**Brogue**

(brög), n.

1. a marked accent, esp. Irish or Scottish, when speaking English: *a sweet lilt of brogue in her voice*.

2. any strong regional accent.

3. a rough shoe of untanned leather, formerly worn in parts of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands.
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Belhaven University is home to the Arts: this allows for interesting opportunities that we as a student body are beginning to explore. Cannot the arts—music, writing, dance, and visual arts—unite to further fan the fire of creativity? Such was the question in the minds of students and faculty alike as we produced the Collaborative Concert, which showcased original musical compositions and choreography, as created by a team of musicians and dancers. I had the opportunity to briefly interview choreographers and composers; the overlapping content of their answers surprised me. The project members detailed their journey to the finished project in three parts: original concept, cooperative frustration, and something new. Composers and choreographers found themselves battling to fulfill their own creative vision; aggravation arose from being forced to allow their partner to alter this vision; but in the end, a new creativity grew out of the opposing ideas and a new piece of art was formed.

I am getting married. Everything is changing. These two sentences rumble continually inside me, spinning round and thumping against my bones as though I am a walking washing machine. In a short time, I must alter my pronouns: no more me or mine, but we and ours.

When I think of collaboration, I think of marriage. A friend once described marriage as two saplings planted very close to each other; starting as two distinct trees, the saplings will expand upwards and outwards. Because of growth and proximity, the trees will grow into one another, twisting and melding into an inseparable one where once was two.

I believe that in that shift between the singular to the united lays the secret of collaboration.

I find myself anticipating marriage in much the same way these students anticipated the collaborative show. I know I have ideas, plans; I know my fiancé has plans, different from my own. But I also know that we both desire something new. We know there will be frustration, but through it we hope to twist and bend to one another, growing into each other. The Creative Writing students have sought the same act: to meet other artists in creativity, in an effort to mould their works into new shapes.

Because after all, through becoming something new, the trees are able to reach farther and grander heights, spreading beauty across the sky. In that change of being—in the shift—there is true collaboration.

Mary Morris, Senior Editor of the Brogue
Collaboration
“The soul of Mexico is very old...whoever claims to know it is either a liar or a fool.”
–Cormac McCarthy

Cottonwoods huddle against the wind and mesas rise on the east and west banks of the Rio Grande—the rim of this world.

The current, dammed up North to swamp fields of onions, pecan groves, plots of chile, is slow and plodding here in the South.

It is all shallows; the water trickles between sandbars. I clamber into the riverbed and walk the waterline. A sun-bleached root breaks out of the caliche, its tree long-dead and carried off.

When this was Mexico, la Llorona wandered these banks, called for her drowned children in the night, her ashen skirt snapped in the wind.

Back then, the water flowed freely. Billowing clouds of silt rose from the bottom, lechuguilla stalks pierced the sky like swords. The Jornado del muerto began and ended here—the last stop for water on el camino real before the trail snaked through dry-lake beds and the malpais. A dove starts from the cattails, glides on the wind currents and its twin, reflected in the water, flickers in the river’s unhurried flow out to the Gulf, and to the end of it all.
St. Francis of Assisi
silver gelatin print
ADIE SMITH
Stairwell

silver gelatin print

ADIE SMITH
The Turning
BY ADIE SMITH

It moves swiftly now
in the stillness that comes with dusk—
the daylight, sliding the breadth
of the wall.

I wait for sleep to come, to roll in,
a tide lapping against my limbs, trying to pull
me out into a sea of dreams. I lay and watch
the evening crawl in,

stealing light and blurring edges.
Beneath the open window, the curtain billows
across my face, caught in the draft’s ebb.
The sounds are magnified by sleep—

train cars boom together, an owl faintly calls,
and the squirrels rustle and squeak in the walls,
the thin division not enough to muffle their claws,
scuffling between studs, beams and plaster.

I’ve heard shadows are not real,
these hollow forms are just the absence
of light. The space left
by the positive—holes in light.
The Young
BY MARY MORRIS

She walked almost pigeon-toed
And when she scratched
Her nose she did so with her middle finger

Because that’s the way the old men
Did it. Those men lined the street towards home,
Keeping her away from store windows
with wooden becheched boards and ivory pieces.

Once young, these old men
And their soft and sagging parts
Held for her a wanton fascination.

When she reached home, she
Would sail down to the floor
And stretch

Her spindly legs into the air. Though her mother
said it was unladylike—
But her mother said many things, and
Had tight skin and almost

No soft places. Her small feet would dangle
Before her face while she thought
About squinty old eyes and mirthfully
Studied the austerity of wiggling her toes.
The Young
silver gelatin print
ALLI BOSTROM
Concern for Oiseau

BY SKYLER BREADY

Dear child, God forbid
that you, in some moment of passion,
tell the damn fool you love him,
set off for a job and a child,
kiss the face of modern America.

You are conditioned for well water,
fresh eggs, swamp air, finger gloves,
motorbikes, the orange grove,
your brother asking riddles
and your mother squawking tagalong.

Dear child, I certainly hope
that you know what you're doing.
You've got a lot to gamble,
and I can't stomach the thought
of being the one to hoist you out again.
Swaying over heraldic
burnt-orange shag carpet, we bowed
like grass stems vivid after rain—
Mrs. Brenda’s hair-raising, harmonicaean
moan soaring, at intervals,
to the chorded pitch and incredible puissance
of my little brother’s wooden
train-whistle. We children
would try not to laugh when the Spirit
stirred and men like leaves
crumpled on the floor where the ripe afternoon
sun spilled through faux-stained-glass
portals, blundering
paths through the motes
of the rented sanctuary’s atmosphere.

Oooobo bomo sokoto sitae, sitae, sitae,
my father would murmur with eyes closed, sweating
slowly in the quiet indoor sun, his face
a map of adoration printed
over dignified deep
bone structure and deep, rapt
peace. In the shadow of his outstretched
arms I spread uncertain fingers, sifting
the light from hand to hand. Eeeesobo
la tomanta sitae, sitae, sitae.

Aeddun iafeth ffawn, my heart
ventured, arranging
the lettering as I liked, hoping God wouldn’t
mind my trying to receive
the gift of Welsh.
On April 23rd I decide Rhonda Birch is lovely. Rhonda is indigenous to the front pews, and I the back; therefore I have never heard her sing. The Birches are late this morning. Rhonda comes in with her chest-length, chocolate hair looking gorgeously wet, and her normal row is taken by the O’Malleys because their cousins are visiting. She, her parents, and her seven-year-old brother have no choice but to sit in the penultimate pew, just in front of me, and before the service starts she turns around and says hello brightly. I give her a respectful nod. Ordinarily, I love the hymns because they honor the Lord and I find the literary style of the lyrics edifying; but the way Rhonda sings “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” slices through my solemnity. She is beautiful. Her voice is cuttingly honest and finds heart without ever straying off-key. Its high pitch commands my attention; it is the morning sunlight raiding the stained glass.

I wonder if there is something wrong with me. My lips barely move when I sing hymns.

The thought comes to me again as Reverend Morrow leads the congregation in prayer. Me, shouting so loud the church shakes. Despite the fact that I do not even know what I sound like yelling, I cannot remove the image from my mind. I am ridden with guilt. The idea is disrespectful and a horrible thing to think. Eventually I am able to inch my thoughts away, although the urge flashes back a few times before the service is over. It is not as bad as some Sundays.

After the monthly church dinner, we begin the process of cleaning. Most of the adults have conglomerated in their jovial discussions, and it is teenagers like Rhonda and I to whom the job is delegated (though the younger ones like Courtney, Stefan, and Malachi are off playing kickball). Rhonda always cleans the dishes—a task I despise due to the grease—but I have never seen her frustrated. I wipe down the tables, looking for shine in every square inch of wood. I love the citric fragrance of soap.

After she’s finished, Rhonda comes into the fellowship hall, and I instigate a conversation.

“Hello, Rhonda,” I say.

“Richie!” Her face lights up.

My name is Richard. But I don’t mind.

“How are you?” I ask.
“I’m good,” I watch her say. Rhonda’s blood-red lips combine with her pale skin to give her the appearance of a 40’s film star—the kind with a black dress and cigarette holder. But there is nothing mysterious or seductive about Rhonda Birch. Her eyes are too big, too playful inside. “Did you have a good week?”

“I did. There was nothing particularly eventful…”

Though I have given her nothing to talk about, the smile she sends to me is sincere, as if all the uncomfortable air I feel between us is a breeze. I want to tell her that she sings beautifully, but this would be too forward. Instead I ask, “Do you enjoy doing the dishes?” as cordially as I can.

She nods. “Yeah. It’s calming actually... How ‘bout you with the tables?”

“It’s fine.”

Soon Ms. Evelyn Gardner approaches Rhonda. Instead of apologizing for the interruption, she requests that Rhonda walk her to her car, which Rhonda says she is happy to do. After some contemplation, I decide it is not overly bold to follow them.

Ms. Gardner is a widow. While she is significantly old, her face is smooth and pleasantly flush, reminding me of a peach. During most conversations I have had with her, she has been overly kind. Every now and again my mind snaps with the compulsion to punch into her face. Bruise the peach. I ponder the fact that the urge is absent this time.

Outside the sky is crystalline. Rhonda helps Ms. Gardner into her silver car and waves her off with sparks in her eyes. Before I get another word in, her brother Joey comes running up to her with a scraped knee leaking red. I would treat it with hydrogen peroxide myself, but Rhonda stoops over and covers him in a hug.

“Hush. It’s okay.”

I am assaulted by her voice’s sincerity. In fact, I cannot help but smile. Her heart is out of its cage, and I can tell by the way she erases Joey’s tears that it is pure.

I have to follow this. My heart is corrupted and has been for as long as I can remember, but her. If I get closer to Rhonda Birch, perhaps I can discover how purity works. I know it will be a difficult process, but I am excellent at being patient when focused on the goal. By autumn, hopefully, we will think of each other as friends.

During the first few hours of April 24th I am unable to keep my mind off her, but by the time biology hits I am back in the mode of learning—organizing graphics and hypothetical information in my mind. I head to Room C05, certain I completed my calculus quiz with one hundred percent and nearly two thirds of tonight’s homework. My mind is abuzz with equations. No sooner do I enter the room than I am accosted by the odor of formaldehyde—a blend of rotten fruit and the scent of a dentist’s office—and I remember today is dissection day.

I already know I am not going to be able to do it. I prefer microbiology. The thought of cutting open the soaking prunes in the shape of rats disgusts me even though both of my parents are
veterinarians. I detest animals.

“Listen up!” shouts Mrs. Kelley. She is monstrously tall with graying red hair.

“Here’s the skinny: You’re getting your rats today, in reverse group order. Please don’t get picky, even though bigger is better. Save it for the lunch line. Now, by the end of class you’ll have peeled off the outermost layer of skin—get off all that nasty fur, just chuck it. If you have time, make the incision and get the heart and lungs exposed. By Wednesday you should be slicing into the guts, and Friday is the last day I’ll be examining your work without points being lost. Instructions are in your packets. Let me know if you need help, but there’s one of me and twenty-six of you, so patience with me is as paramount as it is with the actual process of getting to know our little friends, okay? At the end of class, make sure to fold back all the skin so you don’t make a mess, put your rat in a plastic bag and write your name on it, and wash everything. That’s it. If you didn’t get a packet Thursday or Friday, there’s extras on the desk.”

My partner Charlie, whom I have already informed of my reluctance, nods and goes to dissect alone, while I walk to Mrs. Kelley’s desk.

“Richard, I have bad news for you: I was grading your test last night, and you got one wrong.” She looks up from her papers to smile.

“Mrs. Kelley, I was hoping—”

“You don’t have to dissect.” Right—why wouldn’t a mind that sharp remember? “If your partner’s still okay with it, I’m fine if you just do the paperwork.”

“Could you write me a library pass?”

She finishes a sip of her Danimals drink. “I could, indeed.”

I do not smile as she signs her name because it is embarrassing how much I admire her. Mrs. Kelley is wonderfully intelligent, articulate, witty; and most incredible of all is the kindness she shows me. It’s humbling. As she turns her head up I feel an instinct to kiss her. This is illogical. She is nearly fifty, and I am not attracted to her. But she smells nice. I feel guilty.

I take the pink slip as quickly as possible, saying, “Thank you,” completely clean of emotion.

Through the majority of my trip I am obstructed by two girls and one guy whom it would be impolite to pass, so I listen to the group’s conversation. They discuss videos they viewed on the Internet and people with whom they are upset, and this epitomizes the quotidian dialogue of my public high school. People speaking directly to me—typically new and lonely students—are shocked and horrified regarding my unfamiliarity with the Youtube phenomena. They rattle off a list of five-minute shorts, insistent of my need to watch them. If they do not try to bond through this pseudo-evangelism, they typically talk about something they hate—the cafeteria food, a class, a clique that serves as the antithesis of their own—hoping that I will hate it as well and we will begin complaining about it together. In my high school, commiseration is evidence of an authentic connection.

Only near the end of my walk do they notice I’m behind them. The girls say, “Hello, Richard Lambert,” and giggle. The boy, a declared
homosexual, appears indifferent. My life is rarely comprised of more meaningful words than these. I am talked at and, on special occasion, talked to because of my atypical disposition. Males will ask for help on their homework and jokingly hyperbolize how smart I am—I am a recurring character in the sitcom that is each of their lives. Females will smile, give a flirtatious greeting, and then continue on with their days. At least other students like me. Or their perception of me.

I do not actually go to the library. A television in there is eternally playing the news, and celebrity posters litter the walls, goading the masses into reading (or at least into smiling prettily with a book in one’s lap). And of course the library is the watering hole of students who went to the bathroom forty minutes ago. They play various games on the Internet and swap complaints when hit with a blocked website, all while doing thumb cardio with their cellular phones. I am intensely uncomfortable there.

It’s spring, meaning the gym classes will be outside and the gymnasium will be empty. I enter and my steps make cold echoes in the vastness as I examine the room. The high windows emit calm light. Everything is still. Clean.

Aesthetically I enjoy the notion of sitting in the very center of the gym, but to do so would be narcissistic. I sit on the bleachers in a corner and complete as much of the dissection packet as currently possible before finishing the calculus assignment. After this, I decide to review microbiology, namely the chapter on the cell membrane. I re-familiarize myself with the concepts of diffusion, passive transport, and equilibrium. I study the chart on sodium-potassium pumps, and I must wonder how we know all of this is real. Of course, it is intelligently hypothesized and rigorously tested, but I confess that at times my love for microbiology cracks under the weight of utter uncertainty. Can we, as humans, know for certain what happens at this level?

But then I see the visual for the cell membrane’s fluid mosaic structure. The shiny, purple blobs that are the proteins find themselves wedged between the neat beads that comprise the phospholipid bilayer. There are bright orange compounds of cholesterol and green carbohydrates arranged in ways that make them seem fit for display in a museum of abstract art. The molecular chemistry, the beautiful micro-ecosystem, appears so simple, so obvious, that I cannot help but sigh in relief.

Then my mind begins a list of all the ways I could destroy the book.
My parents are both still at work when I get home. They are extremely hard-working people.

I go to the basement and complete my routine of 120 push-ups, 140 crunches, and 60 pull-ups. Three days of each week are dedicated to anaerobic and aerobic exercise—tomorrow I run on the treadmill. Before I return upstairs I box with a punching bag, which I take very seriously. My technique is minimalist. I inherently know the object before me is inanimate and that the exercise is for fitness purposes only.

I go upstairs and bathe, although beforehand I end up spending a quarter of an hour cleaning the bathroom. Once I am dried off and dressed, I consider what I should busy myself with until dinner, since all of my homework has been completed. I could listen to classical music. However, I have not purchased any new collections in some time; when I listen to pieces I have already analyzed numerous times my mind wanders, which cannot happen now. I enjoy drawing as well, but when I drew the previous Saturday I was disturbed by the thought of tearing the paper in half.

I slowly climb upon my bed, and then I bury my head in my knees. I begin to cry, but only in small amounts.

My mind feels as if it cannot breathe. I tell myself this will pass, but I have been waiting for such a long damned time, and I have put so much discipline in my life for no reason I can see. I exercise, but my body feels made of water. My well-fed mind cannot refrain from perverting everything. I cannot do anything real. I am empty.

I hear something hit the window. I don’t know what it is but label it nothing of import until it happens twice more. I put my face to the glass to find Rhonda Birch below, waving like a child.

My heart stitches itself up immediately.

I find a Kleenex and remove my tears before heading downstairs. I head past the kitchen and open the side door.

“Hey.” Even in a sweatshirt and jeans she appears to be glowing.

“Hello.”

“I was taking a walk, and I just—I dunno. I wanted to say hi.”

The exuberance in her stutters makes her wonderful. “That’s very kind of you,” I say.

“So what are you doing?”

I might as well tell the truth. “Nothing.”

“Would you like to come on a walk with me?”

I notice how there is no trace of fear or reluctance in her demeanor, and I say, “I would like to, very much. Let me grab my coat.” I would invite her in—she has only been to my house once, four years ago when her family first moved here—but it would not be ethical while my parents are not home.

We head into the woods, where the greenery is so vivid I can scarcely remember my pallid high school. We don’t speak; but, for reasons I can’t explain, I know that neither of us minds. I’m not sure exactly how far we’re allowed to go because I don’t come out here much anymore. I know portions of the woods have swapped ownership, and I do not want to trespass. The branches shake above me and I wonder
what is in her mind—what’s inside her. I decide that if she has enough boldness to throw rocks at my window, it is acceptable for me to be frank.

“You know, I’ve always wondered,” I say. “Your kindness to everyone. Were you always that way?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re very compassionate.”


I don’t believe it, but the fact that she does makes me pause.

“So what about you? Were you always so smart?”

I sigh. “Well, it’s not really about smartness. Around fourth grade I decided to take my schoolwork much more seriously.”

She nods. “So were you crazy as a kid then?”

“Not particularly. I mean, I can’t remember. I know I used to come out into these woods and hunt insects. I would pin them, and I put them in a glass case. I believe the collection is currently in the attic.”

“Well, you should show me sometime.” She leaps over a creek; I’m more careful in my procedures. “Because I can’t picture you as a kid, you know?” she continues. “You’re strait-laced.”

I give a small laugh because I like the word. “Well, I promise you it is nothing I do on purpose. At one point I simply comprehended the futility in some activities.”

“No fourth grader says ‘futility’,” she laughs.

She’s just like a kid; it’s as if every element of the world is magic to her.

“I started looking for the end result of things because I realized that type of work is satisfying. Patience is one of the most important virtues.” That and self-control.

I catch her staring at me. She looks away fast.

“Well, sure,” she says. “I guess in a way, without patience the world would... well, it would probably just crack right in half. But the most important virtue is love.”

“Love,” like “the” and “nice,” is a word that through excessive use has lost all meaning. But Rhonda’s voice makes it sound like she just invented it. I can’t remember its connotations let alone its denotation, which I am sure is not concrete, anyway. I try to recall its meaning but cannot separate it from this very moment.

“It’s definitely Biblical,” she says before attempting to recite, her fingers drumming on her chin. “If I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”

I finished setting fire to my body not even an hour ago. On my bed all I could feel was that it was for nothing. I’m skeptical; but I can find no blemishes in the concept she presents. That maybe, in some ethereal way, this sunflower of a girl next to me is the element in my life that is missing.

“If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge... And if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love—”

“I am nothing.”
A few days pass. My outlook improves. With more time spent on walks with Rhonda comes less time spent on academics, but I have worked so far ahead in my classes that this is of little consequence. I notice that I have greater difficulty concentrating when I work at home, but justify it with the idea that the human mind is naturally inclined to have a spring break. The days are getting long, and since walking after school is impractical for both of us—we have to get home in time for dinner—we frequently walk after eating until dusk. We watch the woods turn lavender before we sink into blindness, and then I walk her home.

We discuss a myriad of things, from Scripture to the people we know from church. Sometimes she talks about being homeschooled, and I describe the public education system as best I can. On occasion I teach her some microbiology, which she understands superficially at best, but it fascinates her. Once we hold hands. But this leads me to think about how soft her skin is—and hairless, like some Greco-Roman masterpiece. After that I can’t stop thinking about what it would be like to slice it. I know I would never do it, but the urge does not care. It sticks, a filthy mark on the walls of my mind. Sometimes it seems like it’s growing, but I can’t say for certain, which is maddening.

I love her. I hate that I feel guilty for spending time with her.

One day she invites me to a dance recital a friend of hers is in. I would feel bad saying no, and so on Friday night I borrow my father’s car and drive us to Corinthian, a private Christian school on the southern side of town. There was recently a fire there that made all the newspapers—purportedly due to poor lab equipment—and after I park, I look up expecting to see a monstrous, carbonic chomp out of one of the roofs. But in fact, I cannot tell where the fire happened. All I see are ordinary buildings, a large and dirty fountain, and a few columns in the style for which the school is named.

Ordinarily dance makes me extremely uncomfortable. The way the people move, and frequently how thinly they are dressed, frequently makes me feel as if I am seeing beings in their most naked state. However, I am impressed by the precise synchronization of these dancers. By the end, when the modern pieces depict struggle and torment, I understand not merely the beauty but the imperative nature of expressing oneself.

Strangely enough, Rhonda is distant throughout the performance. She has brought with her yarn and two crochet hooks and begins making a scarf before the lights even dim. At first, her pace is moderate, but at some points—sometimes even during slow songs—it escalates to an unnerving level of dexterity. Her hands take the hooks bouncing and weaving through the complex of threads like an ungodly machine that would mutilate stray fingers.

She finally puts it down when the last dancers bow and the lights come back in full bloom. We push through the crowd to her friends who have more make-up on than a pair of geishas. Rhonda congratulates them with her beatific sincerity. I introduce myself, say it is nice to
meet them, and add that I enjoyed myself very much. They seem kind, but we don’t get to talk to them much before they receive flowers from other friends, whom they must turn their attention toward.

“Would you like to go?” says Rhonda. She heads out before I can even respond.

“You’re an amazing friend, Richard. Thank you for accompanying me.” We’re outside under a riot of stars, and she sits down at the fountain.

I sit beside her and enjoy the clean vapor. “You’re welcome.” And then I have to get up because of how easily I could push her in.

I know I have to tell her about these urges—they’re not normal, and she deserves to know. But the push for sincere expression of self battles my every fear she will see me for the monster that I am. And without this girl—my source of purity—I have no hope...

I summon courage and say with a parched throat that I have something to confess to her. My heart pumps inordinately fast. I become sure I am not going to be able to say it, but with a flare of irritation at myself it shoots out: “Sometimes when people are praying in church I just want to yell.”

Her sable eyes communicate nothing to me, so I have to continue.

“My mind isn’t right.” My voice is cracking, which it never does. “Pretty much all the time I want to do things no sane person would ever consider.”

“Well, like what?” The normality of her tone indicates she doesn’t understand.

I pace a little. It’s like I’m holding in vomit.

“Whenever something is good or important to me, I have the urge to destroy it. Like my drawings... or even people.” Hot moisture is growing on my eyes; I blink repeatedly to keep it under control.

“That’s not a big deal,” she says.

I cannot believe she has said this, and yet there’s something so fitting about Rhonda being able to overlook my flaws.

She says, “Well, no one’s perfect. I mean, I’m not immune. Look, I’m telling you everything’s going to be alright.”

The compassion in her voice purges all that’s rotten in my mind. I’ve been a proper citizen, but it seems like only now do I get it.

She takes a deep breath. “Look: Right after I got my iPod for Christmas I wanted to break it. I think I even wanted to dip it in the chocolate fondue,” she laughs. “Even though I really liked it—because I liked it. It’s the devil within us. We’re always thinking of ways to kill something that’s good.”

“I wanted to kiss my biology teacher,” squeezes out of my throat.

“Well... yes.” It seems she wants to forgive me but realizes I didn’t specifically apologize. “There are thoughts like that, too. I mean, Richard, you are really handsome,” she breathes. She’s ashamed.

“Well, no—I don’t want to. I just... feel like it. And you’re so kind to everyone, Rhonda Birch, and I’m bewildered and intimidated and enamored and a thousand other transitive past participle verbs because I don’t know how you’re so perfect. You’re too perfect.”
“Richard, I am not perfect,” she whispers. “I mean, I think about making Joey suffer all the time. Even last Sunday—I just wanted to tear at that gash.” Now her voice sounds damaged.

I don’t know what to say. She’s bowed with her hand on her forehead, sniffing every once in a while. I was expecting she would turn her emotions off—tell me to see a psychiatrist or that she’d like to go home now. Nothing like this. “Are we bad people?” she asks quietly. “I know you aren’t.” “Well, I know you aren’t.” She smiles. And she’s sincere. “So have you told anyone else?” She turns her head up, and my head shakes slightly. “I was pretty sure I was crazy,” I say. “Well, everyone’s crazy to a degree. It’s just... it’s weird, you know?” Her free hand twirls her hair. “I mean, Richard, you’re so disciplined.”

I think about it as the water continues to gush in the fountain. “Well, sometimes I believe it’s the discipline that makes me so frustrated—subconsciously, anyway. I mean, perhaps things have just been bottled up too long. And so my mind has no choice but to seek out satisfaction through these illogical actions.” I correct myself, “Thoughts.” Of course, this does not explain the expressive Rhonda. “I think it’s...wanting things to be permanent,” she counters. “I mean for example, I don’t need to throw this scarf into the fountain because it would just dry out. Maybe we’re looking for change in our lives.”

I think about the desires to pervert a student-teacher relationship, to ruin an MP3 device, to hurt Rhonda—all of them irreversible. “And if there was one action that we could perform and never take back,” I say, “then wouldn’t we want to do it to see what was on the other side?”

She looks off to the side and ponders. She has suddenly become calm. “I just felt so guilty,” I said. “There are times when I have thoughts about you that are not good. I need you to know it is not because I want to do them—they’re proof of how important you are to me, Rhonda.”

Rhonda Birch chuckles, gets up, and hugs me with one arm. I hold her close to me with one arm as well. Her free hand is holding the scarf in between our jackets, and on my stomach I feel the shifting of the shiny crochet hook. “It’s okay,” she tells me. “These urges are bad. I don’t know how to get them to go away, but we’re gonna help each other.”

Days dissolve. More walks in those gorgeous woods. We soak our wounds in each other’s springs, and our souls coalesce. She tells me all the horrible things she thinks about her brother, especially when she tries to get him to read (which at seven he still does terribly), and I tell her about Ms. Gardner and the pull to burn the books I enjoy most. I tell her when she teeters on the rocks she’s stepping over how
easy it would be to push her over.

“Don’t do that!” she laughs. So I put my arm around her, and she rests her head on my shoulder.

She also talks to me about her neurotic fear of heights. She always feels like leaping or dropping her phone over the edge—only now do I find out she has a phone since she never takes it out when she’s with me. After a week, however, we have exchanged all the horror stories we have. We know each other fully.

The urges are still there.

One night we’re lingering at the gate of her old-fashioned house and I ask her if she’s told her parents about me.

She shakes her head. “No. My parents know I can take care of myself.”

I run my thumb across her powder-soft palm. “You can take care of yourself?”

“Yeah.” She laughs. “God, I’ve had to—ever since Joey came into the picture.”

I love Rhonda’s eyes, reflecting galaxies. I want to kiss her, but that would be too much.

“Your parents?” she asks.

“No. Frankly, I’m kind of enjoying this being our little secret.” And it’s not particularly difficult to keep it that way—my father didn’t even ask why when I requested the car a week ago.

She nods. And we wait there longer, for some reason we are petrified to let air separate our hands. But we have nothing left to talk about. It’s Sunday: The long weekend is about to end, and I wish we could be back in the woods. Except we were there all day and I didn’t even feel at ease then.

I begin to panic, and I sense she’s restless, too. The silence we fell in love with is growing stale.

The following morning I get up when I feel like it. I speed through a Psalm before pacing my room aimlessly for a quarter of an hour. I wonder if Rhonda is going to come over after school today, and when I realize that she probably will it still doesn’t make me feel better.

I feel dirty. Today should be special, I think; we should confide in each other again, except we’ve run out of secrets to give. One of the urges pricks at my mind—a daydream about sticking my head out the window. It’s an interesting concept, and because I know I’ll never go so far as to do something dangerous, I am left in a state of curiosity.

I get on my bed, open the window, and stick my head out, looking at the drop below me. Two stories is a long way. I begin to empathize with Rhonda’s acrophobia, and I crane myself out further and further with my hands on the sill until my feet lift off my bed, and my entire body is tilting downwards.

I grin and then slowly retreat back inside. I can see why Rhonda expresses herself so vehemently—it’s therapeutic. In fact, sometimes it’s necessary.

Work throughout the day sobers me. I do not think expressly about Rhonda, although she is underneath my mind’s topsoil. During
biology class, there are several points during which I could speak to Mrs. Kelley regarding the packet, which is due today; but I find myself walking out of the room as the bell rings. It would have been too simple. Rhonda is going to be coming over this afternoon.

I come back after school to a room empty save Mrs. Kelley, who has the television play through the huge projector. There’s a commercial for Mr. Clean Magic Erasers that makes them look like they’ll bring your whole damn family back together, and I can’t help but see in it America’s idiotic need for everything to look nice. I’ve been there, micro-managing my life—thank God Rhonda saved me from it.

“Just wanted to make sure I had everything right with the hepatic portal system,” I say.

She puts my paper on my desk, leans over it for a few seconds, and then laughs, probably at my attention to detail. She hands it back to me. “That is quite adequate, Mr. Lambert.”

I notice how un-styled her autumnal hair is today, but I like it. “I’m ready to turn it in, then.” I put it in the tray on the counter before watching another commercial or two projected onto the huge, white sheet.

“There’s this one for Orbitz that my son really likes,” she explains, grinning. “I’m trying to catch it, ‘cause we don’t have a VCR that records at home.”

I nod.

“So what was it that scared you off, Richard? Was it the ethics?”

I put my hands in my pockets. “Not particularly. It just grosses me to death,” I say.

“There was this Jehovah’s Witness student a few years back who kept acting as if they were people, asking how they would feel about it.”

*About being hacked into by indifferent beings?* “Probably not good.” She tilts her head as her hand continues fiddling with a pen. “‘So powerless,’ she would say. ‘No control over what’s happening!’ She actually went to the principal, but he wasn’t too interested in her disapproval.”

“I’m religious, but not that religious.”

“For me, it’s just surreal to have creatures that once breathed and lived now soaked in chemicals that make them so immutable. You can cut ‘em open, then put all the skin back when you’re done.”

I look over to where they had been to find spotless tables with nothing but washed equipment stacked off to the sides.

“But I think it’s really important to get a real sense of life,” she concludes. “The diagrams in the book are helpful, but they give you no sense of what a miracle it is we’re dealing with.” A sitcom comes back on, so she says “dagnabbit” and switches to PBS.

I stay for a few more minutes. My mind’s crackling with bad ideas.

After school that day we’re in the woods again, and I tell Rhonda how hard it was to be normal when I like Mrs. Kelley so much. She totally understands. She says she was crocheting in her father’s study because it was so quiet, but she couldn’t stop thinking about burning
all of her father’s collected volumes, some over a century old. We sit on a large rock, and I bury myself in her redolent hair. Again I refrain from a kiss—I think somehow we’re both uncomfortable with the idea. Instead we just sway, soaking in the feeling. That good quiet is back again.

On Wednesday night we go to the state fair, where the lights shine hot and the air is thick with funnel cake dust and kids are chasing each other like roller coasters gone rogue. For some reason Rhonda’s fretting over the idea of me paying for her, even though I’ve told her several times I’d love to. It’s only after a ton of pleading that she comes out of her house with a fifty dollar bill and a tiny, excited smile.

I’m wearing the green scarf she crocheted regardless of the fact it isn’t that cold. After paying two bucks for a go at one of those milk bottle games, I eye up my targets without a whiff of emotion. Finally I sling the baseball like an animal. It murders the pyramid, and I feel unbelievable.

Now we’re walking around the carnival, me with the scarf and her with a huge stuffed butterfly she’s embracing like a child. She’s the best. We’re in the line for the Ferris wheel, and she gives a buck-fifty to a younger couple in front of us because the girl doesn’t have enough; they smile but don’t say thanks. She’s smiling, but I notice she’s shifting her feet for the rest of the wait. It’s an extremely long wait. By the time the wheel carries us to the top, my emotions have dribbled back down again and calmness has set in.

I look over the side of our car as we’re taken further and further up. The patrons below in a mass shuffle, and I watch them for a while. There’s a smattering of noise. So much letting loose. These people are chasing their dreams of couplehood and the image of a perfect family like lottery balls they hope will get picked. Anyone could be a winner. But everyone stays down there in scintillating futility. Shelling out dollars before returning to their pointless day jobs. Punching keys. Making lunches for the kids. Going for a healthy jog.

All so that nothing ever changes.

“What do they ever do?” I say quietly. And is there anything about my existence that could set me apart from their uselessness? I have my schedules and my knowledge, and I have never achieved anything. And now here I am with Rhonda Birch, trying to break free of my discipline, my typicality, in order to find some emotion I know at some point I felt it with her.

But I don’t feel it now. I can’t fool myself—this is just as pointless. Maybe the people below can believe in the carnival, but all we’re doing is burning cash. The mess of lights is an inferno.

I hadn’t thought Rhonda had heard me, but apparently she did. She replies, “They really don’t do anything,” at a similar decibel, “no matter what you do.”

Her hand comes over and interlocks itself with mine because we’re both having the same thought of jumping, because it would be a shock. We are utterly lost, and the only thing we can locate is each other.

Thursday night the Birch family ends up going to the fair again, so
I draw, considering the nuances of the desire to rip up all my laborious sketches. Friday evening is filled with quality time, but I continually think about shoving her. I hate the fact that the urges are still there; they were supposed to have gone away. Of course, now I know there is much more to them than I’d originally thought. I should get rid of them, though—I don’t like the way things are.

She comes over Saturday at ten. My parents aren’t home, so I invite her in because I feel like it. It’ll be a nice change of pace.

I give her a tour, since she hasn’t been over since the one dinner. Rhonda laughs and says it’s ridiculously clean, but judging from the outside I know her house is well-kept also.

I show her my room in all its organized stillness. She looks over my drawings without much interest. I would show her the bug collection, but I don’t feel like rummaging through the filthy attic.

She looks mildly troubled as her sight ricochets around the room. “So...” She looks at a chess trophy and my books and the small picture of my family. “Where’s the scarf I made you?”

“That’s in my closet.” I go over and open the door to show her. I have it off to the right in between all my coats.

She looks and gives a very tiny nod.

We sit in the living room for an hour, talking little. I keep thinking of things without much interest. I would show her the bug collection, but I don’t feel like rummaging through the filthy attic. We have a set of knives in our kitchen inserted into a clean black holder, and I take out a small one with a smooth gleam. My blood starts pumping. It may be a little crazy, but nothing is happening in my life. I have no way of knowing what’s what anymore. Not to mention this is honestly what is going on in my mind.

I take a step forward and graze the knife across her back. Something tells me I shouldn’t hurt her too much and so it doesn’t go deep; the slit’s three inches long max.

Immediately Rhonda whips around glowering. With a screech she tears my button-down open, and I feel her hard fingernails scratch my chest.

She stands panting. I stand there with my cold, pale torso exposed down to the last button, which she didn’t manage to pop off. We study each other with our minds half-eaten, and the whole kitchen’s so still that nothing distracts us. We might have been standing there for ten minutes with our thoughts vibrating. It takes a really long time to remember we are in the real world and what that means.

We don’t talk much as we clean up, probably because we don’t know what happened or what’s happening. Emotions are off. We’re
feverish. She takes off her T-shirt so I can treat the wound, and I’m not aroused. In fact, I find the mess repulsive.

I take care of the cut with hydrogen peroxide and some gauze, and the stain with more hydrogen peroxide and dish soap. Rhonda nimbly sews my buttons back on and her own shirt with my mother’s sewing kit, which we replace exactly where we found it. I wash the knife. In an hour all proof it even happened is gone.

Everything’s clean again.
Second Shift
Eternal Dance of Sun and Moon

BY JACOB ROWAN

Part I: The Moon
In folds of black velvet, flecked with diamond, rest the earth and watcher. A jeweled orb of sapphire, inlaid with pearl, bronze, and emerald. Above, a spirit whose robe is the wan aura of the moon.

The watcher weaves his dance, no rhythm marks his steps. His gaze is ever on the jewel, regard becomes rapture over sapphire seas. Duty and pleasure in the cold of space.

Below him bronze is tinged with crimson, as a crescent of light is followed by a wave of heat. The light in splendor, blazing bright, a woman whose robes are sunlight.

Shame and terror consume as silver light flees the gold-tinged crimson. The jewel a silent witness of a watcher who cannot bear to look.

Part II: The Sun
Radiant beauty once seen is not easily forgotten. The watcher’s gaze is ever turning, his light no longer faithful to the earth. His dance falters as he lingers, searching, longing.

The woman whose light is the sun again appears, gliding ever nearer he who waits, mired in nervous fears. The glory and brightness overwhelms and again the watcher cannot bear to look and so he flees.

Fragments of images, seared into his memory: The curving twist of flaxen hair, luminous as silk, skin pure and smooth as ivory, the flash of pearl teeth, fiery spirit in such a delicate vessel.
Despair, blacker than the velvet void,
swallows him. In grief he turns away
from the jewel below, reminded
only of the glory once reflected.

Part III: Eclipse
Unable to endure the empty void, he turns
and waits. He stands unfaltering as she draws
closer. Preferring the mystery and fear of the unknown
to the sure and present torture.

Heat washes through his body at her glance,
her eyes are blue beryl, more radiant than sapphire.
He turns away, ashamed of his pale and chilly
light, eclipsed by the fire of her beauty.

Her slender hand reaches out to lift his gaze,
He starts at the warmth of her skin,
accustomed only to the chill of the void.
They stand, eclipsed in each other’s light.

This is the tale of Sun and Moon’s
eternal dance, done untiring
from dawn of time till end
of days.
In Defense of Winter

BY LINDSAY GILL

“Ever winter,
When the great sun has turned his face away,
The earth goes down into a vale of grief,
And fasts, and weeps, and shrouds herself in sables,
Leaving her wedding-garlands to decay
–Then leaps in spring to his returning kisses.”

Charles Kingsley, Saint’s Tragedy, Act III, sc. 1

I disagree, Kingsley. I love it
when the snow has flaked the ground,
deadening the woods of any sound
past the flirting of Spring,
sweating Summer, fickle Fall,
the night all diamond-pricked
and sharp as the kettle’s whistle.

No more noise
From crowded, vernal scenes
of waking plants and roaming animals,
bleeding of over-used, stifling sentiment.
The world’s been enchanted
into a dark, stark dream,
folded in mystery and under ice.
With the solstice, time stops
and the earth breathes deeply
the crisp air to revive and
shake off the bustle of summer,
to drop the decay of autumn.
The wind whistles in the trees,
bringing back the memories of older days.

So, Kingsley. It’s Winter.
Beauty shows a dramatic face.
The front door slams,
admonishing the freezing judgment
for coming down
it gets such pleasure out of pelting me.
Dissolution has soaked me straight through
so I wipe my feet and shake out my hair,
hang up my face to dry,
then take off my pretenses which are sure to
stain the floor as they dehydrate
into a puddle of marrow-squeezed tears.
Only my loneliness is home to meet me—
I greet it with a sorry smile,
(though lately it’s really been
pissing me off).
But it’s nice to see a familiar face
especially since mine is mine own
for once
and the world outside is
more treacherous than the one within.
I sit before a fire of languor
and finally let my mind dwindle
into the thoughts I want to have—
an activity forbidden
out there.
Rain pours. I stay bent over, relentlessly streaming rich values deep into the page. Bold scrapings bending and grinding, bearing down on the line, forcing its completion as it fills and floods the canvas.

It’s a late night. Long streaks sputter against shrouds of middle-gray, splintering across as it pops and splatters across the sheet, the graphite runs down, falls away, branding the page, separating the light, highlighting the white in the quiet hours of darkness. Delicate but deliberate. Wild yet cautious. Fumes of charcoal disorient the striped spectacle. Pressure builds, hours pass, anxiety heightens when my pencil snaps, lines broken busted and bent in one ashen flash. I pause, fist clenched, to see its precious tip charred and horned; the fourth one tonight. I hear the rain again.

I ignore it, force it, cut deeper in its mark, strike the page with streaks of strangled gray—hue of steel and iron—as the page slowly illuminates in gradual scrapes, leaving trails of obscure black snowflakes that flow and flicker, fumbling to the ground.
Mannequins in a Store Display

BY SKYLER BREADY

Some distant mother
with whom I’ve never spoken
gave me high, Indian features,
a love of God the Father
which I’ve since spent up,
and bones like braided piano strings.

Some distant father
who never spoke much to anyone
gave me a thick set of English hands,
a love of the bottle
which I’ve seldom indulged,
and a mind like a ball of brambles,
barbed wire, and gilded electrical lines,
which he interspersed with silk.

Some father I met quite recently
with whom I’ve spoken quite often
gave me a book on art with an essay by Heidegger.
I’ve read that some relation of this man
gave him a proud German heart, with which
he marched too far.

I, instead of taking to those streets,
torch in hand, hate in heart,
might be careful not to slip my chains—
lest I and my brothers become gods,
and face the fear of the brake line cut,
the wrong turn made,
the dead end near.
The Black Widows  
by Angela Thomas

To anyone passing, they were just a pair of black high-tops that dangled by their laces on the utility line over Carcel Avenue. But to those who could decipher the code of the streets, the shoes told that crack cocaine was sold only a few feet away.

He hated those shoes. They always seemed to come back, no matter how many drug busts the police did. As long as there was a demand, someone would eventually supply. He hated how even with the wear and tear from Mother Nature, those shoes still looked better than the hand-me-downs on his feet.

“Your shoes may not be new baby, but at least you don’t have to look over your shoulder every second, not knowing if the police or death coming for you,” his grandmama once said to raise his spirits. But it was a temporary fix as the reminder of his reality hung above him when he walked home from his job as a grocery bagger.

Those shoes had done plenty. They stole his mother and replaced her with a shell enslaved to cocaine. They were the reason his little brother was afraid to walk to school any more. And those damn shoes were slowly sucking the life out of the neighborhood he called home.

It was because of them that, at seventeen, Khalil was the man-child of his household. His mama was strung out and didn’t think much of herself let alone her responsibility; his daddy was locked up and couldn’t do anything except call on holidays and try to tell him right from wrong behind prison walls. His grandmama had lost her job thanks to the latest cuts at the hospital. So it had been up to Khalil to provide the means that Social Security checks didn’t cover. But what he hated even more about those shoes was the way they tempted him.

Khalil didn’t understand how those shoes made him stop and stare at them at least once a day. This cloudless afternoon in July was no exception. The thumps of bass from a profane rap song blasted from a nearby truck and rattled the ground. Instead of laughter and frolic of children at play, the vulgar shouts between a fiend and her supplier filled the air.

Khalil was in the middle of Carcel Avenue. He gripped the bag of groceries he had barely been able to afford as he stared at those shoes. He could smell the stench of raw chicken in his bag as it thawed and dripped blood. He should have gotten the groceries home by now, but those shoes seemed to have summoned hands from the smoldering asphalt to grab his feet and keep him in place.
Think of everything you could have if you lived by our rules.

The fruits of the labor they offered weren’t hard to miss. Expensive cars sat in driveways of decrepit homes on Carcel Avenue. Their drivers wore only the best clothing and jewelry. They all had big smiles on their faces, showing teeth plated in gold, relishing in a life that offered fast money and lots of it.

They weren’t worried that their next paycheck may not keep a roof over their heads. They definitely didn’t have to choose between electricity and water for the next month. No, they flaunted their stacks of money in abundance and lived in a world where they only had to decide between yellow or white gold.

Khalil wanted that. His heart ached for that carefree life where a month’s worth of bills could be paid in less than one day. His hands itched for the ability to buy what he wanted, when he wanted it, without a second thought. He wanted more, he needed more.

And the shoes knew that. They were silent to natural ears, yet Khalil couldn’t ignore their call as he continued to stand in the middle of the street. They taunted his circumstances and, in the same breath, offered him a honeymoon in paradise.

All you have to do is say yes.

But he knew what he would be saying yes to. He would become an ‘ogre’ as his little brother used to call dope boys; he’d become everything he told David not to be. And he would be the reason someone else lost their mother.

Don’t think about that. Think of everything you could have.

He couldn’t. The shoes offered luxury, but at a price Khalil wasn’t ready to pay. They called and pleaded for him to listen, but he walked away from their spoils with his meager bag of groceries in hand.

The shoes waited and wove their web.

* * *

If we go with lights this month, I’m sure Ms. Rogers next door will let us get buckets of water from her house. Don’t worry about it baby, we’ll be okay.

Them folks downtown claim I get too much in Social Security to even get on welfare. It’s a damn shame.

I’m still hungry, Khalil. Don’t we got something else to eat?

If we can’t live here, where we gonna live, Khalil?

“Khalil! Bag her stuff!”

Khalil finally heard his best friend call to him, and he realized where he was. Miss Grant glared at him and lifted a cigarette to
her lips. She was in her usual Wednesday attire: a purple mumu, slippers, and rollers in her hair. An occasional drop of water fell to her shoulders—she must have rushed over from Miss Layla’s shop across the street before she went under the dryer.

She waited for him to bag her carton of Newports and took a long drag on her cigarette. “Boy, you gone just stand there or what? I got stuff to do,” she said. “Need to give the job to somebody else if you ain’t done it right.”

Khalil shoved the box into her bag and passed it to her. “Have a nice day, Miss Grant.”

“Damn shame,” Miss Grant cursed. A light ding sounded as she left the store.

“You got somewhere to be or something?” Starr asked. “You’re so distracted.” She hopped on the cash register counter and grabbed some Doritos from an open bag nearby. She smirked at him. “I didn’t know you had a life.”

Starr had been Khalil’s friend for as long as he could remember. The two of them used to be “attached at the hip” as his grandma would say. At one time it was the three of them, but Nashia...

“Hello, earth to Khalil,” Starr called out. “For real, what’s going on in that head of yours today?”

In the early afternoon, Mak’s store was empty. It was summer, and most kids were probably just getting up. The older ladies who usually came in to buy groceries during the day had already done so, or were waiting until their ‘stories’ went off of TV before they came. So Khalil could talk without the worry that his private conversation would be going across the older folks’ phone lines before the day was over.

“We got the notice today.”
“What notice?”
“The notice.”

An alarm clock hadn’t awakened Khalil that morning. Instead, the thuds against his front door had. His little brother slept through it, but Khalil and his grandma got up in time to see it was their landlord. The thuds, full of purpose, had been him nailing an eviction notice to their door.

“Mr. Green, you know I will pay you as soon as I can, but things are hard right now,” his grandma said. Khalil balled his fists at his sides as she begged and pleaded, pleaded and begged.

They had ten days. Khalil was supposed to be the man of the house, yet there wasn’t a thing he could do about it.

“I gotta do something, or we’re gonna be on the streets soon,” he said. Starr offered him Doritos but he waved them off. There wasn’t anything in those chips that would keep a roof over his head.

“You should tell my dad,” Starr said, and Khalil bristled.

“I ain’t going to your dad every time I have a problem,” he said. “He gave me this job, that’s enough. I’ll figure it out.”

Another ding rang out in the store. A group of teenage boys came in, laughing among themselves. All of them wore baggy jeans and oversized T-shirts with gaudy chains draped over them. One of them
was talking on a cell phone as his watch and rings glistened brightly. Khalil looked at their shoes.

All of them were wearing brand new kicks without a scuff or blemish on them. They were gold compared to the old, worn pair on Khalil’s feet. He watched their shoes right up until they came to the register with arms full of snacks.

“You not even supposed to be in here,” Starr mumbled. She rang the items up anyway. The guys chuckled.

“You need to chill out, baby girl,” the one with the cell phone said. “Your daddy ain’t even here. I don’t know why he tripping about us coming in his store anyway. I’m not gone steal nothing,” he said. “Besides, he should like me. I’m going to marry his daughter one day,” he tried to touch Starr’s cheek, but she swiftly pushed his hand away and glared at him as the others laughed.

“Keep your hands off me,” she said.

The one with the cell phone smiled, revealing gold plated teeth. “Oh, so you, bougie, huh?” he asked. “You think you all that, cause your daddy own this store and you go to that rich kid school in the hills? Let me guess,” he looked to Khalil and back. “You wanna get with this chump? The bagger boy?”

The group laughed collectively. Khalil’s jaw tightened and he clenched his fists.

“For real, how much you make, man?” The gold-plated teeth one asked. “Cause from the looks of it, Mak ain’t paying you crap. Look at them ol’ shoes you got on. Probably can’t even afford to buy my socks.”

The laughs got louder, but they couldn’t drown out the begging and pleading, pleading and begging of his grandmother that morning. He stared at their shoes and remembered the faithful pair hanging on Carcel Avenue, waiting for him, longing for him.

“Get out! And don’t come back!” Starr yelled. Khalil barely heard the group curse back at her as they left the store. All he heard was the promises of those shoes as they called for him blocks away.

_It won’t be so bad._

Starr put her hand on his shoulder and for a moment, the shoes were silent. “Don’t let them get to you, K. They’re jerks.”

_It’s easy for her to say. Look at all she has._

Khalil looked around the small grocery store. It wasn’t much, but it was more than his family had.

_See what doing the ‘right thing’ will get you?_  

_It wasn’t much._ All of the people Khalil knew who had ‘much’ were the ones he condemned while he tried to hold on to his nothings. He had struggled, and the harder he fought to do right, the worse things got. He could end up homeless because he was doing the right thing.  

_All you have to do is say yes._

Khalil pushed Starr’s hand away. “I don’t wanna work in this store for the rest of my life.”

His friend’s eyes widened. “Nobody said that, Khalil. One day you can go to college and—”

“I can’t save for college! Don’t you get that?” he shouted. “We got bills that need to be paid now. We could end up on the street in ten
days. And your pops ain’t about to give me no raise,” he said. “I gotta make money.”

Khalil left with those words and nearly knocked Starr’s dad over on his way out. He was sure he heard Mak say something to him, but Khalil kept going. He didn’t stop until he reached Carcel Avenue where the shoes waited patiently.

It was on that sweltering July afternoon that he agreed to the shoes’ proposal.

*   *   *

The leaves on the trees were turning a fiery red as fall descended on Garden Heights. While most kids his age were preparing to go back to school, Khalil was a student of a different kind of classroom on a corner of Carcel Avenue. In this class, he learned survival of the fittest, and the forty-caliber Glock tucked in his pants was his survival tool. He loved the way it felt in his hands, the power it gave him when anyone dared to test him or take what was rightfully his. With it, he was no longer a man-child, but a man, feared by many and intimidated by none. But there was one thing he loved even more than the power and respect.

The shoes had kept their promise: money came quickly and in abundance. When Khalil lost his virginity to his hustle, he had sworn it would only be that one time, just so he could make enough to pay the rent. The shoes agreed it would just be a one-time affair. They would never do it again.

Then there was a shut-off notice from the gas company. Khalil wanted hot meals at home, so he stayed on his corner a few more days. The shoes told him it was just one more time.

The water was turned off without notice. Khalil remained on his corner a little longer, and the shoes assured him their relationship could end whenever he was ready.

Soon, he became just like the fiends he sold to—desperate and longing for something and willing to do anything to get it. But his addiction was money.

The more of it Khalil got, the more of it he wanted. He was never satisfied. Day in and day out, he stood on that corner, getting his fair share of wealth until exhaustion forced him to bed. Even then, his dreams were haunted by green paper that tempted him more than any voluptuous siren. His commitment remained with the shoes, but his affair with wealth kept him going.
He was even able to quit his old job.

“If you gonna sell that shit, you can’t work here,” Mak told him. By then, Khalil thought he was doing his boss a favor since nobody else wanted that low-end job. There were many other ways to make money in Garden Heights.

“Fine. I make more on the block any way,” he said with the confidence of the man he felt he had become. He didn’t need that job; he didn’t need anything or anyone. The shoes made sure of that.

His hands stuffed into his pockets, Khalil waited patiently on the corner for his work day to begin. His hand-me-down shoes were replaced by brand new sneakers without a scuff on them. He wore a gold chain around his neck to flaunt his status and kept his attire to a simple pair of jeans and an oversized black T-shirt.

“You selling that stuff, ain’t you, boy,” his grandmother asked one day after noticing his change in dress. Khalil said nothing and merely put a couple hundred-dollar bills in her hand and a bouquet of silk roses he bought from one of the street vendors. He figured they were the better choice; she wouldn’t have to work to keep them alive.

He knew she didn’t approve of what he was doing, but he also knew that it kept a roof over their heads and food on the table—that should have been enough to silence her.

Tears slid down her face, and she glanced from the money to her grandson. “I can tell you it is wrong all day,” she cried. “But you’re the one who will have to deal with the consequences. But know that I’m not gone let you influence your lil’ brother.”

Khalil didn’t get to see David much those days. Khalil worked to keep them off of the streets, and when he was home, David didn’t say anything to him. He would look at him with eyes far too young to understand why he was doing this, but he would eat the food Khalil’s new life provided.

Do you even understand?

“Hey, hey, you,” someone said and jolted Khalil into the present. He watched as a haggard woman approached him. Her hair looked like if it hadn’t been combed in months and her battered clothes were shades darker than their original colors. Khalil’s nose scrunched up; her odor met him well before she did. She looked like most of his customers, but her swollen stomach was unusual.

“How much can I get with this?” she asked, holding out a hand full of crumpled bills. Khalil looked from her belly, where a new addict awaited arrival, to the wad of money in her hand. He reached for a bag in his pocket that would give her and her unborn the fix they craved.

Just like mama is lost.

His words to his little brother from years before echoed in his head. Khalil looked down at his glistening chain and then to his new shoes.

He was an ogre.

The bag fell freely from his hand, and the second it did, the piercing wail of sirens filled the air.

The woman he had mistaked for a fiend reached for a pistol, and for a brief moment, Khalil caught a glimpse of her padded belly of
deception. “Put your hands in the air, now,” she demanded. This couldn’t be the end of it all. He had come too far, had further to go; prison was not supposed to be a part of his future.

Khalil pushed the woman aside and ran down Carcel Avenue, not knowing where he was going but knowing where he didn’t want to go. *Real men don’t put their lives or their family’s lives at risk like that.* Mr. Mak’s last words to him rang in his ears. His feet barely touched the ground as he tried to escape. He saw the shoes still hanging in the distance and made a silent cry for help.

_You owe us, Khalil. Protect us._

Khalil stopped just short of the shoes’ shadow.

They had rescued him from a life of ‘barely getting by’ and kept their promises. But they had made him into an ‘ogre’; he would pass a mirror and see a stranger. They promised to give him the world, but now he faced the price. *I can’t pay it.*

He turned his back to the shoes to lift his hands in surrender and deny all they had to offer.

The shots rang out before he had the chance and Khalil dropped to the ground, falling into a state that not even the richest man in the world could bribe his way out of.

And the black widows remained, waiting for their next spouse.
At $5.85 an Hour

By Peter Davis

Multitasking is for women,” Larry says as he seals the drive-thru window shut. “That’s the only reason why we have so many female managers.” He sighs slightly, resting his potbelly on the counter. His face seems low, as if in silent mourning of some inexplicable disappointment. This is Mr. Larry Hamilton, the owner of the fast-food joint and my new boss.

“Anyway,” he says while raising himself and his belly up, “the way we work here is as a team.”

Like a commodore of some distant merchant ship, Larry briskly introduces each piece of equipment, followed by the employee who is working on it. He explicates the importance of teamwork, the uniqueness of each individual, and how each one has a different task suited specifically for his or her different skill set.

“Yeah, one hell of a team,” slights Dustin behind Larry’s back. He is working the grill. Larry acts like he heard it, but rambles on. It doesn’t take a genius to pick out everyone’s job. Whoever can talk and look pretty at the same time is a cashier. Food assembly is for miscellaneous Mexicans. Fries and grill—guys. The managers then snoop around to make sure everything is working. All this means I will work the—

“And so you’re going to work on fries for now,” Larry says rather proudly, my skills obviously aligning with my task. He stands there, waiting for an acknowledgement of something.

“Oh, thanks,” I fumble out.

“Good,” he says indicatively. He goes back to his office to deal with something. I look around at my fellow employees. Nobody is really happy. Not that I expected them to be. Not that anybody should be happy about anything. I mean, we are working fast-food. I look at Dustin, still in high school, making a slutty joke with the cashier. This job is a joke for him. Chelsea makes a wisecrack about some football team. She knows her time here isn’t long.

“Estequépued incluirensucabecerapiedepágina,” says one of the Mexicans. Or I guess said, because, as it turns out, she isn’t talking to me but her Mexican friend. They jabber away on the food assembly line in Española. It’s a good thing I took Spanish in high school, because I can understand now that they are—

“ParaordenarlaEnSitiedenosotrossólo” says the other. Well, at least I know they’re speaking Spanish.
“I need fries down, now!” yells one of the managers. “Fries down?” I ask. “Yeah, fries down as in…uh!” she pulls a bag of fries from the freezer and dumps them in the oil with a sizzling splash and gurgle. “Fries down means just cooking more fries,” she says as she begins taking the next order while bagging the previous one and preparing two soft drinks. “Oh,” I say to apologize, but she doesn’t hear me. I don’t know if I want her to hear me. I straighten my hat and look down into the vast oily batter that soaks the fries, popping and sizzling as it goes. It’s going to be a long six-hour shift.

* * *

“You enjoy the nice day!” I say with a genuine smile. Well, at least I hope it looks genuine. The custumer just looks at me strangely though and drives off. Why do they do that? Why do people make me doubt myself? I was the ideal, picturesque, Norman Rockwell, example of friendly. I was prompt, and I even said have a nice day—oh…it’s 8:30 at night...

“Hey, Peter Parker, go ahead and take your break,” yells Ashley while taking the next order. She’s an okay manager. Her chubby cheeks don’t hide her frank comments, but she is nice at the core, I think. She has a kid on the way, newly married, but seems a bit worn out in general. Everyone here seems a bit worn out, like they are halfway through a marathon that they are clearly not going to finish. I need to take my break.

I walk up to the cash register, type my digits in, and clock out. Now to start eating the same food I’ve been serving for the past seven or so hours. I don’t really understand why being a home schooler raised on organic, whole-wheat, non-processed food would make me enjoy Wendy’s food all that much, but I really do. Besides, I get fifty-percent off the menu, although I know many a worker who prefers the free route, i.e. just make it yourself and don’t tell the manager. Nevertheless, my moral code would never delve into such depravity, and I do the ‘right’ thing and pay for my food, always, of course, off the value menu. It didn’t make much sense to me why you would order anything other than the value menu. It’s the cheapest, and it gives you the most food.

“Pete, you can get three, and only three, things off the value menu,” my parents used to say on those rare occasions that we did have to eat out. So naturally I pursue the same course now, and the fact that lunch is only a $1.50 makes me feel thrifty. I get every cent out of minimum wage. As I mentioned, the value menu gives you the most food, which, at this point in my life, is my biggest concern.

Everyone here seems a bit worn out, like they are halfway through a marathon that they are clearly not going to finish. I need to take my break.
So I order my usual Jr. Bacon Cheeseburger, Double-Stack with Cheese, and Chili, to my fellow co-worker, which I always find kind of funny and awkward at the same time. My co-workers don’t think there is anything funny or awkward about it. Nevertheless, I get my food and take a fairly isolated seat in the corner. After praying, there is about twenty-five minutes of break left, which I usually use to read a book. I find I can save even more time if I eat and read at the same time. A cautionary, albeit somewhat non-ideal situation, but it could mean finishing a chapter before work.

I start with the Double-Stack, which is for some reason unusually big. I unwrap it, finding an extra third patty on it. I look up and see Venae, one of the Mexican workers, winking at me. She smiles a toothy grin that shakes right through my seat and the table. I’m stunned. I look back at my hamburger with its extra patty of beef. What? Is she...what? My first ever job-related moral dilemma pops up, and I have no clue how to take it. I don’t even know what to make of it. She specifically gave me an extra patty of beef on my hamburger. What is the point? Do I tell the manger? Do I throw it away? Do I just ignore it? Do I talk to her about it? Is this some sort of message? It’s a real conundrum. I think about just eating it, but then I remember her toothy smile, and the goose bumps shroud up from all around. Then a worse thought comes to my mind.

Is she ‘hitting’ on me? Is this what ‘hitting’ is supposed to be like? Maybe it’s a Mexican tradition: to hit on someone, give them more meat. Once again, being homeschooled, I have little experience in my life of being “hit” upon. I glance up, only to see her beading eyes, staring blankly back until the toothy smile breaks away from her lips. I don’t know how scrunched you can be in a chair, but I test the limits today.

The rest of the break, my eyes are down. And now there is this hamburger in front of me, this anomaly in my pious, righteous order. Can a third layer of meat really be all that important?

I sigh heavily, perhaps it was just a mistake. It’s a cop-out, I know, but my conscience is fine with it; after all, this is the first time. I pray over my food again, and then proceed to eat and read my daily piece of literature. If nothing else scares my co-workers away from me, it has to be reading literature while on my break. I do this during almost every break, simply because I don’t want to waste time. The other workers don’t really understand it. I don’t really understand them, so it is a relationship that works, I think.

Today happens to be Dickens, Great Expectations specifically. I’m not a big Dickens fan, but I read it with my sister when I was young and we were both committed to finishing it at some point in our lives. Besides, at chapter forty there is no going back, even for Dickens. As I read, I can’t help relating with Pip and his strange new expectations that lay out before him, the different tasks he is given, the change of lifestyle, and generally his naïve nature all the way through. My manager probably thinks I am just stupid, but I’d say more naïve. I don’t know, but if my life does turn into a novel, I would hope it wouldn’t take twenty chapters to get to an actual plot change.
A glance at my watch reminds me that my break is ending. I put *Great Expectations* back in my bag, and begin wrapping up the food. I can’t help thinking that I have great expectations in front of me. The trash needs to be taken out, the fries have been sitting out too long, and the counter is in pitiful shape. Then I see the wrapper that held the double-stack with an extra patty. It’s a good thing Venae is nearly twice my age, because I really can’t force myself into believing she is hitting on me. But even so, it shows at some level that I’m at least making a difference for somebody.

*   *   *

Scrunch and squirm. I pinch the cold salad dressings in the refrigerator as they twist and contort in their plastic white coverings. My finger traces down the crinkled rows as I check their stock. Thousand Island, Honey Mustard, some French one I can’t pronounce, and the rest of them each with a million ‘ingredients.’ There are twenty-one different salad dressings, and that’s just at Wendy’s. Why would you need twenty-one dressings? It can’t improve one of our salads. Why would you get a salad at Wendy’s?

“Hey, grab me some medium cups,” yells Chellese. I walk to the back, grab the cups, walk back. As I open the wrapping, I begin to think I should probably say something to Chellese. She always looks annoyed about something, like losing in a video game you don’t even understand yet. Maybe something will cheer her up. I should—I spill the plastic cups I was holding across the floor.

“That’s coming out of your pay check,” yells Angela walking by.

“Really?” I ask.

“Haha,” Chellese grins. “Wait, are you serious? Angela, he’s serious! He’s friggin serious!”

“No,” I start to say, but I was never good at lying. “I mean, no, I just meant—”

“He was serious. Ah-ha! Angel you’re never gonna believe this guy!” Chellese walks back to the manager’s office to tell the whole tale. Not exactly the material or comedic effect I was looking for, but I guess it works.

So cleaning is not exactly our store’s top priority, but it is mine. Like the legendary fry cook and my inspiration, Spongebob Squarepants, I set out to make my workspace a shining spectacle of cleanliness. I start with the fry counter, and then the drive-thru, then the grill, and now even the register. I clean everyone’s station, which everyone is fine with. I clean their stations, so they can sit around and talk. Everybody wins. This is probably why I am almost always assigned to the garbage dumping.

Garbage is by nature filthy. Throw in Mountain Dew, ketchup, mustard, hamburger grease, half-eaten nuggets, sticky dried syrup from sodas, and you have a whole different beast. Coming up to my chest, the sheer scale of the bag inside the container intimidates me. Of course the container itself has soda and mayonnaise spilled all over it. As I pull the bag out, I notice its color is scale-skewered but intact with striped yellow and red running down the sides, and long black
syrup streaks flowing throughout. *Lift bag, throw in canister, replace bag, tie bag, shut lid, next.* Going outside is always more fun, I don’t know if it is the freedom of being away from the steamy kitchen or being away from my co-workers. Probably both. Whatever the case, even on stormy and windy days, it always feels warmer outside.

Inside, the broom is my pencil, and with it I cover the entire work floor in splattered bits of paper and dirt. Swinging the broom from one side to the next, I like to think I am bringing out the floor’s true color, even if that true color is a distasteful red-brown. I sweep myself up along with the broom, and start whistling along with the screeching of the broom.

This is quite a spectacle for the other workers. I can never tell if they feel pity for me or think I am stupid. Probably both. During down periods, ‘the circle’ will forge and we huddle around and talk, that is if Tiffany isn’t eating with her boyfriend. Why would you ever have a date at Wendy’s? Why would you have a date at the same place you are working? Our estranged circle produces laughter and high spirits, but also low production and often times ignores customers. I’m not opposed to talking or sharing jokes, but the customer was always first, right?

“These fries are cold!” yells the old woman from her car. I know the fries had been cooked at least twenty minutes ago, but Tiffany said we had to save money. I chuck the fries and make some new ones. It takes three full minutes to bring them up, then dump, salt, scoop, and the customer has fresh, piping hot fries.

“That lady was such a bitch,” says Lacy sympathetically. I think the customer is right, but I also know Lacy is trying to be nice. I think I should have said something.

Things slow down, and the centrifugal force of ‘the circle’ draws me in once again. Work seems to stop and everyone seems like themselves, or even better, what they want to be. The open forum of ‘the circle’ creates stories and tales that can’t possibly be true, but we all believe them anyway. I feel like I should be helping them, maybe even spreading the Gospel, but I don’t have all that much to say. But, as far as I can tell, they don’t have anything to say either. They are best when they are laughing. As the customers start to come in though, their expressions change, and suddenly life becomes work, and terrible work at that. By the end of the day everyone is sloppy, messy, and sweaty. The damp rim around our hats always reminded us of that.

There are some messes I just can’t clean up, and even if I did, I don’t want to see the true color it would bring out.

* * *

It’s hard to believe I’m actually quitting. I haven’t told Larry. Larry doesn’t like confrontation. “Have a nice day,” I say as I hand out a bag of food, realizing that I will be doing this only a few moments longer. I look over into the office to see another new hire filling out his forms. Miranda looks at me.

“People come in here and go as fast as the drive-thru,” she says.
“Good time on the drive thru by the way,” she says while leaving. It’s the first time she has complimented me, and she’s known for never complimenting anybody, except herself of course. How do you get to be a manger with that character trait?

At least she’s doing better than that one day, I think to myself, when she was crying on the floor behind the drive-thru window. She had made herself into the shape of a tight box, and just moaned gently to herself. I later found out it was a divorce, but at the moment there was nothing to really know.

I wish there was something I could’ve said, some word of encouragement, some silver lining in the clouds, but she was in her forties, a manager at Wendy’s, and now a divorced and single mom. There wasn’t time to stop and stare, not that I would have, since we were busy pumping out orders. But I wish there was something I could give her, some way to tell her it was going to be all right. But she wasn’t a Christian, or didn’t live like one, and she was my manger, mourning away in the corner. Did I even believe there was happiness in store for her life? How could there be? The sky was bare and blank that day.

“Hey, I need a number five with no pickles and an extra side of fries,” yells a voice from the speaker. I awaken from my stupor, put down some fries, and get the drink ready. One minute, eighteen seconds later and the customer is gone. I look proudly up at my timer. I search around for a little acknowledgement, but Miranda is criticizing the dishwasher, Larry is in the office, Becky is cleaning tables, and Chelsea is taking an order up front. Everyone is doing their job. Now that I think about it, everyone has their own little timer on, determining when they’re going to get out of here, when they’re going to college, when they’re going to fulfill their lifelong dreams...

Yet, college didn’t really provide a job for Angela, relationships here have ended fairly bitterly, and for some people this is the best job they’ll ever have. I shiver at the thought, but they know who they are. Funny how the consistent workers are the laziest.

“I still can’t believe you’re leaving,” says Kedar. “You’re the best guy here.”

“Yeah, Peter’s awesome,” says Chelsea from behind the counter. Other workers smile and continue on listing off my various traits that are more odd than complimentary. Why should they like me? I wasn’t supposed to fit in here. I was just doing a job.

Later, I start scribbling on napkins a picture of Spider-Man, this time with his head tilted upward, his legs flinging across the concrete jungle of New York, effortless, flowing, free.

“You’re going to be something,” says Angela, as she looks from
across the counter. “I don’t know what, but something.” She laughs, and suddenly it all kind of makes sense as to why they like me. Why I get extra hamburger patties, why I get the best shifts, and why I usually get the time off that I need, because I still dream. I can see all the different dreams around me, some crushed, some delayed, some just starting again. But they all count on me, that these dreams can actually be accomplished; because if some po-dunk homeschooled kid from Brush Creek (wherever that is) can be happy working at Wendy’s, like genuinely happy, maybe there is something worth dreaming about.

“You’re going to do it, ya know,” says Angela. “Whatever it is.”

I look down, slightly embarrassed. The moment I have to leave is the moment I realize I truly am a member of this group of workers. And although it isn’t one of Larry’s job positions, I definitely think I found a way to use my ‘unique skill set’ on another important factor of any job: dreaming.
To My Brother

BY KIRSTEN CALLAHAN

I.
When my heart broke in the spring,
we gave up our bitterest secrets
in an afternoon, almost by accident,
left to ourselves on the pistachio couch
with stacks of framed vintage artwork and half-filled
boxes, packing an apartment
for the lonely lady from church.

To you, with your big shoulders and your
Wookie-hugs (you who never learned
how to gather a woman), building
Lego space stations on your computer desk next
to the Metamorphoses and Paradise Lost,

I have been protractor.
I have measured your spirit’s trajectory
by my own roots sinking
into softer words, a more confident step,
and a less-cowed mind.

II.
Once you and I found an unfledged
Mockingbird limping in the yard
on legs like stems of grass.

You chased off the cat while I
like a surgeon caught the grey,
damp, palpitating
heart in my palms, and knit
my fingers like a nest.

III.
In blunt winter, when the last clinging leaves,
rain-rotted in their own loves’ arms, were dropping
everywhere we looked,
I sat on your bedroom floor and joked
that my existence was full of banes, and that I
just wanted to watch Dr. Who and be happy,
and be left alone and die. In your silence, then, with stilled
bosky jaw and moss-dark eyes turned inward,
I heard the muttering bones of you,

the straining of fiber and weight under seasonal wind. I saw
in you then that shepherd-brother so coveted of my soul
in my young desperate days

when we, by quantum leagues yet cloven, lioness
and lion roaming over cold
deserts grey with moonlight, found no tree, rock, bush, not God,
not another breathing body in all those haggard miles
to rebuff the wind, the punisher.

You were hiding through those years of sand,
plodding from dune to identical dune
with Sega and fantasy novels after breakfast
and morning family prayers,
after you dragged the garbage out to the street, drew
like nails over a scab your daily math assignments,
came out for popsicles or bitter words with me;
and somewhere in that seventh-grade

limbo between Mississippi and Middle Earth,
a mundane child crying with Christ’s
or woman’s pangs began a years-long death
to birth this man.

I have risen
under the spring rains of God and our father’s words
from your lips pouring as from a lost homeland,
while you like Jonah’s weed climb, soaring
for mercy at the walls of the penitent city.
She found me the night before classes started our second semester of college. Apprehension and moonlight kept me from falling asleep that night, so I left my dormitory at two o’clock in the morning and wandered out alone on the Diagonal beneath snow-covered maple and crabapple trees. Moonlight flooded the ground and threw my shadow on the snow behind me. I paused in a clearing and looked up at the full moon, round and large as though it were pressing away from the sky, straining to brush the earth with its face. I breathed out a funnel of steam.

Are you looking at the lunar perigee? she asked. I looked over and saw her standing about ten yards from me. Her pointed face was wreathed by long dark hair under a wool cap, but her face itself effused a pale glow. I had the impression at the time that she was the source of illumination for the snow around her feet and the branches of the trees above us.

What? I asked. The lunar perigee, she repeated as though I just hadn’t heard, but she smiled and her teeth flashed white in the partial darkness. My grandfather told me about it when he dropped me off today, she said. It’s the closest the moon ever comes to the earth. She stepped over to me. She wore an oversized striped jacket zipped up to her chin, and her pants were wonderfully tight; I couldn’t help noticing her slender legs and thighs. I love snow and moonlight, she said, because it makes everything look blue. Even your face looks a little bit blue. But maybe you’re just cold. Are you cold?

A little, I said. I was feeling pretty warm by that time. She laughed—I swore I heard music—and took a step closer so that she stood at my chin, looking up at me. I hear that if you’re alone with someone else on the night the moon and the earth try to kiss, it’s only right for you to do the same. I could see that her eyes were the color of pistachios. I wanted to say right then, Marry me, but I waited another year.

I was in college to study literature. My father nearly disowned me when he found out. My first semester, I took a class on Hemingway and grew to love the silences between words, the places where absence was the soil out of which everything grew. Seline, who came for art, loved negative space; she said she used to draw architecture, but was soon so entranced by the emptiness between the lines that she found
herself creating, instead of buildings, the white spaces between them, and between their walls and doors and ornaments. I could never see walls or doors or ornaments in the things she drew—I saw lightning and the twist of riverbeds in those spaces, but never buildings. She laughed when I told her that and said, Good. I want you to see what you see.

We never separated after that first night in the snow. We were two people who saw the emptiness in each other and made a home for ourselves there. During the afternoons, we met in the Arboretum where I would read aloud to her beneath the trees until she told me her heart was brimming and couldn’t take any more, and then I would kiss her till the security guard came at dusk and escorted us out. I copied poetry on my notepaper in math class and passed it to her; I also copied Tesla lyrics, but she would tear them up and throw the pieces at me when the professor turned to change his transparencies. In turn, she filled the walls of my room with pages and pages of her drawings.

The first time she took me back to her room, I thought I had walked into the sky, or that she had lifted me there. Everything was blue and airy. She said that blue was the color of sadness but also the color of flight. When we made love there for the first time, she cried, but I flew.

In January of our sophomore year, I found the lump on her breast. She sat up angrily and pulled her shirt closed, saying it was nothing. I watched fear crawl in her eyes. That night she woke me up in the middle of the night, crying. She told me that her mother had died of cancer two years before. Her face was pale and frightened, and I understood then all of the sadness she had been trying to convey through her pages and pages of silent spaces. I asked her to marry me and promised then I would never let her die.

I quit college at twenty and my father helped me get a job at an automobile factory in Detroit. I think he may even have felt grateful to Seline for contracting cancer. He died later that year of a heart attack. Seline and I moved to Detroit, and my job paid for her first round of chemotherapy. When she lost her hair, I told her, You are iridescent. She laughed and said, Yes, see, even my scalp is reflecting the light. Although the doctors told us her cancer was advanced, she seemed to recover. We were married in the hospital chapel. That night, I lay beside her in the hospital bed stroking the short tufts of her hair, and she handed me a note with the lyrics to “Gettin’ Better” in her delicate handwriting. She smiled at me weakly, her skin tightening around her cheekbones. I kissed her as she fell asleep.

For six years after, life became almost normal. Seline was never strong enough get a job, but she taught herself to crochet and sold some of her drawings. If she was lonely while I went to work, she never showed it. At night, I often read to her while she made hats
and sweaters, her brown hair falling in cascades around her thin, concentrated face. On other nights, she lay in my arms without speaking. Let us be silent, she would say as she came to me, that we may hear the whispers of the gods. While she lay beside me, I watched thoughts pass across her pale forehead, her chest rise and fall, her long black lashes slowly drift down over her eyes. I felt as though, if I watched her close enough, she could not leave me: that my force of concentration held life and breath inside of her. The doctors told us at each screening that no signs of cancer had returned; yet I know now that for six years she knew she was dying.

On the seventh year, I came home and found her collapsed on the living room floor, her dark hair wreathed around her upturned face—upturned and peaceful as though she was only beginning to fall asleep. The hospital ran numerous tests, all of which returned with the same result: my time with my wife could no longer be numbered by years, or months, but only by days. When the news came, I kept myself awake for seventy hours at her bedside, watching to keep her alive. Don’t worry, I said when she opened her eyes, I can still save you. We’ll still have a life together. She smiled, but her eyes looked like ferns in shadow without light. You’ll have white hair like Einstein, I said, but I’ll be the one who looks old and fat. My face was wet; I felt it. I could hear myself sniffing like a girl as I said it.

We lived at the hospital for a year. I don’t remember sleeping; I only remember tallying days by the color that drained from her face. Toward the end of that year, I came from work to find her sitting up on the pillows. Her arms were as thin as rails as she held them out to me. Do me one last favor, she asked. Her voice shook but I still heard music in it. Anything, I said. Get me a canvas and blue paint.

I didn’t know then that she wanted to create her last empty space.

Three weeks after she finished the painting, she died. I could not save her. I took the painting back to the house; it was all blue, with no emptiness in it, yet she knew I would feel the negative space all around it. On the back, she had sketched in pencil, Blue: A self-portrait. And under that, I will always love you.—Seline.

It was the only piece of art I kept. I could not discard it.

Seline and I had lived in the emptiness between; when she died, her death became another absence, a space into which we could both still fit, in a way. Yet this silence was no longer one from which things grew, but one into which I watched myself sink like one caught in a whirlpool which is the absence of ocean; a man drowning in all of the silences and nothingnesses to which he has committed his life. In the weeks and months following her death, I found that every silence was haunted by her presence; that loneliness was anything but a place of quiet solitude. She came to me in dreams, screaming and raving;
she crouched in the corners of my mind and sprung forward every
time I slipped into distraction or thoughtlessness. She pressed against
windows and mirrors, she slunk in doorways. She made herself a part
of every empty space, tangible or mental, and I found I could not expel
the vast emptiness she created.

The first reprieve I found was on a night that I met a girl who
needed saving—a girl who, like a bird, nestled against me for safety. A
girl with eyes the color of sadness and of flight.
Widow

BY SARAH VANBIBER

I lie still,
face turned skyward
like the soft-bodied moth turned
over and spent beneath a desk lamp.
Long into the night she beat
against the opaque shell of the light, beat
a delicate dust from her wings, beat
again and again returned until
she lay wasted beneath. She spurns
her distance from that which
her blind eyes cannot see
but tired, soft body
desires.

Does the burning wire within
the translucent glass ever long
to shake off its case and again
become the warmth of her
who wastes herself for loving?
Daddy told me about silver mermaids that sang. They made men love them and tumbled them in the ocean, he said. I got scared, and Mama smacked him.

Daddy left me and Mama with the baby. The baby was sick.

“Colic,” Mama said.

Daddy should have stayed. But he left. He was wearing a new blue suit, and a flat white hat on his head.

Mama said he was fighting for our king.

Tom Harrow said he had a mistress, because his daddy did the same thing last year, and Tom got a new sister with pretty black eyes. Mama laughed when I told her what Tom said.

“That’s not true,” she said.

But she cried last night, after the doctor left, and held the baby and yelled for Daddy to come back. She threw Grandpa’s ship-bottle at the wall. It broke in pieces; the ship bubbled in the mop bucket and sank.

“Damn the Krauts, damn the Navy,” she said.

Tom Harrow said the Navy was a bunch of ships, only bigger than the ship-bottle. People on the ships were sailors,
not pirates, and they got to see mermaids and whales and flying fish.

Mama said mermaids aren’t real.

Today a man came with the doctor. He wore a jingly blue jacket and a flat blue hat with a gold anchor. Father Kinley was behind them.

“Oh God,” Mama said.

Tom was right, Daddy had a mistress.

She must have been a mermaid.
I have not had a dream since the war. For me there was only ever one war, and one dream, and I do not know the difference. It has been about six years, I think—I am not sure what year it is, whether 1924 or 1925, but it is winter, and Christmas passed almost invisibly through the heart.

Monday, the Landlady asked me if I were a Marxist. She dribbles when she talks, and her breath smells like Wrigley’s Spearmint. I told her I was a social democrat. She said the elections had turned out well for the SPD, and I said I didn’t know there was an election. Then the round glasses and long ash-colored overcoat came, as he does every Monday. The Landlady said that he was probably a democrat, but even a democrat paid his rent, though it wasn’t really for himself, of course, but for his father. His father is almost a dead man. He hardly ever rises from his bed, doesn’t say anything, and takes drugs to sleep day and night. Though I’m his neighbor, I haven’t seen him but once or twice, and even then I saw only blank eyes and an unkempt white beard like trickles of ice falling from his chin. He looked like the corpse of St. Jerome, and I sometimes wonder if he rises when the moon is high and wanders Hirtenstrasse like a phantom.

I mentioned this thought to the Doctor two days ago in the Elfenbeintore Café, but he was distracted and did not reply. The fingers played nervously at his side, twisting into grotesque shapes and dissolving again to take new form.

“I’ll bet you twenty marks I hit that cockroach,” the Doctor said, pointing to the insect scrambling across the café floor about eight feet away. I knew better than to answer. In a sudden quick movement the fingers plucked a knife from the Doctor’s belt and threw it. The knife sliced the roach neatly in half and remained, handle upward, embedded in the floor. The fingers lay still for an instant.

My neighbor, the Soldier, was nearby, smoking cocaine, eyes closed, leaning far back in his seat. He opened his eyes and cried, “It’s
“Gone?” said the Doctor. I hardly noticed the Russian accent anymore, though it clung to him like a mad dog. “How can you say that?”

“I say it’s gone,” the Soldier replied in an irritated tone. “I lost it. The colors have all changed.”

“That’s because you’ve changed,” the Doctor said, and the fingers started drumming the side of his seat. “The colors are all in your head.”

“It was orange before,” the Soldier murmured. “All blue and orange. Now the city is gray, except for the red places.” A shudder passed through his limbs and entered the throbbing air through his extremities. “I want to go home.”

“Shut up,” the Doctor said. “If coke and dancers can’t take you home, nobody can. Unless it is Death.” He leaned forward, exposing the long saber scar on his left arm under his rolled-up shirtsleeve, grinning toothily. “What about you, Faust? Misplaced home yet?”

That’s what it was like when I stopped living in Wedding, the day the Spartacists ran from the barricade and past the house. A black slouch cap wanted to take shelter, but I told him to be off, for the Free Corps was killing those they caught. He pushed the door open despite the protest, but at that moment he was shot from behind through the head and dropped before me like a fish, his shattered face hidden against the floor. I told the housekeeper to clean up the blood and find someone to take the body, but the next day I moved out.

When he did not receive an answer, the Doctor rose to his feet. “I need to hug the Frau,” he said, leaning down to pick up his knife. “Good night.” He went out of the café, singing in his native tongue, while through the windows I saw a tweed jacket and white boater smoking a pipe, and blackbirds descend upon Babylon like Oneiroi.

“He’s a devil,” the Soldier said, rolling his bulging blue eyes upward. “Nothing can kill him, I expect. He knows it too well.”

I glanced down at the newspaper in my hands. I had forgotten that I was holding it. The headline said, Policeman acquitted of Alexanderplatz shooting. A few more dead communists made no difference. I tossed the paper away.

That was afternoon, while the clouds shed gray wool across the sky. As they were dyed with the pale red hues of the sinking sun, and the buildings leaned like dark beasts over the streets, I left the café for my apartment. A grimace met me in the hall.

“He’s been groaning all day,” the Landlady said, indicating the cracked brass-handled door to the Sleeper’s room. “It’s awful. Giving me a headache. Must be having nightmares.”

I went into my own room and picked up the violin a few times before putting it back down. I never play, of course, because I have forgotten all the songs. I reorganized my books, patterning them after a rainbow I saw one March in my childhood. My uncle liked to read books. He quoted Goethe and Schiller daily. I inherited most of his books, along with the money which enables me to live as I do.

Feeling a weight, as if a shroud of heavy canvas had been thrown
over me, and also the familiar pain of the wound, I lay on my bed and stared up at the cracks in the ceiling. I tried to imagine that they resembled something other than the Landlady’s scrambled eggs, or the mixed brains and guts of a companion who was blown open at Amiens. But they did not, and in time I fell asleep.

Yesterday afternoon I met the Frau for the first time, when the Doctor brought her into the Elfenbeintore Café. She was a pretty, fair-haired girl, with a green face like that of a dying moon, the husband of a rising People’s Party politician, if anything about that party can be said to be rising. She leaned on the Doctor’s arm, and I wondered what had led her to take the spectacles, unfashionable beard, and old staring eyes for a lover. Perhaps she liked men who spoke five languages and knew just about every way possible to kill a person.

The Doctor had money. He always had money, somehow, and did not shirk to spend it. He purchased a black suit that fit him poorly, perhaps because he denied the bulge of his paunch and the shortness of his arms. He refused to take cocaine like the rest of us, as he claimed it was hard on the nerves, although he occasionally carried a calabash pipe which he bought in Paris in aught-four. It was constantly shifted from one side of the mouth to the other in a strange rhythm that was difficult to follow but nevertheless unmistakable.

“You see,” the Doctor was saying to the half a dozen bodies nearby, “when I fled my office in St. Petersburg during the revolution, I had to leave behind all my surgical equipment, which besides being very expensive, was made specially. Since then I have had to work with crude, mass-produced instruments. I tried to find work in the government, but they said they weren’t interested in my abilities. So I found more legitimate work.”

“Dear,” the Frau said uneasily, pulling up her miniature eyebrows into a frown. “Don’t talk of that, please.” It was raining outside, and the water-droplets on the large café windows cast gray shadows that ran, like worms, down her face and the Doctor’s.

“What’s the harm? Now, in Russia it would be dangerous to speak of such things, even to one’s woman. In Berlin, you might shoot someone at random, and chances are you’ve shot someone involved in the questionable side of city life. Hell, you might shoot a horse and find out that it was a radical.”

“Or a prostitute,” someone else said, and we laughed. We were all ghosts on the cold windowpane.

The Doctor pointed one of the fingers at me. “You should learn from that, Faust. There are always people who have work for you if you know where to find them.”

“And who said I wanted to work?” I asked.

The Doctor shrugged. “If idling on your inheritance in the slums suits you, I’ve no objection. But I’m going to regain my place in the world, whatever that takes. In St. Petersburg, my services were invaluable to the guard department. It was there I realized that a clean death is far more valuable in the end for a majority of purposes. I had such a collection, a collection I must one day rebuild, of instruments, models of the human body, diagrams, books, and over two hundred
distinct poisons. Whenever we get a government with guts here, they will need me again, and I intend to make myself available.”

There was some muttering among us, and a rumpled collar whispered to me, “Vain boaster.”

“Please, dear,” the Frau said. I looked around to see if anyone could overhear the conversation of our group, but saw only a couple of large noses, one male and one female, and a napping bald head.

The Doctor smiled. “I’m not afraid of anybody, even these Free Corps vigilantes. Everyone dies, after all, except maybe the Tsaritsa’s holy man, may his worm never be quenched.” He kissed the Frau.

Most people left gradually, until it was only the Doctor, the Frau and I. As the Doctor went over to the counter to procure a third glass of vodka, the Frau leaned forward, her dark, round eyes staring into mine.

“You are his best friend,” she said.

“The Doctor doesn’t have friends,” I replied.

“He’s going to get himself in trouble, involving himself with these secret societies and political lunatics.” She moved her hand over the table, and moved it back. “He’s a hard-headed man. I love him, though. Don’t think I’m a shallow woman looking for pleasure like the cheap street-girl I used to be. That’s why I married, because I had a chance to get off the streets, but life became intolerable.”

“What of it?” I asked.

Her lip trembled. “He was damaged when in Russia, but I know he’s good inside. I felt it from when I first met him. He’s better than my husband, anyway, who might as well have left me a whore for all he cared. I want to divorce my husband, marry him, and move to the country.”

“Why?” I asked. “It won’t make the war to have never happened.” There was silence for a few moments, and then I said, “What do you want me to do?”

“He must want to let go of Berlin,” she said. “Please talk to him.”

No, I could not, but I did not need answer, for at that moment the Doctor returned. Why could I not? Because Babylon is better than the desert—and that is all that is left of the provinces, which are now meaningless as the winds that rustle the linden-leaves there. I cannot go back to the Franconian rye-fields, to the lane columned with lindens, to the blackberry bushes where blood mixed with juice on the thorns. It is a wasteland to me.

As I stood up to leave the café, the Doctor said to me, “Meet me here at nine tonight. I’m taking you to a club to meet some friends.”

The journey to my apartment that day was as long as many years. The wet streets are nameless, and they are full of corpses and rubbish bins and empty of souls. Within an apartment, children were singing Häschen klein. An old widow-woman sat in her window, blindly pouring water into the pot of a dead geranium, despite the afternoon rain. The cinemas were showing Der letzte Mann. Those expressionist films make me ill with all their lights and darknesses. I am still afraid that one day I shall stare out of the face of Caligari’s somnambulist, and then I shall realize that I am truly a madman, and I shall be
relieved, because none of it matters. But in that day I shall also know for certain that I am dead.

Evening brings no rest to Babylon, and the electric trains wind through the streets like veins. When I returned to the café I saw the Doctor standing there in a long black coat, and he said, “Are you ready?”

Then we slunk along the streets like dogs, watching the little lights of the cigars and the big lights guiding traffic. These were our stars and suns, and they did nothing to illuminate the city, and their specters hung in the puddles below. The whores materialized and vanished through darkened doors, and the streets smelled of coke and opium. Restaurant owners, many of them foreigners like the Doctor, closed their stores, while here and there other establishments were just opening.

I followed the Doctor’s feet into a nightclub, where the cocktails and brandies glowed in the soft red light. A Negro jazz band played in the corner. Men, women, and a few transvestites, sat or reclined in their chairs, smoking, drinking, and talking. The Doctor led me to a table where the Frau sat.

“Dear,” she said as soon as he sat down, “My husband knows about you. I shouldn’t have come.”

“So? He’s worse than an idiot if he hadn’t figured it out by now.”

“No,” she said uneasily. “He suspected. But somehow he knows about you and your business. He has money and connections.”

“What do I care about that?” the Doctor exclaimed, shaking her shoulder roughly. “I’m no damned communist. They don’t go after us, most of the time. We’re helping them, after all.”

“Please…” she said. But at that moment three men came up to the table and took seats without introduction.

“What excellent Negroes,” a pince-nez said. “I like this song.”

“It’s called ‘Tomorrow is the end of the world,’” a white top hat said. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Let’s make it happen,” said the Doctor. The fingers pointed to me. “This is a friend of mine who was in the war and may yet prove useful to us.”

“He looks like a corpse,” said the pince-nez, and the three men glared at me as if I were a murderer rather than the murdered, and they were a jury.

Thin, nervously-shaped sideburns leaned forward. “Can we trust him?”

“Of course,” said the Doctor, wrapping an arm around the Frau. She leaned on the Doctor’s arm, and I wondered what had led her to take the spectacles, unfashionable beard, and old staring eyes for a lover. Perhaps she liked men who spoke five languages and knew just about every way possible to kill a person.
“Cards, anyone?”

“We have business, Herr Doctor,” the pince-nez objected.

“Plenty of time,” said the Doctor.

The men looked at one another. “What about that business with the sausage seller?” asked the top hat.

“I took care of it last week,” the Doctor smirked. “We are perfectly safe.”

“Now that the leader is free again,” said the pince-nez, “we can resume our dealings with his people.”

“You know, Faust,” the Doctor said, his eyes a wild fierceness, “I’m no zealot. I’ve got no gods, whether they wear brown shirts or sit on heavenly thrones. But the reds destroyed me, and the only pleasure I have left in life is sticking a blade in their kidneys. This business is getting dangerous, and I need a watchman.”

“I don’t know,” I said. My wound burned.

“Damn it, Faust,” said the Doctor. “You’ve got to live for something these days.”

Suddenly our heads turned to the club door, for a white boater burst in with intentional abruptness. He carried a pistol in his hand, and was accompanied by four armed policemen. The music stopped.

“Line up,” he said. “We’re checking everyone’s papers.”

“Devil,” the sideburns said, beginning to perspire. “If they....”

Suddenly the white boater caught sight of us. “There!” he cried, and pointed.

What happened after this was so swift that I barely saw any of it. I know that the men at the table pulled out pistols and began firing, and the policemen shot back. Glass shattered everywhere, patrons and bar girls were shrieking and taking cover under the tables. The pince-nez was killed almost immediately, but two of the policemen were wounded. The Doctor grabbed a chair and threw it through the window, then leaped out, pulling the Frau after him. The rest of us followed as we might.

One of the policemen was there, but in a flash the Doctor’s knife was naked, and in an agile motion he stepped forward and grabbed the policeman’s pistol-hand with his left. The fingers drew the knife across the policeman’s neck, and the man fell, gurgling.

“Carotids and jugulars,” the Doctor chanted, taking the pistol.

Then I heard a terrible, regular drumming. One of the policemen was firing an MP18 in our direction, and the bullets were sprayed around us. We ran. The top hat went down. The Doctor staggered, his shoulder bleeding, but the Frau screamed and fell into the wet
street, blood soaking the bosom of her dress. The Doctor gave a cry and leaned over her.

“Not in the street,” she was babbling. “Not this way. I wanted....” The eyes stared upward.

“I didn’t want her dead,” someone was screaming. I saw a roundness near the white boater. The politician. “Just that damned death doctor.”

The Doctor rose up abruptly and raised the pistol he took from the policeman. He fired once, a flame darting forth eagerly like a tongue from the barrel, and the drumming stopped. Then he pointed the gun at the roundness and fired. Again and again.

I do not know if he clipped the politician, for at that moment I fled. The sideburns were already gone, and a moment later the Doctor tossed down the empty weapon and followed me.

“They killed her,” he shouted at me as soon as we seemed safely away from the pursuit. “He killed her.”

“What does it matter?” I said.

“I don’t know.” The Doctor fumed helplessly. “Damn it all. I don’t know.”

“I’m going back to the apartment,” I said. “I’m going to sleep.”

I lied. The wound kept me awake. For an hour I sat in bed, staring at the walls. The world was silver now, and a wind came unexpectedly through my window. My hands began shaking, as if I were back in the trenches. I pawed at my sheets and longed for opium. Some mischievous spirit compelled me to reach into the drawer beside my bed and pull out the old Reichsrevolver.

As my fingers closed around the grip, my soul passed into Franconia. The sun is above me, and from it a corpse is hung by the neck. No one else notices it. The wind blows waves over the rye fields, and down the lane between the lindens comes the Father. He gave me the revolver once, as he gave me my blessing to go to war. He is not there any more, nor is the sauerbraten on the table. The Mother plays the piano. I hear her over the field, the rye-stalks tingling with each note, the trees nudging one another and saying, “Be still, brothers!” It is gone, too. The corpse hangs over us, and forgetfulness follows rot like a demon.

The blackbirds play over my head. I am barefoot. The soil is rough. It has covered many bodies and received many who are sleeping. The rye teases my skin. The piano is quiet. There is a dead man lying among the blackberry bushes. The thorns pierced him, and he is all over in sweet, sticky blood. The farmers will burn the blackberry bushes. Flames will go up like archangels being born.

The Mother’s crucifix stands on the horizon. I always imagined the Christ descending like that, stuck to his cross as he always was on our wall, and wondered if the bottom end of the cross would crush the Devil’s skull when he came down. But what if the Devil descends and not Christ? A voice wails, “He is dead, and I have forgotten his name.” That is me. The desolate man is doomed to hang on a silver rope from the sun. The Father has vanished, and the lindens are bowed down to the west.
There was a knock on my door. With a clatter the revolver fell to
the floor, and I rose from my bed. Opening my door, I saw the Doctor
standing there.

“He’s there, at my flat,” the Doctor said. “The man with the
policemen. They’re after me. I’m going to be sharing a room with Colors
down the hall.”

“Do they know about us?” I asked.

“What does it matter?” the Doctor asked dully. “We’re all dead
anyway.” Then he was gone.

As I replaced the revolver in the drawer, I picked up the silver
pocket watch on which was engraved the words *Non Omnis Moriar.*

This, too was a gift, but when I returned to Franconia I found no
home. I did not know the Father or the Mother. So I went to Babylon,
and now I committed myself to sleep again in the restless city.

It was morning. The Soldier was shaking me. “He’s done it,” the
Soldier said. “It’s over for him. Come.”

The Doctor sat like a dead birch twig in the center of the room,
bloodlessly pale. The bare gray walls cast no shadow on him, and he
cast no shadow upon them. He was transient, wavering between two
worlds. One he hated and the other he feared, and his spirit could find
home in neither.

“Damn you, Faust,” the Doctor said weakly. “Let the war castrate
you. Not I. I am a man.”

The Doctor’s skin was clammy, and he smiled at us. “Best way
of all is morphine,” he murmured. “No mess. Morpheus, the god
of dreams....” His head sank and his eyes closed. “Prosti menya,
matushka.” Moments later he ceased to breathe, and the one who
studied death completed his apprenticeship.

The Soldier sank into a nearby chair.

“You know,” he said to me, “those days were hard: the trenches
and the bones. The blood wasn’t bad. I liked the color. We painted the
field in that charge. It was beautiful.”

“What are we doing here?” I exclaimed suddenly. “What are we
waiting for? We know there is no home anywhere anymore. We ought
to follow the Doctor.”

The Soldier looked at me, a stupid drowsiness in his blue eyes. He
spoke slowly. “I don’t think so. Not yet. Home is gone. There is nothing
for us. But Berlin will not forever be Berlin. The world isn’t like that. It
changes. Home is gone, but maybe I will find it again. I smoke coke at
the café and walk around blue Tiergarten in the evenings, wondering,
because every day I hope that something will change. Someone will
appear and revive us. I can’t do anything for myself. My head is a
quieted battlefield, and all the remnant thoughts are dying or dead.
There’s nothing I can do but wait.”

“For whom? A god?” I cried.

“Yes,” said the Soldier dreamily. “He is god enough if he takes me
home again.”

Suddenly there was a crash that made us start and turn to the
door. The Landlady shrieked, and I looked down the hall. What I saw
was terrifying. The Sleeper’s door was open, and a hollow morning light
shone through and out into the dimness. A dark shape was framed in the doorway, a tall, bearded shape, white-haired and ghostly. I saw. The Sleeper is awake.

The Soldier was behind me, and he sank to his knees in prayer to the beast. In my vision, forms dissolved; the walls of the building fell away. The earth groveled. Babylon, the dead in their graves, the sleepers in their beds, were bowed in the great dream to the terror.

Heedlessly, the Sleeper strode down the hall and passed through the door into the world, signaling the coming of the new age.
During the Pilgrimage of Homes

BY MARY MORRIS

The Montrose House, Mississippi: the Yankees begin their nasal exclamations of disbelief, wearing the worn wood and rugs with muddy sandals.

I descend, herding the tourists—
a grandfather with a drawl calls me sweetheart, asking for another pamphlet.

Pacified, he joins his wife in making room for me to pass, hoop and skirt and all—we move deeper into the house, admiring relics like the yellow-lace curtains, or the time-flattened quilts. Brushes that retain someone’s hair, and dishes—all look refined, forgotten.

How odd, that I should rustle my skirts and lead strangers through an old house, just a brick and oak structure that is attractive only because it hasn’t fallen yet, because it was not burned or marred by grey coats or blue hats—

I don’t falter as I tell facts mixed with stories. I’ve memorized the notecards, I look them in the eyes because I want them—the strangers come to visit—to remember all this lace and silk, the Old Dead South.
Pascha Birches

BY REX BRADSHAW

The sun was weary
and drowned in the pale sea.

In the winter the wolf comes,
and the summer belongs to the bear.
The fields are blue with flax-blossoms,
the peasant’s swaying stars.
They saw them then,
two lilies
lingering there
by the brook in the silvery birch-grove.

They are warm,
the breath in her ear,
the kisses on her neck.
Yena Sheleshchuk is young
that day in the spring.
Pascha approaches:
the Resurrection day.

He plays the dudka for her,
long fingers on a long ash pipe,
its voice soft and reedy.
His bearded face is like the gilded mask
of Christos triumphant
in the harrowing of Hades,
a redeemer wrapped in crimson—
his eyes are blue, scintillae from the fiery Heaven.

The sun shall pass beneath the hill,
and my husband will go with the sun
to dwell with fire
and leave the weeping birches behind.

The spinning-wheel turns.
White-haired frost comes
to the fields and thatch-roofs, girding them
in pale, crystalline armor.
Yena Sheleshchuk is alone under her woolen blankets. His rifle has joined Kalinouski, and the hearth-stones mourn his missing boots.

1864.
Their blood is pale like silver, gray running through Kalinouski’s veins. “Whom do you love?” the watchman asks. “I love Belarus.” The password is spoken. “So mutually.”

I love....

The prison of Muscovy, Siberia, devours the souls of the captives; there some must lie in the evening, and others find a blanket of earth to keep out the chill of living.

They are ghosts, marching in ranks into the deep water. He shall be buried beneath dark willow, and the black-draped rook shall sing his lullaby.

_Do not fear, my beloved one,_
_that the waters shall close over thee;_  
_the cross is reared at thy head_  
_to guard thee in forgetful dreaming._

The years pile about like leaves in lonely drifts, winter on winter. The star-branches wheel over the earth.

_The roots of Heaven are in Muscovy, where their eyes are full of stars and remain yet black and cold._

The moon furrows the sky like a plow, like the plow in the hands of Yena Sheleshchuk pressing lines through the gray soil and into the face of its mistress.

She goes to the brook; she goes to the brook in the evening. Yena Sheleshchuk is old that day in spring.

_Sorry is your fate, silver birches._  
_The winds of winter leave you bare, and the stars are silent and senseless._
Darkness falls on the silvery birches.
A linden moon rises, and
the shadows change.
Her fingers are cold, but they do not tremble.
Yena Sheleshchuk is murmuring.

You have come late, my sun.
I am withered by the plow.
I am drained by the wind.
There is no beauty left in me.

Her basket lies by the brooklet,
filled with flowers, crane-white lilies,
waiting for Pascha:
the Resurrection day.
Fourth Shift
Brown Child

BY SARAH VANBIBER

You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That’s American.
Langston Hughes

She looked like you:
two skinny arms, legs
that dangle from the dock
where ships come in, and brown
eyes. She had the same fear

of leaning from windows,
high ones where
brown skirts and white
shirts hang or fold themselves
softly in the wind.

She had the same soft-
spoken voice, and she too
liked the heavy rush of rain
over the dusty streets
in summer. New York

was all either of you knew;
and yet. Yours was a glittering
white city; the brown child saw
brown blind tenements crawling
in all directions.

Your father handed you
lollipops outside FAO Schwarz
while she sewed buttons
on her father’s coat
in a windowless wooden
room in hell’s kitchen.

No one saw the scarlet fever
on her brown skin. The carts
wheeled her body past the brown
dock on the harbor where you
watched the sparkling sea
and laughed at the sweetness
of candy.
Though It Lingers, Wait
silver gelatin prints
ALLI BOSTROM
Between
latex, charcoal
MARY KHRISTYNE YOUNG
Habitual Revisitation
mixed media
LAURA LITTLE
Proliferation
foam fruit nets
SAMARA THOMAS
Untitled
*welded steel*

MIKAEL JURY
Plicus crescus

mixed media

EMILY GOFF
Untitled

oil on canvas

WES SUMRALL
It was nearly noon and the summer sun glowed in a cloudless sky. A breeze faltered in the humid-heavy air and barely flicked Agnes’ skirt as she huffed her way up a smooth dirt road. She leaned on the brick wall bordering Aveuville’s town graveyard and fanned herself with her straw hat. Nowadays it took her almost an hour to walk a route that had only taken twenty minutes a few years ago. Of course, that had been when she still had blonde hair, not grey. Still, she was in good shape compared to Ethel and Grace. They did not walk now, even to church, and had bought a car each.

Agnes refused to drive, especially after that scapegrace Thomas Jolene ran his father’s truck into the river and near killed himself. If humans were meant to drive, God would have given us metal for skin and wheels for feet.

And now her only child drove tanks for the Army.

Her heart rate was back to normal and Agnes straightened. She scanned the graveyard with keen eyes. The care of the tombstones and graves had been her husband’s responsibility, then her son’s, and now it was hers. Agnes stepped through the creaky wrought-iron gate and walked to the small shed where she stored her wash bucket, brush, and garden tools. A moment later, Agnes stopped and turned completely around to stare back at the graveyard drive.

There was a truck in the driveway, a green one, squatting a few yards from the gate like a giant beetle. Agnes searched the graveyard again and paid closer attention. She knew the visiting schedule of every person who had family buried here, and no one was supposed to show up until three. Old Reuben Klaus always came then to visit his wife.

A flash of red caught Agnes’ eye. There was someone in the plots set aside for the dead without family. Most were old Confederate graves, but there were a few newer ones for immigrants who had come to Aveuville via New Orleans. Maybe this was a relative. Agnes followed the gravel path around the mausoleums and stopped next to the dogwood tree.

It was a young woman, a tall, pretty, young thing wearing a red button-up shirt, tan slacks, and a pair of scuffed brown boots. Really, so many girls just refused to dress properly now that the war was
over. Agnes moved slightly, and a twig cracked under her shoe. The woman’s head came up and her whole body jerked to the right, toward one of the larger tombstones.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you!” Agnes stepped forward. The young woman relaxed and her lips quirked into a slight smile.

“It’s all right.”

She drowned, you know, out in Secret Bayou. Some people said it was suicide, but no one really believed that. She made wonderful cream pies for the Sunday picnics. Are you a relative?

“Can I help you with something?” Agnes stood next to the woman and read the tombstone. “Lila Campion? I remember her, the poor dear. Such a pretty woman, and such a horrible death. She drowned, you know, out in Secret Bayou. Some people said it was suicide, but no one really believed that. She made wonderful cream pies for the Sunday picnics. Are you a relative?”

The woman’s posture had stiffened. She reached out a hand and brushed her fingers against the stone. “Yes. Lila was my mother; I’m Rosa Campion.”

That name brought images of afternoon tea with her old friend Giselle Varnadou and a small dark-haired girl with quiet eyes. Agnes peered closer. The curly hair was shorter and the face thinner, but she saw little Rosa in the woman’s high cheekbones, crooked nose, and hazel eyes.

“Goodness me, you are Rosa! Whatever are you doing here? It’s been years since your father took you from White Cypress. We didn’t think we would see you again.”

Rosa’s smile twitched. “I received a letter from Miz Varnadou about three years ago. She asked me to visit, but I was in Europe at the time. I haven’t been back long.”

“Have you been up to the house, then?”

“Not yet. I thought I would come here first.” Rosa traced the name on the tombstone. “It’s been ten years, after all. I’m in no hurry to get to White Cypress.”

Agnes kept her silence and waited for more information, but was disappointed when Rosa straightened and turned to head back to the graveyard gate. The young woman glanced at Agnes and nodded.

“It was nice to see you, Miz Culpepper. Maybe I’ll see you in church Sunday.”

Rosa strode toward the gate and Agnes watched her leave. When the young woman had climbed into her truck and left, Agnes walked back to the tool shed with a new spring in her step. She would have to hurry through the cleaning today and make sure there was still pound cake left in the Frigidaire. Agnes would invite Emily over this afternoon. She would love to hear about this!
Chapter 1

Rosa’s red headscarf twisted in the wind and flicked her nose. She rubbed at her face with one hand, then dangled it out her open window and watched moss-covered trees replace houses as she left town. She smiled slightly and muttered, “Nosy old biddy hasn’t changed a bit.” Agnes Culpepper had been a force of nature in Aveuville for years—as she was down the road in Plover before her marriage—but she looked frail now. Many of the older women she passed in town had that same fragile look, as if war had sucked the strength from their bodies.

Rosa remembered another frail woman she had visited last year in San Antonio, with two stars in her window. One was gold, but it should have been red, like the blood streaming from that child’s mouth and staining her hands as she tried to keep his intestines inside his body. Captain Swanson was shouting, Jane was shouting back—there was no more morphine—and Rosa caught a glimpse of the ambulances outside the tent. They were unloading again. One had new bullet-holes. The body beneath her hands shuddered. The boy smiled at her, all bloody teeth and big green eyes and Can you please give this to Mother as he put a rosary in her hand….

A buck bounded across the road, and Rosa jumped and shook her head. A herd of deer milled on the roadside. One doe stared at Rosa’s truck with wide dark eyes, her fawn curled in a bundle of brown and white under her belly. Rosa slowed. The land had changed. Ten years ago, the swamp had crawled within a foot of the road’s edge. Gators sunned themselves on tufts of swamp grass—sometimes even on the road—and herons stalked the fetid water.

Now, the swamp had retreated. Rosa could see a glimmer of water underneath moss and tall grass several yards from the road, but here, by the road, the trees sheltered solid dirt, thick grass, and plump deer. Cypress and oak twisted together and dripped moss to the ground at points. Rosa could hear various birds over her engine, including the knocking of a woodpecker.

A sign appeared on her right, its white paint turned grey with years and its message almost unreadable. She knew it by heart.

White Cypress, 2 miles.

Jimmy had enlisted Rosa’s help with the sign. At eight years old, she had boundless energy, and, in summertime, nowhere to direct it. Jimmy helped her with her careful drawing of the old plantation house, his big work-red hands holding the wood steady as she painted. At dinnertime, he ushered her inside to Poppy. Rosa was covered in paint, and Poppy scolded and shook her wooden spoon at them. Jimmy laughed then, a deep rumbling sort of laugh that reminded Rosa of the giants Aunt Cecily would read about at bedtime.

A horn honked, and Rosa swerved. She bumped to a stop at the dirt road’s edge, barely missing the sign, as a red Cadillac sped around her toward White Cypress. The deer scattered, dappled flanks wisping into the shadows under the trees. Rosa coughed and her eyes watered
as she attempted to wave away the dust. When Rosa could see again, the Cadillac had disappeared.

She pulled back on the road, away from the thistle-filled ditch. “Damn idiot with his flashy car,” she muttered. “He’ll get himself killed.”

*   *   *

A pair of chipped marble lions guarded the entrance to White Cypress. Maximilian Varnadou brought them back from Italy in 1830. They survived the Civil War, only to submit to time. The right-hand statue dealt with the indignity of honeysuckle vines in solemn silence, a string of yellow-white blossoms dangling from his upraised paw. The left-hand lion had a bird’s nest cradled behind its left ear; the right was missing. They stared with empty eyes as Rosa pulled into the rutted dirt drive between them.

Twisted live oaks loomed above, their thick green leaves casting the whole road into shadow. Beyond the oaks, peahens scratched around wisteria and magnolias. The peacock stood guard beneath a scraggly fig tree and followed Rosa’s truck with button-black eyes. He was molting; his tail lay in ruins in the grass.

“I’m not scared of you anymore, you nasty bugger,” Rosa muttered. She could tell it was old Solomon. The scars from his fight with a feral dog carved silver lines through his body feathers. He used to chase her, and she would hide with Jimmy’s dogs until Solomon left.

The road curved to the left, skirting a large, man-made pond with lily pads, and the trees abruptly stopped. A clearing opened up before her, carefully landscaped with rose arbors and paths of carnations. A circle of dirt to the left held three cars, including the red Cadillac. A meandering brick path led to the colonnaded porch of White Cypress.

Two-story Doric columns, connected with a wraparound balcony, surrounded the house like an honor guard. Wrought-iron rails edged the balcony with black fleurs-de-lis. Behind the columns and railings, tall windows, flanked by wooden shutters, reflected sunshine. The shutters were black, Rosa noted. They had been green when she left. She parked her truck lengthwise behind the Cadillac and resisted the urge to break one of its lights.

Rosa stepped out of her truck and slammed the door, startling a flock of geese. The squawking birds lit out for the back of the house, flapping their wings as they waddled across the grass. Rosa paid them no mind and stared up at White Cypress. The noon sun glowed off the pristine white plaster walls; Rosa blinked and felt as if she were staring at the blinding sun-glitter on ocean waves—then turned and followed the geese.

The grass was springy beneath her boots, and she could smell baking bread. The angry honks of geese grew louder as she rounded the back corner of the house. A hedge maze spread out behind the house, starting only a few feet from the back door. The maze covered the gentle slope of the backyard and opened onto a small lawn. To the left, beside a pair of dogwood trees, was a vegetable garden. Rosa’s
mouth watered at the thought of fresh tomatoes.

“Good Lawd above, what’s making all this racket?” A skinny black woman with iron-grey hair popped her head out of the open kitchen window. Her face was shiny with sweat. Rosa grinned and waved.

“Good morning, Poppy.”

Poppy blinked for a long moment, then shrieked “Rosa!” and disappeared from the window. A moment later, Rosa gasped and laughed as Poppy—all of six feet and seventy-three years old—swung her off her feet with an iron grip around her ribs. The old woman petted Rosa’s curls and patted her cheeks, sobbing and laughing in turns as she dusted flour from Rosa’s shirt.

“My Rosa-child’s back! Lookit you, where you been and what have they been feeding you, you’re nothing but bones!” Poppy stepped back and dabbed her eyes with the back of her hand. “Oh, but you grown so pretty! I always knew you would!”

Rosa wrapped an arm around the taller woman’s shaking shoulders. “It’s good to see you too, Poppy. Sorry about the racket. I think I scared your geese.”

Poppy stepped back. “You mean that was you? Oh good, I thought them wild dogs had come back, we been having trouble with ‘em. Now, you go on down to the bayou.” Poppy said even as she began to sniffle again. “Go see Jimmy afore he finishes burning the trash-pile, so’s I can finish lunch. Oh Lordy, I knew we was having company today when I dropped my dishcloth, but to think it would be my Rosa-child!” Poppy hurried inside, leaving streaks of flour on her face as she swiped at her wet cheeks.

With a smile on her face, Rosa took the long way around the maze. It had been years since she wandered the maze and she did not trust her mental map to get her through in less than an hour. She stretched out a hand and brushed stiff green leaves. These had been her castle walls, and an old quilt her ceiling, while she whispered stories of dragons and brave knights to her dolls.

At the edge of the lawn, a copse of cottonwoods hid a narrow dirt path bordered with cracked logs. Kudzu stretched beneath and sometimes over the trees. A snake slid off the path, and Rosa watched the reptile disappear into a rotten tree stump. A few feet down the path she found a box turtle on his back and picked the creature up.

The trees soon thinned and opened onto a thick strip of grassy ground. Insects hummed around her and she slapped at a mosquito. The turtle had poked his head out of his shell and quickly pulled it back at her movement. Rosa could smell wood smoke. Humid air pressed against her as if she could drink it through her skin.

Secret Bayou glinted wide and brown beneath reeds and cypress knees. A grey heron stalked the shallows, searching for frogs and crawfish. Rosa could see Treasure Island sitting lower in the water than it used to. The gazebo was still there, and the rickety dock, but both were covered in moss. The dock on this side was in better shape, but there was no boat in the water. The bayou was abandoned.

“That bayou holds more ghosts than the family graveyard,” Aunt Giselle told nine-year-old Rosa. Firelight glowed on her hands and
glimted on her gold ring as she wove a reed basket. “If you listen closely, you can hear them cry at night.”

“Why are they crying?”

“That depends, child. Some mourn lives stolen before their time, and others the love that killed them.”

“Love can kill?” Rosa frowned. Aunt Cecily nodded from her plush armchair beside the fireplace. She stroked the half-finished quilt on her lap.

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“Yes, dear, love can kill just as easy as it can bring life.”
Rosa leaned her elbows on a brocade footstool. She watched Aunt Cecily’s bony fingers press the sharp silver needle through fabric and batting, her ceramic thimble tinking rhythmically against the sliver of metal.

“I think that’s silly. The Bible says Jesus loved us a lot, but he got hurt because of it. What’s the point of love if you get hurt?”

Her aunts smiled at her. Aunt Giselle placed her finished basket on the side-table and picked up a handful of new blue-dyed reeds.

“Love is like a needle, Rosa.” Aunt Giselle’s voice changed, slipping into deep richness that reminded Rosa of pirate tales and will-o’-the-wisps over the bayou at midnight. “It will prick you and hurt you as you learn to use it, and some give up in despair of ever learning. But, if you keep on in spite of the pain, it will diminish and you can create something beautiful.”
Tita’s Prayers

Ay, mi hija,
how my heart aches for you.
I now remember when your mami
gave birth to you—
Ah! Love at first sight.
My hands, smooth like tortilla’s
brushing by your black, black, hair.

Now, you become a woman
se fuerte tambien!
And I am envying you, for
you can become beautiful and soft
Like I could not. Though I am poor,
your eyes shine for you, Preciousa.
In your pretty yellow dresses, also be
pretty inside, clothed in compassion.

Hija del Rey,
be thankful, be happy
with what is give for you!
Siempre estoy orando,
you are loved at all times.
Princessita, granddaughter,
my love is raw and pure,
scraped knuckles on the washboard.

Learn to sacrifice: that is love.
Be joy to me in these years,
Se tu la restuesta para mi oracion.
See this woman? She loves you, working
hard, but having the heart soft.
Oh, Dios, como amo este nina!
I follow, slow and uncertain, the movement of my two daughters, grown slender and swift like bamboo in the green earth with rain. They, my only China, grow taller here where all things are taller, bigger—America. These young fruits of my land move with rapid English and loud fast laughter, most of all Niu, my baby child. She laughs long and hard, but I see jia in their eyes when they weep and cling to my arms with soft China cries.

When I sew qipao for my growing daughters, I am back to Guilin—my jia, my home—and the shadow of Elephant Trunk Hill on the water, his back mossy like the slow-moving river he drinks. When I hear the wind move in Oregon or I sit on the wooden benches by the river where grass grows thick and heavy with seed and I close my eyes, I am back. I hear the Li River singing. I breathe the sharp scent of China fir and golden larch grown over the Elephant. I lie and my husband lies too on the soft green mosses. There, Jiawen, my daughter, you were formed under the great beautiful clouds. The ducks rejoiced together on the river and cried out with loud triumphant cries.

Twenty-seven years and a thousand rains. We buried your father by the Li. The zaws sail quickly, unknowingly by. The river moves, the Elephant drinks. I grow old. Turn to me your China eyes, my Jiawen, my home. The river has grown silent and dust scatters on the wind.
Shrouds of Snow

By Rebecca Yantis

“Few, few, shall part where many meet!
The snow shall be their winding-sheet,
And every turf beneath their feet
Shall be a soldier’s sepulchre.”
~Thomas Campbell

-July 31st, 2007-

The road is remarkably smooth, a long undulating line of grey-black asphalt that twists between trees. It feels like climbing a mountain, but this is Belgium, so it is only a series of hills and valleys with tiny villages that all begin to look alike. Our Toyota minivan is the bulkiest family car on the road, dominating tiny Opels and Audis in size even as they whip past us. Josh, Sarah, and I are curled in our seats, listening to music and courting the Sandman. We were out of our house at the ungodly hour of six this morning; the only perky person in the car is my father.

As the commander of the U.S. Army’s Northern European Veterinary Detachment, Father has several duties, one of which is handing out promotions. One of his captains (soon to be a major) is stationed at a Belgian NATO base, so we get to tag along and experience Belgium. We are so thrilled.

Again, we are not morning people.

We sit back and let the blurring trees hypnotize us into daydreams, as Father drives toward our first stop of the day—a place he calls Malmédy.

-December 17th, 1944-

The once-muddy roads are frozen, small sections icy with melted snow. Black trees line the wayside like silent sentinels as grumbling engines threaten to shake the icicles from their branches.

To the southeast, the heavy treads of German tanks make the ground tremble; the 1st SS Panzer Division has entered Belgium. Their targets: the bridges over the Meuse River and, later, an ambition to seize the city of Antwerp, all part of the beginning of Hitler’s counteroffensive “Wacht am Rhein.” The division’s leading formation, Kampfgruppe
Peiper, is already twelve hours behind schedule andLt. Col. Joachim Peiper isfrustrated. Creating a gap in the American defenses—one large enough for tanks,artillery, and a myriad of other vehicles—took much too long. The US 99th Infantry Divisionhad been a tougher enemy than expected, and now hislead element is reduced from seven tanks and a platoon of halftracks to two tanks and two halftracks. Peiper is not a happy man as his tanks lumber toward the Baugnez crossroads.

In the opposite direction, an American convoy rolls along a rutted road edged with brown slush. This is Battery B of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, a long line of maintenance trucks, Jeeps, and command cars that stretches over a couple miles of road. They are moving to Luxembourg to join the VIII Corps; their commander, Captain Scarborough, had left the day before to prepare the new camp. Now, the convoy rumbles toward a tiny Belgian village named Malmédy, and reaches the hamlet at noon.

There, amidst quaint medieval houses with curved barn roofs and mined bridges marked off with tape, the convoy crosses paths with elements of the 7th Armored Division making their way to St. Vith. The soldiers jeer, wave, and grin at each other as they pass; from their windows, Belgians watch the young Americans with weary eyes. Battery B is paused at the east end of Malmédy by an Army engineer, Lt. Col. David Pergrin. Part of his command has stayed behind to protect the important N-23 road, and his Jeep patrol has brought news. A column of German armor is approaching the southeast; it would be a bad idea, Pergrin tells Lieutenant Ksidzek, to head that way. They should turn around, take the alternate route to St. Vith.

No, we have our orders—the artillerymen are firm in their decision—we have a planned route, with men up ahead that need to be picked up. We’re going forward.

So they move up through patchy snow and sludge, spindly trees stark black slashes against the frozen brown fields stretching on either side. The sky is clear, the sun shining despite the frigid temperature, and Five Points, the Baugnez crossroads, is only a few miles ahead.

Peiper’s tanks reach Baugnez just as Battery B arrives. All is confusion and chaos. The two tanks of Peiper’s lead element pound the vulnerable convoy with 75mm shells, then circle around behind the broken Battery. Wreckage is scattered across the road, abandoned vehicles burning, crushed, or punched with holes. The shocked Americans have fled to the shaky cover of the roadside ditches, but safety is nowhere to be found. The tanks begin spraying machine guns under the order of Lt. Sternebeck; he wants to force the soldiers to surrender. With no heavy artillery, the Americans have no choice but to give up.
Peiper is furious. They are twelve hours behind already; this delay is intolerable! He immediately orders Sternebeck to move on to Ligneuville. Peiper follows soon after with a Mark V Panther tank and the halftracks from his 11th SS Panzergrenadier Company. As the German armor trails their commander, the unarmed American prisoners are herded into a field next to a lonely café, which, along with a few isolated farmhouses, is the only sign of habitation near the crossroads. By two o’clock in the afternoon, one hundred and thirteen soldiers are in the field. The Battery B boys are joined by prisoners from various units captured before Peiper reached Baugnez, and by medics and military policemen who had the bad fortune to be caught at the crossroads.

At two-fifteen, the Germans open fire.

-January 14th, 1945-

Pergrin’s engineers stand in a white field next to a small café, mine detectors in their hands. They have heard the stories of the Malmédy Massacre, listened to the rumors, but here is proof.

Seventy-one bodies lie before them, frozen in twisted positions. Snow covers them, surrounds them like Nature’s own shroud. Uniforms are intact, unit patches bright on sodden wool; the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, the 23rd Infantry Regiment, the 32nd Armored Reconnaissance, and others. Later autopsies will confirm forty-three died from shots to the head; this backs up the story of a hiding soldier, who saw the Germans walk through the killing field and shoot any survivors. Nine bodies were found with their arms still stretched above their heads, pleading for clemency that was never granted.

-July 31st, 2007-

It’s a chilly day for July. We wander down a cobbled street in Malmédy as the wind brushes cold fingers against our cheeks and flaps the lone American flag like a woman airing her sheets. The flagpole stands in the middle of a star shaped in Texas roses, a wall of rough sandy-colored stone curving around the alcove behind the small garden.

Brown-grey leaves are scattered on the tiled floor of the alcove, bunched beneath a skeletal figure of Jesus pinned to a wooden cross. There is a plaque here, and another set at the Baugnez crossroads. Both carry the names of the eighty-four soldiers that died in the Malmédy Massacre.

I’m not sleepy anymore.
Fifth Shift
A Different Kind of Death

By Joy Patterson

Paper covers are amputated halfway as proof to the superior public that their value is diminished.

Bearing Sharpie tattoos and shuffled into color-coded tribes, they lie discarded on carts to await their demise.

They march, faces fossilized by despair, as foreign dictators demand their extinction.

Sorted by emotionless hands, they cling to the wrinkled corners of yellow stars for comfort.

All coffee-colored bruises and grimy fingerprints, they are tarnished—Yesterday’s accomplishments hauled to mass graves in silence.

There is no pride in rot and nakedness except in the shelter of untouchable Freedom, deep in the mind where memory of better days can still refuse to surrender.

They will not be forgotten.

They are too powerful.

Between the pages, notes and love-letter bookmarks preserve buried voices in dust-scented handwriting.

From the ashes, our humanity will cry out and conquer this holocaust.
A Maritime Occupation  
BY DAVID SYRIGOS

Abram was stranded for days in that dull raft. Now, more than ever, his missing hand imperiled his chances of survival. He never got used to the fact that he was missing a hand. Sometimes, he would reach for something—a blade, for instance—and realize that his hand was a ghost. Often, he imagined he could see it. He burned with anger, wishing it had corporeal form.

Abram also suffered from self-inflicted long and short-term memory loss. He had poisoned his mind with marine biology jargon and the scientific names of fishes he would never see twice.

In the raft, he had little to work with. He managed to salvage a waterproof journal during the wreck. The death of his crew was no important matter; Abram had already forgotten.

Of course, he had a knife; rarely was Abram without his knife and whetting stone. The knife had been through much, but Abram didn’t have a story for every nick and scratch. His sharpening stone shaved away the steel of the past. He used the stone extensively, and the blade grew ever sharper.

Lightning struck. The waves soared so high that they veiled this second flash of lightning. And Abram saw a sable silhouette within the translucent mound of water.

All he remembered was his fearlessness. In the life he recalled, he lived without a fear in his heart. He simply couldn’t remember what fear felt like. Every meaningless incident in his mid-term memory stood out as a triumph over reasonable human fear. His fearless endeavors included climbing accidents, car wrecks, plane crashes, and vicious knife-fights—“duels” as he liked to call them. Throughout the course of his life, he felt no fear save for a single agent of death. But his memory-loss took even that fear from him, and thus he was fearless.

The water was getting rough, yet there was a vast stillness. Abram searched the horizon for hope. The waves again pressed upward. The wind picked up, the sky grew dull, and the unbroken surface of the water took up its habit of swelling in the wind. Lightning struck. Blue turned white. Rain fell. Abram found himself at the peak of an oceanic hill. Then all was dark. Lightning struck. The waves soared so high
that they veiled this second flash of lightning. And Abram saw a sable silhouette within the translucent mound of water. The raft sunk into a trough, some twenty feet below the shadow. The dark shape whipped and twisted, then vanished when lightning struck a third time. As the bright light left his eyes, Abram saw that something shadow-like had broken the surface of the water. But it was more than a shadow; it was an agent of death. Abram was still, but he was not fearful.

He watched the shadow skid down the wave towards his raft. And then it vanished below the surface and burrowed into the darkest blue. But Abram promptly forgot what he saw.

* * *

When Abram was twenty, he and his father were caught in a violent storm on the open sea. The father and son looked out over the tremulous water and saw the silhouette of a man on a flimsy, bobbing raft. They called to him, but the rain was too dense. The man, waving his arms, shouted something back.

The father turned to his son and said, “He’s going to need—”

But Abram’s father was cut off by a flash of lightning and its simultaneous thunder. They were blinded, but they heard a scream.

As soon as their vision returned, they worked to bring their boat alongside the raft and its distressed occupant.

Suddenly, a vicious bolt of lightning set the raft aflame. The fire brightly lit up the water. As the fire was born, the rainfall seemed to die.

Abram leapt onto the raft and pulled the man out of the flames and into the water.

A third flash of lightning, then all went dark.

The fire was gone. The raft was gone. Next he knew, Abram—with the man in his arms—slammed into the ladder at the stern of the yacht. His father lifted the two of them out of the water.

Abram screamed through his teeth as his father pulled him aboard. He was clutching his right wrist. His right hand was gone, and blood was pouring from the stump. Thus, Abram had saved a stranger but had lost his dominant hand.

When the storm died down and all was mostly well, they drifted home. The rescued man was called Grit. He told them tales of his adventures at sea. Abram was intrigued. After every tale, Grit would thank Abram for saving his life and ask, “Anything I can do for you, my friend?” Every time, Abram sincerely asked Grit to stop thanking him. His stories were enough.

Later that year, Abram took to the pursuit of marine biological studies. As it turned out, Grit was wealthy and even willing to fund all of Abram’s proposed expeditions—on the condition that he could go along. Abram was more than willing to accept, as long as stories were told. Once, Grit tried to bring up the circumstances of their meeting, but Abram turned pale and motioned him to be quiet. With the help of his studies, he had put it out of his mind. He had forgotten all the details, but the fearless pain remained.

* * *

When the shadow left, the storm left with it. The sky became clear
and the swelling stopped. Abram took up the pen that was attached to the journal. The journal was a crumpled bundle of waterproof papers wrapped in twine. Using his ghost of a hand, he stabilized the journal against his knee. But he didn’t write. The memory was gone.

He required the help of his teeth to retie the twine.

* * *

A decade after the incident, his studies became monotonous. He was finished. He felt like something wanted to take him, or take the rest of him. He couldn’t imagine what it was that wanted him, but he felt that it—whatever it was—wanted everything he had kept to himself.

Whenever Abram took much-needed time alone, his crew went about their own business. Every mariner needs some time alone to explore his own personal mysteries. Abram would seek out his primary curiosity; a particular mystery plagued him. His goal was resolve. He would return to the place of Grit’s rescue to find it.

Three years in a row, he went on this solitary voyage. Each year, Abram found what he had forgotten. Each year—if only in his transitory memory—it would take his hand. He would see the same roaring waves and watch his body slam into the hull and catch the ladder. But he would only know that his hand was taken. And then he would forget it all again.

On the first of these voyages, Abram wondered about his mystery with the mentality of a scientist. Why would a predator of near infinite capacity take only the dominant hand of its prey? Perhaps the agent of death found that its opposition was stronger in a way unlike itself. Perhaps it had created a handicap that evened the battle. But whenever this thought occurred, it quickly left his mind. Abram found himself drifting under clear skies and above deep waters, thoughtless. The absence of fear brought him there many times.

When Abram was thirty-three, he went on the third—the last of these independent, dark-watered ventures—to the place his hand was severed. Without his father or his friend to remind him of his bravery, Abram happened upon a physical artifact of the past that he couldn’t recall: a ramshackle raft scorched with flame. He cast out his grappling hook and brought it portside. Abram took a moment to survey how expertly the raft had been crafted. Grit made a raft like this. Must have taken him awhile. With all the attention to practical detail. The feeble mast of the raft was still intact, and a tattered, charred, rag-sail was still aloft.
Abram leapt down onto the rope-wound deck and caught himself against the mast. A mist of sea salt plagued his senses. He studied the weakened craft. On the mast, a faint shape caught his attention. He traced it with a finger. It was definitely the outline of a hand that was not his own.

That day, he thought back. Back to the first thing he could remember: eleven years ago. To a couple of years after the day his hand was taken.

* * *

When Abram was twenty-two, the three men dined together. Grit dared to recounts Abram’s heroic deed. Abram had put it out of his mind. He denied himself a source of intrigue, so the memory wasn’t pursued further. For all Abram cared, nothing had happened.

A week later, they dined again. They discussed a mystery of deep waters: that the deeper one dives, the larger the devilfish become. Abram mused towards serious discussion until he noticed a web-like scar on Grit’s right arm. He hadn’t seen it before, because Grit didn’t usually roll up his sleeves. On several occasions that day, Abram wanted to ask Grit about those red, branching grooves that ran down his arm. But he didn’t. He didn’t think it his right to ask. He didn’t think it his right to know.

* * *

Now at thirty-three, Abram realized that Grit had been struck by lightning. On the night of the rescue, the fire that was induced by the hand of God; the terrible friction of electricity. He imagined the pain of some hundred million volts passing through his arm. The electrical knives lacerating his muscles. The trails of volcanic heat seething beneath his skin. Lingering for a moment that hesitated to end. No pain could be greater. Abram shuddered at the thought. But he was not fearful. He laughed hysterically, and then failed to recall why he dared to make a sound.

He stepped around the mast of the sturdy raft and examined what nothings he could find. Superb knots still intact. Handmade pitch still held. But what is this? Abram examined the damp floor. A film of saltwater surged under his waders and filled oddly jagged grooves in the logs. Curved lines following a semicircular path. Almost three rows of them.

He put it out of his mind. His solitary expedition was over. He had learned enough.

* * *

Isolated raft; Abram alone. Dusk was approaching. The sky was clear and the waterscape smooth. Must find home, he thought. Must return to the past. But he felt he couldn’t find it. He felt he never would. But he must continue to search.

He remembered Grit’s stories. Adventures he could believe. Adventures he could imagine. He wanted to see them: the marvelous wonders of the deep. He wanted to forget the confusion like he forgot his memories. He wanted to know the truth behind the mystery. He
wanted to meet his handicapper. *It must be formidable. It must be clever. And it must remember everything.*

A loud thump. The raft tilted unnaturally. Abram stumbled. He fell through rough water and felt a solid sharpness; his face struck something coarse and steely. He outstretched his arms to find whatever it was and push it away, but he clapsed only water. Then he scrambled to right himself on the raft, and pressed his left hand to his face. Abram realized that his face had struck the dorsal fin of the shadow. His cheek had been torn open by the unexpected impact. He looked around, but the shadow had vanished silently away. The pain was significant, but not unbearable. He fought the sensation. Fear was a thing he had learned to fully ignore, but he desperately tried to know the full ignorance of pain.

The sky grew dark with clouds. But fear was not there, in the darkness. Abram inhaled the blood inside his cheek. But he saw that it was too late. A crimson droplet fell. And it vanished in the water. His jawbone began to ache. He imagined a gleaming blade, shining with his blood. But the knife he saw in his mind was not sharp.

Abram sensed another advance. He pulled the knife from his belt-sheath. The sheen of its edge refracted the minimal light that fell through a break in the overcast sky.

The intense shadow angled its approach and missed the raft. But the tail of the monster swept around, and its wake lifted the insubstantial deck.

Abram lost his footing, but ably regained it; he lost sight of the monster. This agent of death wasn’t fond of being seen.

Knife held high, Abram waited.

The clouds departed and the sun shone powerfully. Unnumbered minutes passed. He expected his rival to fight. Soon enough, he realized that the weakness of the human rival was expectation. But Abram was not afraid. He felt only dauntless dread. The power of surprise was a thing worth dreading, and the agent of death would be keeping it.

* * *

Age thirty-four, some time before his crew’s final voyage. Abram was beginning to find a new sense of glory in his occupation. His saltwater studies had indeed become monotonous, and he knew there was something more important to do. Sure, he knew everything there was to know about the adopted habitat of the mariner, but he wanted a proper resolution—a proper end.

Henceforth, Abram had spent his life sailing the sea with these men: his father and Grit. They worked as a captainless crew. As a team they studied the sea, drowned in its presence; their minds dwelled in the world below the horizon. And they studied the brightly-colored lightning below the waves. They called themselves *crew* as long as they were together; when they worked alone, they were strangers—the captains of their own vessels. This separation provided the crew with each other’s necessary secrecy.

But when Abram was thirty-four, his father passed away. Abram had nothing to say at his funeral. He had forgotten the sadness.
Grit became the last friend Abram had on the waterlogged world. Grit had even stopped thanking Abram. So he told new stories. And Abram listened intently. These parables directly pertained to his vocation, so they weren’t quickly forgotten.

Grit asked Abram to take him to the place of their meeting. Abram consented. He couldn’t remember why he shouldn’t. They were to voyage along the hidden roads of the great ocean landscape. The currents were notorious. So Grit wished to sail a borrowed boat. “I need to keep my legacy. You’ll need something to sail when I’m gone,” he proclaimed. But Abram forgot what he said.

They flew onward, cutting across the sheets of thirsty blue velvet. But Abram was lost. He led their vessel in a fruitless and trivial fashion. So Grit took the helm. A wily aspect covered his visage. But Abram didn’t understand it.

A storm pursued. Abram was concerned. This will be the end for us. Grit’s valor at the helm was faltering, so Abram assumed Grit’s place with fearlessness. And he veered the craft toward a faint shadow on the nighttime blue sky. But there will be no pain. He struggled against the waves generated by the dark, island-like shadow. But the wave grew beyond the reach of Abram’s bravery. Their vessel was shattered, and Grit was broken.

Abram didn’t remember it. Another captain had passed away, but Abram felt no emotional pain. He could not recall his passing. Grit had simply vanished.

Floating on the ocean alone, Abram thought about the tempestuous waters he treaded. I need a vessel, or I’m dead. So he cried out.

A raft unfamiliar to Abram—a substantial piece of driftwood—floated by. Abram crawled aboard. He lay supine and wheezed bitterly through his teeth, clutching a bundle to his chest. Thus Abram was shipwrecked.

* * *

Abram was still waiting. The night was getting colder, but the fire in his indignant heart burned unchecked. He pondered ardently, brandishing the sharpened knife as he paced. The clouds swept majestically over the pale sky. Their vast shadows blotched the sea.

Abram remembered his studies. Predatory fish were his peak of intrigue; he had always much admired them: the sluggish grouper, the restless barracuda, the patient moray. He was fascinated by their atypical behavior. Once, when diving along the Gulf Coast, he fell face to face with a barracuda. Abram noted a sense of fearful wariness in the fish. It studied him for what seemed longer than a minute, then swam away. A fish, Abram found, often took a moment to analyze the importance of an individual before it struck. If it realized that its opponent was not worthy of injury, it simply would not attack. But all fish did not do this, and Abram had the scars to prove it.

Perhaps there was a stimulus he had never considered. Perhaps some predatory fish took into account what kind of prey they pursued. Perhaps some fish had acquired an anomalous vendetta complex. But the thought immediately left his mind. He felt assured that his studies were virtually complete, yet permanently incomplete. He knew that
certain things could never be properly investigated. After all, he knew that his greatest studies would amount to nothing.

* * *

Abram was thirty-one. The water was cold and clear. The day was brisk. His father asked him: “Why do you do this?”

Abram asked what he meant.

“How do you persist?”

Abram drum-rolled his fingers on the steel railing. His useless arm hung at his side. “Because there’s something...more out there. There has to be.”

“There is, my son. There is. Don’t lose sight of it.”

Abram’s eyes were blank. Of what? He thought.

“Just keep searching. You ought to find it.”

* * *

The sun shone intensely, and a cold breeze swept under Abram’s torn shirt. Abram bowed his head. Then, in a fit of fierce rage, he dropped to his knees, and slammed the tempered steel blade into the darkened wood. The sound resonated over the vista and died. Pressure built in his veins, and blood filled his mouth and spilled from his cheek. The bloodshed developed into a foul blackish pool. It grew through the parallel creases of the handmade craft and then ultimately settled, staining places scoured by salty waters. Hidden characters were made evident when the blood collected in their hashes. But more prominently, a bending set of three lines appeared. Abram’s memory overlooked such a clue. He grew sick of seeing his own blood, so he drew his knife angrily and looked up.

He looked out over the blue horizon and discerned a break in the underlined nothing of the sky. He couldn’t determine what it was, because the saltwater burned his eyes. It seemed to be a shadow and traveled a wide perimeter as slowly as the moon traverses the horizons.

For laughs, he signaled to the shadow on the water, redirecting the sunlight with his knife, spelling out “S-O-S” incessantly. As soon as he grew tired, he sat down and pondered his complacency. He was missing something—he wanted his memory back. He had nothing more to hope for.

The blood should have drawn a mob of predators. But only a single shadow lurked miles away. Something timeless fills the gap in a man’s memory when temporal reason fails to endure. And Abram taunted it with his conditioned lungs. He called it a coward.

The sky grew dark. The sun slowly set. Abram watched the blip on the skyline till the advent of cold night. Then Abram curled up on the floor of the aimless craft and slept. Half the night passed. Midnight came about. The platinum crescent moon rested behind sheets of grey cirrostratus.

Abram sat up. He thought he remembered something. Hastily he slipped the bundle of pages from his waistband and detached the pen. But it was only a dream. He couldn’t remember. And even then, he presumed it wasn’t worth remembering.
He watched a blackened piece of flotsam drift by. It clunked into the side of the raft. Abram reached and picked it up. On the driftwood was a faint handprint. He flung the heavy driftwood behind him and then turned to face it. In the dead charcoal surface of the fragment, he distinguished the same image from a year ago. And then he realized what he remembered.

Abram’s eyes fell upon the center of the raft, and saw that there had once been a mast. But he returned to the thought of the world he loved. And he dwelt in its colors.

He held up his knife and looked at his reflection. His mirrored eyes glared back. Scars, old and new, jagged and linear, adorned his rugged countenance. Rivers of blood ran all about his right cheek. His eyes were dark. His hair was plastered backwards, slickly unkempt.

A storm quickly wrought the sky into a gluttonous, vaporous mass. Lightning flickered beneath its growling belly. Abram took the whetstone from his pocket and champed it between his teeth. He raised his arm to strike and gazed at his dreadful reflection. But a sudden jolt shook the mirror image and flung the sharpening stone from Abram’s jaw.

The storm quickened. The water grew restless. The rain poured down. Abram gathered his footing and scanned the water for the shadow. Lightning reflected off the water. And Abram was blinded by the light.

Then, he first began to remember. When I was young, my right hand was severed in an accident. But I rescued a man named Grit. Now I am thirty-four, and Grit died in the shipwreck that put me here.

The snout of the beast slammed into Abram’s neck. As his arms were thrown forward, Abram plunged the knife wherever he might. But then jaw muscles snapped apart and launched him away.

Images filled his mind: A raft. A figured doused with light. A fire going out. The teeth of the beast. The blood spilling from his wrist.

Abram fell past the ocean’s threshold. Resurfaced. And waited.

The teeth embraced Abram. But they did not break him. They carried him. Where am I going? He flailed his arms in the darkness. By chance, he caught the hilt of his knife, which was stuck in the side of the beast. And he twisted his arm with as much torque as he could muster.

Emotions filled his mind: My life is gone. And I am afraid.

Abram wept. And his tears dissolved.
Pearl River
Easter Flood
1979

BY CHRIS BROWN

I. Afternoon

Roof of slate tiles,
Parted, reveals a living
Room: oak limb crammed

Between wall, sofa.
Rain soaks into the carpet.
Wind gnaws the ceiling.

Under a street light:
Japanese magnolia,
Blooms beneath the water.

II. Night

Crickets pulse again:
Night has come. The rain has gone.
Silt is our new bed.

The surface of mud
Pales in moonlight. A fragment,
roof slate, testifies:

Home is underneath
Mud and stone. Home is buried.
Silt is our new bed.

III. Morning

Resurrection day.
Cicadas chant from pine-tops:
Day has shed our skins.

Day has come. Day is.
The hymn they hum and rattle
Over the River.
He would have to pass fifteen houses before he could get to school. David carefully counted how many houses there were when his big brother Khalil showed him how to get to his new school, Garden Heights Elementary. It was in the middle of his neighborhood; the neighborhood the school was named for and the neighborhood that was always on the news.

“That’s ‘cause Garden Heights is full of weeds, that’s why,” Khalil joked to him, but David didn’t get it. He figured if there were that many weeds in the neighborhood, why wasn’t anybody picking them? His grandma made him and Khalil pick the weeds out of her garden all of the time so they wouldn’t “choke the roses.” He wasn’t complaining though. He would choose picking weeds over passing those fifteen houses any day.

Some weren’t so bad. There were houses with blooming flowers in the front yards that would distract eyes from much-needed paint jobs or the occasional crooked window shutter. But then there were houses with trash piled where flowers should have been and patches of dirt where grass once was. David knew he’d have to zig-zag into the street to avoid those. They were usually the houses he’d see on the news.

Today he would be passing them alone. Khalil wouldn’t be there to make jokes about the old man in the sixth house who was always outside and hated kids, even seven year old boys like himself. Khalil also wouldn’t be there when the pit-bulls at the tenth house tried to tear their rusty gate down just to get to a lonesome first grader whose legs weren’t long enough to outrun the drooling beasts. David wasn’t tall, Khalil was.

Khalil had kinky, cocoa-colored locks that were braided to look like rows of corn, with shiny lines of grease separating them. In the winter, he had a fluffy afro that he brushed all the time. His face was round and he had high cheekbones that only showed when he smiled. Their grandma said he had “Indian in ‘em.” David didn’t.

David’s hair was rusty brown, tinged with cinnamon in the summer, and cut so short that you could tell when he was thinking hard because his scalp would ripple. Once Khalil tried to cut a “D” into the back of David’s hair, but the lights went out just as he was making the curve, and the clippers took out a plug of David’s hair. That patch
still hadn’t grown back.

Khalil had their mama’s eyes, just as cocoa as his hair and shaped like almonds. David’s eyes had a small trace of his mama’s, but somebody else’s green ones made his hazel and slanted, so when he smiled they looked closed. His smile would also reveal deep dimples like his mama’s that matched the one that always showed in his chin, like somebody else. It was that person whose first name he had. He had somebody else’s skin tone too because he was “red,” and would be the color of a beet when he was angry or embarrassed. Everybody else in his family was as brown as burnt caramel.

His grandma always told him to eat more because he didn’t have “no meat on his bones.” Khalil didn’t have a lot of meat on his bones, but he was big enough that the pit-bulls wouldn’t have scared him.

But even though there were pit-bulls and angry old men, David’s journey wasn’t completely scary. The candy lady’s house stood at the corner of the only intersection he had to cross. The paint was peeling on the once icy-blue shingles, and a few of the windows had cardboard over the broken glass. The cardboard had all kinds of words and symbols written on it by a couple of neighborhood kids, but for some reason, the candy lady hadn’t taken it down. David heard her say once that it gave her house “character,” but Khalil said she was afraid of the kids who did it. Khalil also told David that if he passed her house at just the right time in the mornings, she would give him a honey bun and a box of juice, grape or apple, of course.

Then, there was the house with a bunch of old, rusty cars outside. There was no grass, only dirt that had needles, empty bottles, hash pipes, and other trash scattered across it. The windows in the house had been broken out long ago, replaced by boards, and it was hard to tell what color the house once was because the paint on the siding was gone, and graffiti had taken over the walls. The aluminum carport fell in on an abandoned car, and David thought it looked like a cave.

No matter the time of day, there was a party going on at the house: loud music, people always coming and going. Khalil told him to never speak to anyone there, and David was sure he never would. The people there were downright scary. They reminded David of the dragons he read about in tales of princes and knights, with scaly skin and reddened eyes. Most of them would have a cigarette, and smoke would come from their mouths, like dragons that hadn’t quite learned to breathe fire. Khalil said they weren’t dragons—they were lost.
“Just like mama is lost,” Khalil said.
David would be walking to school alone, and the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to stay home.

*Grandma will understand,* he thought as he sat at the folding card table in the middle of the kitchen. The table was red, the brightest thing in the small, wood-paneled room. None of the four chairs at the table matched. The one David sat in was metal with “Mount Zion Baptist Church” stamped on the back.

The cabinets in the kitchen were the same color as the walls and blended in, except for the occasional knot of the pine. David said the cabinets had chicken pox.

The kitchen sink had a runny nose. It was always dripping, and in the middle of the night, David would count the drip-drops when he couldn’t sleep. There was a window above it, with a crack across it from one corner to the other. David’s mama did that with a brick when his grandma wouldn’t give her some money.

The refrigerator sneezed. It was off-white with the freezer on the top and the refrigerator on the bottom. It hummed almost like David’s grandma would when something bad happened, but if you left the fridge door open too long, it made this loud, deep, *zee, zee, zee.*

Taped on the doors were crayon scribbles by David, Khalil’s report cards, and the prayer cloths or prophetic-word letters TV preachers would send.

The refrigerator also had a rash on one side. It was next to the stove, and the smoke and heat stained it. The stove had a fever—it would always overheat—and Khalil always forgot to clean its eyes. David forgot to clean behind his ears all the time.

David’s feet were dangling inches above the white, linoleum floor that he forgot to sweep last night before bed. No, his grandma wouldn’t understand when she came home from her grave yard shift at the hospital where she cleaned floors, only to have to clean the floor she asked him to.

“You ready for your first day of first grade?” his brother, a man-child at fourteen, asked over the sizzling eggs that were being scrambled a little too long. David didn’t mind though; he liked the extra crispness that came with his brother’s burnt eggs.

“I—no,” he said shortly, but truthfully. The eggs were slid onto his plate with little specks of black throughout them, just like he liked them. After all, they were made by his big brother who was afraid of nothing.

“Why not?” asked Khalil. He took the chair across from David’s. “I told you, everything’ll be fine. You got nothing to worry about.”

Shame made David look away to the small window above the kitchen sink. “I’m—” he tried to get the words out, but for some reason, *scared* seemed to be stuck in his throat, afraid to be spoken. He poked his fork at his charred eggs. “Lotta houses,” he said.

The short explanation was understood. “You know I’d walk with you if I could, right?” Khalil asked. David nodded. Every morning before school, Khalil worked at Mr. Mak’s grocery store. It was only two streets over, but in the opposite direction of David’s school.
“I still wish you could walk with me,” David said to Khalil and put a forkful of eggs in his mouth. He put his fork down. Maybe the rumblings of his empty stomach would scare those pit bulls away.

Khalil said nothing for a moment, but even as he stared at his plate, David could tell his brother was looking at him. Khalil got up and went to the kitchen sink. Curiosity had David look up, and he was confused when he saw Khalil walk towards him with a wooden spoon.

“Stand up,” Khalil said. David, puzzled yet interested, did as he was told. “I know that it seems scary, walking to school by yourself. But this,” Khalil pointed the spoon towards David. “This will guarantee that you have nothing to worry about.”

“It will?” David asked. It wasn’t going to be much help against dragon-people, or dogs, or anything else. “It’s a spoon.”

“It’s not just any spoon,” said Khalil. “It’s an enchanted spoon. And it appoints princes and knights.”

David’s eyes widened and he stared in amazement at the now enchanted spoon. “No way!”

“You bet it does,” Khalil smiled. “On my first day of first grade, mom told me all about it. It knows how scary things can be out there, but it was sent to us to help us be brave. And since today is your first day of first grade, it’s time that your mission begins.”

“My mission?” David asked excitedly. “What kind of mission?”

“Your mission to become a prince,” Khalil said in a hushed voice and David’s mouth dropped open.

“I’m a prince? A real prince?” he whispered as Khalil looked around to make sure no one was listening.

“Yeah. What few people know is that Garden Heights is actually an enchanted forest,” said Khalil.

David’s scalp rippled. “A forest?”

“An enchanted forest,” Khalil corrected and motioned his brother to follow him to one of windows. Khalil pulled back the curtain. “The bad guys put a spell on Garden Heights to make it look the way it does. Most folks don’t know there’s real magic around here. See that over there,” he pointed to an old, brown truck that was in one of their neighbor’s yards. It had been stripped of its doors and tires and was starting to rust.

“It used to be a horse, a real horse, until the spell turned it into that,” Khalil explained. “But there are people like us, people the spoon chose, who see the real thing.”

David squinted his eyes and stared at the aging truck until finally he could see the brown stallion, grazing on the small patch of grass in front of it. “I see it!”

“Pretty cool, huh?” Khalil smiled. “This is your kingdom. But there are bad guys out there who don’t want you to become a prince because they know that you’re going to get rid of them one day. Like those guys who stand on the corners and the ones who caused Mom and all of those people at that house to be lost.”

“The dragons!” David said. His brother’s story started to make sense. “The bad guys turned them into dragons!”

“Exactly,” Khalil said, his voice low. “But before you can become a
All of the knights and princes David had heard about wouldn’t have been afraid of fifteen houses. If what his brother was saying was true, he would have to find a way to break the curse one day, to restore Garden Heights. And if it meant passing those houses on his own—

“I’ll do it.”

“Then it’s time that the spoon appointed you,” Khalil said. David faced him with an expectant smile. “I, Sir Khalil, appoint you, David of Garden Heights, into knighthood,” Khalil said as he touched each of David’s shoulders with the spoon. “You are to protect yourself, first and foremost, but remain brave as you make your journey through your kingdom each day. Do you swear to the enchanted spoon to do this?”

“I swear to the enchanted spoon,” David said proudly.

Khalil placed the spoon on David’s head. “Then, as of today, you will be known as Sir David, Prince of Garden Heights.”

* * *

“A prince? A real prince?”

“Yeah! Do I have to explain again?”

David sighed at the idea of having to tell the entire story. He gripped the chains of the tire swing and gently rocked it from side to side as the shadow of his best friend protected him from the scalding August sun. Imani was a girl, sure enough, and already David had been teased by boys in their class about a girl being his friend, his best friend.

“I bet she his girlfriend!” One of the boys said at lunch, loud enough for David and everyone else to hear.

“Ew man! That’s nasty!” another one said. “My daddy says that women ain’t nothing but trouble and only good for two things. He just ain’t told me what the two things are.”

David didn’t care, though, since they obviously weren’t the kind of friends he wanted.

Imani was just a few inches taller than David, with mahogany skin and eyes just a shade lighter with a tinge of honey to them. Whenever she smiled, it seemed to spread across the width of her face. Her dark hair was done in tiny braids that reached her shoulders and curled at the ends. Each braid was a bit thicker than a strand of hair, yet so small that far away, it was hard to tell that they were braids. David’s grandma and Imani’s grandma used to always say that he and Imani would give them great-grandbabies one day.
“But make sure it’s a long, long time from now, okay?” his grandma had laughed.

He and Imani’s grandmothers had been best friends and, just like David, Imani had lived with her grandma because her mom was lost. But then her grandma passed away, and Imani’s mom came back. David thought that was a good thing, but his grandma always said it was a “damn shame” how Imani’s mom acted. He wasn’t sure what a “damn shame” was though. The way she would say it, he figured it was the same way those boys had acted towards him earlier.

But Imani’s question and its demand had David longing to play basketball with those bullying boys.

Imani stomped her foot, which sent a billow of sandy smoke into David’s face. “It’s not like you have anything else to do!” she argued.

David coughed as the grit of the sand somehow ended up in his mouth. “What you do that for?” he asked and spit out as much of the grit as he could.

Imani smirked. “It got your attention, didn’t it? Tell me again— Garden Heights is really a forest?”

“An enchanted forest,” David corrected as Khalil had done to him earlier. “I saw it all myself when I walked to school this morning.” He glanced around to make sure no one was nearby and motioned Imani closer. “You know that house with all of those scary people in it?” he whispered and Imani nodded.

“Yeah.”

“They’re all dragons,” David said and Imani’s eyes widened as his had earlier.

“Dragons? No way!”

“Yeah, I saw them,” said David as he dug his foot into the sand. “Khalil said that I’m a prince, but I have to be a knight first. It’s up to me to help Garden Heights become an enchanted forest again.”

“How are you going to do that?”

How was he going to do that? Sure Khalil said he had to get to school safely each day, but there had to be more to it than that. Knights always did heroic things, like defeat dragons or save princesses.

“I don’t know,” David mumbled. “Khalil told me to avoid the dragons and I can’t think of a princess to save.”

The only sound amongst them was that of the squeaky swing rocking back and forth and the jovial voices of the other kids in the distance. How was David supposed to be a knight if he didn’t have a real mission?

“I know!” Imani said with a snap of a finger. “There is a princess you could save! Your mom!”

“My mom?” David asked. “But she—”

“Is a princess! Remember, you said Khalil told you that your mom first told him about Garden Heights being an enchanted forest? For her to know, she has to be a princess!”

“Yeah!” David agreed as it all started to make sense. “My mom, she’s a princess and if I save her—”

“You can become a knight,” Imani finished with a grin.

It all made sense now, yet David wondered why Khalil hadn’t told
him that. Then again, Khalil always said their mom was lost but every now and then, David would see her. Once she came over and asked his grandma for money, but they argued so much that she left. Another time, David saw her leaving the house where—

“The dragons!” he exclaimed. “They’re trying to turn my mom into a dragon! Someone doesn’t want her to be a princess anymore!” As much sense as it all made, David’s excitement died when a question came to life. “But who? I know there are bad guys, but there’s always one main bad guy who the others take orders from. That’s usually who knights have to fight.”

David stared at the ground as he tried to figure out just who the “big” bad guy was. Was it the man at the tenth house with all of those pit-bulls? Wait, they were wolves when David passed them this morning. But was it him? It would make sense for a bad guy to protect his castle with wolves. Or was it that old man at the sixth house who hated kids so much? David wondered and pondered, and in his wondering and pondering he noticed Imani’s shadow. Her leg was shaking which meant one thing.

“You know who it is! You always do that when you’re keeping stuff from me!” David said. But he stopped himself from getting upset when he saw Imani wasn’t looking up at him—she was focused on her shoes. “What’s wrong?”

Imani finally met his gaze and sighed. “He’s a really bad guy, David. A really, really bad guy.”

“Bad guys usually are,” David shrugged.

Imani shook her head. “He’s worse. He’s my mom’s new boyfriend. His name is King and—”

David’s jaw dropped. “King?”

“Yeah,” Imani nodded. “And he—,” Imani’s voice faltered as David waited to hear all about this “King” guy. He wondered if King had been sent by a witch who wanted revenge against David’s mom for something. Or what if he was a king from another land who decided he wanted to make the people of Garden Heights his servants? There were so many possibilities, and as soon as Imani told David all he needed to know about King—

The unspoken words lingered in the air, and the moment became a breeze that carried the untold away with it. “Nothing,” Imani mumbled. “Forget I said anything. Forget everything David.”

David could not believe what he was hearing. Here he was, close to finding out about his enemy, and now he was supposed to forget it? “What you mean forget it?”


With one leap from his swing, David landed at Imani’s feet. “Of course I can,” he said. “I see what King and the curse don’t want us to see. Those guys who are always on the street corners who fight each other and stuff? They’re ogres!”

There were quite a few ogres in Garden Heights, and David just happened to see a couple this morning. They wore the usual ogre attire: over-sized T-shirts with big chains draped over them, jeans
that sagged so their underwear showed, and caps or bandanas on their heads. Some of them had gold-plated teeth and most had tattoos on their arms, or even their faces.

The ogres were leaving the dragon dungeon, and David figured that they had given some of the dragon people the potions that would turn them completely into dragons. Then he saw another group pacing a corner, probably protecting it for this “King” guy, when suddenly one ogre started arguing with another. David wasn’t surprised when an ogre pulled out his club and started beating the other one with it. Soon, the rest of the ogres joined in, and David was able to run past before any of them realized that a knight was nearby.

“Those boys who were teasing us this morning? Trolls.” David, now in his suit of armor, nodded towards the trolls as they rough-housed and shouted during across the playground as trolls do.

“David—”

“Just look!” David insisted.

Imani squint her eyes for a few seconds but stopped with a frustrated grunt. “I can’t see it.”

“Close your eyes,” said David. “When you open ‘em, you’ll see what I’m talking about. I know it.”

“How you know that?” Imani asked as she closed her eyes and David grinned.

“Cause, I’m the prince and, if I say it’ll happen, it’ll happen.”

“Great. Now you think you in charge of everything,” Imani grumbled, her eyes still closed.

“Okay, at the count of three, open your eyes. One, two, three!”

Imani opened her eyes and David turned her in the direction of the school building as the playground around them turned into a forest clearing that led up to the giant castle. “See? The school is a castle, and that over there,” he pointed to the jungle gym, “It’s the fort used to keep ogres and dragons from getting in. And look,” He motioned towards what use to be the faculty parking lot. “There are horses, carriages, and even a unicorn!” he turned Imani to him with a grin as her clothes transformed into a rose colored gown. “Because I’m a prince, I get to make you a princess and—”

“No!” Imani shouted, and it was only then that David saw the trail of moisture that had stained her cheeks. “I’m not a princess! So shut up!”

David felt his suit of armor fade away and watched Imani’s gown shimmer into ordinary clothes at the surprising words of the almost-princess. “I told you, I can make you into a princess. It’s not hard, honest.”

“I can’t see it, David!” Imani argued. “You said that only princes and princesses can see it, and I can’t. Besides, you shouldn’t try to save Garden Heights anyway!”

“What?” asked David, like it was the most ridiculous thing he had heard in his short life. “Why not? That’s what I’m s’posed to do. You told me who the bad guy is and now I can go after him.”

“No, you can’t!” Imani shouted, her small frame shaking with every word. “King is worse than you can even imagine,” She swallowed. “You
should just leave it alone,” she said. “Pretend you don’t see anything and leave it alone. Forget about it and leave it alone.”

“No!” David exclaimed. “If you don’t want to help me, if you don’t want to be a princess, fine! I’ll save Garden Heights on my own!”

David marched across the clearing towards the castle and didn’t look twice at the trolls who had teased him earlier for being friends with a girl. Maybe they were right and he shouldn’t be friends with a girl; especially a girl who didn’t even want to be a princess.

But now that he knew his enemy, David realized he was missing a few things vital for a knight—a shield, a helmet, and a sword. If nothing else, he was going to prove Imani wrong, and to do that, he had to defeat King.

David wandered to the picnic tables then to the area that once use to have trashcans. But now—

“Wow,” said David in awe. There was gold, gems and all sorts of nicks and knacks that had somehow been lost in Garden Heights. He figured it must have come from the dragon people. If they were lost, it only made sense that their belongings were lost too. David rummaged through the lost treasures, sure that he would find something to help him along the way.

And then there it was. A silver shield, transformed by the into a metal trashcan top, shimmered in the midst of the treasures. David picked it up and was glad to see it wasn’t too heavy or too light, but just right for a knight of his stature.

The bell rang inside the castle to signal that recess was now over. David hid his shield behind a nearby bush—he was sure Ms. Hall wouldn’t let him bring it inside.

“Imani’s wrong, she’ll see,” he said to himself as thoughts of his doubtful friend swarmed his mind. He wasn’t going to let the curse or King get away with any more than either had already done. He was going to prove Imani wrong. He had his shield, now all he needed was a helmet and a sword so he could save his mom and defeat this so called king who had taken over Garden Heights.

*   *   *

“And then, I got to school and told Imani and—” David stopped long enough to stuff his mouth with another helping of food. He gulped it down with one swallow, not caring that the chicken was a bit overcooked or that the mashed potatoes were a bit raw. Besides, he was so focused on telling his brother about his adventures that he barely even tasted his food. He started with an account of his journey to school, the ogres he saw, and how he got past the dragon dungeon without being noticed. Proud of his first day as a knight, David was lucky that he hadn’t choked on his food since he was thinking more about what he was saying than chewing.

“Slow down, D,” Khalil chuckled. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you eat anything I cook that quickly.”

It was a Wednesday which meant that David’s grandma went in to work a little earlier than usual, and it would be Khalil’s responsibility to make sure he and David got a “hot” meal, as their grandmother
wished. Sometimes they would have leftovers, but on nights like this one, Khalil would spend an hour or two in the kitchen trying to remember all of the lessons their grandmother had taught him about cooking. David would sit and listen to him mumble, “three seventy-five for thirty” this or “rinse before you season” that. Khalil tried his best, but David was glad he had been told that he was a prince and could see things how they really were because now he could see the food in the way Khalil intended it to be: chicken cooked to perfection and mashed potatoes that were smooth and creamy. It was a feast fit for a prince in training.

Khalil joined David at the table with a plate of food for himself. “So you told Imani about the curse?”

“Yeah, but she couldn’t see it. I tried,” said David. “I even told her she could be a princess, but she said it was no use. She couldn’t see past the curse.”

Khalil nodded, like he understood more than even David did, and sighed. “Sometimes D, other people will be so affected by the curse that they can’t see past it,” he said. “And there’s not much you or me can do about it. You understand?”

“Yeah,” David said sadly. “I just wish she could see it.”

While being a knight and prince was fun, David was a little down about the fact that he was the only kid at school who saw the truth. It wasn’t like he went around telling everyone, though. He couldn’t take a chance that the wrong people would find out about his quest.

“So what else happened?” Khalil asked, and David’s excitement about his day blossomed again.

“I found the land of Lost Treasures at school and I found my shield,” he said of the metal garbage can top that was propped up in a corner in his room. “After school, I—”

David stopped himself. He wondered if he should tell his brother about his helmet and how he got it. Khalil had warned him not to talk to the ogres, but after school, the ogres talked to him.

“Right?”

“Wuuuuuell…,” David dragged the word in hopes of dragging time. “After school, I went to Mr. Mak’s store because I wanted to get my candy and soda before you came home.”

The disapproval was written all over Khalil’s face before David got far into the story. He knew he was supposed to go straight home after school, and if his grandma was at work, stay inside with the doors locked until she or Khalil got home. He was a knight now though, and since knights weren’t supposed to be afraid of anything, David figured he could go to the store just like some of his classmates would after school.

“Go on,” said Khalil. David was sure his brother wouldn’t agree with his logic.

“So, there were these ogres standing across the street from the store. And one of them called me over and I went—I had my shield!” Khalil’s stare of disapproval deepened. He definitely wouldn’t agree.
David emphasized how he bravely went over to the ogres and how one of the ogres asked him his name. He was suspicious of the question and couldn’t help but wonder if King had found out about the prince and was sending out spies to locate him. So David told the ogre that his name wasn’t important and asked who wanted to know. The ogres laughed and told him he had heart, and they liked that. Then the ogre David assumed was in charge gave him a wad of money and told him to go into the store and get some snacks for them.

“Because Mak banned them from the store,” Khalil interrupted.

“Right. So I—”

David took the money and went into the store as they asked. He figured there wasn’t much harm in buying snacks for the ogres. Besides, snacks would keep them occupied and away from the dragon dungeon. They told him to get himself some stuff, and David did, and he gave them all of the stuff they had requested, an entire bag of goodies that would fill them up.

“Then the ogre in charge told me he liked me and gave me his helmet,” David finished. The black cap with “NY” stitched on the front had transformed into a metal helmet the second it settled on David’s head. “Now I have a shield and a helmet. That’s a good thing, right?”

The “right” David was hoping for didn’t come. His brother just looked at him with a stare that said more than words could. It was moments like those that David would remember his mom, or remember all he could about her. He could remember her voice, singing songs to him just to put a smile on his face, and he could remember her eyes and the way they comforted him and chastised him all in one glance. Those same eyes were staring at him right now.

Finally, “David, I told you not to go around those guys for a reason.”

“They’re just ogres,” David argued. “I can handle them! Besides, they only wanted me to get snacks for them!”

“I said don’t go around them!” Khalil bellowed.

David jumped fearfully as his brother’s voice seemed to rattle the room. He had never seen Khalil so upset with him and had never been more afraid of him than then. “I’m sorry,” he said timidly.

Khalil sighed. “It’s okay, D. Just do what I say. Don’t go around those ogres anymore, okay?”

Tense shouts started to rise in the air outside. David heard all of the bad words his grandma told him never to say yelled in one sentence. Then there were more shouts and even more voices. Then—

Pow! Pow! Pow! The noise sounded like firecrackers going off, but it wasn’t the Fourth of July or New Year’s so that only meant one thing. David didn’t have time to figure out what was going on when Khalil snatched him by his collar and pulled him under the table. There were more shots and shouts and light flashed through the windows as if photographers were snapping pictures. David felt Khalil’s arms cover him and right then, he felt more protected than he ever did with his shield.

“This is why I don’t want you to talk to the ogres,” Khalil whispered. “There’s a war going on between them, and I don’t want you getting caught up in it.”
“A war?” David asked.
“Yeah. Ogres are territorial. That means they like to guard sections in Garden Heights,” he said. “And if other ogres try to take over, they fight. Like now.”

David looked towards the window and could see the shadows of the war; ogres fighting one another as they yelled and cursed, the screams of horses that would have sounded like tires screeching to anyone who didn’t know the secrets of Garden Heights, and gun shots, the one thing that seemed to remain even in the enchanted garden.

“Will the war ever end?” David asked. As much as he hoped to restore Garden Heights one day, the sounds of battle made it seem like too big of a task for a seven-year-old prince to conquer on his own.

“One day,” said Khalil.

David closed his eyes and tried not to flinch with each thunderous shot that. His heart pounded fiercely in his ears, drowning out the cries of battle. He just wanted it to end; he just wanted them to stop.

Sirens went off in the distance. David figured it was the soldiers who tried to bring peace to Garden Heights, sounding off their alarms. He could hear the ogres take off as horses let out screeching screams once again and galloped away.

The battle may have ended, but Khalil and David knew it was best to stay under the table a while longer in case the ogres came back and started fighting again. But all of a sudden, a different cry filled the air. It wasn’t one of battle, but of a mother who had just found a nightmare awaiting her in the war-savaged street.

“That’s why I want you to stay safe,” Khalil said as the sirens drew closer. “You may be a prince and a knight, but right now, the only thing you can do is stay safe.”

It was like his brother knew David had other plans up his sleeve, so without telling him no, told him what he was supposed to do instead. But as the mother’s cries pierced the air, David still thought of his own mom. Who was going to protect her from the ogres? She was out there all alone with no table to hide under and no enchanted spoon to assure her things would get better. Who was going to tell her to be safe?

“I still don’t have a sword,” said David.

Khalil crawled from under the table and over to his backpack. David watched as he rummaged through it, then he pulled out a clear plastic ruler. But as more of it was revealed, it became a shining metal sword with a brass hilt that would fit perfectly in David’s hands. Khalil crawled back with it in his hands and showed it to his little brother.

“This was my sword. Mom gave it to me after my first day of school.”

David stared at it in amazement. “How did you earn it?” he asked. He knew his brother had done something honorable to be given a sword like that. “Did you defeat an ogre?” he asked excitedly. “Did you save someone from a wolf?”

Khalil carefully ran a finger along the blade of the sword. “No. I stayed safe that day. That’s how I earned it.”

“Huh?” David was confused. He always thought knights and prices earned their swords by doing something big that usually involved
saving someone else. But he had never heard of a knight or prince who earned their sword by staying safe. “That’s not brave,” he protested.

“Yeah, it is,” Khalil said. “There are so many dangers in Garden Heights. Just think, this morning you were afraid of walking to school by yourself, yet you did.”

“Yeah,” said David more confidently. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Yeah,” Khalil smiled. “And that’s brave. Then, you didn’t let any trolls, ogres, or dragons hurt you. That ain’t always easy. In fact, you went up to the ogres and while you better not do that anymore, it was brave. So—” Khalil passed the sword to David as red and blue lights flashed through the windows from. The soldiers had arrived, and voices flooded into the street. “I present your sword, Sir David. You are to use it to keep yourself safe so that one day you will grow up and really be able to save Garden Heights.”

David couldn’t take his eyes off of the sword as he admired every detail of it. He had all he needed to do what his brother said and to save his mom. Somehow, he knew that by saving her, it would be one big step towards saving Garden Heights.

* * *

The walk to school, fifteen houses and all, was no longer scary for the lonesome knight Sir David. He had proven his bravery and now had everything he needed to show for his knighthood: a shield, which he carried with pride as he started his journey; a helmet that was atop of his head and nearly covered his eyes; and a glimmering sword tucked into a loop on the belt his grandma made him wear. Yes, David was more than prepared to make the journey to the castle, but the little prince had other things in mind.

His brother, Sir Khalil, had already set out for work at the nearby market, so David knew that he could set out on his mission without being watched. He was going to find his princess. He was going to the dragon dungeon.

David knew he was taking a chance by going into the dragon dungeon. He would have to sneak past the ogres and risk being caught by them, but he had a plan that he thought would prevent that. The evening before, when David was grooming his grandmother’s horse, Camry the Toyota, with a sponge and water hose, he spoke to one of the kingdom soldiers. Ever since the last ogre battle, the soldiers had been guarding Garden Heights even more; David would see them all of the time on their horses although Khalil said they would be gone soon, and the ogres would battle as soon as they left.

But David hoped to make an alliance. So he told a soldier all about the dragon dungeon, and how his mom, a princess, had been captured. The soldier laughed at first and told him he had a great imagination, but as David went on, the soldier seemed to listen. The little knight told him about King as well and everything he had learned about the evil ogre and how he was giving the potion to the dragon people.

He hadn’t asked the soldiers to go with him and didn’t even tell them when he would infiltrate the dragon dungeon, but if he were to be captured, he was sure that the soldiers would know who did it.
David easily passed the cottage of the old man who hated kids and the wolf castle without a worry about his safety. Then finally, he saw the dragon dungeon.

There were a few ogres in the yard, as David expected, and they were arguing with one of the dragon people. Although any other time, David would have tried to pass as quickly as possible before the ogres could start a fight, he was grateful for the disagreement. It would distract them from his presence.

It seemed that the dragon-man was trying to purchase more of the potion but didn’t have enough money to do so. David watched and waited and was surprised to see the dragon-man snatch the potion from one of the ogres and take off. The ogres started shouting and took off after him, which left the entrance to the dungeon unguarded.

It was his chance. David took out his sword and charged. The entrance was open and the stench of urine, rotten eggs, and burning plastic met David well before he stepped in the darkened cave. Yet he didn’t let it stop him and he ran inside, his shield in front of him and his sword gripped tightly. But even David in all his knightly grandeur wasn’t prepared for what he saw.

More dragons lurked in the dungeon than David expected, but none of them were ferocious like the ones past knights had faced. These dragons were listless, lying on the filth-ridden floor and in corners of the room. Some had billows of smoke rising from their mouths while others had tiny swords they pierced into their skin. None of them noticed that a knight was amongst them; none of them cared.

David wondered if he even needed the garbage can lid he was holding, but he remembered the ogres and clutched his shield tighter. He stepped over trash, including tiny used swords, as he journeyed through the dungeon in search of his princess. Finally, he had to search no more.

There she was, in the corner of one of the back rooms of the dungeon, a tiny sword in hand and something around her arm. But she didn’t look like the princess David had remembered. Her gown, once a rosy pink, was dingy with grime and dust. Her hair, once pinned up with dignity and poise, was scattered about her head and was as ragged as her surroundings. Yet there was no mistaking who she was. She still had those cocoa, almond-shaped eyes like Khalil’s, and unlike David’s, her dimples were visible without a smile.

“M-mama?” David asked as his sword and shield dropped down to his sides.

The word startled the princess, and the tiny sword fell to the floor as she looked up. “David?”

Past the reddened haze of addiction, there in her eyes shone a mother’s love, hopeful yet burdened.

“What are you—does yo’ grandmama know you here?” she asked as she stood. The ruler in David’s hand shook involuntarily—his mother was more bone than flesh, and her skin was infested by sores and scabs.

“I—no. I...I came on my own,” said David quietly. His mother closed the space between them. The scent of perfume that David could
so well remember was gone. In its place was the foul odor of self-neglect. “I...I came to help you.”

“Help me?” she asked as she scratched at a scab. “You wanna help your mama?”

“Yeah.” David straightened his sagging shoulders and held his sword proudly. “That’s what knights and princes do. They save their princesses.”

She laughed and ran a trembling hand along his cheek. “You always been a brave boy. You really want to help your mama?”

David nodded because words seemed to be stuck in his throat.

“How much money you got?”

David’s scalp rippled. What did money have to do with saving her? “Grandma, she, she gave me my allowance this morning,” he said with the shyness of a boy no longer a knight.

Suddenly a voice called out from front of the dungeon. The ogres had returned. David lifted his shield and his sword as footsteps approached. The ogre looked from the knight to the princess and laughed.

“Who the hell is this and what is he doing?”

“That’s my boy, David,” his mom said as she scratched at another scab.

“So you David,” said the ogre as he walked towards the knight. “You Imani’s friend, ain’t you?’

Sir David almost dropped his sword. This was King. He wasn’t as big as David expected, just a bit taller than Khalil. He was what David’s grandma always called “yella,” and had slick, jet-black hair pulled into a ponytail. There was a scar on his face that went from his forehead down to under one of his eyes. He wore a sleeveless shirt that showed tattoos from shoulders to hands. A patch of hair was under his bottom lip, and the top row of his teeth was plated in gold. David didn’t think he looked much like a king.

But David still had to be brave. He gripped his sword even tighter and said, “Yes, I am Sir David. And I’m here to save my mom.”

King laughed and overlooked David to speak to his mom. “You got my money or what?”

“I’m about to get some of it now,” she said as she turned David to her. She kneeled, and the desperation in her hazy eyes was mesmerizing. “Baby, you said you want to help Mama, right?” David nodded and noticed her hand go towards his pocket. “Let Mama have that money Grandma gave you this morning so—”

David stepped back. “No. I want to save you.”

“David,” she repeated. “I ain’t playing anymore, boy. I need that money. Just give Mama the money. Please?” Her voice cracked and with it so did David’s resistance. He hesitantly reached in his pocket and took out the meager two dollars his grandmother gave him that morning. He gave it to his mother and expected her gratitude, only to see disappointment.

“This it?” she asked. “That’s all you got?”

“Yeah,” said David. “I—I’m sorry.”

King’s voice bellowed in the room. “What the hell I’m s’posed to do
with two dollars?”

David raised his sword and shield in defense and stood in front of his mother, prepared to fight for her.

“Wait King,” his mother pleaded. “I know it ain’t much, but I promise, I can fix this. I—how about I give you something else?”

“What?” King asked. “What you got that I could do anything with?”

David wondered himself what his mom could trade for her freedom and was confused when her hand dropped onto his shoulder and gave him a push forward. “David. You can have David.”

The ruler and garbage can lid hit the floor with a clunk. Suddenly, the dungeon walls showed their true nature, plaster covered with dirt and spray painting. Needles and crack pipes were scattered across the floor, and the princess David had searched for disappeared, replaced by a drug fiend.

“He can run orders for you. The cops would never suspect him,” she said. “And he fast, real fast. Ain’t you baby?”

David’s legs shook furiously and the only thing keeping him up was his mother’s firm grip on his shoulder. “I—”

“David!” the voice, a mixture of panic, anger, and desperation, was immediately recognizable. David felt his mother’s hand leave him at the sound of feet running into the house. There was David’s big brother, Khalil.

Khalil stopped in the doorway and glanced from his mother to King to David. There were no “hellos” or even recognitions made to the two adults. Khalil went straight to David. “Let’s get you out of here,” he said as he lifted David into his arms.

David wrapped his arms tightly around his brother’s neck as Khalil carried him towards the front door. His mother, the crack addict, followed behind.

“Khalil, stop! He wants to help me! Let him help me!”

Khalil stepped over crack heads and brushed past the dope boys with a protective hold on his brother. “I ain’t letting him help you! Help yourself!”

Khalil marched out of the crack house, David still in his arms. David looked over his shoulder and watched his mother step back from the light of day and back into the darkness. There was horror and panic in her eyes, and David heard voices and commotions coming from behind him. As Khalil crossed the yard, the police David had alerted of the crack house swarmed towards the dwelling, guns drawn and shields much larger than the garbage can lid David had abandoned.

David didn’t care. He may have saved Garden Heights from King, but he hadn’t saved his princess; she never was a princess. She was truly lost, just as Khalil said, and there was nothing he could do to save her. He wasn’t a prince or a knight. But luckily for him, he had a brother who was brave enough to save him from drug dealers and drug addicts. His name was Khalil, and to David, he was the closest thing to a knight Garden Heights would ever see.
Sixth Shift
We sit in languor, sketching things we have never seen, or perhaps know too well to love. The Divine breath has retired from a sleeping world, as to the ark the dove.

We know the sensuality of the rhyme and the endlessness of our ambages—
the stain of the ink on our skin,
the stain of the skin on the page,
the stain—the blight—
Truth.
The asphyxiation of our symbols comes with the violation of the sun’s light.

The daedal men are all gone over the sea. They are now graven images like moai faces, turned from the ocean in their scorn and bitterness.

There is no such thing as a good man. We, the ignorant, are done with hoping. The Picts are forgotten in Orkney, while the Orcadians tramp across the sea to a darkened hovel in a squalid city.

From the skies, the clouds squint to read the campion, the squill, and the silverweed. The blind in the dungeons feel the bodies of their fellow prisoners and murmur, Elroi! Elroi!

I tire of merely coughing up reshuffled aphorisms, vainly scrambling to find the symmetry.

There is no such thing as a man. The daedal men are all gone over the sea.
I must be an old man, full of knots and wrinkles,
sitting on a sinking throne. I worship
before my own reliquary,
prodding my bones for miracles.
The husk must be shed.
    I feel new form knitted within me, soon
    (I hope) to break forth
    and like a newborn kid feel the rays of morning
on tender flesh.

Meanwhile
words crash upon page
like bright, untamable stallions.
    The page becomes the world
    as the wave becomes the sea.

*   *   *

I have a dream of my death.
I sit on a shore of pebbles, mist whitewashing
the world as I listen to the waves.
They are coming in from the sea.
I watch them, and they drown me.
    The boatmen speak in rude tones
    of cats, and fish, and old dry bones
while the waters crash and creation groans.

I have a dream of my death.
They build the fires around me.
But the licking of each flame turns
my skin to a soft alabaster color
and raises the scent of incense to my nostrils.
    The flames remember nothing of the joy
    with which they once consumed immortal Troy,
such feeling fleet and (toward me) coy.

And can I speak of drowning or burning,
    blessed ruination,
    blessed ruin, I,
    unblessed by bliss,
while the earth is speechless turning?

That sweet sibyl, Wisdom, sometimes walks with me
and I have conversation with her.
I talk of the twisted, wind-blown paths of gray and gray;
she gave me the dream of my death,
though she speaks very little in nowadays.
    I walk, with dark thoughts I am cumbered
    (to hope for blessing would be absurd),
    and I wait for her quietness to become the Word.
I may yet walk between the cold white roses of the garden,
flushed in the chill of the morning,
with her whose hair is dark as mourning,
loving unequally:
I seek her as silver—alas; I am mere dross.

On Good Friday and every day
we dream of my death in the clay;
sleep is sweet to us, and waking fey.

* * *

The moth knows the candle’s fierce flame,
the torturous burning of the luminaries,
but it does not fear to be one with it.
For an instant only, life is alive as it rises and flies,
the whole world gloriously alit,
heavy wings turned to weightless smoke
that curls and rises, as it might be ascending
invisible palatial staircases.

Is it not better for the soul to burn,
and the self to be shed in flame
than for the whole ruin to be claimed
by the grasping sod and the worm?

So I destroy my self—
nay, not I, but God... god... demiurge....

But how shall my self be reborn
and in what form?

Alike the cataclysms and eu-catastrophes break me.
The way is dim—I may yet end
in bestial shape, yet I hope as I close my eyes
and feel the flame’s teeth in my old flesh
I become human.

(Human! What word
for mockery of rule.
We shall judge the angels
when we have sentenced our subcreations to Hell.)

I reveal myself
savagely, vulnerably,
while Wisdom is silent in my ecstasy of pain
and shadows fall and flee in the doorway.

They turn the wheel and my joints snap—
I am stretched on the instrument of my torture
and yet murmur, “Turn! Turn
again! Of such is the kingdom.”
My spirit will yet spring forth
like a hawk from the water
and find new use for its wings.
The cruel domes of Heaven shall not restrain me
when I ascend, a pure fire,
to the Word.

* * *

This mystery, perhaps, you do not ken—
nor do I ken it, only He.
When selves are blowing away like burned-up leaves,
new men come whom we cannot see,
and God knows what the end may be.

Throw up your absurd barrage balloons!
The bombs shall find you nonetheless.
    Do not deny the swallowing sea, the consuming flame,
    the death of the old word.

I am a dream of my death.
I am dead. I am death.
I am dying, birthing, and being born.
All things fixed in time.
So the incarnate are without rest.

We burn in darkness, shedding no light.
    Christ, be my light!
In this weary Nachfolge
no love may wait for me
if Thine doth not.

What else is there to say?
The cold, dead words lie in drifts—
they melt like snow.
    Or, like toads over a fire,
    swell and burst,
    leaving sagged and empty bags.

Into such fire let me thrust my hand—
it shall burn away my flesh, my soul, my self;
let a glowing coal be put upon my tongue
and my hunger for the Word will be satisfied;
let a flame sit upon my head,
and the Spirit will not depart from me.

The leaves are covered in vain words of sin and self
before their felicitous cremation.
From the fire new words shall glimmering grow
and spill across the opening leaves;
their value I cannot know, but only pray.
    It may yet be that we again can cry
      Elroi! Elroi!
    in the blowing of the ashes of the day.
Seeds
BY PETER DAVIS

(Lights go up what appears to be a condensed house. At stage right there is a large bed with furnishings, while center stage there is a couch, and stage left there is a small but neatly kept table. The whole setup is neat and orderly. JANE is sitting on the couch taking notes out of a book. She is tired, but she gets up when she hears JOSEPH walking up. She quickly stands in front of the door as if guarding it.)

JANE
(anxiously)
Hey.

JOSEPH
(Scrambling and searching for his briefcase. JOSEPH is tired but always appears jovial. He is confident, but flustered.)
Hey. How are you?

JANE
Fine. Ready for Alex to get all his junk together so he can finish packing up for college.
(JOSEPH keeps searching.)
You did bring the last check?

JOSEPH
I think so. It’s in here somewhere.

JANE
Oh, don’t tell me you forgot again. The last one? Come on...

JOSEPH
I know I brought it.

JANE
You’d better have brought it, Joe.

JOSEPH
I told you not to call me...never mind. Uh, can I put my suitcase on the table inside so I can actually look for it?

JANE
You know the rules.
JOSEPH
I’ll only be a minute. It’s not like I’m a thief about to steal everything.

JANE
Well, since this thief asked so nicely, why don’t you just make yourself at home?

JOSEPH
Liz…

JANE
(sarcastically)
I told you not to call me that.
(She steps out of his way and they walk into the house. He starts unpacking his suitcase on the table.)

JOSEPH
Sorry. I’m a little occupied…

JANE
It’s okay. I’m used to it.
(Pause)
So where are you taking Alex?

JOSEPH
Oh, I’m taking him to Texas De Brazil, have a nice little chat before his big decision.

JANE
Big decision? He’s already signed up to go to State.

JOSEPH
Yeah, well, I don’t know if he’s ready for it or not. I mean, he really is just—

JANE
He’s going to State. He’s always wanted to go there.

JOSEPH
Yeah, but he still has a lot of money to earn if he wants to avoid loans, and I was thinking he’d want a car.

JANE
I thought you were going to help him out.

JOSEPH
I am. I mean, I will, but not for State, and not right now, mainly because he just doesn’t know what he wants to do.

JANE
No one knows what they want to do at college their first year.
JOSEPH
And since he doesn’t know, I’m going to have to—

JANE
This is Alex’s decision, why don’t we let him make it?
(JOSEPH turns his head away and shrugs his shoulders.)
How long are you two going to be out, anyway?

JOSEPH
Oh, I think we were going to watch a movie after dinner. That new animated sequel to—

JANE
Don’t get your papers all over the place. You know how much that ticks me off.

JOSEPH
Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.

JANE
Right.

JOSEPH
Liz…

JANE
It’s Jane.

JOSEPH
Anyway, we’ll be back around one.

JANE
One? He’s got finals to study for!

JOSEPH
He’ll survive. Besides, I’m not going to see him for another two weeks.

JANE
No, he has to study for those tests. You can’t just be pulling him this way and that for “father time.” Just because you don’t get to see him that often doesn’t mean his grades should suffer.

JOSEPH
I’m sure he’d much rather spend time with me than studying for some stupid tests.

JANE
But he has to make time to study.

JOSEPH
Why don’t you let him decide?
(Pause.)
JANE
Okay, so where is that—

JOSEPH
(hands her the check)
Right here.

JANE
Oh, thanks.
(she reaches to start picking up the paper—their hands briefly touch.)
Sorry.

JOSEPH
Oh, my bad.

JANE
Uh, look. Thanks for keeping up with the checks for the most part. I, we, really needed them.

JOSEPH
Even the ones I lost and forgot?

JANE
I said for the most part.

JOSEPH
Nobody’s perfect.

JANE
Oh, I know. But yeah, I guess it’s just kind of different now. Alex will be out of the house soon, and I need to finish this test if I want to get my bachelor’s.

JOSEPH
Who needs an education?

JANE
Not everyone has been working at the same place their whole life.

JOSEPH
It was your choice.

JANE
Let’s not start.

JOSEPH
I thought we already had.

JANE
We always have.

JOSEPH
Not at the beginning.
JANE
Because everything was fine at the beginning.

JOSEPH
Everything was fine? I don’t think we ever took off.

JANE
Oh, probably cause you were never here. Back then we would—

(Lights suddenly grow immensely bright, and JANE and JOSEPH start walking backwards and doing things in reverse motions, like a tape rewinding. JOSEPH takes off his coat, while JANE pulls off her sweater to show a tank top. They both look more “raw.”)

JOSEPH
(angry)
I can’t believe you stole money right out of my bank account!

JANE
We were husband and wife! I thought we were sharing everything, or did I get the whole “we are one” thing wrong?

JOSEPH
I didn’t even know you had your own bank account!

JANE
I told you years ago, but I guess you were just too busy at the time. You’re always too busy. Too busy for me, too busy for Alex.

JOSEPH
Oh whatever, since you’ve always wanted to spend more time with me.

(Imitates her poorly)
“We could have great conversations and drink coffee and just not earn money because we’re having so much fun.”

(JANE doesn’t respond)
Anyway, I have more vacation time now. In two weeks I’ll take Alex to see the great Smokey Mountains.

JANE
Oh, two weeks? It’s always been two weeks. Or next weekend. Or—

JOSEPH
I bought him tickets to the state game just last weekend, Liz.

JANE
Buying isn’t the same as going, Joe.

JOSEPH
I know! But I don’t see why I’m to blame for any of this. Just because I stuck through college and got an actual education—
JANE
Oh, yeah, and that education made you such a great role model and husband. Who needs your stupid education?

JOSEPH
Don’t even try it. I’ve done too much for this family. I’ve provided us with food, a house, I’ve, *I’ve* persevered through the hardships when we had nothing.

JANE
And whose house is this?

JOSEPH
(growing quiet)
Your father just paid the down payment. He was just helping us out, or so I thought. If I knew you were going to lord it over me, I would’ve paid for it myself.

JANE
Oh, and worked even harder? Well, it’s still my house. My rules.

JOSEPH
And so I guess I’ve just been your little rebel running loose. Well guess what? It’s still partially mine, and I’ll break whatever rules I want.

JANE
Oh, that’s new! Because you already have been breaking them. You break them all the time.
(They both stand at ends to each other over the small table.)

JOSEPH
Just tell me how much money you took or at least how much the last check was.

JANE
How much was *what* check?

JOSEPH
Oh, come on, Liz! The check you stole from me.

JANE
*We’re married.* I didn’t think that was exactly stealing. I just needed to pay the bills. I don’t think you’ve ever met a nicer thief.

JOSEPH
And all the past few years you’ve been paying bills from my account? Great, I’m glad you’re so organized!

JANE
I would hope so with all your messes. Hey, maybe your check is on the table? But, oh, wait, it’s filled with your papers everywhere, because you know how I like that table being used for piles of crap!
JOSEPH
You didn’t mind it before.

JANE
Oh yeah, I forgot. This is my pile of crap table.

JOSEPH
Liz...

JANE
Get all your shit off this table right now.

JOSEPH
Oh, am I bringing a little chaos to your orderly world?

JANE
Oh, chaos? Here’s chaos!
(pushes over the table and all the papers go flying.)

JOSEPH
My files!

JANE
There! Now things are so much easier!

JOSEPH
Just tell me how much money it was, honey. The lawyers are going to resolve it in court anyway.

JANE
I didn’t steal any of your precious money. It was our money, and I used it for us. Although you obviously never got used to the concept of “us,” did you?

JOSEPH
No, and I don’t think I ever will. I guess my attorney will just have to handle things that belong to “us.” Just keep everything else organized so we can get this over with. Okay?

JANE
Is your attorney going to decide about Alex too?

JOSEPH
I was hoping we could figure that out.

JANE
Oh, I have. He’s staying with me. Mainly because he actually knows me.

JOSEPH
Yeah, and you’ve got so much money that you can just provide for his education and college and everything else. Great! Glad you’ve got everything figured out for “us.”
JANE
Oh please, don’t start.

JOSEPH
We already have, Jane.

JANE
We always have. You just didn’t notice until now.

JOSEPH
Well I’m not going to leave Alex to someone who can’t provide for him.

JANE
Why don’t we let him make that decision?

JOSEPH
(pause)
He’s always loved you more, even at the beginning.

JANE
He loved us both at the beginning, back before you left us for your goddamn job!

JOSEPH
You think I—

(The figures both freeze and the lighting increases as the characters once again start acting as if they are in rewind. JANE repacks up the table, while JOSEPH reorganizes his files. JANE puts on a nice coat while JOSEPH is wearing a nice polo. They have some “wear” on them but they look much happier. JOSEPH walks. JANE is sitting on the couch.)

JANE
Hey hun, busy day?

JOSEPH
Yeah...

JANE
Excuse me, I guess they’ve all been busy days, haven’t they?

JOSEPH
The price of keeping all this stuff running.
(Throws his stuff on the table.)

JANE
Were you able to pull off that bonus check?

JOSEPH
Eh, I don’t think so. Wendell said he was looking for a little more effort on my part.
JANE
So you don’t think we’ll have enough money for me to go back to school?

JOSEPH
It’s not looking like it…

JANE
Well, who needs an education anyway?

JOSEPH
Well, Alex does. And his school is really hurting our credit.

JANE
Yeah, well, what if I got my own bank account so it wouldn’t affect either of us? That way we always have a safe, credit-free account that we can use?

JOSEPH
Yeah, yeah, sounds great.

JANE
(looks at table)
Oh honey, don’t get your papers all over my table.

JOSEPH
Sorry, but I need to see all this!

JANE
Joe...

JOSEPH
Liz...
(they both look at each other.)
Okay, I’ll move it to the couch.

JANE
Thank you, Joe… We have enough chaos in this house with Alex’s friends, and your papers practically topple the whole table over.

JOSEPH
Am I really that bad?

JANE
No, but you know how organized I try to keep things.

JOSEPH
(cuddling up to Jane)
I’m just the little tornado, tearing everything up and bringing chaos to everything you do?

JANE
You’ve always been my little tornado. That’s why I love you so
much. That’s why I dropped out.

(They embrace)

JOSEPH

Sometimes I wish you didn’t quit school. We could really use the income you could bring in.

JANE

It was my choice.

(Pause)

Oh, so about that bank account? I think I’ll get one tomorrow.

JOSEPH

Yeah, sounds great.

JANE

Are you even listening to me?

JOSEPH

I’m always listening.

JANE

What you’re always doing is working. It’s not worth it, Joseph.

JOSEPH

Look, I’ve got a lot on my mind right now. We’ve gotta pick a good school for Alex, and it’s probably going to be something expensive like MSA.

JANE

So you’re either going to be his school finder or his father? Don’t let Alex make that decision. Make some time for him.

JOSEPH

He’s not going to have to make any decisions. I’m just busy this weekend.

JANE

Hold on. You said you were going to take him to the State game this weekend.

JOSEPH

Doesn’t he have a lot of school to do this weekend, homework and stuff? I know his grades haven’t been the greatest.

JANE

No. You are taking him, Joseph. You promised him.

JOSEPH

I am. I mean I will, I just have a lot to do before then.
JANE
You’d better go. He’s been looking forward to this all week. He loves watching the football games, especially with his father.

JOSEPH
I know. I know. It’s just that I have a chance at getting a possible pay increase or at least a bonus check coming in.

JANE
You’ve got to think about “us,” Joseph.

JOSEPH
That’s exactly who I am thinking about. How am I going to provide for all of us?

JANE
Joe...you are completely missing the point. We are supposed to share and do things together. The whole “we are one” thing?

JOSEPH
This isn’t the time; I need to get this work done.

JANE
What other time is there?

JOSEPH
I don’t know, just not right now. We need this money, so we can pay off the house.

JANE
But my dad already paid the—

JOSEPH
I know, I know. But you don’t understand Jane. “A man’s gotta provide for his house. Else wise, he just doesn’t have a business being a husband.” Or so my father says. Anyway, Alex also needs a good school.

JANE
Joe, I don’t care about the house. I don’t care about the checks. You could never show me a check for the rest of our lives and I’d be happy.

JOSEPH
Oh, so we could move back into that little trailer we lived in with just a bed off in the corner? Yeah, great, right back at the beginning.

JANE
I wouldn’t mind.

(JOSEPH eyes her)
Okay I would, but it wouldn’t be too bad.
JOSEPH
Are you kidding? That place was so small you wouldn’t even have your “house rules” to make.

JANE
I’m not too big on enforcing the rules, which is a good thing, you little thief, because you keep breaking them.

JOSEPH
You wouldn’t have it any other way, right?

JANE
Well, it would be nicer if you were home a lot more. Back when we didn’t fight over anything.

JOSEPH
Well, let’s not start another one now.

JANE
Haven’t we already?

JOSEPH
Well, not really.

JANE
But you see, things were so much better back when—

(The lights again flare bright and the characters start retracing movements. They put on or take off clothes to have much simpler clothing. They enter on the other side of the stage.)

JANE
Well, here we are. Home at last!

JOSEPH
Wow, it’s even bigger than I thought. Your dad he...he really doesn’t have to do this.

JANE
Oh, Joe. My dad is fine with writing out checks to please his favorite daughter. Don’t worry about it. Besides, I think Alex will love this place. And oh, look at this cute little sofa, but oh, that table is going to have to be put somewhere else.

JOSEPH
I just hope there’s a good school in the area for Alex. But hey, since we’re close to State, we could go to some games on the weekend.

JANE
This house is going to take a lot of work. I’m going to go ahead and get working on a list of things we need to fix.
JOSEPH
I hope Alex and I aren’t on that list.

JANE
Joe...this is part of that us thing, remember? Now we’ve got a lot of work to put into this thing, but I’m sure we can make it, well, work.

JOSEPH
And what about Alex?

JANE
Oh, he can decide what he wants to do for himself. Anyway, we need to find a security company, the windows are a little old. We don’t want thieves getting in here.

JOSEPH
Did you check this area for a local community college?

JANE
Who needs an education? I’ve got all I need right here. You, me, and Alex. That’s all we’ll ever need. Right?

JOSEPH
Well someone is going to have to pay the bills for this thing, not to mention putting Alex through school. Are you sure you still want this?

JANE
It’s our choice. But Joe, I think it’s wonderful!

JOSEPH
Well, there’s no going back now, I guess.

JANE
As if something could go wrong?

(Lights go bright. Characters move backwards. Now both JOSEPH and JANE are in pajamas and are on top of the bed. They are holding each other. JANE is slightly crying.)

JANE
(crying but happy)
Oh, the part where she, she just, just when she takes his hand. It gets me every time.

JOSEPH
(not interested, but he acts like it.)
I noticed.

JANE
Oh Joe. My Joe...
JOSEPH
Yes, Liz?

JANE
Promise me you’ll always love me.

JOSEPH
Do we need to start this again?

JANE
You always have to do it.

JOSEPH
Haven’t we already done this enough?

JANE
Yes, and I think we will always will.
(Pause)

JOSEPH
I love you, Jane. No matter what.

JANE
No matter what.

(Lights fade out.)
Creative Writing Department
the Brogue Awards

**POETRY**

**First Place**
Rex Bradshaw
*Lyric of Dead Authors*

**Honorable Mentions**
Chris Brown
*Pearl River: Easter Flood, 1979*
Kirsten Callahan
*The Homeschooled*
*Charismatic Bride of Christ*
Lindsay Gill
*In Defense of Winter*

**FICTION**

**First Place**
Angela Thomas
*The Black Widows*

**Second Place**
Sarah Vanbiber
*Harold*

**Third Place**
Rex Bradshaw
*Black Wings*

**Honorable Mentions**
Timothy Smith
*Dissection Partners*

**NONFICTION**

**First Place**
Peter Davis
*At $5.85 an Hour*

**Honorable Mentions**
Rebecca Yantis
*Shrouds of Snow*

**ARTWORK**

**First Place**
Mikael Jury
*Untitled*

**Second Place**
Jacob Rowan
*Sprawl*

**Cover Art**
Kevin Lindsay
*Of Its Woven Fabirc*

**Third Place**
Wes Sumrall
*Untitled*
Student and Alumni Accomplishments

Creative Writing Department
Belhaven University

Academic Year 2010-2011

Awards

Adie Smith Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize
Ruminate Magazine
Judge: Naomi Shihab Nye

Adie Smith Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven University

Rebecca Yantis Second Place, Creative Nonfiction
“Shrouds of Snow”
Southern Literary Festival

Publications

Chris Brown, Lea Coker, Jennifer Daine, Ashlee Davidson, Emily Goff, Andrew Hedglin, Cathy Karlak, Martha Krystaponis, Addie Leak, Christina Miles, Adie Smith, Sarah Swenson
Elizabeth Spencer Gift Book
Limited Edition Publication
Belhaven University

Mary Morris “During the Pilgrimage of Homes”
Poetry, Mason’s Road (Vol. 1, Issue 2, Winter 2011)

Michelle Phelps Poetry, “Thomas” and “Fracture”
Pulpit Magazine, (Summer 2011)

Rick Ward Blood for Molasses, Historical Novel
Spring Morning Publishing, 2010

Career and Graduate School

Addie Leak Acceptance, University of Iowa
M.F.A. in Literary Translation

Sarah Swenson Teaching Position, Teach for America
Reading and Language Arts
Ruleville, MS
**ACADEMIC YEAR 2009-2010**

**Awards**

*the Brogue*
First Place, Literary Journals
Southern Literary Festival
Martha Krystaponis, Editor

Chris Brown
Third Place, Poetry: “Resurrection”
Conference on Christianity and Literature
Student Writing Contest

Alex Freel
Second Place, Creative Nonfiction
“The Lodge”
Southern Literary Festival

Anna Rebmann
Third Place, Creative Nonfiction
“Reading on Eternity’s Doorstep”
Southern Literary Festival

Lea Schumacher
First Place, One-Act Play
“Shadows on the Wall”
Southern Literary Festival

Adie Smith
Honorable Mention, Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize
“Along the Natchez Trace”
*Ruminate Magazine*

Adie Smith
Second Place, Poetry: “On Home”
Southern Literary Festival

Sarah Swenson
Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven University

**Publications**

Martha Krystaponis
“Puzzle” and “The Boy”
Poetry, *Diverse Voices Quarterly* (Summer 2009)

Adie Smith
“Along the Natchez Trace”
Poetry, *Ruminate* (Issue #13)

**Scholarships**

David Grimes
Maude Gurley Scholarship, Creative Writing
Mo·T·vation Ministry

**ACADEMIC YEAR 2008-2009**

**Awards**

*the Brogue*
Third Place, Literary Journals
Southern Literary Festival
Andrew Hedglin, Editor

Martha Krystaponis
Honorable Mention, Creative Nonfiction
“Invisibility Cloak”
Southern Literary Festival
Addie Leak  First Place, Creative Nonfiction
“In the Summer When It Sizzles”
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Addie Leak  Second Place, One-Act Play
“The White Fedora”
Southern Literary Festival
Addie Leak  Honorable Mention, Creative Nonfiction
“The Luckiest”
Southern Literary Festival
Christina Miles  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven College
Lea Schumacher  Runner-up, Fiction: “The Weeping Wall”
Hollins University National Undergraduate Fiction Competition
Judged by Tony D’Souza (NEA and Guggenheim Fellow)

Publications
Ashlee Davidson  “Apology to a Beggar Woman on the Steps of Notre Dame”
Poetry, Ruminate (Issue #12)
Mandy McCullough  Daily Devotional Entry
Accepted for Publication in Student to Student: A Guide to College Life, vol. 2 (forthcoming, Regal)
Lea Schumacher  “Ophidiophobia”
Creative Nonfiction, The Distillery
Motlow State Community College

Internships and Teaching
Mandy McCullough  Mississippi Craft Center
Martha Krystaponis  After-School Writing Workshop
Christina Miles  Neighborhood Christian Center
Lea Schumacher

ACADEMIC YEAR 2007-2008

Awards
Andrew Hedglin  First Place, Poetry: “Friendship 7”
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society
Andrew Hedglin  Third Place, Creative Nonfiction
“Taking the Cure So I Can Be Quiet”
Southern Literary Festival
Martha Krystaponis  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven College
Martha Krystaponis  First Place, Poetry: “Puzzle”
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Martha Krystaponis  Third Place, Fiction: “A Fife Fishery”  
Southern Literary Festival
Addie Leak  First Place, Creative Nonfiction: “The Luckiest”  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Lea Schumacher  Third Place, Poetry: “Donut, also Doughnut, n.”  
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society

Publications
Martha Krystaponis  “To Turn a Terrycloth Slipper into Glass”  
Poetry, *Ruminate* (Issue #7)
Christina Miles  “Catamaran 452” and “I Am Not a Doctor”  
Poetry, *Cedarville Review*
Lea Schumacher  “Seeing Red,”  
Fiction, *Albion Review*
Rebecca Yantis  “Do You Remember?” and “Mind of a Child”  
Poetry, *Cedarville Review*

Internships, Study Abroad, and Scholarships
Addie Leak  $5,000 Fine Arts Scholarship  
(Award Based on Creative Writing Submission)  
Institute for the International Education of Students  
Study in France, 2007/2008 Academic Year
Lea Schumacher  Internship (Fall 2008)  
University Press of Mississippi

**ACADEMIC YEAR 2006-2007**

Awards
Andrew Hedglin  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award  
Belhaven College
Martha Krystaponis  Fifth Place, Poetry: “Tessie: Examinations of Belonging”  
National Federation of State Poetry Societies
Addie Leak  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award  
Belhaven College
Addie Leak  Second Place, Poetry: “Lullaby of Leaves”  
Southern Literary Festival

Publications
Martha Krystaponis  “Tracing a Root to Lithuania”  
Creative Nonfiction, *Ruminate* (Issue #5)
Addie Leak  “Letter to the Editor,” *Ruminate* (Fall 2007)
Stacy Nott  “Letter to the Editor,” *Ruminate* (Spring 2007)

**ACADEMIC YEAR 2005-2006**

Awards
Nickie Albert  Third Place, One-Act Play  
“How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane”  
Southern Literary Festival
### STUDENT AND ALUMNI ACCOMPLISHMENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Title/Work</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nickie Albert</td>
<td>Second Place, Creative Nonfiction</td>
<td>“A Tattler’s Tale”</td>
<td>Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Hedglin</td>
<td>Second Place, Fiction</td>
<td>“Under the Name of Saunders”</td>
<td>Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy Karlak</td>
<td>Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award</td>
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<td>Belhaven College</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cathy Karlak</td>
<td>Third Place, Poetry</td>
<td>“Outages”</td>
<td>Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers</td>
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### Publications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title/Work</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Journal/Publication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Bolton</td>
<td>“Nana’s House”</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Cedarville Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew Hedglin</td>
<td>“Matinee Mantra of H. G. Edgar Degas”</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>The Albion Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>David Rahaim</td>
<td>“Belhaven’s Creative Writing Program: One Year Strong”</td>
<td>Feature Article</td>
<td>Belhaven Tartan</td>
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### ACADEMIC YEAR 2004-2005

### Awards

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Title/Work</th>
<th>Institution/Association</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ian Bennett</td>
<td>First Place, Fiction</td>
<td>“The Sable”</td>
<td>Arrowhead (Mississippi College)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ian Bennett</td>
<td>Second Place, Creative Nonfiction</td>
<td>“Black Tuesday”</td>
<td>Arrowhead (Mississippi College)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skip Davis</td>
<td>Second Place, One-Act Play</td>
<td>“Mr. Holloway’s Toy Company”</td>
<td>Southern Literary Festival</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharmeisha Jordan</td>
<td>Second Place, Poetry</td>
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<td>Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society</td>
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<td>David Rahaim</td>
<td>First Place, Poetry</td>
<td>“Scottish Baptism” and “2:42 A.M.”</td>
<td>Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jennifer Wells</td>
<td>First Place, Creative Nonfiction</td>
<td>“Near Death Valley”</td>
<td>Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ian Bennett</td>
<td>“The Sable,” Fiction</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Arrowhead (Mississippi College)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Bolton</td>
<td>“The House of Bread”</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Spring Hill Review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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ACADEMIC YEAR 2003-2004

Awards
Philip Bassett First Place, Fiction
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Sarah Bolton First Place, Poetry: “Security”
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society
Jennifer Chajon First Place, Creative Nonfiction
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Roman Merry Honorable Mention, Poetry: “Prufrock Creeps Creole”
Southern Literary Festival

Publications
Trey Bruce “A Man and His Tusk”
Poetry, The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)
Jennifer Chajon “Illusion,” Creative Nonfiction
The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)
Jeremiah Maeda “Gods Without Earthly Desires”
Poetry, The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)

ACADEMIC YEAR 2002-2003

Publications
Claire Ferris “Pleni Sunt Coeli et Terra Gloria Tua” and
“At Ten,” Poetry
The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)
Mickie Harwell “And the Beat Goes On,” Poetry
The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)
Cari Rittenhouse “Reach,” Poetry
The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)
Contributor Biographies

Rex Bradshaw lives in Manassas, Virginia, and is a Creative Writing minor and History major. He writes primarily fiction, often incorporating his interests in history, mythology, language, and folk culture.

Skyler Bready hails from Puckett, Mississippi. He is a junior Music major, with an emphasis in composition. He has no idea how many of his poems were unashamedly stolen by the Brogue editorial staff, and is therefore unaware that his work has been included in this volume.

Chris Brown is a junior at Belhaven University, majoring in Visual Art and minoring in Creative Writing. He claims Chattanooga, Tennessee, as his hometown, although he actually lives on Lookout Mountain. Like his poetry, Christopher enjoys terse biographies.

Kirsten Callahan is a senior double major in English and Creative Writing. She hails from Pearl, Mississippi, but considers her true heritage to be Gallifreyan. When not busy hopping dimensions, Kirsten enjoys baking pies, writing essays, and singing in her car. Her favorite toys are hypotaxis, playdough, Greek, and martial arts, and she plans to be a treehouse when she grows up.

Having been born at an early age, and being raised in the country, Peter Davis has always been fascinated with what many would consider ordinary or boring and exposing the light and glory in these people and their hardships. He also likes running around in circles, building with Lego blocks, and making anything with what’s in front of him. Peter is also hungry, and not just for food, but to continue learning how to see, to recognize patterns, and to know the darkness but see the light. Peter is a junior Art major and Creative Writing minor from Tennessee.

Lindsay Gill was raised in Hillsville, Virginia, a place reminiscent of Andy Griffith’s Mayberry. She spent many a happy hour making puns on the town’s name. For years, she wanted to be an actress, but by some grace she realized that the epics she concocted for her Barbies when she was a youngster portended that she was really meant to be a writer. Lindsay is currently double majoring in Creative Writing and History, with the intent of earning a grad degree in archaeology. She already owns the hate and jacket for the part.
Mary Morris is not only a junior, but also an English major with a minor in Creative Writing. She believes Olive Branch, Mississippi, to be both beautiful and her home. Though she finds fiction fantastic and makes it her usual reading choice, she writes poetry; this may stem from her thoughts being mostly short, full of line breaks, and rarely lucid. Mary loves seeing God’s handiwork in root systems and she thinks mascara is incredible. She hopes to be an amazing editor one day.

Joy Patterson is a freshman Creative Writing major from Jonesboro, Arkansas, (which is still the South, contrary to popular Mississippi belief) and Katy, Texas. She has been blessed to find new family in every life change. She claims both states as home and the Y as her third home. Joy savors cultural foods and experiences, especially of authentic Irish, Venezuelan, Italian, and Greek varieties. She does not believe a sticker will ever accurately produce the history-rich must of books. She does believe there is beauty to be found in every circumstance, even in “dry paint.”

Haleigh Robbins is a Creative Writing major. Nature is her biggest inspiration. Her favorite writers are the Romantics-Tennyson, Coleridge, Emerson, and Thoreau. She never goes anywhere without a book in hand. To read is to kindle a fire; every syllable spelled sparkles.—Victor Hugo

Jacob Rowan is an Art major and Creative Writing minor. Jacob’s parents live in Maryland right now, but his dad is in the Air Force so he has lived in nine different places over the last twenty-one years. Jacob is very interested in order and the way things are connected: the world is created by God, and thus those connections have meaning and significance. Precision of form and structure are very important to Jacob as a writer and artist, and he often use patterns to express that. As a poet, he enjoys exploring form, particularly those with set rules (created by himself or others). The act of trying to structure an idea to fit a form allows him to contemplate it more fully. As an artist, Jacob experiments with patterns and complex designs. Through spending time on intricate details, the connections and meanings emerge. Jacob seeks to create art that reveals intentionality and effort as well as inviting contemplation.

Adie Smith is a senior Art major, Creative Writing minor from Las Cruces, New Mexico. After graduating, she plans to be famous.

Timothy Smith was raised in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, a town in a pollen-ridden valley known only for hosting the Little League World Series each August. His high-school-English-teaching father and Asian-doctor mother did a lot of the work, but much credit also goes to a nice old babysitter named Lois. Tim has synesthesia, meaning that letters and sounds have colors. His pet peeves include colorless music, the incorrect plural “octopi,” and over-parenting. Tim enjoys writing novels and the occasional short story.
Sarah-Elizabeth Storment is a freshman majoring in English and Creative Writing. She comes from the wonderful town of Leakesville, Mississippi. Sarah-Elizabeth is a fantastic runner on the Belhaven Cross-Country team, and she is generally awesome. This biography is not of her own composition, so if any facts prove erroneous, the fault does not lie with Sarah-Elizabeth.

David Syrigos is a junior Creative Writing major at Belhaven University. He was born in Sacramento, California, and grew up in Perrysburg, Ohio. He is a proud third-generation Greek American. He currently lives in Memphis, Tennessee. Besides writing fictional stories and the occasional poem, he enjoys playing the piano, drawing, and throwing things.

Angela Thomas is a senior Creative Writing major from Jackson, Mississippi. Her influences range from southern author Flannery O’Connor to rapper/poet Tupac Shakur. She hopes to pursue screenwriting in the future.

Sarah Vanbiber is from a wandering gypsy family—almost. She has lived in six states in the north and south and, upon graduation, will be getting married and moving west to her seventh state, Colorado. The most significant years of her childhood and young adulthood were spent in Flint, Michigan, so the northern landscapes and people often breathe through her writing. She is a senior English major and Creative Writing minor. She was seven years old when she wrote and self-published her first book with a pencil, copy paper, and a stapler. She has not stopped writing since.

Rebecca Yantis is a senior, about to graduate with a double-degree in Creative Writing and History. As an Army child, she did not have a set home state or town, but right now her parents live in Verona, Wisconsin, so that’s where she’ll be for now. Rebecca is a sucker for Batman, British comedy, Reeses, Dr. Pepper, and Labrador Retrievers. Remember: growing old is mandatory, but growing up is optional.
Belhaven University

If you would like to learn more about the BFA Degree in Creative Writing at Belhaven University, please contact the Chair of the Creative Writing Department as follows:

Dr. Randall A. Smith
Belhaven University
Creative Writing Department
1500 Peachtree Street
Jackson, MS 39202

E-mail: rsmith@belhaven.edu
Phone: 601-968-8996

Visit the Creative Writing program on the web at http://www.belhaven.edu/academics/Creative_writing/default.htm

If you would like to learn more about Belhaven University in general, please contact the Admission Department as follows:

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Belhaven University, Box 153
1500 Peachtree Street
Jackson, MS 39202

Phone: 601-968-5940
Toll-free: 800-960-5940
Fax: 601-968-8946
E-mail: admission@belhaven.edu

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