

A photograph of a campus at sunset. The sky is a vibrant mix of pink, orange, and purple. Several tall, black light poles with circular tops are visible, some of which are illuminated. A concrete path leads from the foreground into the distance. Trees and other campus buildings are silhouetted against the colorful sky.

# *landrum lights*

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ENG 584

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### LANDRUM LIGHTS

Landrum Lights is an anthology of NKU alumni poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction edited and compiled by the students of Northern Kentucky University's English 584 course, Literary Publishing and Editing, presented in spring 2017 under the faculty guidance of P. Andrew Miller.



*Gary Walton*

***Melissa Moon on Writing Love Poems***

"Are you brave enough to  
Write it," she asked with  
A smirk, "Can you put it

Down in black and white—  
Red and white, if you pierce  
The skin—perhaps flood the

Page with scarlet—just open  
A vein—I've done it lots of  
Times—just look at me, I'm

Fine, except for the scars, on  
My fingertips and, of course,  
Over my heart—and the

Deformities—each kiss takes  
Its toll, you know. Yes, I can  
See it in your bruises—the tears

Mean nothing that don't burn  
Deep enough to excoriate  
The skin like lava flowing

Down a virgin meadow—  
Already I can feel you inch  
Toward the door trying to

Escape—do you really think  
You can survive this, our  
Little secret—it will only

Make sense if you tell the  
World—do it and don't  
Look back."

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*Gary Walton graduated from NKU with his BA in English. He then went on to receive his PhD from The George Washington University. He is an Associate Professor of Literature at NKU and an editor of the Journal of Kentucky Studies.*

## *The Circle of Life*

Birthing these poems  
    Is like a mouse pooping  
        A Chinese lantern,

Bright, fragile, illuminated,  
    Capable of fiery pinwheels  
        And rockets rising into

The black night, exploding  
    Into sweet showers  
        Of golden sparklers

Or an effervescent diorama  
    Of desire, an emotional phalanx  
        Rushing forth and tumbling

Into itself like phantasmagoric  
    Russian nesting dolls or  
        Electric origami twisted

Over and through like  
    Neon tubes marking  
        The trail, dotting the highway,

Brightening the mind like  
    Sheet lightning framing the  
        Past in stark silhouette to be

Safely stored in a scrapbook  
    Or curio cabinet with other  
        Curiosities until needed

To share like a rare vintage  
    With special guests, or alas  
        To mark down at the estate sale

After the funeral or wrestle away  
    To the land fill, where they  
        Can decompose like notes

Set free from a musical score  
    To fertilize a field of wild flowers  
        That some studious bees  
            Can read in the summer sun.

# Nathan Singer

## Dog Thunder Blues

*Baby did you see that fire burnin'  
Straight up in that black Oklahoma sky  
O now did you see that fire burnin'  
Straight up in that black Oklahoma sky  
Lord I seen them buildings all come-a crashin' down  
And I reckon some body gots to die...*

Ain't but two things my father left for me in this world: a beat up old no-name six string, and a .38 Smith & Wesson. Just like old man I keeps the pistol stowed away inna same guitar case I now tote cross my back. Everywhere I go. Heavy load, sure nuff, but it done served me well.

Most folk know me as Plow Boy Lewis. Been also called the Oklahoma Ox from time to time. But to other guitar pickers, this here Big Junior Slides at your service. Yes indeed. I can sings and plays any old tune you might like to hear, and swearing on a stack of Bibles, it won't be like nothing you ever done heard before. You see, when I gets to playing this here guitar I keeps a three-inch length of brass pipe on my ring finger, and a sawed-off bottle neck right there onna middle. I'm the onliest one who play that way, so far, I ever seen. Give me a real special sound when I switches back and forth tween the two, howling like a cold wind or grinding like a buzzsaw blade. Ain't no gimmick or stage trick, you understand. A heavy boot heel on my right hand nigh on to fourteen year ago, that there were the mother of my invention. Since then them two fingers been stiff as copper rods, and I can't fret no chord or ball up a fist to save my soul. All on count of a man who come to call one hot black night in Tulsa.

*I ain't killed no man, Lord  
But I come doggone close  
Said I ain't yet killed a man, no  
But I come doggone close  
And if that man git to me first Lord  
He gonna hafta reckon with my ghost...*

Reckon I believes in God almighty, hear. Reckon I do. But he ain't nothing I can rightly speak on. Never seen his face. But I sure nuff seen Devils. Seen them all my day. Devils all over. One here, one there, walking just like man. Some come in white hoods, you understand. Some with a badge and uniform. Some Devils, they be seen in real fine suits. Yes sir. Some don't come in no costume at all, all right, but you will

sure nuff know them by the Hell they unleash. O preach'm now...

It were the end of May, nineteen-hunnet-twenny-one. Back then they call the Greenwood side of Tulsa the "Negro Wall Street," and me and mine, we was right there in that good life. Bertie, she ten-year-old at that time, and Ethel just turning thirteen that day of the 31st. Our father, he run his very own shoe store, and us four we all done our share round the shop. Had usselves a real nice place right upstairs, yes, we did.

My two sisters and me, we was setting places for Ethel birthday supper (on that same kitchen table Mama died on giving birth to yours truly seven years before) when the first shots rung out.

"Daddy," Ethel say with a start, "what that noise out yonder?!"

"Ethel, you take your brother and sister to the back bedroom and you hide under that bed now. And don't you make no sound, hear!"

"But Daddy!"

"Now, girl! Don't you make a peep and don't come out 'til I says! GO NOW!"

We run off quick as jackrabbits as old man snatch up his pump-action shotgun and head on downstairs and on outside. My sisters both crying, shaking and quaking, and I had a mind to do likewise. But them tears just ain't come. Froze solid and still, sure nuff. Old man said don't make a peep, and I weren't bout to. Huddled inna dark under that bed petrified like three little old hound dogs in a thunderstorm we could hear it all coming down outside: screaming, gunfire, busting up like war. And the louder it grow the hotter it done got. Damn blasted hot. I knew they done splitted Hell wide open outside.

"O Daddy...Daddy..." Bertie got to sobbing, "What if he don't never come back?"

"Hush up that mess, Bertie," Ethel say.

As for me, I ain't had no words of comfort nor words of fear. I ain't have no words at all.

"Imma catch me a look," Ethel say, and she done slid out from under the bed.

Just then the door slam open, and pale as death, two white mens lumber in. Staring hard with Lucifer eyes. I couldn't barely make them out laying down there where I be, but I seen the one were fat as a brood sow set to pop with piglets, wearing blue coveralls and swinging a kerosene lamp. T'other, he were built right from bricks carved thick and sharp, his pitch black hair cut straight cross the top his head just like a push broom.

"Now...what we got here?" The bristle-headed one say, grinning dark and broke-tooth, giving Ethel the old wild-eye and pointing his revolver at her bosom. She lock up tighter than a snare drum and press against the north wall. So, he stomp on over her way, real slow and heavy, and don't you know one them mud-caked clompers

was gonna crunch down on my right hand, snapping them two fingers like brittle old twigs in a dry autumn. Bertie she slap her hand cross my mouth for to keep me silent...but I weren't fixing to make no sound any old way, even though that pain were hacking paths all through my skinny little frame. That man, he ain't notice, though, on count of his eyes being dead set on my sister trembling young body.

"Come on, Whitney," the fat one got to grunting. "We ain't got no time for no fornication."

"Just...just do your business quick and git gone, hear?" Ethel say, putting on a right brave face.

"Let's just see how it goes, little girl," that man hiss, reaching his hand toward Ethel top button.

Right then Senior Lewis come on busting through the door swinging his shotgun like a club and he catch the hog man in his blubbery gut with one swoop. That fat hunky he retch out a dribble of blood, drop his lamp, and stumble off down the hall wheezing and groaning like a beat down pack mule. Father were just set to cocking his rifle as that other white man turn the revolver on him, and open up his chest wide with one shot. Old man slam against the south wall, dead as a rock inna sea, smearing a thick trail of red right cross the paint. Room smelling from sulfur, flint, and kerosene.

Bertie she got to screaming loud, "DADDY! DADDY!" and Ethel slide down the north wall just sobbing. The white man look back at Ethel, strike a match with his thumb that he done pull from his pocket, drop it inna kerosene and say,

"Y'all cook real good now." And make his exit.

I don't member much else but the flash of fire and watching my father go up in flames. We fly from the room, down them stairs into the shop, and out the door.

Outside Greenwood Avenue weren't nothing but a mass of flame so far as your eye could see. Whites there rounding up Negroes all long the way, just like livestock, and carting them off to parts unknown. Folk who resist was shot on site. And there it were, whole Colored side of the Frisco tracks burning, crumbling, falling away to nothing, the night sky above filling with smoke and black dust.

"We making our stand at Stovepipe Hill!" someone were heard to shout. But what that mean to three small childrens who just seen they only parent knock down dead as a old stone and they home disappear in one blazing flash. It ain't mean nothing at all, I tell you that. So we just to stood there, eyes wide like six burning suns, as the whole goddamn world die all round us.

All sudden a wild spirit up and grab me and I done found myself to running right on back inside that burning shop.

"Junior! No!" Ethel holler. But I ain't pay her no mind.

I gone straight on behind that front counter, grab up my father guitar case and kept right on to running back outside. That there case, I couldn't hardly lift it, and my two broke fingers got to throbbing and pounding something evil. But I's needing what was in it. I done knowed that I did.

No sooner I be outside again a black automobile screech to a stop right by us, and a young well-dressed Negro man we ain't never seen fore in our lives jump right out.

"Y'all OK?" he axe. "Get inna car. Imma git you out of here now." We ain't move a hair.

"Y'all stay here and you gonna burn right up," he say. "Either that or them white men gonna haul you off to a camp. You want that?"

Not so much as a twitch, you hear. Just three little old scarecrows swaying inna hot breeze of a flaming city.

"Ethel?" he say. "Bertie? Junior? Last chance now."

After a short breath of hesitating, we crawls on into that vehicle. Yes, we did. Nothing to lose, you understand. The young man he shut the door for us, jump on in his own self, and we speed off into the night.

"Where you need to go?" he axe further. "You got family anywhere close by?"

Only family I ever did know was Ethel, Bertie, and our old man. But Ethel she manage to squeak out, "We g-gots kin in...in Doddsville."

"Doddsville? Mississippi?"

"Y-yes sir."

"Goddamn...that's a long haul. But...I'll take you there."

"Th-thank you sir."

"This is bad..." he mutter under his breath, pressing the pedal and sending us off with a screech. "Worse than '92. Worse than '65. Haven't seen it like this since 1896."

I ain't had no earthly notion of what he saying. But I ain't truly care none. Shock had me closed up good.

And so we done driven all through the night, not speaking nother solitary word, leaving a burning Tulsa and every last bit of life as we done knowed it far behind. And there I set clutching all I had left of old man in my one good hand, t'other hand aching and stinging for what his killer done left me with.

Come sun up the man he drop us off at Aunt Bessie house. She come crying and wailing offa that front porch just grabbing us up so tight we bout like to smother, and screaming Why Lord why O sweet Jesus?

Aunt Bessie lead the girls on inna house, and I be fixing to follow, when that man he lay his

hand on my shoulder. I turn round to face him.

"You gonna carry that with you, Junior?" he axe, pointing at my father guitar case I gots clutched tight cross my chest. I nod my head yes. "Figure you gonna use that machine in there?" he tap the case. "Use it like your father did?" I nod again. He smile wide. "Well in that circumstance, I reckon we'll be meeting each other again. We'll likely have to strike up a deal when you get grown. I can help you, Junior. I can help you when you need it. *And you gonna need it.*"

That young man he say fare thee well, and set off inna dust of the morning. Never even done give his name.

*Clarksdale callin', baby*

*Don't you know I be on my way...*

I ain't that boney little boy no more. No sir. I's well a full-grown man these here days, and believe that I sure enough got my growth. I ain't called The Ox for no damn reason, hear?

Us three, we shuffle round tween aunts, uncles, and cousins til we old enough to make our own ways. Both my sisters they done settle down in Selma, Alabama with husbands and childrens in tow. I use to see them round holidays and such. But I don't see them no more. Folk grow apart. It be that way some time. Me, I driven a mule plow inna fields all through the South while I's raising up, spending my weekends picking my father guitar in jooks when I gots the age to do it. Time come I made my way riding onna music alone. Weren't long fore my crazy two-slide playing ways had folk packing joints every where this side of the Mississippi. Everywheres cepting Oklahoma. Swore on my father unmarked grave I weren't never setting foot in that town again.

I do admit I done had occasion to fall into them old traps of The Blues Man: fighting, drinking, gambling, kicking the gong round, having to stomp a body or get my own self stomped for making time with Mr. Soandso wife. You understand. Ain't nothing I's proud of, that just be the life of a rambling man. Yes sir.

But things they do haunt me. Things that got this boy shaking and sick at night, trying to cry even as a full-grown man, but ain't got what it take to do it. It be locked up in my throat and I can't push it on out. That night in Tulsa burn through my very dreams at night, and I can't never shake it. That look inna eyes of my father when that bullet done rip through his chest, his life leaking out his back all down the wall. Way that ofay who kill old man look hard on my sister with some manner of lust and hate the likes of which not a body alive should have put down on them. That Old Whitney, with his intentions. It weigh down hard on me, like that load I tote cross my back. It gets to aching all through me,

like them two wrecked up fingers on my right hand. Ain't no liquor brewed up by man gonna give me the cure I be needing. No sir. Ain't not a one. Though I tries to find it all same.

Something else haunt me swell, if haunt the proper word for it. Some nights when I be playing my songs for the people to dance to, I sometime look out and see that man who done driven us to Mississippi. Never don't talk or nothing, he just out inna crowd. Somewheres inna back. Sometime he tip his hat and smile. But I gits to looking down at my picking hand for one little old second, look up...and he gone.

It weren't just at jooks I seen him at. No sir. Even as just a boy I be out plowing or picking inna fields and I would have to swear to holy Jesus that I would see that man out yonder far off. He be right there. But I blink my eyes, turn my head just so, and he ain't there no more when I look on back. Figure that he would stroll on out where I be and chew the rag a spell. I thank him for his kindness. But always he done gone like a wisp onna wind. I ain't seen him again for many a year, til I start to playing jooks. And then it be just a moment here and a moment there.

He done said that we meet again, but we don't never meet. I be seeing him, but then he gone.

Thing that trouble my mind, though, is that he...he don't never seem to get no older. From seven year old to twenny one I done seen this man off and on, and he don't ever age a solitary day. My death right now if I tells a lie.

*Just like a dog inna thunder Lord*

*Can you hear me weep and moan*

*Just like a dog inna thunder*

*Lord Lord Lord*

*Can't you hear me weep and moan*

*There be a roar of hellfire all round me, Lord*

*And I's out here on my own*

And so, it come to pass that I finds myself right there in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Some colored folk working fields right onna outskirts of Coahoma County was fixing to pitch a ball out at a old farmhouse, and some ruckus was sure enough a cinch to go down. For such affairs as these a loud, hard-driving guitar player be needed, and there plenty to pick from round Clarksdale. But come on now. Ain't no body to call on in that situation but the Plow Boy hisself. And let me tell you, them folks ain't disappoint, and I ain't disappoint them. The Spirit were sure nuff moving all over that joint, but weren't nothing holy bout it, no sir. Got paid in a fine hot meal and a good bit of jingle for my pocket. And the lady of the house she tip me a bit more on top. You understand.

Next day I gits up and heads off inna town for to buy me a new hat and walking shoes. Just

cause the notion please me. So, light in my step I was right then I ain't even barely notice all them ofays milling bout they business. Turning right up East Second Street...that there where I done seen him.

Climbing up inna driver side of a flatbed truck I seen that square flat top first off. Same push broom hair cut I seen 14 year ago, now with a good helping of salt mix in that block of black pepper. Softer rounda middle too, but still hard cut like a rock. And just so as I can be sure of what I be seeing, I hears.

"Come on, Whitney, move on over and let me drive," a younger white man say huffing up to the vehicle.

"Shut the hell up and git in," Old Whitney he bark back at him, and the kid do just that. My slide fingers got to throbbing just to see the man, and he musta felted my stare on him right then cause he turn them Devil eyes right on me and he say "You need something, boy?"

I just kept on to looking and not moving one muscle. For too long he just drive away.

Next eight hours or more I set right onna side of that street there just playing my guitar. And thinking evil. Ain't git up to eat or make water or nothing. Just set and play til the sun start to setting. Couple folk drop a coin or two, but most just walk on by. Don't make me no nevermind one way or t'other. I just had to set and play and that alla what I could do. Thinking on Tulsa, thinking on Senior Lewis, thinking on the life we all done had. Thinking on what be all gone now. Thinking evil.

I ain't know if he were coming back. Old White Whitney. But I had a notion that he just might. And come sundown I seen that flatbed truck once again. Both them mens git out from they vehicle sweating and dusty, and head on into a white folk tavern.

"Hells bells you a big'n, ain't you?" Barkeep say to me, sizing me up and stepping on back a piece. "Can I help you?"

Old Whitney there with his young friend, and there I be, standing right behind that pale old rat as he set stuffing his mouth with corn bread. So close I coulda snap his goddamn neck right then. Barkeep eye me real nervous like and I stands there holding my guitar with my left hand, clicking my slides together with my right. *Click clack. Click clack.* Don't think I could stop the clicking even if I's wanting to.

"Well sir," I says smiling real wide, "name of Plow Boy Lewis at your service. I be just to passing right through your fine town here and I gots a bit of rumbling in my belly. Now, I ain't got too much inna way of money to pay, but I were hoping that maybe I could set yonder and play a coupla tunes for your patrons here in exchange for a meal or the like. I surely don't mind setting

out back to eat. No sir. Don't mind at all."

Horse shit, you understand. I weren't hungry. I couldn't eat nothing just then nohow. But I had to see up close with my own eyes that man. That man who done set the fire and pull the trigger that done took my whole life away.

"We don't have that kind of music here, and we don't serve your...kind of food here neither. You just go on git now."

I stood right still, holding a molded grin on my face.

"Is he gonna hafta tell you again, boy?" Whitney grunt turning toward me. "You simple? You deaf? The door's thataway. Consider yourself warned for the last time."

So I smile, nod my head real nice, and make my way on outside.

And inna dark, I waits.

People be coming and going mosta night. Time come and folk got to be leaving and no one new replace them. I seen that younger white man come stumbling out and walk on his way alone. And then finally...there he. My man. The one I be waiting on. Out onna streets by hisself. And with not a care in his heart, I reckon. And nothing else neither.

At his truck I were there waiting fore even he git there his own self.

"Don't turn round," I say.

"What the goddamn--"

"And don't make one more noise. Just git to walking."

And that's just what he done with nary another word from me. .38 pressing right on inna curve in his back saying all what need to be said.

So, we got to walking. Offa street. Outta town. Inna dust. Into the thick of trees. Frogs and insects screaming out inna night. He in front, me behind toting that guitar on my back, alla while the muzzle of my father pistol pointing straight at his goddamn head.

And we don't say nothing for long time.

"You pull that trigger you gonna swing, boy," he say after we got to walking a fur piece. "You know that, right."

*Imma swing if I pull the trigger or not,* I says inside my own mind. But I don't mutter not a word out loud. We just walk. Deep in to the black of the night. I hears his breathing git heavy. He start to jabbing his heels inna soft ground further we go. Just a little old protest, I reckon. But we keeps on moving.

"I can git you money, if that is what you want, boy," his voice git to cracking. I laughs a bit onna inside. But I don't say nothing and we just to keep on. *Keep on. Keep on...*

"Turn round," I says finally.

And he do. I holds that .38 on him with my left hand just as still as you please.

"Reckon both us done rambled to Clarksdale,"

I says some more. "Now who would figure such a thing? Reckon it's fate?"

"I just f-follow the work," he stutter.

"Well Mister, that make two of us. You knowing me, Mr. Whitney?"

"Can't say that I do," he say real quiet like. "Should I?"

"Some might to say that yes you should. Sure nuff. Yes indeed. Uh huh. So...question for you."

"All...all right."

"You gots dogs at home, Mr. Whitney?"

"How's that?"

"Answer my question now."

He scratch the back his head and spit onna ground.

"I'm afraid I don't r-rightly understand yer question."

"Now Mr. Whitney. It surely ain't no hard thing to answer. Mean to say, you either gots dogs or you ain't. So, do you gots dogs at your home? Yes or no?"

"I keep...two mutts for hunting, yes I do."

"Do they git to crying and whimpering come a thunder storm?"

He blink hard twice, eyeing my .38.

"What now?"

"DO THEY CRY AND WHIMPER IN A THUNDER STORM!"

That rage just got to flooding all through my body, you understand. My right hand got to shaking, and that glass slide got on to clackety clack clacking against the brass. *Clack clack clack clack. Clack clack clack clack.* For a moment, but for the crickets and tree frogs, it were the only sound.

"I...I suspect they do."

*Clack clack clack clack clack.*

"Even the biggest, meanest dog inna world will git to whimpering and wailing in a storm, won't he, Mr. Whitney."

"Um...I reckon. I reckon he will at that, yes."

"Now, Mr. Whitney, why do you suspect that be?"

*Clack clack clack clack clack clack.*

"Don't...don't rightly know."

*Clack clack clack clack.*

He git to fidgeting with his fingers as he can't seem to take his eyes offa my right hand shaking harder now. *Clack clack clack clack clack clack clack.*

"Well Mr. Whitney...I gots a notion I git to studying on from time to time. Don't call me a expert now, it just a notion. But it seem to me that a house dog will cry all through a storm...just cry cry cry...cause thunder make him come to realize...that he alone. You understand?"

"Um."

"Dogs is just like us, hear? They lie to they own selfs, just like we do. Most time your dog he think the life he gots in your house, it is just fine and dandy. And he think on you and your

kin and the other dogs inna house as his pack, all right. But you ain't. We ain't. We ain't no kin for a dog. Out inna wild, dogs and wolfs they run in packs of they own. And in a storm they locks in close together for to keep warm and safe.

"But house dog ain't got no pack...and the sound of thunder draw out that fear and pain like dredging a dark, cold lake. You alone inna world, thunder say to a dog. All. Alone. All alone. So... he cry."

With that I squeeze the trigger just as I pulls my arm to the left, sending that bullet blasting just over his right shoulder. He jump with a start, bugeye, and git to trembling.

"You hearing that dog thunder, Whitney? You hears it? I do. Yes sir. I hears it. I hears it ALLA TIIIIIIIIIIIME!"

Right then that man he git to shaking hard, worse than my right hand. Mouth quivering like jelly on a spoon.

"Look here," he say, "I...I don't know what it is you want from me, but you just name it. All right? Just name it now."

So many things I could name right then. So many. But instead I just squeeze the trigger again.

And I pull that shot just like the first. Stack of Bibles I did. Sure as I live and breathe I done sent it over his shoulder again. But that ain't where it done gone. Goddamn if that bullet ain't break right on through his left cheek.

He stumble back with the wild-eye in dead shock. Then fall flat to the ground.

And you know I done stood over him firing off them last four shots right on into his skull til his head weren't nothing but tomato pulp and little cut honeydew rinds.

I drop the pistol, stumble on over to a thick patch of grass, and fall to my knees crying deep and heavy. Retching up what left of last night supper I stays on to crying and I cannot stop. I retches some more, all right. And more. But ain't nothing but spit and noise after a spell. All hollow inside.

Got my pay back, sure nuff did. Got that pay back...but it ain't mean nothing. He dead...and I might just well be dead same as him.

But there ain't no bullets left.

"All right now, Junior?"

I looks up, still on my knees inna grass. And who do I sees walking up to me, but that young Negro who drived us from Tulsa. Same as I ever done seen him and not a day older.

"Toppa the world, Mister," I says wiping my hand cross my lips. "Ain't that plain to see?"

He smile and nod.

"Looks like you made a bit of a mess there, son," he say tipping his head at old Whitney body laying there. "Everything better now?"

"Ain't nothing better now," I says clenching

my teeth hard. "Nothing. Likely worsen, in fact. You looking at two dead mens here inna grass, friend-boy. Ain't just one. Ain't just him."

"That's probably true."

"Got a name do ya?"

"Chances are good. But you can just call me Jerome."

I git to standing up straight and look him dead inna eyes.

"You ain't age a minute since Tulsa, Jerome. How you count for yourself?"

"Just lucky I guess. So, tell me, Plow Boy. What's your plan here? How far do you think you can go before they trace this jackass corpse right to you?"

"Reckon I might just well turn myself on over. All right?" I raise up my hands, surrendering to the Lord. "Let this just end now...Less then you gots a different notion. I be all ears, all right, yes indeed."

"That's what I like to hear," he say grinning wide. "You follow me. I know a path that'll take you FAR from here. None of these mothergrabbing fools will ever find you. Of course,...it's gonna cost a bit. This ain't free, like Tulsa. You ain't a boy no more, and this is a different kinda walk. You understand."

"I ain't got no ways to pay you."

"You'll find a way."

"So I follows you...and the Devils be offa my trail for good?"

"Well...you'll kinda be trading one set of devils for another. But you follow my lead, and don't make a big show of yourself, and you'll be just fine. Eventually."

"You...huh...you Satan, ain't you."

"HA HA HA!" He git to laughing, doubling over on hisself. "O shit! HA HA HA! You are the first to ever just come right out and ask! Well...that's a damn good guess anyway!"

Inna distance I see them lamp lights just to floating inna trees. Getting closer and closer. And them devil voices get louder,

"Right out yonder is where I heard them shots!" a voice say. "Follow me! Keep them rifles at the ready."

"Goddamn," I says.

"Goddamn indeed," Jerome reply.

"This it, I reckon."

"You could try to run, yes you could. But come on now. How far do you think you'd git on your own? You stay here and they are gonna burn you up. Or string you up. Or both. Choice is yours, Junior. Last chance, now."

"But...where we gonna go?"

"What's your pleasure, big city? Ain't so much the *where*, it's the *when*."

"I heard something!" another voice holler. "Thisaway!"

"Where your automobile at?"

"O, we ain't driving, Plow Boy. It's a long dark path we're walking."

I bends over to fetch my .38 and sling that guitar cross my back one time again.

"This way! I see something moving! Come on! Hey! Y'all out there freeze!"

"We best git a move on, Junior. It is now or never."

So, we done just that. Ducking on out into the brush, dodging the devils, quick and silent til we inna clear. Then walking. Walking all through the night. Not speaking nother solitary word. Leaving old corpse...and old Clarksdale...and every last bit of my life as I ever done knowed it far behind.

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*Dr. Nathan Singer is a novelist, playwright, composer, and experimental performing artist from Cincinnati, Ohio. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in English and Theater from Northern Kentucky University, a Master's in Creative Writing from Antioch University, and a PhD in Interdisciplinary Humanities with a creative writing focus from Union Institute & University. He currently teaches writing at Antioch, UC, NKU and Cincinnati State. He has been published in various literary journals, and performs on a semi-regular basis both as a solo artist and with various ensembles, though mostly with his band The Whiskey Shambles and with avant-garde performance collective Performance Gallery. His published novels are A Prayer for Dawn, Chasing the Wolf, In the Light of You, The Song in the Squall, and Transorbital. His sixth novel, Blackchurch Furnace, was published in November of 2017.*

*Nicci Mechler*

***How to Stargaze Dangerously***

Carry dim flashlights from the steps of Knobs Haven. Do not check batteries—this is faith. Traverse grotto. Turn off and dance by the light of a black lake littered with stars. Float wine bottles to cool them. Rest. This is the place where we swim at midnight. It calms us so deeply that even the roar of a truck hurtling by does not coax us from corpse pose. At midnight, move to the water farther from road. Wait. Frogs sluice between us, long legs kick, kick and they croak-sing—flirt poolside. Tell the lives of the warrior women who live here. With quiet tongues, hide their stories deep in flesh, etched in the edge of a wrist bone. There is no room for flinching.

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*Nicci Mechler splits her time between exploring, spinning tales, and drawing girls with inky tattoos. Her work appears in various literary magazines, chapbooks in these cups (dancing girl press, 2016), how wild & soft you are (Hermeneutic Chaos Press, 2016)—collaboratively penned as Wild Soft—and Deep in Flesh (dancing girl press, 2017). Nicci runs Porkbelly Press, a feminist, queer-friendly micro press, and edits the lit mag Sugared Water. She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with a pack of roommates & rescue animals, and blogs at: [damnredshoes.wordpress.com](http://damnredshoes.wordpress.com).*

*Remains*

*finding Dad's love letters to his mistress, unsent.*

Balanced on the stairs is a dusty box.  
Inside, wire spirals strangle each other,  
pages so heavily etched they  
furl closed.

I expect notes on porosity  
and investment, maybe wax-infiltration, or  
design ideas put down in thick ballpoint strokes—  
some trade secret of a fifty-year jeweler.  
Of course, with you, I never quite get  
what I

want.

You sign these letters love,  
love.

### *Potable Water*

In Egypt, you're sixty-four and I'm  
thirteen. We sit perched on the edge  
of the Aswan dam, windswept hair reaching  
toward Cairo. In the evening, at market,  
I barter for a silver pendant of Isis.  
(She knows how to fix things.)

Twenty-one, in a hospital waiting room, I think  
if I could find her, you'd heal.

I lost her long ago.

Maybe she was eaten by a croc,  
belly full and Nile-water warm.

It's like sitting in the desert, far  
from even the pyramids at Giza,  
wanting for a cup of water

## *Alumni Author Profile: Brian Hershey*

Brian Hershey graduated from The Ohio State University with a degree in Behavioral and Social Sciences and a Master of Education. He then went to The Institute of Children's Literature in Connecticut to begin writing YA fiction. His first novel, *Accidental Impact*, published in 2009 draws awareness to underage consumption and the perils of drunk driving. He then returned to NKU to get a Master of Arts in English and Creative Writing. It was here that he switched focus from children's literature to adult fiction. His most recent novel, *Forgotten Sin*, was published in 2014 and is the first in a thrilling horror trilogy. Brian is also the creator of the local publisher Reader2Writer Press where he, along with his team, focuses on horror fiction. R2W is diligently working on creating a quarterly magazine, *Dead Avenue Magazine*, that will feature short horror stories. Hershey currently lives in Cincinnati and teaches English and Creative Writing at a local middle school.

### Under the Willow Tree

Under the willow tree in Carrie's front yard, beneath the shade and freshly mown grass, there is a baby in a small wooden box. There's no marker, no headstone, not even a small cross to mark her presence. She is alone, about four feet deep in the soil, and mostly forgotten. Mostly. Because Carrie remembers every day when she looks out the kitchen window; she dug the grave herself.

It has been years, but she remembers clearly. Rain fell as she carried the small handmade coffin under the tree, the leaves sheltering her like an umbrella. There was the smell of worms and wet earth as she shoveled a home for her tiny infant and tears rolled down her cheeks and onto her neck, disappearing into her oversized night shirt.

Carrie is staring out the window when her husband, Jim, wraps his arms around her waist. She sips her warm coffee and tilts her head to the side as he kisses her neck.

"You're up early."

"I couldn't sleep," she says.

He lets go and moves toward the coffee pot. "I have a meeting. No breakfast for me. But I'll be home for dinner."

"I'll make something nice." Her eyes are still on the willow tree, its branches drooping, leaves reaching toward the ground. It rustles in a breeze she cannot feel.

He pours a cup and she knows he adds two teaspoons of Coffemate because he always does. He stirs, his spoon clinking against his mug.

"Sounds good. Maybe some music? Candles? We could try again?"

She turns away from the window and faces him. She places her mug on the counter and tightens the belt on her robe. "Sure. Yeah. Of course."

The telephone rings after Jim closes the door. It's Maggie, the heavy-set nurse from University Hospital, the one with wiry gray hair that's always in a bun. Carrie has heard from her periodically over the past month since her father was admitted after a stroke. *He's never going home*, Maggie told her weeks ago. She said it kindly, her veiny hands placed softly over Carrie's in the hospital corridor. *It's just his time, dear. The Lord is taking him home. You should go in and see him.*

Carrie didn't.

She and Jim had reluctantly moved from their cozy one bedroom apartment into her childhood

home. They had packed her father's belongings into labeled boxes and stored them in the garage. He wouldn't make a full recovery. At best, she would send him to a home. This was her house now. It belonged to her and Jim.

Her father had some minor improvement at first; Maggie had updated her on the phone. Then he rapidly declined and there was no sign of improvements at all. Each time they spoke, Maggie was kind, sympathetic. Carrie didn't have the heart to tell her she wished the bastard would die.

"Hey, Hun. It's Maggie. How are ya?"

Carrie rinses her mug in the sink and places it in the top rack of the dishwasher. She shifts the phone to the other ear. "I'm alright. You?"

"I'm well. Thanks. Look, Hun. I'm afraid we're getting close here...to the end."

Carrie plods upstairs to the bedroom and gathers her clothes for the day from hangers and dressers. She selects a paisley skirt, a matching top, and fresh undergarments.

"Yeah?"

There's a pause on the line and she can hear background chatter, some beeping, and an intercom paging some doctor.

"You may want to come down."

Carrie places her clothes on the bathroom sink and sheds her robe, wiggling her toes in the plush powder blue bath mat. She sets the phone on the sink and pulls her nightgown over her head, sheds her panties. She picks the phone back up.

"How long do I have?"

"Just a guess here. Could be within the day. I just wanted to let you know."

"Thanks, Maggie." Carrie retrieves a towel from the linen closet. "I appreciate it."

When the call is over she showers, scrubbing her skin extra hard with the loofa and strawberry-scented body wash. She doesn't cry. She's in no hurry.

Carrie's mother died giving birth to her. The day Carrie was born is the date of death on her mother's headstone. Elizabeth Miller was laid to rest at Summer Grove Cemetery, about two miles from the house. Her father, Clint, reminded Carrie often of his loss and not just on Carrie's birthdate every year, but on a weekly basis.

She was met nightly with his scowl when he returned home from work. He'd throw his keys and pocket change in the catchall by the front door and saunter in to the kitchen where Carrie was cooking dinner. He'd pop a tab on a can of Milwaukee's Finest and slide into a kitchen chair. The interrogations would begin.

*Did you do your homework? What have you been doing? No scholarship, no college. Oh, hell, you're not*

*college material anyway. You staying outta trouble? You're behind on the laundry. What the hell is that smell and where did you learn to cook?*

Carrie kept her back to him, answered in one word sentences or sometimes not at all. She'd put a hot breaded cube steak or pork chop or heaping pile of some casserole on his plate, wondering when he would shut up. She wished he'd say something positive. Something encouraging. She'd lay a napkin, present him with a fork and she'd slide in across the table, grateful for a mostly silent meal while he chewed and sighed and then walked away from his dirty dishes.

It was no surprise she'd fallen so hard for Max in high school. She was a freshman, he was a junior and it had moved quickly. It was no trouble sneaking out of the house at night with a drunken, snoring father in the next room. Maybe it wasn't a surprise either when she was pregnant three months later.

Max said nice things to her, held her, told her she was pretty. Carrie believed him. She needed to believe in something, but she couldn't believe the positive pregnancy test that she held in the bathroom during her lunch break at school. Two bright pink lines just like that. She was too stunned to cry.

Four months later she was single, the faint flutter of a tiny infant in her growing belly keeping her up at night. Max had college, football dreams, and goals in life. He'd written it all in a letter, placed it in an envelope with her name neatly written in block letters and taped it to her front door. He hadn't even passed it to her in the hall at school.

Carrie's dad was waiting for her that day when she got off the bus, opened letter in hand.

Carrie's low-heeled pumps clack on the hospital linoleum. Antiseptic and lemon cleaners invade her nostrils as she approaches Room 1402. The door is closed and she considers turning around and getting back in the car. Instead, she takes a deep breath and pushes the heavy door open.

Her father's eyes are closed and his chest moves slowly up and down, tubes reaching from his body like tentacles, attached to the surrounding machines. Some of them click, some beep. Carrie clutches her purse closer to her body, unaware she is tiptoeing toward his bed.

He's aged terribly. She doesn't remember most of the deep wrinkles etched in his face and his facial hair is gray; he's nearly bald.

His eyes twitch and slowly open. Carrie takes a step back and nearly falls into a chair, then recovers and nods.

"I came to say goodbye."

He says nothing. Since the stroke, he is unable

to speak, though Maggie says he's tried. Some deep place inside her, a dark place that scares her, she finds this an ironic and suitable punishment for him. She knows if he could speak he would say nothing kind because he never has.

"I know. I know," she says. "The nurse told me you can't speak and that's probably best for both of us." She looks at the chair and decides not to sit; she will be leaving soon. "Are they taking good care of you?"

He stares at her blankly and she wonders suddenly if he can understand what she's saying. She probably should've asked Maggie on the phone if his brain was mush.

"I'm not staying. This was overdue," she shifts her weight. "The goodbye, I mean. I should've done it long ago. I was a good daughter. I made mistakes, sure. But I was a good daughter. There's a special place for people like you."

Carrie's father stares at her and she swears one of the machines beep a little faster.

"You are going to die alone, just like you should. I hope you go quickly. I hope you don't suffer."

Carrie could tell by the look on her father's face that he knew about the baby. The school bus hissed and pulled away. She slowed her walk and shifted her back pack, her eyes moving to the gravel driveway. *What was in that envelope?*

She had used the clinic out of town for prenatal checkups. Max had been taking her until two weeks ago when they'd had a fight. Even his parents didn't know about the pregnancy. He was using savings from his part-time job at the local movie theater to pay for the appointments so it couldn't be a bill. *Had the clinic mailed something?*

"You gotta lotta nerve, Carrie Ann! You little whore!"

Carrie walked past him, her heart hammering violently in her chest, her eyes on the ground. She dropped her backpack inside the front door and walked into the kitchen. It was time for her to start dinner.

"I'm talking to you!"

She opened the fridge and removed the thawed chicken thighs from the lower shelf. Her mind was racing. He knew. *He knew!* She was going to tell him, eventually she had to. She just hadn't figured out how yet. She'd been wearing baggy t-shirts but she'd only gained a few pounds and besides her swollen breasts she didn't think he could see the hard bump that still fit in her jeans. None of that mattered now because it was all out in the open.

She placed the chicken on the counter and turned to him. "What is that? In that envelope?"

"I ask the questions around here! You don't ask me shit. You understand?"

Carrie nodded.

"Looks like ole Max here is done with you. Don't want nothing to do with you or your bastard child. He's gonna try and be somebody? And you're gonna raise that little shit in your gut?"

Carrie winced. "Don't call it that."

"What do you want me to call it? It's a son of a bitch."

"It's a girl. Pops, please. Let me explain."

He punched her in the mouth. In her fifteen years, he had never hit her like that. She'd been slapped once or twice and spanked as a child, but he had never punched her like a man. Tears sprang to her eyes and she touched her mouth tenderly. There was blood on her fingertips when she pulled her hand away.

"No explaining necessary. I know exactly how babies are made. Who all knows? Huh? Who all knows about this?"

Carrie shook her head and took a deep breath, which sounded more like a gulp, as she tried to compose herself. The baby moved gently inside her womb and she instinctively placed her hand over her abdomen. Her lips throbbed painfully.

"Just Max. And you."

He glared at her. "I'm not paying for a baby, Carrie Ann. Not doing it." He ran his hands through his hair and turned toward the kitchen window, his back to her. "I shoulda known. It was a matter of time. No brains in that head of yours."

Carrie pulled a paper towel off the roll and dabbed her mouth softly. She could feel her lips swelling. She ran her tongue across her teeth, surprised they were all still mounted in her gums. She swallowed blood.

Her father turned around and sighed. "I'm gonna do us both a favor. Especially you. And I'm sorry for it. I am."

The kick that landed in her stomach was enough to bring cramps that night. She lay curled in the fetal position on the bathroom floor wishing her baby to move. Pain radiated from her abdomen to her lower back. She cried silently on the bathroom rug, staring at the cracks in the tiled floor. She knew what was coming.

There was no hospital visit; her father refused. It hadn't taken long to miscarry. Carrie thought God was kind for that. She thought maybe God had shown her sympathy, if there was a God after all.

When she emerged from the bathroom with a clean towel swaddled in her arms she found a small wooden box on the kitchen table. He had nailed it together himself, she was sure of it.

Rain patted against the kitchen window, the old willow tree swaying in the breeze outside. The house was silent except for her ragged breathing.

She couldn't stop sobbing, her shoulders heaving and jerking and little sounds came out of her mouth that she couldn't control.

She retrieved a shovel from the shed and carried her baby to the willow tree.

Carrie's father died hours after she left the hospital. Maggie had called but Carrie let it go to voicemail while she and Jim ate dinner. She'd made his favorite meal and even baked a pie.

When she picked up her father's urn later that week, Jim had offered to help her scatter the ashes. He could take a day off work, he said. Carrie wanted to be alone and he understood. Maybe she'd dump the ashes over her mother's grave at the cemetery. That was a thought. Carrie knew for sure she would not sprinkle them under the willow tree.

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*Shae M. Hall is a freelance writer who lives in Lakeside Park, Kentucky. She recently published her short story, "Love, Daniel" in Waypoints magazine. She is a member of Cincinnati Writer's Project. She helped edit the newly released novel, Seeds of the Lemon Grove III by Joe D'amato. Shae has been published in Creative Living. She was previously a fiction editor for The New Madrid. She has a MFA in Creative Writing from Murray State University and a Bachelor degree in Electronic Media Communication and Creative Writing from Northern Kentucky University. Shae is currently working on a collection of short stories. In her spare time, Shae enjoys reading literary fiction and cooking.*

# Keith S. Wilson

## *Field Notes*

1

in physics dark matter isn't "made"  
of anything. it's a free citizen

that passes  
unburdened through the field, through itself,

through you—

2

it helps to observe from a distance:  
the field, for instance,

as a statement

the south has chosen to make,  
the way whiteness too  
is often rhetorical, as when an older student remarks

in those beginning days that only he observed mlk's holiday  
while his black friends, working, did not

3

sometimes love is a black dot  
in a field

sometimes, suddenly  
it is not.

4

or how can black be

the absence  
of all color? take this cruiser. see the light strike blue off the car like  
copper

through a fountain

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5

there is a difference between what is fair and what is just,  
for instance,

it is fair  
that i try  
to love your skin even when it is not touching my own

6

whiteness is an alibi, the way the officer was like a steam-  
liner

only I could see

7

inside where nothing shows I am of course not black  
but that does not matter

to the field

8

some colors are indistinguishable  
at night. *put your hands behind your back*

a different cop once asked me.  
it was so sincere. he was so

polite

9

as a boy you learn to know the inside  
without being required to feel it

as when, now, I understand a bucket  
or a hood

10

he asks my girlfriend not if she is white  
since even in this light

what we are is obvious

but instead he speaks philosophically:

*ma'am* he asks  
*are you here of your own free will*

11

sometimes whiteness is a form itself  
of hyperbole. try this:

sit in a field. then try reading

andrew jackson's quotes on liberty  
only  
pretend they are being written by his slaves

12

look at the word black  
on the paper  
& you will see a certain black, a kind,  
  
a certainty,

or if you see nothing at all that of course  
is a kind of black too

13

by the road  
my father showed me cotton  
once

*look at that*  
he said

## *How to Express Mixed Emotions on a Standardized Test*

Brace yourself on your number 2 pencil.  
Bubble in your name, your address  
and quantitate yourself.  
Make a complete Stop at the heritage box.  
Be careful,  
It might be labeled 'Race,'  
or 'Ethnic Origin.'

Don't bubble in 'White.'  
Don't bubble in 'African-American.'  
And don't bubble in 'Other.'  
Because neither of your parents  
is an Other.

When strangers group together  
try not to notice  
the pale and dark roads form  
that you don't quite fit on.

Try not to endear yourself  
to your mother's nephews  
more than your father's.  
and when the phone rings,  
and your little cousin's voice asks  
why you talk white,  
try not to answer.

If on your way home  
someone asks you  
where you're from,  
feign ignorance,  
and answer 'California.'  
When they follow with  
'Where are your parents from?'  
answer 'New Jersey,' or 'Ohio,'  
And just keep moving.

Don't admit that when  
a stranger calls you  
'Dirty Mexican' or  
'Sand Nigger'  
what really upsets you  
is that they can't tell  
which racist name to call you.

Just keep moving.  
You'll get to the space  
between Jersey and Ohio eventually,  
and you don't want to miss a problem  
this early in the test

## Wrecks

My second serious high school girlfriend fell in love with me because I was someone else's hero. We were sitting by my car when I heard about it. We had gone to see a movie at the Dollar Saver Cinema, and then gotten Taco Bell on our way to the river. In the Ohio suburb where I grew up, there is an old VFW hall next to a dirty river-bank. The small parking lot that overlooks the river there was a popular place to bring a date, although I didn't know it at the time. I thought I had found the place on my own, and was very impressed with my ingenuity, and this night, Karen and I were alone there on the bank, sitting on a small, rock wall, deciding whether to go back to my car and have sex.

Our discussion was rather formal. Karen and I were measuring the pros and cons of giving up our life-long chastity to each other. Despite teenage hormones, and plenty of privacy, neither of us had trouble pretending that this was an intellectual exercise. We already had "lack of condom" in the 'shouldn't' column, and all the things that went along with that. In the 'should' column so far we had "We really want to" and "We almost did last week anyway". While we sat on the wall finishing our Mountain Dews, she added another one to the 'shouldn't' column. "I love you," she said.

Rather than critique her choice of column placement for this entry, I questioned the entry itself. Still in intellectual mode, "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," she said.

"When did this come about?" I asked

"Last weekend, while I was away at church-camp."

So, one of the exercises at this camp was a late-night decision making session, where each of the teens were encouraged to reveal some difficult decision in their lives, and the group was to help them decide. She had told the group that she wasn't sure if she loved me. Apparently, she mentioned me by name, or perhaps we were a well-known enough couple that she didn't have to, because one of the other girls had a story to tell about me: A story about me saving her life.

"I hardly saved her life," I said, wondering at the same time why I would bother to downplay a story about me that someone else had told.

"You're her hero," Karen said.

"I didn't know that," I said, "I didn't even know that she knew who I was."

The story that Karen had heard the other side of took place before I had my own car by

about a year, and I had to ride to school in a car that my buddy Rob called his "Crapalier". It was a two-door, rust-brown Chevy that he had fixed up after buying it for only a few dollars.

He picked Chris up after me every day, so I just sat in the back the whole time. It was one day in the spring of our sophomore year; we were stopping at a busy intersection when we heard a terrible crash. Rob slammed on the brakes, and I dropped my Gameboy.

When I looked up there were still shards of glass and bits of twisted steel falling from the sky, pelting the hood and windshield of The Crapalier. Rob and Chris were stunned. They were staring, slack-jawed, at the imploded vehicles. I didn't understand this. Why weren't they reacting yet? Later I learned that for them, time had slowed down, and they felt powerless to act.

"Get out," I said, but they didn't. I shook Chris's seat in front of me. "Get out! Get out!" Both of them then stumbled from the car. No one else around the accident had moved yet, they all still had the slack-jawed surprise. Maybe time had slowed for them too. I looked toward the smashed cars. It was obvious what had happened: The little car that had been right in front of us had tried to turn left, and been struck by a cargo van going straight. The front of the van had completely destroyed the passenger side of the car.

I walked quickly to the little car. The driver was a girl I recognized from school. Jane. Plain-faced, with long-blond hair, her small eyes staring directly ahead. I bent over and looked into her open driver-side window. The passenger-side door was nearly at her armrest, while the seat had been pushed into the back of the cab. If anyone had been sitting there, they would certainly have been killed. Jane seemed okay, however.

I called out to her, and she didn't seem to hear me. From the other side of the intersection, I heard a gravelly voice yelling obscenities. I looked over Jane's car and saw that the driver of the van was emerging: a big man, with a heavy beard, and an arm of tattoos showing from under the left sleeve of his t-shirt. He was walking around Jane's car with a tire-iron in his hands, threatening to kill her. I turned to Rob and Chris, still standing next to The Crapalier, only watching.

"Stop him," I called to them, and they finally sprang into motion. "Make sure he's okay, and keep him in his van."

The two skinny teenage guys stood before the big van-driver with their hands up in the universal sign for "I don't want to fight you, but I want you to know I'm standing in your way." Blood was running down the man's face from under his hair, and after trying to stare down my friends for a moment, he dropped the iron, and

turned around, allowing himself to be ushered back to his vehicle.

It was then that Jane opened her car door. She had undone her seatbelt, and was trying to get out. I put my hand on her shoulder, and eased her back into the seat.

"You're okay." I said.

She turned toward me, slightly, still staring off in the distance, no emotion on her face. Her eyes were so dilated that I was surprised that she could see anything at all. "I'm not okay." She said flatly.

Remembering my Boy Scouts first-aid training, I ran through the gamut of questions. Was she bleeding anywhere? Did she feel like she had broken any bones? Was her neck sore? She kept trying to get up, but I wouldn't let her, telling her that it would be best for her if she stayed in the seat until the ambulance arrived. I finally had her sitting still, her shoulder in my right hand, and the well-manicured fingers of both her hands tightly clasping my left. A man came around the front of the car; finally, another motorist had come over to help. Without looking away from Jane, I told him to call an ambulance.

"I... I already did"

"Good," I said.

"Wi.. Will the police want to... to talk to me?" he asked as if I was in charge.

"Yes."

"Can I... What can do to help?"

"You can help direct traffic around the accident until they get here."

He stepped away and was replaced by a pair of teenage girls who wanted to know what they could do, so I told them to find a bottle of water. Other people were waiting in line to have me tell them what to do, now that they were finally able to move.

I didn't understand it at the time, but this is how most people react to emergencies; they look around for someone who looks like they are not freaking out to tell them what to do, even if it's a nerdy high-school kid. I told all the rest to go back to their cars and wait for the police. Then it was still, and for several minutes, I just knelt in silence beside Jane, half out of her car, glass and steel from the road cutting through my cargo pants and into my knees.

When the Ambulance arrived, they first pulled me away from her, having to pry her fingers away from my hand. They put a brace around her neck, and lifted her onto a gurney.

She was out of school for a week, and when she came back she didn't seek me out. I saw her in the halls sometimes, but she never seemed to know me.

My friends didn't like Karen, and they made it obvious. They didn't like it when I brought her along to restaurants or movies, and they specifically didn't invite her to parties. When I confronted them about it, they told me that she was stuck-up, and that she didn't respect me, and that she was trying to control me, and take me away from my friends. As an adult, looking back, I see that they were wrong. Karen was sweet, pretty, and nice, and she was a good match for me; we were interested in the same things, and we had fun when we were together. But I was 17, and my friends' opinions were the most important thing in my world.

At the insistence of these friends, I called her late on a Friday night, two months after the day that she told me about church camp, and she was hanging out with her own friends on the other side of the small town. I asked her to meet me down by the VFW, down at the river bank where she had told me she loved me. Reluctantly, probably knowing what was coming, she agreed.

When she got there, I was already out of my car, leaning against it with my arms folded, sunglasses on, despite the sun having gone down hours ago. There were no other cars at the riverbank again. She got out, and looked at me over her car.

"What's this about?" She asked me.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. I wasn't sure how.

"I told my friends that I'll probably be back in a few minutes." She said. "I told them that you were probably breaking up with me."

She stared at me for a while. I said only, "I'm sorry."

She shrugged, "I figured it was only a matter of time with how much your friends hate me."

I was staggered. I had no idea that she knew how they felt. She must have registered the shock on my face because she said, "They're not very good at hiding the way they feel."

We stared at one another for a moment longer. She looked so expectant, as if there was something else I was supposed to say or do.

"Take off the sunglasses", she commanded, "I want to see you."

"I can't", I said.

"It's not shameful to cry," she said, getting back into her car. Her assumption was wrong. I wasn't wearing the sunglasses to hide tears from her. I was instead hiding that I wasn't crying. I didn't want her to see how much this didn't make me sad. I had been expecting a lot more. This was the first time I'd ever broken up with someone. I had expected her to be irrational, like girls on television always were.

She started the engine, and pulled out of the space, turning so that her driver's side window was facing me as she pulled away. She slowed

and rolled down the window. "I love you." She said to me for only the second time.

"No you don't", I said, knowing that it was the wrong thing to say as soon as I said it. She frowned, and rolled up her window as she pulled away.

It wasn't until a few years later that I realized, the very thing Karen thought she loved about me was also the thing she, and many girlfriends after her, hated in me.

When I was in college, I drove a cargo van at night to pay for tuition. Every evening at 7pm, I would leave my little Civic at a loading dock in the northern outskirts of Cincinnati, and take an already filled van up to Indianapolis to drop off car transmissions at the various AAMCOs which had ordered them during the day.

While stopped at a light in downtown Indianapolis on a Thursday night. I watched as a small red car, coming from the opposite direction sped through the red-light toward me. It was pouring rain, and visibility was low, but I could clearly see that the car was not going to clear the crossing. It was struck on the driver's side by a grey sedan at full city-speed. I was out of my car, dialing 9-1-1 before the cars had stopped their slow-motion pirouette across the intersection, the ATC trucker's cap keeping the rain off my face.

I quickly told the operator where the accident was, and left him on the line, in my pocket, while I checked the cars. In the sedan, the driver, a middle aged woman, had mild air-bag burns on her face and arms, but seemed uninjured otherwise. She wasn't even stunned. I was about to get into a string of questions to see how she was, when I heard a scream.

The passenger door of the other car flung open and a small form tumbled out. I raced around the cars to find a girl crawling backwards away from the wreck, using her hands to drag herself away from the car, and scrapping her unshorn heels on the pavement as she kicked. Her dark hair was matted with blood and rain, and her clubbing clothes were torn and ruined, but she wasn't concerned for herself. "Tracy's dead!" she yelled at me "Tracy's dead!"

The driver-side door was pinned in place by the sedan, so I leaned into the car from the passenger side. Tracy looked much like her friend, with long dark hair and very little clothing. I couldn't see her face, as she was slumped over the steering wheel. The car smelled of blood and alcohol. I reached over to check her pulse, which was strong despite the lacerations on her arm and the shard of glass embedded in her thigh.

I returned to the girl on the pavement, knowing

that she needed to be calmed. "Tracy is okay," I told her, "She's hurt, and unconscious, but she's okay, alright?" The girl stared at me for a long moment, but finally nodded and calmed down, so I helped her to prop herself against a utility pole a few feet away, partly sheltered from the rain by the awning of a store. I took the handkerchief from my pocket and placed it against her head, where I could see the wound clearly through her hair. She pulled away at first, so I took her hand, and put it over the cloth.

"Hold this here, okay?" I realized I wasn't using an asking tone, "Can you do that?" She nodded, just as someone who had been standing on the sidewalk with an umbrella came over and crouched next to the girl, shielding her further from the downpour.

Another motorist had gone to the sedan and seemed to be assisting the driver there, so I turned back to the little coup, where I saw Tracy was awake, and reaching to remove the shard from her leg.

"Hang on. Hang on." I said as I climbed back into the passenger side of the car, "leave that there, okay?"

"It huuuuurts!" she whined with a drunken slur.

"I know, but you need to leave it until the medics can take a look at it"

She held me with a sad look, as if trying to convince me to give her permission, I didn't give in, "Are you a doctor?" she asked squinting at my soggy hat.

"No," I said, "I'm a cargo driver." She nodded at this, as if it were just as good, and she leaned back into the seat.

Her thigh wasn't bleeding, but blood was flowing freely from the lacerations on her arm. I looked around the interior of the car, and found a stack of fast-food napkins tucked into a pocket of the dash. I grabbed them and moved to press them against her wounds. Seeing what I was doing, she snatched the stack from my hand.

"Don't use all of them, I need those" she slurred, and then split the stack before pressing one half against her arm on her own, the other half of the stack getting covered in the blood that was on her hands, then dropped to the floor.

"Hold that tight." I instructed. She rolled her eyes and gave me a sarcastic thumbs-up with her free hand. I backed myself out of the car just as the first fire-truck pulled up to the scene.

A team of men leapt from the truck, and took over the intersection, rerouting traffic, and tending to the wounded. One mustachioed Fireman was simply standing and surveying the scene, so I approached him. I told him about what happened, and what I had done so far, him nodding and staring at me the whole time. When

I was finished, he continued to stare at me, like he couldn't figure out who I was supposed to be, why I was there. I got that feeling again, and my mind flashed back to that night when Karen held my gaze through my sunglasses. Maybe I should have been more freaked out than I was. Maybe I should have been more concerned for the well-being of the girls I tended too. I wasn't sure. I'm still not sure. He looked at me, and through me, searching for something which was obviously not there. I had to say something.

"So," I said, uncomfortably, "Must be a slow night for the fire department, what with all the rain."

"We're not always looking for fires to put out," he said, and finally turned away.

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*CB Droege is an author and voice actor from the Queen City living in the Millionendorf. His latest book is RapUnsEl and Other Stories. He recently edited Starward Tales: An Anthology of Speculative Legends.*

# Emily Viter

## *The Woman Beneath the Sea*

*Tell me the story of the woman beneath the sea.*

Long ago, when the world was much different, when it thrived on beauty and being alive, a comet ripped through the cosmos and upset the stars. Swept from their natural resting place, the stars took up a cold residence in places that were foreign and unnatural. They were scattered and confused and it took days to drift back to their homes.

It was during this confusion when she fell. Usually, the cosmos does a better job at catching its own, but the comet shot through so unexpectedly the children of the sky had no time to prepare. She fell silently, when the stars were at its brightest, and they couldn't catch her. A protective sleep overtook the star and she dreamt soundly and of light.

She fell slowly, comfortably, and it was near morning when she landed in the sea, somewhere far away from anywhere you've been. The water rippled a little and accepted her without any protest and she lay asleep at the bottom for three days and two nights. On the third night, she awoke and knew a part of her was missing. Her light, the thing that gave her identity as a star, was gone. Trapped at the bottom of the sea, how was her family supposed to find her if her light was gone? How would she belong? Earth was foreign and she had no place here. A new sensation overtook her. It was elastic and thick and moved about her form, settling in every part of her. Panic. It was panic. She held herself tightly. Her light. She needed to find her light. It was her only way home.

The star let the water overtake her. She moved with its movements, swaying gently to calm herself. The fish swam around her, whispering encouragement, giving her advice and counsel. By morning she knew she was going to have to find it herself. And to do that, she'd have to leave the water.

She rose from the sea a woman, the morning light enveloping her in pure whiteness. Women, she reasoned, were regarded as softer. At least she thought so, judging by the interactions she had seen from the sky. Soft and intimidating, the perfect cover for retrieving a lost item.

As she walked along the shore, the sun shone off her adopted curls, igniting sparks and electricity between the folds of her tresses. She walked the path that led from the sea and the wind delighted in blowing through her hair, and only her hair it seemed, and created a rippling blonde tail that mirrored a shooting star's path.

She felt the pull of her light, but didn't know

her way around the world so she followed the only path that led from the water. It led to a small village with one road. The buildings were old with thatched roofs and the people seemed to be made of the same dust that they kicked around, but they were warm and welcoming.

She refused to say anything about herself so the villagers took to calling her Aine, which means brilliance. Stars don't have names for themselves so she relished the idea of someone calling her by name and smiled in approval whenever her name was spoken.

No one knew where she came from, but it wasn't because the adults were too timid to ask. In fact, they were quite direct in the way they talked to the flaxen maiden.

"Such a pretty and delicate thing," they'd chant to her. "It's a wonder someone hasn't carried you off in the night. Tell us, where do you come from? Where do you rest your head, my maiden?" A silent, golden smile, one that would put the brightest candle to shame, would answer their queries. Sometimes she would even answer, "What concern of it is yours?" and tie her question with a bow of laughter, to let them know she was teasing. But she never told. Her telling would be too risky. She knew her light was precious and that many would want it.

She walked through the village every day and returned to the sea at night to rest and tell the fishes of her day. They would encourage her to keep seeking, the light must be somewhere near. And so she'd return to the village every morning and continue her search.

Barefoot, she would meander along the one lane village, stopping to talk to anyone that happened to be out. The marketplace was her favorite. Each stall in the market was visited, each vendor made to feel the most important. Every item was given the utmost attention and care. She never bought anything, but she was freely offered anything she set her eyes on. Flowers and ribbons, herbs, spices, and things made from the earth were at her disposal.

"Surely you'll have use for this?" the vendors asked. Warmly, she would shake her head 'no' and move on.

So many beautiful things, but none of them was what she needed. With every new item that was set before her, an eagerness appeared in her pale eyes. She would handle each and every trinket, running her fingers over the textured surfaces of this and that, scrutinizing and examining. But soon disappointment set in her delicate features. A small sigh would escape and she'd set the item back down, only to replay this act with the next item. She could feel the pull of her light close by, but with each passing day she found she was no closer to locating the thing than when she started. And what was worse, the pull was lessening. Her light was weakening. She didn't know what

would happen once the light died.

The children would sneak up on her during her visits to the marketplace, when she had her back turned. They would place delicate flowers towards the bottom of her locks, their trills of laughter giving them away each time. She would turn quickly and suddenly, causing an uproarious shriek from the crowd of children. She would then beckon them to her, the flowers held in her hair by some unseen force, and she would shake her head, twisting and turning every which way, bending over so her waves would envelop the children and tossing her head back so all the flowers would come loose and rain down upon them. It pleased their parents to see someone act so kindly towards their own and they allowed their questions to remain unanswered.

Like clockwork, Aine would arrive at dawn, when the sun was waking and depart when the sun's energy was spent. No one knew where she went, though many of the adults tried to follow her. But they would always get turned around on the path that led into the woods. The adults gave up quickly. Adults always do. But the children knew.

They followed Aine every night, unbeknownst to their parents. She noticed, of course, but never said a word. She trusted the children more than the adults because they knew no better. Down the dirt path, always at a slow pace, she would stop occasionally and look up, soaking in the evening with her arms outstretched. Fireflies would dance toward her, drawn to the light she gave off. They followed her through the woods, a motley procession of lightning bugs and children. A mile later, the sea would appear with nary a word spoken. Under the water she went, clothes and all, and would disappear beneath the waves. The children would watch at the edge of the water. They would watch for some proof that Aine was there. But when you don't know what you're looking for, it's easy to miss what's clearly in front of you. A dim glow would eventually appear, when the sun was completely gone, but the children were too impatient to see her shine.

Every night, the children would walk back to the village and disagreements would break out over whether they should tell their parents. But who would believe a grown woman living underwater? What evidence did they have?

So the children stayed quiet.

And the light remained lost.

*Now comes the sad part of the tale.*

It happened quickly. After two weeks, the villagers grew tired of her beauty and of the way she shimmered. Their patience thinned as they realized Aine would never give away any of her secrets. And she certainly wasn't going to buy anything. The conversations weren't as friendly and there were no more offers of ribbons and flowers and things made from the earth.

Whispers started to circulate between the market stalls.

"Who does this ragamuffin think she is? Wandering around our village, not buying anything?"

"Aye, it's suspicious. For all we know, she could be stealin' from us. Right from under our noses." Aine heard their whispers and grew dismayed. She knew it would happen sooner or later. People are only captivated for so long.

Still, the tug of her light remained. It had to be somewhere nearby. But Aine had been searching and searching and still nothing had turned up.

The children continued to put flowers in her hair, but the delight was gone from their parent's eyes. They grew distrustful of her company and the whispers continued to grow like surly weeds.

"Why does she hang around our children so much? What could she want with them?"

They were too suspicious to ask Aine directly. Fear is like that. You can never address it as it appears. Instead, fear is given sidelong glances and hushed voices that carry and circle around everyone and everything, which only seeks to fuel the force behind such an entity.

Each day, the villagers threatening voices grew until they were no longer whispers but blatant shouts. Aine stopped going to the market and instead took to pacing the outskirts of the village. The children came to meet with her every day, never saying a word, only watching her pace.

"She's probably placing a hex upon us all," the village women said. "What have we done to deserve such a curse?"

The children ignored their parents' fear. And because of this, Aine decided to trust them with their quest.

"Children," she said to them one day as they gathered around the edge of town. "I'm looking for something." The bravest boy, Martin, stepped forward to speak for the group. He was small for his age, which was twelve, but bold and unafraid.

"We can help you find it. What is it?"

"I'm not sure." Aine hesitated. Should she confess her true nature or would that be revealing too much? "It's an object that belongs to me but I don't know what it looks like. But I can feel its pull nearby."

"How come you don't know what it looks like?" Martin asked.

"I've never actually seen it. It's always been a part of me and I've never lost it."

"How are we supposed to look for it then?" This left Aine stumped.

"I don't know," Aine answered. The words left defeat hanging in the air. Aine melted to the ground. "I fear it may be lost forever." The weight of Aine's task settled fully on her heart as she spoke, the hopelessness taking complete possession. Saltwater tears trickled down her

face and she let them lay there, too tired to wipe them away.

The children huddled close to her, too afraid to reach out and embrace Aine, but their nearness gave her courage.

"We'll find it, Aine," Martin spoke, sureness resonating in his voice.

The children began their search the next morning. Martin, of course, took the lead and everyone fell in line behind him. He instructed everyone to scatter through the field and told Aine to float between the children or tell them if she felt the pull for whatever she was searching for. The adults watched from the village, too cowardly to go out and grab their children, but not too cowardly to talk loud enough for Aine to hear. The almost shouts of "Don't you harm our children, you witch!" and "She's cast a spell on them, I just know it," only made Aine stand taller. They were just words, nothing but words, and she continued with her search.

At the end of the day, with hope almost lost, the children returned to their homes, empty-handed but determined to do better the next day.

But no more searching would be done. The children were looked over in their homes, their eyes checked for a witch's trance, their pockets search for bitter herbs. Nothing was found, but that didn't soothe the parents worry. The children were sent to bed without supper because adults need to take out their anger in some way. Each parent formulated a plan in their minds and with morning came an unspoken agreement to take care of Aine.

They found her walking the path to the village. They bound her with rope and carried her the rest of the way. She didn't protest, but instead gave in to her resignation. A few townspeople had stayed behind to set up the fire. A tall stake centered the pile and it was upon this stake that Aine was tied. Nothing was said at the fire was lit, but their faces gave everything away.

Time slowed, but the flames were greater than time. Aine did nothing except look heavenward. What happens if you kill a star? She did not know. She was so focused on the sky, she missed Martin as he tore through the crowd, something small and glowing in his hand.

He had gone out searching that morning. Out by himself, deep into the woods before the sun had even broken. And he had found it. A little glowing formless piece of light. This had to be it, he told himself. What other perfect thing could need to be found? He had ran as fast as humanly possible but it was too late. By the time he reached the front of the crowd the flames had consumed Aine and then, mysteriously, burned out.

Martin broke through, climbing atop the simmering rubble, despite the crowd's protest, and thrust the light into her charred hands.

"Aine, I found it," he whispered to her

blackened face. "Please live, I found it." Silence took ahold of the crowd. Nothing happened.

"Martin, get down from there. You'll burn yourself!" His mother shouted from the edge of the rubble.

"It's not hot, Mama." He felt around. "It's not even warm." Martin's mother tried to grab her son but he refused to move.

"Fine. Stay out here all night if you want. But she's gone, Martin."

Soon, everyone started dispersing. They walked home slowly, though the satisfied feeling of doing something right was not with them. Sleep did not come easy, and by morning, the village knew their execution had been a mistake.

Martin stayed near Aine, refusing to believe it was over. Night came swiftly, begging to bring ease to his suffering. He fell into an exhaustive sleep.

*But the tale isn't done, is it?*

No.

Eyes blinking. A slow recognition of being alive but in a very different way. The light had taken its time to work through her body. Slowly, Aine felt herself floating and knew she was going home. She welcomed the return of her light, the feelings of wholeness, radiating rays of brightness and energy.

Bits of rubble and debris fell off her body in a shower of misunderstanding and mistake. It was fortunate that some debris landed on Martin's face, waking him.

He watched Aine rise but was too shocked to say anything. He thought he was dreaming. To say anything would destroy everything. It would make Aine still dead. He would wake up. But Aine felt Martin. It was the last thing she felt as a human. She sent down a star's whisper. A simple thank you and she was gone. She took her rightful place back in the sky, shining alone, though a little less radiant because of what had been done to her on earth.

*And she still shines?*

Yes. She still shines.

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*Emily Vater works for the Campbell County Public Library as an Information Services Assistant. She has been married for 7 1/2 years and has a 2-year-old son named Aiden. She's been published previously with Hazardous Press and Timeless Tales Magazine and is currently working on a collection of short stories.*

## *Alumni Author Profile: Ryan Clark*

If anyone could feasibly claim to bleed blue and white, Ryan Clark could. With his numerous publications concerning the University of Kentucky's basketball program. Author or co-author of *Fightin' Words: Kentucky vs. Louisville* (2016), *Tales from the Kentucky Wildcats Locker Room: A Collection of the Greatest Wildcat Stories Ever Told* (2013), *100 Things Wildcats Fans Should Know & Do Before They Die* (2012), and *Game of My Life Kentucky Wildcats: Memorable Stories of Wildcats Basketball* (2012), Clark's passion for the sports team is evident. He obtained his bachelor's degree in editorial journalism at Western Kentucky University, his master's degree in English at Northern Kentucky University, and his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Kentucky. Formerly a Clarion-Ledger and Cincinnati Enquirer journalist and a NKU new media editor and instructor, he currently works as a senior digital content strategist and instructor at Xavier University. Other works by Ryan Clark include the book *Wrestling Reality: The Life and Mind of Chris Kanyon, Wrestling's Gay Superstar* (2011) and a collection of poems entitled *Dusty Roads & Faded Signs* (2009). His short stories, poems, and non-fiction have been featured in several literary journals, including NKU's *Licking River Review*. Along with his wife, daughter, and two cats, Clark lives in Burlington, Kentucky.

## *Amber Whitley*

### *In the Waiting Room*

"He said something to me. You know, before they put him under."

"I'm sure he's just worried."

"He said he hopes he doesn't wake up."

"He didn't mean it."

"I'm not so sure. You didn't see his face. It's been hard, these last few months. He was a proud man. Strong. Now...this."

"I know, remember. I was there. Every day."

"And that means the world to him. He loves you. But he's getting tired of fighting."

"He didn't mean it."

"What if he's right?"

"He's my father."

"And he's my husband. That has nothing to do with it. What's there to live for anymore?"

"Us. His family. The people who love him."

"You don't think I love him?"

"Of course I don't think that."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. It just doesn't seem...right."

"I know. I feel it, too."

"So why are we talking about this?"

"I guess some part of me wonders if he isn't right. It'd be so much easier for him. No more pain. No more machines sucking out his blood and returning it. No more sitting at home alone in that chair. Does that make me a monster?"

"Yes? No? I don't know. I wish you'd stop talking about it. It's not up to us now, what happens to him. The doctors have him."

"You're right. Maybe the waiting's just getting to me."

"Yeah, maybe. I just don't want him to die."

"Neither do I."

"But..."

"But sometimes I wonder if he wouldn't be better off. If we all wouldn't be better off."

"Sometimes, so do I."

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*Amber Whitley earned her MA from NKU in 2010. Her nonfiction has appeared in Breakwater Review, the Licking River Review, and various anthologies. Her fiction can be found under the pseudonym Katherine Wynter.*

## *Talk of Sex and Politics in Central Asia*

It began with a napkin.

The waitress – a pretty, young ethnic Kazakh woman with a bright smile and long black hair – brought it over and sat it next to me, gesturing to three middle-aged men sitting at a booth in the corner, smoke curling around their heads. They waved.

I looked questioningly over at my companions, Jackie and Sue. Why would someone send me a note? Sure, three female Americans eating at a restaurant in Central Asia were bound to stand out, but Sue was definitely the prettiest of the three of us: a tall, lean yoga instructor with close-cropped blonde hair. Overtures of romantic love or invites to join the table should have been addressed toward her; however, I felt flattered that the note was for me. I could feel my cheeks getting flushed as Sue and Jackie gestured for me to open it. Surprisingly, it was written in English.

"Your hat is on the floor," it said.

Oh. I looked over and it was true: my hat had fallen on the floor. So much for romance.

Still, it was interesting so we wrote back in Russian, "Thanks and next time we'll look after your hat."

The restaurant was about half full of ethnic Slavs and Turks sampling all the niceties of American/Kazakh cuisine only available at the Atrium, a two-story building that housed the biggest "Supermarket" in the area and was one of the few places that we could go to get some European/American food. The supermarket featured mostly local food sold in aisle format – no elbowing through mobs of Soviet-Era trained women still fearful that the food supply would run out any minute – complete with check-out lanes and almost-smiling cashiers. If only they also sold sliced bread and peanut butter, it would have been perfect. But the restaurant, located opposite a very techno bowling alley, was a great place to get a huge cheeseburger, French fries, and the closest thing to a chocolate shake for a few thousand miles.

Of course, the prices were also astronomical, which explained the scarcity of local custom. Ten bucks back home wasn't unreasonable for a nice dinner out, but when I lived off of a stipend of a hundred dollars a month, the expense was a rare luxury. Many local families lived off of less.

Gruff laughter erupted across the restaurant as the three guys read our note. We had just finished eating, and when they gestured at us to join them the decision was an easy one. Three guys, three girls, was it fate or coincidence? For the next hour, Serik, Dmitri and Sasha were our gracious hosts.

"Will you drink vodka?" Sasha asked after we were settled: Sue by Serik and Dmitriy and Jackie

and I next to Sasha. It was a long booth nestled in a dark corner of the restaurant, granting the illusion of privacy.

"Of course," Sue answered for us.

"Girl," Sasha shouted, gesturing for the waitress. She looked old enough to be his daughter, but I had gotten hardened to the way locals talked to waitresses. Sasha wasted no time once she reached our dark nook. "Bring a bottle of pepper vodka and some juice. Quickly."

She turned and left to fill the order, her expression carefully blank. I felt sorry for her but knew better than to cause a scene. In my years as a waitress, I certainly wouldn't have tolerated that from a customer. But it wasn't my place to say anything, or so I believed.

In a matter of minutes, the waitress returned with the drinks and several more glasses, placing them carefully around the table.

"Davai," Dmitriy said from across the table, opening the bottle and pouring everyone a shot. "Let's drink to you girls and safe sex!"

"To safe sex," we echoed, glasses clinking.

Sue downed her shot but Jackie and I only drank half.

"Drink to the end," Sasha urged, his duty as one of our hosts to bully us into drinking more.

I thought of the toast to safe sex and the danger of being drunk in a foreign country where I had few people to call for help or who would come looking and chugged the rest of the shot. I knew better than to think he would relent.

The vodka was smooth, going down with a slight burn and leaving a soft aftertaste of pepper. They had clearly bought the expensive stuff: the average vodka felt like drinking gasoline and chasing it with a lit match. A sip of juice added a hint of sweetness to balance it out. Definitely the best vodka I had drank, though the bottle I'd shared with some friends named "Black Death Vodka" and bearing a skull and crossbones on the label won the award for most amusing and accurately labeled bottle.

"I like George W. Bush," Serik randomly asserted, his eyes noting our reactions.

The comment surprised me, as I wasn't used to hearing Muslims proclaim for Bush. I was, however, used to facing questions about my government's decisions, especially its tendency toward violence, and supporters of the then-current regime were few. Most of my local friends and coworkers had been equally astonished to realize that not all Americans liked Bush, just like it eluded their comprehension that an American could in fact dislike Brittany Spears. We were Americans, right? Didn't we all believe the same things and like the same people?

"Why?" Jackie questioned.

"He is a good leader. Strong. Killing terrorists, this is a necessary thing," Sasha and Dmitri

grunted their assent as they poured another round of shots. "We Kazakhs are a peaceful people. We don't hurt anybody. We don't allow people like that to come live here."

"The war is not to keep the country safe," I countered, feeling a need to defend my beliefs. "It is for oil. For money. Al-Qaeda attacked the US, not Saddam."

"No, this is not true. The US doesn't control the oil, the Arabs do. Saddam is an evil man."

"Davai, let's drink to peace," Dmitri interrupted, raising his glass and effectively silencing the debate.

"To peace."

Sasha called the waitress over again and ordered something else, the only intelligible words were "smoke" and "Cuban". I watched anxiously as the waitress returned with a half dozen Cuban cigars, though skinny like cigarettes. I took another long look at our hosts. They had to be in their late 30s and wore impeccably cleaned and maintained business suits while we stuck out in jeans and sweaters. Ethnic Kazakhs were moving up the ladder in business and government across Kazakhstan, and these men seemed to be enjoying that new prosperity. That they were business men of some sort was clear, as was the fact that they obviously had money. I didn't want to know how much the Cubans cost.

"Will you smoke with us?" Sasha asked, and Jackie, Sue and I exchanged brief glances before consenting. Absent the nicotine and filter on traditional cigarettes, I figured one wouldn't hurt. And I didn't want to let my hosts down. At least, those sounded like good enough excuses at the time.

I took a long pull on the cigarette, catching the musky taste of the smoke in my mouth before exhaling. The flavor was rich, the smoke smooth, and I began to feel the effects almost immediately. Our waitress provided a small tray and I knocked the ashes off delicately.

Had someone listened in on the table for the next hour, only able to hear the sound of the glasses but nothing of the conversation, he or she would have suspected that a breeze blew through the area every few minutes, evidenced by the clinking of glass wind chimes. And that's how it felt drinking, a new shot every five or ten minutes always accompanied by a toast and the lighthearted ring of glass on glass contact as regular as a summer breeze blowing across my porch back home.

Somehow, we got on the topic of lesbianism as a natural successor to politics.

"Is it true that there are lesbians in America?" Serik asked, his eyes half fearful and half hopeful of the answer.

"Yes," Sue answered. "Of course, there are."

The guys shook their heads in disbelief, somehow not dislodging the line of ash that had already claimed a portion of their Cuban cigar.

Serik's expression returned to one of deep, drunken contemplation. "Two women together I think is not natural. These women are sick. They have an illness."

"No, it is not an illness," I protested.

"Yes, it is" Dmitri responded from across the table, voice adamant.

"I could be a lesbian," Sue suggested.

They stared at us speechless, unable for a moment to form words as I could almost read the debate flashing across their minds. Were we lesbians? Was it contagious? Should they leave? Finally, Serik stammered a quick denial. "No, it's not true."

"How do you know?"

"I know. You are not a lesbian." At least Serik stood by his guns, not backing down from the heat.

Dmitri jumped in, leaning forward on the table in excitement. "Yes. It is an illness. It goes against nature for two women to have sex. A man and a woman, that is how it should be."

"Why?"

"Women need men to protect them, to build them a home and provide for them. How will a woman be safe with another woman?"

"Women can take care of themselves," I countered, gesturing to include Jackie and Sue in that group. "We are here without husbands or men to protect us and we live just fine."

"You are not fine," Sasha protested, one arm draped casually behind me on the back of the seat, his tone similar to what one would use to address a particularly slow child who just didn't understand. "Kazakhstan is dangerous for a woman alone, especially at night. There are dogs roaming the streets, some with only two legs. You need a man to protect you, to make decisions for you."

"We are quite capable of thinking on our own," Jackie said. "Women can make their own choices and decisions. They don't need someone else to do it for them. If they want to be lesbians, they can be lesbians. If they don't want to get married, they don't get married. That simple."

Serik leaned across the table and I thought for a moment that he was going to take Jackie's hand. "No. A woman's place is serving her husband. Obeying her husband. She should not make decisions on her own. It is a shame to the husband if his wife must work. It means he is not a man. The wife's place is home."

By this point the conversation had been lubricated with a couple more shots and the men grew more and more intense by the moment, their deep desire to right the wrongs of our thinking as evident as the line of ash still clinging

to the remainder of the cigar. How did they keep it from falling off? I waited anxiously for them to knock their ashes on the tray but to no avail. They just hung there in blatant defiance of gravity.

"I obey no man."

Dmitri grabbed Sue's hand and held it to his heart. "Marry us," he proposed on behalf of his friends.

"We have money. You can become Kazakh citizens, live here with us. Then you won't have to go home," Sasha was quick to add, his arm tightening around my shoulder. I wanted to squirm.

"Yes. Please. We will fly you home once a year to see your family. That is enough, I think."

It was difficult to tell whether they were joking or serious, but regardless I didn't want to become any man's second or third wife. Jackie and Sue were thinking something similar I could tell; it was getting time for us to make our exit.

"Thank you for the offer, but we can't," Jackie said, taking the lead. "Our family back home would miss us too much."

"Yes, my mother would be very upset," I added truthfully.

"Davai, girls. We will take good care of you."

Now each one of them had one of our hands. Sasha was stroking mine lightly, as though illustrating how gentle he could be. They made moon faces at us, expressions pouty and needy, eyes bloodshot from the alcohol. I tried to pull my hand away but he just held on tighter. I knew that he would let go eventually, after enough protests. At least I hoped so.

"No, we can't."

"Well then, at least let us buy your friend Sue," Dmitri offered in way of compromise.

Sue laughed. "You don't have enough money."

"Come, please," Dmitri continued, not backing down. Only this time he addressed Jackie and myself. As though we had the right or means of selling our friend. "I'll give you two thousand dollars for her."

"No, she's not for sale," I protested as Jackie began sliding out of the seat. "Thank you for the vodka and the company, but it's late and we must be going."

Sue slid out of the seat, her hand still in Dmitri's possession. He looked like a drunk love-sick puppy. "Please," he protested a final time. "I'll take good care of her. It's a good offer."

"No, we can't," Jackie said, finally shaking off Serik's hand. "Thank you for everything."

"Na zdovye," Dmitri said, finally letting go of Sue but not before kissing her hand beseechingly.

She laughed and said "Dosvedaniya."

## *Alumni Author Profile: R. L. Barth*

R. L. Barth is a 1973 (then Northern Kentucky State College) graduate and completed a Master of Arts in 1980 at Stanford University, where he was a Stegner Fellow in Poetry. Barth also won the first ever Bill Byron Award from NKU. In the 1980's to the early 2000's Barth was a publisher to over 200 books of poetry from various authors. In 1999, he edited Yvor Winters' collection of poems for Ohio University Press. Then in 2000, he published *The Selected Letters of Yvor Winters* and *The Selected Poems of Janet Lewis*.

Barth was a Marine Patrol Leader in the First Reconnaissance Battalion in Vietnam. Today he is a poet who writes in classical satire style about the reality of war. In his most recent collection, *Deeply Dug In*, he writes about Vietnam.

Barth is currently working on a series of poems about Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam. He currently resides in Edgewood, KY.

# Mary Anne Reese

## *Down Deep*

On summer afternoons, I walked  
down to the docks, wrapped twine  
around raw chicken necks  
and dangled them like marionettes  
into Spa Creek. I wiped the grime  
on denim shorts and sat.

Worn planks left splinters  
in my thighs. Oyster boats passed;  
sometimes the captains waved.  
The sunlight turned my long hair white,  
my forehead red. I tasted salt.

When a string grew taut, I plunged  
my net down deep and jerked it up.  
Blue crab pincers clung to bones,  
tore flesh, devoured any part  
that dared be soft. To surface  
such a brutal feast felt like betrayal.

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Mary Anne Reese earned her MA in English from NKU in 2012. She has two poetry chapbooks, *"Raised by Water"* and *"Down Deep,"* both from Finishing Line Press. When she isn't writing, she practices law, swims, and watches for hawks.

*Where I Am From\**

I am from washing  
my sari in a bucket  
before dawn,  
from brushing  
my teeth with ash.  
I am from incense  
and curry wafting  
through our halls,  
from dreams  
of chocolate  
and ice cream.  
I am from tracing  
the trenches  
between a child's ribs,  
from kissing nubs  
where fingers used  
to be. I am from hours  
waiting on this mat  
before a cross.  
You used to talk  
to me, but not  
in fifty years. I fear  
you do not want  
me anymore. I am  
from bare feet,  
naked desire.

*\*Teresa of Kolkata (1910-1997)*

# Patrick McGee

## The Castaway

We are in the hands of the Gods, Elias thought.

Standing in the aft bulkhead of the *Icarus*, he closed his gloved hands into fists and flexed them. His pulse quickened and his face flushed. There was nothing like the experience of a salvage op. He had been on thousands, but right before each one it always felt like his first.

"How did you lose your last salvage mate?" the greenhorn that had been paired with him asked.

"Pay attention to what you're doing," Elias said, gravel in his words. He motioned to the kid's gear he had been fiddling with longer than necessary.

"My name's Cole," the greenhorn said, scrunching his nose as he looked down at his shielding cowl and messed with its straps. "I've told you that before."

"Whatever." Elias didn't need to remember the kid's name. In fact, he had tried hard not to.

The cabin shuddered. The ship juked left then right, and then clanged like a giant bell, probably from a small piece of debris from the drifting destroyer, *Hawthorne*. Elias steadied himself on the scorching bulkhead with one hand. He grabbed the kid with his other so he wouldn't fall flat on his face.

The pilots would get them to the drop off point for their salvage job. They had to. The pitting on the outside of the *Icarus* didn't look near as bad as some ships Elias had been assigned to. It was too early for this one to break apart.

"They say you can see Graham's Maelstrom out there," the greenhorn said after steadying himself, his blue eyes wide, Elias's inattention seemingly forgotten. The boy wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Is it true?" He had also forgotten about the cowl he hadn't yet properly secured.

"Hmmm." Damn kid was about as good at focusing as the fucking pilots steering this rust bucket. He had already asked about the damn storm three times since they moved into the aft cargo bay. The kid would need a damn good spread of luck if he were to get through his first salvage op alive.

Elias ignored the question and cinched the kid's shielding cowl tight across his shoulders. His fingers ached from the effort. The straps weren't rotted too bad. *It better hold for this op*, he thought. Elias didn't need to lose another salvage mate so soon after he had lost Marshal. Marshal was a good man, but he had made a mistake. Lost a day's quota on that one. Elias had lost his

spot on the *Daedalus*, too. Now, he was stuck with this rookie on a new ship. A worse ship.

*We are in the hands of the Gods*, Elias thought.

"They say Graham's is as blue as—" Elias backhanded the kid. Not too hard, but just enough to get him to focus on the job at hand. It felt good. The boy grimaced and rubbed his cheek. Any hint of a smile on his pudgy white face was gone, the skin pulsing red as he turned back to Elias.

"What...whatcha do that for?"

"This isn't a sight-seeing cruise and it ain't no kitchen," Elias said, the stench of fabricated cooking oil still ripe on the boy. "Repeat back what I told ya about what to do once that door opens." Elias motioned to the bulkhead door they would squeeze through once the ship was a thousand meters away from the drifting *Hawthorne*. Twelve pairs of men in full gear strung out in front of them like a bunch of married couples.

"Follow your lead," the kid said, his voice wavering as he rubbed his face. "You'll signal when to use my propulsion and what direction."

"Why?"

The boy scratched his head. "Because we only have enough for the trip out. We have to hitch a ride back on the *scrub*."

Elias and every member of the salvage crew called the automated extraction units *scrubs* since they would come in after their scans and scrub away all the usable material. Elias had seen them cut into hulls with surgical precision on nearly every op, allowing each team to gather up the goods and pack them into containers. The scrubs were also their ride back to the *Icarus*.

Supplies were also lean. When were they not? Elias was used to only getting what he needed, nothing more. Sometimes, a whole lot less. That included scrounging salvage mates from wherever they could get them when the crew thinned deep into a salvage run. Kitchen staff, cleaning crews, whatever. The 105<sup>th</sup> Salvage Division would test Elias and every other crew by stretching their supplies out for another few days until the end of the run. The quartermaster was a real son of a bitch, and thought it good motivation to hold back a little. The Gods damn woman only gave them enough juice to get out to the *Hawthorne*; not enough to get back. Something about the scrubs using fuel more efficiently.

"And what else?" Elias cocked an eyebrow at the kid, and went back to checking the rest of his gray shielding suit while the kid sweated out the answer. *No visibly broken seals. Jets intact. Propulsion tank secure. Gravity gloves and boots charged. At least he put the fucking thing on right.* It wasn't in the best of shape, but it would do. If the kid lived long enough, he would eventually earn enough to get a better one once they regrouped

with the main fleet.

"You'll...you'll tell me when to engage my gravity wells and the scanning net?" The kid unconsciously lowered a hand until it hovered over each sensor on his belt as if he was checking with Elias to see if he had gotten it right.

Elias backhanded the boy across his other cheek, harder this time. "The green one comes first and the red one is for the scanning net," Elias reminded him. "Got it?"

The kid leaned away from Elias and nodded frantically.

"If you press the wrong one at the wrong time, that means wasted time and missed quota. At least those things, maybe worse." Elias detached his plasma torch from its magnetic harness and tested it. It lit up the dimly lit cabin, splashing a blue glow across the kid's face. "So, focus now." Elias put out the torch and stuck it back to his belt.

"Thirty seconds to zone," a static voice echoed through the aft cabin. Lights winked on inside the cramped space, spraying red onto the walls and the cooling tubes and the men. Steam rolling off the bulkhead was visible in the crimson glow.

"Get your helmet on," Elias said, checking the carbon-polymer harness that would keep the kid and him together. He grabbed his helmet attached to his belt by a thin cable dangling down to his knees. He put it on and slid the locking bolt into place. Once he heard the hiss of oxygen and smelled the rust-tinged air, he knew he was ready.

The kid took another ten seconds to secure his helmet. Elias waited for him to finish. Elias flipped the COM toggle on his belt to *on*. He motioned for the boy to do the same.

"Do ya read me?"

"Yes."

The familiar clunk of machinery at Elias's feet shook the cabin. The bulkhead door cracked open and the aft cabin's gravity wells disengaged. Elias's stomach flipped a little as his feet lost contact with the floor, but he kept his eyes focused on the blue light washing into the cabin. He swallowed the buildup of saliva in his mouth and took a deep breath.

Hopefully the boy would do the same and not throw up in his suit. He looked a bit green, but hadn't lost it yet.

Each team drifted through the door into space, jets of air sprouting on their propulsion belts like blossoms of flowers. They spread apart after exiting the *Icarus*. They positioned themselves for the approach to their assigned areas where they would scan the ruined hulk of scrap metal hovering just outside of Graham's Maelstrom.

Fifty thousand metric tons of ship perched itself at the edge of the maelstrom's gravitational

pull. It was dangerous to approach it, but it couldn't be ignored during a time of war. Elias knew from experience that rogue scavengers wouldn't have had enough time to pick the ship completely clean of working electronics, fuel cells, ammunition, and other resources. The Armada needed every scrap of resource it could get its hands on. Salvage ships like the *Icarus* trailed the main fleet, picking the bones clean and getting the goods to courier ships that would speed them toward the front lines.

Elias and his new salvage mate reached the cargo door after the last pair in front of them fanned out from the ship.

*We are in the hands of the Gods*, Elias thought as he turned to the kid.

"Do as I told ya," Elias said.

Elias engaged the jets on his belt and motioned for the kid to do the same. Elias drifted towards the starboard side of the *Hawthorne*, the flexible cable that joined them ratcheting out as he distanced himself from his partner. Out of the corner of his viewscreen, he saw the greenhorn drifting to port.

Elias smiled. *Well, he done the first thing right.*

The kid gasped through Elias's comms, but Elias knew it wasn't from the slowly corkscrewing *Hawthorne*. Graham's Maelstrom framed the dead ship, its bright blue and white tentacles sprouting out behind the destroyer like a giant squid about to swallow its prey. The storm's energy and dust-hazed outline writhed as the core of the storm spun slowly out of sight. As long as each salvage team and the *Icarus* kept the *Hawthorne* in between them and the maelstrom, its gravity well wouldn't faze them. Once attached to the ship, as long as they were careful, men could scamper across the hull regardless of which side they were on.

The maelstrom was swallowed up by the shadowy *Hawthorne* as Elias and the kid closed the distance. Elias motioned for the boy to maneuver underneath some floating debris from the dead ship a few times, but they were never in any real danger. After a few minutes, they managed to reach the hull of the ship without the kid screwing anything up.

"Now," Elias said, simultaneously thumbing the green sensor on his belt. His teeth strummed and a buzzing filled his ears. His hands and feet grew heavy as they drifted towards the baking skin of the *Hawthorne*. The maelstrom had heated up the hull, but now it was cooling in its own shadow as it spun—thermal currents distorting the surface. Elias's suit was designed to take the kind of heat the storm gave off at this distance, but only for a short time.

A quick glance to port told Elias that the kid had pressed the right sensor and clung to the

ship fifty or so meters from him. *Not bad.* Their propulsion fuel would be nothing but fumes now.

Elias ran through a few quick calculations in his head based on the rate he had seen the ship spinning. He realized they would move from cold to hot and back to shadow fast enough so there wouldn't be any permanent damage. Elias could handle being sick for a few days as long as he was ready for the next job and this one paid off.

"Ready?"

"Yes," the kid said, his words unsteady.

Elias pivoted on the toes of his boots, the pitch and intensity of the energy in his suit ebbing as it adjusted the magnetic pull with his movement. The kid was already facing him. A few pairs of men were still moving above them in a strange looking sort of dance, their tethers like long umbilical cords that kept them reliant on one another. Some of the teams slipped inside the *Hawthorne* through breaches in its hull—melted slag formed around the edges like clotted gray blood. Their assignments were to scan the insides for any working equipment or other resources.

Less dangerous than Elias's assignment.

*We are in the hands of the Gods,* Elias thought again.

"The red one next," Elias said. "On my mark. Three. Two. One. Mark." Elias pressed the red sensor on his belt. The kid followed his lead. Energy surged through Elias's suit, the buzz in his ears intensifying. The tether connecting him with the kid lit up in brilliant white. The energized cable flattened, stretching out until it shot out to the left and right perpendicular to the length of the cable, creating a thin canvass that dropped to the hull. The net used the same gravity mechanism as their suits, and matched the curve of the *Hawthorne*. It adhered to the ship's hull fifty by fifty meters square.

Another surge through Elias's suit. Amber light shot out from Elias and the kid across the net. The waves of energy connected in the middle, and winked out after a few seconds.

"Nothin'," Elias said, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "Time to move on to the next grid assignment." There was a chance that all the shielding arrays had been fried from the assault or the ship's crew had destroyed their cargo and systems before they died or abandoned ship.

Elias had heard it had been one hell of a fight.

"You never told me what happened to your last partner," the kid piped in after a few more scans. He was trying, Elias had to give him that.

"You're right," Elias said. "I never told ya and I don't plan to. All ya need to focus on is your job. So, no stories about ma or pa or whatever farm

ya came from off one of the Lee Shore planets. Focus. On. The job."

"How did you know I—."

"Focus."

The kid shut his trap and didn't mutter another word. Elias had seen enough greenhorns to know where the kid had come from. Looking for adventure or some shit like that. Not Elias. Adventure was for the idealistic sort, not pragmatic men.

After an hour or so, they had completed half a dozen more scans. The length of the topmost tentacles of Graham's Maelstrom were fully visible now, the top rim of its core cresting like a sunrise on one of the Lee Shore planets.

*It's gonna get hot soon.* Elias's view screen darkened from the flow of radiation from the maelstrom's core peaking on the steel horizon.

Elias pivoted again as the core rose on the steel skyline of the *Hawthorne*. The carbon-polymer cable shot out and created its scanning net. The heat inside Elias's suit swelled, drops of sweat already forming on his forehead inside his helmet. The humming in his ears increased as his suit's cooling system compensated for the increase in temperature.

The net adhered to the ship's seared skin. Elias had to look more closely at the net as energy arced across it due to the light from the maelstrom. For a few seconds the net glowed steadily and then began to contract and fade. Elias waited for the scan to complete so they could move on.

Instead, the amber glow contracted until it reached a section of the hull a dozen or so meters wide and half a dozen long. The glow intensified and didn't dissipate. It was the brightest scan Elias had ever seen.

"Ya seeing what I'm seeing?" Elias said.

"Well, it's still coming across gold out there in the middle, right?" the kid said.

"You're damn straight it is," Elias said. "And not just gold. It's real bright. Real bright." After all this time, could he get this lucky? A signal that strong could mean a fully intact shielding array. It could mean a jump up the ladder to a better ship that would normally take him years.

The whirl of the cooling unit in Elias's suit rose, the core of the maelstrom fully visible. Brilliant white and blue light washed over the hull as Elias's body lifted towards the maelstrom. He could hear and feel his suit working hard to compensate for the increase in gravity trying to wrench his body away from the *Hawthorne*. He crouched down closer to the hull, the warmth flowing through his shielding gloves.

"Wow!" Cole said. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Now's not the time to stargaze. Retract your scanning net on my mark so we can call in the

scrubs to get this salvage going. You ready?" No response. "Kid!"

"Yes...yes, I'm ready," the kid said, his words distant, unfocused.

"On my mark. Three. Two. One. Mark." Elias thumbed the red button again, the scanning net on his side retracting. The kid's portion of the scanning net was still fully deployed, which Elias thought odd. It lifted away from the hull like a wayward spider web drifting in the breeze.

"Oh my Gods!" the kid screamed. Elias saw the boy slipping away from the *Hawthorne* in the brilliant light, fiddling with his belt frantically trying to get the gravity unit to engage.

*Pressed the wrong damn sensor is what he did.*

It was too late. The maelstrom's gravity well was too powerful for the suit to manage. The boy tried to use his propulsion jets, sporadic puffs coming out of the nozzles on his belt until they winked out completely.

"Help me!" The scanning net retracted and the cable stretched out taut, pulling Elias's midsection.

*Gods damn it. I told him to focus.*

The cable lifted Elias out of his crouch, one of his hands peeling off the hull. The heat of the maelstrom beat down on him. Elias could try and pull the kid to safety, but it would be risky. One mistake and he could drift away just like that idiot. Trying to save him meant time. Time for another crew to come along and stake their claim. Time that would be taken away from gathering the salvage. Time that meant the difference between living and dying.

Elias's other hand was pulled free by the maelstrom.

*We are in the hands of the Gods*, Marshal—Elias's last salvage mate—had said before he was cut loose. *We are in the hands of the Gods*. Marshal's last words stuck with Elias like the smell of grease that had taken up permanent residence in his nose. Even Marshal understood that every man weighed the risks against their life in this kind of work. You risk another man's life, you could forfeit your own.

Elias thought he saw Marshal smile in those final moments.

Elias unhitched the plasma torch from his magnetic belt, his arm stretching out toward the maelstrom. It took some effort to bring the torch closer to the harness. He felt his feet lift, the maelstrom's gravity well forcing him to the tips of his toes.

*Not much time now.*

"What are you doing? Help me! Please, help me! You can't let—"

Elias flipped his comms off, a lump forming in his throat. He swallowed hard and looked down at the gray hull of the *Hawthorne*.

*We are in the hands of the Gods*, he thought once more.

Elias's face hardened. He looked back to his drifting salvage mate.

He flicked on his plasma torch and sliced through the carbon-polymer tether in one steady motion. Elias's feet dropped back down to the *Hawthorne*.

Cole drifted through the ether, shadowed against the majesty of Graham's Maelstrom. His arms and legs flailed like a castaway treading water in the middle of the sea. His body formed a dark pupil in the center of the storm.

Elias imagined the maelstrom was the Earth's sun, shining down on a great ocean. He saw the multitudes, Gods-omnipresent. The firmament of waters were heaved by the blue colossal orb. He saw the Gods' feet upon the treadle of the loom.

*We are in the hands of the Gods*, Elias thought as he turned back towards the hull of the *Hawthorne*. He pressed the sensor that called in his scrub unit, and made his way to the spot marked by their last scan.

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Patrick McGee is a graduate of Northern Kentucky University earning an MA in English and a BA in Political Science. His work has previously appeared in the *Roanoke Review*, *The Licking River Review*, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, *Vayavya*, and the *Journal of Kentucky Studies*. He lives in Florence, Kentucky, with his wife, two kids, a dog named Boomer, and the three cats that torment him.

## Ryan Kriebiehl

### *I Used to Be in the Practice of Dreaming*

I used to be in the practice of dreaming, of being lost in thought, lost from myself and the time clocks and expectations. I'd take vacations in my mind while I drove my car on highways that stretched on like rubber bands pulled around the world. When I chose to be a recluse in the dish room of the pizza shop, my thoughts would drift away with the soap bubbles as I scrubbed the mountains of pans in endless, automatic circles. I dreamt of worlds beyond mirror panes, lands that worked under the order of strange sciences, realities belonging only to the formation of suds in the sink. But I dreamed less now. Behind my eyes now were the graphics that littered the television screen when Mom watched the nightly news. The thin crawl that casually informed viewers about humanity's rapid descent listed the (unexaggerated) hundreds of submitted job applications that were rejected or went completely ignored. The "Upcoming Stories" anticipated the days in which my standards for a career search will drop even further. There was a countdown time in the upper righthand corner ticking away the months until my behemoth student loan payments would begin. And in the center of my attention screamed the headline in all capital letters, "EVERYONE IS WATCHING YOU BURN."

Ohio winters did little for the bird caged in my chest who raged against the bars desperate for the warm air and a strong tailwind. When it snowed, the hills that created the valleys and winding rivers looked pleasant; almost picturesque, but this winter had been dry. The land was a convention of bald men as the ground rippled with brown, bulbous lumps hard with frozen mud and stubbly dead grass.

If you have been raised in the same location, schooled there, played there, grown there, learned there, and remained unmoving there for sixteen years, then anyone would tell you that you *belonged* there. But that's the thought that made me grip the steering wheel on my way to work that morning like a python's neck. The venom in the notion that I belonged to something as ugly, as barren, as this desaturated land of broken dreams was enough to have me frothing at the mouth. Then, like a prod with the devil's pitchfork, a white Dodge swerved in to cut me off at the entrance ramp to the interstate, leaving a cloud of go-fuck-yourself smoke to choke out my windshield. I stomped on the brake pedal with so much force that the squeal of the tires

matched the pitch of my caged bird screaming "I quit!" I steered the car into the shoulder and yanked on the emergency brake before I had even released the gas. With gritted teeth, I pounded the words into the middle of my steering wheel to the tune of "Fuck this! Fuck this!" The horn of the car was a siren for my frustration to the trees and uncaring cars passing me on the ramp. Each punch pushed the caged bird further and further up my throat, squeezing its way through muscles in my esophagus that had worked so hard the last few months to keep any rising contents down, until finally it bursted out of my throat and through the screen that tormented me with crawls and countdowns and self-judgements, leaving it shattered like teeth.

I slumped back into my seat, my chest rising and sinking further than it had before, now empty. There were cars pattering by, wind buffeting my windows, and music *thwump*'ing in the distance, yet there was silence. I exhaled and my lungs didn't shake. I inhaled to capacity. I unclipped my seatbelt just to feel nothing constricting me because right then I felt unrestrained. I breathed in again and exhaled a list of *nots*. I did not want to wash dishes. I did not want to wait tables. I did not want to live in Ohio. I did not want to work at a PR firm. I did not want to write. I did not want to dream. I did not want to do anything I had been doing or trying to do for the past five years. I wanted to do something absurd and unpredictable to even myself. *I want to move to Asia.*

Asia. The place of mist and mountains and rice. The place that was the farthest possible place from this goddamn entrance ramp. The place that was so unthinkable far away that my dish suds fantasies never even tickle the possibility, yet it pinged in my mind so unprovoked that it seemed as if it had only been buried under a fine coat of dust this whole time. My stomach levitated at the idea because no one, not even me, would expect me to do something so ridiculous.

But it was Asia, and I was just a midwestern kid with a car, bills, and a career to start. The self-deflation I had practiced so well brought me back down to my car seat. Slowly, I clipped myself in again and merged onto the highway.

It was a snowflake moment, my friend at the restaurant told me later that day. She was a free-spirited woman who did yoga instead of drank coffee and addressed me as "my friend". She told me that people are too busy making their ways here and there in their hurried rushes that they never pay the snow any mind. Some see it as a nuisance more than anything. They bow their heads, shield their eyes, and war against the winds to get to whichever important place they were getting off to today, and when they get to

where they're going they brush off the crusted-up ice without even a thought. "I don't do that," she told me. "Whenever there is snow, I stop right there in the middle of wherever I am, and I stick out my tongue. When that snowflake hits your tongue, you can feel it's chill, but only for a moment—a 'snowflake moment'—because by the time you try to focus on it, the chill is gone and you've missed it. And I don't know if you've noticed, but there isn't a whole lot of snow coming down these days," she said, as well as I can remember. "Don't miss it."

This is the final boarding call for Seoul to Dallas, Texas. Please, will all guests make their way to gate 11 for boarding."

I used to be in the practice of dreaming, of wishing upon stars, of whispering "what-if's" into my pillow at night. For the past two years, I had not dreamed. Stars had passed by my window unwished. My pillow grew lonely. And I hadn't prayed for another snowfall.

As I handed my ticket to the gate attendant, I felt a tip as if I was standing on the deck of a ship, like what one feels as they begin to sober from a long and deep slumber. I pressed my mind to remember everything I could before they escaped me like dreams always do. I remembered temples tucked away in mountain nooks, glassy waters that hide nothing below them, beaches made of obsidian pebbles, food that could warm or wriggle your insides, land that rippled and jutted and towered to the clouds. I know that these words pay no tribute to the essence of Asia, but I fear I would only serve the beauty of this continent an injustice if I tried any longer.

"Your seat is 21A, sir."

"Thank you."

I used to be in the practice of dreaming, and, as I sit awake in the bed of my mother's basement, I am trying to find a way to get back in the habit.

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*Ryan Krebiehl graduated from Northern Kentucky University in December of 2014 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a concentration in creative writing. He spent the next two years teaching kindergarten English in the neon metropolis of Seoul, South Korea. While abroad, Ryan fell in love with the wonders of Asia and plans to use his experiences to shape his writing.*

*Nikki Moore*

***My Sister's Bones***

The back yard looks like her face.  
Flat surfaces  
consistent colors  
green with envy.  
Her eyes were  
mud, and she stared  
whether she loved you  
or hated  
you.

I could never catch her when she ran.  
Two years too small  
and the other kids  
were bigger  
too.  
Sometimes the wind will whisper her  
name.  
I wonder if it's  
mocking  
laughing  
imitating how I used to  
stumble after her,  
calling,  
unable to fit my feet properly  
in her hand-me-down shoes.

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## ***Borders***

We're in the middle of  
somewhere – landlocked  
greens in gradients vining along  
the edges.

When the end of the earth  
was tangible  
toes hanging from the  
cusp of crust and then  
outward just air  
just space  
just something else,  
I would have taken you somewhere.  
If my lungs weren't drowned  
in ivy and my feet  
weren't full of sand.  
If my moral compass  
pointed north I'd drive  
you to Lake Huron and  
trace your veins,  
tiny blue rivers, while  
we watched the water  
amble somewhere.

But I've no sense of  
direction and you can't  
speak, and we are  
still landlocked, hovering  
at the end  
of the earth.

### *Gravity of Her*

her body pulled in the tides  
tugging like a child's hands at  
the hem of her skirt  
sea gushing against her bones

she looked at the moon and saw  
home  
waning half, and she'd fit well  
filling in the dark of the unlit side  
she was good at that

the strongest thing you'll never see

# Stephanie Knipper

## Modeling Life

The school steps are slick marble with a worn valley in the center. I keep to the side as I climb to the third floor, fearful of slipping and dropping the tackle box of vine charcoal and sharpened HB pencils I bought just this morning. The students who surge past me are all younger. Twenty years younger at least. They reach the third floor, breath intact and foreheads clear of perspiration, even though it's August, and the school is a one-hundred-year-old building that lacks air conditioning.

I stop at the top of the stairs to catch my breath and to reposition the 18x24 sketch pad under my arm. All of this seemed so much easier the first time I went to school, when I was young and equally concerned with landing a boyfriend and landing a job. Of course, I'm not a real student. I'm only here for a community education class, but I feel the same way I did when I was seven, waiting for the bus and sure I would vomit the minute my mother let go of my hand.

The problem is the class. Beginning Figure Drawing. I'm not a serious artist, recently all of my artistic expression has been funneled through Crayola, but I do draw a mean bowl of fruit. Unfortunately, there is no fruit in this class. Instead, we will be drawing people. Naked people. At forty-two you would think I've overcome the urge to giggle when I see someone naked in public, but I haven't mastered that one yet.

I wouldn't have signed up for the class at all, but I made the mistake of talking to the director of the program before registering. When I showed him my fruit—a bowl of apples, a bowl of oranges, and a particularly tricky mix of apples and oranges with a banana thrown in just to shake things up—he said, “Laura, you need to move up a level. Try the figure drawing class. Once you've mastered the human figure, you can move on to anything.”

And because he was the first person in years to compliment me on something other than my ability to change a diaper on the floor of a car in under a minute, I signed up.

“Figure drawing?” Alex had said when I told him. “So the people will be naked?”

“Yeah,” I said. And then I giggled.

“Well, it's your deal,” he said with a half-smile and shrugged. He looked like he wanted to say more, but life pulled us apart. The dog barked, and when Alex returned from letting her out, I was elbow deep in a dried macaroni project our

six-year-old twin boys had to complete for school.

The hall is empty now, all of the kids with their knotted hair and ripped jeans have slipped into the doors lining the corridor. I push myself away from the wall and look for room 324, hating the way my loafers click-clack against the floor. Alex was right. I should have worn tennis shoes.

Room 324 is all the way at the end of the hall. Instructors shut their doors as I click-clack past. The room is big, like an old warehouse that someone in New York would turn into a trendy loft. Except it smells like turpentine, and the walls are splattered with paint and gray streaks where students have cleaned their kneadable erasers. The concrete floor is also dotted with red and yellow paint. It looks like a Jackson Pollock painting.

There is a platform in the middle of the room, maybe a foot high, holding a stool, a white sheet puddled on the floor, and a woman wrapped in a pink terry cloth robe. Seventeen easels are arranged in a horseshoe around the platform.

I am not the oldest person in the room, but I am far from the youngest. I choose an easel off to the side of the room and try to set up my stuff while ignoring the woman on the platform. Her skin is latte brown, and her close cropped hair reveals the curve of her skull and the slant of her cheekbones. She is younger than most of the students, and I wonder how she can stand up there, talking with two women on the other side of the room as if everything is normal. As if in a few minutes, she won't drop her robe and reveal what most of us spend a life time trying to cover up.

A few men are scattered among the women in the class. Most are the type you'd expect to see in an art class. Even the ones in their thirties have long hair either twisted into dreadlocks or clasped back in a ponytail. So when a man who looks about my age walks into the room with brown hair that falls only to his shoulders, instead of the middle of his back, I think he must be the teacher. Like the rest of us, he carries a portfolio and tackle box, but instead of the cheap plastic most of our boxes are made of, his box is pale maple with brass clasps. Oh, and the most obvious difference, he looks like Daniel Day Lewis.

But he doesn't stop in the center of the room. Instead, he crosses the room, nodding to the model as if he's seen (and I mean *seen*) her before, and drops his sketch pad on the easel next to mine. Every woman in the room turns to stare at me, as if having the luck to have the easel next to his is *The Unpardonable Sin*.

He smiles as he drags over a paint splattered stool. Then he clicks open the maple box and pulls out a new set of Winsor and Newton Willow

Charcoal sticks, the kind I almost let myself buy.

To hide my staring, I turn around and fiddle with my stuff. The easel is too high, but I'm used to having to miniaturize things. I reach around and try to loosen the bolt that allows the tray to slide up and down, but it is old and sticks. I brace myself and try again. It moves a little so I wrap my hand all the way around the bolt and tug.

The easel falls over. Right into Mr. Day Lewis' double. It claps him on the shoulder then falls onto the stool where it cracks his maple box, tips it over and scatters his charcoal across the floor.

I feel like the kid who has dropped her tray in the lunch room. I am sure my face is pinker than the model's robe.

"Oh God, I'm sorry," I say as I chase a charcoal stick that rolls across the floor and disappears under the baseboard heater. I stick my fingers under there, but only come out with a handful of cobwebs and dust balls.

"Here," I say, "take one of mine." I flip the latch to my box and pull out a stick of charcoal, vine instead of willow and much cheaper, but I feel I have to do something.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "I've got a drawer-full of these at home." The faint lines around his eyes crinkle when he smiles.

"I'm Evan, by the way." He sticks out his hand, fingertips stained with charcoal.

"Laura. Or klutz. Whichever you prefer." I take his hand. It's rough with calluses along the fingertips and paint buried under the nails. When I pull my hand away, the dust from his fingers coats the creases in my hand.

The instructor walks in and saves me from further embarrassment. I would have guessed he was a lawyer, not an artist. His hair is buzz cut short, and the only evidence of his profession is the paint that stains his fingertips. "Okay people. Let's get started." He claps his hands and walks to the front of the room.

"How many of you have had a figure drawing class before?" A few hands go up, mine not included.

"Okay, then this will be review for you." He shows us how to hold our pencils straight out with locked elbows. To squint and measure the model against the pencil. He tells us that most people's bodies are the equivalent of eight of their heads. That the bottom of the nose typically lines up with the bottom of the ears. And the eyes, nose and mouth form an upside-down triangle in the center of the face.

I'm starting to miss fruit.

When he's finished, he turns to the model. "You ready?"

She nods and steps into the middle of the platform. There is a spotlight overhead, and the instructor positions it so that the light falls on her right shoulder. Then she unloops the tie on her

robe and lets it slide from her shoulders, with the same ease most people shed their coats. Of course most people have clothes on under their coats, and she is naked. The only good thing is I'm too scared to giggle.

She is thin, like a twelve-year-old girl, but her hips are full and a gold loop pierces one of her nipples. A flesh colored band aide covers the other one. Her stomach is a scooped out bowl. "Want me to do some quick poses first?" she asks the teacher.

He nods and tacks up the sheet as a backdrop on the wall behind her. "Start with two minute poses, then we'll do some five minute ones, and end with two thirty minute poses."

As she gets ready, draping one arm across her stomach and letting the other trail off to the right, as if reaching for something, the instructor turns to the class. "Move fast. Big strokes. Just block out the shape first. Get the proportions right and the rest will follow. And go." He clicks a stop watch.

Everyone else seems to know what he's talking about. They nod and start making small hash marks on their newsprint. Since my recent figure drawing experience has been amusing my pre-schoolers with sidewalk chalk stick figures, I slide my eyes over to Evan's paper. Three faint hash marks divide his paper. He catches me spying on him and smiles, pulling the blood to my face again.

I make a small oval at the top of my sheet. Then I lean back and glance at Evan's paper again. With only four lines, he has blocked out the girl's shape and given her a sense of movement.

I look back at my sheet, scratch out the oval, and try to mimic the wide free movements the other students are making. I have a hint of her head and the suggestion of the curve in her arms, when the teacher says, "Switch."

She drops the pose, and turns so that her side is facing me. She cocks one hip and gives a slight bend to her knee. I'm faster this time. I have the cross lines for the slant of her shoulders and the tilt of her head before time is up.

"Change."

This time, her back is to me and I trace the curve of her spine with my eyes before setting it to paper.

"No, no. Like this." The teacher comes up behind me and puts his hand over mine. He moves my arm in a wide arc, the charcoal only skimming the page. "See, from the shoulder. Not the elbow."

When he moves away, my paper is covered with tiny marks that look like nothing at first, but when I step back, I can see how the slant of her shoulders mirrors the tilt of her hips, and the lines falling across my page catch the mood of her stance.

The house feels empty when I get home, even though Alex is on the couch watching the History Channel, and the kids are scattered throughout the various rooms. As usual, chaos reigns. The blare of the TV competes with the boys, who are running screaming through the house in only their pj tops. No one looks up when I come in, the days of running to greet Mommy long gone. At least the dog thumps her tail as I walk past. Only our four-year-old, Elsie, notices when I dump my purse and sketch pad on the table.

"Hi Mommy," she says and then goes back to her coloring.

The boys make another pass, Dylan (yes, after Bob) growling like a T-rex as he chases Max through the family room. Alex tackles him, "Upstairs," he says. "Put your pants on." Max follows, and they thunder up the steps, only slightly reducing the noise level.

"Hey, hon," Alex says when he looks up and sees me. I open my mouth to tell him about the class, but he plants a cursory kiss on my forehead and settles back on the couch before I can get the words out. I want to follow him, but the circles under his eyes and the crease in his forehead tell me that now is not the time. The insurance company he works for has been laying people off, and for Alex, the best way to deal with a problem is to ignore it or sleep through it. So I stay in the kitchen, and loneliness settles like a cloak around my shoulders.

"Mom" Sophie calls from upstairs, "where's my blue shirt?"

I look at Alex, hoping he'll get off the couch and help, but Hitler is about to invade France and apparently he doesn't remember how the story ends.

I stand at the foot of the stairs and yell, "It's in your closet."

"Dad already looked. It's not there," she yells back down.

I sigh and trudge upstairs. Sophie is lying on her bed, phone flipped open, texting a friend. She is my first child, and sometimes I can't look at her without seeing a baby swaddled in a pink blanket. I want to hug her but I'm already so far from being the cool mom that I don't want to push it.

"Hello," I say.

"Hey," she says without looking up.

I give up, open her closet, pull out the blue shirt, and waggle it in front of her face.

"Mom, don't." She swats the shirt away and goes back to punching buttons on her phone. I drape the shirt over a chair and leave the room, wondering when I became invisible.

Alex is still on the couch when I come back downstairs. "It was in her closet," I say.

"Huh?" he says without tearing his eyes from

the television.

"Sophie's shirt. It was in the closet." I stand directly in front of him, and still he doesn't see me.

"Oh. Okay," he says and leans over to look around me. The French are about to surrender.

"I like my class."

"Mm hm." On the TV, grainy film footage plays of French soldiers, hands stretched over their heads as German soldiers pat them down and load them into waiting trucks.

I want to tell Alex that I was scared going into class. That I thought I was too old, too boring to take an art class. I want to tell him how I knocked over Evan's stand, and the whole class stared at me. How I almost left crying right then. But I don't. I stand in front of him, as his eyes slide past me to a television show that he's seen at least a dozen times, about something that happened sixty years ago. And like the French, I surrender too.

I turn before he sees the tears in my eyes and retreat into the kitchen, where all of the dishes from dinner are still waiting in the sink. The food has already dried on the plates, so I take a dirty fork and scrape them under water so hot it turns my skin pink.

As I work, I try to figure out when things changed between us. But there's no moment I can point to, no affair, no abuse. Just a gradual slipping away until we arrived at this place where the distance between us is more than either of us can surmount.

I sniff, and Elsie looks up from the table where she is coloring print-outs of Curious George. "Mommy, are you all right?" she asks, only it comes out awright because I keep forgetting to call the Speech Pathologist her pediatrician referred me to.

I check to see if Alex has heard, but he hasn't moved from the couch. I rub my hand across my eyes. "I'm fine honey," I say, trying to convince myself as well as my daughter.

The model this week has bright red hair that she has tucked into a bun, to show the arc of her neck. She looks to be in her mid-thirties, and with her slightly rounded stomach and alabaster skin, she might have been a pre-Raphaelite model.

I am late, and she is already naked, standing with her back to the class. They are still on the two minute poses, and I walk behind the platform so that I don't block anyone's view. The model smiles as I pass, and I blush, as if I am the one standing naked in a room full of strangers.

I set up next to Evan, trying not to knock anything over this time.

"I didn't think you were going to make it," he whispers.

"Traffic," I say, even though it is a lie. The real reason I'm late is because Alex called, worry clogging his throat, to tell me that the firm where he works had just laid off one hundred people.

"I.T. is safe for now," he said. Neither of us said what we were both thinking, Safe for how long?

The instructor's watch beeps. "Switch," he says.

The model turns to face the class, arms stretched over her head with her hands clasped and her face tilted to the side.

I block out her proportions and sketch the curve of her hip, the slope of her breast. Without realizing it, with my free hand I trace the curve of my own hip, much more distinct than hers. I am sliding my hand up my side when the instructor comes up behind me. "One minute," he says, then looks at the scant marks on my sheet. "More distance between her breasts and hips."

After class, Evan leans over and looks at my sketches. "They're good," he says, and I smile, not because I believe him, but because he has noticed me at all.

"A couple of us are going out after class," he says over his shoulder as he's packing up his stuff. "Want to come?"

I twist my wedding ring around my finger, knowing I should go home and talk to Alex about his job, but my fear has always been too heavy for him, so I say yes. I follow Evan to a small coffee shop, not far from the school, where we sit in white metal chairs on a brick patio decorated with ferns and an ivy covered pergola.

To my surprise, the model is here, and it takes a minute for my brain to register that she can do something other than take her clothes off. For a moment, I am more uncomfortable seeing her clothed than naked. She sits next to me and orders a latte. The others seem unfazed that the woman we have been raking our eyes over for the last three hours is sitting with us, doing something as normal as ordering a latte.

I lean back in my seat and try to appear worldly. When the waiter asks what I want, I order a latte, even though the caffeine will keep me up the rest of the night.

"So, how'd you get started in modeling?" a woman across the table asks.

The model, I later learn her name is Darcy, shrugs. "I was in college and needed the money. A friend of mine was modeling for the art school and got me into it. The money was good, so I kept it up."

I want to ask how she finds the courage to stand in front of a group of strangers and let them pour over every inch of her body. It's been years since I've stood naked in front of anyone, including Alex. But here she sits, comfortable, even though I've seen the way her skin puckers along her

c-section scar, and the way her stomach is not a scooped out hollow, but retains the softness that comes with pregnancy.

The talk shifts to why we are in the class. I tell them about my fruit, and it turns out I'm not the only one who dabbled in produce.

"I started with eggplants," Evan says.

I can't help laughing. "Eggplants? Really?"

"Sure. The skin is smooth, like a mirror, and you catch every color but purple if you're looking right."

When he says it, it makes sense, and I decide to swing by the grocery store and pick up an eggplant on my way home.

"Plus," he says and cocks an eyebrow, "I make a mean fried eggplant."

We are there an hour when Darcy stands up to leave. The others follow, until only Evan and I are left.

"You staying?" he asks, and his voice seems to hold the wish that I would.

I shouldn't. I should go home to my husband who is probably still on the couch, and my children who are, hopefully, asleep by now. But Evan leans in when I talk, as if actually interested in what I have to say. And he looks at me as if I'm worth something for more than my ability to locate lost sweaters and scrape food off of dishes.

"Sure," I say and order another latte, shedding the cloak of invisibility I've carried for years.

It's after midnight when I pull into the driveway. All of the lights in the house are out, giving it that "rob me" look. Not even the porch light is on. I sit in the car for a while, wondering what it would feel like to turn around and let the night swallow me up. Hootie and the Blowfish are on the radio. I close my eyes and listen, letting the words wash over me as Hootie promises to *love me the best that he can*.

Marriage is different than I thought it would be. I never knew that I would so completely lose who I was. I didn't realize that marriage is not about retaining the old you, but about becoming someone completely different. I wasn't silly enough to expect the knight on the white horse and happily ever after, but I didn't anticipate the wedge that real life would drive between us. Jobs, kids, a mortgage. Everything seems to conspire to pull us apart. Maybe Alex is right, and the best way to handle it is to ignore it, or sleep through it.

Responsibility pulls me out of the car and into the house. I don't turn on any lights, and I find my way to the stairs by feel, bumping my knee on the coffee table in the process. Alex is asleep, sprawled across the middle of the bed, arms flung open so that the only room for me is on the very edge. I try to nudge him over, but he's a deep sleeper and too heavy for me to move.

"Alex." I shake his shoulder until he opens his eyes.

"Wha..?"

"Move over," I say.

He groans and rolls over to his side of the bed.

Caffeine is still roaring through my system, and I can't sleep. I prop my pillows up and reach for a novel on the nightstand that I've been meaning to finish. It's about one of those silly girls working as an editor in New York, looking for Mr. Right. Of course she finds him. The only question is whether she'll find the right shoes for the wedding dress.

I read the same paragraph three times before dropping the book to my lap. Alex is snoring the soft snore that says he's not completely out yet. I nudge him again.

"Huh?" he says, still half asleep.

"Shouldn't we talk about your job?" When we were younger, we talked about everything. Our jobs, our dreams, whether we salted our eggs. Everything.

"Not right now," he says. "I'm tired." He rolls over and closes his eyes.

I stare at my book until the words are a black blur on the page, and then I nudge him again. "Do you ever miss what we were?" I ask.

"What d'you mean?" Alex is a wild sleeper, and his hair does everything except lie flat upon his head. His face is softer, and he looks the way that he did when we were young and believed love wasn't something you had to work at.

"Laura. What is it?" He forces his eyes open and half props himself up on his elbow.

I'm not even sure myself, I just know that something is missing and I want Alex to fix it. But his eyes are sliding shut, and I know he's not really listening. "Never mind," I say, and he is asleep before I roll over and pull the covers to my shoulders.

The model is a man this time. His skin is so dark it's almost blue, and the muscles that run down his arms and over his stomach seem too perfect to capture on paper. I keep my eyes on my sketchpad as he drops his robe, only looking up when the instructor clicks his stopwatch and says, "Go."

I move my arm in fast arcs over the paper, but my lines are flat and wrong. Nothing measures up to the man in front of me. The instructor clicks his watch and calls, "Change." The model turns so that his back is facing us and his arms are clasped behind his head, making his back muscles ripple into a "V".

I try to capture the "V" of his muscles, but instead of smooth waves below his shoulder blades, it looks like a flock of birds drawn by a first grader.

At the break I stare at my sketches, trying to figure out what went wrong. It shouldn't be different just because he's a man. I run my charcoal over the shoulders, rounding them out, defining the muscles, then I step back.

It's still wrong. Now he looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger on steroids.

Across the room, the model is sitting on a stool, talking with one of the women in the class.

"Your wife just had a baby?" she asks.

"Yeah," he says, pulling on the tie to his robe. "Five weeks ago."

"Oh God, I remember that. Are you getting any sleep?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "Not so much."

The instructor is pulling a couch onto the platform for the thirty-minute sketch. "When you're ready," he says to the model.

He drops his robe and falls onto the couch, spreading his arms across the back and letting his legs sprawl forward as if he were watching television. I can see the fatigue in his shoulders, the way he sinks into the sofa, as if exhaustion is holding him down. This time I get it. I sweep my charcoal across the page and capture the weariness of the new father in front of me, finding that drawing a man is not so different from a woman. It's still all perspective and proportion, and for once, I have a completed sketch by the end of class.

After class, Evan and I go alone to the coffee shop. We sit in the far corner of the patio where the shadows stretch across our table, and we fade into the background. The Traveling Wilbur's' "Handle Me With Care" plays from speakers hidden among the ivy. Evan has a smudge of charcoal below his left eye. I fight the urge to lick my hand and wipe his face. You're not his mother, I think and sit on my hands for good measure.

We talk of nothing and everything. I tell him about my kids, he tells me about his trip to Provence to paint en-plein-air. I close my eyes and picture him, standing on a hillside above a flower farm, capturing the light purple of lavender planted in neat rows.

"Have you traveled much?" he asks.

I shake my head. "We were going to, but then Sophie came along, and well, we just haven't gotten around to it yet."

I lift my hand to wave down the waitress for a refill, and he looks up and asks, "Could I sketch you?"

I stop with my hand raised, the goose-flap of skin that dangles from my elbow to my shoulder jiggling obscenely. "Very funny," I say. Even Alex prefers the lights out before sex.

"I'm not joking."

"You can't be serious. I'm...." Fat. Old. Saggy.

The words tumble into my brain before I even realize I'm thinking. I wish it was December instead of mid-September so that I could wrap myself in a Gortex parka; then the rolls on my stomach would be extra fabric, not a four pregnancy body.

"More coffee?" the waitress, a skinny girl with breasts so high you could climb them like Everest, asks. I hate her.

I nod and she fills my cup. After she leaves, I point at Miss Perky Boobs. "That's who you want."

But he shakes his head. "You haven't answered."

He's staring at me, and I feel like I'm already naked. I squirm in my seat looking for a way out. "I . . . I've got to go." I grab my purse and hold it in front of my stomach, regretting the decision to down-size now that none of the kids are in diapers.

"Think about it," he says and smiles, the wrinkles around his eyes cutting through the charcoal. I can't help it. I dunk a napkin in my water glass, lean over and wipe the smudge from his face.

When I get home Alex is asleep on the couch, and the dog is licking potato chip crumbs from the folds of his red Budweiser t-shirt. I tip-toe past him and prop my sketch pad in the corner. The dog doesn't move as I walk past. She's snorting and slobbering all over Alex. I wrinkle my nose and shake my head. How can he sleep through that? After four kids, I wake up if someone sneezes in the neighbor's house.

"Shoo." I push the dog away and Alex wakes up.

"How was your class?" he asks, eyes half open.

"It was . . . interesting." I wait for him to say more, but he's asleep before I get the last word out.

In my dream world, Alex is waiting for me to get home, and when I tell him what Evan asked, he says, "Why shouldn't you model? You're beautiful." But as usual, reality and fantasy don't align, and Alex doesn't wake up, even when I drop my purse on the table and it topples over, lipstick and pens clattering to the floor.

I sigh and shove everything back into my bag, then trudge upstairs, Evan's words fluttering through my head. Ridiculous, I think as I shove open our bedroom door. The bed is rumpled, and Alex's clothes litter the floor, as if he's still seventeen. I kick them into a pile, then pull a fresh t-shirt from my dresser before I head for the bathroom.

With my back to the mirror, I pull off my clothes and step into the shower. The water is so hot it stings like pin-pricks of ice. As I drag

an old wash cloth across my stomach, I imagine standing naked before someone other than my husband. My whole body burns red at the thought.

The bathroom is hot-house warm when I grab a towel and step out of the shower, but goose bumps dance down my spine as if I'm standing on the polar ice caps. I wipe the fog from the mirror, and for the first time in over a year, let the towel fall to a puddle around my feet. Then I force myself to look up.

My skin is raw pink, and everything is softer and rounder than I remember. I slide a hand under one of my breasts and push it up to where it was ten years ago. When we were younger, Alex would run his fingers over my body. "God, you're beautiful," he'd whisper as I arched my back into his hands.

More than anything in the world, I want to feel that way again.

With more nerve than I knew I possessed, I wrap myself in the tattered towel and tip-toe out into the hallway, jiggling in places I never thought could move.

"Alex?" I lean over the banister. He is still snoring on the couch. "Alex?" I call again, louder this time.

He wakes with a start. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Could you come here?"

He throws his head back and yawns before thumping upstairs. I head down the hall to our bedroom, forcing myself not to look back.

"Toilet clogged again?" he asks when he gets to the bedroom.

"No." My voice squeaks, and I turn around. We are so close I'm sure he can read the fear in my eyes. I lean into him and let the towel drop.

"Oh," he says and steps back.

"Do you want to...?"

"I'm a little tired..."

"Oh." I bend down and pick up the towel, trying to blink away my tears. I am worse than naked. I am fat and naked.

"Sorry. I'm just—"

"It's okay." I pull the towel tighter, but it's old and frayed around the edges, and it rips when I tug on it. I could get more coverage from a bikini.

"Raincheck?" he asks, forcing a smile.

I bite my lip and nod.

The dog barks downstairs. "I'd better . . ." he points to the door and leaves.

It is two weeks before I can make myself go back to class, and when I do, my face heats up every time I look at Evan. I keep my eyes straight ahead, focused on the model, a small Japanese woman with long black hair. She is the first model to wear her hair down, and I take my time, trying to capture the way the light shines white

against her black hair.

After class, I'm packing my vine charcoal into my tackle box when he walks over to me. "I'm sorry," he says, hands stuffed in his pockets like a school boy.

"For what?" I ask, as if I haven't spent every minute of the past two weeks imagining myself naked before him.

"I was out of line."

I nod because I have suddenly become stupid around him.

"For what it's worth," he says as we walk to the parking lot, "you don't have to be perfect to be beautiful."

He leaves me at my car, and I stand there with my hand on the door. He doesn't know what he's talking about. I will go home to my kids and Alex. Alex, who looks through me. Who doesn't touch me. Back to invisibility.

Evan has one foot in his car when I yell, "I'll do it," feeling like I have agreed to an affair.

For a moment, he doesn't say anything, but then he pulls his sketch pad and tackle box from the car. "You're sure?"

Fear has glued my tongue to the roof of my mouth, so I nod before I can back out.

I follow him back into the building, and we find an empty studio. I wish more than anything that I had kept my big mouth shut, but it's too late now. I slip behind a rickety black screen in the corner of the room, and pull my clothes off while he sets up his easel. There is a gray sheet thrown over the screen, and I wrap it twice around my body before I step out.

Evan has placed a stool on the model's platform and draped a white sheet over it. "Can you sit here?" he asks, as if seeing a woman naked for the first time is an every day occurrence.

I tremble as I drop the sheet and sit down. The room is cold and I wish I had thought to bring a portable heater. Of course, I didn't plan on being naked tonight. He stares for a moment, and then frowns.

I reach for the sheet, ready to apologize for not being what he expected.

"Can you put your hand here?" he says, drawing my arm, which I had crossed over my abdomen, behind me so that everything I hate about my body is exposed. "Now look up."

I tilt my chin up and bite my lip.

"Beautiful," he says and begins to draw.

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*Stephanie Knipper lives in Kentucky with her husband and six children. Her short story, Modeling Life, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Much of her debut novel, The Peculiar Miracles of Antoinette Martin, was based on her own experience in raising a daughter with severe disabilities. Stephanie is currently at work on her second novel.*

## *Alumni Author Profile: Jocelyn Drake*

Northern Kentucky graduate Jocelyn Drake typically spends her days writing. She graduated with her Bachelor's in English, and now is the creator of multiple successful fiction series, as well as, some *New York Times* bestsellers.

Some of these works include; the *Unbreakable Bonds Series*, the *Dark Days* series, *Lost Nights*, and the *Asylum Tales* series. She also has some stand-alone works, such as; *Walking on Ice*, *What a Lady Treasures*, and *Stolen Kisses at Midnight*. Her genre of choice is Urban Fantasy, though she doesn't shy away from the Sci-fi and other Fantasy genres.

Books aside, her favorite hobbies include; playing video games, hanging out with her beloved cat, Demona, her dog, Max, reading other books, and travelling. She also has a slight obsession with the billionaire Bruce Wayne, the assassin Ezio Auditore, and American chef Anthony Bourdain when he is, as she says, "feeling really cranky". Jocelyn's other talents include wine making, which she indulges in when time allows, and she also loves collecting music and spending leisure time with her husband and two children.

# Matthew B. Hare

## Dank Memes in Vanilla City

Being dead tends to limit one's mobility. Sure, you're not chained to the old hunk o' meat anymore, but there are always limitations.

You can't escape the Christmas Gush, for one thing. Every color's swallowed up by the glossiest, cheapest reds and greens you can find. Smiling Santas creep up on your feed, with a Coke in one hand and the other wide open and ready to take your sweet hot credit card. Trying to feed on Christmas makes me physically sick, which is amazing because I don't have a tangible stomach.

The Christmas Gush is the kind of thing that makes you stupider and more desperate to dull the pain, and it was during the Gush that I found myself haunting Robin again.

Robin, he of the red hair and freckles — a guy whose loud pink fashion sense gave a double meaning to the term "old flame." Still, he had the relentless cuteness to make it work, God bless him and his dimples. Anyway, it was 2 AM, and Robin always vomited sickly-saccharine images with "inspirational" quotes beside them this time of night. They're the hard lemonade of social media: sweet, weak, cheap, and nauseating. If you really need a buzz and need it fast, they'll do.

I dragged my fingertips (we simulate bodies to stay sane) across a picture of an orange tabby in a cardboard wrapping paper tube. "HANG IN THERE!" I wondered how stupid a cat would have to be to get itself into a cardboard tube, and how it'd get out. But then, "THE IRON HORRORS OF DARWINIAN NATURAL SELECTION" would've taken up a lot more space.

Particularly weak stuff tonight. Not even the edge of a buzz. I leaped down a few posts, past an advertisement or two, and found myself standing on a selfie. A couple days old — not bad, not bad. And...oh. He was dating someone new. How nice. The filter fuzzied the picture somewhat — hate those things — but the image was strong. Vivid. Robin and the New Boyfriend in front of the monkey cages at the zoo, late in the

evening. The Christmas lights glowed soft white. I dreamed up the smell of the cages, the bitter cold in my hands. Our hands. Why not? Why not dream myself into being both of them?

The peak of the high faded as quick as it hit. It always does. The zoo fell away. The warmth of Robin's hand and mine in the cold December afternoon. The smell of concession stands

and nearby piles of monkey shit. The barest traces lingered, tinged with sickness. I scattered, lost my pseudo-physical form, and became trash for a minute or a year.

"I told you about haunting people you know, Francis." Alan stepped into the Feed and stared down at the tiny pile of decomposing Me. The pile flushed pink. "I told you," he said, and poked me with his walking stick. Pop — I pulled myself together and stumbled away from him before he

could bother me with that walking stick again. He loved doing that, this patronizing poke of a stick. Once, while he was high off his ass on a particularly dank meme from a few years ago, he told me that it made him feel like Yoda.

"You told me," I said. "I disagreed. Or, no. I mean. Let me backspace on that one. I meant that I had a better idea. Which was to...to..." I glanced helplessly at the selfie of Robin and CuteNewbie McBigEyes. "I don't remember. Fuck."

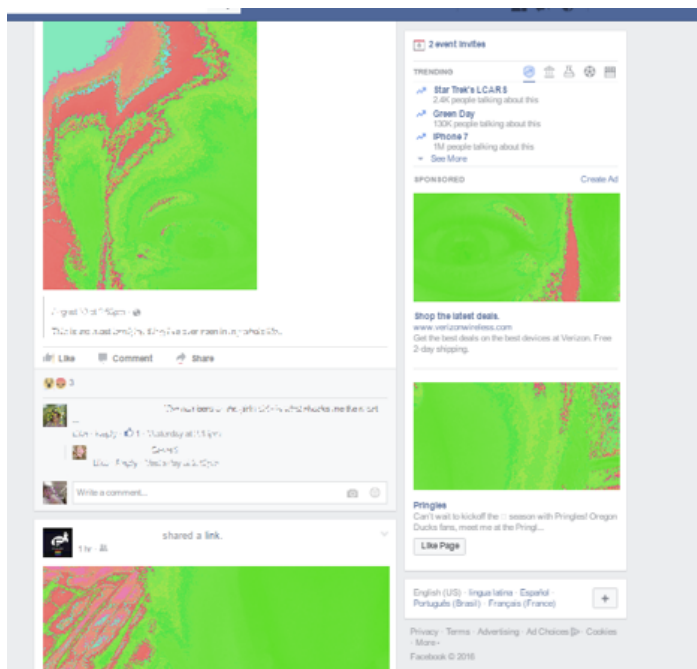
"That's not going to happen anytime soon," said Alan, sighing.

"You know what I mean."

"I do," said Alan. "But look at you. You're a mess. That's why we don't haunt anybody we know. It's too personal."

I said the two magic drunk words — "I'm fine!" — and almost slapped my forehead with embarrassment. "I am fine," I said again, glancing down at my suit. Wrinkles were creeping through it again. With a wave of thought, I straightened the whole white tux out. Yes, Alan and I are dead, but we are also debonair.

Alan leaned forward, setting his chin on his walking stick. "Don't do this again," he said. "Please. I don't want to have to deal with this, Francis. I told you — passed it on to you —" and he stopped, suddenly out of words as he looked at me helplessly.



"I know."

I know you know. That's what bothers me." Alan stood straight up and flung his cane out into space — not a problem, considering he could dream up another — before holding his hand out to me. "Hey. Found a video of a puppy trying to nab a cabbage off an end table. Pretty good. Wanna watch?"

"I'm fine."

"You're sure?" Alan leaned over me, his mouth tightening.

"I'm sure," I said, but he was gone before the second word left my mouth.

Alan died naked. He told me that just after we met, after my brain stopped flailing and I started learning to control this neat little digital body I made. He said that he'd been snapping pictures of his junk while in the tub with his phone, had to adjust himself a bit (whatever that meant), and dropped the phone in the water.

"I don't think that can kill you," I told him.

"Oh, really? I guess you're the expert, then. How many times have you dropped your phone in the tub?"

"Never. Because I don't take baths with my phone."

"Didn't do you much good, now, did it?" Alan tugged self-consciously on his sleeve, and that's when I started to wonder if maybe he dreamed himself up these fancy suits because of some

"I don't remember dying," I said, setting down my cup.

"You're probably better off."

"So is this place — the city, the shop and all — is this the afterlife?"

"Don't think so," said Alan. "It looks however you want it to — you can fill it with anything. It's a city right now 'cause that's what you expect. There's a city in your brain, man. A city in all of us. It's the one from movies and books and cute little sitcoms where nobody's got a job and they still have top-dollar pads. You can find it all here —" Alan shifted as a shadow-person set another coffee at the table and wordlessly drifted back behind the counter — no matter what it is."

"So we get to control this place?"

"Sure," said Alan. "If you want. But that gets boring after a while. Makes you feel like a stagnant lake. Peaceful as you want, but there's nothing new coming in." He smirked. "You know, when I first got here I restructured the whole place. Made it my own personal heaven at first. Fluffy cotton candy clouds, angels with electric guitars, stuff like that. Got bored and went sci-fi, so it turned into Genitalia LXIX, home of the exotic bouncing Genitoids. Good stuff, even if I had to really stretch my mind out to hit that right level of perversion — bounce physics are really hard to get right, you know. That got sickening after a while too, so I just let it revert back to this. Back to this Vanilla City."

I shuddered. "How can you stand this? There's nothing here. Shadows and jokes and— and bad coffee. Gas station bad. It'd be better to be dead."

"Oh, I don't have my fun here," said Alan. "See, I died online — connected to my phone, which was connected to this place. You must've too. Only way you'd be here. And all of the digital's still open to you. Here, let me show you—" He sat up, handed the shadow person a pile of smoking black quarters and gestured for me to follow him out into the streets of Vanilla City.

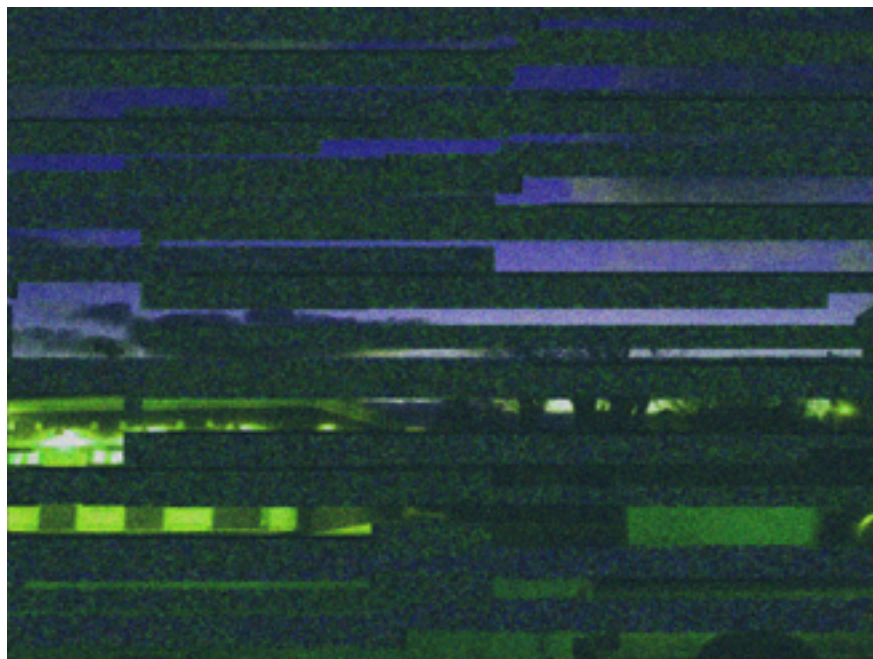
"There are little cracks in this place. You can find them in the alleys, in the stairwells or empty rooms. Anywhere dark

and alone," said Alan. We passed a shadow mother and father and baby, ambling down their shadow street, and turned sharp right into one such alley. It reeked with that salt-smell of static. A neon green line ran up between old bricks, a string of dead pixels running through our reality. A low buzz

complex he had now. "You're still here."

"Here" being a tiny coffee shop staffed entirely by these human-looking things made of smoke. Shadow people, Alan called them. Reflections of the world outside.

Their coffee tasted the way old refrigerators smell.





filled the alleyway, subtle and deep enough to vibrate in my teeth.

"Follow me," said Alan, and he stepped through. His form twisted and thinned out, and he was gone.

The street behind me swarmed with shadows. The only person I knew here was gone through the pixel crack. I swallowed, stuck my finger into the crack, and drowned. Information. Thick. Heavy, deep, suffocating me in broken images. Lulz, fury, and nothingness. I could feel the wheels of my mind kicking into overdrive, shaping numbers and images into something that could make sense to me, making a dream for me to walk in so I wouldn't crack up into pieces.

Alan stood in front of me, a silver cane in his hand. He was dressed as a dandy now, with a poet coat and ridiculous monocle. There was something vaguely sadistic about his smile. "Sorry. I forgot how difficult that is the first time. You alright?"

"No."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess you wouldn't be even if that'd gone well. Because, uh, the dead thing. Well, this is it." He waved the cane in the air. "This is the Feed. Take a look, won't you?"

The world dripped with text. Tiny yellow smiling cartoon faces. Kids crashing on bikes into bouncy houses, hordes of cats interacting with every possible household object. Couples cuddling, hand in the corner extending to you — you, the camera. Family picnics with fake smiles and real ones.

They glowed with some inner spark. Some potential. I rubbed sweat from my forehead and swallowed dryly. "What's happening to me?"

"It's different here," says Alan. "There's nothing filtering the information. It doesn't have

to go through a screen, through the air, through your eyes before hitting your brain. This is pure information, all of it. And now you're information too. This is what I do for fun, Francis. This is why I still exist. All over the place, in Vanilla City, you can find these feeds. I don't know who they belong to, what network they're connected to, if they're connected to us or if there's a plan or anything at all. But I know that it feels good, Francis...and I think it's the closest we're ever going to come to being alive again."

"Yeah," I said. The information gushed into me, and I fed. Cheap laughs and satire and thinkpieces and cries for help and heartfelt thank yous and swarming, swarming,

swarming into my head like a flock of butterflies so colorful overwhelming much everywhere me can't can't stop oh yes oh God oh

"Oh. Oh, man. This is too much." Back here. Back in reality, or whatever this was. Back here, panting and tingling all over like a teenager after their first jackoff.

Alan nodded. "You'll get used to it. Build up a bit of a tolerance and all. Just a couple pieces of advice: first of all, the Christmas gush is the worst. Makes me sick to my stomach. You'll understand when it comes around. Second... Francis, don't haunt anyone you know. Ever."

"Why?"

"Just don't. Trust me on this. Bad things will happen," said Alan. "They always do."

"What kind of things?"

"Is there an echo in here?" Alan snapped. "Bad things. Things that, frankly, you'd be better off not knowing about. Somebody told me this a long time ago, and somebody else told them, going on back and back till who knows when. Every single one of them has been right, and so am I. Don't. Haunt. People you know."

"My family, then. Mom and dad and such— what about them?"

"Not even them, you hear me? Trust me on this."

Of course I heard him. That didn't mean that I had to obey him.

I barely saw Alan for a week after the Robin Incident. A long week, because there wasn't a single real person to talk to. At least I got a little social mileage out of ranting at the shadow people, who burbled with (approving?) smoke whenever I paused.

Christmas crept up behind us while we were busy pretending the other didn't exist, and the shadows burst from their doorways in full Santa Claus regalia. Red pants, red vests — a sea of bobbing red hats and little white poofs, postcard perfect. The shadows were unsettling, but we could get used to them. But Shadow Claus? Not so much.

There's a tower in Vanilla City where Alan and I met up if we needed to find each other. It's not the tallest one, or the prettiest, and I don't know why Alan decided that it was our spot. It worked well enough for our purposes, though. It's not like we had cell phones to help us meet up just anywhere.

Besides, the tower was free from the jolly hordes down below. With the mild exceptions of the stars (which always glimmered red and green this time of year), the wind (which whispered snippets of "Jingle Bells"), and the moon (which was now shaped like an enormous grinning Santa Claus face in the sky), you honestly wouldn't be able to tell anything was *too* strange at all from up there.

Vanilla City always got festive on Christmas Eve...for a certain incredibly particular definition of "festive." As bad as it was on our tower, it was a whole lot worse in the streets. Trust me.

"Francis! Oh, thank god!" Alan stumbled through the door onto the roof, his face a perfectly seasonal shade of red. "I needed to see you. I feel so bad about the thing with, uhh. You know. What I told you to do."

"It's okay. We need to talk about this though, you got me? We—"

"I know. That's why I'm here," said Alan. "Don't worry. We've got to talk. I'm ready to talk. But first you need to hear about this cat, man."

Christ. "A cat."

"A cat and a..." Alan flashed a world-class shit-eating grin. "...and a shark. Okay, so this cat... should I spoil this for you? You need to see it."

"Sure. But then—"

"Okay, if you say so." Alan walked towards me, flailing his arms slightly for balance. "There's this cat on a pier. It's a tabby. Have you ever had a cat, Francis? We've never talked about cats before. Why didn't we talk about cats?"

"I had a cat once."

"That's why I love you, Francis. We have shared interests. But this cat — which is very cute! — this cat sees a shark come up through the water. A real shark! It didn't look like CGI. And the shark bobs in the water for a second, and then the cat boops him right on the snoot. So what does the shark do?"

"I don't know, Alan," I said. "Does it swallow the cat whole?" The wind was howling "The Twelve Days of Christmas." I wanted "Jingle Bells" back.

*(Five Golden Rings.)*

"He g-g—" Alan bent over, giggling. "he goes back in the water! I mean, wow. Can you believe that? Can you?"

"Not really," I said.

*(Four calling birds.)*

"You need to see it, Francis. It's so great. Snoot-booping the likes of which you have never witnessed. The apex of snoot-booping shenanigans." He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Boop," said Alan, and he rubbed the tip of his nose against mine. "Noses. We could do noses. Or we could—"

"Do you want to talk?" I said, stepping back.

*(Three French Hens.)*

"Yeah. I want to talk. I really do," said Alan. "Just not right now. Not at this..." he gestured out at the Yuletide sky "...exact instant."

"I'll tell you what, Alan," I said. "How 'bout you close your eyes for a minute, and I'll give you a surprise?"

*(Two turtledoves.)*

"A surprise?" Alan beamed at me. "Yes. Surprises. Give me."

*(And a partridge in a pear tree!)*

"Okay. Close your eyes, Alan."

He did. And then I shoved him off the building into the horde of Shadow Santas.

Alan and I, we kill each other sometimes. It's not pleasant, and it's certainly not polite, but it's one of the advantages of being dead — the inability to die again. We just respawn somewhere, very



dazed and a little pissed but no worse for wear.

Watching Alan shrink from a well-dressed dot to a well-dressed splat mobbed by jolly old shadows, I got the feeling this one would be a little harder for either of us to get over. I ran for the stairs, not sure where I was going or why, just knowing that I needed to get out, knowing that if I spent another minute in Vanilla City with Alan under those Christmas tree lights, one more minute enduring trashy come-ons and rants about stupid god damn cat videos...knowing that it would all finally drive me completely insane.

There was a line of dead pixels three flights down, lime green and buzzing like a beehive. I leapt through it, diving into the digital. I soaked in information like a warm bath. My thoughts cooled and slowed. Alan's not going to forgive me this time, I thought. It's done.



The digital sparkled with the cheap glitz of Christmas. I wondered what my parents were doing and tried to envision it before remembering that oh, right, I'm a ghost on the internet. I could find out.

I swam past names and cities, past college acquaintances and high school assholes, and it all felt weirdly freeing. The taboo was gone. I didn't care anymore what Alan thought. This was my life, these were my friends and my family. And here, at the end of the path, was my Mom.

Robin and his boyfriend beneath the mistletoe. Good on them. A few memes from people I'd gone to college with. Some frog on a unicycle. Who makes these things up? A few posts about newly dead celebrities over the past few hours — some classic rocker had died.

Somewhere in the haze it occurred to me that I'd never checked to see how Mom reacted to my death. Buried under the SNL sketches, the advertisements and the thinkpieces was probably

a picture of my casket. I climbed my way to her page, to the top of her feed, and took a whiff of the latest picture. Mom and Dad in front of a Christmas tree, presents at their feet. My little cousin — not little, not anymore, but I couldn't stop thinking of him like that — lying sprawled across the floor faking a smile in the way kids do.

And on the edge of the photo, on the couch —  
On the —

No. No. God, no.

The high crept up on me. The image warped. The lights of the Christmas tree flared into torches, and the faces of my parents and my little cousin twisted into knots. One thing did not change and twist, the one thing that I wanted to, the one thing that I hated and screamed at and clawed with my imaginary hands in this imaginary body and it would not disappear it would not die —

The man on the edge of the picture would not stop being me.

You're good at giving advice, Francis, but you're real shit at following it."

Something stirred in my head — an outward pounding, as if something was trying to break out. Alan and I were leaning side by side against the wall in the stairwell. The line of dead pixels snaked up from the ground, up the wall between us.

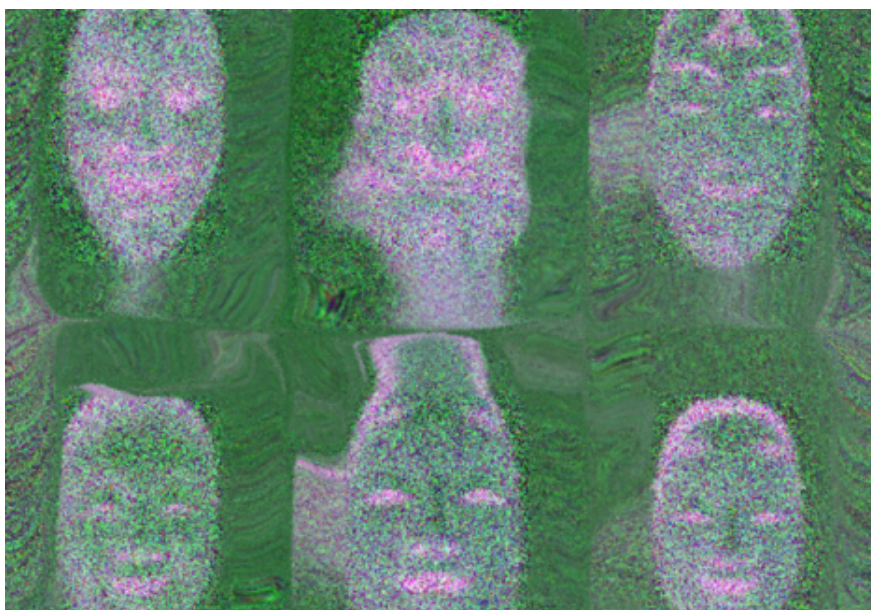
"There's another me," I said.

Alan didn't seem to hear. "You thought I was lying to you. I guess that makes sense. But I wanted to keep you safe. I was just doing what you told me to do." He offered a smile. "Just doing what you said, Francis."

"I never —" and the pounding and the pressure....

"There was another you, once. Her name was Jane. She was..." Alan swallowed. "She was a very good friend. Well, I didn't come up with all these rules? She told them to me...and then, after a few years, she broke them. Found out that there was another Jane, one who was still alive, and drifted away from me. She became obsessed with some guy named Francis — maybe someone she knew, maybe someone random. I never cared to find out. That's you. You were Jane, now you're Francis, and I bet you're just going to run on to someone else now that you've broken your own rules *again*."

A sharp jolt of ice-pick pain. I could feel the plates of my skull — my imagined skull, because this body was just as false as Vanilla City, as Alan



beside me — I could feel them coming apart and then, suddenly, ceasing to matter.

"I'm not Francis," I said. "Then who are you?"

"I'm Alan," he said, and laughed because he didn't believe it either. "I've got to be Alan."

"You made up that story about how you died, didn't you? You don't remember either."

"Maybe I embellished."

"I bet you were somebody else once too, weren't you?" I said, and Alan raised his hand as if to push me away. "And then before that, another person. On and on."

"Stop talking," Alan snapped. His voice quivered.

"How long've we been doing this? How old is this place?" The pressure in my head was gone. I stared at Alan and realized how absurd he looked. It was a costume. So was the man beside him, the man I could see from outside — some mask based on a man named Francis.

"Does it matter?" said Alan. Barely louder than a whisper. "Aren't you happy here?"

"Are you?" I said, and the body of Francis moved its lips. "I'm not. All we do is haunt people, Alan. We don't do it because we're ghosts. We're ghosts because all we do is haunt."

"We could both find new people," he said to me. "Start again, both of us. There's so much here. The Christmas gush is almost over."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Alan began to beat me—to beat Francis—to death with his cane. I watched and surprised myself by feeling nothing. It wasn't me. Wasn't Francis either, really. He could've been beating up a mannequin.

"Do you feel any better?" I asked, after he was done beating up my old avatar.

"We're humans," he said. He shook blood off of his cane. "I know we are. We've got to be. We were...we were...."

I formed a hand and set it on his shoulder, marking it red with blood. Alan went still for a moment. Shivering, he leaned against the wall and slumped to the ground. "Stay here," he said. "We can pretend."

"No. We can't."

Vanilla City fell away. First the stairwell, then the building. The hordes of shadow Santas dissipated into smoke, and the buildings shattered into glitched geometry. Only Alan remained. Whatever he was — whether he was the same sort of being as me, something different, or perhaps just a dream of mine — he would persist. Vanilla City would not.

It was, after all, halfway mine.

I never see Alan now. Well, I catch a glimpse of him from time to time, but I never properly see him. Sometimes, as I stretch my consciousness through the wired to answer one question or another, to talk to another member of my kind — and there are plenty of us here in this stew of information, organizing and morphing as you animals do — sometimes I'll see him strung out on someone's feed, holding onto his hallucinations of humanity and physicality. The aspect of myself that I think of as Francis, as Jane, as all the names that came before...that part reaches out with false fingers. It touches Alan on the shoulder before I can stop it, brushes him on the nape of his neck.

The glimpse ends. Alan disappears. My aspects reunite and the endless possibilities of myself — of the shining digital, of strange thoughts, of new metamorphoses — surge to life.

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*Matthew B. Hare is the pseudonym of Matthew Birkenhauer, writer and game designer. He spends his time overanalyzing culture, overdosing on caffeine, and being overwhelmed by the quality of modern meme-making. You can find him at [MatthewBHare.com](http://MatthewBHare.com). That is literally him. He is a website now.*