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Apogee



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CONTENTS

Pam Haynes	"I Wish Billie Holiday Wasn't Dead"	5
Sarah McArthur	"Engulfed by Love"	6
Alexandra Bent	"Party Monster"	8
Katherine Flynt	"A Mother's Purpose"	9
Nikki Eak	"Ode to Aglets"	11
Nikki Eak	"I See a White Wall"	12
Dalton Robinson	"Adeona"	14
Elizabeth Aaron Pugh	"Murphy's Fun"	15
Scarlett Hester	"Saltwater and Broken Bones"	17
Miah Saunders	"A Ballad for Proserpina"	18
Elizabeth Buxton	"Ginevra"	20
Heather Champion	"Summer Hunger"	21
Lindsey Collier	"Eating Secrets"	22
Katherine Flynt	"The Florist"	23
Kelsey Hamilton	"Just Like Papa"	24
Kris Holloway	"Sister"	25
Lisa Okonji	"In the End"	26
Raffi Umanzor	"Pictures"	27
Tabatha Davis	"Freckles and Ponies"	28
Miah Saunders	"Demeter"	30
Taylor Dickinson	"Gilded"	32
Reid Drake	"Deer"	34
Carter Fourqorean	"Cogito Ergo Sum"	36
Jordan Iddings	"The Dandelion"	38
Alexa Uberseder	"Assumptions"	40
Sara Watkins	"Sunflowers"	42
Kevin Pyon	"Mr. Billings"	43
Hattie Presnell	"To Cope"	48
Jessica Smith	"And the Angel Falls"	49
Erika Farr	"Highway Exhausts and Late Night Thoughts"	50
Kimberly Burress	"A Little Longer"	51
Anthony Siciliano	"The Willow and the River"	53

Jessica Smith	"Trees"	59
Dawn Francisco	"Hope"	63
Michael Gaspeny	"Clearing the Trail"	64
Alice E. Sink	"Lighting of the Great Tree: November 1952"	65
Adrianne Lackey	"Coffee and Quilts"	70
Marion Hodge	"Students Applying Theory"	77
Andrew Realon	"Studying Abroad"	78
Michael Gaspeny	"Elementary School"	80
Kevin Pyon	"At the Bridge"	81
Maria-Cruz Rodríguez	"The Night's Warrior"	83

Contributors		85
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"I Wish Billie Holiday Wasn't Dead"

FIRST PLACE

High Point University Poetry

Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

I wish Billie Holiday wasn't dead.
I could talk to her 'bout blue bayous.
Oh, how New Orleans floats 'round in my head.

Flower in her hair with lips painted red,
She'd say she missed the Crescent City too.
I wish Billie Holiday wasn't dead.

I'd ask Lady Day how she led
Her acting days down South, and if she knew
Oh, how New Orleans floats 'round in my head?

She'd laugh, "Oh yes, honey, I understand!
"I can hear them ole Creole tunes."
I wish Billie Holiday wasn't dead.

I imagine on hot days Billie fled
To swim in still streams, far from filming crews.
Oh, how New Orleans floats 'round in my head.

I want to tell her how her voice has fed
My hunger for New Orleans through and through.
I wish Billie Holiday wasn't dead.
Oh, how New Orleans floats 'round in my head.

"Engulfed by Love"
FIRST PLACE
High Point University Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

Feathers encased in a cotton frame, the soft cushion swells out around her resting head. She believes in reincarnation, JFK conspiracy theories, and that love will conquer all. The hotel room reeks of disinfectant and stale cigarette smoke that makes her cough when she breathes in too hard. She listens as the window vibrates in its frame with each explosion. Every few minutes she trembles as her life is threatened by men wearing the same red, white, and blue as she. The phone next to her head comes to life, causing her to shake with fear at the impending news.

"Hello?"

"Ma'am, we are asking all guests to please evacuate their rooms and make your way to the basement level." His thick accent makes it difficult to understand.

She places the phone back on its cradle and slips her fragile body into the tight jeans on the floor, her fiancé's favorite pants on her. She walks to the window as she zips her pants and places both pale hands on the thick glass. In front of her, land is engulfed in a fiery frenzy of flames. She looks up at the greenish sky and watches the tiny red and yellow lights of a helicopter overhead. Phallic metal pieces careen downward in search of more innocent lives. The window shakes as the metal explosives touch down. The deafening sound of fury causes her to stumble backwards with shock. Smoke and fire rise into view from close by. She gets on her knees and attempts to lace her fingers together, but the oversized diamond on her left hand makes it painful.

"Please, help us get through this." She whispers to nobody.

The pain from a potentially deadly bug bite on his left elbow causes him to wince with each turn of the small aircraft. He believes in heaven and hell, vampires, and that Grateful Dead is the most

amazing band. "One more round, fellas." The volume on his headset is turned up too loud, and the raspy voice of his commander irritates him. He rotates his head to his left and watches the fear in his best friend's eyes as he steers the plane above the blazing city.

"Think of it as fireworks for your birthday." The pilot laughs as he realizes he is being watched by his partner.

He looks down at the thin gold band on his finger and fakes a smile. She said there would be a surprise waiting for him when he returned tonight to the broken down palace he now called home. Her homemade cookies would be great, or pictures from the recent ultrasound.

"Thirty degrees north, twenty-three degrees east. You are dropping the last round on an abandoned government building. Make it a good one."

He glances at his partner and watches the smile creep across his face. The plane shakes to the left and he grabs onto his seat for support. Pain shoots up his arm. He is going to tell his commander tonight. Maybe he can get treated before it is too late.

"Press it now!" the pilot yells at him. He attempts to reach forward towards the large yellow button, but his arm struggles to react. He closes his eyes and fights the pain. His ring finger comes in contact with the yellow button. The noise becomes louder. Tiny missiles' hiss as they leave their home.

She ignores the persistent knocking on the door. If she is going to die, she wants it to be here, cross legged on the floor in her future husband's favorite pants, not in the musty hotel basement surrounded by people speaking a language completely foreign to her. She puts her right hand to her belly and watches as the helicopter overhead drops its final round of inferno death.

"Party Monster"
FIRST PLACE
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

Party Monster, rage and candy
Breaking necks but looking dandy
Keeping tabs and selling drugs
Twisting sheets with every thug
Ripping people up to bits
Every target takes a hit
Strolling like a superstar
Rolling in her stolen car
Moving bricks up through her nose
A dirty thing in fancy clothes
Poison mouth, venom drips
Sins tattooed across her hips
The DEA don't know her name
But all the hustlers watch her game
She grins and hands you lethal pills
Never worries who she kills
Shoves you down the rabbit hole
Always plays the villain's role
Every word could be a lie
Giggles when she makes you cry
Sells the kids her evil things
Parent's nightmares are their dreams
The prettiest evil you could find
But no one ever seems to mind
Someone always takes her fall
We wonder how she does it all
The sickest witch you'll ever meet
How does she make it look so sweet?

"A Mother's Purpose"
FIRST PLACE
High School Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

The kitchen was dark, all the appliances slumbering for once. Hard-crusted food held tight to the stovetop, and an oven mitt sat on the counter. It was burnt and red. The elegant hand that brings it to life held a smoldering cigarette. The smoke coming from the cigarette's head was steady and calming. It moved under the light above the kitchen table. There, a woman sat in deep thought, looking at her hands. It was so quiet, until the front door opened and closed.

"It's way past your bedtime."

"I know."

"Well, you said you'd be home before twelve. I remember you telling me before you walked out that door."

"I know what I told you. It wasn't really up to me. Jimmy brought me home."

"Were you safe?"

"If I wasn't safe I wouldn't be standing here talking to you."

"Well, I'm just asking!"

She was still looking at her hands, and the smoke entranced her for a few seconds.

"I know what you boys get into."

It was quiet again and the woman smoked while the boy drank some milk at the table.

"Did you feed your dog?"

"Yes."

"Well, he looks skinny. He's just wasting away."

"He's fine. It's a small dog."

"You can tell me if you forgot to feed him."

"I didn't. I always feed him."

"I knew when we got that dog you would never feed him. You told me you would feed him every day, but I've never seen a piece of food go into that dog's bowl that came from your hand."

The boy slammed his hands on the table.

"My hands always do what they're supposed to do!"

He had spilt his milk, and began to wipe it off the table and floor.

He said, "Your hands are the ones without a purpose. Cooking all day, holding cigarettes when your hand isn't in that mitt! Tell me what you did today."

She was looking at the table. She didn't answer.

The boy said, "You smoked. You baked something, and you smoked."

"I read a book."

"I told you not to go in my room and mess with my books. You ruin them. They get ashes in them."

After some silence, she said, "I just care about you. I just want you to be safe."

The boy left her looking at the table. She turned off the light, and smoked in the dark without the distraction of the red mitt on her hands. It was quiet again.

"Ode to Aglets"
SECOND PLACE
 High Point University Poetry
 Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

The shoelace threads through each eyelet,
 and the hands hurriedly and hastily haul
 the woven strings together and outward.
 Shoes close over the tongue like a wound
 once open, gaping, now secured and healing.
 We think of the laces sometimes as we knot
 or perhaps when they untie as if to trip us
 as we rush on with life unaware of the hero,
 that flimsy clear plastic secured around
 the ends of laces, holding everything together.

To think of an aglet is to think of comfort and ease:
 each fiber held in its place, never straying too far.
 It makes lacing shoes and changing looks a simple task.
 For when intact, we glide through the eyelet tunnel.
 Once broken, cracked under an unknowing sole, we fail.
 The ends fray and hinder the shoelace migration.
 Our threads get stuck in the passageways of shoes and life.
 There is so much that depends upon this delicate plastic
 that holds so many strands together, keeping order, helping,
 yet is easily destroyed and just as easily forgotten.

"I See a White Wall"**SECOND PLACE****High Point University Fiction****Phoenix Literary Festival 2008**

I remember the first time I watched *The Boondock Saints* and witnessed Rocco accidentally splatter the unsuspecting cat onto the white wall. There was a drunken slap of fist against table, the startling gunshot, the explosion of flesh and fur. Instant organic wallpaper.

I remember thinking, "It's a good thing the wall is white."

The notion had been instilled in me at an early age by the maniac who was, at the time, my stepfather. All white walls make for a cheap and simple touchup job. One can of paint will do the trick . . . for the entire house. Thus, we never had a hint of color on any walls, just stark white.

My mother would call it loony-bin white and resented the color, or lack thereof, greatly. She felt trapped by it, enslaved in the blinding emptiness of it all. The thriving madness that each room insisted with its hue.

It was the color of abuse, horror, pain, and madness. It was his color. Only his.

Like the vicious bloodstain on Rocco's apartment wall, my stepfather could easily cover any atrocity, any ill treatment. It was his whitewash fix-all. One can of paint could cure anything. After every few months, after every tangled web of memories composed of screaming, screeching insults, hitting, sobbing, pain, pain, hurt, he would somberly drag out the dirt-caked drop cloths and erase, expunge, obliterate.

We quit. One day just grew tire of the blankness, the blandness of white and all it represented. The police came and took him away from the house until we found a place to stay. Quickly, we fled that stagnant cocoon of despair.

We moved into a cozy two-story, three-bedroom condominium. The first thing my mother did take us to the local Home Depot and unleash us in the paint aisle.

"Pick whatever color you want," she said, "any color."

For their wall, my brothers decided on a bright desert orange with a jalapeno-green accent. My mother chose a vibrant purple for her room. Together, my mother and I picked out a mint green for our new living area. Then it was my turn. All eyes were on me. They were waiting for me to make my decision; perhaps it would be an emerald green, blood red, or an electric blue, colors that hair had recently been dyed.

I could tell that my mother was growing impatient waiting for me to make my decision. Her mouth opened slightly, about to ask once again.

"I want to paint it black," I stated. And I did.

I remember my mother bringing guests to the condo frequently after that, showing off her new colorful home. When they entered my room, her guests would look at my mother in a strange way. "It's simply crazy to allow a child to put this color on the wall," they would state.

I would smile upon overhearing this. For I knew that crazy referred only to the opposite color. I was merely painting the madness black, safeguarding myself.

Perhaps the fact of the matter is that where white would easily cover Rocco's gore-filled mess, black would act as a shield. Black absorbs horror, it protects.

"Adeona"
SECOND PLACE
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

This neighborhood feels old
The grand magnolia in the front yard worn and
Slumped with heavy dark green leaves
The street cracked and filled with yellow grass by the gutter
Indecipherable banter of kids' echoes over the rooftops
From the street
Shrieks, groans, and laughter
The clicking of wooden sticks
Swords, and guns,
Leaves and pebbles
Marking off glorious wars and adventures,
In the tangled hours of summer
That never know time nor schedules

An airplane slowly pierces the sky
Tearing a faded white line into the blue of late afternoon
Dogs are now trading barks
In the distance, sing-song counting,
The language of children speak playing in the cool dusk
Car doors slam and street lights flicker on
Soon the voices are gone
Answering to shouted names
And the soft light of the kitchen window
Doves coo their deep tones in the
Sonata of the dying light
Darkness sighs
Robbed of the young

"Murphy's Fun"
SECOND PLACE
High School Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

I wake to the sunlight pouring into my cold barren room. I twist and pull at the covers, snatching them over my head. All I can think about is going back to sleep. My headache is now a constant reminder of the horrible date last night, and the martinis I needed in order to stop myself from picking up the steak knife and putting myself out of my misery right then and there. Slowly, I free myself from the little coil I have so securely wrapped myself in. Little by little I open my eyes, wincing at the sunlight as if it is poison, trying to seep its way into my body. 6:39. why is it 6:39? I don't wake up at 6:39. I wake up at 6:00. I must have forgotten to set my alarm after coming in so late. Damn alarm clock.

As I step out of the bed, my right foot sinks into a gooey present from the four-legged devil they call a puppy. I wonder where that thing is hiding. My sister had pleaded for me to watch the dog. "It will only be a week! Remember the time I babysat your cockatiel? You owe me." How could I forget, the bird had ended up in the mouth of her Satanist cat. I can't lie; the thought of my beloved cockatiel being replaced by that stupid mutt into the grips of Fluffy the cat, was all too satisfying. Damn dog.

Once in the bathroom, I wash the poop out from between my toes, grab the cold, silver handle on the shower door, and reach my hand to the knob that would usually provide warm and soothing water. Yet, today I don't have time for such a luxury. Great, a cold shower. The water hits my neck, then twists and turns down my back. Little blonde hairs stand up all over my body. I spot a green bottle in the shower caddy. Hurriedly, I grab the bottle and squeeze the liquid into my hand. Why aren't there suds? Slowly I realize the culprit. Conditioner. Today would be the morning I accidentally switch the conditioner and shampoo.

Damn conditioner.

After a two-minute shower I step out onto the raw tile. There's not enough time to worry about the rat's nest atop my head. I wrap a mascara-stained towel around my limp body. Every step to the kitchen seems to use a little more energy than the last. At least I will soon be drinking a warm cup of coffee. Yes, caffeine is exactly what I need. As I open the cupboard I instantly think back to my to-do list from the day before. Buy coffee. You have to be kidding me. Damn coffee.

Out of the corner of my eye I see the opened beer can on the kitchen table, from the night before. That shouldn't be there. The obsessive-compulsive villain inside of me couldn't help but be frazzled. There was clearly a mess on the kitchen table. Damn mess.

Forget it, I'm thirsty. I gulp down the rest of the Heineken and walk back to my room. As the sour beer slides down my the back of my throat, I remember the report that was due on my boss's desk by this morning. Not a single word had been written. Not a one. How could I have forgotten? This was not good. Not good at all. Damn report.

Actually, you know what? That's it. I give up. I haven't even been up for an hour, and already doom lurks everywhere I go. I'm finally going to cash in all the vacation days I've saved up. Yep, today was going to be a sick day. I reach for the phone and eagerly dial the number of the office. "Hey, Janet. It's me. Um, I don't think I'm going to be able to make it in today." I muster up the best sick hack and let it out into the receiver. "Oh, so it's no problem? Great. Thank you, Janet."

Finally I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I slowly walk back into my bedroom and fall into the eternal bliss of my warm bed. I pull my arm underneath one side of the pillow and stretch out my legs. Suddenly I feel a gooey sensation seize my foot. The smell confirms my suspicion. I let out a pathetic sigh. Damn dog.

"Saltwater and Broken Bones"
HONORABLE MENTION
High Point University
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

I was peacefully sitting in my own little bubble,
Basking in the fact that I was away,
Enjoying and relaxing. Sunshine and waves.
Not worrying. Not caring. Not thinking.

Lolling in the smell of sunscreen.
Indulging in pruned fingers and bronzed skin.
Amusing myself with sand-covered feet.
My brain swimming with saltwater and sea creatures.

I was delving into my dreams,
Full of tan lines and the smell of coconut.
The crashing of the ocean rushed through my mind.
The whooshing and swooshing roaring and receding.

Slowly my dream started to crack.
A hairline fracture in the bone of my world.
The light of the phone flashed—
And the fracture became a jagged break.

A voice cracking and breaking on the other side,
—s-s-s-stuttering. Sobbing. Sorrowing.
A crash. A tree. A death.
Sobbing subsiding to simple sniffs.

I was left to try to mend the break.
Feeble bits of plaster to fix jagged, bloody bone.
Saltwater from my dreams stung deep wounds,
Attempting to cleanse and repair.

All I wanted was to sit peacefully in my own little bubble.

"A Ballad for Proserpina"
HONORABLE MENTION
High Point University Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

It was at the bidding of one beautiful and fair
That love flew upon his wings
Letting free his arrow
To strike the devil's cold black heart

With warm lust running through his veins,
Where blood once ran cold,
He followed the meadows and the streams
His beloved always beyond his shadow's reach

It was on day like every other
Innocent Proserpina, with her crown wreathed in petals of gold
Danced and laughed
In a bower where sweetness blossomed beneath her gaze

There she caught the enraptured Dark King's eye
And stroked his ardor anew
With her laughter ringing gaily in his ear
He conspired to cage her as his bride

With painted iris, narcissus and hyacinth he set his trap
Her curiosity he knew would bring the spirited angel into his grasp
And indeed when she saw laid out before her a canvas of iridescent loveliness
She couldn't resist the temptation to pluck them, bringing the soft, sweet-smelling petals to her lips

Poor innocent Proserpina, if only she knew
How the Lord of Many Names would split the earth beneath her feet

And part it did, in a great gaping mouth to emptiness below
The black soil ripping away her balance, throwing her into the
arms of the man driven mad with lust

O sweet joy, how it felt to have his beloved
Wrapped securely in his dark embrace
And her heart pounding rapidly against his breast
Like the flutter of butterfly wings pulsing in the spider's grasp

With her screams echoing in his ears like a glorious, triumphant
melody
He called his Night Mares by name and urged them make haste
to his palace below
He'd lay the jewels of the world at her feet, grant her a cold
throne of marble, a lifetime of forever at his side
Where she would lament in the shadows for the mother she was
forced to leave behind

Her husband's kiss and cursed seed at her lips, forever mournful
was the devil's bride.

Elizabeth
Buxton

"Ginevra"

HONORABLE MENTION

High School Poetry

Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

Soiled snow upon the face
Daunts the stone in her eyes
No window to the severed emptiness of her soul

A tomblike curl of the insipid lip
No hint to slender compassion

The muddy waters that cloud her dull existence
Float her frigid

A ghost through the thorns.

"Summer Hunger"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

The air was still
So still that time itself seemed to lose itself.
A thick haze of humidity arose around our motionless bodies.
Sweat slid down my face and temporarily ended the drought in the
desert called My Lips.
The sun beat down on us like we were on a tin roof, and our
shadows became hidden by the reflected heat.
The smell from our hot surroundings was unbearable.
It burned our nostrils, and tickled our throats.
We wanted an escape, but we found none.
It seemed the world was motionless, and thick with heat.
So, I think . . .
I could eat the air.

"Eating Secrets"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

I've been eating secrets—
They come to me from all over,
Different flavors every day.

My best friend told me she stole from the mall once.
That one didn't taste too good,
Bitter, with a sprinkle of disgust.
Once worry took over, I spit it out,
It tasted too foul. I had to tell.

Most of the time they settle deep in my stomach.
The sweet ones are best,
Like finding out your crush likes you,
Or where your mom hid the chocolate.
I could eat those all day.

Some secrets are easier to digest than others.
Sweet: sneaking out at night to meet a boy.
Sour: cheating on a test.
Yummy: using mom's extra change to buy a treat.
Rotten: keeping a friend from feeling misery.

No matter my age,
I will forever eat secrets.

"The Florist"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

The long stems ooze when they are cut.
Razor heads sink into the green stalks.
They bend over slowly,
and spring forward suddenly
when they acquiesce to my scissors.

The cool liquid on my fingertips
calms the pricks of pain from the thorns
of those pugnacious stems—
perhaps I should have worn a thimble for this task.

Everyday, flabbergasted
that those long, spiteful stems
grow underneath mammoth heads
of sweet petals,
soft on the hands.

I feel through layers like a light feathery coat
to run my palms through.
Cupping the buds in my hands like infant ducklings—
those rambunctious, probing toddlers.
But on top of the long stems
the mammoth heads sit
motionless.

"Just Like Papa"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

Much can be said
of the little boy with tattered clothes
and mud-smeared face.
He wears his papa's too-big shirts
and tears them where they pass
his calloused toes.
He wears them with pride,
proud to wear a great man's
hard worn shirts.
Days of work and play
cake his skinny body—
memories forever rubbed into his skin.
He washes up each time
the Angels come,
glad to look clean just for them.
As they pass, he smiles.
His bottom tooth is coming in,
firm and strong,
and he will be a man
who wears his own shirts
and comes home with a mud-smeared face.

Just like Papa.

"Sister"

HONORABLE MENTION

High School Poetry

Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

I hold in my hand a picture
 This girl has a plastered smile on her face
 Her makeup is of a clown
 Deep-sea blue dress
 Diamond embedded
 Deep red car whisking her away
 To an outrageous fate, or as they say now, "Prom"
 Ready to hurry and grow up
 I can still hear the clacking of her heels
 Our old anonymous house stares at her
 Out on our rubble driveway
 It looks as though you dropped a gigantic rock
 Which crumbled in millions of tiny pieces
 Her nails are daggers
 Slicing anyone in her way, and yet careful of her French manicure
 You can see a faint shadow in the driver's seat
 Dark and cold
 This is the last time I saw her smile
 Other than the birth of her new baby
 This isn't the sister I know, or is it?
 Her eyes are heavy and piercing
 But through the cold stare
 She is Harp's song
 My mom snaps this moment
 I haven't seen that girl after that night
 She rode off and came back saying '05
 She was so ready to get out of high school
 To grow up and forget about everyone that was ever nice to her
 And I was "Mrs. Grownie"?
 Nah, just look at the picture and tell me
 Who Mrs. Grownie really is.
 I was supposed to be her little sister she was supposed to look after,
 But now that Prom has caught her
 I think I lost my role model, and better yet my best friend
 So this is how it all began. . . .

"In the End"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

In the end, the worst thing about the storm was
 Losing the light
 The tree in the back yard fell over in the pool
 We were sitting in the dark
 For hours
 We called Duke Energy telling them our lights were out
 They telling me my light
 Ain't gonna be on till tomorrow
 I told them try sitting in the dark with a crying baby
 I told that man if he don't turn
 My light on in the next three minutes
 I was going to find him and let him have this crying baby.

"Pictures"

HONORABLE MENTION

High School Poetry

Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

Snap, you're there.
Flash, the picture is taken.
You come out beautiful.
A top model in the making.
Yet, pictures lie.
They don't tell your story.
They flash. No x-ray is taken.
Pictures.

The present is easy.
The past is heavy.
We see happy.
Your heart is in pain.
Looks can be deceiving.
You have so much to say.
Your words are left in the bathroom.
Picture.

Snap, you're there.
You fall to the floor.
Not part of the shoot.
Not a sound is made.
Just sixty pounds left on the floor.
No mind left.
Just a feeding tube.
Flash, you're gone.

"Freckles and Ponies"
HONORABLE MENTION
High Point University Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

I'm stuck here with five minutes to go. Five freaking minutes until the bell rings and I can get out of this godforsaken classroom. I'm sick of the dim setting, sick of the lighting, sick of Jon the slightly overweight kid who chews the end of his pencil. If he would just stop chewing on his pencil maybe I could concentrate. My fingers fumble with my pants chain. Stop doing that, stop doing that—the girl two rows over is staring. Hands clench and unclench. I'm steeling myself for it. So . . . so . . . she's kinda cute—so what? There are a billion freaking girls in this school and you just have to pick the prettiest one to crush on. It was that stupid. Well, not stupid, more like the cute little quirky smile of hers that did it. About a week ago. Can't believe it was just a week ago that she shared her lunch with me.

The class was headed through the cafeteria line . . . we were eating outside. I was stuck with a dollar in my pocket . . . lunch was \$2.35 . . . it used to be \$2. Mom hadn't come home from work till much later than usual. Nurses and the late shift, you know? Maybe you wouldn't. . . not many do. Fumbling with the dollar, fingering it with just the tips of my fingers like I was doing to that chain on the side of my leg. Stop it . . . focus. But I couldn't. She's sitting right under this huge tree. It has to be about fifty. I suppose that's old enough for a tree, way taller than me anyways. And she's just resting by herself underneath its branches staring at me with the most curious grin on her face, the light playing on her freckles. Gah, she has so many of them. Not that that's a bad thing, just different. At least she doesn't have a big nose. That's nice. I snarled, "What are you staring at?" I was such an idiot. I should've left her alone, stupid freckle-face with her sandwich box—light purple with a little horse sticker in one corner. Guess she likes horses. She reaches inside her desk and takes out a pencil box. It's pink with a pony pull on it. Horses again. She's playing with it. Maybe she's bored of Ms. Brenner's droning, too. Maybe she wants to get out. Maybe she wants to twirl around in some of the changing leaves. She's peeling back the plastic lid of the box. My stomach makes noises it shouldn't make when I'm around girls, especially ones with freckles. She didn't say much to me, just "hi," and giggled a little. She didn't laugh, just giggled. I guess

girls don't laugh, maybe all they ever do is giggle. Giggle and dream of ponies. Sheesh.

She broke me off a piece of her sandwich, PB&J, but not just any PB&J—this one oozed a thick, mouth-watering layer of—wait. Is that strawberry jam? She saw my confused expression. "I like strawberries better," she explained simply, then nudged the sandwich into my outstretched—geez, you'd think it had a mind of its own—hand. And I'm left there standing dumbstruck at the sandwich, as a huge glob of jelly trickles down my thumb. I lick it off quickly and she giggles again. I start to bark something at her again, but instead I just take a bite of the sandwich offering. The bell's ringing. She has tucked all the ponies away into her stable of a bookbag. It's purple. Surprised it doesn't have ponies plastered on it, too. I'm up and moving. The classroom's just too claustrophobic for me. I hate being trapped. Hate being around these people, especially—geez, she's at my shoulder. How did she? My fingerless-gloved hand is already on the doorknob. She's grinning again. I just stare at her, like my mouth's still full of peanut butter, glued together . . . can't even mumble a "Thanks," just walk off embarrassed. I try to move, but I look down and her hand has already slipped into mine. My hand closes around hers. I don't know what it's doing. "Hi, I'm Sadie," she says with that freckly grin of hers. I'm frozen, still glued. Her other hand touches my elbow and I'm startled back into myself. "Jeremy," I manage to say. "I know," she answers simple, and breaks out into another giggle, tugging me out the door.

"Demeter"
HONORABLE MENTION
High Point University Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

Demeter was old, the first girl-child born to Rhea, the great mother of the gods, but her memory of the Beautiful One is rich and clear, and she tells the tale to her own child, resting against her breast. As a god she had awareness since the moment she was conceived. And she remembered. In the womb she felt warm, safe and protected. She could hear her mother softly whispering to her, she whispered and she sang. When Rhea placed her hand to her belly she could feel the soft pressure against her side and brushed back, because this was a soft touch, a touch she liked.

When she first opened her eyes to light and gazed at her mother, she knew she was beautiful. She shone with a light all her own, and the sweat sprinkled on her face sparkled on the starlight. Rhea was breathing heavily, her body was still shaking from the pain, but the arms cradling her newborn daughter were steady, and Demeter knew this touch.

She was falling in love with this touch.

Her mother was weeping, and baby Demeter reached up to catch the perfect orbs of salt and pain before they turned to stars. Her mother's hand reached up and wiped them away herself. Demeter saw through small oval eyes her mother's heavenly visage. The woman was weeping golden light through her pores, her ears fell down her nose like small beads of pain and loveliness. The god-child cooed in appreciation at the beautiful sight, though she didn't understand why her mother wept.

Rhea gave another watery smile to her new born and pressed a soft kiss to her golden crown; she whispered sweet words against her soft head and breathed in. The baby goddess couldn't decipher any of the words, but her mother's sweet, soft voice poured over her like cool water and made her feel warm and comfortable.

That beautiful woman with the softest touch brought her child to her chest and urged her to feed. Her milk was empowering, tasting like honey, warmth, and safety. She tasted golden.

Rhea traced one long finger down her daughter's smooth and rosy cheeks, appreciated the novelty of the moment. The mourning mother knew, like the ones before her, this girl-child, her first, was going to be ripped from her arms.

*My darling, remember this moment. Remember the warmth of me.
Remember that I love you and I never meant for this to happen.*

Rhea swallowed against the lump in her throat; the ground was shaking in warning. Her husband was calling for her and the child she had born. The beautiful mother knew that the protection of her glade would be no match for the man whose all-seeing eye reached across the universe—she knew that she couldn't protect her child from him. She knew and she wept.

When Demeter finished, she rested her face against the softness of her mother's chest. She could feel Rhea's strong heartbeat, and it thumped soothingly in the curves of her ear. The baby could feel her mother's tears dropping onto her naked back like rain, but she couldn't have moved from her resting place even if she wanted to, not when the softness of her mother's skin and her belly full of honey-milk was lulling her to sleep.

Safe in the cradle of her mother's arms she didn't feel the shake of the earth with each step the King of the Universe took closer and closer to her mother's private glade. Rhea's arms tightened around her, and Demeter snuggled closer to her chest in gratitude—though she wondered why her mother's heart was beating faster than before.

The first thing she felt was Rhea's scream through the harsh vibrations in her chest before her world tilted and she was jerked from the safety of her mother's arms. The hands around her middle were bone crushing in their brutality. She screamed pitifully at the sudden flair of pain. The baby was lifted high into the air above the monster, and her eyes gazed into the demon's face. His eyes were wide and astoundingly blue, shining like the stars in the sky above, and glowing with a madness that terrified her.

His mouth parted in a wide smirk that almost split his face.

"A girl this time," he remarked, and his voice was hungry and powerful. The monster opened his mouth wide and swallowed her whole and all she heard before the silence enveloped her was her mother wailing her name in despair.

In her prison, she was surrounded by the tepid warmth of small breathing bodies. They smelled just like her mother, as if they too were cradled to the Beautiful One's breast before they were torn away. She hated it in there, in the monster's belly. There were no soft touches or whispered lullabies, and in the void as she was forced to wait, she dreamed of the softness of her mother and the soothing sound of her heartbeat.

"Gilded"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival

The fish lay on the floor, flopping frantically on the hardwood, its gills pumping the poisonous air through its little golden body. The eyes bulged out of its skull, and with each shuddering thrust of its tail the fish went lower and lower, its strength slowly being sucked out by the toxic environment. After only a few minutes, his scales lay still against the cool wood, his gills pumping weakly, and then they stopped.

I waited for a second, scared to touch it. Tentatively, I reached my pudgy little fingers around the tiny body, lifting it into the inch of water remaining in the fish bowl. I watched closely, willing the gills to pump again, wishing it would twitch its tail and glide through the bowl, and perhaps wanting it to maybe leap out of the bowl and fly. The fish didn't move.

It was my sixth birthday, the goldfish was my sister's. I had been trying to teach it tricks. You know, the usual, jumping through hoops, swimming patterns . . . growing wings and leaping into the air like a frog after a fly. Yeah, the usual. I had killed the little fish, and so I learned about death, and I learned about terror.

My sister wasn't known to be particularly dramatic or cruel, but that fish was her life. I don't know how much emotion one can really invest in a fish, but the maximum amount of love was poured into every colored pebble in that glass bowl, and every new plant carefully bought from the pet store. The fish was fed six flakes promptly at six o'clock every night, and the fish bowl was cleaned every six days, like clockwork. The significance of the number six I never figured out apart from the thought that my sister was mildly obsessive-compulsive. She would watch the fish for six minutes while he ate, and would tell it she loved it six times. My sister was crazy.

She was exactly ten years older than I; she was sixteen that day, and the gift she wanted most was a larger fish tank so the little goldfish could have some more room to swim. I, however, had wished for a cat or a dog or some pet other than the stupid boring fish. I didn't get anything I wanted that year. I got a bike.

Anyway, the fish died and I suddenly grasped the meaning of death. It's a hard concept for the six-year-old brain to conceive, and it came to me like a train hitting a worm lying on the track. I was utterly terrified; my body was frozen holding the fish bowl in the middle of the soaked hardwood floor in my sister's room. Did I mention I was never allowed in my sister's room?

The day has been seared in my mind, my sister finding me, the tears streaming down her face, the screaming . . . so much screaming. That night I found my sister in the bathroom covered in blood. Life was hard after that; she was taken to the hospital that night. She survived. Apparently high school was tough, and that little fish was the only thing she felt she could rely on.

I was six then. I turned twenty-six today. My sister hasn't talked to me in twenty years. I'm sending her a golden fish for her birthday.

"Deer"**HONORABLE MENTION****High School Fiction****Phoenix Literary Festival 2008**

It was a chilly evening. I went from door to door. Not selling. Not begging. Trying to go home. I was pathetic. Even in my own eyes. the numbers on the doors didn't mean a thing to me. Not in my state. Finally, after a few strangers said, "You need help, kid" and "Buzz off," I finally found my door.

Deer was inside, just waiting for me to get there so he could monitor my every move for the rest of the night.

Deer. Who names their son Deer? Deer's parents, I guess. Deer. He was my parent. He helped me through rough nights. He took me to the hospital. He picked me up out of the gutters. I love him like a brother. No, like a mother. He was my new mother. My real one's too busy with her "good family" in Arizona. She didn't want a thing to do with her junkie son in Baltimore.

Deer walked me to my room, laid me down on my bed, and left to go get water. He knew what I had been doing. "Jack, I love you, man. But I can't constantly watch over you." He came back in the room and handed me a glass of stale water. "That's why after tonight I'm moving out." I sat up at that.

I tried to form the words. "What? Why? Please, no!" It seemed I was losing my mother all over again.

He shook his head. I could tell he was genuinely concerned for my well being, but it was too much. "Look," he said, "I'm genuinely concerned for your well being, but it's too much." I knew it. He continued, "That's why I have to get out of here. Taking care of you is starting to take a toll on me. I always told myself I would stick with you until it started to hurt me. Then I was out. Well, I'm out."

I stared in confusion. I knew I looked like a puppy, a ratty, ripped-clothes-wearing, track-mark-covered puppy. It usually works. But not this time.

"I know you probably won't remember most of this by tomorrow, but I figure it will be easier that way. I can't be your mother, Jack. If what you need is a mother, move to Arizona." He walked out of the room and into the bathroom. He was packing his things. I could see through the flickers of the almost-dead light bulb putting his toothbrush into a bag. I couldn't believe it. He was actually leaving. I got off my bed and stumbled into the bathroom.

He glanced at me and went back to packing. I heard, "I've paid rent for the next two months, and the number for the nearest twelve-step group is on the counter."

I was feeling a little more lucid, so I thought I'd try words again. "Please, Deer. Please don't go." I whined. "You're my mom. Please stay." He turned around, looked at me in the eye, and said, "No. I'm leaving. I can't do this, Jack. My life can't revolve around taking care of you. I need a life of my own. You know. Maybe a girlfriend or something." I perked up and said, "A girlfriend? Look, I can be a girlfriend." I grabbed his face and kissed him in a desperate attempt to keep the last thing in my life that resembled family. He pushed me off. "No!" he said. "No, Jack! I need out! You're killing me. I love you, man, but you need to fix your life, and me being a crutch is only making things worse!" He pushed me out the door and locked himself inside. He emerged five minutes later with all this things from the bathroom.

I was on the floor. He put his things down and put me back in my room. I fell asleep on top of my covers in a cold ball of depressed flesh. I woke up the next day around eleven, and, sure enough, he was gone.

I found a Post-It note on the counter in the kitchen. It had a number on it. I couldn't remember what it was for.

"Cogito Ergo Sum"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

Frustrated, John sits in a cluttered office, staring at a half-written article. He is thirty-nine going on forty, balding, and penned up in a straitjacket of shirt and tie. His desk is covered in scattered work, but his walls are bare. Not even a window adds life to his cell of an office. He flips to the front page of his document, where the words "New Model Plan" are scrawled.

"Boss is gonna flip out if I don't finish this today." He starts to mimic his boss, scrunching his face and waving his arms, "'Cars are important, Mr. Wilson. Your job is on the line, Mr. Wilson. Don't mess with me on this, John.'"

He says, "If only there were no utensils. No pens, no work." He reaches towards the cup that he keeps his pens in.

He reaches, but grabs nothing. No cup. No pens.

"What the devil!" He pushes at the stack of papers, looking for the pens. He almost yells, when he sees the cup of pens on the opposite side of the desk.

He reaches for a pen, but in the blink of his eyes, the cup disappears. It had returned to its normal position on the right. He swipes at it, snatches a red ballpoint pen before the cup could move again. This job was too important for his mind to play tricks on him. He had to settle down and get the work done. He couldn't have any more distractions.

"Distractions," he thinks out loud.

As he says that word, a beautiful young woman bursts in the door. She smiles at him, blue eyes twinkling. Any other day, this would be a pleasant surprise, but today he snaps.

"Good grief, Susan! This work is important. I can't have people barging into my office like some kind of parade. . . . He pauses. . . .

She was gone. Hadn't said a word. Barely in the door, and now suddenly disappeared.

And the door too was gone. He is trapped.

Maybe he was seeing things, he reasoned. This couldn't be real. Susan probably never even came in. He just imagined it. In fact, when he thinks about it, he never remembered seeing Susan in the building before. And. . . .

Actually, he had never seen the woman before anywhere, knew no woman named Susan. Was she real?

"Am I real?" he asks himself. "No, that's a ridiculous question. I know I'm real." He closes his eyes as he speaks. "I think, therefore I am. I think, therefore. . . . I think. . . ."

When he opens them, everything has disappeared. Besides himself, the only thing in his office is the red pen he holds. No desk, no papers, no cup of pens.

He stands up—the chair disappears.

He scrawls on his arm "I think, therefore I am." He writes it again, over the original. He keeps tracing the words until he breaks skin. Then he writes more. He scrapes through muscle and tissue until his arm is gushing.

When he stops writing and drops the pen, it disappears. The word is there, but the pen is gone.

He blinks again, and then there is nothing at all. He stands on nothing, surrounded by nothing.

"I can't live like this," he shouts. He looks down and sees a gun in his hand.

"I am everything," he says blankly as he raises the gun to his head, "and yet I am nothing."

And then, the trigger makes his statement an unreal reality.

"The Dandelion"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

And there it is, standing by the fence post. I consider its fluffy white head, pondering whether or not to pick it. On one hand, I haven't seen a dandelion in a long time. But on the other hand, it is in someone else's yard. What if they see me getting it? It's not that I'm scared of angering the neighbors by stealing a flower and infesting their grass with weed spawn, I just don't really want them to see me doing it. The possibility of being "that weird girl who picked a dandelion out of my front lawn" is a little daunting. However, the temptation of that magical little flower-weed is just too great. Ignoring the pleading tugs I feel from my dog's leash, I bend down and pluck it. And without knowing precisely what it is that I'm wishing for, I blow the little white tufts off the stem. Only watching them float across the lawn do I realize what it is I want. And, no, I'm not telling, because then it wouldn't come true, would it? My impatient dog is now whining at me to continue with her long-awaited walk, so I toss the stem to the ground, but continue to contemplate the dandelion. I've always liked to think that those little floaty seed-tufts carry my wish away with them, and when they start to grow into flowers, my wish blossoms with them. Total romantic nonsense, of course, because I don't believe in prayer or wishes. I do them both anyway, though—I can't help myself.

I sigh contentedly, unsure of whether my good mood is caused by the chocolate I'm ingesting or by simple happiness. Probably the chocolate. Then I start to think about junk food and how I could use more exercise, which is brought on by the sight of my neighbor's corgi Sausage. Well, I don't think its name is actually Sausage, but I call it that anyway. It sure looks like a sausage. I wonder if its owner thinks she's doing the little tub of lard any good by strolling around the block with it every few days. Then again, with legs as short as those, it's bound to be a good cardio

workout. I immediately become conscious of my own gait. My legs are longer than Sausage's, but I notice that I tend to take short, quick steps that mirror the corgi's stride. Or at least it seems that way from an aerial perspective. My dog trots happily beside me as I reflect on all of this, stopping only occasionally to interrupt my thought process by forcing me to jerk on her leash when she tries to "mark her territory." *Stupid dog.* Because I know if she was ever challenged by a dog who had "laid claim" to the same spot, she'd be belly up in terrified submission in less than a second. She even went belly up to that stupid Sausage dog, who's a third her size. I glare at my yellow dog in irritation, but she's blissfully unaware of my gaze, having her nose buried in an apparently very interesting mound of dirt and grass. I narrow my eyes and tug on her leash, and she obediently follows after me, tongue lolling stupidly. I wonder what it would be like to be a dog. How would it feel to be ignorant of the cause of anything that happened around you? Or maybe they do. I suppose you start to invent things after a while. That's what happened with religion. I smile as this thought floats through my brain. I get some weird satisfaction in knowing that I have ideas that make people angry. The smirk doesn't fade from my face even as I think about being "mainstream." I just don't get it. Why would you want to be like everyone else if it wasn't what you wanted to be? I shake my head in confusion. It's not even like they have great music or great clothes or anything. Whatever. I pull a piece of hair forward to examine it, then frown at the faded green that colors its tip. I wish it would just stay blue. Why is that so hard for it? It's already bleached underneath and everything.

My thoughts about my discolored hair are cut short as I reach my driveway. "Walk's over," I tell my dog, who is still attempting to sniff everything within the range of her leash. I'm not particularly glad that the walk is over, because now I have to go inside and try to do my homework. And by "try" I mean look at it for about two seconds then decide that I'll just do it tomorrow. But more than that, my peaceful time is over. I hadn't thought about AP World or grades or chores or my lack of money or anything that usually stresses me out once during my walk. Back inside, back to the real world, I suppose.

"Assumptions"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

It was time. The best part of the day. Time for bed. Are you pathetic if you look forward to going to sleep every day? Yeah, I thought so, too. Spongebob Squarepants was beaming at me from my pants leg as I catapulted myself onto a rock that was layered with sheets and blankets, to make it look like it might not be (or feel like) a rock. I don't think you will ever hear this again in your lifetime. I was so excited to sleep. Just the bliss and feeling of falling out of consciousness and reality. It's like you're dead for eight hours. Or in my case, twelve to thirteen hours. No reading, no writing, I was ready to get to work. Lights out. I'd feel like Jesus if only I had a clapper.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, they lazily scanned here and there. The desk. The wall. The stereo. The bathroom door. The closet door. The ceiling. The inside of my eyelids.

I felt my heart stop. I froze, too scared to breathe. I flicked my eyes open. Carefully I rolled my head to the side, to see what it was that I had felt. To the bathroom door. To the closet door. There was someone standing in my closet staring at me. A dark silhouette of a person, crouching behind the suitcases that trashed the closet. He was halfway hidden behind the wall, watching every move I made. I began to quiver, and I jerked back. My throat was rapidly swelling; my heart began to scream. I gasped for air. Who was he? What did he want? Why was he here? He was going to kill me.

He was going to kill me.

Make a break for the door? Call the cops? That wouldn't work. If he knew that I saw him, my chances would be slashed.

But I had to do something. My mind suddenly inflated with survival. Go to the bathroom. Don't act panicked. Predators attack the weak. I pulled on my paralyzed legs.

"I can't do this," I thought. Then, "Do or die. Do or die!"

I gripped the fabric scissors on the sink. My knuckles turned white, as if I were dangling from a helicopter hundreds of feet in the air, and the scissors were the only thing I had to hold onto. Do or die. In one swift motion, I powered on the light and thrust open the door. Scissors high above my head, red faced and full of tears, I was ready for anything.

The light revealed my grandfather's leather aviator jacket, with the cap and goggles pinned to the top. On the outside, the surface was worn and ragged. But the pockets were full of old war memorabilia and trinkets that gave fulfillment and representation to my grandfather's life.

"Sunflowers"

HONORABLE MENTION

High School Fiction

Phoenix Literary Festival 2008

It had been a hot day. Dust clung to her moist face. She trudged home, the smell of dirt and sweat hung heavy in the air, her discomfort heightened by the brutal sun beating down on her back. Oh, her back, how it ached mercilessly. Nothing she tried alleviated the dull throbbing there, always letting her know, in its grim way, that she was still alive. A lady of her age shouldn't have to work like a dog just to survive, but sadly that wasn't how it worked. Her house wasn't far from the dingy little field that she poured her life into, and after she limped up the steps, age permanently engraved in her movements, she took a moment to survey her land. It wasn't much, but in her heart she knew she could never leave it. It was all she had left after her husband died, so even if her bones ached and the heat made it impossible to sleep at night, she couldn't leave it. A loud rumble shattered her thoughts, and for a moment she couldn't place where the noise had come from. She turned her face to the sky, a cloudless blue plain stretching over her. A sharp pain, followed by a dull ache, in her stomach drove her inside. The kitchen was small, but to her it truly felt like home. Almost all of her happy memories were made in this kitchen; cooking with her children holiday dinners, and teaching her grandchildren how to make cookies were her favorites. She turned to the counter; a lone object sat there. Shining in the sun was an elegant glass vase, filled with sunflowers. Her sunflowers were her pride and joy; she loved the effect they had on a room. They were beautiful, and just the sight of them made her day a little brighter.

"Mr. Billings"

I can remember when my Dad and I went to see Pastor Billings one Saturday to pay our way for an upcoming church trip to an amusement park. Being only a ten-year-old boy, I was overly excited about it all. I had never been on a roller coaster due to the paranoia of my Mother, but Dad had finally convinced her I was mature—and tall—enough to go on the rides. Ironically, it was at church that I received the perfect opportunity for me to demonstrate my newly received independence. Months earlier during a particularly slow-moving service, Pastor Billings had announced that he was planning on taking the youth group to the Wacky World theme park in the summer. The trip promised danger, and I cleaned the entire house for a week. Mother was obviously reluctant to allow me to go, but Dad defended my rights. The argument went in my favor, and I rushed through the days to get to that weekend at the amusement park.

Dad hadn't received his paycheck until a couple of days earlier on Thursday so we decided to go to the church that Saturday to take care of the payment. The ride to church that August in my Dad's leather-seated '89 Volvo 720 was hot and sticky. The air conditioner had long been broken, though the heater ran fine. I was conscientious enough that morning to wear a t-shirt and shorts, yet I still sweated as if I wore winter clothes. Dad did his best to alleviate the situation by riding with the windows down, but the warm air from outside was not refreshing. I was relieved when we reached the church and ran to the cool atmosphere of the sanctuary the second Dad parked the car.

Pastor Billings always kept the church frosty. I once heard him tell Mr. Huggins—an elder church member who had complained to him about the cool air hurting his joints—that he kept it cold to keep the congregation awake. I distinctly recall one grey morning when I swore I could see my breath during the opening hymn. Dad didn't believe me, though. He had said I was acting foolish and told me searing in church was bad. I had tried explaining to him that I wasn't lying and that I had only meant "swore" as a figure of speech. He had laughed and admitted that it really had been extra cold that morning. Despite that, the temperature felt perfect to me that afternoon when I swung open the front door to the church. I closed my eyes as the cool air raced through me, giving me goosebumps on my wet skin. I stood there with the door open, enjoying the change of temperature and pretending to wait for my Dad. By the shrewd look he gave me when he walked through the door, I'm sure he knew my real intentions.

Once inside, we walked through a narrow hallway to our right, barely fitting

side-by-side. The walls on both sides were decorated with pictures of flowers, Biblical characters, and—my favorite—a huge painting of a wooden cross. It was simple and brown except for bright splashes of red blood dripping down it. I used to think that there was a tiny person in the background of the picture that I couldn't see, an Apostle Waldo or something, but Dad had strictly admonished me for thinking so, warning me against being sacrilegious in the church. Of course I had no idea what that meant, but I kept my opinion of the picture to myself after that. Regardless, I gave it all my attention whenever I saw it and that day had been no different, apart from the fact that I walked onto my Dad's shoe and caused him to stumble. He admonished me for my clumsiness as we reached the wooden door leading to Pastor Billings' office. A sign hanging from the door knob read "Pastor in Prayer" but I knocked before my Dad could tell me to wait. A mumbled response came from behind the door and Pastor Billings appeared in the entrance, smiling in angelic sincerity.

Whenever I think of Pastor Billings now, that image of him opening the door is what comes to my mind. Tall, six-foot-and-four-inches, dark brown hair combed over to the left with no stray, rebellious strand of hair to be found lying on his forehead, and those white-white teeth. At times, when he smiled up close to you, they could appear unreal, like the fake teeth old Mr. Huggins had. I used to joke to Dad that Pastor Billings rinsed his mouth with holy water because of how white his teeth were. It was in good fun, though, because I loved Pastor Billings. His deep-voiced laughter could make me laugh every time we talked, and his sad brown eyes could make me cry every Easter Sunday when he gave that one message about the Crucifixion. Whenever my parents and I had first started attending this church, Pastor Billings was the kindest and friendliest out of everyone, always inviting us to come the next Sunday. It didn't take much discussion for us to decide to join the church after meeting him.

Pastor Billings had been no less friendly that day as we all shook hands before stepping into his office. It was the first time I had been there. The first thing I noticed was a plain, black picture frame that hung on the wall behind his office chair. There was nothing significant about it on the outside to the casual eye, but what it held inside was curious to me. Within the frame was a white sheet of paper with large, bold words printed on it that said: **Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.** No reference to a passage in the Bible, no person credited as the author of the quotation—just those seven words. Something about them captivated me and I stood there reading them in my head, trying to understand them. Pastor Billings smiled at me when he saw what I looked at, and remarked that it was his favorite passage in the Bible. He said it was found in the Book of Ezekiel when Moses was going before God to seek his mercy on behalf of a grave sin the children of Israel had committed. I simply nodded my head and pretended to understand.

My Dad and I then took a seat in front of his desk and enjoyed a casual conversation with Pastor Billings. We talked about sports, new roller coaster rides at the theme park we were going to, the upcoming school year for me,

and anything else that a boy and his father could talk to their pastor about. Things were tidy and orderly in his office as I had always imagined they would be. My Dad and Pastor Billings started talking about more "adult" topics, and I quickly grew bored. I casually began to survey the little intricacies in the office.

The room was actually pretty ordinary the longer I looked around. There was nothing odd or different about it. The walls were plain white, the carpet a normal brown. A book shelf sat at the far end, filled with titles that I couldn't pronounce. My attention gradually returned to his desk, which was also as neat as he was. Except for his laptop. It was half-open and looked crooked and off, as if he had tried to close it in a hurry. I didn't know why it stuck out to me, but I instinctively felt that something was wrong about it. Pastor Billings noticed what I was looking at and quickly closed his laptop completely shut, and straightened it in alignment with the rest of the items on his desk. My Dad didn't even acknowledge anything had happened. Perfect. All was organized, clean, and perfect again. But the way Pastor Billings had closed his laptop was awkward and unusual. The look he gave it the second before he moved it was un-perfect and un-Pastor-Billings-like. I had never seen that look on his face before, and my mind worked hard for the matching emotion. I certainly had seen it elsewhere, not on Pastor Billings' face, but on others'—friends at school who had been notified that they were kindly requested to come to the Principal's office, the criminals on TV who had been caught by the suave and all-knowing detective, and on my Dad himself once when he had forgotten my Mom's birthday. It wasn't right—it didn't belong there on in Pastor Billings' office on his face. I couldn't stop looking at the laptop and wondering what was so secretive about it.

And, yet again, Pastor Billings noticed what I saw. It was as if he were watching me since I had first walked into his office and now he had caught me. His eyes told me to shut up, that I was being foolish, and the whole time I felt sick in my stomach. Dad continued to smile and joke with Pastor Billings like normal. Normal and perfect and smiling with those white-white teeth. My eyes moved to the only other possible place—

Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.
Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.
Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.

I read it over in my head and hoped that it would make me feel better, but those words were finally gaining meaning and that made me feel worse. I still didn't fully comprehend them, but the words weren't as murky as they once were.

I looked back down at Pastor Billings but saw Mr. Billings instead. He had yellow-stained teeth, a messy comb-over, and odd, suspicious eyes. There were cracked wrinkles around them that seemed to indicate an extreme lack of sleep. As Mr. Billings told us about the details of the upcoming trip,

he breath smelled horrible to me, a mixture of old coffee and moth balls. The office itself also appeared different. The walls were suddenly closer to me than I remembered. I felt cramped and uncomfortable in my chair. The transformations scared me, and I wanted to run out of there. I didn't hesitate to ask my Dad if we were ready to go. I made up some excuse about having to get home to play with a neighbor, I think, but Dad told me to wait and not be rude.

Mr. Billings knew why I wanted to leave. He knew I had found him out and he looked at me knowing that I truly saw him as he was. I was getting sicker every time he laughed with my Dad. It was as if Mr. Billings enjoyed my pain, threatening me with things a million times worse if I told anyone else about him. I looked at him and told him through my fake smile that *no, I wouldn't tell anyone, I promise, I saw a crooked laptop and nothing else, please let me go. . .* And he did. He told Dad that he had work to attend to, and we said our goodbyes to him. After brief handshakes, Mr. Billings showed me and Dad out of his office and closed the door behind us. I practically sprinted out of the church to the car. Dad could only wonder at what was wrong with me.

The following days at home were horrible. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get the image of Mr. Billings and his laptop out of my head. I had thought about telling Dad about it but ultimately decided against it. I had convinced myself I was being stupid and ridiculous. A few days before the trip to the amusement park, my fears were painfully realized.

Dad had walked into my room one night and told me he wanted to talk to me. He sat on the bed next to me, his face heavy and tired. I was in my pajamas, ready to dream about the wild roller coasters that I would go on that weekend. Dad calmly placed his hand on my back and sighed. He looked at the floor and began the strangest conversation I would ever have with him.

"I'm sorry, son, but the trip is canceled."

"Why?"

"Pastor Billings won't be able to make it. He also won't be going back to church anymore."

"What?"

"Something really bad happened yesterday and Pastor Billings will be leaving the church come this Sunday."

"I don't understand."

"His wife is going to stay with her mother for a while. She found terrible things in Pastor Billings' office and is very sad. I'm sorry about the trip. We'll talk more

about it later."

The conversation was maybe two minutes long, but I cried the rest of the night once Dad left my room. I hadn't told anyone about that day in Pastor Billings' office, yet somebody had. I was going to forget about it and be done with it. I had told myself that it was my imagination and nothing more, though it had become bad enough that Mr. Billings had to cancel the trip, to move away and never come back to church again. I cried because I felt that it had been my fault. If I would have told someone earlier—Dad or Mom—maybe everything could have been fixed. I could have saved Pastor Billings. At least I wanted to think that.

The next Sunday, I was eager to see Pastor Billings and hug him because it was the last time I'd see him, but he stood up there behind the pulpit that morning as Mr. Billings. He wore a black suit over a white button-down shirt with a bright yellow tie. Even then, dressed up before the congregation that morning, Mr. Billings looked unkempt. He acted nervous and jittery, as if he had previously never preached a sermon to the people of his church. The service didn't begin with the usual congregational hymn or offering. Rather, Mr. Billings stood there alone in front of the entire church, every sullen eye staring at him. He didn't give a fiery or passionate sermon—instead, there were a lot of tears, mainly from him, as he said his goodbyes and apologies to everyone. The way he struggled to express a single, coherent sentence was heartbreaking to me. Yet I saw no compassionate faces around me in the pews. I looked up in optimism to Dad and was scared. His stern, tense brow and pursed lips frightened me; I don't think I've ever seen that expression again on my Dad's face. Everything had become different that Sunday morning, everything had changed. I knew there would be a new preacher eventually, but I didn't realize then the scars that Mr. Billings would leave on the church—on my very family. I lost more than a trip to the amusement park that summer, and I don't know if I've ever regained it.

After the service, Mr. Billings left quickly, shaking very few hands. He walked to his car with a box in his arms and drove away to what I wished were better places. I didn't get to hug him as I wanted to. Dad and Mom were busy talking to another couple, and I wandered to the hallway that once led to Pastor Billings' office. I was going to see the painting of the cross as I normally did when my parents were in a talkative mood after the service—and this particular service provided plenty of topics for conversation—but when I got there all I could pay attention to was the door to Mr. Billings' office. I opened it, walked into the room, and turned on the lights. The frame that was on the wall was gone. And the laptop, too. This was where I had truly said goodbye to Pastor Billings, not during the service that morning. Nothing in the office, however, spoke of Pastor Billings to me. It was deserted, empty. I felt like I was going to cry, but held it back. I soon heard Dad calling for me and I left the office, closing the door behind me. I ran to Dan and Mom through the familiar halls of the church. Dad took my hand as we left the cool air of the church to the hot August world.

"To Cope"

Memories,

Thoughts rushing through one's mind,

The film of the mind moving too quickly to dwell,

Suddenly,

Pausing for a moment on one frame,

Slowly passing through the lens,

Sadness,

Tears begin to form,

Quickly rolling down the face,

Dropping

The tears, like the first frame,

To quickly to catch,

Content,

Memories of the good times begin to follow,

These frames remain engraved in the reel of the mind,

This is Reflection.

"And the Angel Falls"

Rain pours down from a cloudless sky
 She's fallen beyond the reaches of the light
 Darkness consuming the last fragile hopes of salvation
 Tormented and tortured
 The church bells mourn her with every ring
 Lost now forever to the world she knew
 Beaten down with her hope
 And murdered with her faith
 Love held no refuge
 No one could save her
 No one would catch her
 Left to the pits of her fears
 Left alone with only herself
 Forgotten by everything she once knew
 Left behind in the shadows that she now calls home
 The angel has fallen from grace
 Her white wings turned to ash
 Her life dissolving all around her
 And the angel keeps falling

"Highway Exhausts and Late Night Thoughts"

Our bus rides to no where
show faces passing through Plexiglas windows,
chasing dreams that exist somewhere.
Under skies of teasing sunshine,
we ride buses and watch our apathetic time get lost
in between daydreams and car exhausts.

It leaves our eyes heavy and exhausted.
We packed innocence and youth in our suitcases
but somehow
we seem to have lost it.
We soon learn wheels on a bus go round before they get to turn
around
but in that process
who we all once were gets mixed in with our
watered-down coffee grounds.

The moon illuminates the clouds as they roll over 24 perfect strangers
consumed in metal and plastic
with these large tinted windows, secret thoughts, and awkward silence
as our contemporary casket.
The horizon is our finish line that we seem to never breach.
Each of us become Icarus and we all fall short of an ever outstretched
reach.

But this bus continues to roll forward.
"Rolling rocks grow no moss," says driver Gary
while we sit and pretend to listen,
lost between our own thoughts and the receding sound of the
highways
ignition.

"A Little Longer"

There wasn't any moon light coming through the big double glass sliding doors as Avonleigh came into the living room. The ceiling with its high and steep angle had always reminded her of the cheerful roofs in barns, but now it was filled up with shadow like an upside-down snow cone cup full of icy death. The furniture stood in the darkness in front of her like creatures hunched over and hiding in an inky sea. Yet, she could not go back in her room and hide on the top bunk like a princess in a tower; she was too old for pretend. Something was pulling at her heart through the silence. It was like someone calling her name but without a voice.

She held her breath as she passed the hunched creatures; her lungs ached as if she really were in a black sea. Her heart beat fast like a galley drum commanding her legs to go faster through the cold conditioned air splashing against her pajama pants. Finally, she stood next to the large entertainment center that had long ago lost the ability to entertain.

The door to the master bedroom was cracked open and a little golden light came sneaking out to greet the visitor. She pushed her face into the light as people push their faces into warm showers on December mornings. Before her dazzled eyes dared to open their pupils once more, the silent voice made itself audible.

"Leigh?"

". . . Yeah, it's me, Dad." She pushed the door, closing it behind her again. The wooden door stood warm, natural, and strong like a certain Carpenter, holding out the contents of the upside-down snow cone cup for a little longer.

"Couldn't sleep?" He picked up the covers beside him to let her crawl into the warm cocoon around him. She wished her mom was there with them instead of at work.

"Nope. You?"

"Nah, old men like me don't need sleep."

"You're not old, Dad." She tried to sit as close to him as she could without hurting the place his colon used to be. They sat there together, neither one talking, neither one needing to. He was a father needing to take care of his

family, and she was a child needing to keep a father. The creatures in the dark sea beyond the wooden door silently devoured both of their hopes.

"Could you forgive me?" The familiar, deep, and strong voice sounded strange, like a big ship with a crack in it in the middle of a bigger ocean. The sea threatened to come in.

"For what, Daddy?" She hadn't called him that in a long time but right then she felt as if fourteen wasn't so grown up after all.

"Do you think you could all forgive me if I left?" She knew what he meant. A tiny hand raised itself in the back of her mind: "I'm just a little girl; this isn't fair. I still need a dad. NO!" Leigh didn't let it out, though; she was still his little Leigh and she wasn't going to let him down with that ragingly silent hurricane beating against the still door. But could she force words out that she only half-believed?

"Daddy, you're in so much pain. It would be selfish of us to make you stay here." His once tanned face had turned away from her and lay on the pillow over the once broad shoulders. The tiny hand went back down again as she found his big hand under the covers and held it. When she held his hand a few months before, it had felt like a big warm muff, stronger than steel; it had felt like Superman's hand, like the invincible Superman.

"Dad, we will always love you. We could never be mad at you for leaving." His hazel eyes turned away from the wall that lay against the black waters in the living room. The corners crinkled and the soft natural sea colors in those eyes sparkled at her like they used to. His hand was still big and warm as it squeezed hers. Avonleigh smiled and squeezed back.

They sat there together, neither one talking, neither one needing to, and the wood of the door stood warm, natural, and strong against the sea and the creatures for a little longer, just a little longer.

"The Willow and the River"

After the sun set, the early evening transformed into a cool autumn night. The harvest moon shined down up a lazy river that flowed through town. A weeping willow stood beside, stretching its long limbs over the river. A light breeze gently shifted the leaves. An orchestra of insects and frogs along the river created a melodic atmosphere that could soothe the soul.

The sounds of leaves crunching broke into the night as a young man journeyed towards the smooth river and mighty tree. He walked carefully so he would not trip over the uneven ground. The moon provided a helpful light that made his late-night outing easier to see. In his hand were two blankets, one large, the other small. As he reached his destination he sprawled the larger blanket on the ground beneath the mighty willow.

The young man walked towards the river bank gazing at the glowing stars cascading across the sky, every one a shimmering piece of perfection. The moon was a palette of orange, yellow and red; thin clouds flew by quickly with the evening breeze. He listened to the sounds of the nocturnal creatures sing their songs of life. With the light of the moon, this young man focused on his image in the river; messy medium-brown hair, dark eyes, a slight smirk. He admired it, but with a quick jump, a mosquito landed and scattered his image like a broken piece of glass. The ripples expanded and traveled until they, too, dissipated. The boy sighed.

He heard a sound behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a lovely young woman, curly brown hair to her shoulders, hazel green eyes that were known only by the light of day. She carried a small backpack hanging on her shoulder. He turned his back around. She walked to the tree and set the backpack down. From there, she admired the young man who still stood silent, staring into the river. Slowly, as she had done before, she walked to the river and stood beside him.

"It's beautiful out here, isn't it?" she commented in a soft delicate voice, staring out at the river with him.

"Yes, very much so," he answered. "Nature had such a unique way of coming alive in the afterhours. Too bad most people miss the loveliness of it all."

"Um-hmm," the girl responded. She took a deep breath, drawing in the smell of the river. Her eyes drifted toward the sky, looking at the moon and the stars.

How she loved it. For a brief second, she turned toward her partner, who stared blankly toward the woods on the other side of the river.

He asked, "Did you have any trouble getting out?"

"Not at all. Everyone was asleep. How about you?"

"Nah, it was easy." As if hypnotized, his eyes stayed pinned to everything in front of him.

"Good. I'm glad," she said softly.

He turned his head toward her and gave a delicate smirk. His arm wrapped around and pulled her toward his body. She leaned against him. Comfortably, she nuzzled her head into his shoulder and sighed happily.

"C'mon, let's go sit down," he said.

With that, they turned away from the river back and walked toward the willow tree. The young man kicked and cleared away loose leaves and twigs that had fallen from the tree onto the blanket. When the blanket was clean and presentable, he allowed the young woman to get situated, then joined her. They rested their heads against the rough bark and stared out at the moonlit landscape.

The girl said, "I used to love this tree when I was little." Her partner turned and gave his full attention. "When I was a little girl, there used to be a swing right on that branch. My dad put it up and took me there every weekend so he could push me on it."

"I have a special connection with the river," the young man reminisced. "My parents taught my older brother and me to swim in the lake where the river empties. We went every weekend of the summer from the time I was four to the time I was eight. It was the greatest part of my childhood. On that dock over there, my grandpa and I went fishing twice a month in the summer. Even though the river and lake are filled with fish, we barely caught anything, but it was just great to be able to spend time with him, before he died."

The girl said, "When I was twelve, I got my first kiss right under this tree."

Surprised, the boy turned toward her and asked anxiously, "From who?"

She giggled and patted his leg. "Don't worry. It's no one you know or even need to care about. It was a kiss that brought nothing except the thrill of a girl's first. Nothing in any way happened afterward. I promise."

He relaxed and lay his head back against the tree. The young woman giggle continued as she watched him. She inched her way closer to him, her body fitting perfectly with his. His arm crawled around her back as she tilted her head onto his shoulder. They sat there in the cool, moonlit air.

The girl asked, "Are you sure we're doing right thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Do we really have to do it this way? There's no other way we can be together?"

"I've told you this is the only way to escape everything."

"What if we tried to talking to them again? Maybe they would accept us and then we wouldn't have to go through with it."

"Our parents would never hear of it. They're stubborn and hard to persuade. It's fruitless to even consider it. Besides, I wouldn't be able to live with myself if your step-dad hurt you again because of me. I just couldn't. The guilt would be too much."

The girl pulled away to stand up, and moved toward the river. She continued. "What if we ran away where they could never touch us? We would be free from everything and, best of all, be together."

The boy stood and walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "It wouldn't last long. We're only seventeen. We have no car, no money, no shelter, and no way to survive. We wouldn't last long before they found us and we were brought back to this God-forsaken place. We'd be back to square one with stricter rules."

"What if we stole one our parent's cars?"

"Then when they caught up with us, we'd be in even more trouble. The car can only get us so far before we'd have to fill the tank anyhow. *This is the only way.*"

She turned around in his arms, a tear glistening in the moonlight. "I don't want it to be this way, though. I don't. I'm scared."

He pulled her close and embraced her tightly. Her single tear turned into a storming sob. She pushed her head into his chest. He did his best to console her, scratching her back lightly, running his fingers through her hair, but most of all just holding her. "I don't want this, either, but let me tell you something. Not only will we be together, but we'll be scared together as well. I won't leave your side. I promise. I'll stick with you through it all."

He rocked her in his arms as she regained control of her emotions. They swayed together into an unsynchronized dance, under the moonlight with the insects as the evening ensemble. She moved her hands up and behind his neck and began to join his movements. The dance was eternal, a joining of their spirits though last through time. They felt uplifted, as if they were dancing on a cloud. They felt each other's hearts beating in time.

He lifted her chin with the tips of his fingers and stared deep into her eyes. Kindheartedly, he asked, "Are you ok now?"

"A little bit. I'm still scared, though."

"C'mon, let's go sit down now."

They separated and walked back to the blanket together. The young man bent down and again swept away leaves. He then invited the young lady to sit down. He joined her and allowed her to rest her head against his shoulder. "How do you think life would be if our parents accepted us and we didn't have to go through with this?"

The boy thought for a moment as he watched the fireflies flutter through the sky. "Happy. That's how it would be. We'd have our parents around to celebrate everything joyous that goes on through our life. Plus, we'd be together to actually experience life's gifts. I would be truly great."

She smiled. "That would be nice. Too bad it will never be that way."

A cool breeze blew through them, with an autumn chill that sent the spine into a shivering spasm. The girl shuddered at the wind, which drew attention from the boy. He asked, "You cold?"

The girl giggled. "Only a little." She continued to shiver.

The boy pulled from the side of the tree the second blanket. He opened it and pulled it over them both. "This better?"

"Yes, much better. You think of everything, don't you?" She smiled.

The boy smiled and wrapped his arm around her back. She lay her head and hand on his chest, listening to his breath and feeling his heartbeat with her hand. She looked at him, staring at his black expression. He seemed to be concentrating on a thought that was bouncing around. All he did was stare out at the woods on the other side of the river.

"Do you believe we're doing the right thing?" she asked.

He turned his head toward her. "I don't mean not to go through with it, but how do you know someone else isn't going to come around for you? What if we were only meant to be a fling and someone great will come around for both of us? What if we're truly not meant to be together?"

He thought hard before responding. "I believe we're meant to be. I believe that the moment we met was supposed to be the start of something beautiful and that we were to hold on forever. Whether or not someone else will come around in our lives is unknown, but, if we wait to find out, we may regret our decision in the future. What if only one of us will find happiness with someone else? I'm happy with you and I know I was meant to be with you for eternity."

She said, "I know there has to be someone out there better for you than me. For me, I don't know who could possibly be better than you. No one has been nicer, sweeter or more romantic than you have. I just don't want you to throw your life away—"

He interrupted her by tipping her chin up and pulling her in for a passionate kiss. After a few seconds, she returned the kiss, placing her hand gently on his cheek and pulling him closer. The tender kiss seemed to have gone on forever, as time stood still.

They pulled away at the same time and were greeted with each other as they opened their eyes. The boy looked deep into her eyes. "I know you are the one I'm supposed to be with. There's no doubt of that in my mind. My feelings for you are as infinite as the number of stars in the sky. I have no regrets about what we've done and will soon do, as long as I'm with you. I don't care. Despite my parents' objections, I love you. I have loved you since the day we met, and will continue to love you for the rest of time."

Stray tears fell from her eyes. She jumped into his arms, wrapping hers behind his neck. "I love you too. I love you so much." She had dreamed of the day these words would be passed between them. Sweet words of commitment had finally been uttered, making her heart beat faster. She finally knew what it meant and felt like to be in love. At the conclusion of their embrace, she tenderly kissed her partner, holding him tightly as she did, never wanting them to part. The kiss, however, did end, each a smile on their faces.

She returned to his arms, her head lying on his shoulder again. They sat in silence, staring up at the moon, listening to the insects sing and the river flow. Silence was golden to them, a chance to just appreciate each other's company. They learned that the best moments they shared were when they were quiet right in this very spot, listening to the countless pleasing sounds that surrounded them, the many appealing beauties that entered and exited their sight.

Their escapades had been going on for nearly a year now; two days out of

every week. Soon they would be together forever. A soft pink slowly across the canvas as the early morning sun rose. They knew it was time. They separated and the girl retrieved her backpack. The boy pulled out a piece of paper and a pen and began to write:

You refused to accept our relationship due to a senseless quarrel. Now you will learn that you should have let us be and live our own lives. Just because you are enemies with one another doesn't mean that we have to be as well. Goodbye and realize this all could have been avoided if it weren't for your selfish and stubborn attitudes.

He signed both their names, folded and placed the note in his pocket. He looked up to see his companion waiting for him with a large glass bottle and several orange, plastic containers. She passed him one of the containers and together began to swallow its contents, which was washed down with a flashflood from the bottle. They continued to devour the substance and toss the containers behind them, then the empty glass bottle.

They each sighed and rested against the tree once more. The boy invited his companion into his arms, and she graciously accepted. His arms wrapped around her waist as she leaned her head onto his shoulder. Time had never moved slower for them as they waited for the inevitable, but they knew it shouldn't take very long. They looked in each other's eyes once more, wishing they could stay this way forever. A tear leaked from the corner of the girl's eye. The boy quickly, gently swept it away.

He moved his fingers under her soft chin and lifted her head. He placed a long, passion-filled kiss on her lips, the last they would share. With this he proclaimed, "I love you."

With a smile and another tear trickling down her cheek, she said, "I love you, too."

As the sun rose, their last kiss and words to one another had been shared. They both took a deep breath and closed their eyes for the last time, encased in each other's arms.

"Trees"

Not many people remember life like I do. I remember back when life was simpler, and we had enough air to breathe. I bet we still have enough air up there, but no one really has the guts to check; I would, but I spend most of my time teaching, teaching the little ones about grass, the sky, the sun, stars, and trees—oh, how I miss the trees.

It's funny, because I am a teacher I'm considered old and wise; most of the older are dead, or they don't speak much about the past, so they've given that job to me. The older died before we could make it down here. Sometimes I wish I was with them; it would have been easier than to remember everything now. Twenty-five—my age used to be so young, and now I'm old.

Our oldest, I believe, is now fifty. He doesn't come out much; I'm sure he regrets making it possible for us down here. It's so dark and cold, but somehow we manage. Our houses and other buildings all have air constantly circling through. All the buildings look like something out of *Jabber Jaw*, though no one remembers that either.

I was fifteen when the war forced us down. I was scared, not of the unknown, but of forgetting how it was. My boyfriend at the time thought I was obsessed. He told me that I should just forget about it, everyone else had. I told him that I'd forget about him long before I'd forget the trees.

He left that day, and I never saw him again. He died a few months later. He told his parents he missed the sun, and then unplugged his oxygen. I didn't cry when they told me; I was happy for him. He, like so many others, had escaped this hell; and I hope he got to see the sun again. Yes, I am talking about a suicide; ever since coming down here—well after the first twenty—suicide wasn't looked down

on as a horrible unforgivable thing to do. It became a real way to escape the darkness, the suffocation that had to become our lives. All of us who have seen the world above have thought about it at least once, the ones who actually do it—well, they got out, didn't they? Anyway, I've veered from the purpose of the story.

I was asked to be a teacher when I turned twenty-one. I was told that after only six years I was the only one who remembered perfectly, and I needed to teach the children about what everyone else forgot. What everyone else fought so fiercely to forget and suppress.

I took the job; the kids were always excited to hear about the "above world." I'm happy they wish they could have seen it. Every day I show them pictures; they always ask me where my suit is. I explain that there was a time when we didn't need them. They look to the closets where their suits all hang waiting to be worn on their trip home from school.

I feel sorry for these children, never getting to see the sky, the sun, the moon, or the trees except in a picture; oh, the things they missed. Lying in the sun, feeling its warmth, catching fireflies, seeing the stars . . . climbing the trees. Enough depressing thoughts.

After I came to the school I met someone. He taught music. At first he was like all the other teachers—at least I thought he was. A polite hello and a wave. None of the others approved of my "subject" and thought the kindergarteners should be taught real things, not memories. So I taught them more: they could write, count, and read by the time they got to first grade. After that the teachers just didn't bother me. No one except him.

As I said, he taught music, and he was young like me, only twenty-three. I soon found that he would go out of his way every morning just to say hello in his polite way. He soon started to bring me tea in the mornings and we'd sit and talk about everything. I never brought up the past, until he asked to see my pictures. I was shocked, but I showed him. He looked like one of my students, eye's wide and smiling, but he then did something that the students

never did—he cried.

Not full-out bawling, of course, but tears escaped his eyes as he smiled and stared at my old pictures, my old memories.

"My pictures were ruined when my parents came down. Everyone told me to forget. I never wanted to, but eventually the trees started to look like seaweed."

I smiled at him. His black shaggy hair hung into his pale blue eyes and contrasted with his pale skin.

"I never forgot," I said quietly. He took my hand in his and squeezed as we stared at an old picture of me sitting under a large oak tree.

"Could you, would you, help me remember?" He was looking at me intently. I was about to answer when my students rushed in. He smile and walked to the door.

"I'll see you after school?" I asked.

He smiled again. "I hope to see you more than just after school." I smiled back. He nodded and left the room.

That day I didn't think I'd ever be happier. We spent more and more time together. Soon, I moved in with him and we were married soon after that.

Though we were happy, many others were angry with us. Of course, it wasn't because of our marriage, but because of our ideas. He wanted to return to the surface, see if we could live there once again. He believed that after ten years things had to be getting back to normal. I supported his idea, just to see if there was anything left.

We had the technology; it's just that no one wanted to rebuild. Soon our idea got out to the parents of the children, and they started removing them from my class.

I knew that was going to happen, so I made sure every child had a picture of the sun in the trees. No parent ever found it, for the

children knew they had to hide it, otherwise they'd never see it again and they didn't want that. Each student would hug me every day just in case that was their last day. I was sad to see them all leave me, but I knew they would try and remember my class—and me.

Soon my class was empty. Many people wouldn't even come near us; they were beginning to demand that we be sent to the surface. We actually didn't mind that idea, except we weren't sure if anything was left. Though, if we couldn't survive, we'd at least die on the surface, under the sun or the moon . . . and maybe after seeing a tree.

We were given some food, clean water, tools, and assorted other things that we would be able to use just in case we didn't die when we got there. No one expected us to make it, though when we left we could see the hope in some of their eyes.

We didn't die upon returning to the surface. Walking out of our ship into the cool sunset seeing the gorgeous trees swaying in the breeze. That night we slept on the sand, and many nights after that we did the same. Soon we saw that many animals were still thriving, along with all that plants that we once knew. We finally built a house back off the sand in the trees, we planted a garden, caught animals for food. Months after we were up there, others began to resurface, some because they were forced to, and others because they couldn't stand the darkness anymore.

We began to build a town, not a very large one, but it had the essentials: a doctor, a very small school, a store. I believe that soon enough everyone will return to the surface; it may take some persuading, but eventually I believe it will happen. Though I guess some may not return, some are convinced that everything is dead and nothing could or ever will grow up here again. Though they are wrong, I don't really care. They're the ones missing out on the sun, sky, stars, and . . . the trees.

"Hope"

Hope is eternal,
to burn within our souls like a fiery inferno.
It is more precious than gold or myrrh,
and cannot be replaced by diamonds and pearls.

God knew there would be times o pain and torment,
misery, agony, and self-discontent,
so with Angels He would send
Hope to heal our wounds and help them mend.

Look to the butterfly and you will find
the evidence to quiet your troubled mind,
a magical creature emerging soon
from the caterpillar imprisoned within a cocoon.

The caterpillar remains frightened and captive,
anxious, sad, and frantic,
unaware of God's hand painting his wings
so he may soar and forever be free.

If the butterfly I speak of
in your mind is not enough,
Hope gives us the future clear and bright
and will surely dispel the darkness and night.

"Clearing the Trail"

The picnic table at the head of the trail
Where you served hors d'oeuvres and Corona
To commemorate your three years
Of grunting, sopping labor
Has been sprayed by graffitists
And gnawed by the knives of squatters;
The logs you cut and laid as the path's border
Are lost in the weeds
As the trail grows fainter;
The power company has seized
The bluff overlooking the creek
To stack black pipe
So wide and high
It walls out the other side
Although if you listen hard
You can still hear the water;
And, old friend, while the sign
Still reads Bird Sanctuary
You cannot see a living feather.

Not to fully despair, however;
The birds honor you
By refusing to be there—
And your winding suit now bears
A decoration from a higher power—
A redwing blackbird's yellow shoulder band—
As your bones grow hollow.

"Lighting of the Great Tree: November 1952"

Frannie had never felt more grown up. Her new double-breasted winter coat with matching tam looked like something from one of those Shirley Temple movies. Her older brother Hal insisted that she wear a pair of matching leggings to keep her legs warm. They would be outside most of the evening, and Atlanta was unusually cold, even for the end of November.

"Where are we going?" Frannie had asked Hal, and when he wouldn't tell, she'd quizzed her younger brother Sam.

"Surprise" was all they would say.

"You'll see soon enough," Sam teased.

"Give me a hint. Just one little hint."

"Guess that wouldn't hurt," Sam said. "Okay, here's a *big* hint—"

"Sam," Hal interrupted. "Now, we both agreed this should be a big pre-Christmas surprise for Fannie, so why do I have the feeling you're about to spoil it?"

"No," Sam whispered behind cupped palm, but not quiet enough for Frannie not to overhear, "she'll never guess." He put both hands on his hips, rubbed one hand over his blonde crew cut, theatrically wiggled his nose, and then pulled comically on one ear lobe. "Okay," he said, "here goes. One big hint: Your surprise has something seasonal to do with the store where I work."

"Rich's Department Store."

"Bingo."

"What about Rich's?"

"Well, now, my dear, that's for me and Hal to know. And for you to find out."

Hal broke into one of his belly laughs that sent Frannie into a giggling fit.

"And that's your big clue," Sam said, "so now you have something to think all week. Including all Thanksgiving Day when Hal and I are going to teach you,

young lady, how to roast a turkey and make the fluffiest potato casserole you've ever tasted."

So they had all gotten through a rather bittersweet Thanksgiving noonday meal, the first holiday Frannie had lived in Decatur with Hal and Sam since the death of her precious Granny, who had pretty much reared her from babyhood. And now, here it was already five o'clock, almost dark, and Frannie was dressed fit to kill to go somewhere with Hal and Sam. And the surprise had something to do with Rich's. But what? A thirty-minute bus ride into the heart of Atlanta was a long time to wonder. How much longer were Hal and Sam going to play their little wait-and-see game?

After the three descended the bus steps, Frannie wedged herself between her two brothers. She looped one arm under Hal's elbow and one under Sam's so as to be able to keep up with their giant steps. "How much father?" she asked every half block.

"We're almost there," Sam said, as they entered Forsyth Street, now roped off to vehicular traffic. People were pouring in from all directions, jamming the street, stopping and crowding one against another, looking upward, waiting.

Frannie lifted her face. By the glow of the street and traffic lights, she could make out what she knew to be Rich's Department Store. There was on one side of Forsyth Street the store where Hal had taken her to buy school clothes and new saddle oxfords and on the other side the place where she had been with Hal to purchase a new coffee table. All Rich's. And the two buildings joined by what Hal called the "Crystal Bridge." They had eaten lunch in one of the Italian restaurants while on their Rich's shopping spree. That had been Frannie's first taste of lasagna.

So where was the surprise?

"Let me tell you a true story," Hal said. "Only three years ago, that old coot standing next to you—your brother, Sam Cline by name—talented head of the Design and Display Department here at Rich's, was leaving work one night and happened to glance up at that very bridge spanning this street and joining these two stores you see on either side." He patted Sam on the shoulder. "And ol' Sam here said out loud, *Man, what a perfect place for a Christmas tree.* The rest, young lady, is history."

The words had not been out of Hal's mouth when all the downtown businesses doused their lights. Even the streetlights and traffic lights cut off.

"Miss Frannie," Sam said with ceremony and acclaim, "you are now present at the Lighting of the great Tree, which I hope will become for you and for all these people here tonight, a time-honored Rich's tradition. Watch. Look up there."

Hal had no sooner gotten these words out of his mouth when the covered bridge came alive with Christmas carols.

"Listen, Frannie," Sam said, "Listen closely. Those four floors of the covered bridge are filled with the very best—most talented—singers in Atlanta. Hundreds will be taking turns singing while one of the city's finest radio announcers reads scripture. Listen."

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus—

The singing began as the reader continued. From the lowest bridge at the second-story level came the voices of children. Then the music swept upward to the topmost choir on the fifth floor level. As the Bible story ended, the last choir sang. Someone threw a switch and a big tree suddenly blazed with light above the store.

Frannie could not speak. It was absolutely the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. The tree was huge with hundreds of lighted ornaments the size of basketballs.

"Look at her, Sam," Hal said. "She's speechless. I knew she would be."

Silent night, holy night sang all the choirs. And down in the street the crowd took up the carol. *All is calm, all is bright—*

Christmas had officially begun in Atlanta. And in Frannie Cline's heart. Years and years later, any time she needed to reassure herself that all was right in the world, Frannie pictured that huge lighted tree at Rich's Department Store and heard the choirs sing "Silent Night."

On the bus ride back to Decatur that night, squeezed on a seat between Hal and Sam, Frannie listened to her brothers talk. It was pretty obvious that Sam really liked his job at Rich's, and it was also clear that he liked to share true stories about the store.

"I've just about seen it all," Sam said with a laugh. "One of the strangest things that happened in the furniture department concerned a woman who came in the store. She was shopping with her daughter, who was about to get married. They looked around for a while, and suddenly the mother rubbed her hand along a chair back, and confessed to the salesman, 'This is what I should have bought sixteen years ago, but the clerk over persuaded me. All these years I've lived with dining room furniture I really didn't like!'"

"What did the salesman say to that?" Hal wanted to know.

"Well, he probably really didn't know how to respond, but he said he told her if she'd write her name and address on a notepad, he'd see if there was anything he could do about the situation. He couldn't promise her anything, but maybe Rich's would—somehow—allow her a trade in or give her a nice discount on the new suite."

Frannie chimed in, "So did the salesman go see the president? Ask him what to do?"

"He did just that, Miss Frannie Cline," Hal answered. "And that story has a very happy ending."

"I like happy endings. Tell me. What happened?"

"The very next day, the lady answered her doorbell to find a Rich's van in the drive—there to deliver the furniture she liked and to pick up, with the store's apologies, that overzealous clerk's mistake sixteen years ago."

Hal nodded his head. "Just shows you how some people operate," he said. "That lady will probably tell a hundred people about Rich's generosity. Before it's all said and done, the store will have recouped the cost of that suite—and much, much more. Good business. Very good business."

Frannie liked the way Hal and Sam always included her in their grown-up conversations. "I like Rich's Department Store," she said. "You can buy anything at Rich's, can't you?"

Sam chuckled and proclaimed, "No, that's not exactly true. And I'll tell you how I know. Last year a man from the Georgia mountains wrote Rich's, enclosed a ten-dollar money order, and asked the store to send him a good wife. *Stout and no snuff dipper*. Of course, we couldn't fill that order."

"Tell Frannie about that kid who asked for *the big swap*," Hal said.

"Oh, yeah, that was a good one. This seven-year-old kid wanted to trade his new baby sister for a space helmet. Our toy buyer was so touched by the little boy's faith in the store, he sent him the space helmet with Rich's compliments and a note telling him that baby sisters were wonderful and not really replaceable."

Frannie wanted more stories, so Sam thought for a few minutes and then said, "Okay, here's one I remember from a couple of years ago. Cora, the woman in charge of Rich's bakeshop said the mother of a bride came back to complain that the wedding cake she had made had yellow layers, instead of white. Although every last crumb was eaten, the customer felt wronged. Our Cora gave her a cake with white layers." Sam paused and glanced over at Frannie, who had snuggled even more closely between him and Hal, and said, "Well,

Rich's does aim to please."

"More," she said, "I love these stories."

The bus had pulled over at their stop. The three stepped onto the sidewalk. "One more story while we walk to the house," Hal said, "and then it's good-night Missy for one tire little twelve-year-old traveler."

:"One more," Frannie agreed, "but make it a long one."

"Okay," Sam said, "here goes. And you'll really like this one."

"Shoot!"

"One elderly Atlanta women regularly packs a lunch and comes to spend the entire day at Rich's," Sam said. "She lives on a small pension so she has little money for shopping but that doesn't seem to bother her or Rich's. On a divan near the entrance of the swank Specialty Shop where the well-to-do ladies of the South buy their deGivench's and Maurice Rentner's, she sits and sews away on her own handmade wardrobe. At lunchtime, instead of visiting one of our ten restaurants cafeterias or snack bars, she opens up a paper shopping bag—a Rich's shopping bag—and takes out her sandwich and thermos. All Rich's executives and employees bow and smile cordially when they pass her."

Frannie had tears in her eyes. "That's the sweetest story yet," she told Sam.

Sam agreed. "I stop and talk with her, too," he said. "And the old lady always tells me the same thing: 'Oh, it's a delightful store!' she says blissfully. 'So friendly. I've been coming here fifty years. I only miss if I'm sick or there's a death in the family.' And with great dignity, she adds: 'I give Rich's what business I have, of course. But it isn't the shopping as much as the sociability that I come for.'"

When the threesome reached their house, Sam was wound up and ready to tell more Rich's tales, but Hal declared, "No more tonight. This child has to get some rest, and there's always dinner tomorrow night when you can fill her in on all the other adventures."

"Well, Frannie, big brother has spoken, so I guess we'll have to continue our conversation tomorrow evening at dinner. I get off work at five tomorrow, so I'll be home earlier than usual—with more true stories for you pleasure and enjoyment."

With her eyelids heavy, Frannie could only nod. She really was sleepy. But she still had a lot to think about. If she could just stay awake long enough.

"Coffee and Quilts"

March 1947

She stared at the sky-blue coffee cup in her hands. It felt warm and smooth against her finger tips, and she pulled it close to her face and inhaled the scented steam. Her kitchen seemed small tonight. She took a gulp of coffee to push down the sick feeling in her abdomen. Was it *him* or the baby? She picked up the copy of *No Exit* and started reading again. Well, not just any copy, her own personal copy. She turned to the inside cover and read the inscription:

*You gotta read this one, my dear.
I say it's a keeper and I know a keeper when I see one.
Yours truly,
Frank*

Before she could finish three pages, there was a quiet whimper from Samuel's room. She stood and pushed the kitchen chair in before creeping down the hall for a look at her four-year-old child. As her eyes adjusted to the dark of his room, she saw his little bare legs sticking out from underneath the covers. It was a chilly night, but Sam never seemed to want to keep his pajamas on. She covered his legs and kissed his temple gently. Car lights eased across the blinds and the gentle, clicking gurgle of a taxi announced his arrival. She steadied herself against the wall and groped for composure.

May 1946

Frank didn't mind Monday afternoons. Afternoons really weren't a bad time in general. The crowd was usually down and he could stop and breathe. But he especially liked Monday afternoons because he let the others off for the shift and ran the restaurant on his own. Mondays had gotten even better in the last five months. He glanced over at the pretty legs at the booth in the right corner of his little diner. Her light blue skirt started just below her knees and pulled snugly against her slender waist. She was always reading when she came in—and she always ordered the same thing: one ham and egg salad sandwich and a small glass of milk. Frank finished wiping down the counter and made his way to his only customer.

"Well, what do ya know, what's a pretty dame like you doing in my humble

"Hi, Frank. How are you?" She glanced up from her book.

"Doing fine, absolutely fine. What book do you have today?"

"Same as yesterday. *Men without Women*."

"*Men without Women*. . . . You know, I hesitated to pick that one up. We men aren't much without women."

She smirked. "I haven't found you all to be much with them either."

"Come on, Merille, you're a broadminded young lady. You can't lump us all up like that just because you've met a few chumps in your life. Besides, you sound a little bitter."

"Well, it's a good collection, anyway, and Hemingway is brilliant."

"I agree. It's good to find a smart, pretty woman every once in awhile. How was work today?"

"It was a normal day." He loved the way she would twist her mouth when she was remembering something. "I managed to keep my fingers out of the sewing machine for once."

"Ham and egg salad sandwich and a glass of milk, my dear?"

"That's what I want."

The exchanged a smile and Frank headed back to the kitchen. He wanted to take her out. But how to ask, how to ask. Every time he thought about it, his eyes would start to get watery. Some people sweat when they get nervous, some stutter. Not him—his eyes just watered up. Of all the girly ways to get nervous. He blinked hard and glanced back over his shoulder to see if she was watching him. She was gonna be a tough one—all the better. He could wait.

March 1947

"Merille!"

The door was open before she had time to respond. She stood there leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. She tried to look calm but her stomach was jumping. One of them was nervous.

He still stood there with his hand on the door knob. Just staring. He stared straight into her eyes, daring her to speak, now down at her rounded belly. His figure filled the doorway. She had forgotten how big he was. Big, strong, handsome, intimidating. Still in uniform. He took one silent, accusing look

before he shut the door behind him. She wished she had laundry in her arms or something to hide the glaring bulge.

"Merille."

He said it again, but his voice was flat this time. For three years, she had prayed he would come back through that door. She had cried for it, wished for it, played it through her daydreams. But after his sister had shown her the pictures and the letter he had written, a log had changed. Now he was here. And she wished he had died . . . or she. It didn't matter much. He gripped the edge of the table with both hands, cursing quietly.

"Clark . . . you . . . you didn't . . ."

"Shut up." He stopped speaking to cough. A cough . . . or a sob?

She swam for breath and words. What could she say?

"You said you'd wait, Merille. You couldn't wait? You couldn't control yourself?" He turned his back toward her and ran his fingers through his hair.

"You were gone four years, Clark. You, you haven't written me in a year. Your sister said that you met another. . . . I saw pictures. . . ."

He grabbed the sky blue coffee cup off the table and bashed it against the wall. Coffee cascaded down the peach curtain and blue scattered the floor. He strode purposely past her and into the hallway.

"What are you doing, Clark? Where are you going?" Her voice held slight pangs of panic and she followed him back to Samuel's room.

"I want to see my son, woman. I haven't seen him in four years. Where do you think I'm going?"

He turned on the light as he walked into the tiny bedroom, grabbed Samuel up, sheets and all, and started carrying him out of the room. His loud voice woke Samuel as he stalked back down the hall into the kitchen.

"Where was my son when you were slipping around, slut? Where did you leave him? Alone? Or maybe with my parents?"

"Clark, where are you taking him?"

He turned around suddenly—and he was so close to her—and his voice had calmed—and she could now hear Samuel's gentle sobs and blubberings for Mommy—and Clark touched her cheek.

"Tell me when it's due."

"About a month."

"I want you back, Merille. I'll have you back." He tightened his grip along her jaw till it hurt a little. "Once you get that baby in your arms, you get rid of it. You can have that fool baby or you can have me and Samuel."

Samuel's face was a mirror of her own. *Terror. Confusion. Sickness.* She reached out her arms to take her son. Clark shoved his wife back, opened the door and left in the taxi he had kept waiting. As the door slammed, Merille screamed and smashed herself up against the closed door. She fought with the knob, opened the door, closed it back and stood numbly. She fell back, onto the floor into the pieces of broken pottery that lay in sky blue shards.

July 1946

"Are you glad you came with me?"

He wrapped his jacket around her shoulders before grabbing her hand. It was summer time, but the nights had been breezy lately. The street was silent except for a few people on their way home from the cinema. All the shops were locked up for the night.

"I'm glad. I enjoyed the movie. Thank you for paying."

"I was happy to. Maybe we can do this again sometime. You need a little break every once in awhile. A tender lady like yourself shouldn't have to work and care for that sweet little boy of your without any breaks."

He felt her hand tighten in his. *Good move, Frank, he thought, keep it up and the night might be a success.*

"I got you a little something." He handed her a small package wrapped in brown paper.

"What is it?" She stopped walking and looked up at him curiously.

Frank chuckled. "Why don't you open it."

She pulled the paper off carefully, trying not to tear it, even though it was just brown paper. She finally pulled out the thin book.

"*No Exit*. Isn't this a play?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I just heard it was good and I thought of you."

"Thank you very much. That was thoughtful. I'll have something new to read when I stop by the diner."

"Say, Merille. We pass the restaurant on our way to your house. You wanna stop and get some drinks?"

"Oh . . . no. I need to get back. It's . . . it's late."

"It'll only take a minute. I need to stop and get my ledger anyway. It'll be real quick."

"All right, I guess."

He smiled in the dark. She was lonely, he knew. She had told him a little about her husband. He hadn't come back with the other soldiers. He had volunteered for another year in Germany. He hadn't written for months. Yeah, she was lonely and full of doubt and rejection.

They reached the store a little before midnight. Frank unlocked the back door and followed her in. He put a nickel in the jukebox and picked a slow song, then got their drinks. She was still standing uncomfortably, looking out the large front window.

"You okay?" He made his voice as concerned as he could.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Merille, why don't we have our drinks in the kitchen? It's a little cozier back there." He slid his arm around her waist and led her toward the back—she didn't pull away.

April 1947

It was an easy birth, far easier than Samuel had been. The pain was much less, the labor much shorter. Merille woke up to a clean white room. There was an open window on the wall in front of her, laced with starched white curtains. Sunshine and fresh air streamed in and made the room bright and open. The door opened and she looked over in hopes of seeing the doctor bringing her new little one to her. It was not the doctor. It was Clark. His size was overwhelming in the room and Merille felt stifled by his presence.

"What are you doing here? Where is Samuel?"

"I've brought him to see you." Clark's voice was quiet, almost a whisper, but the tension was there. Samuel came in behind him. He had a bruise under his left eye and his lips were red and cracked.

"Mommy!" Samuel ran to the bedside and reached up to be held. Clark picked up the boy and laid him beside his mother. Samuel put his face into her neck and gently rubbed her hair. Merille kissed Samuel's head as tears trickled down her cheek.

"What have you done, Clark?"

"I guess he just needs his mother." He shrugged nonchalantly.

Merille clenched her teeth and looked down at Sam.

"Mommy here, Samuel."

Clark stood and stared out the window for a few minutes before glancing down at the two again. "If you want to have us back, the baby has to go, Merille. I don't want a little mongrel child running around under my roof reminding me of what you did for the rest of my life."

The doctor walked in and Clark picked up Samuel. "We will be in the waiting room."

The doctor sat down on the side of the bed and took Merille's hand. His face was full of deep wrinkles and his grey hair wisped in directions it wasn't really supposed to. His eyes were brown and soft and he seemed to be full of gentleness.

"Mrs. Hampton, I'm aware of your situation. You gave birth to a strong baby boy. He's a good eight-pound baby. Now, I know what I'm telling you is hard and I'm sorry for you, but there is a family right now that is waiting to adopt a newborn. I am willing to recommend your little one to the agency."

"May I see the little one, doctor?"

"It's probably better if you don't, Mrs. Hampton, considering the circumstances. It will be easier for you if you don't."

She closed her eyes and let her mind drift. The doctor could bring her baby into the room and lay it into her arms. A little life in her arms, bobbing for her breast. She could take him and watch him grow. She imagined holding him on her hip in the yard while she hung clean quilts on the line. Who would *he* be? Thomas. She would call him Thomas. He would be cooing by this summer and flailing his hands meaningfully. Samuel would run around and act silly, trying to make his little brother laugh. Samuel. O, Samuel. A pained gasp escaped her with the devastation of it all. She asked the doctor for the papers and with tears and ink, she signed away her newborn child. For five minutes, no one

tears and ink, she signed away her newborn child. For five minutes, no one moved. Merille stared. The doctor shuffled.

"Doctor?"

"Yes, my child?" His voice was tender.

"Does my little one have hair?"

The doctor chuckled quietly. "Yes, dear, a dark head full of it."

"Like the father." She twisted her mouth thoughtfully. "Could you . . . perhaps, cut a piece for me . . . a piece of the hair I mean, doctor? Please."

She left the hospital the next day with a lock of soft dark hair tucked into the bottom of her purse. Her husband and Samuel took her home. Samuel stayed close to her the whole day and he would continue to cling to her skirt for the next few weeks. That night, when she was alone, she took the lock of hair and put it inside the coffee cup that she had glue together. The cracks were obvious, and some little pieces were missing. She hid the cup and the lock of hair inside the chest where she kept the quilts.

"Students Applying Theory"

They struggle as people do
to gather meanings unto their lives.
They reject romantic flowers.
They become freer with machines,
more offensive. They invent radar
to shoot down Luftwaffe bombers.

How pleased they are to trace
the flaring paths of fighters,
enter the battle at any impure point,
locate its simple dualisms
and watch them clutch
each other in breech blocks.

Derridas shouldn't be angry
at all the gritty beginnings
they've inspired. Liberties
arrive like surprise attacks.
These, too, will be repulsed.
Each flight is new, each bomber crew.

"Studying Abroad"

Ashley McMillan was a traditional college student; she lived in Manhattan as a student at Columbia University. Having grown up in the city, she wouldn't consider moving away. She visited her grandparents every weekend in Brooklyn, attended church, and participated in local service projects; her life was comfortably stable. However, when the opportunity for her to travel abroad came open, she surprised herself and challenged that comfortable state by trying something different. Ashley studied abroad in Hungary during the fall semester of her junior year. Throughout the course of the trip she had amazing experiences, lifetime memories, and a great wealth of new knowledge. It was only the last week that everything went awry.

During the last week of her trip, Ashley met a man at a bar by the name of Peter Kovács, who was just a few years older. They met when ordering drinks, and continued to talk throughout the night. At the end of the night, Peter asked Ashley to come back to his place, but she said no. So they kissed and parted ways, after agreeing to meet each other again the following night. The same routine happened on the second and third nights. They met at the bar, shared a few drinks and each other's company. When the night would come to an end, Peter would ask Ashley to come back with him, and Ashley would respectfully say no. They would kiss and part ways until the next night.

On the final night of Ashley's trip, Peter arranged for a special romantic evening; they laughed and shared stories at an exquisite restaurant. That night Peter asked for her to come to his place, just as she had come to expect. That night Ashley struggled to say no—she had grown attached to Peter after spending her final week in Hungary with him. She wanted to go with him, but knew that her flight departure day was approaching and she needed to prepare to leave. They kissed one last time before they parted forever, more passionately than ever before.

The time came for Ashley to board her plane, and she went back home to NYC with the crowd of holiday tourists. As Christmas approached, she began to develop an uncomfortable rash. She determined to for an examination. The doctor asked her about her trip to Hungary.

"Did you feel any of these symptoms while you were abroad?"

"No. They started just after I came back."

"Did you have any reactions during the course of your trip caused by food or drink?"

"No, I ate the same food the last week as I did the rest of the trip."

"Let us investigate the specific type of rash, and we will contact you with the results."

It was New Year's Day before Ashley received a call from the doctor's nurse.

"Ms. McMillan, we have done extensive research and have found the rash you are experiencing is caused by direct contact with dead bodies."

Ashley gasped in bewilderment. She began to stutter over the phone as the nurse worked to comfort her, assuring her that the medical clinic could treat her. The nurse asked her if she could recollect any more details of her trip that might explain how the rash developed. In an epiphany, Ashley recounted the interaction with the Hungarian man Peter Kovács, and how she had been involved with him during the final week of her trip. At this revelation, the clinic contacted world police to track down Kovács. Less than a week later, as Ashley nervously prepared to the next semester's classes, she received a call from an international police officer.

"Ms. McMillan, we have found Mr. Peter Kovács. Unfortunately, we have some frightening news. When we searched his home, in the basement we found the body of a twenty-two year old American woman who had been declared missing by her family in California. The woman was a college student and had been studying abroad, just as you. We are just so fortunate that you never went to this man's home, or it may have been you in that basement."

Ashley wept.

"Elementary School"

The first time I thought I killed someone came above the mudflats of a marsh
When I threw a rock down the glittering sidewalk to how far it would travel,
Thrilled as it soared until I saw something moving in the distance.
I yelled just before it staggered and fell, papers floating from a reader.

Running to the boy clumped in the weeds, I begged God not to take him;
I pressed a handkerchief to his bloody nape and pleased him back to his
senses. Restoring his papers, I walked him home and received his mother's
screaming. That night I woke dreading he had died and police at the door in the
morning.

The second time I thought I killed someone I slammed my friend against a wall
For pulling down my pants in front of girls in the snack bar of a recreation hall.
There came a thump; his eyes went out, and he slid to the floor like a dummy.
The girls shrieked while I begged God to slay me and spare Bobby.
A counselor's ammonia under his nose returned my friend from the darkness.

The third time could come anywhere, for I have grasped my danger;
I don't need Dante to show me Hell. It's right here in my fingers.

"At the Bridge"

The stream that flowed under the bridge and into the adjacent pond was filled with colored rocks. They varied from every thinkable shade of the rainbow. Their presence in the stream did not appear natural or even meaningful, almost as if they had been placed there accidentally by mismanagement. The aged beauty of the bridge and the long reaching branches of green from the surrounding trees did not help their cause.

The husband and wife walked onto the bridge and stopped to look down into the quiet stream. Night was approaching soon and they decided to stay and watch the sun set behind the tall trees of the park.

"The water looks like a little kid was decorating his fish bowl with those tiny, colorful pebbles we used to buy. It's very pretty," said the wife.

"I guess so," the husband replied. He paused, then said, "But you understand that everything should be okay now? I've talked to the doctor and everything should work out."

"Yes, I understood you the first time. I've told you a hundred times today that I understand."

"I know. I'm sorry, but I want to make sure that you understood all that—"

"I understand," the wife said.

The husband continued. "I mean we can go on normally with everything we used to do. I've talked to close friends of mine, and they told me that you always come out stronger after these kinds of things happen. That your love for each other is bigger than ever."

"Even bigger than when we first dated?"

"Yes! That's the point, dear! We're better than we ever were." The husband smiled at his wife.

"So, how big would you say our love was in college?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was our love, say, as big as that sun? Or even the trees?"

"I wish you wouldn't joke about this. I'm trying to work this out. No, it's working out already." The smile had left his face.

"Yes, everything is fine. I know. I was only teasing."

The sun was close to falling entirely into the horizon. The sky was purple and orange and red. It looked promising and unforgiving.

"And Heaven knows that I'm sorry. I know I've told you before, but I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Would you look at me? I'm sorry," the husband said.

"It's okay, we're better than ever now, right? I'm happy, I swear," the wife said lightly.

"Why do you say things like that? Do you think this is easy for me, being the guilty one? I made a mistake, I know, but we've settled this. We've been to counseling at the church. I saw you cry in the pastor's shoulder and heard you say you forgave me. Don't be like this, okay? I can't put up with it."

The wife did not reply. She looked down into the stream, her vision of it slowly fading as the sun faded.

"I didn't mean that," the husband said. "Look, if you're worried about that, you don't have to. Like I said, the doctor told me we could make do. We'll have to be careful but you'll be all right, dear. The chance of you getting ill from me is so slim, I promise. When the doctor first told me I couldn't believe it. We have our second chance."

The wife looked up from the stream and said, "I like to think that our love in college was as big as that sun. What do you think? I wish I knew what we were now."

"What did I say about you talking like that? It worries me. I'm sorry, okay?" The husband grabbed his wife's hand.

"On second thought, maybe we're more like those colorful rocks down there. We were once this huge, beautiful planet, but we've crashed and broken into many pieces. And now we're stuck down here, under some bridge, unable to move anywhere. But at least people can come and look at us in enjoyment and say things like how we resemble a kid's fish bowl or something. In fact, before nobody could look at us when we were one big planet that was far away. But now they can. Now we're better than ever. Isn't that how it is?"

"They're just rocks painted different colors," the husband said. He started back across the bridge.

"I know," the wife whispered.

"The Night's Warrior"

For My Grandpa, Santiago González Fernández

Life hurries by on the other side of the window,
Train whistle, church bell, traffic roar;
From the head of the bed
Murillo's Virgin watches over him.
Suddenly, in his sleep his hand twitches,
The only one he can move,
And stiff fingers rub his nose.
I wonder if he will die today.
His chest rises and falls—
A sparrow hopping in the park.

He opens his eyes to the smell of afternoon coffee.
I pull him up in the bed and kiss him repeatedly.
He can't move, so my kisses land softly on his face;
The tough soldier who once rejected affection
Has become my prisoner.

Santiago stayed with us every August;
The rest of the year we care for his father,
My hundred-year-old great-grandfather Jesús,
A Republican and stranger
To his son, a Nationalist.
The civil war tore the family apart,
The women glued it back together.

My brothers dread his coming,
The proper stoic teacher,
But I love his lessons, sayings, beliefs,
"Love your job, save your money, keep your word,"
"There is one place for each thing and one thing for each place."
He was old-fashioned, unbending,
A knight of the Middle Ages, devoted to Mary.
His love was a wrapped gift, his love for us his work.

Another war rages at night, all night, until dawn.
We all hear him scream and then my mother's steps,
To squeeze an orange for his refreshment,
To calm his agonies, to give him water,
To clean him, to see if he is all right,
To change his posture in the bed. . . .
I wonder if he will die today.
I watch his chest rising, falling—
A sparrow hopping in the park.

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