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Tempered Steel strives to overcome the challenges of being a minimally funded, obscure, and exclusive production by embodying the diverse student population present on the CSU-Pueblo campus. Our contributors come from a varied group of majors—Political Science, Mass Communication, English, Chemistry, Psychology, and more—contributing their words, ingenuity, and creativity to bring this magazine together.

The production process of Tempered Steel, from the writers to the editors to the artists, epitomizes the cohesion and development of community through the poetry, fiction, and nonfiction pieces you are about to read. Of the multitude of works, anonymously submitted, it took fierce deliberation by the staff to choose the pieces present in this issue. From these, several subtle undertones emerged: the conflict between adulthood and fantasy, manifested through experiences of loss, nature, family, and the general strangeness of life.

These themes echo the journey of the staff, who had to weigh and debate the various merits and aspects of each respective piece, bearing the responsibility of professional editors while allowing themselves the creative freedom to shape the voice of the magazine.

Thank you to all the contributors, readers, and staff, each of whom was equally valuable in helping put together this edition of Tempered Steel. Without you, Tempered Steel would not be what it is today.

Zeta Poulin and Cala Grayson,
On behalf of the Tempered Steel editorial staff
Andrea Rule

There’s Only Dirt Down the Rabbit Hole

No matter how much you wish there could be something magical hidden away, There’s nothing unusual at all in this wood.

You like to pretend in blind childhood. Adults know better, and they always say, oh, there’s nothing unusual at all in this wood.

No magic-scorched glade, no little red hood, no wise, bearded wanderer cloaked in grey, no matter how much you wish there could.

Jabbers don’t wock here, no elf ever stood to catch upon fair face the light of the day or search for trespassers hid in their wood.

No relics of battle between evil and good. No pack of direwolves cornering prey, No matter how much you wish there could.

If still you search, and you’re not sure you should, don’t let adulthood get in your way. But no matter how much you wish there could, there’s nothing unusual at all in this wood.
Samantha Lacy

Sunday Mourning

I am restless after days hiding away from drunken voicemails and slurred apologies in a bed of regret. After being tethered by blankets and a melancholy that sticks to the insides of my cheeks like hard candy, my legs scream with gratitude in time to the shrieking kettle. My feet pad across the kitchen tile as I make my way through the squeaking door to the back porch, my footsteps sending ripples through the moon’s puddle of a reflection. The tea bag bobs up and down in my mug, struggling for air as steam rises and swirls away. I fold myself into an old lawn chair, and in between sips, I take drags of my Marlboro Red. Chills crawl up my back leaving bumps and tingles as the crisp morning air curls around me. Seeping from my mouth and rising from the cigarette dangling from my lips, the smoke climbs through the air with bony skeleton claws. Crickets harp their tunes, their staccatos interrupting the early mourning. I close my eyes and suck the last breath from the cigarette as it does the same to me. My thumb traces the now vacant spot on my left ring finger, and at 3:18 in the morning I find myself at the bottom of an empty mug, as drained and alone as the tea bag.
A Life in the Day

It was a Sunday. By the time she had woken up and stumbled to the kitchen, it was already past noon. She burned her mouth on the coffee she had brewed in a futile attempt to cure the hangover that made her feel as though she’d been shot through the skull. *Fuck*, she thought as she spilled some of the coffee on the men’s button up that she was wearing; the shock coming partly from the burning coffee and partly from the fact that she was positive that she didn’t own any men’s shirts. She set the cup on the windowsill and picked up the pack of Marlboro Lights and the lighter that lived by the window. She inhaled deeply, letting the smoke envelop her lungs and shoot straight to her brain. She exhaled the smoke in a thin stream that cascaded over the closed window. Her landlord was always telling her not to smoke inside, but she had enough money that it really didn’t matter what she did or didn’t do. She heard a creak that made her jump and glance towards the bedroom door. She made her way over to the room and pushed the door open. A man with dark hair was passed out in a heap on top of the sheets. She vaguely remembered him from last night. *What was his name? Martin? Michael?* She was getting forgetful. She walked to the bathroom, making no effort to stay quiet. She unscrewed the cap on the pill bottle, washed three of the white pills down with the remnants of whatever was in the wine glass tipped precariously on the sink, and got in the shower. When she got out, the entire bathroom was filled with steam; she liked her showers scalding. She threw on a thin robe and emerged in a cloud from
the bathroom. She saw that the man had gone and in his place, there was a note that said: “Had a great time last night, can’t wait to see you again –Dylan.” Shit. She went back out to the bright, chrome kitchen to scrounge up some kind of breakfast. She saw a pie, still in its pan. **Who the hell brings a pie to a party?** It was then that she even remembered that there had been a party (she usually never needed an occasion to drink). She scanned the room and looked at the wreckage. Confetti was everywhere, cigarette butts scattered the floor, lamps were missing their shades, the white fur rug was stained red. She made the decision that mimosas would suffice as breakfast. She opened the fridge and realized there wasn’t any orange juice. In fact, the fridge contained only an apple, lettuce, a moldy item that she thought might have been a pear, and booze. Champagne, vodka, rum, wine, and scotch (which she liked to refrigerate). She popped the cork off of the bottle of champagne and began to drink. By the time she had gotten ready to face the day, she had polished off two bottles. **No one has a need to drive in New York, so everyone can drink.** That was her reasoning; hell, that was one of the reasons she moved to New York in the first place. She tied up her tangled black hair, put on a large pair of sunglasses, and left the apartment. She knew it would be clean by the time she got back. That was one of the perks of being a trust-fund baby; the only love she got from her parents was their making sure she didn’t die in a dirty apartment and keeping the flow of money into her bank account constant (which was the way that she liked it). The air that hit her as she walked out of the building was cold and crisp. She pulled her sweater tighter around her and hailed a cab. She didn’t know where she was going, and she didn’t really care.
She thought about calling one of her friends but then realized that she actually didn’t want to. She went through friends the way she went through cigarettes; she took what she wanted and then discarded them. While it might be a deplorable way to exist, it was how she kept herself sane. She could barely keep track of her own life, let alone others’. As she made her way through the kiosks and corner-stores that sat in disarray around Central Park, pawing her way through tabloids and candy selections, she pondered her life. How had she made it this far? She was a black hole that devoured everything from booze and pills to people and bad decisions.

She thought back to the day after her sixteenth birthday. Her parents had forgotten it, again, and the only acknowledgement that she got was from one of her teachers. Even back then, she didn’t really hold onto friends. She was always on the outside looking in. The weird girl who smoked cigarettes and drank too much and went to college parties and hooked up with boys that were too old for her, but not old enough to know better. People had always responded to hearing about the boys in the same way, “He took advantage of you.” She thought differently. She saw it as two equal people coming together in mutual agreement. They used her and she used them. To look at it any other way, she thought, was an insult to her. Reacting on impulse only, she did what she wanted to; tattoos that she would later question and a string of ex ‘somethings’ that never made it past a couple of weeks with her. She didn’t really float through life, as much as she slammed from one extreme to the next. That impulsivity showed the day after her birthday, when she unscrewed the cap on her mother’s sleeping pills and scattered them onto her bed. She fished a bottle of whiskey from her nightstand and began swallowing the pills—one at a time. She laid down and looked around her
room. She had always hated her room: the lamps, the bed, the furniture, everything except for the color, which was a pale shade of lavender. She waited and waited for the pills to kick in. Lighting a cigarette, she finally began to feel weightless. Purple and yellow spots danced at the edge of her vision and she slowly closed her eyes; the cigarette burned a hole in her sheets. By the time her parents found her, she had thrown up most of the pills. She was rushed to the hospital and then put on a psychiatric hold. The only thing she remembered clearly from her two months at the clinic was the constant stream of pills that kept her in a zombie-like state. After it had been decided that she was ‘all better,’ she was sent in for her final session. The therapist was a fish-like woman who seemed to only wear black. The blue eye shadow she wore came off in flakes every time she coughed, which was often. When the doctor asked her why she had tried to kill herself, she only answered, “I wanted to see if I could.”

These flashes of clarity would come and go from time to time. She enjoyed them, but also enjoyed when they passed by and she was left to go on with existing. Thinking that she had spent enough time walking aimlessly through Central Park, she hailed a cab and gave the driver the address to her building.

She unlocked the door to her apartment and swung it open to reveal the spotless interior. There was no more confetti and it even seemed that the rug had been replaced with one that was only slightly different in shape. She checked the time and decided that since it was past five, it was, once again, time for a drink. She enjoyed pairing her vodka with Ambien. The doctor that her family employed had made her promise not to mix the pills with anything, but what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her. As she popped the pills into her mouth and chased them down one by one, she suddenly felt light. This was always her favorite
part: the airiness in her head, the feeling that her skull had split open and allowed her brain to expand and float away. She thought about just how neglectful her parents had to be. Your daughter swallows a bottle of pills and then, less than a decade later, you give her another bottle. It was with this thought, still trapped in her head, that she finally succumbed to the pills and slid into sleep.

She woke up groggy and glanced at the ostentatiously gigantic clock on the far wall. 11:00. The perfect time. She felt like it was calling her, letting her know that it was once again safe to venture outside, into the night. She changed into a tight red dress, slipped on some black ‘fuck-me’ heels, and looked herself up and down in the floor-length mirror. This is how I want to die. She found that she thought about death more and more as she got older. Not even twenty-two yet, and already thinking about her own destruction. Of course, she had been slowly destroying herself for years. The way she thought about death now though, was in a permanent way. When she was sixteen, she had thought about death like a college party or a new drug: don’t knock it ‘till you try it. But, now that she was beginning to get older, more tired, she thought about it as a cheat. A way to get out of the game. She had given quite a bit of thought as to how she would do it. She was too vain for razorblades or a gun, she had already tried the pills and wasn’t one for repeating herself. She ended up deciding that she wanted to exit in the grandest way possible. Maybe she’d go to the back allies behind the clubs and find her death there. Maybe she’d find it at the end of a heroin needle. Maybe she’d throw herself off of a building, her red dress making her shimmer like a star, falling to earth. She made her way to the club across the street. One of the perks of being an avid drunk was that you were a regular at the clubs. She bypassed the line and walked right up to the bouncer.
With a knowing smile, she gave him a kiss on the cheek and walked inside. She got in the elevator with about fifteen other drunks and waited for the doors to close. She could already see four guys eyeing her hungrily. A girl elbowed the man next to her in the stomach and he jerked his attention away from the hem of the red dress. The elevator doors opened and everyone got out and began to climb the stairs to the roof. She waited. As she stood at the foot of stairs, she took in the smell of cigarette smoke and sweat. She could see the lights flashing and feel the bass vibrating the world around her. The building was alive. Beating with the heartbeats of hundreds of like-minded people. She took a drink and a cigarette from some couple making out on the stairs and ascended. The crowd seemed to move as one and as she pushed her way through; she felt as though she could have been any one of them. She felt a connectedness that was absent from any ‘friends’ she might have had, absent from even her own parents. She closed her eyes and let go. She closed her eyes and faded into the pulsing lights.
Destiny Campa Meza

Selfish Prayers

Our appetite for that which is
Egoistical and unequivocal
Sex on frozen bleachers
Wanton lies
A month’s rent exhausted on the lottery
Pick-pocketing strangers
Yet in the moment
Life hangs by a wire
A car wrapped around a telephone pole
A late period
We drop to our knees
Swear by our absent souls
That we will pray more
Attend mass
Make that Pilgrimage to Mecca
If only ~
Selfish prayers
Are granted
Megan Robles

An inch for an inch

You said you’d move mountains
to be with me.

But babe
these peaks are still standing in
the same place
as they stood
thousands of years ago.

They’ve seen more history than
We have combined
And I don’t think they’ll be leavin’
anytime soon
but
honey
I’m
already
gone.
Some of the most beautiful things in life are free. Rain that cleanses the soul, the ability to put one foot in front of the other, sloppy midnight kisses, smiles, a nod from an unfamiliar passerby. When I say ‘things,’ I mean the homage that life pays humans in exchange for sustained happiness. Love may be initially free, but those hours of tearful labor certainly come at a price. The years of worry and heartbreak that follow cost everything. By ‘everything’ I mean the universe of sacrifice that we exist in for others. Our children, our lovers, our family. Strangers we pass in the street and reluctantly acknowledge may seem irrelevant to our current stream of consciousness, but that is surely not the case. For with every breath we are achieving a purpose or intent of some kind. We are fighting for our people, struggling to make sense of our tangible actuality, and paving a path for a twinkle in the eye of future humanity. I ponder these issues as I wait for Gracie at the bus stop. Gravel scatters and becomes audible with the movement of the school bus. Her delicate mouth perks up at the corners as excitement enters her hazel eyes.

“Momma!” Gracie exclaims as she trips and falls into my tired arms. “Gracie!” I mimic back, “How was your day?” She looks around, adjusting to her surroundings as autistic children often do. “I made a hat! Mrs. Neil let me play in the back room.” I mulled this over for a moment. “It is very pretty. What did you learn today?” She drags her untied shoe through a thicket of mud and leaves while she recalls. “I had blue paper. And yellow. I asked for red but
Mrs. Neil was busy.” I can feel my temperature rising, my cheeks flush. I swallow the rising anger and still for a while so my tone is even. “We better start walking, I hear the sidewalk turns to lava after four o’clock.” I smirk. Her little eyes widen and she begins skipping, purposefully hopping over every third crack. I struggle to remain focused, weighed down by fatigue and hunger.

“Momma, where do birds come from? How does a bird know where it’s going?” Gracie’s questions bounce around in the emptiness. I can hear her soft inhalations as she sleeps, content and fearless, oblivious of the world taking place outside in the Denver night. I listen for noise in the stairwell, the neighbors are at it again. Slurs and drunk fists are perceptible in the dark, dogs howl and I can hear my hunger knocking on the front door, a human necessity constantly here to collect rent. Rolling over, the flip side of my flat pillow, nothing helps. I have no choice but to digest the inhabitants of my psyche, my memories, my longing for a warm body and better circumstances.

It seems as though yesterday I was making dinner in a warm home, decorated with twinkling holiday lights and surrounded by the aroma of Christmas dinner. David flashing his boyish grin and us laughing when his cousins sang their rendition of ‘Deck the Halls’ in the front room. We all hooped and hollered with applause, enjoying every moment. He kissed my temple, trailed along my hairline, my body shivered in agreement. Memories like this sneak up on me, bring a smile to my thin lips only for a moment, the sickening reality and punch to my gut always quickly follow. I have flipped through my “Forests of Costa Rica” calendar five times, the dates are off and the colorful jungle illustrations are familiar. I remember when I opened it, David gave me a teasing smile as I sneered at him with joking disapproval. A sparkly tennis bracelet fell from in
between ‘NOVEMBER’ and ‘DECEMBER’ as I lit up with laughter and admiration. I try to resist the memory of that lonely January. I cannot repel the recollection as my hands ball up. I saw them through the window, the new life in my pregnant belly kicked, my knees buckled. The two men waited patiently for me to open the door, staring lifelessly at my belly while they removed their hats and bowed their heads.

I startle as a beer can ricochets off the apartment door, I settle back into my compulsory stupor. We all bow our heads, the church is filled with people. Family, friends, and people in uniforms I have never seen before. Gracie screams in my arms in protest to the silence. That was when the emptiness invaded, filled my lungs, heart, and whole being to capacity. Forcing out common sense, ambition, and strength, only leaving enough room for the desolation and memories.

* 

The alarm clock is screaming, demanding I rise and face another day. Gracie is already in the bathtub, I can hear the water trickling. She hums a song I have never heard. My fingers search for the snooze button and I gather my auburn hair into a ball on the top of my head. The world looks slightly more upright as I sit up and inhale a needy breath.

“What are you doing, missy?” I plant a kiss on her wet head. “I am blowing bubbles. Lots of bubbles.” She says in a very matter of fact manner. I smile. “Yes you are, Miss Gracie, beautiful bubbles. Do you want cereal for breakfast?” She slaps the water with defiance as I hand her a bath towel. “Today I will make you a hat. A red one.” She murmurs. I pat her head and thank the universe for this homage, a gift in exchange for my emptiness. “I would love that,” I respond softly as I pop a stray bubble sparking with soap.
Gracie eats the same cereal every morning, Fruit Loops. I love to watch her chomp down each piece individually. She divides all of the colors, moving them into respective sides of the bowl with her spoon. We walk the four blocks to her elementary school in silence as she focuses on avoiding every third crack in the sidewalk. I brush back her stray hairs as she hops along. “Try to pay attention today, okay? Maybe you can sit next to Allison. Isn’t that her name, the blonde one?” She doesn’t look away from the sidewalk as she appears thoughtful. I wait a few moments. “What do you say, missy?” I give her a hopeful smile. She continues to look at the sidewalk, carefully avoiding every third crack. “I think I can even make you a crown, Mommy. Sometimes Mrs. Neil lets me use scissors.” My stomach twists with frustration but I let out my sigh quietly. “Remember to eat your sandwich, Gracie.” I kiss her head once more when we reach the bus stop. She smiles her dad’s toothy smile and jumps up onto the yellow platform. I wait and wave at her as she pulls away.

Walking back to our junky apartment complex, I pass the pawn shop. It has a yellow and blue sign that illuminates and blinks “OPEN.” My cold fingers streak the glass as I spot it, twinkling and demanding attention from the third shelf of boxed jewelry. I stay there awhile, holding back my emotions as my eyes dry heave with tears that won’t come. My stomach snarls and I recall why the tennis bracelet sits there with a white price tag tied to one end. My legs move me involuntarily forward and the ding of the shop door sets me on edge. “What ya lookin for today?” sounds out from behind the cash register. “Nothing.” I say plainly. “Well let me know, we are having a sale on the cassette tapes. Two for one.” I shake my head with feigned acknowledgement. I find myself in front of the case, the bracelet blinks with the light and the tiny
heart and triangles glitter as I tap on the glass as if I am a zoo-goer, trying to steal the attention of some lonely animal. “Ma’am, please don’t touch the glass.” The woman shouts as she reaches for some generic Windex and a rag.

The day passes quickly after tidying up the apartment and walking back and forth from the outdated Safeway up the road. I spend my last twenty dollars on a gallon of milk, some sandwich fixings, a newspaper, and a pack of sparkly red construction paper. I sit at the kitchen table thumbing through the job postings for a half an hour, waiting for the opportune time to begin my four block journey to the bus stop.

I make Gracie a sandwich for dinner, she picks at the brown lettuce while making red paper crowns instead of doing her reading homework. She watches Cinderella for the hundredth time, and I enjoy the grey noise as I circle ads with my highlighter. Nights seemingly run together in this exact manner.

Gracie hums in the bath, I run my fingers through a stream of orange morning light. My mind turns in circles and seems to be taking orders from the violent tide of emptiness, rushing forward and then receding. I stare at my “Forests of Costa Rica” calendar now hanging next to my bed, and trace the waterfall and lush jungle depicted below ‘DECEMBER.’

The yellow school bus has already turned the corner and I gulp back the fear of the approaching Winter Break. The emptiness in my stomach kindly makes a little room for desperation as I wonder how I will provide Gracie with any kind of Christmas gift. David’s monthly pension check won’t arrive until January and the rent is past due. I let the chilly breeze take my worries, and I focus on the lines of the sidewalk, now covered with snow.
The pawn shop lights dance and intermingle, yellow and blue, “OPEN.” I fight with everything in me to keep walking, so much so that I trip twice. Thankfully banging my knee, giving me a new pain to dwell on. The next week passes like this, blurred consciousness and humming. Red paper crowns decorate the bare tree Mrs. Higgins from 41a gave us. Snow falls outside, and sandwich crusts pile up in the trash as I do not move from the couch. Gracie is filled with excitement and curiosity as Christmas approaches. I wish I could harness the innocent contentedness that is the hallmark of childhood. I wish I could bake cookies and string popcorn along a beautiful tree, all while singing carols to my daughter who deserves the world and so much more than one parent who doesn’t possess the inner strength to take out the trash let alone teach her the meaning of life. She doesn’t know his toothy smile or remember long nights spent conversing about wonders of the world and articles published in *The New Yorker*. Yet I do, and even after five years, my weak existence is only fueled to keep moving by involuntary memories such as these, and red paper crowns that hang from a sad looking Christmas tree.

I flip and roll around in bed, stirring with the shouting from drunk neighbors in the hallway. I can feel a certain warmth tonight, some kind of energy that comes from Gracie’s questions about Santa Claus and reindeer, and memories of Christmas Eves spent underneath static, satin sheets. I slip on my boots and coat, forgetting socks. I tie a scarf over my mouth and kiss my “Forests of Costa Rica” calendar before I skillfully and quietly unhinge the deadbolt of the door, locking it again and practically run down the flight of icy stairs of the apartment complex. I slip numerous times, paying no attention to the icy lines of the sidewalk. The blue and yellow sign is not lit, it swings and taps against the glass of the shop window.
eliciting a kind of electricity within myself I have not felt in a very long time. I spot a large stone nestled comfortably in the gutter.

* 

I can feel Gracie at my feet, tugging the satin sheets from my legs. “Mommy, get up! Get up!” She exclaims, her brown curls bobbing with excitement. I smile sleepily and allow her to pull me into the living room. She runs from toy to toy, showing me her new roller skates, a painting easel, and even a pink guitar perched on an end table in the corner. I kiss her head. Gracie runs around the room looking for my gift, a small, red paper box. I take the box and pull out a note. “I LUV U” sprawled in her childlike handwriting. I smile and say thank you as the small hearts and triangles of my tennis bracelet twinkle against my bare wrist and clank gently against the red paper box.
Everything You Left Behind

I kept that old perfume bottle you tried to throw away. The smell is still glazed over the inside bottle and cap.

It reminds me of the way you’d stumble in your six inch heels.

It reminds me of your obnoxiously loud laughter that I could still hear echo down the hallway.

It reminds me of when you’d drunkenly tell me you loved me over and over again and how I felt too uncomfortable to say it back.

It reminds me of how I love you too even though I never said it out loud before.

I still have your favorite blue dress you accidently ripped one night while you were partying.

Remember when I got it on my birthday from my best friend?

Remember how much better it looked on you than it ever did me?

Remember the first time I wore it for prom and you told me I was beautiful before vomiting all over it?

Remember the night we stayed up until 4am theorizing about how different things would be for you if only you knew how to put the bottle down?
You know I’m wearing your wedding ring on my middle finger because it makes me think of the day you slapped me.

It makes me think of your quick temper and abusive soul.
It makes me think of how much I appreciated when you’d hit me instead of tell me I’m worthless or pathetic or ugly or a poor excuse for a daughter.
It makes me think of how I’d cry because I believed you.
It makes me think of how I wanted the alcohol to poison your tongue so no more words could ever come out.

There’s so many traces of you left in the depths of my closet.
It reminds me of why you ended up on the side of the road.
Remember when you chose your drug dealer husband over me?
It makes me think of how it’s the reason you are now gone.
Madison Gill

Flowering

When you are young, love
is a breath
caught at the base of your throat,
a fly stuck in a spider’s web
madly embedding itself
further down the bronchial tubes
until exhale
becomes a distant memory,
a relief you are no longer permitted.

When love leaves,
there is nothing but
the taste
that coats each note
bubbling bloodily over the lips,
up the hollow gourd of the esophagus
You do not speak
without tasting the
rust on your tongue
emanating from
the spaces between your copper-tinged teeth.
But when love comes again,
there is breath
and it comes as easily
as the trees shed their leaves
at the season’s change
ready for the
cracked, broken, and burned limbs
of their rotted branches
to bud anew,
drink the July rain,
and bloom again.
Alex Young

Perhaps

Many authors write about the cruelty of the world. The cruelty of chances not given, the if/then that never were. But the world is not cruel. It does not seek to make our lives worse or better, it cannot think, it cannot choose, it only is. It is neither kind nor cruel, it exists merely to exist at that moment. There is no cruelty in the world, for cruelty lies elsewhere. It lies in being, in existence itself. Existence is derivative of cruelty, because by consigning yourself to existence, you’ve made a choice. You made a choice to make every choice until the day you die. There is nothing more cruel than choice.

That is what brings me here. To this moment in time, to this very same second that has been longer than a year. This moment, in which the choice is mine. This single, agonizing time in space, where I can stand in front of her, and make a choice. The choice is simple in the most complex way, as any good choice is; Do I speak, tell her how I feel, let the words flow from my mouth and brave the consequences, or do I bite my tongue, and suffer in silence? I know, that unless I make the first move, unless I take that single step over the edge, and confess to her my feelings, all I will ever know is an assumption. And that will haunt me until the day I die.

As I sit here, watching her fingers slowly trace the notes on her page, I want to make a choice, to choose to be something better than myself, but there is something holding me back. Something that is at the very edge of my mind, grasping with its dark fingers. It whispers into my ears that I am not good enough, that she would never feel the same way, and that by trying, I will fail. That voice has been with me a very long time.
We’ve been in this moment before, her and I, alone together. A million times before, every night and day that passes. We would be doing any number of things; laughing, smiling, homework, crying, angry tirades about someone I don’t particularly know but is ever so important to her. These moments are dear to me. Every time, I want to make the choice, to leap from this edge, but the dark voice inside warns me, forces me, to bide my time.

She came over when the sun was barely waxing over the horizon, its waning light shimmering through her auburn hair. We needed to get homework done, as we always do. I mean, that is practically the only reason we know each other. We met in a calculus class, she helped me stay afloat outside of school, and I helped her pass the class. We needed each other to succeed. For the next four years we relied on each other, our experiences, our knowledge. She became my boon, and I became her crutch. When I would falter, she would take my hand and guide me back, and when she would fall, I would catch her. We had our downsides, but we tried to fill them in. I was the genius, the intellect, the elementary—she was voice, the reason, the socialite. I would keep us on track, make sure we both passed classes, and she made sure we didn’t go insane. We were different in our own chaotic ways. She was loud and emotional, I was quiet and reserved, and in this way, we worked together. Perfect in our chaos, feeding off each other’s strengths, and covering our weaknesses.

But that first day, when she smiled at me, with those beautiful eyes, dark and chaotic like a typhoon, I knew I would never be happy again. Every smile after that, every laugh, every sigh, was a dagger, twisting in my heart. Time, and time again, my heart spoke

“Please!” It cried. “Tell her! Let her know!”

“No,” the dark voice sang. “She will leave, and it will never be the same.”

And the dark voice was right.
She was a fire, dangerous and dancing. The closer you got to her, the harder it became to breathe, and the colder it felt when she left. I could feel that cold in my bones, every day, when she wasn’t around. So I remain silent, and every day, the voices cry out to me again.

She sat opposite to me, twirling her gorgeous hair. The little tick she has when she’s thinking, endearing in a very odd way. She was preparing to leave, leave my house, leave me. The night has been long, and we’ve been working, she was tired. She had to go.

And part of me wanted to reach, grab her. Hold her close to me, feel her heart beat against mine. Tell her, let her know, that she did not have to leave. But that distance felt harder to cross than any ocean in the world.

In that second, before she packed everything, before she headed to my door and left, I felt like saying everything to her. I felt like leaping from my chair. I felt like screaming at her, yelling, telling her how I wished I left earlier. How I wished that I never met her, that I knew I should’ve left when she stole the air from my lungs. I wish I could’ve told her how I hated the way she made me feel when she was not around, that I hated myself for not being near. How I wish I never met her because now I know loss, I know tragedy. Now I know what it feels to love and never be loved, and it scares me. I wish I never met her, because she showed me how horrible life is without her.

Perhaps, it was out of love, that I did not say those things. Maybe, I did not leap from my chair because I could never explain to her that I felt a need for her. A yearning from within my heart to hold her and never let go. Maybe if I could make her a potion, mixed with all the chemicals of love. Maybe, if I could fill it with my hopes and fears, my strengths and insecurities. If I could convince her to drink it, have her feel the warmth and the cold that runs through my veins whenever I think of her, maybe she will
understand this feeling I call love.

I could never tell her how I feel – how much she means to me. I could never hold her close to my heart, and tell her all these words that rampage through my mind. I can see it in her eyes – how she looks at me. I am not here, I am not a person, I am someone who can help her, a crutch. I can see it every time she talks to someone else, the way she laughs when she tells me about another man she has a crush on, the way she smiles when she thinks of them. I could never make her smile like that, so I bite my tongue.

Maybe, I was never meant to feel actual love. To feel the warmth that true love could bring to the coldest heart. Maybe I was born not to take part in love, but to observe it. To dine on the lust of love I had in my heart. Perhaps I feared tainting the concept of love, ruining it for those that truly understood what it meant.

But nothing sated that voice in my head, because it was cruel, because it reveled in my misery, that voice that spoke to me, told me I was not good enough for her, that I would never be good enough for her. And perhaps the voice was right in a way. She was a perfect silence, and I, a pandemic static. She would never need me, but all I would crave is her.

And as she left, I looked at her, watched her gentle hands fiddle with her keys. Watched as her breath condensed in the cold night, and slowly left my room. And when the door closed, and she had left. She was gone, but not forever. A cycle, repetition, time and time again.

I felt cold again, empty.

In the end, it was not fate, nor chance, nor the world that condemned me to this cold. It was not some malicious god who strung me up only to watch me dance, it was I. It was the silence that filled my lungs, and the words that stained my tongue, that left me alone.
Perhaps, I thought to myself, slumping further into my chair.
Perhaps I will tell her tomorrow.
“Perhaps.” The dark voice laughed.
Madison Gill

Space Man

I see blood moons
blooming in your eyes
when you stare up at the night sky
and know you’re elsewhere,
leaving me –
locked between the jaws of gravity –
to tumble freely through this universe,
lick the chalk of distant moons
from each of your grinning teeth.

I know you’re skating the border
of Jupiter’s storm,
peering over the precipice of a black hole,
begging it to shred your mortality
in exchange for a chance
to see what’s at the center.

For what holds a black hole together?
Whatever it may be,
I know that you are that for me.

Your heart may venture far out
beyond the pockets between galaxies,
ride comets like the wind
through wormholes that whisper tales
of other suns,
your vision crackling like popcorn kernels
after a nebula explodes like fireworks
before your irises.
You may weep when
witnessing the martyrdom of supernovae,
your tears
parting the red sea of dust
Mars painted to your cheeks,
worrying there will never be time
to pioneer your one-man exploration
of infinity.

As long as you come back to me,
Trade your shuttle for the shelter
of our celestial sheets,
lay your head to rest on the
Earth of my chest;
stardust still sparkling from the
tips of your hair.
Isaiah Morgan

The Moon

Tell me what you desire most
and I’ll find it or die trying.

If it is the ocean
I’ll drown trying to pick it up.

If it is a house
my fingers will be numb from labor.

If it is a diamond
my hands will be splintered from digging.

If it is the Earth
I’ll snatch it from the shoulders of Atlas himself

If it is The Moon
I’ll reach up and grab it.

Just for you.
Daniel Conroy

A Few Things I Learned

Firing rocks at my manacles,
I only graze myself.
With words shared out loud,
I no longer claim who I am.

A glance, a grin. Eyes
thunder with bold meaning. Woe
waits a block away.

Shallow breaths taken
by a body singing joy.
Worlds cannot cage words

The daffodil's born.
It weeps. It knows how petals
fall. Sweetly, swiftly.
From a counter ten
precious urns fall. The owner
smiles, a journey done.

Lavender in rows
hand shakes firm, fingers tighter
in crossing. New friends.

Bleating sheep, a sound
heard in houses without herds,
muffling woeful souls.

Eight little pebbles
standing in two solid rows.
Where one glide, others tumble.
Eight beauties? One wretch.
Crisp, clear, all year round; all throughout my childhood, even now, there is a small lake on my family’s land. When I was younger, the lake was surrounded by trees and thick brush. Cattails rising up from the water on the banks, seemingly isolated, appearing to be of nature born but, in fact, forged by the will and plan of my grandfather.

He moved the earth to stop up the flow of a natural spring in order to store up the water needed for the crops he planned to grow on his little farm. Most of the trees have been cut back and the cattails chased away by the building of family homes in the area. The only mark on the scene is a wooden shed used to store some long forgotten things and a water-pump house. The pump house forces the water up the hill to the two fields my grandfather used to sow.

The lake is still beautiful, though no longer pure, as it was in my childhood. I guess it never was. I used to think so. I believed for many years that this lake was a natural phenomenon. That my family just happened to find a good plot of land, which just happened to have a lake. But no, it was fashioned with blood and will. Most things are, the instant a footprint is made.

Do the fish my grandfather, dad, and uncle stocked in the lake’s waters counter the death of the trees? Plenty still remain, but at least a dozen were lost, that I can tell. Does my family’s lack of gun use in the area, which protects the fowl and foragers, make up for brushed away brush and cattails? Part of me believes in this balance, I believe in balance, but haven’t decided if the balance has
been maintained. I think of the balance because I don’t believe the land-sculpting is done. Already, my father and uncle have placed homes near the shimmering waters in a desire to capture some of the area’s beauty, to go with their coffee and croissant.

Ice comes, and though the summer is gorgeous, winter has no fear. Its beauty sealed up like a diamond. There is a hill on one side of the lake. Leading down to the bank where the cattails use to grow. Out of all the hills and slopes on my families land this one is, without a doubt, the best to go sledding down. One year, lifetimes ago, my cousins and I wanted to go sledding, but it was difficult for all six of us grandchildren to take turns on one single sled. My grandfather was a problem-solver and inventor as far back as history goes. He took a couple of old inner-tubes from one of his tractors he’d use on the fields and filled them with air. Excitement rippled through us as we knew that the fun was about to commence.

Now with three vehicles of wintery speed in hand and warnings of safety in ear, six grandchildren made out for the hill. We paired off. First to go were my sisters. The youngest sat between the legs of the other and down the slope on the sled they went. The silent, crisp air shattered with their screams of joy and excitement. The sound must have awoken every living and dead thing within miles. Next to follow, on the smaller of the two tractor tubes, were the youngest two of my cousins. Again, the smallest of the pair sat between the legs of the older and down they went, even faster than the sled. Their shrill screams even louder than the pair to go before.

Energy pulsated in me. I knew at that moment, sitting on the bigger inner-tube, we would fly like the wind down the hill. I am the eldest of my siblings and the only male grandchild in my family. So, since I was the biggest, I sat down first then wrapped my legs around my cousin,
after she sat down, to help hold her in the large tractor tube. With the two of us inside the tube and perched on the edge of the hill; the remaining four grandchildren gathered round us, and all gave a huge push to send us speeding down the slope, throwing snow in the air, like a wild horse ripping through the countryside.

Wind ripped across my face and all physical objects became a blur - or maybe we were the blur - as we streaked down the hillside. The screaming was so loud and boisterous that I couldn’t tell if the sound was coming from inside or outside of me. I think that the echo reverberating off the countryside gave the screams even more of an impact. My stomach jumped and dropped, my heart fluttered and skipped, my throat went raw and my eyes blurred white with rushing snow-scape and tears.

Finally we began to slow and my senses gained orientation. But the screaming didn’t stop. My cousin and I looked at each other. It wasn’t us. We were just trying to catch our breath. We looked back up the hill and the four little ones we had left behind us were waving their arms and crying out. Heartbeats later I realized what they were in an upheaval about. The added weight and bigger tube had taken us so fast down the hill that we flew past the snow drift and out onto the frozen lake.

A new rush and panic began to pump more adrenaline through me. Quickly, and in a whispered rush, I told my cousin we had to go - we had to move immediately. She got off the tube and began a slow and tentative pace towards the bank. I got up slowly and hooked my arm around the inner-tube. Waiting a moment to give her time to put space between us, to disperse our weight over a larger area, I watched. Our sisters went silent and I could hear my blood pounding in my ears. I could feel my will reaching down into the lake, forcing the ice to thicken, to hold. With a good ten feet apart I began to slowly move.
My breathing was shallow and rushed as the reality of danger started to hit me.

The lake was deep and though it was possible for the waters to freeze thick enough to skate on, the weather hadn’t gotten so cold this year. Birds chirped off to one side, breaking the tunnel-vision of my ears—focused on the breath rushing in and out of my mouth—that’s when I noticed the popping of the ice. I froze, I froze and became part of the ice. Mental will and prayer radiated off of me in waves, then there was a quick snap and I cried out, “RUN!”

My cousin, not far from the edge, bolted for the bank. Our sisters began to shout encouragements as I tossed the inner-tube ahead of me as hard as I could. Bouncing three times the old tractor tube slid the rest of the way to the bank. One of my sisters moved to the edge to pick up the pitched tube and quickly moved out of the way of our speeding cousin.

I could feel, the ice shifting and snapping under every panicked step towards the bank. Breathlessly I ran, and as I got about ten feet away, water started to soak my snow boots and lower pant legs. My feet and ice chunks sunk with every foot-fall, causing me to have to lift my legs higher each time. With one last effort I threw myself onto the bank, landing into the snowdrift that had failed to stop us from going too far.

I rolled over on my back, breathing hard and heavy, swallowing several times to regain moisture in my mouth and throat. Sitting up in the snow I looked around at the sources of laughing and smiling faces of relief. “I thought only Jesus could walk on water.” One of my cousins exclaimed and we all began to laugh so long and hard that tears filled our eyes. After a few minutes of recount we gathered up the sleds, and each other, and began to head back up the hill to my grandparents’ house. Once inside we removed our cold-weather armor and headed
to the upstairs kitchen. I sat at the table and looked out at the lake and hillside where the entire event occurred. We regaled a captive audience—grandma and grandpa—with a story three times expanded, and laughed more as grandma refilled our cups with hot coco.

Now I only walk around the lake in winter and admire its beauty. Memory of that day and those events usually will come to mind and I’ll hear echoes of screams and laughter - like a ghost gliding across the surface of the lake. I’ll fish in the waters come summer and enjoy family gatherings on the bank all year round.

Sometimes on lone walks I will look out over the mirror like water and recall that day of adventure and many others and wonder if those moments were worth the shaping and reshaping of this land. I often find myself contemplating if the richness of my memory is worth the price paid for with nature’s blood. Sounds in the distance shatter my silent reverie and threaten the peace of the land. Not far off there is a highway where tires eat asphalt and just beyond that is an airport where man-made wings shred the sky.

Fear stirs up in my heart for a moment, but I believe in balance. I don’t believe the land sculpting is done. But my blood and its will—which once disturbed and shaped the land—now holds back the world. Saving the unnatural from the unnatural. Though both my blood and the land are small, the lake a drop in the world, I believe we are stronger by far, and I believe in balance.
Meral Sarper

Save Me, Your Mother Earth

I am the spirit of Gaia
aka Mother Earth
I can no longer remain silent
Must remind humans what I’m worth
It’s no coincidence that mistreating me
Tends to yield oppressing all women girls and mothers
So sick of greedy men trying to smother
And suffocate
Our beauty as creators of life
.. Creators of life.
Remember the first time you discovered me, when you discovered nature?
Being outside was your mecca as a child
Running on the grass barefoot so free and wild
Playing in my trees and Breathing in my fresh oxygen....
So why is it now you all lock yourselves in pens?
In addition to the locked souls you keep in your industrial prisons
The everyday human severed its connection to me
And I.... am the Spirit
Your spirit of life
I created you
But you’re obsessed with father time
I am pleading to you
Crying out for help
Please,
Save me.
Save me.
Save me- your mother
Your mother earth
Please please
Give me another chance to show you what I am worth
I need my planeteers to stay near
Help the masses see they needn’t live in daily fear
Fear is the driving force for rape and control
The catalyst for humanity’s death toll
Fear then provides nourishment for animosity
I’ve witnessed it for millennia within humanity
Human beings are the planters of seeds,
Physically and mentally
I am counting you to take the lead.
I am the spirit of Gaia
aka Mother Earth
I can no longer remain silent
Must remind humans what I’m worth
Melody Grublak

Blindspot

A bright green tree smiles
As the sky hums with the clouds’ rhythmic flow
The heart listens- sweet is a promise
Eyes watch the sun’s golden glow

Slowly it gets darker
Often worry replaces glee
Keep on moving forward
One eye too swollen to see

Where do you think you’re going
Why did it take so long to return
I thought I told you once before
You’re never going to learn

Bathed in bruises and loneliness
Truth to never be told
Generations of acceptance
Have allowed these moments to unfold

Praying for peace and quiet
But refusing to leave the ride
The heart forgets why it is beating
One eye sleeps open wide

A dying tree sways in the wind
The sky much more grey than before
One finger resting on cold metal
One eye focuses on the door
Mark Hernandez

A Sestina for Auntie Susie

In loving memory of Susie Gomez-Chacon.
February 13, 1934 - February 12, 2015

Trees hang low this frozen morn
weighed down by silvery crystals of storm last night.
The rime on the grass cracks as I walk into this supposed
sanctuary
offended by the permanently open arms from the statue at
the door.
Open arms that should be comforting – not this time.
Today we remember you – and gather to say our last
goodbyes.

It’s never easy – saying goodbye
surrounded by black-laced mourning.
Praying we’d never see this day
when everyone joins dressed to match as night.
Honoring the one we adored.
The pews are unwelcoming in this so-called sanctuary.

Fog glooms tightly, encasing this sanctuary
the room grows silent as pall bearers pass by
gliding down the aisle, stopping before the door
of the blesséd tabernacle, this frigid February morning.
Let’s get this over with and end this nightmare.
Even though I know we’re together this final time –
But who decided that it was your time?
I wonder as I kneel in this sanctuary
and hope everyone can find comfort this night.
For some, the hardest thing is saying goodbye
realizing this dream won’t fade this morning.
Loved ones take seat at the closing of the door.

But, as you journey to your new open door,
We honor all you’ve done in your lifetime,
We honor all your early mornings,
We honor your open heart – our hospitable sanctuary
and we are assured that this is not an eternal goodbye,
Only temporary – a promise to get us through the night.

The cathedral calms once more and the silent song of the 
Nightingale
sings softly as the priest closes the casket’s decorated door.
I quiver and feel you watching nearby
as I turn, I am reassured by the radiant stime
shining through stained-glass window of the sanctuary
as the sun pierces this dark morning.

If only you had waited one more night, stayed past your 
decided time,
Locked Death’s Door, and found your sanctuary,
You would have turned eighty-one today, by the dawn of 
your birthday morning.
Twin

I have these scars.  
Just below my ribcage.  
Two small dots.  
And so I think of you  
Every time I breathe.

I have these scars.  
They exist where no one can see  
I think these thoughts  
And so I know you.  
Even though we didn’t get to meet.

I have these scars.  
You have the same face as me.  
I got to live.  
You got eight hours to breathe.
Orange light filtered through the dusty canyon, ricochetin’ off walls and piercin’ through my hollow frame. I despise afternoon light, it ain’t nothin’ like mornin’ light. Mornin’ light is the birth of a new day, while afternoon light electrifies yellow aspen trees. I can hear the whisperin’, the rumors bein’ told. They sway and quake with autumn breeze, promisin’ a false sense of hope, when really night is comin’. The darkness is seekin’ Colorado horizon, pawin’ and forcin’ its way into the atmosphere and drivin’ hope and warmth from the Earth. People with anxiety have useless but breathtakin’ thoughts like this. Only I, with my burdened soul could find such beauty in the minute yet such misery in the hour. The tappin’ on my door becomes louder, audible in my sleep. It echoes through the maze of light, drums on the walls of the canyon until I wake. I sit upright and shriek into my empty house with unwilled consciousness. The rappin’ on the door becomes more hurried, hungrier. Stumblin’ around, I grab a pair of dirty jeans, pull a yellow sweater over my short and messy brown locks. The peep hole in the door reveals Mr. Thomas.

“Hello?” I spit out as friendly as possible, smilin’ with my plain eyes. “What can I do ya for, Mr. Thomas?”

“Jenny. It’s been over three months, ya haven’t paid a dime. I don’t wanna throw you out but I got people callin’ me day in n’ out lookin’ for a place. You got the rent?” He said, makin’ eye contact with my bare chest through my sweater.

“I ain’t got it now, but I sure will next week. I
promise. I got a real good deal goin’ down in the square, got myself a job waitin’ tables. I’ll have it next week.” I tried to bat my eyes with no success.

“Your daddy was a good man, Jenny. That’s why you’re still here. I can come back later today, ‘round five. That’ll be about all I can do.”

I smiled some more with my eyes, it didn’t reach my mouth. Mr. Thomas turned on the heel of his worn boot, kicked at a stray cat perched on my landing and made the way down the drive to his rusted Ford.

My daddy always told me that what goes up must come down. The sun rises in the mornin’ knowin’ good and well it’s gonna set in the evenin’. My boots, four of my best button-ups, a few pairs of denim, and my daddy’s favorite cowhide belt is all that fit in my pack. I stared in disdain at the black numbers danglin’ off the mailbox, two – five – one, I sound out, tastin’ every number like the cinnamon suckers my daddy bought me as a child. I kissed my hand, swept it across the numbers. Promised I’d be back.

The sun was still perched high when I started walkin’ down the highway. Several cars passed and none stopped to see if I needed help. It was pretty warm for an autumn day, beads of moisture rolled down my neck. It was three miles until I hit town.

***

Unkempt children were runnin’ and dancin’ through the square, singin’ in such a way that I couldn’t make out the words. The diner was busy, filled with white church men, havin’ their Sunday dose of Jack. I threw my pack in the backroom and straightened my ponytail. Ain’t no men who want to tip a rough neck waitress.

MaryAnn smiled as she took orders, brushed her red fingernails through her fake blonde hair. I watch, takin’ in her movements, noticin’ the small way her hips maneuver as she saunters in between the worn wooden
tables. The front bell rang. A young bloke, about twenty-two, walked in, real nonchalant. He scanned the bar with his big hazel eyes, shakin’ out a copper orange-brown mane as he tossed his dusty hat onto a tabletop in my section. He scanned the room expectantly, and puckered his full lips into an odd smile as I approached.

“You the waitress?” He sneered.

“No, I like the outfit.” I jeered back. He sat for a moment, head cocked to one side, taciturn eyes like winter ice on a highway, cold. I felt myself lose control of the wheel, slide into irrationality.

“Don’t expect no tip now.” He said through a sly smile.

“What can I get you? The dessert special is apple cobbler.”

“Coffee, black. Nothin’ else. On your way back let your blonde friend over there know you gon’ take your break.” I raised my eyebrows in disapproval, shook my head and tried to hide the smile that was threatenin’ my poker face.

***

Layin’ in his bed was a euphoric feeling. The grey sheets and pillows all smelled like him. His room was weirdly neat, rows of boots all lined up against one wall. The wood floor threw reflections of the mornin’ onto the eggshell wallpaper. He rolled onto one side, exhalin’ a lung full of suppressed air. His copper chest hair glinted with the movements of his systematic breathin’. I pulled my hair up, grabbed my boots, and slid into my dress.

It was two miles from his apartment back to the diner. I had nowhere else to go. I mused at the trail of dust my boots left on the road. A grasshopper ticked on alongside me, keepin’ pace. I stopped then he stopped. I went then he went. It kept on like this until we entered the square. One of the kids ran to get their half deflated
football, no more grasshopper.

***

“My daddy was a good man. Yeah, he was still out on the oil rigs. Well good to see y’all, I’ll be back around.” I nodded politely at the Wilks, they reciprocated.

It seemed increasingly hard to talk about daddy. It was useless really. No point. What’s done is done, chattin’ about it ain’t gon’ change a thing. This is what I told myself when the loneliness would come to collect. It wasn’t my fault the truck rolled, but it sure felt like it. It’s called survivor’s guilt. That’s what the medic told me.

My mother had never been around, skipped town after I was born. Daddy said she couldn’t stand his rough hands. Him and I were always together. Every trip up to the lake, every weekend campin’ in the canyon, and every dance recital at the high school. I remember always lookin’ out into the audience and whir of stage lights, blinded with anxiety. I would spot his face and big toothy smile and the world didn’t seem so scary anymore.

***

My back ached from workin’ a double shift. A shift a day wasn’t gonna cover the rent for the apartment I found about a mile out from the diner. The door chimed, copper hair and hazel eyes waltzed in, sat right down in my section. He waited patiently.

“What can I do ya for? We don’t have a special tonight.” I said, lookin’ at my notepad like some answer to life was sprawled across the front.

“Where were you the other mornin’? Didn’t even leave no phone number so I could call.”

“I just ain’t interested. You gonna order?”

He sniffed hard and replaced his hat, gave me a gentleman’s nod and headed for the door.
“I get off at twelve, if you’re gonna be around.” I called out involuntarily. His eyes brightened a bit, he nodded again and slipped through the door.

***

Three months later, we were married. No ceremony, white dress, or teary eyed pop to walk me down the aisle. Just two pens and a piece of paper sayin’ I, Jenny Lee Gardner was destined for a life of unimportance. Kyler was a good guy, he worked nights at the prison. I moved my things into his mama’s house. My pack: four shirts, some denim jeans, my daddy’s belt and an apron with “Jenny” sewed on in pink curly letters. I still worked double shifts at the diner, savin’ up for a bigger suitcase. Nights in Kyler’s grey sheets became increasingly less euphoric, I noticed the eggshell wallpaper had at some point been white. Every night I drifted to sleep and woke up in the canyon. Light cascadin’ from every direction, warmin’ the bare skin of my shoulders. A breeze would whistle through, callin’ me softly. I would climb up a series of boulders, look over a steep side and see a child at the bottom, screamin’, fightin’ for air.

***

Kyler teachin’ me to drive was no easy task. Daddy had been teachin’ me when we rolled and I swore I would never try again. Kyler’s parents lived more than six miles from the square, there was no way I could walk. His pickup protested and whined when you stepped on the gas. This made me feel slightly better. The thing only had so much power to give. I would leave at a quarter to two and reach the square a half an hour past. I drove so slow that half drunken men paved paths in the dirt shoulder, curvin’ around me and my insecurities.

It was the dead of winter and Kyler began workin’ double shifts at the prison, his mama fell ill and he was savin’ up for her meds. I never said a thing, just fixed up
his lunch tin and put on my new gloves, a heavy green coat his mother had given me, my daddy’s belt. It now took me an hour or more to drive into the square, especially when snow was fallin’. Kyler was long gone by the time I left for work. The wind was pregnant with winter ice, it whipped through my loose hair and licked up my jaw. The truck took longer than usual to start, stallin’ and putterin’ down the road. I made it maybe three miles before the snow kicked up. My windshield was blanketed, the pickup slid and tailed from side to side. I turned around a bend and heard a god-awful noise. Light filled the cab and I violently jolted forward.

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The canyon was warm, filled with birds and fallin’ leaves of red, yellow, and orange. My clothes were damp with earth, my short brown hair twisted with mud and dew and life. The candescent lights of the canyon kissed my soul. I focused all my attention on a noise in the distance, a humming. A soft humming, a tune my daddy sang me before bed when I was a girl. I thought of Kyler, out workin’ somewhere with his rough hands. I thought about my life and the simplicity of unimportance, of ornate nothingness. I had no perception of time or direction. White clouds opened enough to let out a light shower of rain, my hair and clothes dampened more, the earth beneath me became lenient. The humming grew louder, it got closer, closer, louder but still gentle. It was upon me, surroundin’ me. I felt the warm embrace of the sun through the rain and allowed myself to succumb to the beauty of the wilderness, now a flower of the canyon.
Cynthia Carmichael

Emma’s Favorite Blanket

It lays in the tiny hands of a new child.  
It is new and whole and soft.  
The pastel blues, greens and pinks behind  
The honey-colored sleeping Pooh Bear  
With his signature bright red shirt all made of fleece.  
Yellow and black Tigger bouncing as  
“Tiggers do.” The always-so-blue Eeyore  
Forever sulking next to the honey eating Pooh,  
The star of her baby blanket. The hand-crafted blanket,  
From a friend, strip cuts with care and tied with love.  
In her small hands she takes the thinly cut strings and unties them, Soothing her to sleep. Hands so small it’s a mystery how she untied so many, But she puts each in her mouth, a pacifier again to comfort a tired, curly haired baby girl. It is in need of repair. Surviving many years of devoted, Soothing love the cherished handmade blanket  
Is ripped, mended, and treasured.  
It stays with this growing girl, her baby blanket,  
Throughout the years it matures with Emma,  
Forever known as her favorite blanket.
Ceresa Kennedy

A Mother Ashamed of Her Lack of Patience.

Through empty rooms
Ghosts of angry words floating
Where the children used to play at
Being grown up.

Pretending, a life similar
Yet inverted, where
They made the rules.

With only her to mimic
They smoked and cried and drank
And held each other close in
Moments of fierce comfort.

They replaced make believe with fact,
Gone from her dictatorship
To form their own.

Alone, the ghosts insistently
Fault her, saying
She should have been more benign,
Like a TV mom.

Quiet and sweet and good at math,
The antithesis of self,
Tender and raw.
The transience of childhood
Its selfish demands.
Lovers capsized by the storms,
No safe harbor.

No protection from their needs
Replacing her own, loneliness
Becoming a habit.

She finds herself to blame,
It was so much easier to reject than
To refine a potential mate,
To conform to the shouting children.

Shamed by a longing to renew,
Her children, a man, her life,
She cried for patience.

Still the ghosts overwhelm her,
She sleeps alone
And tells the world it’s her choice.
For the children.
As he rummaged through the attic looking for his mom’s box of old family recipes, he came across a box he had been avoiding for nearly five years. As soon as he caught glimpse of the tattered cardboard, he came to a halt. His heart sunk and his stomach turned into knots. He felt a lump in his throat and immediately his eyes started to fill with tears. He stood there and stared at the box for several minutes trying to decide if he wanted to open it up. Finally, with much hesitation, he bent down and dusted off the flaps.

“Letters from Dad” was written on the top. I don’t know if I should do this, he thought. I don’t even know the last time I looked through these; it’s been so long. I don’t know if I can bear the pain again. I should have burned these like I said I wanted to...But I miss him.

He sat on the creaking floor of the attic with his head in his hands while tears streamed down his face. He stared blankly at the box and its contents, still fighting with himself as to whether or not he should relive his pain. The feelings became too overwhelming and he finally just grabbed the box and pulled out a handful of envelopes; and one by one he opened the letters.

Dear Tyler,

How’s my little soldier doing? I miss you so much! I can’t believe how quickly you’re growing up. Mom told me all about your first varsity basketball game. I’m so proud of you, son.
I wish I could have been there to see you score all of those points...24?! That’s so impressive! When I get home, we’ll have to play a game of one-on-one. Speaking of which, only four more months! I bet you’ve grown so much! I just hope you aren’t taller than me by the time I see you! Keep watch over Mom and keep working hard in school. I can’t wait to see you. Time will pass soon. I love you, son. And remember, I’ll always be with you.

Love,
Dad

Wow, I had forgotten all about that. That was way back in junior high! A tear fell down his cheek as he re-read those words, “When I get home, we’ll have to play a game of one-on-one.” You have no idea how much I looked forward to that day. I spent hours outside in the driveway just practicing so that I could beat you! I can still remember the first game of one-on-one we played when I was only five.

***

Tyler’s dad took him to Sports Authority and bought him his very first “big-boy” basketball. They wasted no time in getting home and changing into their tennis shoes. He parked the car in the street so they could have the entire driveway to play a game of one-on-one. He taught him how to dribble, shuffle, defend, and proper shooting form

“When you’re dribbling, always keep your eyes up,” his dad taught him. “If you’re looking down the other guy could easily steal the ball,” he said as he swiped the ball from Tyler who was staring at the ball.

“Dad!” Tyler whined.

“I’m teaching you, son!” he said with a chuckle. “Let’s try that again,” he said as he handed Tyler the ball.
“Keep your eyes up this time so I can’t steal it.”

Tyler succeeded and his Dad didn’t steal the ball. It was time to move on to shooting.

“Bend your knees, keep your elbow in, and flick the wrist,” he said as he demonstrated a perfect shot.

He and Tyler practiced the fundamentals until Tyler said he felt confident.

“That’s my boy! You ready to play a game?”

“Only if you’re ready to lose!” shouted Tyler with a laugh.

The two agreed to play to twenty-one. His dad was fairly lenient, but he made Tyler work hard for every earned point.

***

Thanks for making me work hard, Dad. I wish you could be here to help me train for college ball. He took a deep breath and looked back down at the letter and read, “I bet you’ve grown so much.” Mom kept a record on the wall to see how much I grew from month to month. He closed his eyes as he remembered looking at the wall with his mom and asking, “Am I as tall as Dad yet?! I wanted to be just like you...tall and strong, seemingly invincible. I wish we wouldn’t have stopped measuring my height on the wall. But the doctor said I’m 6’2” now, that’s one inch taller than you, Dad. He wiped a tear from his cheek as his face formed a slight smile and he reached for another letter.

Dear Tyler,

What’s this I hear about you having a girlfriend?!

Oh gosh, Hannah. He let out a slight chuckle before continuing to read.

My boy is growing up too quickly. I really wish your letters would get here before Mom’s because she tends to enjoy telling me all of your business
before you get the chance to... I love you, son.
Only three more months until I see you; I can’t wait! Don’t forget, I’ll always be with you.

Love,
Dad

With each letter, his heart began to soften as he could recall what his life was like at the time of each letter. Finally, he found a small jewelry box at the bottom of the tattered cardboard underneath the pile of envelopes. He started to reach for it but then pulled back. He closed his eyes and the scene started playing like a movie.

***

The parking lot was filled with families saying good-bye to their beloved soldier(s). Some were crying while others made jokes to help relieve some of the tension. Men in uniform held their loved ones as they said their farewells and made promises of coming back soon. Some made it look easy as if they had been through this process a million times, yet there were others who made it seem like this would be the last time they ever saw each other.

“Come here, son,” Tyler’s father said as he knelt down. “I got you something. Now listen closely, ok. I want you to keep this with you until I come back, ok? Wear it every day so you don’t forget me.”

“I would never forget you, Dad!” Tyler said with a quivering lip as he tried to keep the corners of his mouth from frowning.

“I know, son. I know. This is just my gift to you, and my promise that I’ll never leave you. No matter what, I’ll always be with you, right here.” His father placed a chain around his neck and tucked it inside of his shirt as he pointed to his heart. “You’re my favorite little soldier. I love you so much, Tyler.”
With tears streaming down both of their faces, they held each other tight. His father gave him one last kiss before he stood up; and as he walked away, Tyler stood at attention and saluted him farewell.

***

Tyler opened his eyes and a rush of anger swept over him.

“You promised you would never leave me!” he yelled as he threw several of the letters across the attic. “You promised!” His body fell back in frustration as he began to weep. “You promised...”

Several hours passed and he woke up to scattered letters and a face stained by dried tears. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and reached into the box. He grabbed the little black jewelry box and decided he was ready to open it. Inside, he found a folded up letter he had sworn he would never read again. It said:

Dear Tyler,

I don’t have much time to write. I’m sure you’ve heard by now that the war is growing and they are making me stay longer than expected. I’m so sorry, son. I hope you are still wearing the chain I gave you. Never forget my promise to you. Take care of Mom, you understand? I love you so so much, my soldier. No matter what happens, I’ll always be with you.

Love,

Dad

It was the last letter he received from his dad. It came one hour before the other soldiers knocked on his door. It was the day he began to resent his father because he had broken his promise to him. It was the day he
ripped off the chain and threw it into a box with all of his dad’s letters. It was the day he knew he would never forget.

With trembling hands he reached into the small box and grabbed the chain and held it close to his heart. He took a deep breath and whispered, “I’m so sorry, Dad. I love you so much.” He then opened his palm and read the inscription on the dog tag before placing it over his head; *I’ll always be with you.*
Bryana Ewing

Desolation of Stars

Driving through the dark on unlit streets, I am uneasy. There is something about these country roads that makes my blood thrum, and not in an exciting way. I’m almost queasy with panic, choking on the knot it creates in my throat.

It’s hard to pinpoint where the alarm stems from. Maybe I’ve seen too many horror movies where unlit streets in the middle of nowhere can only spell death. Or maybe it is my own over-active imagination making me think about car crashes and bleeding out on the pavement alone. This is the time of night when the lack of sleep culminates in drifting off while driving, so imagining closing my eyes behind the wheel and not waking up again feels too real, and-. I stop that line of thought right there. Wherever these fears stem from, imagining everything that could go wrong sure won’t help.

I think that it is the emptiness of the area that gets under my skin. The dark itself is not the problem. I was the kid who kept the curtains tucked tight against the window because I couldn’t sleep with even a quiver of light, so it can’t be the dark itself that bothers me. But vacant streets are another thing entirely. In the dark, there is only the road and empty space, nothing more. It makes loneliness cling to my skin in an uncomfortable way, makes me think that I am the only person left in the world. It makes me yearn for a big city, yearn for electricity and not having enough room to breathe without inhaling a stranger’s exhale. Then I wouldn’t be so suffocated by wide open, blank space.
The few headlights that join me on this road don’t help either. Instead, passing them as they move in the opposite direction, I imagine that they are the ones closing their eyes, and I will die because of it. Really, the whole act of driving out here after the sun sets feels like a risk I shouldn’t be taking. I don’t want to be taking it. But there is no other way home, so I’m stuck here with the road as my constant companion and anxiety making me grip at the steering wheel with white knuckles.

When I finally give up my fear in an admission to my father, he laughs with his whole body. He has never been one to fear things like the dark or seemingly endless roads. Sometimes it seems like nothing makes him afraid at all.

“Think about the stars,” he tells me before changing the topic. It is a statement that surprises me. When has he ever taken the time to think about the stars? And how does he think that that statement alone solves everything?

Maybe it does. Out here, where hardly a car drives by and where the lights from the city don’t reach, each star is a beacon. Each one is lit in a way that I have never been familiar with, in a way that I would never see if not for these empty streets.

I come from a world of electricity where natural brilliance is overlooked and underappreciated. Growing up, stars were the lights of the city reflected through a glass of water, the office rooms lit on the skyscraper down the street, pixelated images on a television screen. The dark was never quite complete. And if things grew too dim, some electronic screen was always by my side to help me find my way to the switch at the door.

Out here there are no switches. I can’t just throw back a curtain and let some light in. And the bright headlights of my car don’t make a difference to the dark atmosphere around me. The only true lights are the stars,
each one a pin-prick of beautiful energy. One by one, they seem to pluck themselves into existence as if from sheer will alone. After all, how else could they fight against space? Driving on this country road, I have to contend with miles of empty farm land. But they have the whole dark universe to battle alone. And they shine despite that endless dark.

I think if I were a star, I would have burned out a long time ago. If this stretch of pavement is too much for me, I can only imagine. But they are still burning, their brilliance made pure for me to see.

Thinking about what they battle, I feel better during the drive. There is still fear laced through my veins, and I still imagine tragedy. But I also appreciate the dark, just a little, for letting me see their fight.

There is something beautiful about the desolation of stars. Out here, they are the only comfort, burning bright, not worried about their existence in the dark.
Andrea Rule

A Silver Fog, A Silent Forest

The men whispered. The Captain knew it, but whispering couldn’t make things worse anyway, so he let it be. They had been on the sea four months. One month into open water, an unnatural, freezing fog had driven in, and stayed for the entirety of the voyage. It stained their whole world, shrunk down to the deck of the ship, to a sullen, damp grey. From time to time, a breeze would stir itself up and the fog would clear enough in one direction or another to see a small distance across the black sea. The days hardly looked different from the nights, the sun far above never seeping through the cloaking fog more than to give everything a pale, watery glow. At night, swathed in the fog, the ship had its own unearthly illumination, as if the moon lent its color to the soaked, warped wood.

Captain Morris was not a superstitious man, unlike many of his men. He was an old Navy type, now the noble Captain of a merchant ship to see him through his middle age. This was supposed to be an easy job, a three month journey across the narrow sea, transporting spices and furs for trade. He had seen his fair share of oddities, travelling the wide world in his younger days, but nothing that could make him believe in ill omens or the curses his men were whispering about. So, unlike his men, he did not think that the unnatural fog was the result of the ugliness in the beginning of the voyage. The cook’s new cabin boy turned out to not be a boy, so much as a bedwarmer he had picked up in one of the taverns at their last stop. Before the Captain could stop them, a few of the men had risen up and beheaded the poor girl for a witch,
and dumped her body over the gunwale. When the cook came shrieking out of the galley to stop them, they tossed him over the side after her without a second thought. Not a half-day later, their winds died and fog had shrouded the ship. The few men who had stirred the pot and killed the cook fled overnight in one of the longboats and scuttled all the rest, leaving the crew unable to do anything but shake their fists and curse the traitors. They muttered about curses of ill fortune and rifled through the cook’s things for evidence he was performing black magic, sure this fog was some last affliction his spirit had brought upon them for revenge. Captain Morris thought it was more likely a blight sent by God as punishment for their sin of murder, and he begged his men to repent.

At this point, the Captain had ceased to pray at night, and he ordered the last barrels of freshwater to be opened and distributed. The crew had consumed the very last crumbs of the hard tack several days earlier, and the only remotely edible things they had left were the spices they had packed for trade—unfortunately the only thing they had in abundance, and inedible in their current state. The men also whispered about untying the bundles of furs and chewing on the leather, and at this point Captain Morris figured there was no harm in denying them that, if it gave their mouths something else to do.

He stood at attention by the helmsman, with First Mate Bainbridge staring fervently forward with his spyglass. Despite the unusual amount of activity on deck, the men were silent, massing on the forecastle, not daring to hope. The current hour’s lookout, half-frozen to the crow’s nest at the tail end of another fruitless watch, had seen a distant shadow when the fog cleared fleetingly. He held his breath, eyes unblinking and burning and crusted in the cold, sure he was delirious. All eyes strained forward through the grey. Chatter burst from the crew as
the ship drew ever closer, borne on the light breeze that had been absent for months and the steady waves, towards what was now a distinct dark mass along the horizon.

“L-land ho!” the lookout cried again, not even believing his own words.

The men on the deck cheered. A few even dared to laugh. First Mate Bainbridge lowered the spyglass and sighed. “No use tryin’ to see through the damn fog, Captain,” he said. “It looks mountainous to me, but I can’t tell you if there’s life nor civilization out there.” The Captain, hand pressed to his brow to cut the glare off the water, nodded and hummed unhappily. Of course the fog that had plagued them for so long would, to the last, cause them no end of trouble.

As the ship neared the island, the sparse crew began to prepare for full stop; furling sails, securing lines, preparing the anchors. The Captain clapped the helmsman on his tense shoulder, letting a smile stretch his face, wondering at how unnatural it felt. Cliffs rose out of the mist, gulls swarming and shrieking and gliding on the currents, their shapes glaringly white against the silver-grey of the fog. The helmsman huffed a laugh. “Never thought I’d miss that sound.” From the crow’s nest came an angry shout and a loud screech, and a gull tumbled down from the mast, caught wing on a stiff current and shrieked back over its shoulder at the lookout, who shook his fist and shouted curses at the bird.

“Captain!” he called a moment later, “there’s a shore ahead to the port side.”

Captain Morris gave a terse nod; now came the tricky part. “Helmsman, steer us as close as you can to the shore, without running her up onto the sandbar.”

“Aye, sir,” gritted the helmsman, already deep in concentration. He steered straight at the stretch of beach they could see, the deck completely silent but for the soft
slap of waves on the hull and the creaking of old wet wood. “Steady.” The Captain’s voice sounded extraordinarily loud in the stillness. He saw what the helmsman intended to do. He called out to the men, “ready the anchor to drop off the port side, lads.” The helmsman kept their steady course, slowly slipping through the water straight at the land until the bowsprit was nearly hanging over the beach. The helmsman waited... and waited... and gave a curt nod to the Captain. “Drop anchor!” called the Captain, and the helmsman cranked the wheel hard to port as the anchor slapped the surface of the water. The ship spun to the left, driven by its own weight in the water almost up onto the sandbar. A terrible gritty noise ground out from under the starboard side for a bit until the ship settled, slightly tilted, only a hundred yards from the shore.

Captain Morris heaved a heavy, relieved sigh. The men laughed and clapped and shouted praises up to the helmsman, who pried his fingers off the spokes and wiped his arm across his brow. “All ashore, boys, and thank God for it,” the Captain called, striding down the stairs, buckling a holster around his waist and slinging a rapier over his back. The men made themselves ready, strapping on pistols and swords.

Despite the skill with which the helmsman had steered them close to the shore, the freezing swim nearly did them in. They dragged their emaciated bodies up the cold white sand, dripping and shivering. The beach spread away to their right, stopping at a sheer rock wall that rose above them at heights unguessed, into the fleeing shreds of the fog.

Spiky, silver grasses started sprouting about two hundred yards from the shore, the brush growing thicker until it met a line of trees, trunks pale and silvery leaves shimmering in the half-light through the fog. Through the
trees, the Captain could see a clear path winding its way through the forest towards the center of the island.

“Ahead, men. Keep your eyes open, and your mouths shut. We don’t want to wake anything that might be in there.”

The men took to the path, shaking the freezing water off and drawing their weapons carefully as they crept under the quiet canopy. Neither bird nor insect chirped as the men made their way through the trees; the only sound the stump of their boots on the hard packed earth, and the drumming of their hearts in their ears.

The path wound slowly, steadily upwards, and in some places boulders and fallen silver trees blocked the path so the men had to climb over, quiet as they could. As they climbed deeper, the silence only got thicker, so that even their stifled panting seemed tremendously loud. Their feeling of unease grew steadily as well, the silver trees seeming to lean over them, watch them, making the air thicker and harder to breathe until the men were all but cowering, looking over their shoulders as if they expected to be attacked at every moment.

“Haah, uncanny this is,” muttered one of the men. The men jumped at the sudden, explosively loud noise in the motionless air. “Stow it,” Captain Morris hissed, eyes twitching from treetop to treetop. He had the horrible feeling something was watching them, everything was watching them. The man shot a sullen look at him, muttering again, “It’s uncanny! Who ever heard of a forest with no animals, nor bugs, nor even bloody wind in the trees?”

“I said, stow it,” the Captain hissed again, stalking back through the silent, shrunken men and cuffing the speaker on the ear. “Let’s get out of this thrice-cursed forest quick as we can now.”
The exhausted, shaken men hurried forward as fast as fatigue and weariness of heart would allow. After another hour’s steady going, the crew crested a sort of hill, and they spotted smoke rising in the distance, a darker smudge wavering through the pale silvery stillness of the forest around them. “Thank God,” the Captain breathed. The men let out a collective breath, but kept their heads enough not to go rushing all at once towards a strange fire. The meaty scent of woodsmoke grew thicker as the trees thinned, Captain Morris cautiously approaching the edge of the forest. As they drew closer to the eaves of the forest, sound rushed back to the world, deafening after the oppressive silence of the trees.

Several wooden huts circled a clearing, a large fire burning in the center of the village. Painted men in white furs stood around the fire leaning on spears, talking in quiet voices. Women draped in a simple white cloth sat baking bread in hard-packed earth ovens, the smell of which was enough to make a few of the men moan. Taking a deep breath, which only pulled more of the intoxicating smell into his nose, Captain Morris crept from the woods, trying to stand as straight and look as noble as a near-starved, salt-faded merchant Captain could. The quiet conversation around the fire ceased as all the heads in the village turned to look at the new figure emerging from the silver woods. Even the fire seemed to shrink. One small child started to cry. A woman slowly stood from the fire and scooped up the child, carrying him into one of the huts. When Captain Morris was fairly certain he wasn’t going to be murdered on the spot, he gave a slow wave of his hand, and his men began to warily emerge from the forest. The men and women in the village walked in a neat line to the edge of the forest, stopping just a couple yards away.
The Captain understood their ragged appearance wasn’t going to garner much sympathy, and they could quite easily be mistaken for pirates. He slowly unstrapped his pistol’s holster and leaned down and placed it on the ground, followed by his rapier. He backed away with his hands in the air, in a gesture he hoped they understood. A painted man with a missing left ear slowly moved from the front of the group and laid his spear on the ground, repeating Captain Morris’ gesture. Captain Morris nodded, straightened his moldy coat, cleared his throat, and called out. “Does anyone here speak English?” The villagers only stared at him with wide, terrified eyes.

“Captain, I doubt these people have ever seen another human being before…” whispered First Mate Bainbridge. The Captain glanced at him. “Please, English?” he implored, taking a step forward. The whole village backed away from him. The man with the missing ear leaned down and whispered to a boy, who turned and wove his way back through the villagers. Sailors and villagers stared nervously at one another for several endless minutes, the villagers unblinking and silent until Captain Morris felt he wanted to shout just to break the endless silence.

“...What are they waiting for?” the First Mate breathed. The boy walked back through the crowd leading an old woman by the hand, for whom the villagers parted respectfully. She leaned heavily on a walking stick taller than she was and equally as gnarled. Beads woven in her wispy gray hair clacked in the silence, as did the adornments on her staff. “Perhaps this is their leader,” the First Mate said hopefully. The Captain swallowed, cleared his throat again. “Are you the leader of this village?” The woman gave no answer, only stared. The men all saw in that moment that her eyes appeared blind, clouded with cataracts thick as the fog, but she was looking right at
them. After a horrible minute of silence, the Captain, growing fairly desperate at this point, tried to keep his voice from shaking as he spoke again. “Please,” he begged. “My men are starving, we are desperate. Please, will you help us?” he took another step forward.

“Nn!” the woman hissed, stepping forward as well. She planted her walking stick at the toe of the Captain’s left boot and drew a deep line across his path. She stepped back and planted the stick in the ground at her feet, pointing back towards the silver forest, her papery hand steady. The message was clear. The men behind him made quiet, distressing sounds of despair. The Captain, the steady, solid Captain was near tears. “You can’t!” he choked through a thick throat. “You must help us!”

“Nn,” said the woman, pointing back towards the forest.

“We will starve...” the Captain tried, one last time. “Death waits in that forest.”

The woman’s head bobbed. “Death has already found you,” she croaked. She stepped over the line, through the Veil, and led the spectral crew into the Ghostwood.
Alexis Martinez

Siren

Murderous beauty told in old folklore, thought to be untrue. Old wives tale
Golden hair and chaotic blue eyes, silky skin and hypnotizing smile, the siren of the sea.

Intoxicating her prey, she’s melatonin for the soul
Drowsiness is her way, she is a siren of the sea.

Her sweet aria reaches the sky, to tell her sorrowful story.
The moon her audience, water the judge of the siren of the sea.

She steals the men, her melancholy melody takes their hearts
Her blackened soul feels no remorse in keeping theirs. Oh, siren of the sea.

Alexis, they whisper again and again. Come closer, my dear
You belong here in the dark, depths of the sea. You, a siren of the sea.
Daniel Conroy

Ennui

I reach only for the stars,
and this is how I starve.
I am not mighty for it;
I am emaciated, withered
by many nights yearning
for only the unattainable.

About me, myriad fruits
fester and rot. Flowers
wilt beside me,
no revels made for their beauty.
I walk through brambles
and meadows, knowing neither,
for I claw at the horizon with my eyes
and try to chain the ether
in an alloy of hope and shattered dreams.

I reach for the stars,
and fall on perfect lattices.
I am enslaved by this.
Even when I see them,
I am not liberated by far shores,
for all I want is a new world
after the next new world
I find. A nomad of desire.
A feast enters hands that feel only a need to grasp at dust motes. They are bony and weak, ethereal and broken like a dying demigod. Heracles’s corpse coughs at the end of my right arm and Perseus hacks blood from clammy lips from my left, searching for tasks already done and gorgons already gone. Stepping is all the impact I have while enfeebled by the impossible, and bitter tears leap from eyes that see only the shadow of the near nothingness that is me.

Only falling below the horizon might cure my madness now, but in the depths of Hades I’d still search for Persephone in spring and beg coins from Charon. No Virgil nor Beatrice shall warm these wispy hands, as I still wander, a ghost in an undead land.
Isaac Matson

Visions of Lean Cows

I
Out of the furnace beams gilded ribbons of technicolor, a solid lightmass upon which rolls all the cars, all the ink plans Detroit ever fed into sheet metal presses.

The lightmass brushes away stilted grass, scrapes the rust off stray machines left by the lifeforms who once inhabited these corroded fields, hibernating in the front lot of the CF&I mill.

II
Joseph told Pharaoh the meaning of his dreams, the seven fat cows devoured by the seven lean cows, lean still; how the seven fat cows were years of plenty, and the hungry were years of famine.
III
A man’s hand was severed in a press,
then stamped into a side panel that bled
108,000 miles later when my 1970 Nova crumpled,
spinning on a winter bridge.

IV
It is written, “I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne,
and the train of his robe filled the temple.”
I too saw the gilded ribbons fill the city, whole boroughs
dissolving with each flicker,
the glory of hungry cows eating the suburbs.

Molten alms flowed freely through the temple,
where 10,000 men came to worship for a century.
There were scattered by the lean cows,
all the glory shut up in the bones of the last foreman.
Eterne Merzeau

emailcorrespondence.txt

Day 8
It’s so hot here. Do you remember that day a few years ago when it was so hot we went to the pool and it was like bathwater? I’d kill for a day like that. I’d kill for a night like that. I’ve been here one week and we only just got the interplanet communications up. Ma and Da and I were on building duty. We set up twenty huts for the hundred people who came. Spent all day in thermal suits. At night I lay in bed naked. I’ve got five fans on me as high as they can go. It isn’t enough. The air conditioner isn’t enough. My arms are sore from the needles they give me to stop my sweating. Every day we talk about how important water is.
Tell me about cold things, Max.

Day 10
If I had a lemonade I wouldn’t even drink it. I’d pour it over my head and stand in front of all the fans. You made me dream of lemonade, Max. You’ve got a way with words. Just keep mailing me about it. It doesn’t matter if I’ve sent anything. I’d read it. I’m hot and bored.
Write me, write me, write me.

Day 11
The planet’s so active. The earth is shaking from volcanoes miles away. It rains ash all the time. I forget what color is. All I ever see is gray and black. Sometimes I wish that the magma under us would break through to the surface and swallow me up.
At least there’d be color. At least there’d be light.
Thanks for telling me about your day, Max. It helps me through this.

Day 15
Abel went exploring. Said he’d be back in a couple days, but his life signs went out last night. He could have fallen into lava. His suit could have broke. He could have thought some place was safe and taken his suit off. There could even be something out there. I know it’s silly. I’m sure it was something simple, but all I can think about is a dragon heaving itself out of a pool of lava, all red and glowing and ripping Abel’s suit apart. I dream about him burning and when I wake up it’s so hot I think I’m burning. I scream and cry. Sometimes Ma comes. Sometimes Da comes. They say the same things.

They go to the window and they turn on the wipers, brush away the ash so we can look at more ash beyond it. They say, “Look, Maria, we’ll put the playgrounds there. We’ll have a school right next to it. See that ridge, up there? That’s where we’ll put the hospital.” They talk and talk about it, like it’s already there, like they can see it. All I see is a burnt up husk of a planet.

It doesn’t help. Nothing helps. Nothing stops the dreams.

Day 16
I don’t know, Max. Tell me about dumb things. Tell me about what rainbows look like. Tell me about the test you had in school. Tell me what was streaming last night. Tell me something stupid one of our friends did. I don’t care. I just want something to think about that isn’t this. Give me anything.
Day 20
I was right. There was something else out there. It’s other people.

Day 21
They want us to leave. We don’t have any way back. Da handed me a gun this morning while we cleaned the huts. He just showed me how to use it. He didn't say anything else. He had this look in his eyes, this sad, sad look. It broke my heart and I’m not even sure why.

Day 27
They raided us on the twenty third day. They did it in the night. The days here are twenty hours, damn close to Earth’s. The nights aren’t, though, the nights are so black it’s like a room without windows. The days are gray and dim, but you can see. You can’t see anything at night without the goggles. They caught us blind.

Five of our tents were ruins before we could do a damn thing. They had laser cutters, turned them on against the sides of our tents and burned through them. They cut big, gaping holes, so all the heat and ash got in. All the poison air got in. None of the adults are dead yet, but they’re dying. There was a little one in one of the tents. Six years old. He died. He didn’t do a damn thing and he died.

I slept through all of that. Isn’t that strange? That something like that could happen and there wasn’t a sound in the world. It was so quiet. They couldn’t even scream because the ash was choking them. So I just laid in bed the whole time while a child died and men and women were poisoned.

The kid’s name was Joseph. Joseph. Joseph. I say it every night before I go to sleep. I’ve seen him around. His face is brighter in my memory than anything I’ve ever

Day 30
I signed up for the militia. Ma and Da didn’t like it at all. They said that they’d come here for peace. They came here to make something. They said a militia only destroys things. They said I should stay with them. They said their job was more important. They said that, without them, we wouldn’t be able to have a future here.

I said without a militia we wouldn’t have a present. They didn’t say a damn thing to that.

Day 32
I’ve finished training. It’s not much training, not real training. No one expected we’d need it. It was clear the planet was barren of life so we wouldn’t have to fight anything. We’re so far into United territory we didn’t think anyone would come, but they did. It’s Pan-Asia. We know because they screamed it at us.

“This land is for Pan-Asia,” they said. They’d hacked us and it came through our speakers. Their accent was thick, but we all knew what they said. It was obvious what they said. “You fucking pigs. You fucking capitalist pigs. United Nations of fucking Old World. Go back to the god damned old world.”

Then he said he was going to kill us all. He was going to rape us. He was going to dip our children inch by inch into the lava and make us listen while they screamed. He said that to everyone in our settlement. We have three more children here. Those children heard it. They’re so frightened they don’t really sleep anymore. They don’t understand why it’s happening. They don’t understand why someone would do this.
I don’t understand either, Max. You know what, though? I don’t care. There’s nothing that could ever excuse the things they’ve done.

Day 35
We’re at war.

Day 38
They only came with fifty people. They’re from a bio-planet. Focused way more on genetics than technology. They’ve got heat resistance, some poison and electricity in their palms and shit like that. Doesn’t do a damn thing when you set up a gun with AI to aim a bullet through their eyes. They raided two more times, and both times they’ve fallen down like rag dolls, like little girls dropped them and ran off to dinner. It’s so sudden how they go from alive to dead. From people to corpses.

Day 40
They’ve stopped raiding. We’ve sent Rebecca in full armor to scout their camp, to see what they’ve got left.

Day 44
Nine adult males.
Eight adult females.
One adolescent male.
One adolescent female.
Three child females – aged approximately eight, five, and three.
One infant male.
Less than half what they started with. Less than a third of what we have left.
Day 54

Sorry to worry you so much, Max. We’ve been debating.

The fact is, even without the mounted AI, we think we can finish them off. We have twenty five people, myself included, who are ready to finish the job. I’m the youngest, and I’m seventeen. Everyone else is in their late twenties or older. They only have seventeen adults, so they’re completely outnumbered. They don’t have a chance if we go in. We might even wipe them out without losing any of our own men.

There are plenty of people who don’t like it, though. Ma and Da are big on just leaving it alone. They say we’ve already won, that they won’t be coming back, and even if we did we already know how to defend ourselves. Ma was pleading with them. She gave a really long speech about how we came to this planet to help, to make someplace beautiful. She says we don’t want our world to be based on death. She said it’s a whole planet. Lots of countries shared one planet once. There are still planets that share countries. She says we can share. She says it won’t be a problem. She says our countries aren’t even at war, so they won’t send more people. They won’t send an army. She says we should just go back to our jobs.

I haven’t forgotten about Joseph. The rest of us haven’t. We haven’t forgotten about how they snuck into our homes and they killed people for no good reason. They killed them because they wanted the whole planet for themselves. They killed people because they couldn’t share. Ma’s wrong. They’re going to bring more. They won’t stop unless we wipe them out, unless we show them that we mean to protect our place no matter what the cost. This is still defense. This is still to keep our planet safe.

People on Ma and Da’s side were worried about the children. They said we couldn’t just kill the children,
especially not the baby. If we did that we wouldn’t be any better than them. I agree with them. My side agrees with them. What we’re going to do is take the five and three year old, and we’ll take the baby too. We’ll raise them as our own. We have the resources. It’s nearly been two months, anyway, and even with the setback, the terraforming should be to a desert climate by the end of the year. Cool enough to grow some food so we won’t have to live off rations. We have more than enough to take them in.

I remember Ma’s face, all fire and fury. “You’re going to kill the eight year old? She’s a little girl! You’re going to kill a little girl? Why can’t you take her in? We’ll take her. Maria seems to be an adult now, so we’ve got plenty of room for a child.”

I remember my commander’s face. John. He was Joseph’s father. He’s been nothing but ice through all this. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him have a single emotion. He didn’t have one then either. He just said, “Too old. She’ll already be sided with her group. She’ll remember what we’ve done. It’s too risky that she’ll try to take us down when she’s old enough.”

Da spoke for the first time in the whole meeting. He was quiet, so quiet, but the room was even quieter. “Don’t you think, if we’re doing something that drives a child to kill, we might be doing something wrong?”

Then he looked at me. He looked me in the eyes and his eyes were filled with tears. I thought my heart had broken when he handed me the gun. I was wrong. That was just a crack. This time, my heart shattered, Max. It fell into a million little pieces, so small they look like sand, and I don’t think there’s any glue in the world that could put it back together.
Day 55
We’ve decided. We’re finishing the other encampment.

Day 66
Yes, Max. I lived.

Day 79
I’m fine. Just busy.

Day 94
I don’t think you actually want to know what happened, Max.

Day 95
Are you certain?

Day 96
You won’t think of me the same. I killed someone, Max.

Day 103
Alright. I’ll tell you.
We reached the camp just after daybreak. I thought our huts were primitive, but theirs were worse. You know what ours look like, right? The ones they showed us in the settlement videos. Like round, metal tents, big enough for three rooms. Theirs were rock houses, made out of the same stone we stood on. They cuts strips of stone then melted them together. It was so clumsy you could see where they’d done it.

We went into each hut one by one. There were ten of them. They were nearly all empty. I wasn’t in the first once they found people in. They found about five adults in there, found them with the eight year old. Killed them all.
It was louder than the earthquakes. Made me shakier on my feet than the earthquakes. I broke off from the group. Went into one of the tents we’d already explored. I just wanted quiet. I just wanted to be alone.

But the girl had snuck in, the teenager, about fourteen years old. She was with the kids. All of them were sleeping. She had the baby cradled to her chest and she stared up at me. She stared and stared and I stared back. I hadn’t drawn my gun.

“You look like us,” she said finally. “I mean, not entirely. Different planet, probably, but same country, right? Pan-Asia?”

“I was adopted,” I said.

“We drugged them,” she said, gesturing to the kids. “When the perimeter warning went off, we drugged them. Partially to keep them quiet while we hid, partially so they wouldn’t have to see. They’ll wake up in a few hours.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Can you make it quick? Here. I’ll set the baby down.” She did so, laying him gently on the floor, then stood. She was shaking. “You’re going to take care of them, right? The little ones? You’re not...”

“We’re going to take care of them,” I said. I pull my gun out. I set it gently between her eyes. “We’ll have the world really nice in a couple of years. They’re going to have the best life terraforming can make.”

“That’s good.” She closed her eyes tight and started mouthing something, a language I didn’t know. Maybe it was a prayer. It seems like what someone would mouth, if a gun was at their head.

When her lips stopped moving, I pulled the trigger. Bam. Ragdoll.

Then we took the kids and went home.
Day 104

No, Max. It’s really not that much colder here. I just don’t notice the heat anymore.
The Sad Solemn Cat

The sad solemn cat, dressed as death, moans in distress from outside my window. Screeches fill my room, a glass-breaking tune. Omen, unholy—three a.m., hour of witches. Eyes like a fall foliage paint palette, guised in short black fur, Satan’s messenger. Dark, wicked monster—black feline magic, I ban you entrance into my lair!

I tremble in bed, sheets over my head. Incessant, eerie growls till four a.m.

I shout “leave me be, creature of the dead! I mean no harm; I’m a transparent gem!” The shrieks end suddenly without warning, and I awaken in the late morning.
Andrea Rule

Goodnight, My Dragon

The cave is dark. Even with his superior night vision, it takes him a moment to find the maid. She is hunched in the corner, trying to make herself seem as small as possible, her thin, dirty arms wrapped around her knees. She’s staring in his direction, the whites of her eyes showing all the way around. He has to contain his excitement, not wanting to scare her, as she’s obviously frightened. Slinking over to the far wall, across from her, he lets out a single puff of flame, lighting the room in a glare for a second, before the fire catches onto the torch pinned to the wall with an old claw of his. With that small illumination, he walks on all fours over to the ashy pit in the center of the room, lighting the blaze there. The smoke is whirled away up into a small hole in the center of the sloping cavern roof. With the either merry or fearsome blaze, depending on which one you ask, filling the room with its glow, the dragon walks to the side of the cave opposite the girl, sits down, and stares at her expectantly.

She does not blink for a solid two minutes. She just stares at him, the whites of her eyes shining in the firelight, her pupils pinpricks.

Eventually, he decides to start off the conversation, hopefully showing her there’s no need to be afraid.

“So, what is your name?” he asks, his voice a subaudible rumble.

She pushes herself farther back into her corner, never taking her enormous eyes off him. He pulls his lips up in what he hopes is a... oh, what did the humans call it again... it was a sign meant to show friendliness, at least.
She blinks, finally. Was that... a smile? Was he trying to smile at her?

_FINE_, she decides. _There’s no point in sitting here like a useless lump, now is there? You’ve read about dragons. Use it._

“Elwyn,” she says, and to her everlasting pride her voice doesn’t shake at all. “And, what is your name?” she asks. Even if he does eat her, perhaps she can get his name outside somehow, so that maybe her brothers-in-arms will hunt down and kill the beast to avenge her.

“I am called Gilvian.” His voice is proud. Maybe because of his name, maybe because he got her to speak. Elwyn’s not sure.

“Gilvian... Gilvian...” she tastes his name. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard of you before. Have you burned any major cities? Eaten an obscene number of people?”

“No,” the dragon drawls. “That was always my elder hatchling’s area. He was always the one setting fire to the towns and eating the people, glad to challenge any Hero who came his way.”

“Oh,” Elwyn perks up. “What’s his name?”

Gilvian cocks his head, peering at her out of one giant emerald eye. If his face could show expression, she would have thought she saw something like mild surprise written on his expressionless face.

“Ancalagon,” he says after a pause. Elwyn’s eyes widen. Now _him_ she has heard of. Bane of Seven Heroes, the Red Terror. He haunts the Northern Moors, hidden by the mists that he rises with the heat of his internal fire, vaporizing the humidity in the air. _Gods, this is his younger brother!_

“Hm. I take it you’ve heard of him.” Gilvian sounds bored.

“Well, yes. There are stories written about him.”

“Reeally... hmph. I suppose I’m not surprised. Infamy tends to bring publicity as well. It’s supposed to be
the dream of any respectable dragon to destroy as many cities as possible, hoarding gold, eating people...” he casts an eye over his cave, empty save for the firepit, and then looks considerably at Elwyn, “…stealing princesses.”

Elwyn swallows uncomfortably, trying to look as innocent as possible.

“…But for whatever reason, I never felt that way. Ancalagon was ever so disappointed. The burden of carrying on the legends fell to his shoulders.”

She breathes a sigh of relief. Thank the gods. Of course, he could be lying. Dragons, after all, are wicked and tricky creatures, but at the moment it appeared she isn’t going to be eaten. Yet, anyway.

“Actually,” Gilvian coughs out a puff of embarrassed smoke. “I have a secret.”

“Oh?” Elwyn tries to sound politely interested, rather than anxious.

Gilvian stretches his neck down so his long spiky head rests on the ground a few inches away from her. He breathes the words right in her face, his roast-mutton smelling breath blowing back her auburn hair, whispering as if he’s confessing a solemn, fatal flaw. “You are the first maid I have ever stolen.” If she’s being honest with herself, she saw that one coming. Just the fact that he didn’t eat her immediately gave it away, but it’s obvious that he is humiliated by this fact. What is my life, she thought, that I’m trying to offer reassurances to a dragon?

“Well... she begins hesitantly. “As far as I can tell, you’re doing a... pretty good job?”

Gilvian lifts his head up suddenly, peering at her out of one narrowed eye. “Are you only telling me that to be nice?”

Elwyn blinks. “No, no!” she hastily tries to reassure him. Did he really just say that? Is he really that self-conscious? “You’re doing just fine, as far as I can tell.
I mean, after all, you are the dragon in this situation, and so I am really in no position to tell you how to do your own job…”

This really seems to startle the dragon, as he sits abruptly back on his haunches and coughs out a spark, almost like a laugh. “You mean... you mean to tell me that you haven’t been trained? Are you too young for it? When do they typically start? I mean, I do know some things about humans and I expected that someone of your age would at least have been taught the basics-” The words fly fast through the air, making little sense to Elwyn.

“Wait, hold on, training?” She snorts out a laugh. “Training for what, being captured by a bloody dragon? Ha, I don’t think so!”

Though Elwyn could not read dragon facial expressions, the look in Gilvian’s eyes is completely and obviously dumbfounded. “No one in my family explained how this was supposed to work.” He speaks almost hesitantly. “I had... assumed that you had some form of training and would tell me what to do when the time came.”

The pair stares at each other in disbelief.

“Seems I was wrong,” the dragon says, his lips curling back in a reptilian smile, one that Elwyn matches.

***

It’s been a couple of days, it’s hard to tell trapped in a lightless cave, and Gilvian and Elwyn have formed a sort of cautious friendliness. She is still on tenterhooks, unsure when he will change his mind and eat her. He’s provided her a bed, a pile of sheepskins in an out-of-the-way corner. She tries not to think about where he had gotten them, literally tearing them off the backs of a defenseless flock.

She lounges on the pile of wool, combing through a dirty strand of her hair. Gilvian is stretched across the entrance on his back, staring at the rough cave wall.
“You must be bored out of your mind,” he says at last, still staring at the wall.

Elwyn is shaken from her thoughts at the dragon’s voice cutting through the almost-companionable silence. “Well, yes, I am,” she admits.

He rolls over onto his side, looking very human as he props his head up on his fist. “I am too. That is why I suggested it. Frankly, I am not used to being cooped up in this cave for a lengthy period of time... Is there anything you enjoy doing?”

Elwyn considers this. “I suppose I’m fairly good at needlework. And I have a rather vast knowledge of stories that I could tell you....”

As she’s searching for more examples, Gilvian just nods his head. “Needlework, fine, great. Could you make me a tapestry?”

“I suppose so, if I had the proper supplies.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will fetch them for you. I am also amiable to the idea of being told a story or two. It’s been so long since I’ve seen any humans besides shepherders, and they’re in no mind to be imaginative when they’ve pissed themselves and are screaming for me to spare them.”

Elwyn doesn’t know whether to laugh or not. Gilvian rolls over, stretches his vertebrae all the way down to his tail, and walks to the cave entrance. Then he turns to her as if he’s just remembered something.

“Oh, yes. Obviously, I can’t have you escaping. It would ruin this new reputation I am trying to build for myself. And I’m afraid I can’t trust you not to run off. I’m afraid it will get a little stuffy, but I will be back soon.” He strolls outside. Elwyn is on her feet and sprinting the hundred yards or so towards the cave entrance within an instant, her dirty dress streaming behind her. Just before she reaches it, she hears a great grinding of stone and a
boulder rolls to seal the entrance of the cave. The only gap left is at the top, letting in a tiny crack of daylight.

“I’ll be back soon!” Gilvian calls.

Elwyn stamps her foot.

***

Gilvian returns that evening, dropping a bolt of fabric and a set of needles in her lap. Elwyn stares at them, wondering whose shop he had burned down to get them. She gets a sudden mental picture of Gilvian, demanding needle and thread from a fat, sweating tailor cowering on the ground, wondering what the hell a dragon is going to do with them. She almost laughs.

That night, Gilvian goes out for a hunt. He covers the entrance with the boulder again. Elwyn’s mouth twists in frustration, and she begins her tapestry.

Later, Gilvian returns with a raw sheep’s leg speared on the foreclaw on his right hand.

“Brought you dinner,” he says with his dragony grin, coming more and more frequently.

***

A few days later, after the midday meal, Elwyn turns to Gilvian in the middle of stitching the tapestry.

“It would seem I’ve made a mistake.” She swallows sudden nervousness, wondering if he’ll grant her this request. “I can’t go any further without something to remove the stitches, or the whole pattern will end up lopsided.” Surely, if he wanted the tapestry for his new treasure trove, he should want it to look the best it can? “Could you find me a stitch remover? I only need a small stick that’s sharp along one side.” Gilvian only stares at her, his eyes narrowed. Gods, this is it, she thinks. This will be the mistake that gets me eaten. After a silence that leaves her dress soggy at the armpits, Gilvian says, “I know of something that might work,” and slithers out the door.
Elwyn nearly cries from relief.
Gilvian returns triumphant, saying “I think this is what you meant, yes?” He throws a thin short sword down at her feet. She stoops to pick it up and tests the edge with her thumb. It’s a little long to serve as a stitch remover, but it will suffice.

She nods at him, giving him a rare smile in return for once.

***

Weeks later, the pattern is coming along well, the random seeming swirls and lines she’s stitching starting to form a coherent pattern. As Elwyn stitches, she tells Gilvian any stories she can remember from her books. About mermaids and elves and all sorts of ridiculously unrealistic creatures. He seems to like the ones about dragons the best, and so she tells those most frequently, although none about Ancalagon.

“-and his wingbeats were so great that they caused the waves of the ocean to rise up and buffet the shore, washing the whole town away into the sea-“

Gilvian chuckles deep in his chest, the cracks between the burgundy scales glowing orange like a hot coal.

“I don’t know where the stories you humans pass around came from, but you sure have some strange ideas about dragons.” The heat from his fireglow fills the room, causing sweat to drip down into her eyes. Elwyn brushes it away, impatiently.

“Why do you leak so much?” Gilvian asks, peering at her shining forehead.

“It’s how humans cool down, but don’t ask me why it works. I never studied alchemy very much.”

“Hm, no. It seems you prefer wildly inaccurate adventure stories about dragons.”

For the first time in weeks, Elwyn really laughs.
It’s been a couple months. The tapestry is almost finished – there’s only so many times she can claim incorrect stitches before Gilvian grows suspicious. The dragon is not yet back from his nightly hunt. He had yet to see it; Elwyn insisted she wanted the final pattern to be a surprise, that she’d show him the finished product when it was ready. As she ties off the last stitch, for the final time, she lets herself feel the sandy grittiness in her eyes that reminds her she needs to sleep. Yawning, she folds up the tapestry around her makeshift stitch remover and set of needles, tucks it safe under her bed, and curls up on top of the sheepskins. Elwyn can hear a heavy thunderstorm crashing outside the thick walls of her sanctuary. She falls asleep to the sound of rain coursing down the walls of the cave.

When she wakes suddenly in the dark of the night, it’s because she’s shivering violently. Not even buried under the wool can she get warm. Since Gilvian sleeps by the cave entrance, he never puts the boulder back at night so the cave can get as much fresh air as possible. Tonight, there’s a chill breeze smelling of petrichor blowing in over his heaped form in the entrance. Shaking so hard her teeth are slamming together, Elwyn stands, dragging a sheepskin over her shoulders to try and retain some body warmth, and walks around to try and get some feeling back in her numb toes. When she passes close to Gilvian’s sleeping form, she almost smacks herself when she realizes he’s not only a living thing, but a fire dragon as well, and so positively radiates heat.

His neck is as long as she is tall, his head half her height. She curls up on his folded arms, tucking her head under his chin, letting his internal fire keep her warm.
“Hmm, goodnight, my princess,” Gilvian hums sleepily, curling his head and arms more securely around her.

“Goodnight, my dragon.”
“...oh, yes. Gilvian...?”
“Hmm?”
“I should have told you a long time ago... I have a confession to make too.”
“What is it, dear Elwyn?”
In a smooth glide, she drives the point of her sword up through his soft, pale chin. Superheated blood pours over her. Gilvian’s green eye roves to meet hers, betrayal in its depths.

And she whispers in his soft, twitching ear. “You should have done your research... been more careful that your first human was a princess, not a dragon slayer.”
She spreads the completed tapestry over his head, blood from the real dragon darkening the dead one in the stitches.
Emily Mann

The Bonfire of the Vanities

Uncaring of the damage,
   Unseeing of the pain
In this city of the Medici
   All will go up in flames.

While he stands upon his pulpit
Screaming of the Pope’s blasphemy
   The culture of a city dies
Yet how little he will sacrifice.

The Grand Duke of Florence
Casts away his sacred books.
   No more Dante, nor Ovid.

The women throw in their mirrors,
   Their jewels and pearls tossed into
The towering fire that stretches toward the sky
   This is the sacrifice demanded of a city.

   He gives up his life’s work.
Elaborate scenes of startling beauty
   And unholy design, unfit for this pious city.
   *Primavera. La Naissance de Venus.* Beloved Botticelli.

   Together they stand
Around the crematorium
   To give up their vanities.
In the name of his sacrifice.
Fractured Mores in the American Zeitgeist: The Extraneous Abdication of Homo Sapien and Ursidae Interspecies Relations
JaJayrod Jadooger III
Top Gunn Too University
Abstract

Humanity’s recent explosion of sexual interest regarding the Ursidae has become a hotbed topic not only for the constituent base of the United States, but for that of the wider world of academia as well. Given the human race’s neophyte status apropos of ursine sexual relations, the level of discourse regarding the subject is significantly limited. This paper aims to explore the effects, ranging from the subtle to the overt, of human-on-bear sexual contact, and how the frivolous effacement such relationships only serves to mitigate the advancement of human evolution.
Fractured Mores in the American Zeitgeist: The Extraneous Abdication of Homo Sapien and Ursidae Interspecies Relations

Bears and humans have long cohabited planet Earth, but it is only recently that the two have begun to engage in sexual relations with one another, to the chagrin of many across the United States. “It just ain’t right, them furry ole bears takin’ up our females like that,” asserts William Wigglewaum (1969), associate professor of radiology and weapons platform construction at ITT Technical Institute (69). While many in America view mankind’s sudden infatuation with the ursidae as an augury of trepidations to come, others see the bond between humans and bears as an act of innocuous serendipity. It can be asserted that mankind’s recent explosion of sexual interest in bears is indicative of deeply fractured social mores in the American zeitgeist, and this paper not only asserts that America’s sudden interest in the ursidae stems from deep social, economic, and moral issues that have plunged the country into the rut in which it is currently mired, but that such sexual relations are necessary in the continuing of mankind’s genetic evolution, which in turn necessitates the negation of anti-human/ursidae views.

In his novel *Bear Junk: Unzipped, An Opened Can of Soda* (1969), Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, states, “bear wiener are like, really big” and this statement is indicative of underlying social issues relating to the fallacy of anthropocentrism in American culture (69). In order to come to a better understanding of the relationship between anthropocentrism and the fractured mores of American society, the differences between homo sapien and ursine genitals must first be explicated.
“When rock solid, the phallus of the bear is roughly 1.065 meters in length, and this can lead to feeling of inferiority among human males, whose penises measure 0.15 meters on average,” suggests Glitter (1969), stripper at the Hard Times Bar & Grill, and author of Don’t Be a Prick: What’s That Against My Thigh? (69). Bears are simply more endowed than their human counterparts, and as indicated by Miss Glitter above, this is cause for sexual frustration among many males in the human community. In the article “Why Can’t I get a Girlfriend? Why My Wife is a Bitch and Other Frightening Tales” Durmarien Levarian Bopapa Ba Quope FaFinsky VIII (1969), head of ethno-linguistic fractionalization studies for DARPA, argues, “Are you recording? Please do not use this in any interviews, my wife will kill me,” and this statement suggests, albeit latently, that human males have been relegated to a near subaltern status relative to that of their female counterparts (69). This fact, coupled with the frail and flimsy size of the male penis as compared to that of the bear, has incited mass social upheaval across the American landscape, and demands for congress to outlaw interspecies sexual relations.

Yet while legislators battle it out on the hill, another war is being fought on a decidedly more metaphorical front. As aforementioned, recent interspecies relations have explicated the validity of the fallacy of anthropocentrism, and it is relatively clear that humankind is no longer at the forefront of the food chain. Men can no longer satisfy their women due to the upsurge in ursine interests, and many are fearful that mankind will eventually fall to the wayside in lieu of this fact. “Bears are taking over. I can’t go to Applebee’s anymore without seen a fuckin honey bear” says WHAMBULANCE (1969),
professor of knee growth eugenics at Go Go Gadget BADABING,BADABANG,BADABOOM University (69). Such an account begs the question; are bears truly capable of usurping mankind? While the limited scientific discourse pertaining to the subject would suggest so, many think not. “Bears feel good, but they’re like, pretty stoopid” claims SOISOISOISOISOISOISOISOISO (1969), the Relativity and Coordinated Full Frontal Assault Fitness Instructor currently stationed aboard the International Space Station (69). While humans appear to be losing their grip on the penumbra of sexual ingenuity, the general naïveté of the ursidae may indeed be their saving grace. Given the discussion thus far, it may be insinuated that it is only human males that feel the adverse effects of interspecies sexual relations with the ursidae, but women too often find themselves mired in the iniquity of America’s furry quandary. According to Riggardly Rimjob Badonkadonk, M.D. (1969), Head Professor of Economics at the University of Economicly Economic Economy of Economics:

Bears are just cheaper than women, it’s as simple as that. When you have a human, a bitch, you have to buy them stuff like diamonds and bird feed, and they still run off with your hot friend and convert to lesbianism. With a bear, it’s easy; you just bring her a big fat salmon, and she’s ready to ride all night. In essence, men often desire to adopt a parsimonious approach when instigating sexual relations, and such an approach is ideally fulfilled between man and bear. (69)

Dr. Badonkadonk’s statement hints toward deeply fractured economic modes of thought in the United States,
and it is likely that the sudden upsurge in human-on-bear sexual relationships is a latent effect of the nation’s current recession. “Money is down, bears are up. Bear bitches are cheap bitches” asserts Suddenly Potato’s <3 (1969), President of the Why Don’t they Show Reruns of the Amanda Show Anymore Mom Association, who feels that the ursidae are merely being used to ameliorate social stressors (69). “Being a human is hard. Bears are furry, they got big paws. They don’t talk much. They provide a fantastic sink in which to alleviate the various stresses we are subjected to a daily basis” argues Mr. President (6969).

While the societal and economic transgressions brought on by human on bear sexual relations cannot be denied, the moral quandary presented by the discussion at hand is perhaps its most salient aspect. “What are you talking about? Bears and people? Are you sick? This isn’t funny, and you should be ashamed young man” states That One Old Lady That Gave Me Twenty Dollars in 1999 Which In Turn Made My Best Friend Jealous To The Point Where He Wouldn’t Trade My Charizard Back, and as a Result We Still Don’t Talk to this Day, Which Makes Me Sad Inside Because He Was and Still Is My Best Friend and I Miss Him (69 B.C.E.), Chairman of the Hardcore Knitting Committee for Disgruntled Ethiopian Youth that Somehow Ended Up in a Small Suburban Neighborhood in Utah (69). Assuredly, the moral dilemma presented by bear-on-human sexual relations has made manifest a reasonable amount of vexation among the academic community, albeit this level of anxiety pales in comparison to the acrimony expressed by the public. According to a poll conducted by Z to the X Zxibit of XOF News, it is reported that nearly 69.69% of American citizens feel that the ursidae have begotten exceedingly dramatic levels
of civil unrest and unethical behavior amongst children between the ages of 3-14 and adults between the ages of 18-122, as indicated in the figure below (fig 6.9): 

(fig 6.9)
Given the above infographic, American’s views on the matter are made strikingly apparent, further insinuating that the prevalence of bear relationships and erotica serves as a source of moral corruption for American citizens.

Even without the magnetic draw of the ursidae to seduce them, Americans have been subjected to a bevy of transgressions before the fact. The prevalence of bears merely brought the aforementioned flaws of the American zeitgeist to light, and the abdication of the ursidae, be it figuratively or physically, acts as nothing more than an exercise in frivolity. Albeit not discussed explicated previously, the burgeoning relationship between man and bear acts as the next essential step not only for America, but the entire world. Mankind currently sits
at the periphery of its sexual and genetic ingenuity, and to abandon the adroit sense of efficacy humans have garnered as they have become sexually comfortable with the ursidae is not only wholly unnecessary, but is tantamount to a travesty of superlative infamy. Humanity has arrived at the advent of an event more important than the discovery of fire, more important than the 1969 moon landings, more important than Star Wars Episode VII; the dawn of the homo ursidae, the new human revolution.
References


Source, Not A. (1969). *Not a source: This source is not a source and was not even used in the above paper.* Not a Sourceburg: Nor a Sourcany.


Charles Evans

Cheerios

So dark packed together like rats
I see friends come and go
Days are nothing but darkness
I see a hope of life
Realizing my life is short
Waiting on my last breath
The pain of dying breaks my soul
I see light
I guess it’s my time to say good bye
Michelle Ramos

A Squirrel’s Delight

Your leaves twirl in the wind beyond us,
Shimmering in red and yellow!
Your acorns are my treasure,
I plead you; bequeath them all to me.
And I will no longer refrain my hunger!

A snarl, a growl!
What is this?
A fierce canine
Cascading toward me!
Quick, ascend the tree!
A flicker of my tail sends you regards
As I laugh at your delayed reactions!
Look at you, silly canine,
And see the artist you have permitted to escape!

Now, here is my treasure!
How flavorful and filling!
I will take the time to stuff my jowls,
And perhaps I will wait for this canine to leave my presence.
Until then, this tree will be my hideout
And these acorns shall be my feast!
Ceresa Kennedy

My Loss of Sanctuary, or, The Summer of My Discontent

I am at war. It’s been more than a year and there is little hope for peace. My enemy has been steadily destroying my sense of security. My home has been invaded and I see the enemy everywhere. I don’t know how much longer I can keep fighting, I am only one, they are many.

My battle began in the early summer of 2014. There had been skirmishes, dating back more than two years. The incidents had been small, my plundered garden, my dog driven to the edge of madness, battering and scarring the wall of my outbuilding in a vain attempt to confront the enemy, more of an annoyance than an attack, often blamed on other factions. I remained neutral going about my daily business of work, school, and household chores, a small Switzerland in the midst of threat outside my door.

That summer began as any other, the soft breezes of spring suddenly giving in to the sweltering heat of the high plains. I had a lot of inside tasks to keep me busy and I would be basking in the currents of my swamp cooler, the large unit that perches on my roof like a benevolent gargoyle. I was content until, on the hottest day so far that year, the cooler began blowing warm air. I did what most people would do, I jiggled the controls and stared up the vent. When that didn’t work I went to the backyard to check the faucet and tubing that carried water up the side of the house, across the roof and into the cooler. From the ground everything seemed in order with the exception of a free-form waterfall cascading off the edge of the roof.
“Crap.” I said.

I hauled my old aluminum ladder, the one with the missing bottom rung, out of my battered shed, leaned it against the carport roof and perilously climbed. I traversed the lava hot roof to the cooler; there I found the plastic water line leaking in several pieces. I admit to a suspicion that this could be the work of my enemy, trying to destroy my morale and drive me out of my home, but no, I wouldn’t give in to paranoia. The line was old and had weathered winter temperatures; it had just been weakened and needed to be replaced. I climbed off the roof forgetting about the missing rung. My grown son leaned against his car smoking a cigarette, watching me, as I picked myself up from the ground where I had landed, he said “That ladder’s got a rung missing.”

After acknowledging his brilliant skills of observation I dusted myself off and made my way to the local hardware store to buy forty feet of new tubing. I came home with one hundred and fifty feet, my son was sitting on the front porch looked at my purchase and commented, “That’s a lot of tubing.” Ignoring him, it’s sometimes difficult to remember he’s smart, I quickly finished the repair. I put the left over tubing in the shed with the ladder and returned my sofa, in my cool living room, video game controller in my hand. I suddenly felt capable, my own handyperson. I told this to my son and my dog, neither seemed impressed. Two days later it became obvious that the cooler wasn’t cooling. Back up the ladder. This time two spots on the waterline were broken. I remember wondering, is this the work of my nemesis? Had I bought a faulty hose? Did sharp edges of the shingles tear a hole? Was it something more sinister?

I climbed down, untangled the remaining one hundred and ten feet of tubing that had somehow formed itself into a Celtic knot during its two days in the shed, cut off another forty feet and decided to check for leaks
by using it like straw. As I sat on the back concrete step diligently trying to draw water through forty feet of quarter inch tubing my son wandered by. He stopped to watch for a moment, shook his head and said, “You suck, Mom.” Unable to speak, I glared at him and his self-amused grin as he walked away.

I finally succeeded in sucking the water through the tubing, no leaks. I carefully affixed the coupling to one end and climbed back to the roof just in time to see one of my sworn enemies scurrying to the far edge of the roof and into the overhanging branches of my shade tree. I thought about what I saw as I replaced the leaking tube with the new one. I had an idea but wasn’t quite sure if I was right, I needed proof. I climbed off the roof leaving the ladder in place. Then I turned the water back on and waited. It may have been an hour, it may have been ten minutes. Time has no meaning when one is preparing to face the enemy. I had armed myself with a broom and a pair of loppers; I grasped both items under my left arm and began to climb silently up the ladder. I eased my head over the edge of the roof, farther and farther until my sightline was even with the bottom of the cooler. My suspicions were justified, there was my foe. Four small, brown rodents, chattering amongst themselves, their bushy tails dripping with water meant for my cooler. The brand new tubing was spraying a fountain three feet in the air and the four of them were frolicking in it. I hurried the rest of the way up the ladder shrieking like a banshee and waving my broom in their general direction. The vandals jumped to the low hanging branches and disappeared. My son came out the front door, sauntered to the middle of the driveway, and looked up at me. He didn’t say anything, just shook his head and went back inside.

I used the loppers to remove the branches as high as I could reach, satisfied that I had removed their access I set about replacing the tubing once again. That finished
I returned to my Xbox, confident that the problem was solved. That night I woke to the sound of scratching and scurrying coming from the roof. I lay awake listening until the first light of morning found me on the ladder to the roof. The tubing was intact, perhaps I had been dreaming. The next night was a repeat of the one before, and again, the waterline was not leaking. Night and day carried on in this manner for five days, on the fifth day the cooler began to blow hot air once more. Sure enough, the tubing sprayed water in half dozen directions. I stood at the apex of my roof, head hung in defeat, my eyes filling with tears of frustration. They were tormenting me, playing with my sanity, threatening my way of life. It was personal. Slowly my soul filled with determined rage, I lifted my head and studied the tree, the foliage was thick and heavy with shadow, as my eyes adjusted I saw them. Dozens, no hundreds of beady little eyes staring back at me. I swear they had tiny little smirks of victory on the toothy faces, I admit, it freaked me out. I quickly slid down the ladder, let them think they’ve won, it wasn’t over.

Inside, I sat in my overheated living room and thought, what would MacGyver do? I soon had a solution. Dragging my son along to help carry stuff, I returned to the hardware store where I purchased more tubing, a twenty-five foot garden hose, a package of zip ties, silver duct tape, and two twenty foot lengths of PVC pipe, one two inches in diameter the other four inches. I loaded this into my elderly Camaro, my son held onto the PVC pipe from the passenger seat to keep it from blowing out the window on the drive home. The rest of the day was spent hauling items up the ladder, cutting, threading tubing into other tubing, drilling holes for fasteners, zipping everything together, and attempting to convince my son that this repair was not overkill, but necessary for the peace and happiness of our home. By dinnertime I was done. As I stood back to admire my work I felt their eyes
on me, not so smug now as they surveyed what I had done. The soft poly-plastic tubing had been threaded into the garden hose, still flexible enough to drape over the side of the house and down to the water spigot. On the roof, the garden hose, ends cut off, had been pulled through the two inch PVC which, in turn, rested inside the larger pipe. The end farthest from the cooler had been stuffed with steel wool and duct taped thoroughly. The end that fed into the cooled had small holes drilled into it, just enough to slide the zip ties in, these were then attached to the side of the cooler and covered with more duct tape. I stared into the tree, there weren’t as many as there was before, they were leaving, knowing they had lost the battle.

There was reprisal, of course, last October my painstakingly carved jack-o-lanterns were savaged, pieces scattered throughout the yard. It was an eerie feeling, standing in the middle of my lawn, holding a fragment of desecrated squash, knowing they were there but unable to see them. Small items, if left outside, disappear, a cigarette light left on the patio table, a small wind chime that hadn’t been hung, and the bolts from my bicycle when I left it in pieces to go for a new tube. My son tells me I have angered the squirrel gods and they seek revenge. He has suggested sacrificing another pumpkin in a moonlight ceremony involving partial nudity and drums. He even offered to make a video of the event. I no longer trust his ideas, they seem laced with sarcasm.

It’s been over a year, I have settled into an uneasy truce. This last summer passed without major incident. Now two pumpkins are intact after several days on the front porch. I have seen very little of the enemy although my dog reports frequent harassment, I believe he suffers a form of PTSD, seeing enemies that are only in his mind. I remain watchful.
Boú Amaya is a senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo where she is double majoring in English and mass communications. In the fall, she will begin her career as an English language arts teacher at one of the local high schools in Pueblo.

Destiny Campa Meza is a junior at Colorado State University-Pueblo and an English major with a minor in professional writing; she plans to pursue a career in public administration. Destiny is the president of the English Club, the coordinating assistant of the Writing Room and Gen Ed Tutoring Center, and a spring 2016 inductee of both the National Society of Leadership and Success and Sigma Tau Delta. In her spare time, Destiny enjoys being active, reading, and spending time with her husband and family. “Selfish Prayers,” “Red Paper Crowns,” and “Three Miles to Light Canyon” were inspired by the coalescing hardships of the human spirit.

Cynthia Carmichael is a junior at Colorado State University-Pueblo and a health and wellness promotions major. She is married and has three children. Her poem, “Emma’s Favorite Blanket,” is about the evolution of a favorite baby blanket at a time when young Emma realizes none of her friends are still using their baby blankets.
Daniel Conroy is a chemistry and biology major with a minor in English. Currently, he investigates the synthesis of novel inorganic compounds, and holds an interest in the investigation of the creation of compounds that might assist in the promotion of sustainable energy and investigation of greener synthetic techniques. His pieces are influenced by his unshakable pursuit of earnest expression and preservation of small moments for the purpose of personal growth.

Matt Enck is a sophomore at Colorado State University-Pueblo and is a double major in psychology and sociology. Matt is the treasurer of English Club and a tutor in the Writing Room. In his spare time, Matt enjoys yoga, spending time with friends, and drinking copious amounts of coffee.

Charles Evans is a sociology major, who is currently on the football team at Colorado State University-Pueblo. He got the inspiration from staring at a box of Honey Nut Cheerios, but he really couldn’t take all the credit, due to a special someone giving him pointers and editing his work. After college, Charles plans on attending law school to become a defense lawyer.

Bryana Ewing is an English major with a minor in women’s studies, and is a senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo. Her short non-fiction piece, “The Desolation of Stars,” was inspired by the overwhelming feeling that dark open spaces evoke, and the feeling of being at peace with the beauty of the night sky.
Segan Falconer is currently in her sophomore year as an English major at Colorado State University-Pueblo. Her sonnet, “The Sad Solemn Cat,” was inspired by the incessant screeches of a demonic-like cat from outside her bedroom window. As much as she wanted to dismiss the event as some uncanny dream, her roommates confirmed the unnerving event when they, too, said they heard the cat’s horrific screams. She hopes (more than anything) to travel to Iceland one day and be fluent in the Russian language.

Madison Gill is a junior at Colorado State University-Pueblo pursuing a degree in English literature. Her passion for writing extends as far back as adolescence, and she hopes to continue developing that passion into a professional career. All of Madison’s pieces are inspired by matters of the heart, which she considers among the most important matters to pay homage to, and make up the core of all of her work.

Melody Grublak is an English major and a junior at Colorado State University-Pueblo. Her poem, “Blindspot,” was inspired by domestic violence and the acceptance that transcends from cultures and generations in terms of the “woman’s role” in a relationship.
Matthew Hawkins is double majoring in political science and sociology/criminology, with a minor in the honors program. He likes to spend his spare time watching the cult classic Top Gun, and is anxiously awaiting the release of Top Gun 2. In the future, Matthew hopes to become an acclaimed director so that he may direct Top Gun 3. His story, “Fractured Mores in the American Zeitgeist: The Extraneous Abdication of Homo Sapien and Ursidae Interspecies Relations,” was inspired by the masterful performances of Tom Cruise and Anthony Edwards in Top Gun, which was snubbed in the 1987 Academy Awards.

Clinton James Hearst is a non-traditional student in his senior year as an English major at Colorado State University-Pueblo. His short story “The Lake” is based on an actual event from his childhood.

Mark Hernandez is a full time student at Colorado State University-Pueblo and also works at his family’s restaurant in Colorado Springs. Mark transferred to CSU-Pueblo this semester from Pikes Peak Community College. He has been studying non-fiction, fiction, and poetry for the past two years, pursuing a major in English with an emphasis in creative writing with the desire to become a teacher. “A Sestina for Auntie Susie” was written as an elegy for his Great Aunt Susie who passed away in February 2015. His poetic inspirations include T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, and Billy Collins.

Ceresa Kennedy is a student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.
Samantha Lacy is a sophomore English major at Colorado State University-Pueblo. Her prose piece, “Sunday Mourning,” attempts to capture the melancholy of a Sunday spent alone.

Emily Mann is a 3+2 student at Colorado State University-Pueblo simultaneously completing her bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the Hasan School of Business. She is a member of the Marketing Club, the National Society for Leadership and Success, and Alpha Mu Alpha. Her poem “The Bonfire of the Vanities” is a historical description of the event of the same name that took place during the Italian Renaissance. The poem conveys the event from the eyes of those who participated in it.

Alexis Martinez is a concurrent enrollment student from Dolores Huerta Preparatory High School, and she is a music composition major with a minor in creative writing.

Isaac Matson is a history major and a junior at Colorado State University-Pueblo. A native of Fresno, California, Isaac worked as a roofer and in a warehouse before attending college. He is inspired by all things broken, haunted, industrial, and spiritual. And whiskey.

Eterne Merzeau is an English major and senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo. Her science-fiction piece “emailcorrespondence.txt” was inspired by historical accounts of colonization. Eterne has a really awesome fiancé and an adorable cat, and finds writing about herself in third person really hard and awkward.
**Isaiah Morgan** is a business management/marketing major and is a current member of Enactus. He is currently pursuing a career in marketing but hopes to publish a book of short stories and poetry someday. Isaiah was born and raised in Pueblo, CO, and he enjoys listening to hip-hop music with complex lyricism. Isaiah’s “The Moon” was inspired by the simple fact he is always striving to become a better writer.

**Michelle Ramos** is a chaotic good writer, reader, and PC gamer who studies under the creative writing major at Colorado State University-Pueblo. “A Squirrel’s Delight” was inspired by a walk through Pueblo’s City Park.

**Megan Robles** is a senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo, earning a degree in English with a creative writing emphasis. This piece is dedicated to all the heartbroken homies out there, and to her four, four legged friends who helped her through this breakup.

**Kayla Rucker** is an English major studying professional writing and business marketing as minors. She really enjoys writing. Her story ‘Everything You Left Behind’ is based on a true story about what her cousin went through with her mother.

**Andrea Rule** is a graduating senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo, majoring in creative writing with a minor in psychology. She also works as a writing tutor at the university. In her free time she enjoys reading anything she can get her hands on (as long as it is not assigned), and writing short stories and novels. “There’s Only Dist Down the Rabbit Hole” reflects her love of the fantasy genre, and her deep regret of growing up and losing a sense of wonder.
Meral Sarper (aka Doe Renee, Your Royal Hemptress), is a mechanical engineer and graduate teaching assistant for the Colorado State University-Pueblo Engineering Department. She is pursuing her master’s degree in industrial and systems engineering. Co-founder of LEAF (Leaders in Ethical Action for the Future), Doe Renee represents all three pillars of sustainability: earth care, people care, and fair share into her creative works. Doe’s commitment for her time on this planet is to end all war and pillaging of Mother Earth, thus creating peace on earth along with the hemp plant, renewable energy, and all of humanity.

Rachel Schroeder is a psychology major, a member of Psi Chi, and a junior at Colorado State University-Pueblo. She has been writing fiction for her entire life and has written 4 fiction novels. “Twin” is a non-fiction piece dedicated to her twin brother, Robert. Rachel also has a strong passion for music, and has been playing bass for 9 years.

Alex Young is a student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.
**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. 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.

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