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THIS METAMORPHOSIS SUFFOCATES
Sean Morrell

You built it – it came from you.
Came from unthinking lifetimes
Spent crunching. Absorbing.

Synthesizing.

So why the surprise? The panic?
You took it in – foreign –
And you brought it out,
Wet and papery,
But yourself. A shield against the world.

And inside
You were safe. Soft.

And, in Dark,
Your bastion became a tomb.

Now it’s overcoming you
The outside then inside become outside
Is so tight it’s becoming inside again.

Your last thought
As skin snaps before the pain and panic:

“Am I the Butterfly, or the Moth?”
TO DREAM
Jynecca Cronk

She was the only one to dream, but no one knew

The scientists argued that sleeping was important,
but it’s the dreams that matter.

The religious minds of the world gathered,
preached to their sheep it was the rapture.

She was the only one to dream, but no one knew

Come morning all would feel disconnected,
still stuck in the one-dimensional.
Unsure of the world and people around them,
waking was a chore they never relish.

She was the only one in control
who could see with absolute clarity.
But she could feel gravity losing its potency,
alone she couldn’t keep herself grounded.

She was the master of dreams and no one knew
SCAFFOLDING
Carolyn Andrew

Carpet of cream colored shag hugging on a mixture of concrete and wood that led to two sections of life. Up the stairs was a world where the past could live forever. Stepping into these rooms was a vortex to the thirties and onward. Those rooms were like a memory that everyone could live in. Down the stairs, was a den, a kitchen, two dining rooms, and a living room. Every wall was a shrine to a life well lived. Frames with children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Throughout the air of the whole house contained love, hate, and every other feeling that fall amongst a family, but all we remember are the things that made us who we are. Up the stairs and down.

I’ve traveled up and down those cream colored stairs more than a thousand times, but I never knew that that day would be one of my last trips. Something so lifeless and man-made can be as much a part of our hearts as any other cherished relationship. These stairs led to some of my most treasured memories. Three years of age, in the den with my Gran on the cream colored carpet, playing with the same blocks my mother and her siblings had. I walked up the steps and looked down, thinking nothing of it because I thought it would always be there for me. Those are the stairs I slid down on my Mickey Mouse air mattress while my Pop cheered me on, as he laughed and my Gran nearly fainted in fear. Now my Gran was in a retirement home with dementia and my Pop had long passed. The carpets were no longer clean and cream colored, but stained by the children and pets of my cousins, who had moved in when my Gran started showing the signs of dementia. I never realized just how parallel this house and my Gran were. My mother, father, cousin, uncle, and myself were all at the house to take
what we wanted before the scavenger relatives came in. My Gran wasn’t gone yet, but there were people in the family who would take it as fast as they could. I judged them at the time, but I didn’t deserve any of my Gran and Pop’s belongings; I wasn’t a good enough grandchild. I didn’t appreciate them the way they deserved. In the past, I came and went as I pleased, not appreciative until it was too late. It was like looking for flowers in the snow.

I continued up the stairs into my Gran and Pop’s laundry room, unloading their collectable plates with my cousin; taking only the ones my mother would like. I walked into my aunt’s old room and looked in awe at the abandoned bedroom that I used to watch Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and Shirley Temple with my Pop. Black and white faces plastered against a never ending scene. I’ll always remember the look on his face as we sat there. Eyes of an innocent, but a face of an eighty-year-old man. I couldn’t think about it anymore, so I walked to the living room where my mom and her brother were packing some of my aunt’s Special Olympics awards. My father was packing some patio furniture into his truck. He took a different car and my mother and I would see my Gran that day. I was pessimistic and I’m still not sure if it was a good thing I saw her that day, but I did. My uncle and his son had packed up what they wanted and left. My father soon followed. This left my mother and me. We left the den and entered the white-walled garage. Not much happened in the garage, but after we had left and my Gran said the last words she said to me, those walls were all I could think of. “Oh, I’m in so much pain.” Her eyes white in confusion and fear and I still wish I could have helped her.

We came back that same day, walking up and down the stairs and looking at the past of a man and woman. I was looking in the room that connected to the laundry room, up the stairs, when my mother called to me from
my Gran and Pop’s old room, which was filled with books, planes, pictures, and other treasures of theirs. When I first walked in my mom gestured to the closet saying, “Look at it, I can’t believe she kept it all these years.” It was my Grans wedding dress. Sixty years ago was when this dress was worn, but looking at it, you would think it was new. That’s what still makes me think that maybe the thread of life could be more fragile than fabric itself. Looking around the room I could see the lonely walls staring at a past they used to belong to and hoped they would belong there again. After that, my mother packed up the dress and we went back home.

The next week was my first week as a senior in high school. I wasn’t on cloud nine, but I wasn’t unhappy either. My Gran was doing as okay as she could and I had begun to settle into my life again. I thought everything would be fine. When I got home that Thursday my mom and dad told me that my Gran had passed. I was numb. Swirls of thought and memory danced around my head like an awful carousel. It wasn’t that I didn’t expect it. It was that like every other human being I didn’t want to believe in the mortality of the people I loved. I sat on the couch as my mind wandered down the stairs of the den in my Gran’s house, locking myself away to the memories of laughter and wooden blocks. There I was at three building, but what was I building? It would be too simple to say that I built a pyramid. It was more than that, it was the pyramid of stairs that my Gran taught me to build. Stairs. I didn’t realize it thinking back, but in that house there were so many up and downs that my Gran and Pop would always pull me out of with the simplest activities. Loss isn’t easy to deal with, but as I sat lost in a mixture of numbness and memory, I couldn’t help but feel guilty.

A week or so passed and it was time for her funeral. I gave a speech, but the day before when we were
at her memorial I saw her, what we attached her memories to. What we all remembered was gone. A disposition of a flawed soul. We all mourned her, but when the funeral was over. It was as if life could go on and the family took no time picking the house clean. Their distance made it seem as if it was business to them. I wonder if some of my family members realized just how detached they were. I wonder if I will ever realize my own aloofness. When my mother and I went there next, most of her siblings were there cleaning the house from head to toe. Not one of them stopped and stared at what was once their home. Scrubbing the carpets and floors hoping the emotional stains would come up and float away in the atmosphere.

All but my mother were grabbing random belongings and tossing them in the trash. As I watched each part of my Gran and Pop’s past slip away, my body was ready to break, but I couldn’t because it was even harder for my mom. I went up the stairs and vacuumed every room upstairs. The room with the storage closet was first. I spent many days looking out those windows floating away into the distant clouds. The pink room was exactly what it looked like, a pink dawn that wrapped you with its warmth. Lastly, I vacuumed my Gran and Pop’s room. What once was the heart and soul of a home was now empty. It echoed the sounds of my Pop’s laughter and childish smile.

When we had finished the house I walked down the stairs and took in what was left of the house. My legs brought me to the wall that led to the backyard. The measurement wall had three generations of families life charted on it, but what would it be after we left and it was painted over? Someone else’s clean slate and the beginning of a home that would never contain the same lives and memories. Would they ever appreciate their adoption of someone else’s family member? Probably not, but it would become part of their family someday and it was better than
the house being alone. Despite the positive aspect of this, the loss of it fell heavy on me. I ran outside and clenched the recycled brick as if to say a sorrowful goodbye. I would never see it again, at least not as my Gran’s house. I embraced the house for what it really was to me: family. When I was done and every family member was ready to leave, I was the one to shut door and sever my ties physically. I swear as the door shut behind me, I could hear my Gran’s wind chimes that she would place on the door that complemented her falsetto as she said, “Hello Darling”, but it left with me and clung to my very being. I may have thought it, but this wasn’t the end, not by far.
I saw her fly backwards – forwards
a blur of Emerald colors
a heart that beats
ten times a second.
Seeking out nectar
she must visit
a thousand flowers a day
simply to exist.

The names have the colors
of an artist’s palette...from
Violet capped wood nymphs
and Purple crowned fairies
to Red tailed comets
and Fiery tailed awl bills
each with a wild heart
the size of a fingernail.

Alas, nothing lives forever
but two years – passes too soon.
On a cold day, many
will not last – the five hundred miles
they will travel, but
no rest for her – for each day
is closer to death
than life.
I WAS
Michael Montoya

I was a premature baby

just another soul who could not wait

to come into this rocky sphere

and write colored words upon blank pages

that were once, yet will be again

written on white ...sandy beaches

in another universe

by another who waited in line
“I don’t ever want to go back to believing life is meaningless. I know there are biochemical causes for forms of depression, but I wish people who struggle against dark thoughts would risk their hopes on living a good life...I think they’d be surprised at how soon their sad thoughts would dissipate, if only for no other reason than they didn’t have time to think them anymore. There would be too much to do, too many scenes to write.”

—from A Million Miles in a Thousand Years

by Donald Miller

August 2013.

“I’m not worried about you...”

Silence.

“I’m not worried about you. And I don’t want you to take this the wrong way. I’m not worried about you, because I know you’re going to be okay.”

I turn to Lanae. She sits in the passenger seat of my car. We are headed to a friend’s house in Beulah, Colorado, about 40 minutes away from where I live in Pueblo West. She is smiling at me. Not in a cynical way. Her smile shines love and compassion. I know she believes in the words she is saying. Her confidence in those words makes me want to believe them too. Amidst the storm raging in me, I feel a small warmth of sun.

“Thanks, Nae.”

When I turn away from her, the clouds form back together, and the storm in me gets wilder. As the words sank into my chest, I knew she was wrong. Or maybe I just wanted to prove her wrong. I wasn’t being totally truthful to her. I kept telling her how I had this hope. I looked into my
best friend’s eyes and I knew I had to tell her. I was beyond messed up. I didn’t deserve her to tell me, I was going to be okay.

“I’ve thought about killing myself. I think about it a lot.”

Her smile fades. She doesn’t say anything, but looks away from me. If I’m honest I feel a slight pinch of victory deep within a very sick side of me. It fades when I look at her again. Her eyes overflowed with the same love and compassion that shone through her smile minutes earlier.

“Kyra. How could you think that would fix anything?”

I have a confession. I am destructive. It’s a side of me that only, truthfully shows, when I’m depressed. I think we are all like that somewhere inside. When we come to pits of our souls and the darkness pours out, we take a bat to everyone that could actually help us in those moments. The more we love them, the farther we try to shut them out. I knew those words would hurt Lanae, I think I wanted them to. But instead of pushing her away, she drew closer to me.

24 July 2013

I sat in a circle surrounded by my family of friends. Not all of them were able to make it to the party. But the closest were there and that was enough for me. My younger brother and sister and cousin were there too. My heart was in a happy state. In my group, it is tradition to play the affirmation game. The affirmation game is for whoever is having the birthday party. The goal is to lift the person up, and tell them all the things they mean to you. This bodes well with our group, because we are a sarcastic bunch.

I was excited to say the least. It doesn’t matter who you are, there is nothing like a little boost to the ego. To get to hear how people truly feel about you. One by one they
all began to express their feelings about me. Most said how I taught them so much about joy, even when it was hard to have it. Others said I inspired them with my intimacy with Jesus. A few even thanked me for never giving up on them when I should have. My cousin Sidney said I was cool, and she loved how welcomed she felt in my family of friends. But instead of these things affirming who I was, they were disproving who I thought I was. I felt fake.

There’s moments that make you question who you are. Break ups. A friendship gone south. But there may be some like mine. Where people look at you. Not only look at you but look into you and see someone you don’t see. They tell you all that you mean, and suddenly it’s like they have the wrong person.

I felt outside of myself. Disconnected. This Kyra my friends saw was not the same person I saw when I looked in the mirror. I never tried to be anything and it became suddenly apparent that I meant a lot, to very beautiful people in my life. The more they went around the circle, the more responsibility I felt attached to who I was. All I wanted to do was fade into the discord of that moment. But I sat laughing and listening to those I loved, and wondered who I really was.

August 2013.

In life, it’s easy to become the victim to ourselves. Our circumstances. Sometimes no matter how awesome we believe we are, or how awesome we believe everything around us is, there is a small seed of insecurity waiting to tear away at our bones. It leaves us empty and discarded. Naked. And that’s when we notice people are looking at us, isn’t it? Or maybe no one even notices, but every pair of eyes that locks with yours reflects all the fears of who you are.
This was my first real depression in years. If I’m honest when I got over my last one, I believed I was cured forever. I mean Jesus saved me right? I believe he is love and love can save us. But the problem is that knowledge doesn’t change brokenness that you never dealt with. I think it gets brought up so we can mend.

This depression was different from my first. I dealt with the same thoughts of worthlessness and pain, but for different reasons. This time, though, I didn’t feel alone. I felt like I was in a sailboat lost at sea, trying to find my way back home. It’s rickety, worn from previous storms, yet secure. The sail with minute wholes that seem to have no effect on its ability to guide. Jesus was in there. He wasn’t yelling. He wasn’t even telling me where to sail. He just let me be me. Yell. Cuss. Cry. Be quiet. He was there sitting in the boat. And I realize now that Lanae was in that boat too. I see Jesus most through her. No one I know loves like her. Has a heart like her.

When I told Lanae I wanted to kill myself, I wanted her to be mad. To yell at me. Tell me she was done with me, simply couldn’t do it anymore. The more the tears rolled down her face, the worse I started to feel. Why wouldn’t she just jump out of my boat already? Just tell me to fix myself and move on? Each tear seemed to secure for her more reason to stay in the boat with me. To brave the storm with me.

“Kyra. How do you think that would fix anything?”

I can’t look at her. Every word she speaks is in heartbreak for me.

“How could that be better for anyone?”

“I don’t know, Nae. Just seems like everyone would be happier without me. Everyone would be better off.”

Still, she doesn’t get mad. It’s like the more times I try to throw her overboard, the more ways she finds to secure her spot in the boat.

“Do you hear yourself? Who would that be better
for? What about me? Do you think I’d be better off?”

I can’t answer that question. At this point, I wish she wasn’t in my car. Her tears had they not been wiped away would of likely flooded the car entirely. I felt awful. Worse than that. Why wouldn’t she give up on me? The only reason she was even in my car was because she was afraid to let me drive alone. Driving alone I would become rather reckless, and she knew with her in the car, I would drive safer. I didn’t care much about my safety, but I cared a heck of a lot about hers.

When we arrived at our friend’s house, we sat in the car for a while. So long, our friend came out wondering why we were still in there. I’m not entirely sure anymore how much of that time was in silence, or in small remarks trying to lighten the mood. Isn’t that what best friends do? When we were about to get out, Lanae looked at me, compassion still even higher in her eyes.

“You okay?
She shows a small smile.
“Yeah, Nae. I’m okay for now.”
My words sting her, but she keeps her smile.
“I love you, Kyra. And I still believe you’re going to be okay.”
“I know Nae. I love you too.”
And there we sat in my boat. Me, Jesus and Lanae. The clouds, darker than ever.
And the waves crashed over and over, drenching us. But they never budged. Lanae was the only warmth of sun I truly felt that day.

1 September 2013.

We all have dreams. Whether they are to fall in love or to save the world, or to make it to tomorrow, they’re all dreams. I believe we thrive on these dreams, even the
unrealistic ones, the ones that make you seem crazy. My dream was to always help someone with my story of how I “overcame” my depression when I was thirteen, but honestly it's hard to tell a story that has no ending. Our stories are ever growing, each season, each friend, each love, each loss. Another chapter. And sometimes the chapters get lengthy. But trust me, each one is perfectly worth it.

Over the course of a summer I coined the phrase “Live Victorious.” No matter what anyone went through, I told them that the fight was won, and even though it sucked they should live in victory. But I never lived through that. I just knew, in me, that was truth. It pumped up a lot of people, but it had no substance in truth. I had never gone through anything that made me have to do this, until this depression.

Since my birthday I was on a steady decline. My boat just drifted father and farther from shore and deeper and deeper in to the storm. I had watched so many things change. My friend Amanda, went off to college, and I never thought it would affect me as much as it did. But by the time she left, I realized there was never enough time for all the adventures we dreamed of. With her, my brother, Nolan, left. We'd been pretty close, it was hard to let that part of me go.

Change takes parts of your heart. Things you heart has latched onto and decided was now a part of it. Just another to keep it beating. Change reminds us that the future is uncertain, and maybe that is one of the humanly common things, that no one ever talks about. We love what we have, but when it's threatened, our heart is threatened.

My boat began to fill with water, the waves had destroyed the walls that kept me safe inside. I was ready to drown. To let the boat be overcome and to let myself sink with it. I felt Nae and Jesus would do fine without me, she had him and I’ve always known his love for her, she’d be
safe be fine. That night, I tried so hard to stay afloat, but I couldn’t do it anymore.

“Nae, I can’t do it anymore. I won’t kill myself, but I’m done with feeling.”

“Listen, I know tonight wasn’t what you wanted, and I know you are hurt. But I still believe that you are going to be okay.”

“I just don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“You can’t give up. Why don’t you just get some sleep and we will talk about it tomorrow?”

“I just don’t see the point anymore. I’m sorry, Nae. I shouldn’t do this to you. You deserve a better friend than me.”

I’ve still never figured out how it happens. The darkness. How one little thing can set you spiraling, but really you find you are already gone. Yet, somehow you are still conscious of the ones you love and how you never want to hurt them.

I’m not really sure what happened that Sunday night. I just remember being at youth group and everything was moving so fast, I couldn’t even recognize the people around me. Numbness was the only escape I saw from this world, that wasn’t my own anymore. Nae was still in the boat, I felt she would drown with me. But no wave could take her out.

“Kyra, you don’t have to be sorry. I wouldn’t be a good friend if I was only here for the good parts and wasn’t there for the bad, when you are there for both good and bad with me. Just please get some sleep. Don’t do anything else tonight.”

I don’t know how she is so caring for broken people. I don’t just see it with me, I see it in the way she cares for everyone. I don’t think I know of a bigger heart. A brighter soul. A person who truly loves even when it hurts.

“Okay. I’ll sleep.”
“Call me again if you need anything. But I’m going to go to bed too. Love you, friend. Night.”
“Love you, too.”

2 September 2013

I lay in the boat. Floating, letting the waves wash over me without wanting to move. I close my eyes and wait for it all to be over. I can hear Jesus and Lanae try to persuade me out. I pay them no mind. I can no longer fight.

School was a blur. I remember seeing the faces of all those around me, hoping they would never have to feel nothingness. But I know all the better than nothingness, comes from a long stringent of heartbreak. And that is inevitable. I didn’t hear my teachers, I took notes without thought. Sang in choir because that’s what you do. I went to home to sleep. Homework felt pointless. It all felt pointless. I saw and heard nothing. A day full of complete darkness.

The waves rocking my boat, violent that they are, became just another thing. I lay. Silent. With only the murmurs of my best friend echoing in my ear.

It’s going to be okay.

3 September 2013

“...Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning. When I was prosperous, I said, “Nothing can stop me now!” Your favor, O Lord, made me as secure as a mountain. Then you turned away from me, and I was shattered. I cried out to you, O Lord. I begged the Lord for mercy, saying, “What will you gain if I die, if I sink into the grave? Can my dust praise you? Can it tell of your faithfulness? (Psalms 30:5-9 NLT)

The waves stopped. The boat settled. How it survived the day before I’ll never know. But when I finally open
my eyes, Jesus is smiling.

I read the Psalm through one more time. It hits me.

“What will you gain if I die, if I sink into the grave? Can my dust praise you? Can it tell of your faithfulness?”

David, the Psalmist, suffered depression and he was not afraid to call out God. Get mad at him. David wrote poems, prayers, whatever you want to call them, that made sense. It was the only thing I read during this period of darkness. I read this Psalm late Tuesday night. David made a strong point. That night I looked at Jesus and I told him I was done with him not talking to me and that it was time Jesus stopped being so freaking quiet in my boat. I was done being who I was.

Okay, Jesus. You know what, you are done not saying anything. This isn’t working. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t be this person anymore. And I can’t quit, so need to speak up. We are now in open conversation.

I swear he laughed. Not in a mean way. His eyes glistened with love.

The sun started to shine and the clouds dissipated. Okay, Kyra. It’s time to go home. Jesus smiles. The boat is tattered, but floats like it’s brand new. I am drenched, but the sun warms my skin. It feels like freedom.

*     *     *

I wrote Lanae a letter that night on Facebook. She reacted a lot like Jesus. She never told me “I told you so.” She was just happy that I knew now, that I was going to be okay. Even though, not every day has been clear skies. I spend most nights caught back up in my thoughts. Some days are rough and I get reckless again. But what I realized through my depression is: I am a victor, not a victim. None of this owns me, or makes me less. And my story matters,
somehow. I find hope in that. Since then I have learned to love my present, the future does not worry me. And my past, well I leave it where it belongs.

The truth is, we all have darkness and light inside us. Some days one shows more than the other. But whatever we walk through can be overcome. We are not victims. We are victors. Your story probably looks different than mine, but whatever chapters you are writing, know they are worth telling. Someone is looking for some hope that there is a chance to make it through. Look into the eyes of the person sitting next to you and know that their story matters. Because sometimes, all it takes is someone believing you’ll be okay one day.
Whispering winds become flagrant howls, as clouds obscure the shining rays of the sun. Apollo darts through the streets cursing the impending squall. A calm utterance is nowhere to be heard.

In the maelstrom is found but one, gazing lost over the masses, Deep in thought she cares not that upon her descends a tempest.

The pounding begins, first gentle then more powerful, upon a weary world, Pouring existence into a vanished soul withered long ago. She reaches out —

delights in what others choose to scorn, unfurls her green locks and feels earth anchor her once again.
Slowly, slowly,
The clock trudges by
On its way to zero.
A naked bulb illuminates
The stark yellow kitchen
Filled with a square table
And a chair.
Grime and rat feces
Overtake the floor
Where the refrigerator once stood.

A delicate strand
Of crimson draws
A line across the left
Wrist of a pale woman;
Its mate is found
To the right and
Up an inch.

Skeletonization signals
The short
Breath of time
Since the point of no return

Recognized only by a black
Number on a white
Tent of paper.

The snap of a photo,
The shuffle of artwork,
Midnight.
ABOUT YOUR MADNESS, MISS DICKINSON...
Heather Quackenbush

_Much Madness is divinest Sense –_
_To a discerning Eye –_
_Much Sense – the starkest Madness –_

– Emily Dickinson, “Much Madness is divinest Sense” – (620)

_Much Madness is divinest Sense_, you say,
mythical girl from unbound rebellion.
You, with truth composed by your words, relay
reality, shame lines of divisions

through your honorable poetic flames.
Imprison our thoughts. Conform our voices.
Shelter sanity from Madness’ aim
by allowing force when it should be choice.

Dearest Emily – you grasp realism
in elusive ways – you pull us away
from falsified materialism,
authoring what it means to be displayed

as unchained from societal sadness –
Brilliant girl, we thank your honest Madness.
GOD’S MYTH
Olivia Foraker

God took special interest in forming her mold
Her eyes He fashioned from the Stars of Pleiades
Her hair from the cobalt of the Heavens

She shines in the coldest of light
   Light of the stars
   Starlight is her companion

Many consider it a distant light
   Cold and remote
   But she walks there

   Night upon night
   She strolls the cosmos
   Her head full of dreams and stars

   She is a creature of myth
   Meant for no man
   God’s Beauty among the stars
At 10:55 a.m. sharp, Satan entered the lobby of the Genesis Talent and Publicity Agency in Los Angeles, California. He casually strolled past waiting clients and approached the reception desk where a buxom brunette was filing her nails. She barely glanced up as he placed his calling card on the black marble counter and cleared his throat. She reached out, slowly grasped the card and puckered her lips as she tried to pronounce the unique name inscribed on it.

“May I help you, Mister…Zee-boob?” she frowned.

“Zee-bub,” he corrected her in very proper English. “The name is B. L. Zeebub, and I have an 11:00 appointment with Mr. Adam Genesis. He should be expecting me.”

“Alright, please have a seat, and I’ll inform him that you’re here.” she sighed as she tossed the card back on the counter.

“Thank you,” he replied politely, retrieving his card and sinking into the seat nearest the desk. He glanced into the enormous mirror that covered the wall behind the reception desk and smiled. He was looking particularly dapper today, dressed in a black pinstriped suit, complete with black wingtip shoes and a black silk tie. His dark hair was short and wispy, giving him an innocent boyish appeal. Beneath thick black lashes, his piercing blue eyes lured unsuspecting people to temptation much like moths to a flame.

“I have it still,” he thought to himself. “Even after ten millennia, I am power and utter perfection.”

As he admired himself in the mirror, he felt the stares of the others in the room being drawn to him. This was always a problem when he appeared in public. His
presence was a distraction and vaguely familiar to everyone he came in contact with. They always wondered where they had met him before. Could they have gone to school together? Maybe they were co-workers or neighbors at one point? He knew the answer, but allowed the speculation to continue since the truth would likely be an unwelcome revelation.

The receptionist interrupted his thoughts and asked him to follow her to Mr. Genesis’ office. As he rose to accompany her, their eyes met for the first time. She was immediately transfixed by his icy stare.

“Blue contacts,” he quickly explained.

“Oh…of course,” she shuddered, barely able to break free from his gaze. As she showed him into the office, their arms brushed unintentionally. He could sense her fascination and her nearly uncontrollable desire to touch him in inappropriate ways. He smiled to himself. There were definitely perks to being the Prince of Darkness.

At 11:00 sharp, Satan entered the office of Adam Genesis, entrepreneur and owner of Genesis Talent and Publicity Agency. The corner office was decorated in crisp black and red leather with chrome accents and offered panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean and downtown Los Angeles.

The assembled team included Joy, a petite textbook blonde wearing a pink business suit. She was there to offer insight as a life coach, basing much of her advice off the metaphysical novel, “The Secret”, which she had eagerly read several times. Also present, was the company wardrobe consultant, Geoff, a flamboyant fashionista with yellow-orange hair that complemented his fluorescent orange Picasso tie. Geoff pronounced his name “Joff” to be unique and felt it made him stand out in a crowd as if he wasn’t conspicuous enough.

Team leader Adam Genesis was an overworked
middle-aged man who dressed informally and sported a shiny bald spot that he rubbed absentmindedly from time to time. They all stood as Mr. Zeebub entered the room. Joy and Geoff greeted him with mouths agape. They had not expected such a darkly familiar man. Both became instantly spellbound, staring rudely and stepping on each other’s feet as they vied for their guest’s attention.

“Sit down, you two,” Mr. Genesis barked. “You’re acting like a couple of kindergartners.”

Joy and Geoff quickly obeyed but were so distracted by Mr. Zeebub’s sparkling smile and crystal blue eyes that they attempted to sit in the same chair which flipped and sent them sprawling to the floor. Genesis was embarrassed and angry.

“I’m so sorry!” he sputtered. “My team is normally much more professional.” He turned and bent to help Geoff to his feet. “What’s gotten into you?”

Geoff shook his head and straightened his tie. “My equilibrium must be off, Adam. I’m sure I’ll be fine.” Turning to address their new client, he asked, “Have we met somewhere before, perhaps the Rainbow Club or maybe the Forum?”

Joy felt compelled to join the conversation at this point. “I think we had drinks at the Flying Toaster, in fact, I’m sure of it. You live in that little penthouse on Wilshire with the zebra couches. I could never forget…”

Zeebub raised his hands to stop the onslaught. He knew both of them intimately, but now was not the time to reminisce.

“I’m very sorry,” he said. “I have never met either of you before. In fact, this is my first time in Los Angeles. I find that I’m often mistaken for someone else. I must have a doppelganger somewhere about.” Joy and Geoff nodded skeptically and they all took their seats. “In any case, I have
an unusual request of you, and I must ask that you keep my true identity confidential.”

“Of course!” exclaimed Genesis, who had been known to sell privileged information for a price. “Privacy is not something we take lightly; I can guarantee it. What is it we can do for you, Mr. Zeebub?”

“What I am about to confess may sound bizarre, but I must be honest with you if we are to work together.” Mr. Zeebub commenced. He had their complete attention and so spoke very directly. “I am Satan the Devil.” Joy, Geoff and Mr. Genesis stared at him as if he was speaking Latin. His frustration began to surface, so he stood and began pacing about the room. “I speak the truth,” he stressed in dramatic fashion. “I am the snake that lured Eve into sin. Dante relegated me to the bowels of his Inferno. I am the Dark Prince, Lucifer the Fallen Angel, Mephistopheles, the red-horned monster of Hollywood legend. I am B. L. Zeebub.”

Silence permeated the office. No one dared to breathe for several minutes until, at last, Joy broke into a rapturous grin. “Oh, I get it!” she exclaimed. “You have terribly low self-esteem! Oh, Mr. Zub!” she squeaked. “You mustn’t think of yourself as the Devil! You have to think positive and believe you’re a creature of light! The universe has a purpose for you, and you must find it!”

Zeebub grimaced. This little blond cherub in her size 2 Ann Taylor suit was entirely too perky and pink. On any other day, he would have snapped his fingers and sent her careening out the plate glass window into traffic below, but today he practiced grueling self-control. He inhaled deeply and continued, “My desperation for a new life and acceptance has compelled me to reach out for help. I have chosen the three of you to provide me a new image.”

“So you need a makeover?” blurted Geoff, who had chewed his fingernails down to the quick.
“Precisely!” Zeebub concurred. “I need a new identity, a new name, and a new look.” He smiled at Geoff, who had his legs crossed twice and his arms wrapped tightly around his chest. His twisted limbs and spikey yellow-orange hair made him look like a Bart Simpson doll that had been wrung like a dish rag. He was a painfully strange vision to behold. “You are correct, Geoff.” Zeebub nodded. “What I need is quite literally a makeover.”

The team sighed with understanding. “I think we can be of service to you, Mr. Zeebub,” declared Genesis. “You’ve come to the right organization.”

Zeebub nodded. “I certainly hope so.”

As the afternoon wore on, the team worked tirelessly to give Satan a makeover. First, Adam Genesis devised a new identity for him. He would no longer be known as Mr. B. L. Zeebub, but as Luc, no last name necessary. If one name was good enough for Cher and Bono, one name was good enough for him. His fictional background was drawn up to include Master’s Degrees in Psychology and Anthropology as well as a jet-set lifestyle that took him to all four corners of the world to study other cultures. He would maintain a Manhattan address as well as a Beverly Hills condo and a luxury flat in London near the Tower, which had always been his favorite attraction. Money being no object, he arranged to purchase a private plane where he could entertain or escape the hounding of the media which would soon unwittingly promote him to the world.

Geoff encouraged him to lose the black themed Mafioso apparel in favor of more colorful attire. A new wardrobe would be custom tailored to include a blue velvet Gucci evening jacket and several uniquely patterned navy sweaters. Blue would be his signature color, chosen to draw attention to his dazzling eyes. Tailors from the finest shops on Rodeo Drive were brought in by limousine to take his measurements and fashion a multitude of suits with vests
made from the finest spun silks.

Zeebub had often wondered why people fancied that particular insect byproduct, but as he was clothed in its softness, he began to see its merits. He made a mental note to keep the silkworm population disease free, at least until his wardrobe was finished.

The last hour was spent with Joy as she coached him on the finer points of positive thinking, dwelling heavily on his apparent catastrophic self-esteem issues. He tactfully put up with her constant reminders that he was a creature of light and daydreamed about flicking her across the room like a ball of dryer lint. He smiled as she had him repeat the phrase “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!” He knew where she had acquired that little bit of positivity and wondered what the writers on Saturday Night Live would do if they knew their material was being used to convince Satan to love himself. The irony was priceless.

Joy, Geoff, and Mr. Genesis spent nearly six hours transforming B. L. Zeebub into Luc, the newest celebrity on everyone’s list. They were concluding the makeover session, and Mr. Genesis was checking into possible interviews with David Letterman and Howard Stern, when the receptionist leaned into the office. “You need to turn on the news. People are babbling about the end of the world or something.” She glanced at Luc, who smiled with mischief and winked at her. She nearly stopped breathing and quickly shut the door. Genesis took a remote from his desk drawer and flipped a switch. Panels on the far wall separated, and a huge LED TV flickered to life. Every station was carrying the news.

“Incredible news from all over the world today,” began the female correspondent from a local news network. “There have been no reports of crime, death, disease or war anywhere on the Earth since approximately 11 a.m.
Pacific Standard Time.” She pointed behind her to a hospital where doctors were milling around the emergency room doors, challenged by the lack of patients. “Some religious leaders are calling this a sign of the end,” she continued, “and worldwide, philosophers are speculating that the Mayans may have been correct in their predictions of a global catastrophe.”

Luc laughed out loud. “The Mayans were such a creative people. They ripped out a few hearts, drank a little blood, and then developed a calendar that modern humans base their whole future on. Idiots! The only reason it ends is because they ran out of room on the bloody stone slab.” He turned around and found everyone staring nervously at him. He cleared his throat and quickly returned his attention to the TV.

“Is this the beginning or the end?” questioned the correspondent. “It’s as if evil has taken a holiday…”

Joy gasped and Geoff sat down heavily before the shock of realization could throw him to the floor. Adam Genesis spoke first, asking what they were all thinking. “Are you on holiday, Luc? Is this all real?”

“Of course it’s real, Adam. Did you think I was making this whole affair up? How could I continue my work? To really accept a new identity, I must give up my old ways. I’m not Satan anymore! I’m Luc, an educated man of the world, a likable gent who just happens to have a dark secret that, incidentally, the three of you now share.” He paused for effect and then continued. “No more personifications of red skin and horns, no more fiery circles of Hell or snakes telling lies. I have become a new man!”

he declared. He marched around the office and vigorously shook the hands of the team who had crafted his new persona. Joy, Geoff and Adam Genesis had just become pawns in his game, bound by client privilege to keep his secret.

And he truly felt like a different being. He was
full of self-confidence, and although he had to fight the temptation to meddle in the pitiful lives of those around him, he felt he was ready to go out and embrace the world.

At exactly 5 p.m., a handsome, blue-eyed man named Luc left the lobby of the Genesis Talent and Publicity Agency, followed by two assistants carrying his new wardrobe and several boxes of fabricated documents. The sun was still shining, and the air was fresh with an ocean breeze. The effects of his transformation were evident all around him. He was standing on the street in downtown LA yet there were no horns honking or angry shouting, no smog or litter on the ground, only children’s laughter and birds chirping. Complete strangers greeted him with friendly smiles as he hailed a taxi. Waiting for the driver to open the passenger door, he had the odd sensation that something was missing.

“Forget something, sir?” the driver asked.

Luc gazed at all the cheerful people on the street. “Does it seem exceptionally peaceful and pleasant today?” he inquired.

“Yes sir, very peaceful and pleasant.” smiled the driver.

“I thought so, too,” he nodded. He then snapped his fingers and sighed with delight as the sounds of screams, squealing tires and the crunching of twisted metal erupted behind him. The driver’s eyes widened with shock.

“No…” Luc replied with satisfaction. “I haven’t forgotten a thing.”
A man I never knew stares at me with my own eyes, piercing time.
He is wearing a tattered coat and hat.
His boots are well worn, and his rugged hands hold a rifle across his lap.

He is only 24, but his weathered face betrays his youth.
He does not smile or frown, but his fierce gaze reveals intense emotions buried deep within.

His thoughts scream at me with fury.
“Them Yankees won’t take my farm!
If they step foot on my land, ain’t none gonna be left alive, I swear!”

I believe him.
I’ve heard the stories told since I was little. I recognize his fate.
But his image seems to defy what I already know to be true, none will be left alive.

I cannot warn this man, this strong, determined young farmer-soldier.
I cannot tell him to keep to the trees and off the road where his life will end.
I cannot tell him that his wife and children will continue to work the land he shed his blood for.

I cannot tell him that his descendants will touch the lives of thousands more across the oceans of time.
I cannot tell him that their bravery will help to liberate the children of war in foreign lands.
I cannot tell him of their deeds, small and great, which will help shape a nation he could never have dreamed of.

In his gray eyes, I see only what he saw, a brief moment of conviction,
captured and preserved before the bullets and blood would take him from this world forever.

I hold in my hand what was once cherished, not only a man but a memory.

His wife held it at night when the children slept and remembered the warmth of his skin
and the smell of his sweat after a day in the sun.
She wept over it and remembered his voice, rough with tobacco smoke, singing softly to her.

Their son clutched it as he traveled across country on a train bound west.
His grandchildren gazed at it in wonder,
as the stories of their papaw’s courage stirred them to find a bit of daring in themselves.
His great grandchildren, born into a mighty nation on the brink of another war, passed it around and made up stories of wild west outlaws where he was the dashing hero. He would have laughed at their fancies and bounced them on his knee.

Now I hold this fragile, crumbling fragment of history in my trembling hand, Touching the same worn edges that his wife caressed over a century ago. It is tear stained and covered with the finger prints of generations.

I have his eyes.

I wonder if I have more of him inside me, this determined young farmer-soldier, who left his home one day, never to return.

I hold this photograph, tiny bits of silver and shades of black and white, now yellow with age. A photograph, so small and delicate, It speaks to me with powerful words, “Remember me...”

And I do.
When I'm gone
spread my ashes near Half-Moon Bay.
Not the beach, of course... go further back
spread my ashes near Half-Moon Bay.

Jemal Duran

DOWN THE WINDING ROAD
ODE TO POSADA’S CALAVERAS
Jemal Duran

What song do you sing tonight,
You merry denizens of the dead?
Is it a song of true love – or perhaps a *corrido*?
You never let your lack of flesh and blood get you down
Your hats sit atop gleaming grins
Instruments at the ready, happy to sing to us in ethereal voices
No vocal chords to speak of – or to speak with.
And yet, when you come out each year
Amidst fallen leaves and the smells of chimney smoke
You throw back your head and let loose with a mighty *grito*
And we know that you, the dead, are dancing tonight.
I hate this bathroom interior. It truly is a god awful design, and quite frankly, the splatter of blood across it improves the look remarkably. It brings a kind of psycho-modern décor to the putrid green and gold zigzags that race from wall to wall. I do, however, love the smell of the soap I’m using to clean my face and hands. Blood is a son of a bitch to wash away, and the deep red stains into my fingernails, even as I scrub them relentlessly. No matter how much I scrub, I can never really wash it all away. I can’t escape from what I do by simply lathering coconut lavender soap and cleansing the stains. I always see the stains, they never really disappear.

She was nothing to me, no more than another job, a type of job that paid too well if you asked me. Even as she lies there in a pool of her own blood on the linoleum floor of this awfully tacky bathroom, I can’t help but miss her already. She looks like an angel. Sirens interrupt my concentrated admiration. I’m pulled back to reality in the sense that the police sirens sound close, too close to be a coincidence. She didn’t scream, and there was no way anyone knew where she was going to be, or what was going to happen to her. I knew this job was too easy. There’s always a goddamn catch. I catch a glimpse of a demon in the mirror above the sink, but as my eyes focus onto the inhuman creature, I’m swiftly disappointed to find my own ugly mug staring back at me through the spider web of cracks.

I light up my last cigarette and clean my switchblade with a hand towel. I shouldn’t have used a switchblade on her. It was too messy and she didn’t deserve it. She deserved so much more. She deserved a loving husband
and two rowdy kids. She deserved a nice home in the suburbs somewhere. She deserved to be called ‘beautiful’ every day and ‘gorgeous’ every night. Although I never talked to her, she seemed like the type of gal who could make you laugh from a joke and make you fall in love with her smile. The only question I have on my mind is why my contact wanted her dead. Unfortunately, there’s no time to play detective, because the front door explodes into splinters from one of the officer’s shotguns. Seems a little excessive and unnecessary, but it gives me time to prepare and gives away their position in this tacky apartment.

I position my pistol against the paper thin walls, connecting the bathroom to the front room and empty a clip. There’s no need to play it quiet at this point, but I do need to play it smart. As soon as I emptied my clip, I dive into the tub and cover my head. A moment of silence followed by a shot gun blast tears the wall to pieces. I reload my pistol and blindly return fire from the tub. I only hear my ears ringing, and as I finally get a grip of and catch my breath, I look into what is supposed to be a wall separating the bathroom from the front room. I see two men identically dressed, but not police officers. These men were contract killers. One of them is holding their stomach together and wheezing, while the other one looks to be just resting on the couch, if it weren’t for the hole in his forehead. As my eyes focus on the scene and my adrenaline subsides, I notice something peculiar. I recognize them.

“Rivers.” I kneel down and meet eye to eye with Jonathon Rivers, a contract killer with a shitty attitude and terrible marksmanship.

“How’s it hanging Azrael,” Rivers gurgles as he holds his innards from falling out.

“Who sent you?”

“Whoever sent you sent us, friend.”

“Why?”
“To tie up loose ends, of course.”
I see the life leave his eyes, yet I’m only thinking about how much this worked in my favor. I wipe my prints from everything that I’ve touched in this tacky, destroyed apartment. I leave my switchblade in Rivers’ hand, and position the shotgun next to his partner. A rushed setup, but it’ll have to do for now. I take one last look at the angel in the bathroom and pull out my phone as I step over the rubble in the apartment.
“Identification number 669.”
“Azrael, what can we do for you?”
“I need to speak with Father.”
CHARACTERS

Billy: A man convicted and imprisoned for serial murder.
Woman:  A mysterious woman who is visiting Billy in prison.

SETTING

A man sits alone in a bleak jail cell eating his last meal. There are two walls formed from concrete, one wall formed from jail cell bars, and the fourth wall is open to the audience. The man sits on a cot pushed against one of the walls. Before him is a simple card table with an industrial food tray holding a steak dinner. A single chair sits on the other side of the table.

The click of heels becomes louder as a woman approaches the jail cell. Billy looks up as the woman opens the cell door and enters the room. She is tall and slender, wearing all black except for her red nails and lipstick.


WOMAN: I believe hello is the appropriate way to greet a friend.

(She sits down on the chair across from Billy.)

BILLY: I ain’t your friend. Hell, I’ve never even seen you before.

WOMAN: Well, you wouldn’t really remember would you?
BILLY: Whatever, lady. I didn’t know they let crazies wander around death row.

WOMAN: Some would argue those are the only kind of people here.

BILLY: Guard! *(No answer.)*

WOMAN: *(Sighs.)* They can’t hear you, Billy.

BILLY: What? Why not?

WOMAN: Because I don’t want them to.

BILLY: Guards! Guards! I need help!

*(Billy stands up and grabs the woman by the front of her shirt.)*

BILLY: What the hell is going on? Don’t you know who I am? What I’ve done?

WOMAN: Of course, that’s why I’m here.

*(In anger Billy throws a punch at the woman. She catches the punch easily, and then squeezes Billy’s fist hard enough to bring him to his knees. She releases him and he quickly backs into the wall behind him.)*

BILLY: *(Looking at his hand.)* Jesus Christ.

WOMAN: Now that that’s settled. Why don’t we get down to business?

BILLY: You’re a bit late if you’re a lawyer. Unless you got
something to get me outta this?

WOMAN: I’m not a lawyer, Billy. Besides, we both know you deserve what’s coming to you.

BILLY: You one of those organ people? ‘Cause I already told them that no one’s gonna get my guts after they fry me.

WOMAN: *(Giggles.)* I’m not here for your body. *(Pause.)* I’m here for your soul.

BILLY: What are you? Are you some kinda devil? A reaper here to take me to hell or something?

WOMAN: People don’t really have a name for what I am.

*(Billy pulls out a shank formed from an old toothbrush handle and holds it out in front of him.)*

BILLY: You better stay back or I’ll slice you open like a stuffed pig.

WOMAN: I’d like to see you try. I’ve got a job to do, Billy. Just like you.

BILLY: *(Pauses.)* My job?

WOMAN: *(Gestures to the cot.)* Why don’t you sit down? I’m sure you have questions.

BILLY: *(Sits on the far edge of the cot.)* Why me? Why is this happening to me?

WOMAN: You always ask that first. *(Points to steak.)* Are you gonna finish that?
BILLY: I’ve lost my appetite.

(*The woman begins to cut the steak. She takes a large bite and continues.*)

BILLY: So?

WOMAN: So? (*Pause.*) Oh right, answers! Well, should I start from the beginning?

BILLY: Don’t have much of a choice, do I?

WOMAN: That’s the thing Billy, you always had a choice. Can I ask you something?

BILLY: Alright.

WOMAN: Why’d you do it?

BILLY: Do what?

WOMAN: Kill all those people. And don’t lie to me because we both know you did.

BILLY: I-I don’t know.

WOMAN: Billy you killed dozens of people. There has to be a reason.

BILLY: Because I wanted to. Because I hated them and they deserved to die!

WOMAN: (*Cuts into steak.*) Good, Billy. Good. Do you know why you feel that way?
BILLY: *(Huffs.)* I don’t know.

*(The woman stops eating the steak and puts down the fork. She lean across the table and puts her hands under her chin.)*

WOMAN: It’s because you never really had a choice in the matter. This is your destiny Billy. Every time Fate has given you a life you’re born into it evil.

BILLY: What do you mean every time?

WOMAN: *(Leans back and begins to cut the steak.)* This is hardly your first massacre.

BILLY: Bullshit! I didn’t do nothing, and I ain’t taking the blame for someone else.

WOMAN: No Billy, in your past lives.

BILLY: *(Crosses arms.)* Past lives? This is just gettin’ crazier and crazier.

WOMAN: You’ve lived a hundred life times. Before this you were a suicide bomber, before that a warlord, before that-. 

BILLY: Stop! Just Stop! *(Quieter.)* Please.

*(The woman reaches out her hand as if to comfort Billy, but she pulls it away and lifts a piece to steak to her mouth.)*

BILLY: So what am I? Some kinda antichrist?

WOMAN: No. Well, not yet anyway.
BILLY: *(Puts his head in his hands.)* Jesus Christ, I must be going crazy.

WOMAN: I don’t know why you keep bringing him up. This really isn’t his department.

BILLY: Why me? Why do I have to do this?

WOMAN: People need you, Billy.

BILLY: No they don’t. The things I’ve done. How can that be good?

*(The woman gets up and sits next to Billy on the cot)*

WOMAN: People need evil in their lives in order to truly appreciate good. It makes them better. When people hear about your actions, they become more open to the good in the world. They hold their loved ones just a little bit closer and forget old rivalries. Through your gift of death they learn to live life. That’s important, Billy.

BILLY: But why can’t I be good?

WOMAN: Would you really want that? I think you’re lucky Billy. You get to live without guilt.

BILLY: What?

WOMAN: The righteous people of the world go around carrying a heaping sac of guilt. They feel bad stepping on an insect. You kill people without batting an eye and walk away clean. I think you really don’t appreciate that enough.

*(Billy reaches out and grabs her shoulders.)*
BILLY: I swear on my mother’s grave that I can be better! That I can be good!

(The woman pulls off his hands and goes to stand on the other side of the room. She places her hands on her hips in a defensive gesture.)

WOMAN: Is that really what you want? Do you want a way out? Because I can give it to you.

BILLY: Please I’ll do anything!

WOMAN: All you have to do is give me your soul. You’ll never be reborn again. I’ll take your hand, and guide you to the next world and whatever is waiting for you there.

BILLY: Where will I go?

WOMAN: Where do you think people who have killed millions of people go?

BILLY: Hell. You’ll take me to hell.

WOMAN: Maybe or maybe not. This could be hell for all we know. Maybe you’ve already said yes, and this is your way out. It’s all very confusing like that.

BILLY: Fuck you. I ain’t letting you take me to hell, anything is better than that!

WOMAN: That’s your decision, Billy.

(The woman turns around and heads for the exit. She pops the last bit of steak into her mouth as she passes the table. As
she chews the BLOOD runs out of her mouth and dribbles down her chin. BILLY scurries after her and reaches the cell door just as she closes it. He grips the bar and presses as close as he can.

BILLY: Damn you to hell! Why give me the option? Why not just take me to hell yourself you bitch?!

(Billy reaches through the bars to grab the woman, but she stands just out of reach.)

WOMAN: I told you that you always have a choice. Doesn’t mean you have to like it. (Pause.)

BILLY: I won’t go to hell, I won’t. It’ll be different next time.

WOMAN: Well then, I’ll be seeing you later Billy.

(The sound of heels begins again as the woman walks away. Billy crumples to the floor and starts to silently sob. The click fades out and the stage goes dark.)
ROMANCING A STAR
Jessi-Lynne Welch

Come with me and sit again
Aneath the moonlit skies
I’ll tell ye of a tale of a Star above
With blazing emerald eyes.

She danced upon a galaxy
As if the world was hers
Indeed there were a thousand worlds
That knelt beneath her spurs.

A fiery maze begat her youth
No ‘verse could hold her bound
Yet all the minds could have never dreamed
How the chains indeed were found.

You see, my dears, that even Stars
May succumb to some great trial
Of love and Life, a battle sure
To raise a tempest dire.

Oh could it be that Fate at last
Has chosen her to share
Her brilliant dance with another step
With locks of scarlet hair.

Their force is strong there is no doubt
For what we see is clear
He tempts and turns and pulls away
To entice his true love dear.
How indeed a violent dance
None in the ‘Verse deny
For if they try to stop their romp
The two great Stars shall die.

Gaze upon and do not fret
For they will at last collide
In the age old of the year
When he makes her his bride.
DIRT ENCRUSTED DIAMOND
Andrew Garcia

I am from 2 a-days,
days filled with bad hops and jammed fingers.
I am from the leather that binds my glove together,
from the double plays to batting averages.
I am from that stadium in the sky.

I am from the dampened and raked infield
from the freshly cut grass.
I am from the faded chalk lines,
to the games showered with rain.
I am from the stadium lights, glistening on my jersey.

I am from outreached diving catches,
from the clutch ninth inning base knocks.
I am from the walk off wins
to the in-between-hop-backhand-throw-em-out plays.
I am from the full rides dreams.

I am from the bad base running decision,
from the fractured ankle.
I am from the depression fueled insomnia,
to the fractured dreams.
I am from the memories for my love of the game.
OSAMU TEZUKA’S STAR SYSTEM
Cala Grayson

A famed writer and artist
Had an explanation for repetition
An answer for his reuse of
character designs.

The Star System, he called it
Reason for all those

Commanding men with hooked noses
Delicate women with thick eyelashes
Juvenile heroes with messy hair

Appearing in stories
About rogue doctors with
altruistic streaks
Wounded soldiers fighting inner demons
Love lost and found in a
robotic Metropolis

The same cast of characters
Allies one story, enemies the next, Lovers
for just one life, and acquaintances the rest.

Over and over and over
No clue of what they used to be
Or what they will be
Only what they are now.

The Star System, he called it.
He should have
called it
life.
GRANDMA’S MONKEYS
Justin Brown

When my mom was a kid, her family had a couple of monkeys. Not at the same time—for a period of time they had one monkey, and then at some point later they decided, hey, why not another monkey? To be fair, from what I understand, the first monkey was quite sweet and shy, and spent most of its time in my Aunt Penny’s bedroom. The second, on the other hand, would have given Linda Blair a run for her money. It lived in a large, round, cast-iron cage and was strong enough to rock the cage back-and-forth, using the momentum created by this rocking to walk its cage around the house. From time to time when it was angry at someone, it would take aim from across the room and drench the person in thick, yellow, foul smelling monkey pee.

I’m not certain how long they had him, but stories like this always make me look at my family and wonder: who the hell are you people? Feral monkeys crash driving cast-iron cages around the house and peeing on bystanders doesn’t add up with the mental image I have of my grandparents. When I was a kid, their house was full of highly breakable objects. My brother, sister, and I, who were little monkeys in our own right, were typically quickly dispatched outdoors, where we would burn sticks and the occasional ant with a magnifying glass, or pretend that a wide, deep hole in the back yard was the Sarlacc pit from Return of the Jedi. Next to the garage were a few ancient washing machines that made excellent forts for imaginary soldiers to lay siege upon. My grandfather had a few giant ball bearings which were perfect for squashing anything needing squashing, which, for me as a young boy, was almost everything. The sounds of my grandmother’s wind chimes catch
my attention and I realize that I’m thirsty. I drop the heavy metal ball and make my way towards the side door. I can feel the sun press onto the back of my neck as I step out from the garage’s shade, but the breeze feels good, and I like the way the wind chimes sound. I pull open the aluminum storm door. It sounds like the hand pump I use to fill the tires on my bicycle. The door slams fast behind me with a hollow, rattly bang. The air is much cooler inside, and it smells like my grandma’s oil paints—a warm, sweet smell. My grandma calls out from the dining room “Whatcha need, Sunshine?”

“Just some water, Grandma.”

“Well, you know where it is.”

I pull a step-stool over to the cupboard and climb up, pull out a glass, and turn the faucet on, filling the glass up. The water tastes right, not like the dry tasting water at our house. I fill the glass up again, set it down on the counter, and hop down. After I drag the stool back to where it goes, I make my way down the back hallway, and peek into my grandfather’s radio room. I’m not supposed to be in here, but now that I’m in here, I might as well look around. There are so many knobs and dials and switches I can’t make sense of anything. My mom told me that tinkering with electronics has always been a hobby of my grandpa’s. It smells like dust and old in the room. Afraid of getting in trouble, I walk out, close the door, take another drink of water, and go back outside to play.

When I was 12, my brother and I broke into Boon’s old elementary school. We skated down the hallways, chased each other through the empty cafeteria, and even banged the trucks of our skateboards against the big bell by the front door. It was weird, being in a place so empty and quiet, not to mention that it was a school, where one is expected to behave in a certain way and definitely not the way we were. After a while, the strangeness got to us and we decided to leave, but as we were leaving I started to get angry
at the building. How did it make me feel this way? No one was using it, so what was wrong with us playing in there? I suppose it wasn’t the building I was mad at, but what it represented. I was a part of a social agreement which I’d never asked to join. I’d been angry about it since I was a little kid, when I would watch COPS on television with my stepdad. It made no sense to me that the cops could hit people and the people couldn’t hit them back. Who’s to say the cops were right and the people were wrong? I remember asking my mom about it, and she said that there are bad people and it’s the cop’s job to keep the rest of us safe from them.

“Yeah -but, what if the cops are bad people? Who gets to hit them?”

My mother replied, like she did often, “You’re a yeah-but!”

“I mean it mom. What if a cop hit you? Couldn’t we do anything?”

“Well,” my mom said, “I don’t plan on doing anything that a cop would hit me for, hon.”

I was just a kid, and had a hard time responding to that, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that there were cops out there who might hit my mom for no good reason. A flash of my father ran through my head. My brother, with his small frame defiant and protective, was standing between my father and my mom.

My little fists clenched at my sides. I didn’t tell my mom about the memory.

As I grew older, I began to see that it was the authority some people have over others that bothered me. I began to wonder why they had it. I began to wonder if that wasn’t why my grandmother, this gentle, artistic woman, used to joke that each of her children was secretly named after a form of birth control that didn’t work. Perhaps that was her way of taking a swing a world that decided she should marry and have children whether she wanted to or not. Perhaps
that’s why my grandmother had monkeys.
Anxiety paced restlessly in my stomach, swirling around like a loner at a party full of strangers. My buddy just dared me to talk to a beautiful girl, and I had no idea how to go about it. After chewing on my thoughts, spitting each out in turn, I finally walked up, caught her eye, and choked out “my name’s Justin what’s yours?” She smiled as if she’d been expecting me. “I’m Jennifer, and this is Rachael.” Her friend smiled and lifted her hand. I waved Dominic over. “This is my buddy, Dominick.” He grinned at the girls and said hello.

Dominic and I were in the Koshare Indian Dancers, a group attached to Boy Scout troop 232, and were on our yearly long trip. This year we traveled to Gallup, New Mexico for the International Powwow to see the real versions of dances we tried to emulate. The two of us had decided that this was going to be the year that we found some girls, snuck off, and hooked up. The older boys were always doing it, or at least they were always sneaking off; we had to take them at their word about the rest.

Talking to the girls was much easier than I had envisioned. I was afraid it would be much more like interrogating a hostile witness, but the girls were just as interested in us as we were in them. The hardest part had been approaching them, but after that, everything flowed. After chatting for a while, we had to get back to our group, and Dominic asked, “So you girls wanna meet up after the powwow?” They smiled and said okay. We told them where we were staying, agreeing to meet 1:30 AM.

The thrill was intoxicating. This was actually happening. I felt like my life was focused to a point thinner and denser than a syringe needle, its barrel filled with years of
expectation. I could barely focus on the rest of the dancing that night. All I could think about was Jennifer’s big brown eyes, full lips, tight pants, and the warm, rich glow which filled my body when she leaned in close to say, “See you in a bit.”

*     *     *

Our lodging was in a gym on an Air Force base. We didn’t think it was a big deal, as there wasn’t much security around the area that the gym was located, but still, we were starting to get a bit nervous. I mean this was an Air Force base. There were tall fences with barbed wire on top. There were guards.

“Are you sure this is going to work?”

Dominic said he didn’t know, but we both agreed it was worth the risk. We waited until everyone was sleeping, snuck out of our sleeping bags, and made our way quietly towards the doors. Once outside, we moved faster and soon we were running. The gates were open and no one was around. At the edge of the base we saw a car pull up and next thing you know, we were in it, breathing hard, and smiling from ear to ear. Jennifer and Rachael smiled back at us. Jennifer said that she and Dominic should switch spots and climbed over the seat. As she did, her shirt came up a bit. I caught a glimpse of the small of her back. My heart coughed blood.

Rachael looked back at Jennifer and asked “So what should we do?” We all looked at one another. One part nervous excitement. One part awkward terror. Four parts explosive desire. Shake well and pour. We decided to go to a park. When we got there, Jennifer told Rachael to drop us off at a picnic table, and her and I got out of the car, which drove away quickly. We sat down at the tables, lit cigarettes, and stared at the ground awkwardly. I felt her look at me. I
looked up to say she was beautiful right as she turned away. The words stuck in my throat. I scooted closer. This was worse than approaching her the first time.

“I wonder what Dominic and Rachael are doing,” she said.

*Here’s my chance,* I thought. *Say something about kissing. Say something clever. Say they’re probably having sex. Say it!*

“I don’t know. They’re probably driving around.”

*What the hell is wrong with you!*

After that I lost what was left of my nerve. I just sat there, smoking my cigarette.

It wasn’t long before the car came back. I wondered if Dominic fumbled as well. I guessed that he had, since they were only gone for a few minutes. They really were just driving around. We went to a truck stop with an all night diner and drank some coffee, but the energy was gone. Before long we decided to call it a night.

The ride back to the base was pretty subdued, until, from a few blocks away, we saw the lights. There must have been fifteen emergency vehicles out front, blue lights flashing, and more driving around the base, their search lights sweeping back and forth across an open field. We had the girls drop us off a safe distance away, said our goodbyes, and made our way to the base on foot. The gate we used to leave was now locked shut, so we climbed the fence. As I swung my left leg over, the crotch of my pants snagged on barbed wire, ripping a huge gash across the fabric as I pulled loose.

Walking towards the gym, Dominic and I decided to play it off like we had just been out on the field, and what the heck is going on, and why are all of these military police cars here? No one bought it, and after a long, hard, disappointed stare down from our trip leaders, we were sent to bed. I could hear the leaders talking about possibly sending us home on a bus, their voices fading into in the darkness as
I fell asleep, soon dreaming

*     *     *

I was looking down through the scope as the coast came into its view range. My guts floated up into my chest as the pilot began his descent, then shoved left as he changed course. When we passed over the edge of the city, I felt the first touches of nausea, and as we approached its center, I started to wonder if I was going to be able to hold down my breakfast. Before I could find out, I yelled “Release!” and pulled the lever. The pilot banked hard and a few heartbeats later, through the scope I saw a small sun ignite just above the city. “Justin!” I tried to imagine what it would feel like to be vaporized. “Justin!” I wondered if there was a moment of shock or if anyone even noticed they were dying before they ceased to notice anything ever again. “Justin wake up!” I began to hear a mewling sound coming from someone on the plane. At first it was unintelligible, but words started to form:

they're dead they're all dead they're dead
they're all dead

“Justin wake the hell up! You’re dreaming, wake up!”

“They’re dead they’re all dead they’re dead!”

I’m being shaken. They’re dead. We nuked the city! I’m being shaken. I look around. Everyone is staring at me. The remnants of my screams are still bouncing around the gym. It was a dream? No! I...we dropped...we killed. The nightmare’s vivid reality began to unravel. My own
history began to come back into focus. The feeling of guilt remained—thick, almost intoxicating. Everyone was still staring at me. The memories from the night before began to surface. The guilt intensified, and was reinforced with shame. I lay back down, wondering why I had been so scared.

I hadn’t even kissed her.
OFFENSE OF CAPITAL
Ecthelion Moore

The countless squares align in lock-step dance
No subtlety how ev’ry block fits in
In all their loves there’s naught but bland romance
No heights, no lows, no virtue and no sin.

And all their droning voices, robbed of pow’r,
Are minds that think of naught but what they’re told.
And ticking by the clock of corp’rate hour
Their hearts have grown deranged, confused, and cold.

Within their tasteless, empty, withered minds
Behind their vacant, dull, and soulless stare,
Inside I fear that I will only find
That there is nothing left of what was there.

Now up, now down, now all around is gray.
Oh, tell me please that there’s another way?
IN A WINTER COLD AND CRUEL
Ecthelion Moore

In a winter cold and cruel,
On a bench beside the park,
He sits and smokes his day away
Long into deepening dark.
No one knows his name here,
And the streets are never dry.
He’d love to stop the rainfall
For a glimpse of starry sky.
He smiles throughout his emptiness,
Grinds the filter with his heel,
He wonders if he’s lonely
If that’s the only thing to feel.
So many things are ripped away
And everything decays,
He never thought he’d learn to say
Goodbye so many ways.
The worst that lingers in his mind
Is every hopeful day
When he came forward, heart held out
Just to be kicked away.
The clouds float by, anonymous,
And never paid much heed,
And no one feels at all to him
But hate and fear and greed.
He laughs, the errant maniac,
At silent voices on the breeze
And listens to their melody
Sighing through the trees.
They pass him by just where he is
And pay the man no mind,
Perhaps they toss a coin or two,
Too busy to be kind.
He shakes a bit in growing cold,
He aches, and coughs a bitter red.
In the morning, there he lies,
Cold and white and dead.
Yet still they just walk past him
And scoff at the old fool.
A tender man that couldn't thrive
In a winter cold and cruel.
A broken line drawn in the sand
Marks the place we cross into
Madness we cannot contain.

Our leaders from across the land
Insist they pay attention to
A broken line drawn in the sand.

But when foolish anger’s flames are fanned
We are pushed much closer to
Madness we cannot contain.

Thoughts that differ then are banned
As we approach the end they knew:
A broken line drawn in the sand.

A man oppressed will raise his hand
And tell us where we’re headed to:
Madness we cannot contain.

We’ve come somewhere we had not planned,
A hellish sight come full in view.
A broken line drawn in the sand,
Madness contained within you.
THE BEAST
Daniel Conroy

Alone till the last
sits a beast by a glass.
Two glasses, to be true,
one filled, a debilitating brew.

And while he scratches his scaly head
he looks in a looking glass, shivers with dread.
The Beast sees mangy hair
an image judged unfair.
He sees an inerrable girth
worrisome ruins of self-worth.

A sudden contortion of features
revulsion, by the creature.
With mighty claw, and roaring maw,
the beast scratches away his self-made flaws.

Too many times has he fought isolation
with such savagery to surpass any minimal consolation.
Too many times has he felt an omission
in such consistency, that he now accepts it, in submission.
Consumed by misguided rage he strikes, lo
now the beast acts in self-loathe.

A presence to comfort found in a fluid friend
as so many abandoned him to no end.
Such rugged hands and crooked horns,
craggly teeth and soles worn,

all grotesque to a self-consuming heart.
The Beast wanders, apart,
amongst pits of sorrow; emotions arise that are all catalyzed for self demise.

A lass passes a window glass, looking on a man of her class. His hair is fair, his build, chiseled, his starry eyes staring strong willed. The lass’s desire screams for him she runs to the window, stirred by whim. She shouts and calls, he cannot hear, as he stares, mind chained to his hateful mirror.
The air was cool around him; the mists of the water-fall always offered such clarity of conscience to the young simian. He simply sat there. The sun provided a familiar warmth to his sprawled frame, and the trees! The trees were always so polite at this time of day. Perhaps, their decorum was due to the noon day sun providing them with so much energy, or maybe, they simply relished the company of such a pure soul as Mada.

One of Mada’s compatriots lurked in those very boughs above him at that moment, waiting to hear the rhythmic breathing patterns of sleep. As soon as small snores uttered from Mada’s mouth, a twenty-five pound monkey sprang upon his form, howling all along his descent. The two engaged each other in a test of mettle at that moment, both giving their all to the lighthearted challenge of wrestling. It was Mada that won out, though the initiative had been given to his companion. “Why do you always win?”

“I’m simply better,” Mada said with only the whisper of a smile upon his face.

“The trees just told you where I was, didn’t they?”

“Now, now Hermes. There’s no need to get so serious. Just because our arboreal friends prefer me, doesn’t mean you can blame them for your own failings;” once again that ironic smile came across his face, mocking Hermes and mocking the truth behind his words.

“They would have told me if you were sneaking up on me, too,” the smaller monkey stuck his tongue out at that statement, “Speaking of trees though, there’s an unfriendly little fellow on the west end of the forest. I tried to tell him that joke about the two badgers and the jerk didn’t even
laugh. You know that one’s a knee slapper.”

“I’m sure this fellow must be up to no good if he doesn’t laugh at your striking witticisms of badgers meeting moles,” Mada said with only a hint of his sarcasm.

“You nearly choked when you heard that one; don’t even try to deny it. But really, you should come see this fellow. If he’s going to talk to any of us, he’ll talk to you.”

“I suppose engaging an austere tree in riveting discourse would be an interesting way to spend my day. Lead on then,” Hermes skittered away immediately, climbing into the low branches of the tree he had just used for his ambush. Mada, with a chuckle, followed the boisterous young primate.

His guide talked constantly through the journey, informing him of other interesting things he had seen on his way to this tree: all sorts of snakes and a large salt bed stuck out the most. The journey proved to be a short one for the agile monkeys, and the tree that stood before them was truly a sight. Its gnarled trunk rose from barren ground twisting into many different low lying limbs. Upon these foreboding branches hung bright fruit. The skins were shiny and red, and they seemed to glisten in the sunlight as the two simians approached the tree further. As they were right below the frame of the tree, one of the bright fruits fell on the head of Mada. He shuddered a bit at the alien touch of this fruit, but as soon as he realized what had hit him, he plucked the thing up off the ground.

“It looks so perfect. I guess grumpy guss here might just be mute and not mean after all,” Hermes climbed excitedly up the gnarled trunk in search of his own fruit. He sprung off the tree at once though, screaming. “Grumpy guss is a meany!” he cried. He lifted his hands to his eyes and Mada could see the blood trickling from those calloused palms. The gnarled trunk did not appear to have any thorns upon it, which perturbed the older primate, but
only for a moment as his stomach began to growl. Hermes had apparently heard the lamentation of his gut when he proclaimed “You’re not going to eat grumpy guss’s fruit are you?”

In answer, Mada took a bite from the crisp flesh of the fruit that he held in his hands. It was meant as a joke to show Hermes how ridiculous his estimation of this tree had been.

The joke did not end well.

Mada wailed in pain only moments after swallowing one bite of that fruit. Bones began to crack and shift as his body changed. His breath became faint as he felt his hair fall off in his grasp, only a small tuft remained on his head. What was most disturbing was watching his feet. The fifth digit that he had once used to grip so many objects began to shift into the pad of his foot. How that hurt, as tendons were displaced to make way for the last toe. He became so much taller, and he stood straighter. Hermes stood beneath him in a fright, eyes bulging with panic. That was the last thing he remembered of that day.

He awoke early the next morning, bewildered. He lay on a stone floor underground. Most unusual for him, for it was normally only bears and wolves that claimed these places, his kin preferring to sleep in the broad boughs of a friendly tree. That was not the only strange thing about him though. Someone had tied a circle of trees around his waist which now hung rather loose upon him. To the side there was a stick about as tall as him that had a stone attached to its head. He glanced next to that stick and cried out. He crawled over to the corner of the cave where some fur was gathered. Tears began to fall from his face though as it became apparent that this fur was not just there from shedding. The fur clung still to a bloody skin. The hide was irregularly straight in its alignment, as if someone had drawn straight lines upon the back of whatever animal this
one and peeled the fur right off. At one end of the maca-bre fur was a familiar simian face. The tears did not stop running from his face for many hours. The uncontrollable shudders of disgust took longer still to cease. The sour taste from his retching did not leave his mouth.

He tried to talk to the trees as if everything was normal. Tried to bathe in the familiar sunlight while the mists of a waterfall cooled him. The sunlight only seemed to mock him as if it knew more than he. The water only made him leap in fright when he did not notice its approach. Even in conversation with the surrounding animals he found no solace. There was only the guilt over what he knew he had done. There was only the fear that one of them may have seen him change. The day passed quickly while his heart was beating at a consistently fast pace. Mada did not know when next he might fall into that transformation, and he feared the hour that it would come.

He paced in the cave from left to right, muttering to himself. He had abandoned the sunlight; it only seemed to mock him with its knowing glare. The truth was unacceptable to his mindset. He had broken from his nature. He had disturbed order and perverted the use of life. The image of the face on the skin flashed before his mind’s eye. He shuddered once more. The shadows grew longer as dusk settled in. This transformation struck him with as much surprise as the first. His howls of pain were heard through the forest, and while he had isolated himself in this cave, it was not as rural as that far away tree that had done this to him. A herd of deer nearby heard the wails of agony and fled, all but a few stags that were curious and unafraid. The cave was found without much difficulty as the stags were used to these paths in the forest.

What they found sent them all back in a shudder. They witnessed the last moments of transformation: the hair leaving Mada’s body and his toes conglomerating awkward-
ly. The bald ape did not wait for their gawking to subside, taking up the stick with the stone head and thrusting it deep in the neck of one unlucky stag. The others attempted to flee the rage of this wrathful creature, but he was vicious, biting, clawing, and stabbing in his pursuit of them. One animal sustained only a minor bite from Mada’s transformed state, and this was perhaps a worse fate. The creature began to lurch and scream: hooves falling off to be replaced by hands, spinal column cracking as it became more vertical, and forelegs being displaced as they shifted into the place of shoulders. As its hair fell away, leaving that plume on the head, the stag turned upon its fellows.

Mada knew what he was doing this time. He knew, but he could not stop himself. These stags just seemed to be so valuable. Their antlers could be gathered for such practical purposes he could not deny that to himself. And once they did not have antlers what did they need their hides for. Once they did not have their hides, why would they need their hearts? He tore the heart from a stag that he had felled and relished the taste of its flesh. He believed he was taking the power of this creature, but the changes to him were ineffectual. The fact that one of the stags had changed to a form like his surprised him, but he felt that this was an ally in his quest to gather the resources that were going to such ineffectual use in the forest.

In this night, the pack of changed ones ravaged the land. Some trees wailed as they were torn down, some endured their suffering with stoic resilience. At the end of their slaughter, the remaining forest members would not raise their voices to even the humblest of creatures. The corpses of their brethren were made into massive structures where feasts upon flesh and other degradations of nature took place. Mighty roaring tongues of orange heat stretched out from pits in the depths of these hovels.

Mada’s grip spread throughout the entirety of his
nation. The lands rested under the gaseous forms of burned tree corpses. No creature was untouched, and the hordes of changed ones were massive after only a few nights in the strange times of this previously untouched world. A few of the original creatures remained in the world; a firm stand against the encroaching grip of these strange bald things that were spawned by that foul tree.

The days were full of mourning, many having lost their loved ones to the maw of one of Mada’s horde. Many of the forest’s creatures were displaced by this ravaging of the countryside, and among the refugees, a single character rose in majesty. His brow was stoic and his jaw set with a constant fury after he watched his wife change before his very eyes. He was one of the few that the trees would still speak with, trusted by them out of all the woodland creatures. It seemed that the trees were the only remaining forces that would care to act against the forces of Mada, and he spoke with them about what he might complete in an effort to dismantle the capabilities of the changed ones to influence the world any longer.

“You must seal them away, youngling” one drawled in the long speech of the arbor creatures.

“But how might I do so? They are strong and many and I am one.”

“They entrap themselves already within the funeral mounds of my brethren. You must simply convince them of the worth in their entrapments. They lost touch with the sun. Always, they refrain from all but nocturnal ventures.”

“Then how might I keep them in a single place?”

“They wish to avoid the sun. Then provide them with a new land where its wisdom is absent.”

The staunch and nameless character affirmed himself with this and went about finding the entrenchments of Mada. Even the moon fled this night, leaving a purely obscured landscape in its wake. He gazed upon the mild
fires, pale imitations of the mighty vessel of light that shone in the day. Nameless had a notion of how to entrap these foul creatures, and his nervousness showed in a dramatic difference to the normally stoic nature that he conjured about himself. Sweat creased his flanks and his breath was heavy. He shook himself from the silent introspections and self-doubts that these frightening creatures brought about in his soul. In the next moments, Nameless shot towards the encampments of the rowdy horde. The surrounding characters soon attended to this rude guest with the violence of their dispositions. They howled with the feral violence of their natures and chased Nameless as he darted past them, so foolish were they in this moonless night that not a single one remained in their settled camp.

Nameless weaved through the chaparral that had replaced the once luxurious forests, making his way towards a towering spire of stone that stood in the West. He made his path clear to the mindless creatures that followed behind him until he neared the yawning entrance into the tower of rock. A slight shift in his movements drew him along a sidelong trail to surmount the archway of this cavern’s entrance. Upon the sides of the cavern rested delicately placed pillars, but the horde ignored the subtleties of this cavern and charged into the depths of a welcoming darkness with abandon. Nameless looked upon Mada as he passed into the cavern, and as the wild creature passed the archway, Nameless leaped down to the front of the entrance and toppled one of the pillars. Before the other pillar could be removed, the entire archway fell atop Nameless, sealing the horde in the subterranean realm of shadow and Nameless’s body underneath layers of rock.

Mada’s horde contented themselves with musing over the movement of shadows upon the wall face. Their minds remained chained to these falsities that replaced their desire for indulgence and frivolity. Never did they seek the
sun, nor try to even push out of the cavern that they had been trapped in. Far away, a gnarled tree released a shrill wail of fury. The foul taint that it had spread to Mada had been entrapped. No longer could the evil of the gnarled tree’s fruit affect the world of sun, but the world of sun was only purified in the sense that neither good nor evil existed upon its barren plains of emptiness. A few seedlings still grew, and there were small carpets of moss that entered what was now Mada’s cavern, but only a few shunned individuals ever relished in the reminders of the bright world outside, mocked by the watchers of the walls who were drowned in the madness of shadows.
THE STORM
Megan Robles

he hit me like a wave
thrusting me about
    -the endless thrusting
the bruises forming
salt water leaking

before I knew it
    the storm was over
leaving me with calmer waters
    but enough spite to drown in.

the death of me
    the birth of she
When Eliza sees the music box, she remembers the one thing that she wishes to forget. But she can’t. The story behind the crack in its lid is too important to throw away. It is all that she has left from that life. At first, Eliza kept it on her dresser, where she could see it every day. When that became too painful, she tucked it away in her closet, hiding it behind a pile of old magazines that she never got around to throwing out.

If her mother knew that she still had the music box, her mouth would turn down and her eyes would glaze over. She would stop talking to her, coming up with excuses as to why she’s too busy to call. If her father knew about it, he would take it and throw it away. He would yell and tell her to stop living in the past, to stop bringing back those painful memories and making everything so bad for everyone else. She can’t trust them to bear this burden with her.

Therefore, Eliza keeps the music box a secret. On nights when she is alone and time seems to thicken with memories, she retrieves it. When she traces her fingers over the broken lid, the memories return. Taylor really loved that music box. It had been a gift from their father when Eliza was born, a gift to show Taylor that, even though there would be another child in the house, she was not forgotten. Every night, Taylor would tell Eliza that the ballerina came to life and danced in the shadows while they slept.

“It’s magic Eliza, just like in the movies.” Taylor’s voice was full of wonder. “After we go to bed, she climbs off of the box and dances all night.”

“Doesn’t she get tired?” At the young age of 12, Eliza believed her sister’s exaggerated tales. There was something
spectacular about looking up to her older sister and hanging on to every word she said.

“Nope, because right before we wake up, she gets back on the box and sleeps all day. And we never get to see her dance, because she’s too shy to do it in front of us.” The music that the box played was the sisters’ favorite song. It was a song for peaceful afternoons.

Aside from Taylor and Eliza, no one could touch the box, not even their father. It had become a symbol of their happiness, of their hopes and dreams for a healthy future.

Now the ballerina is broken. One arm is missing, and the once perfect porcelain face has faded. Her beauty is gone. But in the memories, each eyebrow is painted perfectly, the lips rouged. Taylor would be heartbroken, knowing that the one beautiful thing that she owned broke when she died.

Taylor. She was Eliza’s best friend, her perfect companion even though she was three years older. When everyone else would turn away from the plain little girl in favor of gazing at her sister, Taylor would point the attention right back. She made sure that Eliza was never overlooked. But Taylor was sick. Her sickness is what created the box’s scar. It was what carved a hole in Eliza’s life for years. Now, at the age of 22, Eliza is just learning to move on. She has filled the hole in her heart with the love of a good man, a kindergarten teacher, whose blue eyes only show kindness. Robert, her saving grace. She does not bring the music box out of the closet often anymore, not since she moved in with Robert. During the move, she considered burying it, or burning the pieces. She considered breaking the only tie that she had left with her dead sister.

The little ballerina is resting inside the box, cold and broken. The scratch on the lid glares at her, forcing all of the memories back. Taylor wore a little red dress the
day she fell. It was brand new, and she was modeling it for Eliza, showing off the scars from her various surgeries as though they were trophies. Perhaps they were, the trophies of a young girl who had survived so much. The music box was playing its sweet lullaby, and the sisters were having a good time dancing around the room. Sometimes, it was easy to forget that Taylor was sick. When laughter found her and she stopped coughing, it was easy to overlook the bags around her eyes. It was easy to pretend that everything was okay.

It was a spring day, Taylor’s favorite season, when reality broke the happy illusions. After twirling around the room for the fifth time, she picked up the music box in order to rewind it. The coughing started as soon as played. The box was in her hands when she tumbled to the ground and the seizure began. Though it wasn’t the first seizure that Eliza had witnessed, she was young and did not know what to do, aside from call out to their parents. The box was trapped in Taylor’s fist when the paramedics came. After she was carried off, and her mother had disappeared with the ambulance, only Eliza and the broken ballerina remained. The box itself was still tucked against Taylor’s body. Waiting for her father to take Eliza to the hospital was heart-wrenching, as the littlest daughter relived her sister’s seizure, unable to change the past, unable to help. Finally, it was time to go.

By the time Eliza and her father made it to the hospital, the music box was all that remained of her sister. One of the nurses handed it over, thinking that it would console the little girl who was left alone while her parents grieved over the loss of their perfect daughter. Eliza buried all of her pain inside that box. Her tears trailed down her cheeks. The crack in the lid was glaring. After the funeral, Eliza’s mother poured all of her attention into making sure that her remaining daughter was safe. She smothered her with attention when all Eliza wanted was to be left alone. She did not
want the love that her mother reserved for Taylor. She did not want to fill her place. Eliza’s father grew distant. When he saw Eliza, he was reminded of the daughter he lost. Taylor’s death drove him to divorce his wife, so that he could escape his remaining child. He moved away and never looked back.

Robert thinks that they should throw the box away. He tells Eliza this in his softest voice, the one that he uses when reprimanding small children. He tells her this after he catches her sitting numbly on the floor of their bedroom, clutching it to her chest. She refuses to listen. How could he say that? How could he ask her to let her sister go? Every time he brings up the music box, Eliza locks the door to their bedroom. Robert sleeps on the couch. One day, when Eliza drags a stool into the closet to get the music box, it’s gone. The panic that grips Eliza causes her to fall off of the stool. She has to crouch on the floor in a ball to regain control of her breathing. When she stands, she sees red. Robert is sitting in the kitchen, casually reading the paper. He smiles up at her when she storms in.

“Please Love,” Robert says, “calm down. Please, just listen to me.”

“How could you do this to me? You said that you loved me!” Beneath all of the anger, Eliza’s heart breaks. She lost her sister. After the funeral, she lost her father. Now Robert, the person who fought for her more than anyone else, has betrayed her, and she is losing him too.

“Please, just let me explain. Come into the living room with me.”

Eliza does not want to listen. She wants to hold on to the anger, because if she lets it go, she will have nothing left. But Robert looks at her and those blue eyes are pleading. How could she refuse him, even after what he’s done? After
all, without Taylor, he is everything that she has.

Storming into the living room, Eliza decides that she will listen to his excuses, and then she’ll kick him out of their apartment. She stops short. Sitting on the coffee table is the music box. Except it is not the object that was hidden in the closet. The faded and stained wood has been polished. It gleams in the lamplight, clean and refurbished. The ballerina has returned to her position on the box’s lid, standing proud. Her faded features have been repainted. She is a porcelain beauty again, even though she does not resemble the ballerina from Eliza’s memories. The dress she wears is no longer a light pink. It is red. And the once blond hair has been dyed brown. The ballerina resembles Taylor on the day that she was lost. Her lips are curled up into a knowing smile, and she looks happy.

“What did you do,” Eliza hears herself asking. She cannot take her eyes off of the box.

“Now it looks like her.” Across the room, Robert smiles. “She’s happy, not broken.” Eliza’s tears are hot against her cheeks. “Thank you.” She wants to say more. There is nothing more to say. “Thank you.”

“Look inside. There’s something else in there for you.”

With careful steps, Eliza moves closer to the dancer. The porcelain is smooth against her palms. The crack in the lid is gone. When she opens it, the inside cushion is a blue velvet. Nestled in the center is a single ring. Eliza picks it up with shaking hands. More tears come, but she is not sad. Engraved inside the ring is a single word: “love.” When she looks up, Robert has dropped onto one knee.

“Marry me?” After so many years with him, the words should not shock Eliza. They do. Robert is kind and thoughtful. He restored the object that
meant the most to her. He understood that she could not
let it go. But it’s more than that, more than his care with the
music box. He managed to break through her insecurities
and get her to trust him, though she doesn’t even trust her
parents. She knows her answer.

The ballerina, her painted sister, smiles on as she
responds, “I do.”
DADDY
Rick Quintana

Holding her, holding me
Skin as soft and light as can be
She cries to be loved, cherished, and adored
Eyes wide open, looking at me
Being the best dad I can be

Holding him, holding me
Tiny hands gripping mine, tight as can be
He cries to be loved, cherished, and praised
Eyes wide open, looking at me
Being the best dad I can be
I have always hated the rain. When I was small, rain at its best meant not getting to play outside, and at its worst it meant the mighty Colorado thunderstorms that drove a branch through my second-story window when I was five, that ripped the shingles from our roof when I was six, that broke our kitchen windows with golf ball-sized hail when I was seven, that caused a power outage for two days when lightning struck a power line when I was eight. But I didn’t fear the rain until I was fourteen.

It was August, that time of year when hot, dry Pueblo enters its two weeks of wet season, and the town gets the majority of its annual precip. I knew that it tended to happen at this time of year, but my parents – I hadn’t realized it until this night – always made sure I was distracted, or they made the rain a game, a thing to be laughed at.

Dad and I are home, watching an old episode of Cops I’ve seen a million times. Mom and my little brother had gone to the store. Dad looks out the window and grins, says “Hey cool, look at those clouds!” I guess I could call him a meteorology enthusiast, he likes watching the weather, usually from a safe distance. So I follow him onto the back porch. We had gotten a small sprinkle earlier that day and the wood is still damp, and cool from the ever-present wind that stirs the sickly dust around. It’s mud now, though.

“You see, right over there?” Dad’s weathered and steady hand points towards the northeast. The clouds are the color of a chalkboard. “You see how they’re bumpy on the bottom? That’s called a mammatocumulus. They make really powerful thunderstorms.”

Great. He takes one look at my face and says “It’s nothing to worry about, though. The wind is blowing to the
west. It’ll go right by us. Okay?” I smile at him, grateful for the reassurance.

We return to the riveting episode of Cops. It’s around 3 in the afternoon, and the outside darkens to near-night. I keep restlessly glancing at the window until Dad pulls his computer onto his lap, loading his favorite radar page to show me that the storm is moving right past our house. Instead, he just kind of goes “huh…” which concerns me, of course. I look over his shoulder, and there, moving right towards the little dot labeled “home” is an immense cloud. It’s shaped like an arrowhead, purple in the middle and red fading to yellow all around the edges. Yeah, I should’ve seen that coming.

He looks up at my face, which I guess must have been pale, because he says “Are you going to be alright? I promise everything’s going to be ok. The wind is blowing the wrong way for any hail to hit our windows. It won’t spawn a tornado, we’re too close to the mountains. We’ll be fine, alright?” On cue, the old NOAA weather radio that we kept in the cabinet with all our VHS tapes turns itself on. Those panic-inducing pips that are meant to get your attention, that are akin to the psychological terror of the whistling of a falling bomb. The prescribed National Weather Service announcement plays, that garbled and gritty message listing the symptoms of the disaster that hasn’t happened yet.

The storm didn’t slowly creep over the top of us, it didn’t start with gentle rains and winds and progress into something monstrous. It was like the flip of a switch, and the rain was thrashing the roof so hard we could hardly hear ourselves talk. Lightning zigs by in the distance. We look at each other and count together. “One… Two… Three… Four…” The thunder rattles our windows. “12 miles away,” Dad says. He turns on the news and refreshes the radar page every minute. The news story is about
some convenience store break-in in the Springs. Our storm has been relegated to the scrolling bar at the bottom of the screen. Typical, if it’s not affecting the Springs, it’s not important. Lightning flares, and we count. We only make it to three this time before the thunder growls in the distance. A sun-bright flash stabs through the kitchen window, with an instantaneous crack of thunder that actually knocks a painting off our wall. I scream, pulse careening up to danger level, my hands and feet tingling with adrenaline, blinking the pink afterimage from my eyes. Dad starts to laugh. “Your face!” he says. I sort of huff, a hysterical laugh on the edge of a sob. He starts doing his rounds, calmly for my sake. Packing a worn out old towel under the front door where the seal is peeling, in case the wind drives the water towards the front door. Double checking to make sure all the windows are shut. He heads down to the basement. In a moment, I hear him calling.

“Umm, can you come down here for a second?” His voice is tense, underneath the cracking calm.

So I run. I reach the bottom, and I see Dad standing over by the closest window well, which is slowly filling up with water. He’s got the window open, bailing the silty water into an empty laundry tub sitting nearby. Panic starts to slosh into my skull in and muddy my head, but I shove it down because Dad’ll need my help.

“Can you call Mom and ask her to come home?” He says as he’s bailing. Mom is speed dial ‘1’. It just rings and rings, frustratingly. “Come on…” I mutter, punching it again. I stand at the bottom of the stairs, listening to the generic ring… and the sound of my personalized ringtone on her phone, somewhere upstairs.

“She doesn’t have it on her, she left it here!” I nearly wail, slamming my phone shut, turning back to Dad. The situation has become urgent while I was calling her. He’s bailing out water as fast as he can, and it’s still not enough.
When two laundry tubs are full, and the water has spilled over the edge of the sill into a mini-waterfall, he slams the window shut and leans against it, dropping his bailing bucket. His arms are muddy up to the elbows. His brown eyes, my brown eyes, are open wide and shifting rapidly back and forth, as if he’s reading a blueprint only he can see.

“Alright, here’s what we’re gonna do. I know what happened, that stupid son-of-a-bitch mole I’ve been trying to catch dug a hole right under the downspout to this window well, so all the water in the spouts are emptying into it. I’m going to go up and try to fix it, can you go to the garage and grab me some duct tape?”

I take the stairs three at a time. Amongst all Dad’s tools, somewhere, there’s a roll of duct tape, somewhere, somewhere here. The panic is making it hard to think and I can’t find it and I can’t go out there without it! It’s not where it usually is and I’m reeling, whirling in circles, and stinging tears, blind terror and shame, are blurring my vision. Through the frantic fog in my panicked head cuts a bolt of light: the thought that there’s some duct tape, some decorative purple camouflage duct tape for projects in my room, and I know exactly where it is. Grinding mud into my carpet, I grab it blindly and tear for the back door.

Outside it’s dark, except for when sheets of lightning turn everything to sharp light and shadows. The thunder sounds like a fleet of planes overhead, but too loud, and shot through with an occasional concussion-grenade crack that shakes my heart in my chest. It’s quite literally as if I’ve stepped into a cold shower, soaked to the skin in seconds. My bare feet slipping in the mud, I don’t even feel the tumbleweeds tearing at my feet and legs. I round the corner, skid and slap down into the mud, the duct tape held high like the Olympic torch, like the spear of a screaming warrior emerging from an ambush. I mustn’t get mud on it, it’ll ruin Dad’s plan.
I shove it, triumphant, into his hands, and he asks me to hold this blue, muddy tarp in a U shape, under the downspout. It’s slipping, the water gushing from the spout knocking it from my shaking hands. *No itsy bitsy spider could have survived this* spins through my mind, absurdly. My hair is hanging heavy in my eyes. Once Dad’s perfunctorily taped it, he shouts over the sound of the rain thrashing against the ground, and the thunder’s long growl. “Can you go inside? I’ve got the rest of this, but I need you to try and stop the water from coming inside!”

I nod, constant, unnoticed hot tears being washed away by the torrential rain. I run through the garage, leaving a trail of muddy, sloppy footprints. I slip and nearly fall down the stairs, throwing my hands out to grab at the rail. The concrete at the bottom of the stairs is wet with an inch of water, and I see an ocean. The only thing I can think of is that our washer and dryer are down the hall, and if they get wet they could electrify the whole basement floor. I drag a rug over to the hallway and wad it up, like a sandbag, against the flood.

The water in the window well is up above my head. There’s at least three solid feet of water sloshing around in there. Not knowing what else to do, I press my back against it, trying to hold it up, praying it isn’t going to break. The water surging through the seams around the window washes down my back and legs.

I sing, in a panicked, broken, sobbing voice. Anything I can remember, anything that could help me calm down. Disney songs, old hymns, anything that comes into my head, I sing. I sing to keep my sanity, and laugh-sob when I think that maybe the fact that I *am* is a sign that I’ve lost it.

Time ceases to have meaning. I can’t even explain if it feels like a long time or short. I hear a sudden noise behind me, and I turn to see Dad, standing waist deep in the
muddy water, bailing it out with a bucket. It’s not raining as hard, I can hear. Lightning continues to flash, the thunder a constant, distant rumble.

When all the water is out of the window well, I continue leaning up against it. I don’t have the will to move again yet. My legs are shaking from cold and terror. Dad comes downstairs, his bare feet muddy to the knee, his black hair plastered to his skull, his clothing water-dark and sagging. There’s a single drop of water clinging to the tip of his nose. He looks at me leaning up against the window, and there’s silence for a long moment, a small eternity. In a small, quavery voice, I say “I… I didn’t know what else to do…”

Before I’m even aware I’m moving, we collide and I wrap my arms around him. It’s not a hug, both more and less than that. It’s the clutch of a drowning person clinging to a life raft and a veteran with his arm around a rookie after a grueling battle. It’s a dad and a daughter, mutual survivors of one hell of an ordeal.

I bury my face into his soaked shirt, shaking uncontrollably. He holds me for a long time. Eventually, we help each other up the stairs. He puts a worn beach towel in my hands. It’s the one with flamingos on it. “Go change into something warm and dry. Maybe take a hot shower.” I want to ask if it’s safe while there’s still lightning flaring everywhere out there, but I don’t really care.

I obsessively dry myself off, wringing my hair out multiple times so I don’t have to feel it soaking into my pajama shirt. I brush the tears away with the towel, scrubbing at the dried salt trails. I sit on the couch, tucking myself under blankets. I’m still shaking uncontrollably, violent tremors in my hands making it hard to hold anything. The scratches on my legs are itchy from the gentle toxin the tumbleweeds carry. I can feel my heartbeat in my fingertips, my eyes. The pajama shirt is visibly moving with the force of the
thunderous beat. Mom sits gently next to me on the couch, handing me a hot cup of tea. Dad must have debriefed her, because she puts an arm around me and says “I am so proud of you for tonight. You had to step into a place that should have been my responsibility, and you never should’ve had to do that.” A sudden concern hits me, and all I can say is “I don’t blame you,” before my throat closes up and I start crying. Again. She sits with her arm around me until I stop shaking. The whole time, she says she feels like a terrible mother, that she should have brought her phone, that they shouldn’t have waited the storm out at the store. I whimper “It’s not your fault!” dozens of times, through a tight, sore throat.

My brother, sitting in an armchair and watching us, says the basement flooding wasn’t that big a deal, and if he had been there, he would have dealt with it much better than I did. He says it was just such a typical girl thing to do, cry about something like rain. He says I’m a wimp. I punch him in the eye. It’s gratifying that neither Mom nor Dad yell at me.

I was never formally diagnosed, but I knew what it was. I had nightmares for years. Still do, occasionally. Panic attacks whenever it rained or even looked like it was going to. Horrible shame for making Mom feel guilty, for making such a big deal out of something that shouldn’t have been.

The first time it happened, I told no one. It was the middle of the night, the quietest hour when there aren’t even any cars on the highway, and the whole world is holding its breath, waiting for the dawn. That’s why the slight, sweet sound woke me. For a minute, there was disorientation as rational thought tossed off its blankets, and a flood of adrenaline when my scarred mind grasped what the sound was. I wept into my pillow, telling myself that it was gentle rain and nothing would happen, trying to stop the
shaking, to breathe, to convince myself I wasn’t going to die. Eventually the rain stopped, and I cried myself to sleep.

Most people love the sound of rain drumming on their roof at night. That gentle sound shakes me awake, into a living nightmare that I can’t escape with a pinch.
I hang on to people’s features
like flesh and blood souvenirs
strung like candy-string necklaces
on their split veins
and your eyes
are uncut diamonds

You must understand,
I am violent

You reach for me
palms pooling in honesty
and I want to sink
my teeth
into your wrists,
rip your pulse from your neck,
like if I could just make sure you bleed,
I’d believe in your authenticity

And you must understand,
I will ruin things first
resurrect them second
and in between,
I will choke on my tongue a thousand times
extracting apologies from my gallbladder since
they can’t make it to my lips
through all the ice packed between my ribs

You are a log house
burning down brilliantly
and I am a flickering desk light
fighting for its life

I don’t know which door you used to
let yourself in,
but I’m dying to shove you back out
once I find it again

You can keep prying
at all my rusty edges
but this armor’s been intact
since I slipped and landed
on the blade a forgotten face
slipped between the plates
of my shoulders

The sole mission of this vessel is to never
wreck on the same rocks twice

I wish I could make it easy
but defense is my specialty

Iron will melt
but not before it writhes inside itself so
please, don’t touch me

I don’t want the reminder
your burnt fingertips whisper
to the waxing crescent-moon curve
of my bowing back
proving that I am
lethal,
illegal,
the brick this time
and not
the windowpane
I hate waking up alone. While silence hangs delicately in the early morning air of my apartment, I force myself from the embrace of my bed and pull a pair of black cotton sweatpants on one leg at a time. Sleep still tugs at my eyelids as I cross the expanse between my bed and the door, creeping quietly into the dim lit hallway of my floor and past the repeating faceless facades of doors concealing the still-sleeping other apartment owners along with their unprecedented habitats. Reaching the creaky fire exit with the broken alarm, I wrench open the heavy, metal, black door and climb the remaining stairs to the roof. Another unwilling groan from the previous moaning door’s twin and suddenly the cool autumn air of early October is running its chilly fingers through my hair. I cross the length of the concrete roof to the matching concrete ledge that after 12 inches drops 30 floors to an asphalt ending. This doesn’t scare me though. I perch myself on that ledge and turn my eyes to the smoldering skyline. Scarlet rays split the indigo morning, turning it lilac, then pale pink. The rays expand until they blend together into a single bowing arch of red, yellow, orange. The sky continues to lighten while the sun decides which color to wear today. And then finally, she’s there. I trace her path into the new morning by the parts of my face warming under kiss. In this moment, I am not alone.

That’s why they’re called moments, however, because they’re over in a moment. I’m the girl watching the sun rise, alone, on the roof of her apartment building again. I sigh, and quickly hop down from my perch and turn back to the moaning, groaning door. It takes me half the time to get down as it did to get up. Back within the confines of my apartment, I shower myself, feed myself. As I’m dress-
ing myself, I pull two shirts from my closet: one floral and red, reminding me of the sun; one black and tight-fitting, reminding me of a smoker’s lungs. Pulling the black shirt over my head I sigh again, gazing at the crumpled red shirt looking like a puddle of spilt blood against the hardwood. I light a cigarette and walk back out my door.

At school, I walk quickly and religiously on the right hand side. The flow of traffic on foot is remarkably similar to that of the road. Left turns are always dangerous. I collide with a dark-haired light-eyed boy who explodes in apology when my books fly from my hands. I don’t miss a beat. I am an expert at being invisible. I drop to the ground, collecting the books as quickly as possible; more concerned with the attention I’m accumulating by blocking thru traffic. The boy picks up one of my notebooks at the same time that I close my fingers around the spine. Our eyes meet. It’s like a movie. I wrinkle my nose.

“I’m so sorry again.”
“It’s fine.”
“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you before.”
“You haven’t.”
“Well,” he pulls the notebook from my grasp, flips open the cover, and scribbles seven digits sloppily; a crafty move, why am I so unimpressed? “I’d like to see you again.” He finishes, handing me back the notebook like it’s suddenly become a gift. I return his smile. He settles for it as affirmation. When he walks away, I linger for a bit longer feeling a little like a derailed train. When I walk away, I am dreaming. I see two shimmering silhouettes on the roof while the sun rises. I hear the skin on skin scuff of tangled limbs and the breathy whisper of bubbling giggles interrupting the too familiar silence of my apartment. I curl my fist at my side, feeling the warm ghost of a could-be hand lacing its fingers in my own, and I want it. I want it, I want it, I want it so bad. It is a beast, this want, clawing at the inside of my rib-
cage. I have to stop myself by an iron bench with a matching waste basket welded to its side. I fish around in my bag until my fingers close around the thin body of a cigarette. I light it and inhale deeply, silencing the hunger in my chest by feeding it carcinogens instead of company. I throw the entire notebook in the trash and walk away.

When I am home again, I put on the same black cotton sweatpants one leg at a time. I cross the space between my bed and the door, creeping out into the dimly lit hallway of my apartment building and up the faulty fire exit to the roof again. I perch on the precarious ledge, light a cigarette, and watch the trails of smoke softly twist and slither out toward the blazing horizon line. The sun, having completed her day, is lowering herself into the night like it’s a bath; spinning the clouds into cotton candy in the process. My eyes close just as she submerges herself.

Without warning, an image of the dark haired, light eyed boy sitting next to me, his cigarette smoke entwined with mine slips into my mind. My eyes fly open and I violently squash the thought. The first stars are batting their eyelashes at me from above. There’s not enough room for anyone to sit with me on this ledge anyways. My stomach rolls in recognition of a lie as another image, one of me and a light-haired light-eyed light beam of a boy wrapped carefully around each other, balanced expertly from months of practice on the smooth stone of this ledge, escapes the box of memories I stapled shut and shoved to a corner of my consciousness long ago. The sky becomes a gradient of dusty blue to velvet black and I’m staring at my hands folded in the plush fabric of his old sweatpants that I’m now wearing. I take a final drag from my cigarette and toss it off the ledge, watching the glowing ember extinguish as it falls to its death. I exhale the smoke slowly, recalling the first time I smoked a cigarette. It was right here on this roof. The day still plucks notes on my heartstrings I don’t recognize
anymore.

I’m standing there, facing the horizon, watching the sun. The light boy is a silhouette, becoming my view as he reaches for me with warm palms the size of home. I remember him smelling like tobacco and car exhaust. His lips touch my forehead and I’m crumbling, the floodgates behind my irises pulsing with eminent fracture. When he’s gone, I wobble to the ledge with my remaining pieces. A pack of his cigarettes sits where we usually do every morning and evening. I cradle the little boxy container in my shaking hands. There is only one missing. I picture it dangling between his lips while he drives away, his one suitcase packed and thrown in the bed of his truck. I smoked every cigarette left in the pack that afternoon. I didn’t leave the roof until I’d developed a new addiction.

The dark haired boy probably doesn’t smoke cigarettes anyways. Girls who do probably turn him off. I hop down from my delicate perch as the sky finally decides to become a sea of ink. I cross the length of the roof back to the door that complains more than I do. I take a final look back at the dark, quiet roof. I don’t need anyone anyways. I slip inside the door and pad back to my floor. It takes me half as long to get down as it did to get up. Back in my apartment, I shower myself, feed myself, and put myself to bed. Lying flat on my back, I wait for unconsciousness to claim me. I hate going to sleep alone.
SORRY, I’M FRENCH
Justine Truc

Jouer avec les mots n’est pas chose facile
Dont le résultat est imprévisible.

Et puis, lorsque minuit enfin arrive,
Ma traduction devient imprévisible.

Certains d’entre vous, je vous rendrai ridicule
Car c’est la façon dont j’agis, imprévisible!

Langage est créateur de toutes les règles
Et sa traduction en est d’autant plus imprévisible.

Et, quand minuit sonne une fois de plus,
Quelle langue parler? Tout est imprévisible...
WATER’S REFLECTION
Beau Reed

You know I saw you today,
In a not so old memory,
Out here on this lake,
In the water’s tranquility.

You wore that contagious smile,
Favorite fishing reel in hand,
Cowboy hat tipped down low,
Drifting causally towards the land.

So many things I wanted to say,
But things I know you knew,
So I just smiled and turned away,
Thankful for this memory of you.
ODE TO MY TYPEWRITER
Alison Gervais

Sometimes I’m me
Sometimes I’m a typewriter

Old and unused
outdated
because out of sight equals
out of mind

Set on a bookcase
I collect dust

Until that day you stumble upon me
one day while you’re cleaning,
rearranging things
smelling like Lysol disinfectant

You haul me off the bookcase and
you set me on the table
press your fingers gently
against my keys,
creating rivulets in dust

You can’t find any paper but
you assume I’ve
run out of ink

Ink is expensive
Who uses paper anymore?

So you
decide to give me
away at the next church rummage sale

But
I am worth being fixed

Because I long for the time
where you sit down
slide me in to place
press your fingers
against my keys
and tell me
your secrets

Tell me your sins
and tragedies
your hopes
your dreams
and I’ll keep it
forever

And I’ll fall in love
with the way you
come alive
as you write

The way your brow creases,
you bite your lip
run fingers through your hair
the fire in your eyes
as you fall deeper
and deeper
into a trance
as you write

And if a few tears

100
escape as you
recall
some
memory
I'll never tell

It’ll stay between you and I

Until the next time
you take me off
that bookcase
and we
begin anew

Because my
blood
is
ink
and when it
runs
and
stains
it’s permanent.
DESTRUCTION OF ALL THINGS NATURAL
Madison Tortessi

Words are easy when they are not mine to type.
Face to face, I shudder, but text is enough to live.

Soft fingers touch smooth glass to stay alive,
while mushy sterile brains have nothing new to live.

My ashen skin knows the feel of plastic, not
the feel of warm skin in which we live.

White light illuminates innocent eyes,
plastic and glass keep us too busy to live.

Static noise echoes in my virgin ears.
Nothing natural, nothing whole, nothing left to live.

Black smoke from stubborn motors choke
my life. I dream of air, breathe in pure sky, so I can live.

Oil my robot joints, I am breaking free.
Spread your wings, Madison, fly, you are alive.
SO KILL ME
Madison Tortessi

You know you do, you kill me well.*
My final breath is gone, gone far away,
you like it too, and I can tell.*

You stole my pumping heart to sell
it to the devil, you always had your way.
Because you know you do, you kill me well.

One harsh kiss, on lips, then farewell,
and I miss all the pain you send my way.
And you like it too, and I can tell.

Sweet serenades fill your lungs with lies to tell
me while the moonlight burns the day.
You know you do, you kill me well.

Tripped on my beating heart, and down I fell.
I looked into your eyes. I saw desperate pain.
You like it too, and I can tell.

Moonlight daggers pierced my heart. Farewell!
A fire in my heart burns away the pain.
Because you know you do, you kill me well.
You like it too, and I blame you.

*"Ohio is for Lovers” by Hawthorne Heights
It’s funny how I can miss him when I barely remember him.

I was ten years old and he was twelve—and we were both in the fifth grade. I always thought that was funny because he was exactly two years and two days older than me. He was tall and gangly with dirty blonde hair; he was loud and obnoxious. He had a shitty home life. We met in Mr. Hyatt’s fifth grade class. He gave us a project to do and he was going to choose our partners for us.

“Great. Group work,” I thought. I still don’t like group work.

I was the last to get my partner, and as I looked around the room I realized the only person left without a partner was him. I was so mad. I couldn’t believe Mr. Hyatt would partner me with him. I silently pouted to myself. The boy, he seemed to care less. He was talking a hundred miles a minute and was cracking bad jokes and poking me in the side. He was so loud and hyper and could never stay on task. That’s when I decided, “I’m going to be mean. I’ll make him work.” So that’s what I did. I told him to sit down, and I told him that he had to actually participate in the assignment. I made him work and when he started to get out of hand I would glare at him. He would giggle and get back to work.

Mr. Hyatt knew I was upset for making me work with him. Then, Mr. Hyatt told me something that I hadn’t thought of, something that changed the way I thought about this loud, obnoxious boy—something that would change me forever. He said, “I know you are upset and don’t want to work with him, but you are the only one who can make him do his work. You are the only one that he will listen to.”
made a great project together. I don’t remember what we made, but I remember how excited I was and how well we worked together to create an awesome project.

I found what Mr. Hyatt had said to be true, not only for this boy, but for other fellow peers throughout the rest of my school years. Teachers were always pairing me with students like him, and I always reminded myself what Mr. Hyatt had told me when I was in fifth grade. I found that I could keep them on task and make them work. Maybe I am just mean so they listened, or maybe, like that boy, they found security, a place where they wouldn’t be judged. Everybody has secrets, and I knew, like that boy, that sometimes home wasn’t such a good place to be. So school was an escape, a safe place—at least it should be. This boy, abandoned by his mother, lived in foster care. He would come to school bruised and broken. His foster dad had his own way to deal with his obnoxious behavior. I felt horrible. What could I do? I had to help him.

A unique friendship formed with him. We were nearly inseparable throughout the rest of fifth grade and following into the next year. We went to the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo for a field trip, and we sat next to each other on the bus. We laughed and talked the whole way up. We walked the whole zoo together. My mom had given me five dollars to spend in the gift shop. I remember how excited I was that she had given me this money so I put it in a safe place so I wouldn’t lose it.

When we got to the zoo we all rushed to the gift shop, and there in the middle of the shop was a tall and colorful candy dispenser. It seemed to be as wide as a small car—it took forever to walk all the way around it! It probably had thirty giant sections with different flavors of pixy stick dust, ranging from blue raspberry to coconut to boy-senberry (whatever that was). We mostly picked the candy by color: bright blue, magenta, lime green. There were so
many colors we were practically gawking with our mouths open. I told him that we could pick out what colors we wanted and we could share a giant pixy stick. So we picked out what we wanted but as I reached down into my pants pocket to reassure myself that my money was still there, it wasn’t.

I searched everywhere. I checked my pockets twice, three, four, a hundred times. We walked back to the bus and checked the ground, we checked the bus. We checked everywhere, but it was gone. I was so upset. I wanted so badly to buy him a pixy stick, something he would love and something that he could remember.

On the way back home, I was sitting in the bus seat, slouching, feeling a little sorry for myself to be honest, when out of the blue he pointed to the little tiny pocket on my white shirt and said, “Did you check that pocket?” I pulled that crisp five dollar bill out of my shirt pocket. We laughed the whole way home.

It was sixth grade that he told me the news. His aunt from Michigan was gaining custody of him. If ever there is a time when you can feel two opposite emotions at the same time, this was one of those times. I was so excited and happy for him, and yet, I felt like my heart wasrenched from my chest. Maybe his aunt in Michigan was really nice and he could escape his evil foster dad. Maybe she really loved him and was battling for custody of him for years and was finally able to win the battle. Maybe she had a beautiful white home with an ice rink in the backyard and a front yard with green grass and bicycles on the porch. Maybe Michigan had a zoo and his aunt could buy him an unlimited supply of colorful pixy sticks. Maybe, just maybe, he could be happy there, but a part of me wondered—feared—that this wasn’t going to be a better situation. I feared that his aunt, whom I had never heard about before then, was going to be just like his foster dad.
He was supposed to leave in February of our sixth grade year. So if he was going to leave me, I was going to send him off right. I put together a going-away-package for him. It had hair gel, because he always had to have his hair looking nice, Big Red gum, because it was his favorite, a pink t-shirt that read “Real men wear pink,” well, because it’s true, and a scrapbook that I put together. It had pictures of us and a letter that I wrote him, memories that we shared and a promise—a promise that we would stay in contact. I put every single form of contact that I could think of in that book and I made him promise he would call me as soon as he arrived.

I gave him his care package before we left for Christmas Break even though he wasn’t supposed to leave until February. I guess I sort of thought of it as a going-away/Christmas present.

On the last day of school before we left for Christmas Break, in Ms. Cox’s math class, I gave him his present and we went our separate ways. I probably said “see ya,” and maybe we even hugged. We left that ugly orange and brown classroom as if it was just another day. I don’t remember what he was wearing, but whenever I think about him, he is always wearing a dusty blue shirt, hair slicked back to perfection, and that stupid grin of his plastered across his face.

Plans changed. He left during Christmas Break. I came back to school in January searching for him in vain.

We stayed in contact for almost a year after he left. We would spend hours on the phone together. For his fifteenth birthday—two days before my thirteenth birthday—I called him to wish him a happy birthday, but what I heard was not his voice.

“We’re sorry, but the phone number you are trying to reach has been disconnected.”

* * *
It has been nearly nine years since I have seen this boy. By now he is twenty-two years old. When I think about him, I wonder what happened. I want to believe that he graduated high school and maybe even college. I want to believe that his aunt loves him and that maybe he found a beautiful girl whom he married.

The truth is, I have no idea. The truth is, I don’t even know if he is alive—let alone alive and well. I have searched for him on MySpace, Facebook, a general Google search. I can’t find him. That recorded female voice still haunts me. It’s as if he never existed, but I know he did. I feel his presence in my heart, the memories in my soul.

When I met my boyfriend nearly three years after the last time I saw this boy, he told me something I will never forget, something that has stayed in my heart.

My boyfriend experienced a tragedy long before I ever met him. His brother committed suicide. And he has struggled with that tragedy and he always will.

Right after we met, I hugged him after school. It was a bright and hot summer day and I think I was wearing my favorite Green Day t-shirt, the one with the red rose coming out of the barrel of a pistol. I hugged my boyfriend and I said “goodbye.”

“Don’t say goodbye,” he had pleaded.
“Why not?”
“Don’t say goodbye, because ‘goodbye’ means forever.”

So goodbye, my obnoxious boy. You are forever in my heart. Goodbye.
Authors’ Bios

Carolyn Andrew is a student at CSU-Pueblo.

Justin Brown is an English Major with an emphasis in Creative Writing. He has been a voracious reader since childhood and spent much of his time during middle school and high school classes reading when he was most certainly supposed to be doing something else. Not much has changed over time. His writing, both fiction and non-fiction, is inspired by experiences from his life that won't leave him alone.

Daniel Conroy currently pursues a double major in both Chemistry and Biology. “The Beast” was inspired by analysis of the conversation many of his associates held about both each other and themselves. The lack of self-love made his soul revile and this is the expression that came as a reaction. “The Looming Threat of Humanity” was inspired by a thirteen hour car drive to California. As a first year Junior at CSU-Pueblo, Daniel hopes to maintain opportunities for expression while pursuing his degree.

Jynecca Cronk is an English Major, President of the English Club, and a senior at CSU-Pueblo.

Jamal Duran is a student at CSU-Pueblo.

Shannon Espinoza is a CSU-Pueblo English major with minors in both Professional Writing and Music. She plans to begin her graduate degree in Library Science at Kent State in the Fall. Shannon has a love of research and poetry, and frequently looks for ways to merge the two. Her poems, “The Life and Death of Diane Arbus” and “Daphne”, are the results of such a pairing.
Bryana Ewing is an English Major with a Women’s Studies Minor, and is a Junior at CSU-Pueblo. Her short story “Memories in a Music Box” highlights how we place meaning upon various objects and how that attachment can continue throughout our lives.

Olivia Foraker is a student at CSU-Pueblo.

Andrew Garcia is an aspiring writer and CSU-Pueblo alumni with plans of becoming an English teacher in the near future. His poem “Dirt Encrusted Diamond” was inspired by his first love, the game of Baseball. This piece first took shape his freshman year when he was inspired by an English instructor. Then by his senior year his poem had been finished, with the guidance and inspiration from his poetry professor.

Alison Gervais is a Creative Writing major at CSU-Pueblo and enjoys spending most of her time reading, or with her Underwood typewriter.

Madison Gill is an aspiring writer in her sophomore year at Colorado State University Pueblo, and is majoring in English Literature with an emphasis in Creative Writing. She hopes to publish a novel and a book of her poetry as well as various other pieces of her work at some point in her future career and claims that, “Love is what inspires it all.”

Cala Grayson is an Economics/Finance Major, a member of the Climbing Club, and currently has ten books overdue to the library. His work, “Osamu Tezuka’s Star System,” was fueled by a love of graphic novels and the fact that on the day it was written, it was actually due an hour ago to a very fashionable, but no-nonsense professor. Fortunately, the
situation turned out just fine.

**Cody Griebel** is a student at CSU-Pueblo.

**Ecthelion Moore** is an English Major at CSU-Pueblo. He is currently working on completing a novel trilogy alongside several other projects.

**Michael Montoya** is a junior at CSU-P in the process of gaining my Bachelor’s degree in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing and a minor in Spanish. He graduated cum laude from Pueblo Community College with a liberal arts degree. He loves to write and explore all forms of writing genres, especially essays. He has also self-published a poetry book and is currently working on two more books. He hopes to graduate and pursue a teaching degree in order to give back to the community of Pueblo, where he has been a lifelong resident.

**Sean Morrell** is a creative writing student at CSU-Pueblo. His poem, “This Metamorphosis Suffocates” was inspired by the imprisoned feeling that sometimes accompanies change, and a rather annoying moth attack.

**Alec Portillos** is an English major at Colorado State University-Pueblo and also an aspiring novelist and writer. About his piece, he writes “The main inspiration for the creation of this particular piece is actually a part of a work in progress I’ve been working on for a couple years. I’ve always enjoyed writing violent and psychological thrillers in terms of fiction, and I felt that this piece would be the most appropriate.”

**Heather Quackenbush** holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Colorado State University-Pueblo. She writes mainly
in the genres of poetry and fiction. Her poem “About Your Madness Miss Dickinson...” was created as a response to Emily Dickinson’s poem “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” (620) and was inspired through the works of Dan Vera.

**Rick Quintana** is a Spanish-Native American Indian native of Pueblo, Colorado. He grew up in El Cerrito, New Mexico and graduated from Pueblo East High. He attended Al Collins Graphic Design School, in Tempe, Arizona, Pueblo Community College, and transferred to Colorado State University-Pueblo. He is an actor and director, interned with the Sangre de Cristo Arts and Conference Center, and an ad sales representative for the CSU-P Today magazine. He is a junior and a PHEF scholar recipient currently studying as a mass communications major with an emphasis in integrated communications and attaining a minor in professional writing set to graduate in spring 2016.

**Beau Reed** completed his B.A. in English at CSU-Pueblo in December of 2014. With a love for storytelling, he dabbles as a poet, dramatist, and script writer. He also hopes to continue his education and teach English and Creative Writing at a university level.

**Megan Robles** is an English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis. Her poem “the storm” is a reflection of her experience with sexual assault and the way rape culture is viewed in today society.

**Andrea Rule** is a Creative Writing Major in her senior year at CSU-Pueblo. She enjoys reading and writing fantasy stories. After she graduates, she wishes to become an author. “The Sound of Rain” is a true story, and she found writing it very therapeutic.
Ellysha Siegwarth is a nursing student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Christy Wiabel Smith is a senior Mass Communications major and student editor of the CSU-Pueblo Today online site and magazine. Her story, ‘Satan’s Makeover,’ was inspired by a tabloid headline and is her first attempt at writing humor. If the story ever makes it to film, she hopes Tom Hiddleston will accept the lead role.

Madison Tortessi, a Pueblo native, is an English major with a secondary education emphasis at CSU-Pueblo. She is expecting to graduate in the spring of 2016 and aspires to teach English at the secondary level. Her poem, “Destruction of All Things Natural” was inspired by the technological world that we have come to know as home, and her poem “So Kill Me,” was inspired by her love for music. Her non-fiction piece “Goodbye” was inspired by a long lost friend, in that hopes that she may one day find him.

Justine Truc is a student at CSU-Pueblo.

Jessi-Lynne Welch recently graduated from CSU-Pueblo with a major in Sociology and minor in Creative Writing. Her poem, “Romancing a Star,” is an anthropomorphized description of the relationship between the two stars in a binary star system which are pulled together by their gravity, eventually colliding in a Supernova.

Kyra Williams earned her Bachelors Degree in Music from Colorado State University-Pueblo. She is currently working towards her Masters in Creative Writing through Southern New Hampshire University, while working as a youth pastor.
Submission Guidelines

*Tempered Steel* is Colorado State University-Pueblo’s annually published Literary Magazine. The magazine accepts student submissions of poetry, drama, fiction, and creative non-fiction.

Students interested in submitting their creative works for consideration can do so through [https://temperedsteel.submittable.com/submit](https://temperedsteel.submittable.com/submit). The submission process will ask students to include a cover letter about their submitted work. They will also be asked to remove any author identification and replace it with their PID number.

*Tempered Steel* accepts multiple submissions from students. By submitting to Tempered Steel, students agree that the work is original, has not been published elsewhere, and grants the magazine the right to publish it both in print and on their website. Students retain all copyrights to their submissions and will be allowed to assign any subsequent publishing rights as seen fit.

For more information about *Tempered Steel* or the submission process, please email us at juan.morales@csupueblo.edu.