminated compartment that held her employee badge for easy reference.

The sun was just coming up as she greeted the first passengers who stepped onboard. They were the usual tired road warriors taking the early-bird flight out, with nearly matching leather attaché cases and lawyerly suits. The woman mostly had short hair and wore varying shades of navy that blended in with the flight crew. She checked her lipstick before take-off in the lavatory mirror for smudges after noticing the lipstick stain on the rim of her Styrofoam cup filled with fizzy water she stole sips from to keep hydrated. The first officer greeted her warmly. She knew him from a previous trip. He had treated the entire crew to dinner when their flight cancelled last winter in Dallas due to an ice storm, stranding them an extra night. He even remembered her name, impressive since he, like the rest of the crew, was based in Atlanta.

The 3 day trip was uneventful. No major weather delays. No mechanicals. The hotels were predictably generic, offering the same tiny soap that crumbled into slivers too easily and smelled like a combination of lavender and burnt plastic. The same environmentally friendly plea written on small placards hanging from the hand towel rack that urged hotel guests to reuse towels and featured pictures of endangered species and rainforests. The same hotel windows that would never open, windows that looked out onto a runway or a grassy tract of undeveloped real-estate or another hotel and its bank of windows, some lit, some darkened.

Before long, her favorite part of the trip arrived. The first officer, this one based in JFK, had already instructed the flight attendants to prepare for landing and take their jumpseats. Kate continued to stand, however, scrunching her lean body up against the rear aircraft door by the jumpseat so she could peer out of the small oval window and marvel at the causeway that cut across Lake Pontchartrain. She recalled the first time she spanned this shallow lake on her very first drive into New Orleans. She had just finished training, most of her worldly possessions packed into her red 1996 Volkswagen Jetta. That feeling of exhilaration would never leave her.

Lost in these thoughts, the misplaced rumble and bang of the engine did not immediately register. Only minutes from touchdown, she suddenly found herself yelling BRACE! BRACE! BRACE! as she quickly strapped herself into the jumpseat. The voice of her flying partner Valerie, a blonde from Alabama who graduated from Auburn many years ago but still talked about her college days like they were yesterday, melded into Kate's as the aircraft seemed to tumble forward in the air, imbalanced, drunk, no longer able to glide effortlessly through space.

Delta's training mock up had not prepared them for this. They had practiced their emergency commands many times before, but this did not ready them for the sounds of the aircraft shaking and sputtering, for the vibrations that coursed through their bodies. The two women shared the tight space, their elbows kissing as they crouched in the brace position. There was no time to prep the cabin as they had done so often in their drills, no time to direct passengers to remove sharp objects from their pockets, or show the panicking young mother how to hold her lap child to increase the odds of her baby surviving impact.

It was simply a matter of shouting BRACE! BRACE! BRACE! as the plane jittered and lurched and fumbled out of control, with the two men up front, with families and a will to live as strong as theirs, as strong as anyone on the aircraft, fighting to gain control of this metal tube, the ominous sounds growing louder, the engine emitting a furious hiss like a demon possessed, the runway of Louis Armstrong International inching closer, gravity indifferent, the asphalt awaiting impact, emergency personnel and service vehicles lined up and ready to pounce on the wreckage should this be necessary. Air traffic controllers in the tower loosening their collars, scanning the horizon with binoculars, ready to trace the approaching hunk of out-of-control metal with their fingers as other flights were re-routed or placed in

a holding pattern.

BRACE! BRACE! BRACE! There was a cadence to it, a rhythm. The monosyllabic word rang in Kate's ears. In her zeal for such things, her fourth grade teacher would have most certainly classified the word as an onomatopoeia.

Valerie latched onto Kate's arm, craving human contact and comfort. Kate responded by placing her hand on the offered arm, closing her eyes, repeating the words. BRACE! BRACE! BRACE! Shouting them like a mantra, like a summons to some unseen God.

A rise of quiet panic now from the passengers. They had the clear view outside. The flight attendants, heads down, were unable to see anything, the shoulder strap pressing ever tighter as the plane droned and lunged. The small window on the aircraft door was useless from their vantage point. The passengers had the front row seat. Watching the ground get closer. Watching trees turn from small green dots to organic beings with limbs and trunks and life. The aircraft sputtered, speeding up and then slowing down according to the whims of the cockpit's feverish attempts to regain control.

BRACE! BRACE! BRACE!

A few whispered prayers. Most offered silently. Jaws clenched. Fists made into balls. Sweat rolling down backs. Breathing and heart rate accelerating. Last thoughts racing through minds revving out of gear. Dry mouths. Disbelief. Denial. Regret. Yes, the regret, you could almost taste it in the recycled, pressurized air. That family vacation deferred too long by the gentleman in 7C. Postponed "I Love You's" ping-ponging throughout the cabin. The lady in 18F's bitter, ongoing divorce battle.

BRACE! BRACE! BRACE!

BRACE!

BRACE!

BRACE!

Kate slept in. The magical hour was gone, passed. The shift change had already occurred. There were people about, some gripping a cup of coffee. Morning's first light had already punctured the sky. Her cigarette tasted good and she inhaled deeply. She hadn't listened to the message yet from her supervisor, thanking her for her efforts, for the successful evacuation, and offering her time off with pay as was company protocol. The machine continued to blink in regular intervals, waiting patiently for the 'Play Message' button to be pressed.

A meditative train horn wafted through the humid air in ripples. Funny, she never noticed the peculiar color of the kitty-corner house on Rampart and Burgundy, the light eggplant shade with red and gold trim, its balcony festooned in Mardi Gras bunting. Was it possible it had been painted recently? She doubted this.

A black cat sauntered down the street, its tail sticking up. Kate softly called to it and it startled at being spotted and took cover underneath a parked car. She pulled her sweater tighter to her chest as a light, momentary chill crept down her spine despite the warming sun on her face, and stepped inside to fix a cup of coffee.



Bamboo

by Jennifer S. Williams

MARY JANE REED

Devils backbone is a crooked road
Dust rises as memories unfold
The lost words of a story untold
The wind howls with brunet tresses
Of barefoot girls in cotton dresses
Complexions as soft as the fallen snow

~

To resurrect times faded rose

~

As angels fall Angels will ascend
The wind will rise and fall again

~

How many coins tossed into the wishing well?
Looking for answers that time may never tell
What becomes of hungers newborn seed?
With empty hands of hearts and souls in need
Where fingertips touch like fallen leaves

~

There will be a day of heavens reign
Where everything defiled will be washed clean
The humble and righteous will heal the vain
The scent of roses will blow in the breeze
Branded to the memory of a lost love indeed
And time can't erase the essence
Of Mary Jane Reed

—Val A. Stanley

SEVEN HORSES

Your chiseled features
Bloodlines of a Cherokee
You and I, hand and hand
Morning unfolds over the country
The open arms of her majesty
Rising winds caress your hair
Brushstrokes across the scenery
Seven horses are running free

Clouds shatter
A broken mirror
Distant lightning strikes
The rain appears
Upon our threshold
Sensibility ignites
We could get our feet wet
Figuratively, literally
Under a flowering umbrella
The crab apple tree
Upon a woven blanket
Unravel a mystery
Seven horses are running free

Subtle raindrops sparkle
Like wine from a glass
Poured from the hearts of sincerity
Intertwined on the grass
Shedding the inhibitions of sanctity
Sun illuminating clouds
A candelabra of vanity
Bluebirds lying roses over the grave of conceit
Setting a tableau of harmony
Grasshoppers play violins
The redwing blackbird sings
Strictly for you and me
As seven horses are running free

—Val A. Stanley



Untitled

by Val A. Stanley

SVCC Table Art

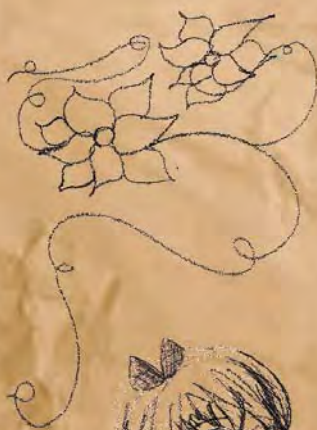
The next two pages of this issue of *The Works* are devoted to selections from a campus-wide art project completed during the spring semester at SVCC.

Blank paper was placed in two high-traffic areas on campus, and anyone was able to use this space to draw or write whatever was on his or her mind.

Included here are just a few of the many anonymous contributions that were received in the ten days that this project was available.

The editors of *The Works* and SVCC's art and humanities faculty would like to thank all artists who participated, and give special congratulations to everyone whose work is included in this edition of our publication.

"She said: She's feeling so much better.
She said: The air tastes so much
sweeter. . . . Since she left me."



When I look at you,
My brain goes all stupid, and
I just want to hug you & hope
you'd hug back.

Screaming cuts the night
Raindrops pounding on the roof
Sleep escapes me now
(JEW
-2010)



He lifts his muzzle
to the bright full moon
to howl his lonely song
the call of the wild
that all too soon
Echoes —
and then is gone



I feel LOST in my nostalgia...
Alone in my morality...
Confused with my purpose...
And regretful of my insecurity...
Mostly, I just sort of feel left behind... Come save me.



Storm
a
Muffin,
Save a
Princess

The Anne Horton Writing Awards

The following pieces are the winners of SVCC's annual writing contest, named for a former chair of the English department and a founding member of the school's faculty. These essays were written in SVCC's English 101 and 103 classes during the 2012-2013 academic year.

Narrative/Descriptive Essay Winner

The Hardest Speech of My Life
by Marilyn Jackson

I am so tired my eyes are burning. I didn't sleep last night, but I would not have been able to sleep even if I had not been trying to write this speech. I see the leader of this event going to turn on the music and that is my cue. Where did I put that paper? Here it is in my pocket. It is so hot in here; I wish I did not have to wear this stupid suit jacket. I better head up to the podium. I hope the back of my outfit is not wrinkled.

Good, I made it without tripping. I better put my paper on the top of the podium so I don't lose it. I won't open it yet because the lack of notes will just make me depressed. I am going to have to wing this speech and I hope I don't blow it.

I glance to my left and there is the man of the hour, my brother, Stephen. He is wearing that crazy yellow suit he loves so much. Did he just smirk at me? It would be just like him to give me that innocent devil grin of his.

There is only standing room left and yet there are so many people that they spill out into the hall. I hope I don't sound like a fool. It is so hot, I feel the sweat dripping down my back. One good thing about the suit jacket is it will hide any armpit sweat stains. Why couldn't I just think of something to write last night? Where is my mom? There she is looking just as tired as me. Her smile looks a little forced and she looks stressed out. If I disappoint her I will just die. Oh God, please don't let me let her down. This is so important to her and to everyone else; I know I can't screw this up.

Narrowing my eyes I look my brother's way. I am so mad at him for putting me in this position that I glare at him. My mom always makes a big deal about what he does. Like when he got a C on that test in school she took him out to eat. I got A's all the time and she never took me out to eat. Oh stop it Marilyn; this is not helping the situation. Mom loves me just as much as she loves him. She was at my Navy boot camp graduation and then again when I graduated from Navy "A" School. Stephen was with my mom for my boot camp graduation. We went out to lunch after graduation was over. Stephen was so proud his sister was in the Navy. He bragged about it to everyone in the restaurant. I remember there was an older gentleman in a grey suit that my brother spoke to for a long time. He told the man about how I just graduated from boot camp and how proud he was to have a sister in the Navy. The man smiled at my brother, then stood up, came over to me, and shook my hand

while congratulating me. I will never forget how my face burned when I found out he was the mayor. My brother can make friends with anyone.

Time is running out fast. I better come up with something to say soon. Why can't they turn on the air-conditioning? It's as hot as a summer day. I can feel sweat beading on my forehead. I am glad Mom gave me some tissues; let me just wipe off the sweat. That's a little better.

I wonder who is here. I see my Aunt Jane standing next to my uncles. Why didn't I answer the phone? I know I shouldn't blame myself; however, I could have just answered it. I was up all night playing a video game, and when I saw my aunt's number on the caller ID I let the call go to voice mail. It was Stephen; he wanted me to go out to breakfast with them. I didn't answer the phone because I didn't want to talk with Jane.

Stop, this is not helping. What are you going to say? You have to come up with something. It feels like a desert in here and my mouth is getting really dry. I wish I had some water to drink. Grandma and Grandpa Jackson are sitting right over there. I bet Grandpa has some mints; I want to walk over and get one from him but I can't. I wish Grandma and Grandpa Westcott could be here. If only I could have talked to Grandma Westcott last night, she would have known what I should say today. We were always with my grandparents when we were younger. Some of my best memories come from the family trips we took together. All of the trips were fun, even if we went to a place that I didn't want to go.

I remember one trip to Canton, OH. We visited the Football Hall of Fame, and after it closed we went to a truck stop diner to get something to eat. My mom and her parents sat in a booth but they let my brother and me sit at the counter. There was a burly truck driver sitting on my left, my brother chatting about the Football Hall of Fame on my right, and next to him another trucker. My little brother was an annoying ten years of age and had so much fun that day he wouldn't stop talking about what he saw. A waitress with a kind face came over to take our orders. I ordered a pizza burger, well done. She asked my brother what he wanted and of course he had to copy me and get a pizza burger. Then she asked my brother, "How do you want that burger, handsome?" He looked up at her with his big innocent blue eyes and sincerely said, "Cooked." The trucker to my left spit a fine spray of liquid all over the counter. The waitress's face turned from kind to looking like she was constipated as she tried not to laugh. My mom and grandparents were just staring with their mouths wide open. The trucker to my brother's right made a sensible comment, "That's the best way to get it, kid." My brother couldn't figure out why we were all laughing.

I come back to reality with a deep ache in my heart and a smile on my face. The music is over now, but I am calm because I know what I am going to say. I reach over, unfold my paper and look down at the words that I wrote just hours before, then I grin to myself again. These people are in for a surprise, but it will be good for them. My brother will love it because this is how he would want a speech about him to be. I look up from my paper to see all of the people staring and waiting for me to begin. I take a deep breath and start my speech with what is written on the paper. "How do you sum up twenty-one years of a life that was cut short?"

I gave my brother Stephen's eulogy that day. We were all very sad, but for the few minutes that I spoke everyone remembered what a fun-loving and care-free person my brother had been. Instead of just crying we laughed until the tears came. It was the hardest speech I have ever had to give. It is also the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life, but I am glad I did it. I will never wonder "what if" and I will always remember that I gave him the kind of goodbye he would have loved and given himself.

Narrative/Descriptive Essay ***Honorable Mention***

Procrastination
by Natalyn Rood

The bright, pearly rays of morning filtered in through my bedroom shades, a relentless mockery of my gloomy, closed mind. I sat there silently, staring blankly into the open space before me. Wondering hour after hour; pondering the possibilities and allowing them to churn over and over in the recesses of my mind. The eerie silence and disconcerting stillness of the morning was unsettling. There was no movement save for the methodical clock hands (tick tock, tick tock), which had rotated twice already by my count.

Initially, it had not been too difficult of an assignment. "A narrative should be a piece of cake," my teacher reassured us cheerfully, "You're the one who imagines it. Just transition your inspiration onto paper. Remember: transition the inspiration." But what could I have to say? She obviously overlooked the chance that there would be anything at all worth telling. Could anything worth writing possibly reveal itself to me before the deadline tomorrow? Honestly, I was skeptical. If any inspiration to transition was to exist, would I not have discovered it already? Dismayingly, I recalled the "good old days," the era when we were assigned to a specific prompt and restricted under those guidelines. Now with all the new options, this once-desired freedom was becoming a curse. I wondered if my classmates were having as much trouble after being set free with too much of this artistic freedom. Undoubtedly, the always-imaginative Carlos was crafting a tale about scaling heaven-touching mountains or wild jungle exploration. And Jennifer was probably telling a story about her sister's life as a professional dolphin trainer in Barcelona. As for me, I was not as imaginative and my life was not nearly as interesting. As a consequence, anything I wrote would be equally as boring. This seemed impossibly unfair. I flopped back in my chair and ran a defeated hand through my curly hair with an exasperated sigh. My fingers were cramped from the eternity of holding the pen so tight and my legs begged to be stretched. I unclenched my hands, extended my legs, and closed my eyes, savoring the moments of calm tranquility. How could this simple assignment have turned into such physical and mental torture?

I dropped my head into my palms and let out a mournful groan. "What will I do?" I wondered. Every fiber of my being was screaming to just ignore the paper. But I knew I could not. If I decided to simply not turn in anything, it would drop my "A-" in the class to a "B+." In order to save my grade, I had to sacrifice my sanity. I simply had no choice but to write a hopelessly-remarkable paper that would give me a boost. I groaned again.

What wonders could fall from the tip of my pen? I struggled to find anything worthy to grace the still-blank page. There was potential, of course, just inaccessibly beyond my mind's grasp. I struggled to think of any original ideas. Maybe I could write about a ferocious adventure. Images of untamed adventures sprang to mind, tales a gypsy caravan traveling across sandy Saharan dunes, perhaps, or wild adventures on dogsled across an icily treacherous Arctic shelf. Or perhaps a different route would suffice as well. Maybe a tale of forbidden love, one of courtly admiration between lovers of 17th century England would appear on the pages. I began to lower my pen to the paper for the thousandth time. But, once again, I defiantly drew it back after deeming my inspiration "not quite right."

Dolefully, I placed my head in my hands again and sighed. Against my will, my eyes slid up the wall to the torturous clock. "Tick tock, tick tock," it replied apathetically to my suffering. Another miserable sigh escaped my lips. Nearly three hours had been wasted. I turned back to my desk, staring hopelessly at the whiteness of the paper. It stared right back, a lonesome blankness that only a writer could recognize. "It resembles my mind," I thought wryly to myself, "blank, empty, disappointed, and alone." Suddenly, pity arose for this poor,

poor paper. It desired a companion, words to bind the two together ending all silent suffering of loneliness. A page without words serves no purpose; and words without a page to record them are lost like dust in the wind. Only I could provide this companion to this paper if a revelation would only surrender itself as my captive. Dejectedly, I continued my staring contest with the innocent paper and tried to think of anything, anything at all, to initiate my essay.

Then, a sudden thought occurred to me, a thought good enough to write about. The inspiration had finally arrived. It was three hours late, but I was too giddy with happiness to care at the moment. I nearly laughed out loud; it had been all too obvious all along. With a smile and without another thought, I placed my pen to paper and began to write.

Expository Essay Winner

Embracing the Digital Age
by Justin King

The world is on the brink of a new age. Information, speed, and connectivity have become central parts of everything we do, and technology is now one of the most abundant resources available. The Internet is the backbone for a brand-new generation of thinkers. Not since the printing press has one invention changed our lives as dramatically as the Internet. It took books hundreds of years to rewire the human brain; the Internet has done so in just a few decades. Already, there is a generation of adults who have spent their entire lives surrounded by technologies that not so long ago people considered to be science fiction. This generation will never know what it's like to live without the Internet and a number of other technologies we now take for granted. They use these technologies with such proficiency and creativity that it's like the machines are plugged right into their brains, which, in a sense, they are. These advancing technologies have changed the way young people think and learn, and society as a whole must change right along with them. This new generation, known as the net-generation or the digital natives, will lead a brand-new world where information is king and the Internet is their atlas, but they need to be guided by the older generation so that, in this new digitalized age, humanity remains intact.

When technologists began conceiving original design ideas for the World Wide Web, they did not realize those initial decisions would go on to have such inherent effects on our minds. The web, according to computer scientist Jaron Lanier, had a number of different alternatives in the way it could have been designed, but still the web is mostly the same today as it was in its infancy. The initiators of the web were building something from the ground up and could not foresee how rapidly it would expand and become popular, especially within the public sectors. Lanier sees himself and other technologists as creators of sensory extensions. We can communicate with people all around the world through our cell-phones and web cams. We can quest for any sorts of information we'd like using search engines, store vast amounts of data on devices no bigger than our thumbs, and retrieve it all in a moment's notice. These extensions alter the way we see, not just ourselves, but the world around us as well. These technological engineers are directly influencing our cerebral configurations (5-6). This gives technologists a lot of responsibility. They have to design hardware and software, at the demand of society, in a way that won't negatively alter the human race, and it must be done without the foreknowledge of how humans will be affected by its constant use. By the time effects are realized it is too late to change anything; these new technologies become intricate parts of our lives too quickly. Lanier sums it up well when he states in his book *You Are Not a Gadget*, "The consequences of tiny, initially inconsequential decisions often are amplified to become defining, unchangeable rules of our lives" (8-9).

When you combine all of this rapid advancement in digital technology with impressionable adolescent minds, it should be no surprise that these minds are turning out different from those of previous generations. Technological expansion has become just another part of growing up, and this new age wouldn't know how to function in a world where these technologies did not exist. In an excerpt from their book *iBrain*, Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan liken the adolescent mind to a new computer. As a young mind develops, neural pathways are laid down to quickly retrieve data. The more these pathways are used, the quicker they become, much like the shortcuts a computer develops to more rapidly access information from memory. This opens a child up to a myriad of neural connections and an ever-changeable brain plasticity (82-83). Imagine a young, susceptible brain being programmed by the vast amount of information technology that has been produced within the last twenty years or so. Everything is faster and more interactive. Young people, surrounded by this

need to make everything instantaneous and cooperative, now have brains that function the same way. This shouldn't be seen as an undesirable effect of digitalization, though. It is, in fact, necessary, because we cannot hope to keep up with the computers we've created to make our lives easier unless we think in a similar manner. These new minds are still relatively unexplored and should be handled delicately, like any other brain, or hard drive.

It is clear that the ways we think and use other cognitive skills have changed over the last few decades, but what exactly has been altered? What is it about the Internet that has caused these changes? According to author Nicholas Carr, research done by a variety of psychologists, neurobiologists, and educators has shown conclusive evidence that when we are using the Internet our minds are functioning in different ways from how they function when performing offline cognitive tasks, such as reading a book. Being online promotes the skimming of text rather than in-depth, thoughtful reading. We hurry from one web page to the next, becoming more easily distracted due to the multitude of hyperlinks. The actual physical brain pathways are being altered by the intense, repetitive sensory stimulations created by the Internet. Our senses of sight, hearing, and touch are all being used concurrently to create a unique, often addicting, experience (115-16). No other medium is capable of creating an experience that seamlessly unifies the senses as the web does. It isn't hard to see how some people can spend so much frivolous time online. In his book *The Shallows*, Carr relates the views and comments of professor of psychiatry Gary Small. Small concludes, from his research into the neurological and psychological impacts of digital media, that the daily usage of such media "stimulates brain cell alteration and neurotransmitter release, gradually strengthening new neural pathways in our brains while weakening old ones" (qtd. in Carr 120). There is, of course, no going back now; we can only move forward. Brains have already been rewired, and technological advancement is only becoming more prevalent in society. Some abilities may be lost or change in their significance to us, but others will be gained in their absence. We should not fear these new developments but embrace them. If history has shown us anything, it's that change is inevitable and trying to stand in its way will only get you run over by it.

One of the biggest problems for the digital natives pertains to their education. According to Mark Prensky, an education and learning specialist, new minds aren't learning in the ways that they should be, because they are being taught by digital immigrants. Prensky defines the digital immigrants as those born before the Internet became immensely popular but who still feel comfortable using and integrating new technologies into their lives. These digital immigrants will always have a "foot in the past." It's mostly the digital immigrants who are in charge of teaching the digital natives, but the digital natives' minds aren't in tune with antiquated pedagogies. Rewired brains are more familiar with multitasking and information that's received rapidly. They thrive on the random access created by hyperlinks and on viewing animations or graphics along with, sometimes even before, text. Some digital immigrants, however, can't understand or don't appreciate these skills. Teachers among them have a hard time realizing that the ways of learning have changed drastically. These teachers must understand that many of the old methods of teaching no longer apply to the digital immigrants (4-6). This is like trying to install the same old software into brand-new hardware that isn't backwards compatible. It will never download or run your instructions. The software must be updated and re-designed to comply with hardware specifications or else the potential of the new system is being wasted and its processing capabilities will never truly be known.

Finding new ways to teach is not a simple undertaking, especially when it involves trying to educate students whose brains are continuing to evolve in new, unpredictable ways. This doesn't mean that technology should dominate in the classroom, however. Although it may be tempting to endorse a completely digitalized learning environment, professors of Law John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, authors of the book *Born Digital*, think this is a bad idea. Using technology in the classroom won't make a difference if it's only there because it's the modish thing to do. Students in today's generation may think that it's fun to read and write

blogs, but this doesn't necessarily mean that blogging would carry over as a useful learning tool for teachers. Learning tools should help teachers guide their students through the learning process, not be a means to an end. School teachers and administrators need to find the right balance between completely avoiding the integration of technology in some classrooms and promoting it in others (246-47). It may be easy to see which side some school subjects should fall on, but others might not be so cut and dry. Parents, teachers, and principals should work together to find ways they think will help students learn within their school district, but they must also keep in mind the students who are unfamiliar with or shy away from digital technology. According to Palfrey and Urs, many students are being left behind their peers because they cannot effectively navigate in the digital world we now live in. Simply having access to technology isn't enough to bridge this "digital divide," though. Digitally inept students should be encouraged to participate in computer and online activities. Both the digital natives and their computer illiterate counterparts could benefit from using technology in a variety of ways that could include: creating different kinds of art works, supporting group learning activities, providing learning-based gaming experiences, interacting with other cultures, and having the ability to leave and reply to comments pertaining to their learning experiences (247-49). The last item is something most digital natives already do throughout their daily lives. Integrating this into the classroom would be easy and fun for students, and, at the same time, it would provide teachers with the feedback necessary for them to modify their curriculum to meet students' needs.

An uncanny intuitiveness for all things digital allows for an overwhelming amount of creativity amongst the digital natives. They might not all be making stunning masterworks of art, but they are using all of the resources available to them through their computers to make new creations and find new ways to create. In *Born Digital*, Palfrey and Gasser praise these innovators for their abilities to manipulate and amalgamate different forms of media files (116), creating complex, unique characters and entire virtual worlds in Massively Multiplayer Online Games, or MMOGs, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* (120-21), and playing a significant role in perhaps the most collaborative construction of this generation, *Wikipedia* (118). The way the world views the music and gaming industries, not to mention encyclopedias, has forever been altered over the last decade, and it is largely due to the creativeness of the digital natives. Most of them aren't creating and sharing their works for money or fame. They are simply doing what youths have done since time unmemorable, expressing themselves. The need to convey one's opinions and beliefs is far from being a new concept. The ways they are being expressed, however, are very new, and, as stated by Palfrey and Gasser, "the impact on cultures and on how they are understood will be vast" (125).

There are some who worry that the pervasiveness of text and instant messaging in our lives is destroying the English language, but professor of linguistics Naomi Baron doesn't believe this is so. The evolution of language is only natural, and studies of college students have shown only slight modifications in sentence mechanics. While the use of hyphens and apostrophes is lessening, all of the acronyms spawned by the web over the years have not entered into our speech habits as much as some might think. The most common ones, like "brb" and "lol," creep up in conversations, but it's not like they are the first to do so. Acronyms such as ASAP and RSVP have been used for some time without anyone finding it detrimental to the language. Students are, however, becoming less proficient in spelling due to software tools like spell-check and autocorrect (42-43). If you look over the history of the English language you will find that it wasn't always uncommon for a word to change or have multiple spellings, so it doesn't necessarily have to be something undesirable now. "The Internet," writes linguistics expert David Crystal, "deserves great credit for granting us a mode of communication more dynamic than traditional writing and more permanent than traditional speech." Elements from multiple forms of expression are being combined to form new ways of communication ("Oh What A Tangled Web" 33). Baron, however, is more concerned with the changes in attitudes toward language itself. Students no longer

seem to care about grammar and spelling, or, more specifically, why these rules are important. While Baron believes this attitude started before the personal computer became a household staple, computer-based media has only made it more wide-spread (44). Teachers of the net-generation need to help their students maintain the importance of grammatical rules even as the rules themselves are changing.

There are also critics who interpret new forms of communication, such as text messaging and websites like *Twitter* and *Facebook*, as hindrances to the development of linguistic skills and causes of anti-social behavior. The first criticism is unfair to the new generation since, as author and online editor for O'Reilly Media Kurt Cagle points out, every generation to precede the net-generation has developed its own form of slang. The only difference now is that this generation has a new and advanced form of communication to accompany their new vernacular. They don't have to be in the same vicinity to communicate with each other anymore, allowing them to develop relationships based more on common interests and beliefs rather than proximity (517). Those who make the claim that social networking is fostering anti-social conduct just aren't looking close enough. There are a vast number of interest groups found on social networking sites, and they are only serving to bring like minds closer together. Cagle writes that the only gap in communications is between those who are online and those that aren't. He believes that social media is actually strengthening relational bonds. In a society where the rates of divorce, job-relocation, and the closing of schools are high, children are being forced to move away from their friends and build new relationships. This is no easy task for a child. Social networking makes it possible to stay in contact with their friends after they move, making them feel less alienated (518). Grown-ups and young adults can benefit from social networking just as much as the young do. They are able to keep in touch with family and friends no matter where they may be geographically. College students can still rely of the support of their parents in the midst of a new living environment and surviving on their own for the first time in their lives. The entire landscape of socialization is changing right before our very eyes, perhaps for the first time ever. It's only natural that some may be averse or even frightened by these changes, but they must also realize that these changes are bringing people closer together on a global scale.

There can be no denying that we are on the cusp of a new age. Every day we develop new, more powerful technology that enhances our lives and pushes society towards a united global community. The human species has survived through much technological advancement but none as great as the current age. A new generation was born along with the Internet. These digital natives could develop the knowledge, proficiency, innovation, and creativity to use technology for the greater good of society. They need a solid foundation of guidance and education to aid them in developing this new world though. Never has it been so imperative that we collectively embrace change. Trying to impede such change is not only impossible; it could cause unalterable harm to those who are to be the future leaders of this planet. The older generations must be prepared to challenge the minds of the new generation, even as they challenge their predecessors in return. The digital age is here, and the digital natives are standing in line, ready to make a difference.

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Expository Essay Honorable Mention

How the Free Flow of Money is Destroying our Political System
by Geoffrey Lemay

Money and power have been inextricably linked throughout history. The cynical version of the golden rule “He who has the gold makes the rules” illustrates this idea perfectly. Simply put, money equals power. Therefore, giving money to those who desire to be in power is a great way of gaining influence in Washington. Lobbyists have been around for years and have used this knowledge to make real change in Washington. In fact, some bills presented before Congress are actually written by lobbyists that support the legislation, then submitted and endorsed by a congressman. Robert Reich, in an article in *The Baltimore Sun*, summed this idea up well by writing, “Millionaires and billionaires on Wall Street and in executive suites aren’t contributing all this money out of sheer love of country. Their political spending is analogous to their other investments. Mostly they want low tax rates and friendly regulations” (Reich). Put simply, corporations are spending money to gain political influence to get changes to taxes and regulations that will make themselves more profitable. So when it comes down to it, companies are spending money to make money, as they would with any other business investment. While this may be a sound business strategy, what impact will these actions have on our democracy?

The primary reason those desiring to hold elected positions need so much money is to finance their political campaigns. Basically, it takes a lot of money to get elected in this country. For that reason, steps have been taken in recent U.S. history to reduce political corruption through campaign finance reform. In an article on *Slate.com* written on January 21, 2010, Richard Hasen wrote about the *Citizens United v. FEC* ruling that day. “the court struck down decades-old limits on corporate and union spending in elections (including judicial elections) and opened up our political system to a money free-for-all” (Hasen). Due to the corruption that money in politics is capable of causing, it is important to regulate and reform the permissible ways political campaigns can be financed in this country. A good first step would be to overturn the *Citizens United v. FEC* decision.

David Bossie and Theodore Olson, in an article for the *Washington Post*, claim the *Citizens United* decision was a step in the right direction. They insist, “it struck down an oppressive thicket of statutes restricting - and even criminalizing - their political free speech” (Bossie and Olson). They further assert that the many criticisms and attacks being hurled against the Supreme Court for their decision in *Citizens United* are exaggerated or unfounded (Bossie and Olson). The Supreme Court’s recent decision and the opinions of those that support the decision are closely linked to two ideas that had been previously decided by the Supreme Court. These two concepts are that money equals speech and that corporations are people.

Despite the arguments of those claiming the recent *Citizens United* decision protected our First Amendment rights, it is tough not to not make a connection between money and corruption in regards to politics. In an article for *The New York Times*, David Kirkpatrick quoted Mark Hanna, a 19th century republican political strategist, as saying, “There are two things that are important in politics. ... The first thing is money, and I can’t remember what the second one is” (qtd. in Kirkpatrick). This simple quote goes a long way in explaining what’s important in politics, the almighty dollar. He who has the most money often wins. This notion is about to be proven true again by the outcome of the current Republican Presidential Nomination. According to information on *opensecrets.org* about current Super PACs, who they support, and how much money they have, Mitt Romney appears to have at least double the monetary support of any other Republican candidate in the race. Romney’s over forty-three million in Super PAC support far outweighs Gingrich’s twenty million as of March 22, 2012 (“Super PACs”). The fact that both political strategists and the data point to the very importance of money in politics helps illustrate how important the issue of

campaign finance reform really is. Therefore, supporters of the *Citizens United* decision trying to downplay its significant and far-reaching role in our democracy are being disingenuous to say the least. With the link between money and political power being so clear, the impact of removing years of regulation involving campaign finance cannot be understated.

Having established the importance of the impact of the *Citizens United* ruling, I would like to address the ideas that are promoted within the decision. Jeffrey Kaplan, in an article on *Common Dreams.org*, wrote a scathing review of the ACLU for defending the idea that money equals speech. He explained that the notion of money and speech being the same thing was based on the Supreme Court ruling *Buckley v. Valeo*. He went on to reveal the flaw in this reasoning by saying, “The ACLU seems utterly oblivious to the fact that there is a profound difference between who we are (human beings with an inalienable right to self-expression) and what we may possess (money or other forms of property). Democracy is simply not sustainable in any society that confuses the second with the first” (Kaplan).

Even if we accept the idea that money is speech, it’s an incredibly unfair idea. To make such a claim would give a larger voice to rich individuals and companies than to average citizens. The recent Occupy Wall Street movement has made it very clear that 99% of Americans do not fall in this category. Yet we are willing to give 1% of the people in our nation, and highly profitable corporations, more speech, and thus more political influence, than the average citizen. Kaplan summed this idea up by stating, “Democracy is at risk when we permit vast amounts of money accumulated through these privileges to buy power over the political process itself” (Kaplan). The most troubling fact about Kaplan’s remarks is that he made them in 2006. He was referring to special privileges or loopholes that allowed corporations to give money toward political campaigns. How much worse is it now that the *Citizens United* decision allows both people and corporations to give without restriction by donating to Super PACs? Reich answered this question well by asserting, “The Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision last year ended all limits on political spending. Now millions of dollars are being funneled to politicians without a trace. ... Yet all this money is drowning out the voices of average Americans” (Reich). The evidence points out that the way campaigns are financed following the *Citizens United* ruling is a completely anti-democratic way of electing people to represent the masses.

One example of one person having such a large voice in a political campaign was illustrated in a *New York Times* article on January 9, 2012. In that article Nicholas Confessore and Eric Lipton wrote about Sheldon Adelson, a billionaire friend of Newt Gingrich, donating five million dollars to the Winning Our Future Super PAC that supports Gingrich. The authors assert that before that donation, Gingrich’s presidential campaign was desperately searching for donors to finance the on-going campaign (Confessore and Lipton). According to the March 22, 2012, data from *Open Secrets.org*, the total money raised by the Winning Our Future Super PAC is slightly under nineteen million dollars (“Super PACs”). This means that one check written by a billionaire accounted for nearly twenty-five percent of Newt Gingrich’s Super PAC money. Of course, that’s assuming he wrote only the one check, since these donations do not have to be disclosed. Apparently, we now live in a world where being friends with one or two rich people may be all it takes to run for the highest office in the land. It seems our country and political process is for sale. This may be great for the rich, but what chance of an equal political voice does the average American have?

Another key doctrine further supported by the *Citizens United* decision is that corporations are people. Of course my first thought on this idea is literal. I’ve never seen a company eat, drink, breathe, go to jail, vote, or run for political office. Obviously corporations are made up of people, but to grant the personhood of corporations seems questionable at best. Reich made an acute observation. “According to the Supreme Court, money is now speech, and corporations are now people. Yet when real people without money assemble to express their dissatisfaction with the political consequences of this, they’re treated as public nuisances – clubbed, pepper-sprayed, thrown out of public parks and evicted from public spaces” (Reich). The idea that money is speech is counterintuitive enough, but now speech

isn't speech. Why would the average person's right to assemble be valued less than a corporation's right to spend money freely in the political process?

In addition to these innately human rights being given to corporations, there seem to be few to no consequences when corporations infringe on the human rights of actual humans. According to an article written by Ian Millhiser on *Think Progress.org* in February of this year, a case may soon be argued in the Supreme Court that involves a company that allegedly aided "the Nigerian government to torture, execute and detain members of an ethnic group" (Millhiser). Millhiser went on to explain the questions Justice Kennedy of the Supreme Court asked about this case and how Kennedy's questions reveal his likelihood to absolve the company in question of all responsibility. He illuminates further that Kennedy was the Supreme Court justice that authored the *Citizens United* decision, "which declared that corporations have the exact same rights as actual human beings for purposes of spending money to influence elections. Yet, when a corporation engages in mass atrocities, they are suddenly entitled to legal immunities far beyond those available to people" (Millhiser). At this point I wonder if I could change myself into a corporation. It seems like I would have all the rights of a person with almost none of the legal or human responsibility.

Basically, the new way of financing political campaigns that was legalized by the Supreme Court in 2010 is completely unfair. Kaplan, while referring to the Supreme Court case that deemed money equal to speech, wrote, "critics think this decision has hamstrung serious attempts to keep wealth from being a dominant factor in elections" (Kaplan). In Hasen's article, only four years later, while referring to the *Citizens United* decision, he declared, "Should the American people, through Congress, be able to decide that the vast economic inequality that comes with our wonderful capitalist system should not translate into vast political inequality? Justice Kennedy seems to believe that this would lead to the imminent decline of our democracy" (Hasen). First the Supreme Court stacked the deck against the average American being able to have any say in the political process due to not having enough money. Then the Supreme Court made it impossible for Congress to reform this incredibly unfair way of doing things. So now the system is unfair and it's illegal to try to make it fair. How Democratic!

In this culture, where those politicians who have the most money often gain political office, it is important that special interest groups are not able to place undue influence on our political system. One can easily imagine how if a few billionaires or highly profitable companies, like the oil industry for example, gave an obscene amount of money to one political candidate, it would be likely for that candidate to vote with the oil industry's best interest in mind. If a congressman didn't legislate with his contributors in mind, he would not likely get the same types of contributions again. Of course this decrease in campaign funds is unacceptable, since the primary objective of many politicians is to get elected or re-elected, and that takes money.

Sadly, we don't have to imagine this scenario at all since it's already happened and will continue to unless changes are made. In Kaplan's 2006 article he pointed out that "as of 2003 the top one percent of households in the United States owned 57.5 percent of corporate wealth...During the same time, the wealthy and their allies in Congress repeatedly cut taxes for themselves, while most budget cuts targeted the poor" (Kaplan). Kaplan went on to explain the loopholes and privileges that had to be used for corporations to then pour their money into the political process (Kaplan). Now, with the help of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling, even the illusion of fairness has been removed.

Reich, in his November 2011 article, wrote, "Why else do you suppose tax rates on the super-rich are now lower than they've been in three decades, and why – even though the long-term budget deficit is horrendous – those rates aren't rising? Why else do the 400 richest Americans (whose wealth is larger than the combined wealth of

the bottom 150 million Americans) now pay an average tax rate of only 17 percent?" (Reich). Reich also gave other examples of the current unfairness in the political process caused by people and companies buying political influence. He references the idea that the people in charge of Wall Street [who caused the economic collapse of 2009] have been hired in key political positions and are writing the rules on banking. Then they leave Washington to go make more money based on the laws they put in place. Reich further explained how this has been going on for years. He also went on to expose the excessive tax breaks and government subsidies, in the billions of dollars range, being received by some of the most profitable industries in America (Reich). Basically, the richest people and companies in America give liberally into the political system. Then, they receive excessively beneficial laws and tax dollars from the government, and the cycle repeats endlessly.

Thank goodness for a Supreme Court, which was willing to put their collective foot down and say we could not possibly stand in the way of democracy by allowing money in the political process to be regulated any longer.

In a day when the United States is trying to export democracy to the Middle East, sometimes by force, there seems to be no urgency about ensuring our own democracy is fair and functioning properly. Our country claims to be a great bastion of democracy while encouraging corruption at every level of the political process. Despite the obvious corruption in our system before the *Citizens United* decision, the greatest court in the land decided to remove some of the few restrictions we had around campaign finance reform. At a time when we needed to be more vigilant than ever to ensure the fairness of our democratic system remained intact, the Supreme Court ruled in a way that gave more power, money, and influence to those who already have almost all of the power, money, and influence.

Reich summed up the injustice well when he wrote, "The first amendment is being stood on its head. Money speaks, and an unlimited amount of it can now be spent bribing and cajoling politicians. Yet peacefully assembling is viewed as a public nuisance and removed by force" (Reich). Our government is making rules that benefit the few at the expense of the many. Simultaneously, they are infringing on our rights to do anything about it. When does the madness stop? How far away from a fair democratic system do we have to go before we realize we're destroying the principles our nation was founded on? When will we take down the "For Sale" sign that is currently being displayed for American Democracy? When will we put our country back into the hands of its common citizens?

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