

TEMPERED STEEL



TEMPERED STEEL

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EDITORS' NOTE

Hello, and thank you for joining us for another run of *Tempered Steel*. This year, we will take you through a whirlwind of literature from the talented students here on the campus of Colorado State University-Pueblo. This issue includes pieces from a wide variety of students of different backgrounds, locales, and degree programs.

This magazine collects the wide-range of voices CSU-Pueblo has to offer into one, unified solidarity through the poetry, fiction, and nonfiction pieces included in this issue. Of the numerous submissions, submitted anonymously, the staff passionately chose what we thought would best represent the heart of *Tempered Steel*. The toughest part was deciding what to keep and what to let go.

Thank you to the contributors and staff for dedicating your time and effort into making this issue possible. Your hard work is greatly appreciated and has not gone unnoticed. Also, thank you to all the readers for checking out *Tempered Steel*. 2016/2017 editors have put together our own version of an exquisite corpse poem, which contains one line written by each member, to start off this edition of *Tempered Steel*.

On behalf of the *Tempered Steel* staff.

Tempered Steel Staff

The Exquisite Corpse

It's a funny thing, trying to claw your way out
The darkness in his eyes seep into his soul
The damned dreams of the wasteland, while embracing the
apocalypse
I'm overwhelmed with your underwhelmed feeling
We can all agree that the sky is blue; however, still people
love to argue.
And the blurring words from the coffee spilled on the
page.
Don't wait for the ending, becoming the new beginning.
Pull me back together again – the way you pull me apart.
Silver hopes leave us stuck in a pocket
Let it rain down and destroy me
These are the names of the memoirs I forgot
I cannot hate you without hating myself. I can't love
myself without loving you
We should take up space
How many have died without a dream lived?

Ashley Lowe

The White Sheet

I often scold my mind.
When I close my eyes at night,
I hear the words inside of my head.
I try to record these words with paper & pen,
But I stop—
My words become lines & scribbles.
Their meanings are
desolate
in a white ocean,
a crumpled white sheet.

Last night
I tried to close my eyes again, &
words tugged the shackles of my mind,
my prison.
I've imagined words without a leash,
words that are free.
I took hold of paper & pen,
But I stopped—
I can't release my words in this world because
I can't defend
their meaning.
So they'll rest,
for now,
in the crumpled white sheet.

But every night that passes reminds me that
I'm running out of time.
My words
no longer rest in the crumpled white sheet.

I throw them away *but they linger inside.*
These words
They do not want to die.
They wake me in my dreams &
they toss & turn in my mind.
In sleepless nights,
the words accumulate & become friends
with thoughts that I've tried
to bury in graves.
I want these words to be dead
I want them to find peace inside of my own head
because I fear what the world could do to
my words
if they were *free* instead.
These incessant words.
I'd like to write on their gravestone *Rest in Peace*
But I know—
The words
won't
rest.
I won't rest.
because these words—
these words
reflect
me.

So I stopped
scolding my mind.
I set my words free.
These words only needed to find their place
in the white sheet.
And I won't crumple it anymore.
A part of me
will never trust the world
with the words inside of my head.
But I've realized that it's more important

for the world
to hear
what needs to be said.

I closed my eyes tonight, &
these words of mine,
these
restless words
went to bed.

Destiny Campa Meza

Humdrum (fiction)

It didn't wake him in the night: Meladia groveling to Dymphna, patron saint of the emotionally disturbed. Long ago it might have. He might have coddled her, kissed her dampened temples, whispered sweet remedies into unhearing ears. Not now. Not after ten years had passed and they owned their own house. A house on the last block of Hatcher that looked precisely like all of the others in their gated community. The house wasn't anything outstanding, sure. It was plainly furnished, a lack-luster jewel in the crown of suburbia with a single-car garage and sickly-yellow shingles. It was a book end, stuck on the last plot of developed land. The house it bordered on the left belonged to the elderly Singletons. To the right was a stretch of dirt cut in half by a small creek. If you sat on the yellow wrap-around porch in just the right afternoon light, you could see small silvery fish struggling across the creek and then toppling into a small pool towards the woods in the back of the house. Meladia loved the scenery; she woke earlier than her husband and sat in a wicker chair across from the kitchen window, taking in the sun and trees and appreciating the half of her home that was not married in structure to the Singleton residence. Two years ago, Will built her a simple greenhouse outside the kitchen. Meant as an anniversary gift, the greenhouse replaced the kitchen window. It now stood full of new gardening gloves, ceramic pots, and unopened bags of spring soil: lonely and untouched in the rays of warm sunlight.

Will slept soundly. He dreamt of beautiful summer days on the lake in his boat and time spent under the shade of evergreen majesty and indigo sky.

“Are you awake?” Meladia panted.

Will heard his wife in the mountain wind.

“Will. I...I keep having dreams. Are you awake?” She knew he was.

Will forced his eyes shut and steadied his breathing. She rolled to face the wooden crucifix on the bedroom wall and listened to the creek as it told stories. Will’s eyes danced inside their sockets, unseeing, listening in a liminal state. After a long while, Meladia quietly slid open the bedside drawer, removing a canister of pastel pills.

“Hail Mary, full of grace.

Our Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,

Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,

pray for us sinners,

now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.”

She drank eleven with a glass of stale water and drifted into a peaceful and enduring slumber.

Daniel Conroy

Blind in Eden

Life is crawling into this garden
and at first you're astounded
by the dappled light
laying warmth upon petals
and all the green popping.
Then you pace the fields
and they become familiar.
The flowers become daisies
instead of nameless wonder
and the green a weed
in eyes that crave some blues.
The red moth floats
outside the reach of your chaining names,
so you begin to build a net.
Sometimes the moth lands on you.
The sun seems to sparkle on your heart
and you forget why you ever wanted
a net.

Then it flies away.
You're full of even more fury;
Hands twist and bind.
Teeth gnash and ropes lash.
Soon through tempestuous fury,
that's stripped the garden
of every blade,
you have your net
in hand, firmly set.

You leap to catch that joy there
not caring that the wings you tear.
You peer into the depths you've made
for just this day to find all flight unmade.
The moth's an ugly thing with twitching spasms
that makes you cringe, but now you see your own dug
chasm.

Jeff Aho

Tapestry (nonfiction)

Sitting in the intake room, essentially a broom closet with two chairs positioned on either side of a tiny card table, I asked how it had come to be that I found myself here, yet again. There I sat, with nothing but the next five days to reflect on my life. Five days to contemplate all that was my youthful dreams and aspirations, and how I had fallen so short of those expectations. A genetic predisposition (of which I was too young to understand), and addictive personality, along with a lot of torturous years trying to perfect the craft of being a “functioning alcoholic,” had all come together in a perfect storm, washing me right into this detox center. I was here because I was in desperate need of help. Also, because my family was out of options and had given me the ultimatum of either trying rehab again, or removing myself from their lives completely.

I had been through this detox program once before (two years prior to this point) and I had professed upon leaving then, that I would not be coming back. That first visit had also included a two-week in-patient treatment program, one of the better treatment programs I had gone through because there seemed to be more one on one counseling, as opposed to other facilities. Sadly, there had been many other treatment facility stays in my past. A majority of the early programs were court ordered, and I did not take them seriously, figuring I had just been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. I did my time (pun intended) and jumped through all the judicial system’s hoops. I was there in body, but not in mind or spirit. There was

no acknowledgement on my part that there might be a problem.

Now, however, things had drastically changed for me. My problems with alcoholism had gradually grown from a teenager who happened to get caught drinking underage, to being in my mid-thirties and not having any control in my life. I had transformed physically from a strapping young body-builder (all six feet and 200 pounds of me chiseled for competitions) into an atrophied, shaking, brittle little peanut shell who had to jump on the scale to get a measurement to register. To look at me, you would think I was near retirement age, my leathery skin wrinkled all about my body, the skeleton frame, and those worn out lifeless eyes which had sunken back in my skull. What was happening inside my body was none the better. By the time I sat down in that cinderblock room with no windows and only a solid steel door on either end, I could no longer function correctly in most every manner. I was at a fork in the road in my addiction, and I knew it. I was way past the point where a person needs to sneak a drink every morning, just to get yourself “right” for the day. I was at a point where I was trying to have wake-up cocktails, my body rejecting them in an unceremoniously bloody trip to the bathroom shortly after. The uncontrollable attacks of vomiting, and then dry-heaving (after you have already expelled what little content there is in your stomach) cannot be compared, or at least I can come up with no suitable reference. Still, the horrible cycle I found myself in dictated that, if I did not at least try to get my medication down, I was in for an even worse experience throughout the day to come. The spastic body tremors, the delusions, overwhelming thoughts that you might be having a heart-attack because your heart is racing, trying to beat a path out of your chest, these are merely some of the more easily mentionable occurrences

which take place when going through withdrawals at this prolonged stage of addiction.

As I think back now about this time, I see the perfect logic and utter lunacy of my whole thought process back then. I knew I had to make changes, but for the life of me, I could not bring myself to give in, to say this demon of addiction was more powerful than I. My mindset was such that I viewed seeking out help was somehow a bad thing, that it proved I was in some way less of a man than other people. I had fought my addiction headlong for the better part of fifteen years, winning a minor battle here and there, but for the most part, losing the war, and my life along the way. In my youth, I had looked at my father (also an alcoholic), and saw, in him, a waste of a life. I ridiculed him for what he was, and for what he could not do (quit drinking), and swore I would not end up like him. I had not yet lived enough to know or understand what he was going through. He died, partly from this disease, when I was twenty-five (roughly five years into my own addiction) and now, ten years later, I saw myself nearing that same conclusion. One of the toughest parts of the whole struggle is that we, as human beings, are taught to seek help externally, and are quick to blame our failures on these external devices when our desired outcome is not achieved. The external device becomes a quick and easy scapegoat to pass our personal responsibility to when we fail. This giving away of power (some may call it our will power) is what my father did, and I came to see that I was doing the same. An interesting “Catch 22” to this concept is we humans are also told (men more so) that asking for help is a sign of weakness. A wicked and deadly double-edged sword I had walked on for many years.

I had lost everything of proprietary value, mostly by selling these things off to pay for alcohol. I had lost the few friends I had, partly because of my own shame,

pushing them away, and partly because of their disgust and apprehension over what I had become. I did not want to partake in, nor was I invited to family functions of any sort, because of shame, paranoia, and embarrassment, mutually shared by all parties. I was a pariah no one wanted to claim, myself included.

Returning to the detox unit, after being run through the intake routine, I was then ushered by my counselor into the sparse main sitting room, just off to the right of the guard center, and in between the men's and women's sleeping quarters. With nothing more than an old color tv which only received three channels, none of which interested me, and a couple jig saw puzzles that had more missing pieces than intact ones, this room was nothing really to speak of. Little did I realize it then, that drab little room is where I made some of the most important decisions of my life. One key decision was that I had to hold myself accountable and take responsibility for where I was, and who I had become. With that realization also came the revelation that I was, when all was said and done, the only person who could help me get back to living a real, full life. I realized then that I must regain and fortify my will power.

It wasn't till the afternoon of my third day in the alcoholic Hilton that I was visited by my intake counselor. He felt we should talk privately and lead me to his offices. This is where I came to find out how bad things were really getting for me personally. After closing the door, he asserted that everything we talked about would be held in deepest confidence, stating also that he wanted me to be perfectly frank with him. He then asked if I was being truthful in my intake interview when I stated I had not had a drink for almost two days before I had entered the detox unit. I answered yes, and wondered to myself "Why does that make any kind of difference now?" At this

point he told me my blood test had come back from the intake interview, and that my BAC (blood alcohol content) was .214. This opened my eyes a bit, as I knew what that number meant, and where it should have been.

I had not had any alcohol in 30 hours or so before having that blood drawn, and in a normal drinker with that amount of down time, the reading should have been close to what I liked to call “blowing zeros” (.000). My number, .214, would put the average casual drinker in a coma. This fact helped to explain the astonished look on the counselor’s face, and his disbelief in my intake statement. When I first walked through the door those three days earlier, he questioned why I thought I had a problem, and had said to me that I looked perfectly fine. Now he knew better. This was another reason I knew I must make a change. That BAC told me, in my last binge episode, I could have died. Blood alcohol levels in the range of .35 to .40 (35 to 40 percent of your blood is alcohol), usually lead to someone being declared legally dead, and I was coming to realize that, through years of abuse, those levels were my norm. A decade or more of practiced, hard drinking, had helped me to build an immunity to alcohol’s effects, and sadly, this was something I had strived for and taken great pride in, at one point in time. I could pretty much drink any and all competitors under the table without blinking. What’s more, I functioned normally, walking, talking, and driving away, all while my foes were being dragged out from whichever table they passed out under. I was dancing with the devil, and I knew the song must come to an abrupt end, one way or the other. With this knowledge, there was no doubt I had to change my life, because my luck was running thin. I was fighting a disease that I came to realize would drown me if I allowed it to continue on its current course.

After this meeting, sitting again in the main common room, I started to examine my thought processes and where they had gotten me. For years now I had been under the false assumption that I could control my habit, just like everyone else. I knew many people who I deemed no better than I, who could control their drinking habits, and my train of thought was that I had just not mastered my self-control yet. I'm not sure exactly what transpired over those next two days, and I wish I could figure out the precise moment when the light bulb went on, but I am nonetheless thankful it did.

During those two days, I came to take stock of who I was then, who I wanted to be, and I also questioned if I had what it was going to take to make a life for myself again. One of the biggest "aha!" moments came with the realization that I must change how I think.... about everything. I had to take an honest, naked look at who I was, and be able to acknowledge the true nature of my flaws. This had always seemed a scary and daunting task. The idea of facing my truth, looking at all my proverbial warts, and facing the problems in my life, was one of the reasons I had lived with my addiction for so long. I feared the thought that I might not be able to adequately cope with reality without my trusty crutch.

During my five-day seclusion, there was one particular instance (the clouds parted and the sun beamed down upon me) where I was dumb-struck. It was the epiphany that every time prior to this, every single program or half-assed idea I had ever entertained to try to control or quit my drinking, had been for someone, or something, else. This time, however, I was being selfish, I was quitting because I wanted (and needed) to. One of my biggest flaws was my close-minded concrete thinking. I had learned over many years to look at life in only one way, my way. There was a ton of black and white policy thinking

going on in my melon, with very little room for grey. It was during these two days, somewhere, where I came to understand that by stopping drinking altogether, I was not giving in and saying I was weak. I was really recognizing that I had the ultimate power over my addiction by not drinking at all. It wasn't as if I was going to miss it.

Addiction had already destroyed my life, taking everything I had ever cared for and shoving it through a meat grinder. I had already consumed enough alcohol in fifteen years to make up for three normal people's lifetimes (and what I wouldn't come to realize until much later was that my worst sober day was still so much better than my best drunk). No matter how I started to look at it, there just was no downside to stopping drinking. All of the stupid infantile thinking, the brand loyalties to companies with no soul (who cared nothing for me as a person), the constantly chasing of illusions seen on the commercials, looking for that ultimate party or perfect girl in each trip to the bar, a complete waste of time, money, and life. I finally began to understand, this was not what real life was about.

I walked out of that unit on the fifth day and professed to my family, one last time, I was done drinking. As I knew this well-worn statement would be greeted with skepticism by my family (which it was). I also stipulated that if I should falter again in the slightest, they could pack me a bag and drop me off at the nearest bridge, and they would never hear from me again. A bold statement after just five days alone in a room with no "treatment" to speak of, yet nine years and some months later, here I am. Let it be said, my life since has not been all roses and puppy dogs. 45 days after celebrating my one-year anniversary I lost a brother in an auto accident. 31 days after that, I lost a nephew, also in a car accident. I found the love of my life, and lost her as well, to uncontrollable

life circumstances. Through all of my ups and downs since leaving that detox unit, not once has alcohol been a part of my life, nor is it missed. These three events alone would have given me great cause, and great excuse, to hide in a bottle, were I still addicted. I have found, however, through direct confrontation with grief, allowing myself to go through the different phases of understanding and accepting these losses, I have ultimately saved myself from more grief that awaited me, had I climbed back in the bottle.

It may sound funny, but I have come to embrace the addiction period of my life. To use a variation on a theme from an old episode of Star Trek (where Captain Picard goes back in his past to change a singular event in his life he is ashamed of, only to have that change completely erase the person he had become). I understand now that much like ratty threads of my past, these actions and instances are all part of my tattered tapestry. They helped mold me into who I am now. Today I say I would not want to pull or cut any of these loose strings off, for fear that it may change the portrait I am designing.

Eliana Taylor

Her Story

Where in the sea of voices do we stand?

Some violent voices say we don't exist

Ripped and torn, silence ravages our minds

Strong-willed females told to cease and desist

Raised young to believe love would save us all.

Dresses and makeup peppered with flowers.

Failing to realize we sought some control,

to tell stories of OUR super powers

So here we stand as females together.

Powerful. Successful. Intelligent.

Look around, we are not feeble feathers

Our voice matters, whether soft or hell-bent

Shut up. Sit down. Here comes the dominator.

We are ready to tell you who we are.

Joey Viera

Ode to the Dark

Standing on the edge of the ocean shore
I gaze into that moonless, starless horizon
lurking beyond the edge of the cosmos,
devouring our stars as they drift apart.

Cold breath dissolves all traces of the sun's presence.
Your gaze tracks me from beneath the inky billows.
I've waited an eternity to peer into your retinæ.

You lure me into the gaping maw of your lunatic
simulacrum,
and chew my feet with teeth of rock and coral.
Your saliva burns as it seeps into my wounds,
liquefying my entrails.

I reach out to caress you and
pry open your sleeping eyes,
but you drag me
down

fathoms
below
where
sun's
light
could
never
reach.

Victoria Jimenez

Sunspots (nonfiction)

The color of sunlight floods my thoughts and rearranges itself to fill the space in the hollow of my bones, and sinks its heat along the surface of my skin. It is a reminder: the body I reside in is still living, still feeling pleasurable warmth of the sun's hands reaching out to brush my being. My body reminds me in beats that I am still existing, beat by beat. Warmth becomes associated with almost every emotion one can feel while learning to live these short human lives.

(There is a definite line between an unspoiled amount of warmth and an insufferable painful heat).

The heat of youth becomes pleasant; some find a small comfort in the ability to make mistakes but not defining them along the way. It is the warmth of his hands and lips that trace delicate lines along my shoulder blades and press tender kisses to my skin, stretched atop the naked mattress. It is not my bed, nor is it his. Yet, we wake up to each other's unfamiliar warmth. Because it is also the warmth of an overheating cellphone in the palm of my hand on a late night, left on for hours waiting for him to call me back. (He never does).

I turn cold, but only for a fleeting moment after I realize I still have a lifetime worth of experiences to face.

It is the seeping warmth of alcohol pouring down my throat another orbit of life in which I am confronted with my youth. Yet, the ecstasy washes itself off my skin just like every other time; I wake up in the morning, same old memories lingering.

In the morning, she wakes up and heaves last night's consumption over the mattress. Her cheeks are flaming red in embarrassment. I tell her not to worry while I grab clean towels:

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, we're only human."

The feeling is all too familiar. I remember most of my youth being embarrassing, from speaking at the wrong moment to learning the limits of your own body. I still felt the same heat of embarrassment on my cheeks when I had pressed a glitter blue pipe to my lips and fumbled with the plastic lighter my friends gave me. They giggle, but in a good light. I chased a high and found myself spreading with new warmth, one of recklessness. Chasing a kind of high, whether than be physical or emotional, is a reminder to myself what it's like to be human; to exist. I hunt these desires in my burning youthful life before anxiety comes to trap me in its cage. I am reminded of the warm feeling of a first love when I see freckles across the skin of cheekbones on another person, but I know they don't compare to the ones that sprinkle across the galaxy of her high cheekbones. (Those are the ones I loved the most).

Then it becomes the warmth of her skin against mine as we fall asleep beneath her covers at three in the morning (It is strikingly cold outside, but I cannot feel it at all; the feeling of warmth has sunk deep into my bones and refuses to leave).

But it turns into a cold breeze before I want to let it go; she is due for bigger and better experiences and I am no longer important, no longer worth sharing space with. The heat of love simmers away before I can warm myself again; I feel cold in my heart, just like before. (The cooling of neutron stars is a quick and brutal demise.)

I tend to forget to let my tea sit awhile before I begin to drink it, but as a result, I burn my tongue constantly, but

I have never changed this habit. It is the unsuspecting boiling heat that burns us the most and leaves us in great pain. This is the heat most of us cower from, but others accept it head on. But in the end, it is inevitable. Sorrow resides in this heat, because it is a fact of life. Sorrow, too, burns my skin, blisters my tongue and leaves me with stinging, open wounds. I am reminded of the loitering heat of a Texas sun bringing me discomfort as I stand on the cemetery grass against an unfamiliar crowd. They are much older than me, all in their teen years, facing their own burning youth alone. The others in front of me stand up to place blood red roses against my cousin's casket. I am filled with an abundance of deep sadness, one that I never have the comfort to recover from. (A searing heat that I cannot sweat out).

The beauty in sunspots is that they are phenomena that exist for a short amount of time, but are constantly reappearing when magnetic fields are disturbed. They have a dark, prominent appearance on the sun's face but are much lower in temperature. These flickering spots are a reminder of the momentary heats of life that we face. Those temporary spots are the tears that are spilled, the skin that is bled, and the carnal pleasure that is chased. To feel warmth cascade over your skin; to blind yourself by the sun's light; it is within this warmth of comfort and heat of experience that I have felt alive.

Alison Gervais

CVS Pharmacy Home Delivery (nonfiction)

Duloxetine: selective serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor antidepressant (SSNRI). Used to treat depression and generalized anxiety disorder. TAKE 1 CAPSULE TWICE DAILY. – 160 MG.

Lamotrigine: Mood stabilizer taken to prevent manic depressive episodes. TAKE 1 CAPSULE DAILY. – 150 MG.

My antidepressants don't make a good addition to my breakfast each morning, but they have their place next to my bowl of gluten free cranberry oatmeal and cup of coffee – always with sugar free hazelnut creamer – because I know I can't get through the day without them. I keep a pill box full of them in my purse too.

They're a bit like Band-Aids. And Band-Aids hurt when you rip them off, but it's better than not sticking one on when you've got bleeding somewhere. The antidepressants are Band-Aids I stick on all the lesions in my brain because something doesn't work right there – not enough serotonin I think.

But sometimes there's not enough adhesive on the Band-Aids and they crumple up and fall off. The last time that happened got me a long night in the emergency room with poking and prodding and the crucifix hung on the wall with its watchful eyes on me while the nurse says, "Do you want to kill yourself?" and I have to say, "Yes," because you can't lie in front of Jesus.

They only cost \$27 with free shipping and handling though, so I don't complain all that much anymore. They're an essential part of my breakfast, which we all know is the most important meal of the day.

Patricia Earl

Silent Object(ion)

*After "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With
You" by Jo Carillo*

Our fathers, brothers, friends

Talk about the issues of the modern woman;

"A little objectification

Is a good thing for everyone."

I'm right here

They tape us to the wall

Hang us on the ceiling

Play us on TV

Silent mouths open wide

"There's something about women

that makes me want to come on them."

I'm right fucking here

We have endured bodily fluids

the shit, piss, and spit of

Fathers, brothers, friends.

They won't enjoy our bodies as much

When they are weaponized

instead of sexualized.

We won't look like

The ones on the pages of magazines, hiding in a box under
the bed

The ones that leave us thinking:

I'm right here

Danielle Farmer

Dear Jackson Pollock

I want to follow the lines of your paint,
They try to lead me, to where I'm not sure.

The drips and splatters want to tell me a story,
Though I can't read it.

Your canvas is filled with chaos and clutter,
It makes me as anxious as when I was a kid.

Everyone says this painting speaks to them,
All I hear are silent screams.

Does this say more about you,
Or about me?

Julia Barela

Unseen

I've seen this in a dream
A wondrous dream
where everything flew through the sky
and was seen through a slate of water.

Stars explode on the canvas, bruising an already blemished
sky.
Black flames of stone reach up and try to join them
Unable to pierce through, instead causing a ripple;
As though it were as gentle as water.

The new sun can't help but smother them out, brushing
away the swirls of the cool, navy sky;
The moon
She tries to say goodbye to her children as quickly as
possible
Before Sun rises and brings them all back to reality.

The houses below are unsuspecting
Of the dream state, they could have
If only they looked up.

Audria Linkowski

Waves

In the dead of night,
Stars flood the black with light.
Oceans filled of bright balls and streaks,
Set to carve a manifesting skyline.

Dark blue absorbs golden spheres of shine,
Eternally shaping into its everlasting, twisting conformity.

Am I insane?
Are the objects my mind perceives,
Simply seas of deceit?

Below the chaos of the forever above, we sit.
A slight imitation of the predictable sequence,
Life is.

Inspired by: *The Starry Night* by artist Vincent van Gogh

Mary Kratzer
Rusted Diesel

Two toned
Blue and white.
Four tired
Turned and tight.

Bench seated
Just for two.
It's heated
In the middle of June.

Redneck AC
Cowboy brake.
He's got the key
And she's got the shake.

Dust swallows the lungs
And did you know?
They have no tongues
Sorta sounds like van Gogh

Jessica Hair

Swing (fiction)

Scratchy, itchy bristles rub on your raw skin. They push closer, trying to become one with you. You welcome that idea. You struggle to breathe. Instead you laugh internally; not breathing was the goal of the day.

Everything in the room seemed sluggish. Wings on the ceiling fan fought at the air to move. Light from behind the curtains meandered across the room, making it seem the cars outside were creeping down the road. People on the TV ran in slow motion, hair swaying in the false wind.

It's your thoughts that are moving a million miles an hour.

Gears in your head, ones that haven't moved in years, start to kick in. The black gunk that's been clogging your head for these past few decades begins to shift. Memories flood your mind. They pour out of your ears, there's so many. With the memories, comes the goo. It's the black, thick, dirty goo that you've been trying to remove. The pills never did much. Neither did jumping into the river; the gooey substance just swam with you.

Your ears are flooded. It drips down the side of your neck, falling under the rim of your t-shirt. Your ears aren't large enough to push out the substance at a fast pace. It spews out your mouth, staining your teeth. The taste is bitter, just as you remember it.

Swinging legs, swinging arms, swinging thoughts.

You're ten.

You rode your bike everywhere. To school, to the park, to the store to buy sweets with your allowance. It was

when you were leaving a friend's house that you first tasted that salty goo. Tackled to the ground on a trail in the small forest by your friend's father, your mouth smooshed into the dirt. Rocks fall into your mouth. They turn soft and sticky, becoming one large substance that clings to your teeth. You choke on it, unable to breathe, unable to scream. From behind you're told not to say a word, that you'll be labeled a worthless liar if you told anyone of that night, pinned between the cold earth and the warm man.

The gunk could never be washed from your mouth, just like the man could never be washed from your skin.

Seventeen.

Yells and insults bounce off the auditorium walls. Laughter piles out of every mouth in the room. You're surrounded by all your peers, the classmates that you've grown up with.

They laughed.
They were laughing at you.

Each huff, each chuckle, and every *ha* that was pushed up and out of throats fell to the ground and turned into blackness. Thick, gooey blackness. It crawled toward you. Colors from the fairy lights that lined the gym twinkled on the substance. It didn't distract you. You turned to run but are instead faced with the one that claimed to go to prom with you. *Look at you. Do you think they were serious when they said I'd go to prom with you? You look like such an ass right now.* Goo spat from their mouth and landed on you. It seeped into your pores. Climbing up the side of your leg was the gunk that was laughed out of others.

You couldn't wash off the stain it left on your skin.

Nineteen.

You stayed in your room when you weren't working. You never left that sanctuary. No one came in to pester you. It was yours to thrive in.

Your father destroyed that idea.

You're such a worthless piece of shit. Pabst Blue Ribbon beer was heavy on his breath. He screamed at you, more than usual compared to his previous drunken nights. The smell reminded you of the goo that rolled around in your head. It was bitter.

Your father pulled at your hair, dragging you out of bed and into the bathroom where he sawed off the ends of your long hair with a pocket knife. *Worthless piece of shit*, he said, dropping you onto the cold tile. The hair that was once attached to you melted into a solid, sticky pile. The color changed to black as it slithered closer to you, absorbing into your now short hair.

Your mother never said anything about your new style. Just that you should probably leave the house and never come back.

You were twenty-five when your daughter was born. This was supposed to be the happiest day of your life.

For some reason the blood on your daughter was black. Thick black blood.

You were afraid that if you held her, the gunk would latch onto you and become one with you. That's what always happened. You didn't hold her until she was a week old.

It still got to you, stuck to you.

She was six when she lost her first tooth.

You just stared at the white tooth in her hand. It turned black. You didn't acknowledge your daughter for the rest of the night. *You're so distant, so uninvolved.* You were told this every day until she was taken from you. She was eight when you were told that you couldn't see her until she was older. *You're not fit to be a parent.* You opened your mouth to respond. Goo that appeared out of thin air shot into your mouth, stopping any words for leaving.

You were never fit to be anything.

You're twentyeight.

Your work is all you have. It gets you out of the apartment, your small, cramped, empty apartment. You work hard, keep busy, and stay quiet. The perfect employee. Yet still. *You're starting to slow down and you're kind of bumming the other workers out. Get your act together or we'll have to let you go.*

From then on, all paper work melted in your palms, sticking to everything and slowing you down even more. Everything you touched clung to you and weighed you down. You fought but lost energy quickly, tiring out early in the work day. *I already warned you.*

The gunk slowed you down every day after that day.

Your daughter was fourteen, old enough to see you.

She saw you twice a week, willing, ever since she was twelve. She always dreamed of a proper family and tried to have both parents in her life. It took her two years

to realize why you weren't apart of the family function. Little by little she drifted back out of your life. One day she'd stay at a friend's house, the next day she would have too much homework to come by or would be sick. She finally just never came. You ex didn't want to explain your daughter. This is why I told her it was pointless being around you. You're worthless. Whatever your daughter had left at your apartment melted and clung to you in the form of the sticky, black goo.

It felt good, the goo.

Thirtythree.

You got a call about your mother. Something about cancer, you weren't entirely sure. The voice on the other line gargled. The sound spewed out of the phone in a mass of darkness.

You were unaffected by the goo.
You just let it come to you.

You held your mother's hand as she took her last few breaths. You never looked at your father as he stood on the other side of the hospital room, blowing smoke out the open window. The heart monitor beeped one last long beep and with it you expected your mother's body to transform into the dark substance and jump out of the bed and down your throat. But it never did.

Standing to leave, you were caught by the sound of your father's voice. *She was never proud of you.* He was referring to your mother's last few words, where she told you how much she loved you and how she always beamed with pride when looking at you. Your father exhaled a long breath of smoke and in it you could hear *worthless, worthless, worthless.*

The smoke turned into goo and jumped down your throat.

Forty.

You hang by a rope in your living room. The fan is on. Cars drive in the night by your house. Gunk drips from your ears, mouth, even your eyes. It leaves your body pale. You're still swinging. Just your body, though.

Your thoughts have stopped swinging.

Joey Viera

Love Eaters

Naked on the beach of our lonely island
my heart lays bare in my palms,
an offering to your broken-glass fingers.

Dissect it with a caress and inhale its reek,
lap up congealed fluids that weep from parted tissues.
Your belly swells as it slides down your throat,
bloated by rotten fumes.

I dive into the scar on your breast,
and swim in the cavity beneath your ribs,
dissolving what's left inside of you with acidic lust
until your skin molds itself over mine.

Patricia Earl

A Collection

Serpents wander to my polka dotted blanket
after a fire ant bit below my lip
giving me two permanent bumps,
Like snake bites. A crucified shadow
hangs its head behind the bedroom door,
staring at the speckled beige carpet.
My tongue can wiggle all of my teeth.
Soon I spit them into my waiting hand,
a collection of bones and bloody saliva
like a mixture of pearls and wine.
My future husband's eyes meet mine
from across the bed. Intimate eyes
while a brunette woman straddles him,
while a brunette man is between my legs.
We all hold hands and laugh.

Tyler Shown

The Mysterious and Most Unfortunate Death of Anthony Charles Mark

(fiction)

I always thought it would be cancer, like liver cancer or some terribly fatal disease that had formed on its own from stress, or maybe a drunk driver would swipe me from the sidewalk, most likely on my way home from a local roller derby bout. Now, I don't define myself as the worst looking guy; there are no serious flaws to the general outlook of my face. I don't go parading into the closest McDonald's every night graciously awaiting my next order of chicken nuggets with extra blubber; so I find it strange that I was so alone for all those years, sipping \$9 bottles of Evan Williams and subscribing to the "new and improved" match.com. I could have met a nice girl on that site, or perhaps simply asked out that cute brunette barkeep at the Tilted Kilt. Of course, it's easy to say that now. Why? You ask. Well because I'm dead, lying here at the bottom of a barrel. They'll probably open it up somewhere three years from now near Portgower, Scotland, look at my body curiously, limp and wrinkled. They'll say "I wonder what happened to this poor chap. You know these Americans. I read about it in the papers all the time."

My name is Anthony Charles Mark. I go by Charlie. When I was 20 years old, I inherited a very large sum of money from my father when he somehow slipped out of his private yacht into the ocean, never to be seen again. I can't lie, the man was clumsy and it ran in the family. Dancing on bars became my calling card for getting kicked out of them. Never much of a "go-getter," I had been

in-between jobs since the accident and couldn't be happier about the lack of employment. However, I regrettably say that most of my days and nights were drunken concerts, headlined by solo acts rather than promiscuous duets. Nearly 35, I had failed to be in a steady relationship longer the waiting line at Kum-N-Go. Actually, I suppose that's where our story begins. I think it was a Thursday. No, a Wednesday. Thursday for sure.

Jim Beam, Wild Turkey, Rittenhouse, there are just so many options. As a true aficionado, I like to sample as many brands as possible. You see, it's the smell of whiskey that really tells you how it's going to kick. There's Woods; you usually want a nice oak or cedar smell, if you hit sawdust then you've gone too far. Then there's Aldehydes that make you feel like you just mowed the lawn or something. I had just began breathing in the Esters when I realized they were much too pleasantly fruity that day. The aroma pushed my eyes into to the back of my head, forcing my heels to spin around to find the source of the new scent, perfume like.

I looked around as I did most mornings, my eyes adjusting to the light, rubbing them out as if my fingers were tiny windshield wipers pushing away the mistakes of last night. After gaining a little more consciousness, I became aware of the truly beautiful sight that lay in front of me.

"Hello? Hello? Are you okay?" asked the angelic voice. I reached out my hand, trying to introduce myself.

I managed to mumble, "My name is Charles Meerrrrkk. Maak. Anthony Charles Mark, but you can call me Charlie." At that point the freshly mopped floor made my legs split like a twig as I plunged to the ground like a dead fish.

"I'm Annie. Annie Cozzetta," she giggled before attempting to help me to my feet.

Skip three months ahead and Annie and I had already moved in together. I had never met someone so perfect. She loved the fact that I always bought shirts two sizes too big because I was afraid that they'd shrink in the wash; I loved when she set the DVR to record *Booze Traveler* on the Travel Channel just because we would be able to sit down and make fun of the guy the entire show. Much like me, she never really had to have a job growing up; she was from a very wealthy family in Chicago. Also like me, she never wanted to talk about what her family did and we were perfectly content with spending weeks inside our bedroom. She would always press her cold toes —they were always cold— against my chest and watch me squirm like some kind of lab rat. A happy rat, I'd simply look at her sometimes, amazed by what I saw. Her long brown hair pressed every so gently against her face, pushing slightly against the small dimples in her cheeks, her smile seeming to echo off the light like a Led Zeppelin album cover.

Now, being from Chicago, she has this unexplainable love of all things deep dish. Can't complain about that because I fucking love pizza. Being Italian, however, proved to be a much larger challenge to deal with; anytime we'd visit her family I'd meet all these brothers, cousins, third-half nephew's three times removed, I don't know, all these guys hated my guts. It was like being on a boat with these guys; every time I'd say something their hands would start moving like they couldn't smack the flies away from their faces fast enough. I hated visiting her family, but she'd beat my head in if I didn't, so I went along. I was constantly surrounded by guys named Joey, Tony, Vinny, and Frank. I always felt bad for Frank; can you imagine what it's like to be the only guy that has a name that doesn't end in "y"? He was probably that kid who showed up late to the school field trip, just when everyone was thinking he wasn't going to. Then he hops on that bus with his chest

popped out, shirt freshly ironed, his dad didn't have the balls to tell him not to wear cologne, and you hear someone say, "Oh great. Look Mikey, fucking Frank's here."

Well Frank Cozzetta just happened to be her dad and this guy looked at me like he was a fuckin' bottle nose dolphin. I know, that doesn't sound too intimidating; dolphins are fun and loving! Fun fact, bottle nose dolphins are one of the few members of the animal kingdom that kill for fun. So think of me as a poor little porpoise or something of that nature, swimming out to grab a bite to eat or to say hello to Mr. Whale when all of a sudden... Bam! Here comes the dolphin to kick my ass and literally throw me to the fishies to finish me off. That man had no filter nor time for a Kentucky boy like myself. I'd kiss Annie on the cheek, then get this burning sensation in the back of my head like he was holding a couple magnifying glasses to the back of my head, hoping it would eventually explode. That man hated me, and I couldn't help but hate him right back.

Annie and I had been together maybe eight months in early October when her mother died, may she rest in peace. The woman could cook and loved me so I was legitimately upset about it. Well, apparently Italians celebrate this thing Saint's Day every year, where you put some flowers on the graves of the dead to commemorate not only the changing of the seasons, but also the passing of those living from the light to the dark. Once the weekend ended, Annie and I were about to head to the airport, escorted by two overgrown Papa John's, when her dad pulled me aside.

He said, "Listen here, Anthony. That name doesn't suit you a fuckin' bit, you know that?"

"Yes, that's why I go by Charlie," I replied sarcastically.

This guy offered me ten grand to leave Annie right there and never come back! As tempting as that offer was, living the last 15 years on my deceased father's inheritance had

taught me little about the importance of money. The most I could muster up for the guy was a modest smirk and a goodbye handshake. Three months later Annie and I got engaged and the blueprints for the wedding began.

Lynchburg, Tennessee. “What a great place for a wedding!” I thought to myself. Not only was it a beautiful location, but also the hometown of my best man, Jack Daniel’s. As an added bonus, I knew Annie’s father would absolutely hate it. As much as she wanted to do the wedding in Illinois, I told her there’s no way she could throw me into the snake’s pit like that. Naturally, the whole family made the flight out though; Big Cozzettas, little Cozzettas, greasy Cozzettas, smelly Cozzettas. There were over two hundred people at our wedding and the only person I’d said more than two words to was the bride and her unapologetically honest father. By the way, did I mention how much Italians love wine? And, that’s all we got to drink. At my own wedding, in the hometown of whiskey, I can’t have as little as a Jack and Coke in fear of offending the elders? Luckily, Annie knows me well enough to store a couple bottles of Jack Daniel’s Honey in the nightstand at our bed and breakfast to celebrate our jumping the broom.

To be honest, I was more worried about something going wrong at the wedding ceremony than the reception. We got to that point when the priest says, “Does anyone object?” I swear to god, all those Italians looked at each other like chickens do when their eggs are being plucked away, almost trance-like, telepathically asking each other, “Are you gonna do something about this?” After the prolonged silence, all went as planned and the celebration began, an overly enthusiastic three hours of storytelling, uninhibited cackling of the lungs, and endless supply of Soave, Pinot Grigio, and Frascati. In between bitter glasses

of aspirated raisins and twenty minute periods of Annie's father looking at me like I was Apollo Creed himself, I couldn't help but take a much needed rendezvous with the porcelain gods.

I also saw my absence as the perfect opportunity for me to go steal a couple pulls from Annie and I's honeymoon, Honey infused stash. Would she be upset? Yes. Would she get over it? Hell yes. So I'm about to walk out of the door with that bottle, that elixir of life in hand, when there's a knock on the door. To my unpleasant surprise, in walks fucking Frank reaching into his pocket like he's about to take me down old school style and leave my body out for the rodents, all too happy to munch on what was left of the lasagna and wine still digesting in my stomach. On the contrary, the guy grabs my shoulder and says,

"Charles."

Close enough.

"This here is my father's ring, and his father's before him, and his before him. You get the picture. Now I know we don't see eye-to-eye, you and me, but for some god-forsaken reason Anna chose you as the shlub she wants to marry. Now when you said 'I do', there was nothing else I could do but accept her mistake."

"Listen," I tried to mumble out. This was arguably the most intimidating man in the world, talking about his daughter, who I'm having sex with, finding me in a room alone with no witnesses.

"No, you listen," he aggressively. "If you ever do anything to break my little girl's heart, I think you know what's gonna happen. I'm gonna use those nuts for cufflinks. Although I'd love to see you dead in a ditch tomorrow, Anna loves you and I will respect her wishes and not slit your throat until she gives me the say so. So take this ring, drink some more wine, and Anthony, welcome to the family."

He said that last part with this peculiar smile on his face and then kissed me on both cheeks. I didn't know what to say, a deer in the headlights. He simply put the ring on my hand and left the room with this joyous bliss about him.

After slowly recovering from shock, I finally exclaimed to myself, "This is a time to celebrate!" And boy was that bottle placed so conveniently in my hands. Annie was too preoccupied with family to have to worry about me, and god knows the only way I'd make it through the rest of the night would be as a drunken, smiling zombie. So you bet your buck that I downed that entire bottle like a runner at the end of the Boston Marathon.

This hyper speed leap back out of sobriety sparked memories that had long been forgotten...The hometown of Jack Daniel's. I distinctly remembered the wedding planner mentioning that the local distillery was located just down the street; I remembered that that was just within my walking distance, and then forgot about the wedding going on outside.

I stumbled through the street, each step pressing against the smooth concrete just as much as it pushed against me. We two boxers, fought punch-by-by to ultimately decide who would fall first. But, no. Not me! I charged to that distillery, breaking in the glass at the front door. Each machine made me reminisce on years I had and hadn't had with my father. The process, so sweet: malting, grinding, brewing, fermentation, and of course distillation. However, aging is the most important step of all. It's over time that whiskey becomes truly worthwhile. You throw in this thing that you've worked so hard to make and hope that years from now it comes out and people will just love him. I managed to climb the ladder overlooking the hundreds of whiskey barrels still being filled and sealed automatically. I looked at the machine do what it was made to do, never steering from its goals. I felt my

eyes begin to fade and my weight shift forward, sending me over the rail my hands seem to be clinging to. My inebriated body plummeted into the barrels, sprawling over two or three until finally sinking, slowly down, comfortably resting into a final spot.

So here I am, dead at the bottom of this barrel. I guess I should have seen this coming. It's ironic really. At least Frank will be happy, but I'll miss Annie. I'll miss the smile she made every time she would roll onto my chest in the morning. Annie. I'll miss her laughing at me eating steak, trying to figure out which way the meat would split best. I'll miss her fingers running through my hair telling me it was going to be alright. I'll miss her staying up with me until dawn as I shook, no longer able to vomit. I'll miss her saying, "I love you, even when you smell fruity." They'll find me one day; You know us Americans.

Mark Hernandez

Grandma's Room

The empty room upstairs remains intact
with decades of collected nostalgia;
door lingered closed to keep us distracted,
to keep us all ignoring the idea
that you're gone. That normal day in August
when your breath slowed and mind faded out, out –
unable to speak or call assistance.
We found you gasping, smell of death throughout.
Relief arrived, but nothing could be done;
the DNR prevented your rescue.
And as your heart stopped, leaving this grandson
to grieve a life. So the dust continues
to rise in room untouched, as memorial
masked in avoidance of your burial.

Kerstin Rilling

The Dance

It's Friday evening and I'm home listening to music,
When a song comes on by Garth Brooks, 'The Dance.'
Slowly I get up and turn down the lights,
I lay down my pen of flowers,
I stare down at the floor
As my mind wonders, and thoughts start to race.

I think about all of the times we've raced,
From one song to the other, this constant music
Making me dizzy, tumbling me to the floor.
It's a wicked, greedy dance
That's full of disregard for loves virgin flowers-
A world of dark, devoid of light.

And then it got to be too much-the loss of light,
That disregard for joy in life that made us think it was
JUST a race
So we stopped taking the time to smell the flowers,
To listen to the music,
To dance,
To wake up in a tangled mess on the floor.

But then you spin me around on that scarred hardwood
floor
And I can't help but to notice the gentle light
Radiating from our saccharine dance.
I see it's no longer about the race,
But about the moment of time we can see the music,
Where we can nurture our own flowers.

And then you'll come home to my face covered in flour,
Seeing even more of it covering the kitchen floor
From when I baked to the sound of country music.
Finally our lives will be full of warm light,
Showing us we were right to disregard the race
And instead create life's beautiful dance.

I know we'll never get tired of our dance,
That instead we'll watch our lives intertwine like flowers.
It's not a race,
It's a slow dance across the floor
Until we see the aura of lights-
Beckoning us towards the sound of His heavenly music....

In that final cloud of light amidst the flowers and music,
I hope we dance and race like children across the floors of
heaven.

Christiana Lieberman

Detached (fiction)

6:13 a.m. Monday

The Autumn sunrise was a mixture of pinks and purples swirling together on a blue canvas like cotton candy, but I could barely take a second to admire it as I was rushed from the ambulance. My eyes were glued to the sky for as long as they could be until soft pinks were replaced with harsh white and the smell of disinfectant.

11:55 p.m. Sunday

I pressed the gas pedal down farther, the needle on the speedometer nearing sixty, but I couldn't slow down with only five minutes until my curfew and almost ten minutes from home. I willed the seconds to slow down as I watched the time on the clock change to 11:56. I cursed under my breath, tightened my grip on the wheel, my knuckles turning white with the force, and pressed further down on the pedal.

6:15 a.m.

I was being pushed through a maze of hallways, each looking the same as the last. Doctors had taken over for the paramedics pushing my limp body on a gurney to some sort of destination. They spoke to each other frantically over my body, but all I could hear was a loud buzzing. One of the doctors turned to me, his mouth forming words with no sound. I blinked hard a couple of times to try to hear him, but the buzzing stayed constant, allowing no other noise to break through.

11:58 p.m.

The stoplight I was approaching was red, but with the dark skies I could tell that the light for the intersecting street was turning yellow. I kept my foot on the gas, knowing my light would turn green right before I passed through the intersection. On my exact count, the light turned and I let out a celebratory shout as I entered the intersection, hoping there was a chance I might actually make it home on time and avoid another lecture.

6:19 a.m.

We burst into a room that continued the white color scheme of the hospital, with two large round lights hanging from the ceiling like bright eyes and one pristine hospital bed in the middle of the room. Doctors and nurses wearing gloves and masks over their faces moved around the room like bees. I realized my clothing was being cut off me when I saw them being placed into a bin, but I didn't feel them being removed.

11:59 p.m.

The car came out of nowhere. A flash of headlights. The screech of tires. My body was thrown to the side at the impact. My head smashed into my window, and I couldn't tell if the sound of something cracking was the glass or my skull. I could feel my car spinning, or maybe it was my head, and then it was flipping over itself so many times I lost count. I vaguely remember this intersection was on a hill and one corner was just a large ditch.

6:21 a.m.

The pain from earlier was gone and my only confirmation that my head was still attached to my body was my reflection in the large mirror above my head. But I wasn't even sure if that girl was me: her hair and

body matted with dried blood, cuts and bruises covering previously smooth skin, eyes so grey they could only belong to a corpse.

12:00 a.m.

When the car finally stopped moving, I was hanging upside down. I could see the blood traveling down my arm, dripping off my fingertips. Outside, everything was silent. I vaguely wondered if the person in the other car was okay. I got my answer when I heard their car start up and drive off. I wanted to be angry. I wanted to scream at them for leaving, for not trying to help me, but I was too tired so instead I drifted off to the sound of the steady drip of my blood hitting the roof of my car.

6:25 a.m.

One of the doctors injected something into the IV that was stuck in the crook of my elbow, sympathetic looks surrounded me as my eyelids started to grow heavy. I glanced back to the reflection above me, searching but finding no comfort in the unfamiliar eyes as I saw them slowly disappear and everything grow black.

Katherine Garcia

The Annex Liberation

Dear Kitty,
this is not what I thought
Liberation
Would taste like, I imagined
Honeyed freedom, the
Ice cream security of before, even
practiced
Emerging from these walls with my
appetite intact.
I know now that salvation is a bloody
tongue between teeth
Inside the muzzle of the wolf.
Like our huddled hearts, their boots crash
heavy
Up our secret stairs and spines,
Shivering our lungs into seismic gasps
Remind us that
At least this stale air was safety,
This mouse in the wall, unseen.
What will become of-

Nadia Montano

The Beauty of Life

A seed being blanketed into the soil
is the beauty of a child,
opening eyes for the first time,
seeing colors of madness.
Walking into obstacles,
then sprouting, sowing little green roots.

An Aster breathing in the oxygen,
is the beauty of a teen.
Learning of life and all its trials;
Falling in love for the first time.
Like little green roots shifting; peeking out of the dirt.

The beauty of an adult
Falling down a few times but
Picking yourself back up.
Watching and learning the mistakes of others,
Asking mom and dad how it should be done.
Finding a place to call home;
Creating a family to call your own.
Like a stock growing all its petals making
a pistil tickle its way out of a blossom.

The beauty becoming a senior
Reminiscing on all the memories;
telling stories of the past,
laughing at silly thoughts.
Watching the clock click down,
is like a rose turning black, wilting to dust.

Nicholas Androes

The Red Star

The biting cold steels our hearts as we
pack into boats like rats on driftwood.
Once again young men cross the river Volga.
As they approach a stench rises on the wind.
Not gunpowder

not smoke

not desiccation.

The stench emanates from the defeated eyes of those who
flee

the iron cross of the Wehrmacht .

Landfall gives no respite or organized military parade.
Just propaganda and political commissars barking loud,
“To admit defeat is to die,” they say,
“There is no backward,

only,

Forward.”

A trumpet sounds and the thunder of men fills the air.
Frost shaken from our minds and hearts in the hearth of
battle.

The Wehrmacht responds in kind with desperation
behind their thunderous drums.

Men once full of fury now silent and dead.

In exchange

an inch

is gained.

Mark Hernandez

The Owl (fiction)

“Your old treehouse is starting to rot,” my dad told me, pointing toward the decrepit boards barley hanging by the rusted nails. “Looks like it’s time to take it down.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “I haven’t been up there in years.” That afternoon, I helped my dad remove the decomposing boards from the intertwining branches that had become infested with spider webs and sharp pine needles as my mother and grandma started to make dinner for the night. As the sun was setting, my dad and I headed inside.

Our family had lived in the same house for twenty years as urban renewal and massive shopping centers encircled the property of the worn house. My father, mother, uncle, grandmother, and I remained there after countless offers from the city to buy us out. My father always refused.

We started eating dinner and were interrupted by the tardiness of my Uncle Shawn. Shawn wasn’t technically my uncle, just a high school buddy of my dad’s who moved in with us after his divorce. After his accident at work left him with a fractured spine he couldn’t afford to fix, he was unable to work full time for a company, so my dad paid him for menial chores around the house as well as free room and food. He wasn’t the ideal role model always reeking of cheap whiskey and generic cigarettes, but he was helpful around the house and my grandmother simply adored him. And she didn’t like anyone. She didn’t speak to my mother for nearly five years after she married her son. My father always explained that Abuela didn’t like other cultures.

“You need to marry a nice Catholic woman, hito,” she

told my dad. “Not some gringa from Wyoming.” My father always dismissed her rants and tuned her out on a regular basis; sadly, I was inheriting those same characteristics as he demonstrated.

My grandmother waved her fork with a chunk of chicken at Uncle Shawn. “You’re late. Lucky I saved you a plate in the oven.”

“Gracias, Mama,” he said in poorly pronounced Spanish accent.

Dinner was over and we cleared our plates to the sink. Grandma was the last one finished and hobbled over to the sink using shoulders and backs of chairs for assistance, instead of her cane which she had misplaced again. Grandma ran her dirty plate under the faucet and glanced out the kitchen window.

“Ay! Dios mio!” she yelled and dropped the plate into the sink shattering it. “Mira! Look! Come quick.”

Everyone piled into the tiny kitchen, Uncle Shawn holding a chicken leg in one hand and a dinner roll in the other, still chewing a mouthful of potatoes. Grandma pointed out the window and blessed herself with the sign of the cross.

We all struggled to see what her ninety-year-old eyes saw. “I don’t see anything. Just the tree,” I said.

“Look what’s in the tree,” she said waving her crooked finger nearly shattering the glass with the force of her excitement. “An owl. Maldito.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” my dad said placing a hand on her shoulder and tried to guide her away from the window.

“No!” she shook her shoulder free. “Call the priest. An owl is a bad omen of death.” My father had that look on his face he gets when Grandma goes on her rants but I opened my ears and listened carefully.

“Mom,” Dad said sternly. “It’s fine. Go to bed. You’re scaring Sam.” I was scared. I tried my hardest not to let it

show on my face. My mother steered me out of the kitchen and told me to go to my room. Uncle Shawn came up a few minutes later to check on me.

“You okay, kiddo?”

I nodded. “What’s an omen?”

Uncle Shawn sighed running his hands through his thick, wavy hair. “It’s like a sign that something’s gonna happen.”

“Why is Grandma scared of the owl?”

“Your Grandma’s very superstitious. She saw an owl for three days before your grandfather died.”

“Is someone going to die?”

“No, kid. Get some sleep.” He patted my head and left the room, turning off the lights. I waited for a moment and peeked out my window facing the tree in the backyard. The Owl was still there.

The next morning, I woke up and started to get dressed for school. As I pulled the shirt off over my head, I slowly stepped toward the window. The Owl was perched deep within the pines, and I could barely make out the body hidden in shadow from the bright morning sun. I finished getting ready and ran downstairs. My grandmother was sitting on the couch clenching her rosary holding it to her lips and mumbling a silent prayer in Spanish. She opened her eyes when she heard me approach.

“It’s still there? Isn’t it?” she said glancing down at her rosary.

“Yes.”

“Come here, child,” she placed the cold crucifix on my head and blessed me and I followed with the sign of the cross; head, shoulder, shoulder, heart. “Your father doesn’t believe me. Be careful. The Owl is a bad thing to see.”

I nodded. I didn’t fully understand, but decided to listen

to my grandmother's warning.

The Owl sat in the tree and stared into the house for three nights. Never moving from its new-found home. But no one had died yet.

On the fourth night, my dad asked me to come help him get some boxes out of the shed out back.

"No. The Owl's out there," I begged.

"Shut up," he said scowling at my grandma. "It's just a goddamned bird. Let's go." Reluctantly, I followed him outside and glanced every which way, observing. I looked to the tree. It was there, eyes shifted from the house to me and my dad walking in the dark with the only light coming from the house's windows and the full moon above. Eyes followed.

We gathered the boxes from the shed and headed back. I spotted the tree, but the Owl was gone.

"The Owl –" I started.

"Don't say another word about that bird." I stopped hearing Dad's serious tone. We walked to the house. I looked down and took caution to avoid the various holes in the ground, observing my shadow moving quicker than my father's. A line of black gracefully moved across my shadow then covered my dad's entirety. I looked up. The Owl was flying directly over us. Its massive body blocked out the light that the moon shone from above. I started to run and when my dad saw he quickly followed. I burst in the house and my dad slammed the door as we saw the Owl veer off, nearly colliding with the glass in the door, and headed back to the tree.

"Santa Maria!" my grandmother cried as I ran into her arms.

"Did you see the size of that fucking bird?" Dad said.

"Language!" my mother interjected.

"That thing was huge," Dad said. "It could've carried you off, Sammy."

“Callate, pendjo,” my grandma scolded waving that crooked finger that would haunt us till her final days. “Don’t scare the boy.”

I went up the stairs later that night and went to bed leaving the hallway light on. I closed the curtain on the Owl that was sitting on my windowsill.

The days continued and my grandmother continued to rock murmuring her silenced prayer clenching the rosary beads so hard that stain from the wood began to fade. My father ignored my grandmother’s pleas to call a priest. The rest of my family began dismissing my grandmother, believing she was in early stages of senility. Everyone except me.

The Owl remained still – observant – since its attack on me and my dad a few nights ago.

“Hito,” my grandma stopped my father in the kitchen one morning as he was heading out to the store. “Please! Please, believe me! The Owl –”

“Mom, Stop! You’ve been carrying on about this for days and your starting to scare Sam. It’s just a bird. Just, stop.”

I walked in to a room filled with silence. Grandma cried and scurried to her room, slamming the door. Dad leaned over the kitchen sink and calmed himself with a splash of cool water. “Go tell Uncle Shawn to start cleaning the shed. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I did as I was told.

After a long conversation with my mother, Dad headed out to the shed to help Shawn. I sat down at the kitchen table to eat breakfast alone. Mom kept busy cleaning and Grandma refused to come out of her room.

“Katherine!” my dad yelled for my mother from the backyard. She ran out the door and my grandmother

emerged from her room and went to the kitchen window. I dragged my chair and climbed up next to my grandmother. Inaudible shouting was seen with my dad pointing back to the house as my mother ran towards the back door crying.

“Que pasa?” my grandmother asked.

“It’s Shawn,” my mother said fumbling the telephone off the wall, hands trembling as she struggled to press three numbers. “He’s dead.”

“Sam, go to your room,” my grandmother said. As I climbed the stairs, I heard the sirens sharpen in the distance, followed by an overpowering screech from the Owl.

“They say he had a heart attack,” my dad said as I listened from the bottom stair. “Guess his drinking took its toll.”

My grandmother remained silent.

The sun was starting to set behind the mountains. Everyone had stayed silent at the kitchen table. My grandmother quietly rose and exited the room.

“You don’t think this has anything to do with...” my mother started to say before seeing my father’s face harden. “I mean, it’s just a coincidence, right?”

“Jesus Christ, not you too, Katherine,” my father said slamming his hands on the kitchen table and walking toward the window staring at the shed. I entered the kitchen and sat next to my mother. She placed her hand on my knee and gave a forced smile. I knew she knew I had been listening.

We heard my grandmother’s hobbled footsteps approaching. My dad turned to rejoin us at the table. His eyes widened. “Mom! What are you doing?”

“You didn’t listen. It’s too late for the priest,” my grandmother said staggering toward the door with rosary

in one hand and my father's loaded shotgun in the other.

"Mom, put that down."

"No! The Owl's still here. It's waiting for someone else." She flung the door open and headed outside, closer to the tree.

"Stay inside," my father told my mom and me. Both of us followed outside.

She took aim from the base of the tree – a sure shot – and pulled the trigger followed by a screech of demise and a thud on the ground behind the tree. We scurried to get a closer look at the fallen beast.

Nothing.

No bird. No blood. Just nothing.

"What the –" my dad stood searching for some evidence of the devil bird that had been driving my grandmother into madness for the past week.

My grandmother handed the shotgun to my father. "It's okay," she said. "It's over now," as one final flap dissipated in the wind.

Daniel Conroy

My Sunshine?

You wound me in frequent absence.
I do not begrudge you this
as suns should not concern themselves with comets
as they might fly past so many of us.

The bitter cold clings/bites (to) me the same,
and another cancelled orbit leaves me lame.
Carry on though, soaring sun, mumming my name.

I've had to forget the idea of a sun
after so many flights your absence has undone.
I keep an astronomer's ledger still, deep in the dun,

for I dare not look to expect your passing
in those pages I'll preserve everlasting,
lest I lose myself in anxious, expectant fasting.

The nourishment of your presence fills
me amply, I doubt you exist now. It breaks my will
to look at the horizon your gravity tills.

So I watch the void before me growing
next to me in my long lone rowing
about this space. The cold now all I'm knowing.

Antoria Mason

For My Brothers and Sisters

Another one dead,
Another daughter or son,
Another mother's tears soaking up the scent of her son's
 favorite shirt,
My stomach clenches,
My heart breaks for the tears shed on the other side of the
 screen,

My brothers and sisters march a new march to new a
 dream,
A dream for justice,
A dream with no stereotypes painted on the pigment of
 skin,
A dream where racism is killed like curiosity killed the cat,

To you, Mr. officer, it might be another black life,
To me that's another brother sister or brother lost
Another King or Queen of nations lost
Lost to racism
Lost to power
Another great writer lost
Another great doctor or lawyer lost
Another mother's child lost
Lost to stereotypes
Lost to ethno-cen-trism
Lost to fear

Please, Mr. Officer, stop killing my brothers and sisters
Stop killing the mothers and fathers that would lead
 nations of wise children,

Stop killing sons and daughters,
Stop killing our kings and queens.
Please stop painting the pavement red with your bullets
Can't you hear me!
I don't want to die too.

Eliana Taylor

We are Here to Empower

She was a girl with dreams, told to be a flower
As her older sister I sought to mold the little mind
With a fierce heart her brown eyes held power

Such little hopes start with a fragile ember
Working hard to not fall behind
She was a girl with dreams, told to be a flower

The hours of study earned her the title “book thumper”
With tears in her eyes I told her they were blind
With a fierce heart her brown eyes held power

Words thrown like stones taught her to cower
And I watched her light fade out, as if the sun died
She was a girl with dreams, told to be a flower

Many told her she had no room for anger
Yet all the rules of a “lady” I never sought to remind
With a fierce heart her brown eyes held power

I grabbed her hand and showed her, her voice had power
Words were no longer a thing she had to find
She was a girl with dreams, told to be a flower
Yet with a fierce heart her brown eyes held power

Alexis Mondragón

Big Little Sister (nonfiction)

The time was ticking down, turn after turn the road swerved in different directions. She was coming fast from behind, close on my tail, any wrong move now and she would pass me in an instant. The many other go-carts on the track gone from existence, only two cars mattered in these final moments, me and my sister. The time was down to ten seconds as the last curve in the road came into sight. Five seconds . . . her car steers off to the right and now is side by side next to mine. Three seconds . . . no mercy on the gas, the break does not exist in this moment. Two . . . the two cars fly into the plastic checkered finish line as the flash of the camera blinds me.

Mac Miller's voice makes its way into my thoughts as I turn over on my bed, the remains of my dream with my sister fading away back into the depths of my memory where it will stay until I go to sleep again. I don't need to be asleep to remember what had happened after the flash. I thought I had won that night at the Mr. Biggs go-cart track. We unbuckled our belts and raced passed the many loading and unloading passengers, passed the workers who yelled at us not to run so fast inside the gates, and passed our family who waited for us outside the gate with smiles on their faces. We ran all the way to the front of the line, scanning the different screens for our faces. There we were, the first screen on the left. Damn. It was a tie. The flat screen displayed both of our go-carts breaking the checkered line at the same time. I was so mad that night.

That was one of the more happy memories I had of my sister. Sometime the dreams would become so real my

brain wouldn't know the difference and only leave me with a broken heart when I woke up and realized she wouldn't be walking through the front gate and knock on the screen door waiting for me to answer. These thoughts brought tears to my eyes as I lay in bed covered up to my neck with blankets. I needed to stop. Crying would do no good, it wouldn't bring her back. Crying wouldn't make her appear at our doorstep any moment of the day like she used to. Crying would do nothing. The sun's ray of light broke through the open cracks of the curtains and the children outside laughed with not a care in the world. To anyone this would be just another normal day, but to me, this was the day everything changed. The number twenty-six taunted and reminded me that I haven't seen her in three years. I don't remember getting ready for the day or the drive over to the cemetery. I have been put on autopilot. Finding my sister's plaque isn't hard to spot; I walk past all the deceased veterans and look down at the names of the many men and women who served for our county.

The homemade plaque, courtesy of my brother DJ, is covered with the dead flowers I dropped off and little knickknacks that changed during the seasons. I sat on the ground not minding how wet it was. They probably just watered the grass. "How are you doing, Danielle?" I talk down to the broken headstone pausing for a moment as if she would respond to my question. Oh how I wished the headstones weren't so expensive and that she had hers instead of the piece of tile that broke under the weight of the lawn mower. I start to clear her spot, freeing it of all the dead flowers and weathered down decorations. I even clear off the headstones of the two men who lie next to her who have been forgotten over time. I believe they have met my sister in the afterlife and are protecting her. Only one could wish.

I sit there cross-legged looking at how beautiful I made

her headstone wondering what she would say if I could still talk to her. Maybe something around the lines of “Lexus, you should go get me a pop.” If she could be here she would laugh so hard at what my life has been like in college. “Oh Danielle, did you know I’m really not the tallest person in the world?” I laugh through my tears thinking of all my friends I’ve met at the University and how they are all more than a head taller than me. “Can you believe everyone that’s not from Pueblo says ‘soda’ instead of pop, how weird is that?” My tears are flowing freely down my cheeks and I welcome them. I am not weak for crying, not today. “They say only old people call it pop.”

I pull a rose from the dozen of flowers I stuck in the vase twirling it around my fingers cautious not to prick myself on the thorns. “I really wish you were still here, you know it still doesn’t seem real. I still think that you’re going to come home when the chili is cooking and laugh at me for prank calling you years ago and getting caught. I still think you will race me down the hill on our bikes to the park while the old neighbors sat on their porches cheering us on.” All the memories come back to me and instead of crying I laugh at how stupid we were. “Remember when we were young and stuffed our shirts with folded socks to make it look as if we had big boobs? We should have taken a picture that day.” I reach into my pocket pulling out the folded white glove that I kept from her funeral. The matching hand lay six feet beneath me on top of your coffin. “I really wished I had gotten to spend another night at your house so you could laugh at me for not knowing what a simple meal such as Malt- O-Meal was. Maybe if we didn’t throw snowballs at Danica or spread Ketchup on DJ’s door I could’ve slept over another day.”

The sun starts to go behind the mountains turning the sky different shades of purples and pinks and soon the

cemetery is dark with the orange street lamps offering an eerily glow across all the tombstones. The day has ended. This day, three years ago is when you left me. It is true, you never know how much someone means to you until one day they are gone without a last goodbye, without a hug or a kiss. "I know you won't ever walk through the front gates again, but thank you for not leaving me alone and coming back even if it's only in a shadow, or in a dream.

I gather all the trash from the ground and push myself up. Sitting here next to my sister made me realize that when a loved one becomes a memory, the memories become a treasure. "I love you Danielle. I'm determined to live until I'm old a grey because you never got to. See you soon big little sister." With that, I gave one last look to her headstone and walked away taking the memories I came to share with her with me. Until next time. I love you.

Ashlee Area

Anxiety

Every time the phone rings I get this instant feeling;
My heart drops to my stomach
For no apparent reason
I look to see who called
The number I do not recognize
Panic sets in
When I leave the house, I map out my drive
The unknown places strike me with fear
Getting swallowed up in this big scary world
Losing my place
Meeting new faces
Unanticipated conversations
Not knowing how it will go inside my head
Frightened my words will be jumbled
Getting called on in class
Feeling a huge heat flash take over my body
I don't have the answer
I'm a moron
Being paranoid of the judgement that will fall on me from
 others
I care too much about the opinions of others
The many concerns tacked to shyness
When will it stop?
When will I grow out of it?
A problem nobody apprehends
Makes me stand out
A disease, a disorder
Appears incurable
Something I must come to terms with
To look straight in the eyes
Living with the stigma.

Jessica Hair

Vessel (nonfiction)

A dark essence breaks the skin around my eyes and seeps into my skull, wrapping its sticky fingers around my thoughts. It fills every fissure of my brain and clogs the sulci and gyri until the mass of tissue that controls me is drowning, gasping to be free of the substance so it can think and be on its own. There is no fighting for the brain. There is only submission as it *clicks* from on to autopilot, thinking and doing only what the darkness asks of it.

A brisk breeze beckons me to join it outside. I want to step out the door, float to my car, strap in, and finally go home. It's been only a few hours since I left the comfort of my house, but it felt like so many more. It was depressing to watch the world go from bright and cheerful to dark and freezing in a matter of a three hours. The late winter days can really mess with a person's mind. And I just wanted to be at home. The studio that homed Bendell Karate dojo wasn't a miserable place, but being here two to three times a week for hours at a time got frustrating for a college student really quickly, especially when I had homework waiting to be finished.

I waved off the last few students that were leaving and sat down on one the black leather chairs that decorate the waiting room of Bendell Karate. In the office was Alex, who was a helpful friend, a higher ranking black belt, and a fun, yet occasionally, annoying nuisance on some nights. He didn't bother asking why I was sticking around that night even though all the students had left. He had a key,

he could lock up the building. Alex rather avoided the topic of my presence and talked about the amount of work he was bombarded with that night during classes. Nods and bleak, one word responses were all I could muster at that point, but Alex didn't care. Sometimes I think he just likes hearing his own voice.

With blabbering echoing off the brick walls, I stared out the windowed doorway that led to the outside world. It called to me. The door was my ticket out of here, but it was also the guard to my prison, keeping me at bay, keeping me from living with the rest of the world. Alex caught my attention as he stepped out of the office and nodded towards the door while still talking about only God knows what.

We stood outside the studio, both of us with keys in hand, aiming for the lock. Unwillingly, I found my way to the key hole first. The key turned clockwise in my hand. The large, metal bolt flipped over and latched itself inside the groove in the door frame. I imagined this scenario in my head a thousand times over *bolt in the groove, bolt in the groove, bolt in the groove* until I removed the key.

The essence had overthrown my thought process. I could no longer think for myself. But my mind wasn't enough. The gunk that clung to the tissue grew, overflowed, and pushed its way down my spine. The darkness grabbed at my nerves. I was held captive. In my thoughts, my own body. I became the essence, drenched in darkness.

My keys dangled loosely from my hand. The lanyard attached ironically read "I'm Not Okay," the name of a song any teenager could relate to. If this were a movie,

it would be my theme song. But this wasn't a movie. My real-life background music wasn't catchy and full of spunk. It was instead composed of cars idling in the parking lot, strangers talking at the bar a few yards away, my keys clanging together, and Alex breathing softly. I could feel his body heat radiating onto me he was so close. His strong cologne lingered in the air and would probably follow me home for me to smell later in the night. I could hear the click of his lip ring as it hit his teeth when he wiggled his lips. I knew Alex was with me, standing in front of the door watching me, but he felt a million miles away.

My left hand *always my left hand, always my left hand, always my left hand* gripped the chilled door handle. The porcelain skin that wraps my knuckles washed out to a solid white. With a quick jerk I pulled the door's handle. I was met with deep *click* after the door moved only a forth of an inch. I yanked at it again. *click* And again. *click*

Is the door locked?

click The door is locked. *click* **Is the door locked?** *click* The door is locked. *click*

Is the door locked?

"Jessica." Alex's voice was distant, there but not. His voice was slathered in annoyance when he half huffed, half chuckled a, "It's locked," to me.

Is it?

Yes, it was. The door was locked. I had inserted the key, turned it to the right, removed it, and then checked the lock. The door budged causing the bolt to catch inside its cubby making a *click. click click click*. It's locked. The door is locked.

Is it?

I wanted to stop. I wanted to turn to Alex, tell him the door is locked, and go home. Why couldn't I, why couldn't I, why couldn't I do what I want?

There were no thoughts of my own. I was just a vessel for the substance that was in my head. I did as it told. And it told me to doubt myself and to check that God damn door again.

Alex reached for the handle. I knew that he wanted to rip my hand off of the handle so he could drag me to my car and send me off. That'd be pointless, but he didn't know that. Alex didn't know I've driven back here in the middle of the night when the essence was so strong, so thick, so dark that when I left the general area of the door it started to strangle me, its vessel that wasn't doing what it was told.

Memories bubbled up through the gooey essence, snapping in my ear, reminding me that this situation wouldn't be any better if I were with anyone else. I had no control of what I was recalling at the time, the substance that clogged my thoughts was projecting these memories, mimicking a drive in theater, just to simply torture me more than it already was.

Fighting the door while surrounded by friends resulted in one of two things; helpful games with Sarah and Blackwell taking turns jiggling the handle and then letting me test it out, or being teased and threatened. Blackwell's twisted grin is plastered in my mind as I am reminded of the time he unlocked the door when I had turned my back to finally leave. He had been claiming he forgot something in the building. That night Sarah held me back from hunting Blackwell down. But in the end, no matter the scenario, I still stood on the welcome mat in front of the building *click, click, click* checking the lock over and over and over again.

Checking the lock around strangers didn't cause my anxiety to flare up like other tasks did. Doing simple things like tying my shoes in public usually made me uncomfortable, but doing this inhuman wiggling of the door to make sure it wasn't open was nothing to me. I'm able to block out the people and go about my business.

My left hand had gripped the door tighter than it had as I twitched at Alex's hand when it touched mine. The substance stopped the private show it had given me and placed me back into reality. Its own reality, that is.

"It's locked, Jessica." Alex's once annoyed voice changed into something else. Concern? **No** That's right. I'm the only one concerned with the door. Me and the essence. Me, myself, and essence.

Is he concerned about you?

That thought, that idea, it was my own. As soon as it breached the surface of the substance that suffocated my mind, it was pulled back down, buried with the rest of the loose, unwanted thoughts. No one was concerned about a girl that struggled with *click* locking doors. "Come on, honey," Alex pleaded. "It's locked." *click*

Is it?

I was miserable. I was jerking a door, hearing its reassuring *click*, and hating myself for doing it. My body and mind wouldn't, couldn't, stop. *click click click* please stop, let me go home *click click click* please stop *click click click* please *click click click* stop *click click click*

The door in my hand jiggled. I looked down at my shirt. *click* I was wearing my dad's shirt. A shirt older than myself, *click* which belonged to my OCD ridden father. Maybe the essence came from the shirt? It left my father and now attached *click* itself to me, feeding off my misery.

No, no, no. I've worn my own clothes and fought this

click door. And I knew my poor dad was at home treading water with his own demons, not the door to Bendell Karate.

“Jessica.” *click* My eyes meandered across the door. There wasn’t much to look at. It was mostly glass outlined with a silver metal frame and had stickers on it that advertised the karate studio. A thought crossed my mind *click*. It was my own thought, one that broke through the depths of the substance and found its way to the real me.

I can stop if I can remove this demon. I will stop if I break this glass.

What if I jammed my head into this door? This glass door. I won’t be thinking, just *click* bleeding, which wasn’t too big a deal. If *click* I put my forehead to the windowed entrance with enough force, my death *click* grip would loosen on the handle and I’ll be free. Unconscious, but free. *click*

The door breaks and it will become open. If it is open, it is not locked.

Shit.

I didn’t care about my well-being *click*. Everything I did from here on out was all about me removing myself from this welcome mat while still knowing that Bendell Karate’s door was locked. I would do anything. *click* Anything *click*. “Jes-si-ca.” *click* My eyes moved from the glass, shifted to the right, and found another thought.

click click click The brick wall. click click click

What if I jammed my head, not into the door, causing it to be unlocked *click*, but rather into the brick wall? The slabs of solid clay, a warm tan with speckles of dark brown and maroon, they looked so rough *click* and worn *click*. One can only imagine the type of pleasure that would come from me shoving my forehead into this wall. *click click click*

At impact, the textured surface will break my skin. Gravel will enter my pores, pushing and pulling its way

until it finds my skull. *click click click* The wall will be sturdy, my head's advance onto it *click* being nothing more than a mere tap *click*. The bone will break and blood will spill. Blood will spill and the essence *click*, the liquefied demons *click*, will fall with it.

And, the door will remain locked.

I didn't ram my head into the brick. It's obvious. But if one day you wake up and the morning paper reads, "Nineteen Year Old Girl Found Dead: Lost Fight Against Brick Wall," I may have succumbed to my insanity. Insanity? No, wrong word. I may have succumbed to need to be free.

I don't know if that paragraph is well put together. As I type, the clock reads 10:04 PM. I have been home from karate since 7:14 PM. I left halfway through the night so that I may finish all my school work in time for the next day. I was not the last to leave. I did not lock the door.

I have texted Alex the following: "Did you lock the door? Lol." I was trying to make a joke out of my obsessive compulsion, something my father and I do, sometimes even my sister and grandparents and my mother will do with their own strange ways.

Alex responded quickly, telling me that he left early as well, but the other black belt that was there is trustworthy and locked up for the night.

But I can't stop thinking about that fucking door.

I haven't been diagnosed with obsessive compulsion disorder like my father has. I don't have the time or money to get a doctor's input. But my genetics, tendencies, and environment scream obsessive compulsion. It's hard to hide.

I write about a door rather than the dishes in my sink or the constant thought of my dogs that haunt me day and night because, on occasion, it can be relatable.

“Did I lock the door” troubles everyone, but to what extent?

Nancy Brown

Eternity

shattered and whole in one container
life is never satisfied with just one end
tradition dictates, time consumes

stone blocks mark the place
flowers come but never grow
peace is the toll death never collects
walking through the frost and snow

memories are scarce
all that is left is mine alone
life is fast and then goes slow
all along I knew you would go

Nicholas Androes

The Problem

Man has many problems.

They stem from a tree ever skyward.

But like the tree all stems have a root.

Hunger, thirst, and strife. The tree of men.

We hunger for iron to build our cities, wood to support
them, and food to feed them.

We thirst for oil to fuel our industry, gas to heat them, and
fresh water to slake our thirst.

Strife comes from all these things as all men hunger and
thirst, forcing conflict between them.

In man's world it is the parent who is at fault when unable
to provide.

Then is the problem not man and our consumption,
but our unfit mother, Earth?

Emily Peachee

Resentment

Resentment grows in you
like a forest fire.
It smolders deep in the pit of you.
You do a good job at disguising it,
but all things become revealed in due time.
Your fire is fueled with pity, regret,
and what others think of you.
Is this what you live for?
It beckons your name.
As it screams louder,
others can faintly hear the war within you.
You have become so numb.
You sit there and let the fire rage inside of you,
spreading steadily to every aspect
of your being.
It soon touches the people you
claimed you once loved.
Within no time, you are set ablaze
in the fire you created.

Victoria Jimenez

Love, Lust, Lost

I. Her cupid's-bow

a gentle curve, pressing heart shaped kisses
into my skin again, again, again, again;
a beautiful stain which I never wash off my body.

Her freckles

a speckled galaxy, stretching beyond the atmosphere,
the space of her skin beautifully suffocating me into
nothing,

for she is Venus

and I remain a meteor floating away;

Her heart

a fading vinyl record, singing to her last melody through
the stereo,

and I am merely the dust, floating in the stale air,

looking to settle on her grooves

just to call her home.

II. ocean waves

break my bones

over your coral shores

spit on me spit me out

take me out

take me

beneath your lecherous current

III. Broken fraught fiber,

halyard hitch severed too much

to dock the ship's heart.

Emma Paulson

The Greatest Love

It used to beat for whom I chose but
 with him it beats quickly inside me,
He was the lighting who struck me
 each of my senses electrified,
This love that I felt for him was more
 it had a gravitational pull that everyone could see,
Like the flip of a switch a new world opened
 a feeling neither could hide,
For you it beats with a strong flutter.

As the months went on like someone put us in
 high speed and everything became clear,
A fix we both saw but came to know
 the ring couldn't solve the problems we face,
The child within ran and cried before
 long the yelling I couldn't hear,
1,700 miles between you and me with a
 love like ours we wanted to be the exception
 to the case,
For you it still flutters, but I feel it begin to fade.

With every word in the book this was a
 relationship neither of us could steer,
Emptiness engulfed me there was silence
 without your presence by my side,
Our words locked in the box with an
 unbreakable bond if only we had a key,
Even within my memories of you it still flutters rapidly.

Madison Gill

I Write for You

For you women who could not call yourselves woman
or writer in the same sentence

Who were handed book after book detailing the evidence
of your inferiority
to balance atop your heads like cracking eggshells

Until the whole bowing stack toppled to expose the yolk
inside – a blacksmith mind
pounding the stifled iron of your dreams into submission

I write for you

Who kept your madness smoothed
beneath the folds of tall velvet curtains by daylight

Who lifted them as soon as night fell and let your
thoughts dance naked
across the stage of your imagination to the music of your
unchained soul

I give you my voice

Climb inside the box at the base of my throat
where all my chords spill from

Scale the ribbed face of my esophagus – forget all you
know of silence
My mouth is a hole in the soil dug for your flags

Turn over in your graves
and howl.

Max Mendieta

The Killin' Floor (fiction)

I wanted the divorce. I was miserable and had been miserable for some time. Ten years of marriage and it seems as if it was bred on fear, anger, insecurities and misunderstandings. Sure, there were plenty of times where we were both happy and happy together. Times where nothing and no one else existed but us. But we fought just as hard as we loved. Our passion, whether it be positive or negative, was too intense. Burning like volcanic ash. This time is different though. I've grown tired of fighting hard. Loving hard, sure. Who doesn't want that? So, I brought up divorce. Deep down inside though, I hoped that we could reach a mutual understanding. A common ground that would bridge the gulf that had grown between us. I guess the currents were too strong. I came home today after a long day on campus.

A note.

M,

I've decided to leave. I'm sorry that things didn't work out as planned and that we've drifted apart.

-B

I quickly began taking inventory of the things in our camper, which we had both decided to live in once her daughter had gone off to college. Her closet was empty. Her clothes and shoes were gone. The shower only held my bathing stuff. Her shampoos, soaps and toothbrush, all gone. The dog and all of his toys... gone. It felt empty all of a sudden. I wanted her gone. Didn't I? Why did it hurt so much to see that she really had up and left then? In our ten years of marriage this had happened more

times than I can count. But we always patched things up with the typical hollow, plastic, I'm sorrys, and carried on as if nothing were wrong. This time feels different. It feels... real. It also feels surreal, if that makes any sense. So, I wander around the empty camper by myself, bottle of bourbon in hand and a cigarette hanging loosely between my lips. Pink Floyd and the Grateful Dead keep me company, but instead of making me happy like they usually do, the music sounds far away, as if it's coming from someone else's happy life next door. Not my life. Not my life where the walls have come tumbling down around me, leaving me buried in confusion, not sure of which way is out or if I'll ever see the surface again. I consider calling friends to come keep me company. To come rescue me. I toss the idea back and forth, back and forth, but like a tennis tournament, the idea keeps coming back unchanged, the same yellow tennis ball hitting my brain over and over again. I've made no real progress so I take another sip of bourbon and light another cigarette. I know the booze won't help my thought process or help me make any real decisions, but it dulls the pain. Quiets the thoughts. Helps me forget what happened and why. I've already emailed my professors to let them know I won't be attending my classes tomorrow. I tell them I'm going through a divorce and that I have a lot on my plate. I don't tell them that I intend on getting blackout drunk in my camper, just me and good ole' Jim Beam. That I've lost something that I wanted to get rid of and now that it's gone I need to drink myself to oblivion in order to escape the question of whether I did the right thing or not. That I need to become comfortably numb. To drown my sorrows and escape the chaos. The bourbon burns my throat as I chug it out of the bottle. *Who needs shot glasses when you're drinking alone?* I don't care. It keeps me warm in spite of the coldness that has penetrated my soul. The rain outside

tick, tick, ticks on the aluminum siding of the camper like a clock ticking away the seconds, minutes and hours of a night that seems never-ending. It would be much easier if the sun were shining and the birds chirping. Instead it's dark, cold and rainy. Mother nature seems to want to mimic the way I'm feeling inside. The one and only solace I have in most circumstances and instead we're dancing together in darkness, both mourning our losses, the tears streaming down my cheeks, hers down the single pane windows of the camper. I ask her if I've done the right thing, but she just sighs, rustling the leaves of the trees outside, and cries her ticking tears.

Danielle Farmer

My Life

As the clock ticked down

I heard the cry of the puppies

Life isn't as cozy as fuzzy dice

Life often pop tarts your ass

You won't always be someone's pumpkin

Not everyday can be your guitar solo

Sometimes you have to chopstick your way through the
day

Until you can get home, say screw it and eat lasagna

Life is hard, crazy, surprising, yet beautiful

Take one moment at a time

The clock will keep ticking

Alec Portillos

A Weary Dream Pantoum

The bite of the candle wax
The flicker of the light
Casts shadows on the wall
In this worn-out study.

The flicker of the light
With the dancing quickness
In this worn-out study
I see a golden frame.

With the dancing quickness
I edge to the reflection
I see a golden frame
With demons in its carving.

I edge to the reflection
My hands dust the surface
With demons in its carving
I see the other side.

My hands dust the surface
The glass cool to the tip
I see the other side
And smile at the stranger.

Daniel Conroy
Life of Tetris

Line piece falls into a perfect tetrad
of carefully set lines.
They all become nothing.
An instant of prepared emptiness.

Squiggly, reverse squiggly, squiggly.
Holes are opened in a world of perfect order.
A quickening pace sets in just as flaws flash to snap at my
helpless
hands trying to fix what's broken, but now they yield

to the end of this attempt.

A nice start. Remaking myself.
A craftsmen. No neophyte cobbling trash together.
I plan. I place delicate rows to grow
into pleasant quadrants and feel safe

for the while that would have been my chance
to set new paths for lines.
All joy becomes nothing.
An eternity of prepared emptiness.

Madison Gill

Dreams of Walden

These days my shoulders bump against the walls of this city
like a cocoon

A phantom itch twists along my spinal column;
Demands to see the world

To leave in the middle of the night
barefoot – and walk until I reach the Eden in me

Until my lungs have tasted every type of air
and I memorize the horizon catching fire from every
mountain peak

Until I've spoken in the same tongue as all the rivers' secret
murmurs
and danced to the thunder of all the oceans

I want to laugh myself dizzy beneath a crescendo of stars

I want the moon to spill from my tongue

After that, the chrysalis can have me
weave whatever unrecognizable thing it wants of my body

At least I won't remember my soul
as a caged animal

At least I will still catch the wild's untethered song
echoing down these prison halls.

Julia Barela

Nature's Canvas

It's softer than fairy floss
Soft enough to reach up and grab

Let it melt on your tongue
Let it be swallowed
Let the unenlightened light of the fresh sun be drunk by
your marrow

Paint bends around the sky;
splatting hues onto the clouds, tops of trees

Favor the pressed tulips in the sky to find their way onto
your skin
Favor your lungs, thirsty for the bleeding daisies in the sky
Favor the light dripping down your face, dewing onto your
eyelashes

It may only last for a moment
But even moments have moments, and moments within
those.

Welcome the altruism
Welcome the warmth to brace your neck
Welcome the innocence and remember

Ashlyn Burch

I Wish I Was Winter

I wish I was Winter,
She brings about a force when she comes in.
Sending gales of frost and wailing winds,
when she wishes to be heard.

I wish I was Winter,
For days she won't move,
Standing at the center like Venus de Milo.
Perfect to a point,
Purposeful imperfection.

I wish I was Winter,
She is loved by all,
On snow days, for peace and quiet, for even clean starts of
 life and warmth.
Covered by grace as her fingers lightly fall across the fields.

I wish that I could be like her because,
Even if she looks lonely, she never is truly alone.

Alexis Martinez

Swallows Road

The moon's lucent allure
Veils the lake water in light.
Quiet tranquility fills the night.

His truck bounces over the dirt roads
Over the tumbleweeds and by old cemeteries.
We laugh nicotine from our lungs

And sing sappy love songs
In hopes one day it won't end.
The hills trace the onyx canvas
Whose edges meet the stars,

With soft kisses of night
Bidding me goodbye.
Until the days get longer
And nights a little warmer.
We'll be back, I whisper.

Raven Romero

Yearning Light of the Night

Here is where the restless hearts come to dream.
With her silver beams, her realm safeguards all.
Wishes make the gems within her tight seams,
Glints of glitter pour out as she stands tall.

She smiles gracefully at the world below,
With quiet light resting upon tree tops.
Drifting downwards to set the world aglow,
Bathed in the gentle blue light of raindrops.

An angelic comet acts as her corsage,
She is silver as her brother is gold.
Burning stars sit close as her entourage,
Clouds vanish and her light becomes bold.

The pale queen rules over the silent night,
Prepared to watch all of those in her sight.

Patricia Earl

Witness Baghdad, 3/21/03

Houses of the aged, of children,
Desecrated into a bandage of bomb dust.
The little girl sailed down the soot-blanketed road
With sand between her toes.
She turned left after passing the cart
That sold chickpeas for her mother's stew.
She ran down the alley until she saw
Where the loud sound must have come from.
The little girl found her friend Miriam,
Splayed on the ground
Painted in blood and screams
In front of the wreckage
That used to be a home.
Her face hardened after she discovered
Miriam's legs had disappeared
Somewhere in the bomb dust,
As did the little girl, whose hands continued
Wiping the destruction off of Miriam's face.

Sandy Brack

Red Sky in the Morning (fiction)

The master bedroom had a huge picture window facing west. The mountains were backlit by the setting sun, indigo silhouettes against glowing pink clouds. I imagined what it would be like to live here. I'd spend all of my time gazing out this window.

Miles and Junior had already gone, spooked by the horrific scene in the bedroom. They frantically put everything back as precisely as possible, wiping their prints away as best as their panic would allow. It wouldn't matter in the end. We were not good burglars and evidence of B&E would be everywhere. I thought about how good they had always been to me, taking me under their wings when I first lost my parents. When I first became acquainted with transiency. Miles and Junior were the only family I had known for a very long time. I would not tell the police about them. They deserved a chance.

I thought about returning the diamond necklace to the box, but instead I let it swing from my hand, heavy and significant against my emaciation. Until today I detested diamonds. It's strange how people form opinions about things they've had no real experience with. I'd never held one of the stones in all my life, yet I regarded them with a cool superiority, a haughty affectation, a calloused disinterest. They were everywhere. The scraps of magazines that cluttered against my blankets during the night were littered with strings of them, meant to drape around necks and wrists, to dangle from earlobes. Ungodly professions of love in a loveless world. They erupted like novae through windows of jewelry stores that peacocked

on the sidewalks of clean neighborhoods. The jewelers in them had no eyes for people like me.

But now I had some in my hands, real life diamonds, and I did not want to give them up. A nebulous phantom of a woman sighed through my imagination, and I squinted through the picture window to see her more clearly. My mother. Did she wear diamonds? Did my father ever buy her any? Like an elusive dream, the harder I squinted at the image the more it dissolved into dust, settling into the crevices of my mind until stirred again by some reminiscent breeze. The cold necklace was warm in the place I gripped it, taking the heat of my life for its own. I thought about securing the clasp behind my neck and making a break for it. I'd meet up with Miles and Junior under the bridge over Mori Street, across from the cemetery. The sirens would crescendo when they sped past us and diminish into the air as they chased after nothing. Junior would swing me around in embrace while Miles would be transfixed by my diamonds, the three of us forgetting for a moment the horrible sight that drove them from the house in the first place. *Molly, Junior would say, you're off your rocker! We've gotta sell this thing before they find out it was us that was in there. Woowee! How much y'think we can get for this thing? How many carrots you figure's in it? Molls, I think you just fed us all for a year!* He'd whoop and holler like that for a while until Miles's stern gaze quieted his outburst. Miles, always more modest and reasonable and even a little educated would ask me first if I was seen, and then more somberly, if the other two were really dead. I'd answer no then yes, and he would sigh once for relief and once for dismay. We'd exchange pensive glances for a moment, and eventually Miles would laugh and say *Junior, they're not that kind of carrot, you know,* and we'd set off in search for the best place to unload the necklace.

No, I thought. Even if there was a chance I could escape with them, I wouldn't sell them. At least not for a very long time. They were beautiful and heavy but not from the weight of the stones. The woman of the house might have worn them once or a thousand times and I imagined how she felt each time did. Beautiful, important. Like she meant something to someone. To the world. People would look at her with those diamonds around her neck and think, someone must really love her. And if no one loved her, she must certainly love herself. The world had been kind to her and she wore that kindness around her neck like a scout badge. She earned this somehow. She deserved it. I thumbed the chain through my hand like a rosary and imagined what I might deserve if I had diamonds of my own.

People with diamonds slept in Egyptian cotton and bathed in luxurious soaps from colorful bottles. They had shoes and jackets for every day of the week during the cold season. There was food in their cupboards that they never ate because there was always something better. These kinds of people had Band-Aids and toothbrushes and combs, medicines and salves, perfumes and tonics of every kind. Their bathrooms hospitably waved them inside with the promise of luxurious privacy and a bottomless supply of toilet paper. They had hot or cold water at the flick of a wrist and clean clothes at the push of a few buttons.

And socks. People with diamonds had lots of socks.

I sat down on the bed with the necklace, moving a cold and stiffening leg to make room. I supposed people who had socks had problems too, but a different kind. I wondered what could have happened here that left the man and woman of the house both dead in their Egyptian cotton sheets. Sheets that are so soft.

Stripping off my sullied rags I lied down on the very edge of the bed next to them, pulling the top sheet to my

chin. The bed was large and easily fit three grown bodies. I never felt so comfortable and safe. Like my hardships were finally coming to an end, like this was the place I had been unknowingly searching after for years. I clasped the diamond necklace around my neck and looked over at the woman who was looking back at me. Her eyes were vacant but her face was full of sadness. Did she pity me? Would my mother pity me? I looked in her eyes a long time and stroked her face, cold and taut beneath my fingertips.

On the nightstand stood a framed photograph of the couple, alive and healthy on a sailboat somewhere. The water around them was sapphire, calm and welcoming. My father and I used to watch sunsets together when I was little and his voice went lyricizing through my head, teaching me the only poem I know by heart: *Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, a sailor's delight.* Was it crimson this morning? I couldn't remember. Though tonight my sunset was pink instead of red, I suspected it was my delight all the same.

Next to the photograph was a telephone, a modest white, its cord stretched and tangled from decades of being passed around. It struck me as an odd fixture, that phone. It didn't belong in a house like this, a house that had a television in every room. A house that had a coffee pot on a timer and three different kinds of blenders. A house that was owned by people who owned their own separate iPhones. But there it was, sitting on the nightstand, a silent eulogy to the past. It still worked; the dial tone droned in my ear and the keypad glowed emerald green. When I was little, my parents discussed buying a cordless phone, musing at the convenience of it. Eventually they decided against it. They favored the old phone's reliability in the event of power outages or other emergencies.

Through the picture window the mountains were no

longer silhouetted but became thick black shadows. The sun was gone and a small sliver of a moon hung in the sky. I knew I shouldn't but I closed my eyes, the woman next to me like ice, and her husband too. I was warmer than I could remember being in a long time, and I slept easily.

In the morning I was coaxed awake by the jingling of the white phone. I was inclined to let it ring off the hook, but I knew it was time. A woman on the other end was frantic at first, calling me Mom and telling me how worried she'd been, that she had been trying to call my cell phone all night. Is Dad there? She couldn't get a hold of him either. I told her yes, her father was here, but there had been an accident. There was dead air for a moment and I wondered if she hung up. At length she spoke, her voice grave as she asked me who the hell I was, what was going on.

"Call the police, something terrible has happened," I told her and replaced the receiver, only to pick it up again to dial a number of my own.

"911, what is your emergency?" a monotonous voice on the other end.

"Two people are dead, you'll need to send someone," I fingered the diamonds as I spoke. The man on the other end grew alert as he asked me who I was, who was dead, where was I calling from.

"I'm Molly and I'm calling from 1611 Crestview Drive," A strange thing, to know such a personal detail about these two strangers yet know nothing about them as people. Only, I did know them. They slept in Egyptian cotton and went boating on the weekends. They lived in excess and extreme comfort. And she wore diamonds. Looking at them I imagined their names could be Karen and David. Maybe Brenda and Daniel. My parent's names were Debra and Gary.

They told me to stay on the line, but I hung up. They

could ask me their questions in person. I unhooked the diamonds from my neck and gazed at them one last time, drinking in their beauty as much as I could. I would not keep them but I wanted to remember them forever. I laid them across the woman's neck. Somehow they kept their luster against her grey skin, but I did not need them anymore. There would be different jewelry for me where I was going. There would be a bed. Hot water and food to eat every day. There would be soaps and medicines and salves of all kinds, and maybe not a picture window as grand as this one to occupy my gaze, but a window nonetheless.

And socks. There would be lots of socks.

Darek Thomas

I Hope for Death

I hope for Death to be a little yellow, afraid to proceed,
hesitant none the less,
perhaps fumble his scythe, be a man with the plight of a
Gomer Pile while sitting for
hours working out the plot in his mind.

I hope he's a dime short for a Newport, and kind enough
to ask me for one. Maybe
we can sit on the balcony and watch the clouds roll
through the sun.

"That's an elephant with its ears chewed off."

"No," he'd say, "it's a tour bus with a fella Hell bent on
meeting me."

I hope Death has a sense of humor and we can sit back and
trade jokes with each other

"Your mother. Your mother. Your mother," I would say,
and we'd laugh so hard he'd write your script, Mom, for
another day.

Matthew Coats

The First Day (nonfiction)

“I’m falling, so I’m taking my time on my ride.” –Twenty-One Pilots

My name is Matthew and I am an alcoholic.

I’ve heard the crumbling and clichéd speech from countless counselors before—“the first step in solving a problem is to admit that a problem exists.” I readily confess that problem. I own it with confidence. I am an alcoholic.

Tuesday morning, the first day of unexpected sobriety.

I woke up with my alarm clock at 6:30 am. Sleep had been ineffective in preventing another hangover from the night before, I jokingly encouraged myself with a line from a song by Twenty-One Pilots... “Wake up you need to make money!” Sleepy or not I still had responsibilities to attend to—working in the University Writing Center and then my work student teaching experience with high school students.

In the midst of addiction there is what recovering addicts call a moment of clarity. For many, that moment coincides with hitting rock bottom. I’ve been at some lows in my life; I’ve gone to jail and I’ve been homeless before—all of which I did sober. It did not take a rock bottom experience for me to have that moment of clarity. For myself, this clarity came with the convergence of a hangover, a Twenty-One Pilots song, and a Facebook message from my ten-year-old daughter, Lily.

“I love you Daddy! I will see you Saturday for your birthday! We will go bowling.” The message was followed

by a loving Pusheen sticker: a cartoon cat surrounded by hearts waved at me, expressing my daughter's love. I read her message while listening to that Twenty-One Pilots song: "Wish we could turn back time, to the good old days. When our momma sang us to sleep but now we're stressed out."

Hitting rock-bottom isn't a loss of physical property--it's an emotional low. I smashed into the bottom at that moment – that innocent message from my daughter matched with a song made me realize that my life was slowly becoming a mess. I hadn't had a sober night in three months. My youngest daughter, Fiona, had pleaded with me to stop drinking the previous Sunday, pleas I chose to ignore. Despite the plan I wanted for my life, I was on a fast road to failure through alcohol. I hated my life. Hangovers had brought regret before, but this hangover, as I looked at that loving message and dwelled on what my drinking might do my children, bore weight. Additionally, there was that Twenty-One Pilots song, amplifying my remorse: "We used to play pretend, give each other different names. We would build a rocket ship and then we'd fly it far away. Used to dream of outer space but now they're laughing at our face, saying, 'Wake up, you need to make money.'"

My shift tutoring passed without incident. Given the time of year, most of the assistance requested was with writing scholarship essays. Over the past several months, I have rather enjoyed the challenge of tutoring scholarship essays since the hardest thing for anyone to write about is themselves. The point of such essays is to show confidence, to let the reader know that you are amazingly unique and the most fascinating person in the world. The advice I like giving is usually things like: "Don't say you 'suppose' this was your greatest achievement. Own it. Say that it IS the greatest achievement in your life." My life was certainly

going to shit fast, but I could still instill confidence in others, do my best to bring out the best in them and give them the confidence they needed to face the future bravely. I tell students: “Let the reader know what you’ve accomplished at the University. I’m sure you’ve done great things that you deserve to be proud of.” Helping others be the best person they can be, assisting others to find their success—these are what I love. It’s why I am committed to a goal of teaching high school; teaching pays peanuts but giving kids the power of rhetoric gives them the ability to succeed, and that is reward enough.

After my tutoring shift, I put in a few hours of student teaching at a local high school: pleasantly helping students develop the rhetorical skills to complete an argumentative essay about any environmental issue due later in the week.

The Elements of an Argument

Hook: I am an alcoholic.

Claim: I should seek assistance for my problem,

Reasons/Evidence: I’m consistently drunk and rely on alcohol to get through each day. I know that every bit of work I’ve turned in for a class in the past two years has been far below what I know I’m capable of achieving. My children have expressed their discontent with my drinking.

Counterclaim: I still earn A’s. I am functional and succeed in my life. Maybe the alcohol is necessary? However, there are LIBRARIES of research available to refute those foolish thoughts from an addict. I was every bit as good a person sober: I was a better person sober. I know that.

Call to Action: Stop drinking.

I wandered the downtown Riverwalk that evening to clear my head. I dwelled on every regrettable thing in my

life that could be attributed to alcohol. The broken bones, the embarrassing sexual encounters preceding a trip to a clinic, the ruined friendships, the estranged family members. Disease and injury didn't find me; I chose to find them. I hadn't lost control of my life, I'd simply made the wrong decisions on my own. Sobriety wouldn't fix all that immediately, but it could be the foundation to rebuild those broken bridges.

I left the Riverwalk with confidence, prepared to face my life sober. Before utilizing the Uber app to contact a ride home, a desperate "person" approached me.

"Person" is placed within quotations because I'm not certain how to describe this man I met. He deserves an adjective, but I'm uncertain about the right one to use, or even if the correct adjective exists in the English language. "Dangerous" is accurate, but only in retrospect. He was Hispanic, but that is just the nature of Pueblo's demographics. The fact that he was Hispanic has no bearing on the events that followed. Therefore, while I know his actual name, I'm going to intentionally obfuscate it by labeling this gentleman "John."

John approached me on a bicycle and asked if I wanted to buy a soda from him. When I declined, he asked if I wanted to buy a microwave burrito. It became clear to me that John was trying to turn his EBT food money into actual cash to spend on something else.

"My life sucks," John told me. "My girlfriend just kicked me out. My whole life is fucking ruined. I'm going to throw myself off that bridge and into the fuckin' river over there later. There's no reason to live."

While my own life was at an ultimate emotional low, John was even lower. I wasn't suicidal, but from his fatalist statements, it seemed that John truly wanted to end it all. I needed to help. I wouldn't give John cash to fulfill any kind of vice, but I was dedicated to somehow giving

him the confidence to see tomorrow. The joy in my life is helping others be the best person they can be. I wanted to help this stranger.

John expressed his desire to just get somewhere he could spend the night, somewhere near home and he pointed towards the East side – a rougher part of Pueblo I was familiar with. I knew those streets as I'd lived on them before during darker days. John told me he felt too exhausted to carry his belongings. I shrugged his bag of microwave burritos over my shoulder and walked his bike while he drank a beer in absolute defiance of local laws. As we traversed the bridge over some train tracks, he made clear his desire to throw himself at an approaching train. I pleaded with him not to. John told me to just toss the bike off the bridge because he didn't need it. I refused with the explanation that he needed that bike. Life would get better, he would find a job, and he would need that bike to get to and from that job. John agreed but didn't seem quite convinced.

At the apogee of this bridge, looking down at the dirty Fountain Creek, John climbed atop the pedestrian bridge and announced his intention to end it all. I begged John to see the potential in his life, to know that he is a good person. In our earlier conversation, he mentioned that he had kids; I told him he needed to live for their sake. Life would get better, it always does. I stole a thought from a familiar song and told John, "Wake up you need to make money!"

John didn't jump. If I could help this man, maybe I could give my own broken life some meaning. I felt purpose. This is what the sober Matthew was destined to do. This felt right, this felt like living. Saving a life; giving someone a purpose to live. This went beyond tutoring some scholarship essay about achievement—this was giving someone the actual, tangible confidence to be

a human being. This was and still is my goal in life: to help others. This became a test to determine my actual commitment. If I couldn't help an adult from ending their life, how could I possibly motivate an aimless teenager to find a career?

Across the bridge, John took an unannounced detour through the shrubbery along the Fountain Creek. There was a small tent set-up along the riverbank, a makeshift for a homeless couple. There was a man in dirty clothes living along the river with a sickly and emaciated woman that looked decades older than her actual age. The couple looked like the "After" image of an advertisement about what meth does to the human body; appropriately, they were that the actual live version of that image. I soon learned that John was friends with this couple. I should have left. I should have assumed John had found someone that cared and would take care of him. I should have said "Good night" and abandoned him to carry on with whatever life John was bound to have. However, I made a commitment to help that I needed to follow through on, regardless of how shady the situation suddenly became. I wanted to work in education, right? What kind of benevolent educator would bail the moment a student presented an issue that was just a bit too heavy?

This couple did help John, but not in the altruistic ways I would have hoped. They handed John a small baggie of off-white powder and a used, uncapped syringe. Using a spoon provided by the couple, John mixed that powder with some of his own spit and held it over flame. I'd seen enough television dramas and movies to have an idea about what was happening.

Heroin.

What do I do? I watched the man I wanted to help fill the syringe and plunge it into his vein. Should I have stopped him? Probably. The man held up another baggie

and asked me, “You wanna push off too?” I declined. I should have made John decline too. I shouldn’t have even followed to see this happen in the first place.

The couple wanted some sort of pay for the little bump of heroin they gave to John. He didn’t have money. I gave them a twenty-dollar bill just to escape this scene. Was this helping someone? Was this the right thing to do? I want to think so. Right or wrong, it was still something I chose to do.

We progressed along 4th Street to where it intersected with Glendale. John saw the sign and proclaimed that he had a cousin that lived along that block that could help him out. A helpful cousin was my way out. Of course I walked him there. John was a junkie so helping this stranger was beyond my altruistic capabilities. I still needed to see this through because John couldn’t even walk straight. What kind of heartless person would just leave a stranger to die? Just get him to his cousin’s house, I thought, that’s all I needed to do.

A block later John told me, “Wait here. Don’t go fuckin’ anywhere. I’ll be right out.” This, I supposed, was his cousin’s house. No, I don’t “suppose.” I need to own my achievements—even the shitty ones. This was his cousin’s house, and I assertively decided of my own accord to wait. This wasn’t the passive sentence of a chemistry abstract: “the bike was watched;” This was the active tense of a regrettable reality: “I watched the bike.” Why? I stood there, coping with my own alcoholism and my own regret by helping a stranger. If I could help this man, then it meant that my life had some purpose. I could celebrate my upcoming birthday knowing that I had something to celebrate. This was my catharsis and I fucking needed it.

John came out of that house on Glendale about fifteen minutes later, looking worse than when he walked in. Why was easily explained by the 32oz can of Camo Black

he quickly finished. John told me to leave the bike on the yard because it belonged to his cousin. I made a futile attempt to tell John that he would sober up and realize that he'd need this bicycle to find a job, to get his life back into order. I took the bike.

As we turned off 4th Street and ventured up an empty stretch of Hudson, John explained that he had stopped to borrow a gun from his cousin. John showed it to me, a 9mm pistol. What do I do? Now the man had a gun. He was full of booze and heroin. Altruism was gone – this was about survival. Since he was armed, I felt deprived of any other choice except to follow this crazy man. No, I should own my achievements; I chose to follow the crazy man.

Finally, we arrived at the Valu-Stay. Across Bonforte Boulevard was a Loaf N' Jug that John wanted to visit first. Again, he told me to wait outside with his bike and, again, the bike was watched.

No, that is wrong.

I watched the bike.

I also watched John inside the convenience store. He stumbled around and grabbed a Camo Black from the refrigerator. I kept watching, until I saw John take the gun out. "No!" I thought, "I am not seeing this. I never saw this. This isn't happening!"

I left the bike in the parking lot.

John's attempted robbery didn't go well. From the paper the next morning, I learned that he sat at a bus stop across the street and shot up again while the police picked him up.

The bike was left in the parking lot.

I arrived home and my roommates assumed that I'd wandered home drunk from a bar, as I'd done countless times before. I wasn't going to tell them the story because, honestly, I don't care about them. I care about you, dear reader, and what you can take from this. I care about

my daughters. This decision was motivated by my love for them. They won't read this today or even tomorrow, but someday they will. Years from now, when that battle with alcohol is in the past, my daughters can know that I achieved sobriety through their love. When my children approach adulthood and, inevitably, have their own encounters with alcohol, I hope that my achievements and failures can help inform their decisions.

A large part of overcoming addiction is the apology, making amends for all those regrettable moments. That is what this is: part confession, part apology, part parable. Maybe I did get that catharsis after all; by acknowledging my failures and accepting the consequences. My catharsis lies in the ability to say: "My name is Matthew and I am an alcoholic."

Nancy Brown

Change

autumn leaves swirling down
golden like honey, red like fire
tides crashing on rocks, melting like glass in a kiln
air cold as death slowly strangling one last breath
transformation is unforgivable and unrelenting
flowers frozen, fallen again
revelation comes in and winding away again
gone are the days of warmth and hope
gone are the sunset colors and willowy whispers
winter's dagger has fresh blood

Wesley Parker

Prodigal Son (fiction)

“I wanna meet your family Alex,” Karen said as we laid on the floor between rounds of rigorous lovemaking. The tone in Karen’s voice let me know that she had that round in the chamber but waited for the perfect moment to strike with the precision of a military sniper. I sighed heavily and moved to get up but she mounted me. I didn’t resist.

“We’ve been dating almost two years. You don’t think its weird that I haven’t met them yet?” she asked while running her fingers through my hair. Deep down I knew she had a point.

“Karen, its not as black and white as you make it out to be,” I replied. Actually it was very black and white. As in I’m black and she’s white. Throw in the fact that I hadn’t been back to Memphis in six years and our interracial relationship would serve as the light on the fuse of Johnson family powder keg. To a good percentage of the world, our relationship is the equivalent of the master’s daughter sneaking out to the shacks near the fields.

Contrary to what most major news networks would have you believe, modern society hasn’t evolved as much as people think. For the last two years we dealt with resistance from both sides. On my side there were frequent stares of disapproval, and whispers of being a traitor. On Karen’s side there was talk of her descending to the gutter for love, and advice that she should “get it out of her system now.” Karen comes from a wealthy clan of blue bloods. From her description they’ve built their fortune

on the labor of minorities and have no intentions of changing their views on social equality.

Getting away from the South allowed me to see Karen as the beautiful lover who complements my very being. She's a couple inches short of 6 feet with dirty blonde hair and a body tightened by yoga 3 times a week. Her high cheek bones only compliment her aqua eyes. Those same eyes caught me from across the room during senior seminar. She's an amazing lover but one event in particular solidified her place in my heart.

It was our second or third date. We were walking through Downtown holding hands and I noticed a couple of black girls headed our way. I conveniently bent down to tie my shoe and prodded Karen to continue walking. She grabbed my hand to lift me up and after serving a toothy grin to our audience wrapped her arms around my shoulders to pull me into a passionate kiss.

"I can handle whatever flak that comes with what we have, as long as it means being with you," she said. That moment is the reason an engagement ring is currently stashed in my underwear drawer.

"You're heading back to Memphis for the first time in six years, can you think of a better time to tell them?" she asks. Yeah, never sounds like the perfect time.

"It's complicated," I reply.

"No, whats complicated is cropping Facebook pictures at perfect angles like were trying to win a Pulitzer. You cant keep running from your family."

"Alright, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"Remember whatever flak I'll take."

The sniper bagged its target.

Friday

I could feel the change in Alex the closer our plane got to landing. His hands that were usually warm and com-

forting were cold and fidgety. Eye contact was non-existent as he held his head down, deep in thought. I wasn't sure if I was heading to a family reunion or a firing squad. Those broad shoulders on his 6'5 frame slumped as he prepared himself for the moment he thought he could outrun forever. As we settled into the hour long drive to his childhood home, he came alive as he gave me the run-down on his family.

"Ok, my grandfather Willie has diabetes and resents Madea for cooking elegant southern cuisine he cant partake in. He will beg, plead and bribe but you can't give in and sneak him anything," he instructed.

"Got it."

"Uncle Ed's wife Cathy will ask you plenty of questions about our sex life. It will get awkward and at some point she will give you tips about giving the perfect blowjob. Disregard everything she says...except the tips about blowjobs," he said with a smile. It was the first hint of the love of my life since we checked our bags at LAX.

"I thought you liked my technique."

"Oh I love it, but this is the longest my uncle has been with one person since Reagan was in office, so she must be doing something right. Also you're going to here the word nigga a lot."

"What about your brother Aaron?" I ask.

"He made his own choices in life. I'll only speak to him if I have to," Alex says as the sound of the engine revving and an increase in speed let me know I'd hit a nerve.

"You guys were close. I saw the pictures you keep in the closet. It just doesn't make sense."

"Leave it alone Karen, you know I can't stand ignorant folks with no ambition."

We drove in silence as we exited the highway and turned onto the road the house sits on. My respect for him grew as we made the final turn. I knew how hard this

was for him. Drug addiction had killed his parents and left a hole that his grandparents tried to heal, but to no avail. Alex often spoke of how he thought building a successful life far away from Memphis would allow him to avoid the cycle. But he knew this day would come.

On the surface his presence was a middle finger to those in his family who told him he'd end up like his parents. But I could see that he's here out of yearning. The same yearning I could see on holidays as he tried to hide the hurt of not having families to exchange gifts with by paying off the layaways of families at Walmart. The subtle hints of better times during childhood when we'd see something in a store that would make him light up like a Christmas tree. For most of our relationship I haven't tried to broach this subject with him. I'm something of a pioneer in the field of fucked up family dynamics. My hope is that coming home will bring Alex closure, but also a reconciliation that he wants but never acknowledges.

The driveway to my grandparent's house is about a mile. When Aaron and I would get in trouble, and assured ourselves an ass whooping when we got home, the driveway felt like the last walk on death row. The manicured lawns surrounding the house are nicknamed The Plantation by the younger generations. We called it that because they had been manicured for decades on the free labor of Johnson descend-ants born out of wedlock and alcohol fueled teenage angst. The labor brought us closer to our ancestors than Black History Month ever could. When I get out of the car the memories come roaring back as I knew they would. Unseen insects make noises from far and wide as the humidity begins to make the sweat stick to my back. The swing is still situated outside the door. That swing was a therapist's chair growing up as Madea would wipe the

tears away after a whooping was doled out by Grandpa. It was on that swing that I swore I'd never return. However, all memories of the swing aren't bad. Aaron and I would sneak to the swing to talk to our girlfriends on the phone as Madea would try to listen through the screen door, the wooden floor creaking under her weight giving away her presence.

The car door closing alerts my family to our arrival and the first to greet us is Uncle Ed from the side of the house. He's wearing a tank top with plaid shorts and New Balance sneakers so dirty that I swear they were stolen from the grave of Steve Jobs. Sticking out of his pocket is an unused spatula that lets me know that he is still not trusted to cook on the grill. A freshly lit Newport hangs from his mouth and in his left hand a glass with three ice cubes floating in what I'm sure is cognac. Three ice cubes means it's his third drink. We could always tell how many drinks he'd had by counting the cubes. When Uncle Ed goes to the grave, he's taking the Hennessy stock price with him.

"Emmit is that your black ass?" Uncle Ed says squinting at me.

"Yeah, it's me. Good to see you Unc," I respond.

Karen looks on confused by the greeting and my uncle interjects before I can explain.

"When he was a kid he only dated white girls, so we call him Emmit, you know, like Till."

I close my eyes and wish that I was anywhere else in the world.

"I'm Karen, nice to meet you Ed."

He takes a long drag on his cigarette while eyeing Karen from top to bottom. He exhales a large cloud of smoke before rendering his verdict.

"You got yourself a mighty fine woman, nephew. But I gotta ask, is she keeping your hands smooth?" he says with a wink. I look over to see Karen struggling to con-

tain a smile.

Back when I was going through puberty and discovering that I could do to myself what I was having fantasies of the girls in my class doing to me, my dear uncle warned me that my palms would grow hair. Not content with warning me about the dangers of chronic masturbation, one night he shaved part of his beard and super glued it to my hands while I slept. I was so scared I didn't touch myself for the rest of 8th grade. After our dad died he took it upon himself to turn us into men. Naturally it was a disaster. Once he told me that he'd gotten a director's cut of *Harry Potter* on DVD. I was excited as any Potter fan would be when it started. However, something was amiss. The character names were the same but their behaviors didn't match the book, and that is how I discovered pornography.

The rest of the family comes out of the house to greet us. Grandpa looks the same as always. A retired mechanic, his large hands bore the scars of years spent fix-ing the cars of the townsfolk. The full head of hair is now replaced by various patches on top of his head. Knowing how stubborn he is it doesn't surprise me that he hasn't waved the white flag in his battle against balding. His raggedy Levis were cuffed at the bottom just above his loafers. The stained white shirt he's worn for as long as I can remember stretches over his protruding belly and tucks neatly into his waist band. The jeans are held up by suspenders that he's had since he was in college. I pray that my patience this weekend is as strong as those suspenders. He held a grudge against me for leaving, not because he was hurt, but because Madea was. As stern and stubborn as he was, Madea always had the power to bring the human side out of him.

Madea wears a Memphis Tigers championship game shirt and baggy grey sweats that matched her hair, which was pulled back in a tight bun. The smile on her face as

she approaches is as warm as ever and makes me shudder with regret. She'd raised us as her own and became collateral damage in my war to get out of this place. Though Madea said she understood my position, every year I could hear her heart break over the phone as I gave some sorry excuse for my absence during the holidays.

Behind my grandparents is my brother Aaron. From afar you'd think he was me as we look so much alike. However, personality is where the similarities end. He's wearing a blue button up with the McDonald's logo stitched over the heart. The look on his face conveys that he shares my enthusiasm for this reunion. At one point we were close but everything changed when I left for college. Our relationship consists of forced 2 minute summations of our lives during my routine calls home. There's a sinking feeling in my heart that our relationship will come to a head before the weekend is up.

Introductions are made as we head into the house. The decor hasn't changed and for a second I feel like I am back in high school. The walls are adorned with pictures of us growing up mixed in with Jesus and various scriptures and quotes from civil rights leaders. There's a picture of Aaron, Grandpa and I outside the Tennessee Titans stadium after a game. We look so happy together and it serves as a stark contrast to how we are today. The nostalgia doesn't last long.

"Why the hell you looking around and shit for boy, you know what this place looks like. Help me carry these damn bags up the stairs," Grandpa says while lugging Karen's bags up the stairs.

"Willie hush, you two can sleep in your old room. Hopefully you last longer than the last time you had a girl in your room," Madea says.

"Grandma."

"I told you on your first time don't go in all fast, hell,

even Lance Armstrong gets off the bike when he cant peddle no more,” Uncle Ed yells from the kitchen. The walls of this house are as paper thin as the foundation.

I shoot Karen a look that says “I told you so.” Grandpa’s reaction let me know the message didn’t get across.

“Alex, if you gotta take a shit make sure you light a match.”

Saturday

My head is spinning. I’m sitting on the swing staring into the distance contemplating making a run for it. In between sips of a potent Colombian blend I try to process the events of the previous evening. Dinner was fantastic as Madea made the same foods that always make me wonder how Grandpa lived this long. Pork chops that were seasoned in the sink and then rolled through a bowl of flour before being deep fried, mac and cheese that had at least five layers, and my personal favorite, banana pudding with thick chunks of vanilla wafers layered throughout the bowl. Of course Uncle Ed and Auntie Cathy brought out the special reserve Hennessey. Aaron and I almost came to blows as he continually insulted Karen with racist remarks. I hear the screen door open and Madea comes out wearing her long bed gown with bunny slippers.

“Last night was a hoot wasn’t it?” she asks plopping down next to me.

“Oh it was a blast. Every guy dreams of having his aunt ask his girlfriend what it’s like to have jungle fever.”

“She means well, she just ain’t seen you in a while. I’m really glad you came home, your Grandpa was so happy,” she says while rubbing my head.

“I don’t think you understand the concept of happy Madea.”

“That man loves you, now, he might not always show it, but he would be the first person on a plane if you needed

help.”

“I guess.”

“Aaron misses you too.”

“Just how much did you drink Madea?”

“You look down on him because his goals and ambitions aren’t what you want them to be, but he has dreams just like you did. He just doesn’t have a way out.”

“Madea I— “

“You changed. Somewhere along the way he became the enemy in your war against this place. This is your family, whether you like it or not, this is who we are.”

“Do you know why I stayed away? I needed time to forgive our parents. This town is just a reminder of the bad and I needed to process the good.”

“Your parents were good people.”

“Good people don’t overdose and leave their children in the world alone.”

“Is that what you think? They had their demons but you two were their world. Their demons killed them but don’t think for a second they didn’t fight. That’s why they sent y’all here. They wanted what was best for you guys. Always remember that.”

I prepare a snarky retort but then I notice Madea casually pull out a joint.

“Madea what is that?”

“You know damn well what this is,” she says as she sparks her lighter and takes a puff.

“Why are you doing this, we got the family coming to-day for the reunion—”

“Alex there is no family reunion....and the weed helps with the cancer.”

In history class you always hear folks talk about remembering where they were when they heard of certain events. They would describe the gut punch feeling that I couldn’t relate to, or how time stops as they hoped and

prayed they'd misheard what was spoken. It's as shitty as advertised.

"You have cancer? Why didn't you tell me Madea?"

"And what would you have done, rushed down here to comfort your dying Grandma?"

"Yes."

"You would have come out of guilt, if you came at all."

"That's not true."

"Alex, since you turned 18 and left for Harvard your relationship with us has been a combination of phone calls and Hallmark cards. You don't know it yet but you're about to have big changes in your life where it's not about you anymore. It's time for you to grow up. The same ambition that made you successful professionally and academically has derailed you personally."

Now had this been my grandfather saying this or even my brother I would be able to withstand it. Partly because I'm used to it. But this was Madea unloading with both barrels. She passes me the joint and I take a long drag. All the emotion comes pouring out of me as the gravity of what was happening and the regret of the last six years combine with the potent strain of marijuana to leave me crying like a scared child.

"How much time?"

"They give me a year, possibly two because of my feistiness. Either way the end is near."

This leaves me sobbing uncontrollably as Madea rubs my back.

"It's okay to cry but pass the joint first."

We laugh for awhile at her comment and for a second I am comforted. Her sense of humor about everything let me know that she was at peace and therefore, I should be as well.

"I'm so sorry Madea. I should've come around more. Please forgive me."

“Ill always forgive you but you have to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t abandon your grandfather. The man worked on his hands and knees to provide for you. He is gonna need you. Build that relationship with him. It’s gonna be hard, but he will come around.”

We sat in silence for awhile gazing at the yard like we did when I was younger. Madea rocked back and forth, a grin on her face and her eyes closed humming some gospel hymn.

“Well, Karen will be up soon I should—“

“Let that girl sleep boy, she aint worried bout you right now. She’s a good woman, lord knows her family could’ve ruined her.”

I look up in shock and notice Madea has a sly smile on her face.

“You knew?”

“Alex you always thought you were the slickest, whether it was sneaking girls in the house or stashing porno in your grandfathers vinyl collection. But I always know when you’re hiding something.”

“Madea— “

“Karen is a keeper. She sees the good in you when you don’t see it in yourself. You had it in your head that we wouldn’t accept her because of her race. But she was curious and messaged me introducing herself. We became pretty close, in fact she was the first person I told about my diagnosis.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would’ve come down.”

“You would’ve came eventually but initially you would’ve retreated and your relationship with Karen would’ve suffered because of your insistence at fighting battles alone. I told you now to give you time to make things right.”

“Just how am I supposed to do that?”

“I don't know I'm just a country girl, I didn't go to an Ivy League school,” she says with a laugh.

I get up and start walking the house when I stick my head out the door.

“Thanks Madea.”

“For what?”

“For bringing me home.”

The vomit is spilling out furiously into the bowl when Alex walks into the bathroom. The coolness of the porcelain sends shivers through my body as I hold on for dear life.

“You didn't even drink last night, how much of a lightweight are you?” he asks while laughing. I look up and shoot him a middle finger as he grabs a towel.

“It must have been something I ate. No big deal.”

“Your stomach has been giving you issues lately, everything alright?”

“Yeah, just the change in climate for California to Tennessee.”

“Well get used to it. I have a feeling we're gonna be coming back here often.”

“Are we now?”

“Yeah, this is home.”

“You weren't in bed when I woke up. Everything good?”

“I was talking to Madea. She told me everything.”

“Alex, I'm sorry I didn't—”

“You don't have to apologize. Everything I knew about you was confirmed. Anybody that would willingly jump into this crazy ass family on my behalf is special.”

Alex lifts me up onto the toilet and gets down on one knee.

“You've helped me confront my greatest fear. You saw

what was broken and mended it. I love you Karen and I need you now and forever.”

I can honestly say I love this man more right now than I ever have. He'd finally came home and found what he was looking for all along.

“Will you marry me?” he says pulling a box out of his pajama pants.

“Of course I'll marry you...Emmitt,” I reply as a grin breaks over his face.

He slips the ring on my finger and puts his head on my chest.

“Madea made me promise to make things right.”

“How you gonna do that?”

“Not a fucking clue.”

I get up and rinse my mouth out before walking toward the room.

“Well you can figure it out later. For now come join me in the bed. I've got jungle fever.”

“You really wanna do this right now with everyone here?”

“Yeah, lets just say I had an interesting conversation with Kathy.”

He smiles like an idiot and leads me to the bed.

I find my Grandfather in his garage tinkering around like he always does. He'd converted an old shack on the property to a personal space for himself. Whenever we had to talk like men he would bring me down here. I remember when he tried to teach me to put a condom on before my freshman year.

“Boy you better learn this shit. At this rate you gonna put the abortion doctor's grandkids through college,” he said as I threw another broken condom on the floor.

Often times when I was a kid he would spend his Sun-

days in here. Grandpa would light up a cigar sit in his old recliner listening to his Motown records or watching the Titans game. On this day he is organizing his vinyl. I watch him for a few minutes as he meticulously removes each one from its crate to inspect for dust. The walls have been repainted since the last time I was here. The autographed Eddie George jersey still sits in the frame on the wall with all the posters from concerts he'd attended in his youth. He's the lifer in the 300 section of Titans stadium saying he was "through with this shit" after an agonizing loss knowing damn well he'd be cheering just as hard the next Sunday. The fan who would boo a player when he made a bonehead play but would say he knew he had it in him after the player scored a winning touchdown.

"Hey old man, how about a game of bones?"

He turns and stares at me over his glasses before pulling out a table and two folding chairs.

"Rack em up," he says taking a seat.

After shuffling the dominoes and choosing our hands we settle in for the game.

"Big six to the board," he yells as he slams down the double six.

I study my hand while contemplating my move. I've never beaten him and he has an uncanny ability to think of what I will do before I even know it.

"Go head and drop that six three and take that fifteen," he says as he writes down the score. Some shit never changes.

"Grandpa I'm sorry I never—"

"You know what's funny about becoming a man? Gimme a nickel," he says putting down another domino forcing me to pull from the pile.

"What's that?"

"The ability to learn and grow. You can leave and figure shit out on your own in the real world. But you always

come back home.”

He puts another domino down and continues on.

“Madea is not a man so what you did was hurtful to her because she didn’t understand. But I always knew you’d come home.”

“I didn’t think you wanted me home.”

“I would’ve never raised you if I didn’t want you here.”

“When I was a kid you would be so distant at times.”

“The world is a cold place son. Part of my job was preparing you for that. Now, maybe I wasn’t the best at it, but don’t think for a second I don’t love you. Go ahead and throw down that big five you been holding.”

My hand shakes as I put the domino down.

“Twenty five,” he says putting his own domino down after mine. “When your parents died I knew you would grow up confused and I didn’t know how to help because I was making sense of it myself.”

My lip is trembling as I survey my hand and the board. I was seeing a side of him I had never seen before. I realized that the validation I had spent the last six years looking for was back home in Memphis the whole time. I put another domino on the table as I fought valiantly to hold back the tears.

“You moved away, got yourself a degree and a woman that loves you. You became the man I knew you had the potential to be and I’m proud of you son. You’ve come a long way...but you’re still shit at playing bones,” he says slamming down his last domino and flipping through my hand to count his points.

I began shuffling the dominoes as Grandpa chuckled and wrote the points on the board.

Sunday

I sit with Grandpa watching the Titans preseason game when Aaron gets home from work. It doesn’t take long for

the fireworks to begin.

“Your brother got engaged yesterday,” Grandpa says.

“I give it 10 years before Alex leaves for some bullshit reason.”

I jump out of my chair as Grandpa gets up and comes between us. He looks exasperated as the Titans just threw a pick six and his two dipshit grandsons decide that midway through the second quarter was the perfect time to portray the roles of Cain and Abel.

“I’m not in the mood for this shit today. My wife is dying, my team is losing, and goddamnit I just want some peace.”

I lock eyes with my brother and we both understood that whatever issues we had were going to get resolved whether we liked it or not.

“Now y’all got two choices. Either you leave and work this shit out like men or I put my foot in your ass and then you go work it out like men. Either way the bullshit stops today.”

He walked over to the key rack next to the door and grabbed a set of keys that looked vaguely familiar and tossed them to me.

“Take the Cadillac. Go work the shit out and pick up two cans of peaches so Madea can make the cobbler tonight. I don’t wanna see either of you until the game is over.”

We shuffle out to the garage and get into the Cadillac. I can’t believe he still has this car. It defies logic. It doesn’t go in reverse, the windshield wipers never work, and the windows haven’t rolled up since I was in Kindergarten. That said, there are so many memories in this car. I went on my first date in this car. I was embarrassed because of how it looked but Grandpa was never one for shame.

“If she doesn’t like the ride, she can fucking walk,” he said. Judging by how the night ended she liked the car

quite a bit.

Aaron reached out the window to wipe off some of the dust as we rolled down the driveway.

“Left or right?” I ask when we get to the dead end at the main road.

“Grandpa wanted peaches, make a left and we can hit the county store on the way back.”

“I don’t hate Karen, really I don’t, its just that it seems to be the only thing that hurts you.”

Well this little impromptu road trip is starting out with a bang.

“Why do you want to hurt me?”

“Because it shows me that you can still feel. The last six years I often wondered if you had feelings.”

“Be serious right now”

“I am serious, you missed my graduation, never invited me to yours...you cut off all contact aside from the occasional phone call, and then you finally come home not because you want to but because your girlfriend went behind your back and started the process.”

“Look, I was really confused and I didn’t know where home was.”

“Where do you call home now?”

“Wherever my heart is and I can have peace of mind. Life can seem nomadic because I don’t know if I’m embracing it or running from it. I can go anywhere, but I don’t know where I want to be.”

“Why did you run?”

“Because I was searching, but I didn’t know for what. I couldn’t see what I was looking for. I just, like, reached out and hoped I grab something. But I didn’t know what it would be because I didn’t know what I was searching for.”

“I don’t get you sometimes, but who am I to judge, I

work at fucking McDonalds.”

“Madea says you have big goals.”

“Yeah I wanna get a degree and go to grad school abroad.”

“So what is your plan?”

“I’m trying to save up enough to move away. Part of my anger with you was that you got out and left me to deal with the sadness of this place. It’s been weird since they told Madea she was gonna die.”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have left you like that. I’ve realized this weekend that I got a lot of things wrong. I’m sorry Aaron, I was no better than our parents.”

“Its cool, believe it or not, seeing our parents struggle and not have the time to figure shit out is a big reason we can have this conversation.”

We pull up to the county store just as dusk begins. Dusk in the South is a gift from above. As the sun goes into the horizon it turns orange as the calmness of Southern folk getting ready for another week populates the streets. Last minute groceries are purchased and children run around eating ice cream one last time before heading back to another week of school.

Aaron hops out of the car and runs in to grab the goods and I’m left there watching the sun slowly fade. In this moment I make peace with my parents. My long standing issues with Memphis disappear with the sun.

Monday

As I load the last bag into the car, Madea and Aaron come to see us off. Grandpa has spilled enough emotions for the weekend and said goodbye this morning before going off to tend to his garden. I quickly pull Aaron off to the side before he reaches the car and hand him an envelope.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a number of things, for me it’s a second chance

with the brother I left behind, for you it's two weeks to leave your job, set your affairs in order and come chase your dreams."

We wrap in a long embrace as Madea and Karen look on. He gives Karen a hug and apologizes for his childish behavior and heads back in the house. I finally turn to face Madea and she's beaming.

"Looks like that Harvard education paid off after all."

"Yeah, I did alright. I'm gonna miss you, I'll fly back often."

"Well the first one I'll fly out to you for. I'm not missing the birth of my first great grand baby."

I turn to Karen with my jaw dropped and her smile helps me register what I'd just heard. The throwing up made sense now. She'd confided in my grandmother like so many others. I turn to Madea.

"Big changes are coming."

"Huge ones."

I get into the car and watch Madea slowly fade away as we head down the driveway. She turns and heads back in the house as I make the left onto the county road.

Mary Kratzer

Here Lies Rationality

They will weep when they whisper they knew you.
Worrying about their black slacks
as they kneel in your honor.

Delicately devastated by your deviant demise,
Selfishly blaming you for departing so soon.

Listening but not understanding,
as they plan their future week.
Cloaked by an ignorant certainty.

I will not speak on your behalf.
Unbalanced moments are not meant to be heard.

Hold your breath
as they lower you.
The candle flame will only thief beneath the dirt.

I will come back for you at nightfall,
And we will fleas though you still exist.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jeff S. Aho is a senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo. He is on the verge of attaining a Bachelor of Science Degree in Psychology, while also seeking a minor in Creative Writing. Jeff is a nontraditional student, coming back to school to further his education after receiving his first degree, an AAS Degree in Welding, from Pueblo Community College in 1992.

Nicholas Androes is a student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Ashlee Area is currently a freshman at CSU-Pueblo. Her major is undecided, but she hopes to get into radiology. Her poem “Anxiety” was inspired by all of the little things that give her anxiety that people usually do not have problems dealing with. She hopes that her poem can be relatable in some aspects to others that struggle with being shy.

Miss Julia Barela attends CSU-Pueblo as a Concurrent Enrollment student. She is currently a junior at Centennial High School and very involved in her school activities. Her major is currently undecided but she has an avid passion for theater, writing, and music. She hopes to live a happy life doing what she loves, whatever that may be. Her poems, “Nature’s Canvas” and “Unseen,” were inspired by scenes of art and nature she has experienced throughout her life.

Sandy Brack is a Colorado native and is currently in her junior year at CSU-P. She has worked as a veterinary technician for seven years in both traditional practice and emergency settings. She earned a license in massage therapy in 2008 and was honored as Salutatorian of her class. Having a love for writing since she was a child, Sandy is now an English major with an emphasis on Creative Writing. She loves to read from many different genres, with some of her favorites including classic literature, modern fiction, historical nonfiction, philosophy and science.

Nancy Brown is an English Major and Degree Plus student at CSU-Pueblo. Her poems were inspired by travel, nature and everyday life.

Ashlyn Burch is an English Major with an emphasis in Creative Writing, she is a senior at CSU-Pueblo and graduates in May 2017. Once she graduates she plans to pursue a Master's Degree and become a Creative Writing Professor.

Destiny Campa Meza is a senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo who will graduate in May with Summa Cum Laude honors and a degree in English. Destiny is the president of the CSU-Pueblo English Club and the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society, she also works as a student employee for the CHASS Dean's office, Department of Social Work, and First Year Composition Program. In her spare time, Destiny completes two communications internships and enjoys watching Netflix, traveling with her husband, and cuddling with her dog, Casper.

Matthew Coats is a sophomore at CSU-P majoring in English with a minor in Education. He aspires to teach high school.

Daniel Conroy is currently a research fellow with CSU-Pueblo and a junior Chemistry/Biology major. Much of his poetry derives from pursuing the combination of knowledge with the intangible human emotion, generally in conceits of variable forms. These works (and many others) were inspired by lengthy evening strolls the author favors and the pursuit of understanding complex amalgams of feeling.

Patricia Earl is an English Major with a minor in Women's Studies at CSU-Pueblo. She hopes to one day smash the racist-capitalist patriarchy while wielding a lightsaber and riding in a chariot pulled by her puppers, Maggie and Padmé. Until that day, her poetry is inspired by alternative facts, like microwave cameras.

Danielle Farmer lives in Pueblo West, CO with her fiancée and kids. She's a nontraditional student, earning her BA in English with a Creative Writing emphasis at Colorado State University-Pueblo. She is a member of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society, and is the editorial assistant for *Pilgrimage*. After graduating she plans to be an editor. Her poems were inspired by her own chaotic, beautiful life. In "My Life" she was given random words like, poptart and asked to write a poem around them.

Katherine Garcia is an English Major, member of the English Club, and a senior at CSU-Pueblo. Her poetry piece, “The Annex Liberation,” was inspired by the life of Anne Frank and her family within the Secret Annex during World War II, and the eventual discovery of their hiding place. The piece is written as an imagined final entry in “Kitty,” the now famous diary of Anne, upon the family’s arrest.

Alison Gervais is unbelievably excited to be graduating this May with a degree in English with a Creative Writing emphasis. You won’t be finding her in graduate school anytime soon.

Madison Gill is a senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo, graduating with a BA in English. Writing is a passion of hers that she intends to cultivate into a professional career. “Dreams of Walden” is a reflection of the author’s personal conflict with societal expectation versus innate desire. “I Write For You” is a tribute specifically to the women writers who preceded the author. This poem expresses a personal responsibility of the author to continue this lineage of women, and suggests an interconnectedness among them that allows for the silencing of these women in the past to be reprieved by the women speaking out today.

Jessica Hair is a junior at Colorado State University-Pueblo and is an English major with a minor in psychology; she plans on pursuing a career as both a writer and editor. Jessica is a black belt at Bendell Karate and when she is not teaching children, is writing, painting, or drawing. “Swing” and “Vessel” both explore mental illnesses in similar ways; “Swing” being nonfiction and focusing on depression, and “Vessel” being creative non-fiction, based off of obsessive compulsive disorder.

Mark Hernandez is a full time student at Colorado State University – Pueblo and also manages his family’s restaurant in Colorado Springs. He’s been studying Creative Writing seriously for three years and plans to transfer to graduate school for the Fall 2018 semester to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing with the desire to become a professor. His favorite writers are T.S. Eliot, Billy Collins, Virginia Woolf, and Stephen King.

Victoria Jimenez, a Mass Communications Major, is a sophomore at Colorado State University-Pueblo. Victoria enjoys listening to music, writing stories, and learning about the history of other humans. Her pieces “Sunspots” and “Love, Lust, Lost” were inspired by many of the people she met before attending college.

Mary Kratzer is an English Major with emphasis in Creative Writing. She is a sophomore this year and a member of the English Club. She hopes to become an editor and/or writer. She's passionate about pottery, poetry, and procrastinating. "Rusted Diesel" is a playful chain of thought that she attributes to growing up in the county. Her poem "Here Lies Rationality" was inspired by the surreal experiences at funerals and the correlation between an ominous loss and grieving the death of someone who is still alive.

Christiana Lieberman is a freshman at CSU-Pueblo and she is double majoring in Creative Writing and Art History. She loves to write flash fiction the most, but does not limit her writing. She hopes to either write for an art journal or work in an art museum when she graduates college.

Audria J. Linkowski is an upcoming junior who is currently pursuing her Biology Major. Passionate about the art of writing, her poem "Waves" was inspired by *The Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh. She wrote this piece to reinforce the beauty portrayed in the uniquely distorted perspectives of life and the unknown.

Ashley Lowe is an English major minoring in education and Spanish. While she plans to continue writing throughout her life and career, her primary goal upon graduation is to teach ESL in Spanish-speaking countries and to eventually become a secondary-level English educator in the U.S. Reading and writing have always helped Ashley to express and to understand herself and the world around her, and her infatuation with words is shown in her poem, "The White Sheet."

Alexis Martinez is a student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Antoria Mason is a junior Social Work major and Women's Studies minor at CSU-Pueblo. Her poem, "For My Brothers and Sisters," was inspired by the media, the issues of police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Max Mendieta is a student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Alexis Mondragón is a Business Management Major, a member of the College Assistance Migrant Program, and a Sophomore at CSU-Pueblo. Her story "Big Little Sister" was inspired by her older sister Danielle Cornelia-Cruz Apodaca and the fun times they and together.

Nadia Montano is a sociology major and is interning at State Farm. She will be a graduate of the 2017 class and would like to have a career in HR management. Her poem "The Beauty of Life" was inspired by her love for nature.

Wesley Parker is a Mass Communications Major, Creative Writing Minor, and a Senior at CSU-Pueblo. His submission, "Prodigal Son," was inspired by his interracial marriage and the crazy family members he loves dearly. He will graduate in May 2017 and hopes to use what he has learned at CSU to write a novel.

Emma Paulson is a student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Emily Peachee is a student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Alec Portillos is a graduating English major at Colorado State University-Pueblo with a minor in Communications and Rhetoric. His poem, “A Weary Dream Pantoum,” was inspired by a writing assignment and a nightmare the night before the assignment was due.

Kerstin Rilling is a junior at Colorado State University-Pueblo majoring in Psychology with a minor in English. Her poem entitled “Grief” is based on the recent passing of her step-father.

Raven Romero is a Political Science Major, a Kane Scholar, and a junior at CSU-Pueblo. Her poem “The Yearning Light of the Night,” was inspired by the beauty of the moon.

Tyler Shown is a student at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Eliana Taylor is a Political Science major, president of the Speech and Debate team, and is a senior at CSU- Pueblo. Current social events inspired her piece, “Her Story,” and Eliana continues to write about current events in hope of creating change.

Darek Thomas is a Political Science/Creative Writing major at CSU-Pueblo. He is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, and the National Society of Leadership and Success. His poem “I Hope for Death” was inspired by Billy Collins’ poem, “My Number.”

Joey Viera is an English Major and senior at CSU-Pueblo. His poems were inspired by personal experience with mental illness, addiction, and unhealthy relationships.

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.

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

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