



ChannelMarker



# ChannelMarker

Volume 18 • April 2019



**TIDEWATER  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

From here, go anywhere.™



Rebecca Smith, *Working Man*. Oil on canvas, 2018.



## 2019 Reading Panel

Cecilia Petretto, *Norfolk Campus*  
April Campbell, *Portsmouth Campus*  
Sara Stevenson, *Chesapeake Campus*  
Daniel Pearlman, *Chesapeake Campus*  
Robert House, *Virginia Beach Campus*  
Michael Tarpey, *Chesapeake Campus*  
Rick Alley, *Chesapeake Campus*

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Rick Alley

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Visual Communications at TCC

### Art

Special thanks to Craig Nilsen  
*Visual Arts Center*  
TCC at Old Towne, Portsmouth

**Cover Image:** Melinda Watson, *Fruit Study III*, Digital Photograph, 2018.

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Hope Drew, *George Harrison*. Linocut, 2018.



## Gymnopédie No. 1

*Melyssa Mizal*

Violet Foster loved just three men in her life. Savoring her hot coffee, she glanced out of Wilson's Café. *The train is rather late*, she thought. Its whistle pierced against the starred sky. Peter crossed her mind, then James, and of course Bruno. *I can never forget Bruno*. With a sigh, her eyes flickered from the chiming clock on the wall to the train again.

*Peter. What a sweetheart.* The sun kissed his blonde, wavy locks. His freckles nearly danced on his nose and cheeks. *We were only children.* He spoke with one of those Charleston accents. *Does he still speak that way?* His eyes were the most remarkable she ever encountered. They were every shade of blue imaginable. She lost count of how many times she allowed herself to get lost in those eyes. *His eyes. Those oceanic eyes.* One day after classes, she convinced herself that he was indeed an ocean nymph that she read about from the Greek myths. During classes, his bright curiosity peaked her interest. He seemed to know all about the birds and the various seas. After grade school, she never saw him again. He vanished. He only lived in her memories. Violet took another long sip. *Maybe I was in love with the idea of him.*

*James.* He came around two or three years after Peter. They were high school sweethearts. *He meant well but he never understood me.* She remembered the times they went ice skating once winter arrived. They were around fourteen. *He never learned how to ice skate.* True enough, she would glide him around the rink every single time. Her smile faded when she remembered that detail. They began to date when they were sixteen. They broke up several times but got back together after a while. One time, he stepped on a caterpillar. *That was the most stupid thing he had done. It would have transformed into a lovely butterfly.* He took and took until she lost herself. Violet allowed him to fade away when they reached college.

*Bruno.* She still felt his essence. *I never believed in falling in love at first sight until Bruno happened.* He struck her like lightning. His name absolute music from her lips. Bruno hid in every color, every song, every dream. He made the world bloom. Violet loved every single detail about

Bruno. From his glasses' indents on each side of his nose to the way he read from novels. Violet imagined intertwining her life with his. She would watch him awaken. They would go the coast on a bright Sunday or maybe to an art museum. They would go see plays underneath winter's stars. They would spend rainy days together near the fireplace and she would fall asleep against the hum of his voice reading Keats. *More happy love. More happy, happy love.* Her eyes fluttered open. Bruno was the first man that she loved that was quite older than her. Violet was twenty when they met. She did not mind until his wedding ring appeared on his finger one day. She never had the chance to kiss his lips.

They were all gone. She was all alone. The coffee was now cold. The train long away. Violet saw a stranger walking past the café. She secretly hoped it was Bruno. Violet paid the tab, fastened her coat, and faded into the starred sky.



## Skirt Fantasia

*Diana Nadell*

The irises, the irises  
Curly edged  
And blue and white  
A vivid sight  
Don fantasia dancing skirts.

Gorgeous hips  
And fragrant lips  
And legs of awkward strength

Purple and citrine velvet  
Veined in white  
Or a golden lemony uplift

An orange caterpillar balance steps  
Permanently towards apron's edge.



## Scintilla

*Diana Nadell*

Hiss, crackle and pop,  
A fire is born.  
Tan pine needles give scent  
Of former life.  
Bamboo's strong;  
We press it down  
With foot and hand.  
We draw twigs across  
Opening it to air.  
Wet forms turn to gray  
And then black ash.  
Wind-shifts toss smoke and flames  
Left and right.  
Turn now with rake;  
Burn with air and life.  
Our understanding lifts.

Explosive pops break free  
From cellular walls,  
Water ready for any mishap,  
Pitter-patter, sparks lift, ashes float  
And whirl with nature.



## Weeding

*Diana Nadell*

Ripple roodle  
sunken noodle  
swept and gathered  
leaves and needles  
every turn abundance  
flies into my eyes.

Rocks all jagged  
ferns and frillies  
crinkly leaves  
and crunchy willies  
vine entwines  
lurks a circle  
crafty rocks  
expose  
all that interpose.

Up turn down twirl  
fall up twist down  
foot's loose unsure  
hill's steep uproar  
some stay some away  
my eyes' hands  
carve here pull there  
gather rather little leaves.



## Casa Bonita

*Heather Means*

In the South American country of Peru, it is a common sight to see families living in squalor. The poorest people make their homes in narrow spaces between and behind dilapidated buildings. They build crude shacks with what scraps they can find. There are no toilets in the little shelters, so they relieve themselves outside on the muddy ground. Self-accumulated junk crowds the small yards. This is what lay overlooked behind the tall, towering walls.

Car horns angrily blare nearby, the impatient drivers stuck in the midst of chaotic traffic jams. Suffocating exhaust fumes hang stealthily in the thick air, enveloping the small yard. A grassy, thatched mat forms the yard's makeshift front wall. A rotting piece of plywood used to cover the entrance sits propped up on the thatched front wall. A little girl leans against it, her bright pink jacket jumping out from the homely scene behind her. Pale, mint green flower barrettes accentuates her black hair, holding in puppy ear braids. Mud spatters almost completely cover her silver sneakers. She holds her finger to her lips, as if uncertainly surveying her surroundings. Beyond her, tall concrete walls stand imposingly to the sides, loyally protecting the young girl and her family. The back of a battered red-brick building functions as the rear barrier.

Farther in the yard, a pungent stench rises from the ground's muddy slop. To the immediate left stands a dilapidated shack constructed from the same thatched material as the front wall. A dank, moldy smell wafts out of its dark, gaping mouth. The thatched roof caves inwards where its supporting wooden poles has slashed long gashes through it. Dirty blue tarps cover the holes where the roof has collapsed. A motor taxi sits directly across the yard, in the corner. It consists of a small, grimy motorcycle with a little carriage hooked onto the back. A dingy, faded red and yellow covering encloses the motor taxi. The little girl wearing the pink jacket proudly points to a fat, muddy rabbit hunkering underneath the motor taxi.



Past the taxi, heaps of debris sit piled against the right-side wall. An old, wooden headboard lay tangled in the rusty spokes of a muddy, red bicycle. A pink, rickety bicycle leans against the motor taxi. A wooden cart piled high with junk tilts haphazardly, threatening to spill its contents into a murky puddle. A second cart stands beside it, covered by a bright blue tarp roof supported by metal poles. The base of it has clear doors that house multicolored dinner plates. Three red and green bar stools sit neatly stacked together on top.

Farther past the carts, the entire corner is packed with wooden chairs, damp cardboard boxes, wooden and metal poles, moldy plywood, and other wood scraps. Muddy blue and yellow buckets lay strewn all over the heap of junk. In the middle of the yard, a rusty metal pole rises up out of the clay-like soil. A sagging, gray rope droops from the top of the brick wall to the pole. White towels and a pink shirt limply hang from the rope, desperately trying to dry themselves despite the misting rain. High up on the red brick wall, "PROHIBIDO" is stamped in large, faded yellow letters.

In the far-left corner, American and Peruvian men work together to build a simple wooden house. Confusing streams of English and Spanish flow as the men bustle around, buzzing like fat bumblebees. Black, red, and yellow wires lay coiled on the damp soil. Saws grate and drills hum. Hammers pound rhythmically like the throbbing of a heart. To the left, just inside the entrance to the yard, several warped sheets of plywood lean against the wall. Soft mewling noises come from behind them. A little girl, who appears taller and older than the first, pulls back the wood and points to several small kittens tumbling around. White and pink flower barrettes hold back the girl's raven hair. Mud splotches stain her peach sweater and dark, navy blue pants. Her bare feet stand gingerly on the saturated soil that is embedded with bits of trash.

Hours later, the imposing concrete walls begin to cast long, weary shadows. As the daylight recedes, cold air silently tiptoes into the small yard. The whirring of drills and pounding of hammers gradually winds down, eventually giving way to utter silence. In the hushed moments just before twilight, the barefoot little girl runs out of her new, yet extremely simple house. With happiness and pride radiating like moonbeams from her smudged face, she exclaims, "Mi casa es bonita!"



## Tattoo Heart

*Brooke Elizabeth Manning*

The dark stains across his skin are not a sin, they save him. Etched into his veins, the pain made the unseeable scars fade away.

Now he sits in a hard, black chair waiting for his appointment that'll ease the sadness, to help his heart mend.

Looking down, he reflects on the inks that reside on his left side.

An anchor for his father, how he held him down to Earth so tight, even when the blades seemed to rip apart his wrists his dad always encouraged him to fight.

The Waterlily under his elbow for his sweet, sweet, little sister, who decided to take a dip but never came back up to take another breath.

The eagle for freedom, a cigarette purely because it's bad ass.

He turns his ring on his right hand, the circle that encases his mother's trust in him to stay pure, even though he only wears it to please her.

Now he sighs and looks at the clock, realizing this is about the time she would be walking through the front door.

But she isn't here anymore.

A pink ribbon about to be etched across his chest.



# My Unforgettable Mission

*Kenneth Russell*

While I was in the United States Army, I deployed to Iraq with the Second Infantry Division Third Brigade. There were many great soldiers in my unit. We became a family. One of those soldiers was like a mentor and role model for me: Sergeant Keith Coe.

After our unit settled into Iraq, we began going on missions. Some missions lasted a few hours, some almost twenty-four hours. There were days when twelve-hour missions turned into twenty hours. The length of the missions all depended on the day. I was part of a dismounted patrol team with Sergeant Keith Coe for the first half of the deployment, and then was a vehicle machine gun operator for the last half. The sun beat down on me all day long while in the gunner's hatch. Vehicle gunners take the brunt of extreme weather conditions. The wind from the vehicle in motion caused the sand from the desert floor to kick up, and regardless of the safety glasses that I wore, sand would fill my eyes. Sand also found its way into my ears, mouth, nose, lungs, and any other body cavity it could find. On this unforgettable day, the temperature had reached a scorching 120 degrees Fahrenheit. The weight of the gear I was carrying, in addition to fully loaded weapon magazines, made the actual temperature feel two times higher. It felt like there was no escape from the elements. Sergeant Coe was the only one that did not seem to be bothered by the extreme heat. He was always telling jokes that helped keep me as well as other members of the patrol in good spirits.

Sergeant Coe had one of the most distinct and obnoxious laughs that I have ever heard. It was one of those laughs that when you heard it, you would automatically identify who the person was before they entered a room. Until I met Sergeant Coe, I had never met anyone who could find humor during the most miserable situations. In the vehicles we used during our convoy missions, we would wear headsets connected to an internal communication system. The headsets seemed to magnify Sergeant Coe's laugh and sometimes caused a ringing in my ears. There were days when Sergeant Coe would laugh at his own jokes,

and then there were days when the members of the convoy and I would have to listen to his laugh for hours on end. We listened to his jokes, as well as his loud and obnoxious laugh through the amplified headsets. Sometimes we would try to imitate his laugh, hoping to shut him up, but our imitations only made him laugh more.

During missions, the meals I had to eat were good old-fashioned meals ready to eat, known as MRE's. For half of the time in Iraq, MRE's were most of my daily diet. At first, none of the MRE's were appetizing, but I eventually acquired a taste for them all. However, it took time to master the art of sitting in the gunner's hatch and eating while the vehicle was moving. The sand that kicked up from the Iraqi floor always added a little extra crunch to the meal. In the gunner's hatch, I also kept a tin of Grizzly Long Cut chewing tobacco with me to satisfy my nicotine craving; smoking was not allowed inside of military vehicles.

Our unit only had four months left of deployment. I was one of those people that would count down the days and months until I was back home. It was always hard to wrap my mind around the fact that not so long ago, I was just a civilian, and now I was soldier experiencing a combat deployment. When I could count the months until I was back home on one hand, I became ecstatic because I did not realize how much I had taken for granted before deployment. When I would think about my tour coming to an end, numerous thoughts circulated in my mind about what I wanted to do when I got back home. I would drink an ice- cold beer. I would eat whenever I wanted and whatever I wanted. I would use my own toilet in air conditioning and be able to close the bathroom door. I started thinking about it, and the thoughts of what I had taken for granted before deployment were endless. Sergeant Coe was excited to get back home as well. His wife was pregnant at the time, and he wanted to be back for the birth of his child.

Our convoy of four vehicles was on a routine mission on the 27th day of April 2010. I was the gunner for the third vehicle in the convoy. Sergeant Coe was part of the dismount team and riding in the rear last vehicle in the convoy. I was scanning my sectors with my mounted weapon. I was facing the nine o' clock position, which was center of the left-hand side of the vehicle. It was awkwardly quiet that day. The streets and villages appeared to be empty with no sign of life. Usually there were local Iraqi children swarming and begging us for "...water, food, candy." On a normal day, there would have been a game of street soccer down some of the streets, and Iraqi locals would have been roaming the streets in their villages going about their daily lives. The friendly locals would wave, smile, and cheer because we were there.

Nevertheless, just as regularly, there were others that were upset by our presence. I could tell by the looks on their faces. However, on 27 April 2010 there was not a single sign of life on the streets. There were no smiling or angry faces. Sergeant Coe was also being very quiet that day, which was not normal for him; he was usually the loudest person. No one in the convoy was really talking that day. There was a weird, eerie feeling in the atmosphere.

Our convoy began to cross a bridge in the middle of a small Iraqi village. We had crossed that same bridge on previous missions, so it was familiar to me. It looked like the same hopeless and rundown bridge on any other given day. Just as I went to rotate my gunner's turret to the three o' clock position to switch my sector of fire, I heard a loud explosion that sounded like it was in close vicinity of our convoy. The explosion was near enough to rattle my vehicle the same way a mini earthquake would do. I felt a blast of heat brush across my face as if someone just turned a hot blow dryer on and pointed it in my direction. To see if I could visually locate the source of the explosion, I rotated my turret. That is when I noticed that Sergeant Coe's vehicle was engulfed in a pitch-black cloud of smoke. For a moment, I froze in shock.

Sergeant Coe's vehicle came slowly rolling out of the smoke and came to a stop. Our commander, Captain Kuhlman, was with us as part of the convoy. After Captain Kuhlman noticed what happened, he started requesting for a medical team to come to our location immediately. While waiting for a medical team to arrive, I scanned my sectors of fire, hoping that I would see the person responsible for the attack. There was nobody in my line of sight. I noticed a group of Iraqi locals about one mile down the road from where our convoy was located, but they did not seem to be posing any additional threats. Just to be certain, a member of our convoy went to cordon them off. Meanwhile, one of our assigned medical personnel rendered aid to the wounded of the hit vehicle. At that time, I could not tell if anyone had been killed, but I did witness one soldier who was missing half of his right arm and screaming in pain. Another soldier's clothes had spots of blood, and his face was covered in black soot from the explosion.

It seemed as if time stood still that day. After what had felt like an eternity, the medical team finally arrived in a helicopter. The medics immediately went to the rear vehicle with a stretcher and medical supplies. A few moments later, from behind the hit vehicle, they carried a stretcher with someone laying on it. I could not tell who was on it or if the person was alive, so I continued to scan my sectors as the medics were rendering aid. After the medical team had air lifted the wounded

and casualties to base, Captain Kuhlman informed us that Sergeant Coe was killed during the attack. We had an interpreter with our convoy that day, and he died in the attack as well. We later found out that an improvised explosive device was the weapon responsible for the deaths and casualties.

Our convoy proceeded back to the forward operating base. No one said a word the entire ride back. We were all in shock and could not wrap our minds around what had happened. Upon arrival at our base, members that were not part of our convoy greeted us and asked us if we were okay. They assisted us with unloading equipment from our vehicles. They were all worried as well. By monitoring radio transmissions back at the base, they had found out what happened to our convoy. The environment was full of emotions. The reality of what had happened settled into our hearts and minds. All of us that were on the convoy broke down in tears once our adrenaline rush wore off. Never have I experienced so many emotions come over me in one single day.

The day following the incident was atypical. Before the attack, everybody was always talkative and cheerful. The day after Sergeant Coe was killed, there was a feeling of sadness and gloom in the air. The feeling felt thick enough to cut with a machete. It is hard to explain, really. It was one of those feelings that someone would have to experience themselves to understand. No one in the unit seemed to be talking to one another. Most of us were lost in our own thoughts and trying to make sense of what had happened. Some of us realized it could have been any one of us in that vehicle that day.

Regardless of what had happened, I knew I still had more missions to complete, but from that day forward, every bump I hit while out on the dirt roads while on missions startled me. There were times that I just accepted the fact that there was a real possibility that I would not be returning home alive. After I had accepted that reality, for the most part, I was able to keep myself focused for the remainder of the deployment.

During the rest of the missions, we would tell stories about the funny things that Sergeant Coe said and did. He was the type of person that kept everybody's motivation up by just being himself and being a great leader. I did not know him as long or as well as others in the unit knew him, but I knew him long enough and well enough to know he was one of the Army's finest leaders, and I know he cared about others. Sergeant Keith Coe and that April Day in 2010 changed my life forever. It was and remains a mission that is unforgettable.



## Driving at Night

*Bradley Hampton*

Every light – woven by the collective hands of mankind: crafted out of pure necessity. Red, yellow, and green – to govern the flow of traffic. The bluish-white, adorning every street – simply to dispel the darkness. All serving obvious, logical, functional purposes, and yet they paint such brilliant pigments onto the pavement. Headlights stretch across the boulevard in parallel rays, coupled like the twins of Gemini. The silent expressions of dark silhouettes hang outside windows, or elongate from beneath lamp-posts. All beautiful images, captured by circumstance – illuminated by four-million starlights, arranged whimsically.

At every instance, society sets these scenes on every corner, every alleyway – esoteric to only those who admire their mystique. A moment passes – a new stroke against the canvas, contrived with no aesthetic thought from our non-sentient artist, and yet the same lively charm. Another moment passes – implicitly connected with the last. And again. And again – tracing out an infinite web of something like constellations.





Andrew Howell, *Zombie*. Charcoal on paper, 2018.





## Welcome to Historic Point Pleasant

*Dominic Pistritto*

The woods were silent, allowing the crickets to chirp their familiar songs of the endless void. The trees looked dead in their stance of decaying bark and hanging branches. The mist acted as a sentient being, showering the woods with its mysterious affection. The moon above beamed down its heavenly light cascading on a tree which was dead and leafless. The moonlight, parallel with the stars above, seemed to dance in a slow fashion which beckoned more stars to move along in their place. An owl sat perched on the highest branch overlooking the perimeter of the area, taking in everything it saw before searching for food. It stayed motionless like the branch it sat on. It let out its low and hollow hoot for any sign of life to respond so the animal could investigate. It tried again and again but no response from anything. The owl was quite truly the only animal in the woods, excluding the crickets. The mist seemed to get thicker and more abundant. The moonlight gradually ceased to be and the temperature dropped significantly. All around the owl was pitch blackness. The crickets ceased their songs of the night. Dead silence filled the air and the owl grew uncomfortable. It spread out its wings, ready to take off until it stopped with uncertainty.

The owl was suddenly pushed off the branch with its head bitten off, allowing the rest of the body to plop on the cool ground. Its feathers danced in the air as they flew away with the current of the cold bitter wind. A creature clicked and clacked as it ate the head of the nocturnal feathered creature. The moonlight reappeared and shined on the thing that killed the owl. The animal had wings that resembled a trench coat with cuts and bruises everywhere. Its legs twitched and convulsed at random. Its skin looked decayed and decomposed like a corpse freshly dug out of the earth. Once it ate the head, it flew downwards to the rest of the owl's body and used its long, sharp and slender fingers to pierce through it. It picked it up and ate the rest of the bloody form charring through the heart. The creature closed its long and carnivorous mouth, twitching and rubbing its face with its wing. It was satisfied for now. The moonlight reflected its unnaturally tall physique parallel with its

two furry antennae. Its eyes were as red as blood. They glowed with a devilish purpose. It was almost like a demon that escaped hell looking for its next victim to drag down to the underworld. The bioluminescent shade of red seemed to echo in the night intimidating any other creature if there were any.

It belched out a long and un-earthly like roar that would make any man drop to his knees in fear and pain. The scream was the equivalent to long nails being scratched on a chalk board for five minutes following a chorus of screaming children. Its wings sprawled out with its claws clenched like a fist. It bent its decomposing legs and propelled upwards into the night sky to become one with the heavens. Without moving its wings, it glided through the night sky with evil intent. Its black feathers flapped against the brisk and cool air as it flew deeper into the night. Clicking and clacking again in a state of repetition it looked for some form of creature to stalk and prey upon. From below, the animal looked as if it were a bat propelling through the sky, inflicting fear upon anyone who gazed upon it. The midnight archangel flew back into the woods once more and landed behind a billboard next to a desolate road that said, "Welcome to Historic Point Pleasant: Where History and Rivers Meet. Est. 1762." It stood behind the billboard enjoying the darkness of the night. It shook its wings and dust fell to the ground in a perfect circle. It was like a snake's skin falling off for the first time. It squealed and twitched as a passing car zoomed by with its headlights shining on its wings. The wings seemed to bake in the headlights. They were scorched, causing steam to rise from the black charred and leathery wings. Its red eyes seemed bigger as it took off into the sky once more to hunt the source of the monster's pain.

A car down below drove faster and quicker in fear because of what the driver saw. The woman glanced at the creature and screamed in horror. Never in her life had she rested her eyes on such a hideous, terrifying creature. The black Honda zoomed past the trees and saw civilization in the distance. Distinct lights meant an escape from the current paranoia that she felt coursing through her veins. The fear in her mind was as heavy as a thanksgiving turkey. Her temples pulsed, her grip on the steering wheel grew tighter and her foot gradually grew heavier on the accelerator. The distance from the town to the car was growing nearer and closer by the second. She could feel the relief washing over her like a tsunami. Maybe there was hope? That hope was decimated when a giant claw pierced through the titanium roof of the vehicle. The roof was torn off and the woman was swept out of her seat before she could even scream. The car crashed into an overgrown tree

trunk with its emergency horn blaring, interrupting the slumber of the peaceful sleeping animals in the vicinity. The angel of the damned had finally found its victim to plunge into the depths of the underworld.

Missing Persons Case File No. 554357B

On the night of [REDACTED] October [REDACTED], 2018 at approximately [REDACTED] a vehicle was found on the side of the road abandoned a few yards away from the welcoming billboard near Point Pleasant, West Virginia. The vehicle was found by an elderly lady named [REDACTED] walking her dog when she noticed a roof of a car was sitting near the side of the road with claw marks slashed on the exterior. When police arrived the vehicle was identified as a [REDACTED] owned by Mrs. Lyla [REDACTED] who registered the car back in [REDACTED] 2009. Mother of three and married, she has been confirmed missing as of the time this document is being written on 10/[REDACTED]/18. The slash marks on the perimeter of the vehicle were estimated that they were inflicted before time of the crash. [REDACTED] speckled throughout the scene were collected as evidence. Further investigation is required to find Mrs. [REDACTED] and reunite her with her family. Possible [REDACTED] man abduction?



# Free Will and Determinism

*Skye Lauren Moss*

In the below freezing middle of winter in Brooklyn, New York, surrounded by earthy toned mold painted on the walls, in an unlit room that robbed me of each paycheck from working as a maid, it was I, who awoke each morning, full of optimism. When I had forced myself to fall asleep to forget about the hunger pains, nevermind the fever I knew was present simply because I couldn't afford a doctor's appointment, and dragging my feet home from singing auditions I was rejected from, carrying a thousand pound dream that no one else was able to see, it was still I, who awoke each morning, convinced I could change my life. It was my internal locus of control that made me believe that I truly had full control of the outcome of my life. The idea that I could be anything that I could've ever imagined was possible, within reason. However, who is to measure that reason. What if the reason I was successful was the same reason that someone else was not? Undoubtedly, free will is executed throughout our everyday lives, but who is to say that those with completely different circumstances in life couldn't already have a predetermined fate that was far from within their control? Who is to deny determinism?

According to free will, a person is responsible for his or her own actions. It is the idea that we all have choices in how we act, and are free to choose our behavior. In theory, this makes sense; however, when executed fully considering the life circumstances that are less common and do not fit the norm, it is unrealistic to assume that free will is strong enough alone to change someone's life. Imagine the emotional and physical abuse that someone has endured throughout their childhood, that has caused them develop Major Depression, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I find myself constantly questioning whether or not someone's past should determine their future or whether or not someone's past inevitably determines their future.

Through personal experiences, I believe that the theory of determinism is most evident in my life through the abuse I suffered from as a child, both physically and sexually. It is the reason why I suffer

from depression, dropped out of college, and moved off to a dangerous city, where I struggled living on my own. Words cannot explain how many times I held that problem solver to my head, double dog daring myself to pull the trigger on three, hoping to conveniently forget how to count after two. I was convinced that living on an Earth that felt like burning in hell was simply my fate and the heat I felt beneath each step was from seeds of fire planted long, long ago. I gave up, because considering everything I had been through, where I was in life was expected. However, one must never use determinism as a means to justify apathy in the actions it takes to change one's life. Although all the adversity I faced at such a young age that forever changed me was not my fault, it is without a doubt my responsibility to take the good, bad, and ugly that life has thrown my way, and do everything possible to overcome the hardships and still be successful. That is where free will and determinism are bridged together. Determinism must always be acknowledged and considered; however, without the idea of free will, there would be no reason for those like myself to wake up every morning with a reason to live because we would constantly feel like our lives were set up for failure. Free will is simply faith meeting action. I must use every last bit of fight in me to create a better future for myself because no one else will fight for my future harder than me.

Thus, even in the below freezing middle of winter in Brooklyn, New York, suffocating in feelings of abandonment, worry, and distress, it was I, who awoke each morning, full of optimism. When carrying a thousand pounds of burden placed upon shoulders, it was still I, who awoke each morning, convinced I could change my life.



Rianna Chaney, *Untitled*. Oil on board, 2018.



## Emily

*Michelle Edwards*

Dear Diary,  
I met a girl! She's got long dark hair and I'm not sure if she's gay, but God. I want to know her.

Dear Diary,  
She talked to me today! She asked me for a pen and I stuttered three times before saying "Sure." She smiled so wide I could see a chip in one of her teeth.

Dear Diary,  
I found out her name is Emily. We got paired for a project and when she put her contact in my phone she spent a whole minute looking for an emoji to put by her name. I was so distracted by the little plant that I almost didn't hear her ask me to coffee.

Dear Diary,  
Emily has two dogs. Emily has the prettiest hands I've ever seen. And nose. And eyes. She drinks her coffee with more sugar than I've ever seen and we didn't talk about schoolwork once, so I think it was a date. I hope it was a date.

Dear Diary,  
We went rollerblading tonight. She was really bad so I grabbed her hand when she was falling and I didn't let go. I saw her skating circles around the others when I came back from the bathroom. I didn't call her out for faking.

Dear Diary,  
SHE KISSED ME! SHE. KISSED. ME. Oh my God she kissed me and it tasted like coconut. She seemed so unsure when she asked like she can't see how my heart melts when I look at her. It was awkward and wonderful and everything I've ever wanted. I can't stop thinking about coconuts.

Dear Diary,

I met Emily's dogs today. While they were jumping all over me her mother came in and she introduced me as her girlfriend like it was the easiest thing. When we went upstairs she asked if that was okay. I told her that I've never been more okay in my entire life and she smiled like she just won the lottery.

Dear Diary,

I'm dating a girl. She's got long dark hair and takes her coffee like syrup. She laughs when I can't stop looking at her lips and then kisses me anyway. I love her. I think she loves me too.





## alaska

*Victor Perrotti*

to lie down to sleep, in gray-green glacial stream; inhaling icy emerald current  
while majestic monsters hold their places against a draining lake  
    sockeye clouds whisk  
        clinging to mountainside  
my head resting softly on quartz and granite  
cradled in smooth sculpted epoch erosion  
dreaming on cold pillows of speckled eggs  
the natives are hunting deep within the forest of a moss covered blanket  
spruce and hemlock creep into my side  
    rooting into viscera  
salmon have returned, back from the salty sea  
    to be greeted by death  
bear heeds the invitation to replenish fat reserves  
moving down from slopes of steep rebellious youth  
claw and teeth arrive to maul the fasting fish  
    transformed in a struggle, now clad in ruby red with greenish head  
    metamorphose males, acquire humpbacks and hooked snout horror  
as the sow feeds her cubs in a gluttonous orgy of pink flesh  
half a carcass discarded; left behind to rot on the stream's bank  
    in his dinosaur body, raven calls out the kill  
despite their violation the behemoth return  
led by ancient instinct, across countless miles  
plotted on nautical charts of primitive thoughts  
final destination fixation, the place of conception  
within nests of stone  
    eggs are carefully deposited to receive showers of milt  
an expansive wilderness of blooming fireweed, kaleidoscope the mind's eye  
signaling the coming end of a short summer smitten  
meditative animal mind, breathing jaws of essence  
unforgiving aboriginal frontier  
    steeped in flesh and bone  
locked hostile ice and stone  
    hearth and home—alaska



## Will He Stay or Have to Go?

*DeOnna Walker*

It was a cold day, and although the sun was shining bright, all I can remember is a cloud hanging over my head, doubt and fear tugging at my heart. Our appointment was early, and as we sat there waiting for our attorney to arrive, we both kept playing out the different scenarios that could happen during this interview. We had been married for years, we had an adult son, and we had a life we had built together over the past twenty years. The thought of that being taken away from us, the thought of him being taken away from me, scared me more than anything had ever scared me before in my life.

We met in 1994. I was a junior in high school and my best friend Ginger and I had gone roller skating one Wednesday night. He was there, attempting to skate, but spending ninety-nine percent of the time on his rear end on the floor. I had always had a thing for Hispanic guys. I'm not really sure why, but as soon as I saw him I knew I wanted to meet him. He was horribly shy, worried that his grasp of the English language wasn't good enough to carry on a conversation with me. I went home that night with stars in my eyes and a fluttering heart and I could not wait to see him again!

And I did see him again, a week later, playing pool at a local campground. I had met a friend in town at the mall and had ridden with her to the Yogi Bear Campground to see if he was there. I was too nervous to go alone. When I saw his light blue Toyota Corolla in the parking lot, I felt the butterflies in my stomach begin to go crazy. I felt nauseous and excited and nervous all at the same time. Eventually my friend left, and Ricardo agreed to give me a ride back to my car.

As we sat in the parking lot at the mall, we were both nervously fidgeting, not quite sure what to say or do. After a few minutes, I told him I better get home, and he leaned over and gave me the sweetest kiss ever. I knew from that moment that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. And I did. I ended up pregnant (and to this day I do not regret it at all), and after our son was born, we moved in together. We had our ups and downs. We were two independent young people who

all of a sudden had someone else's feelings to consider all the time. He hated not being able to go out with his friends whenever he wanted, and as badly as I had wanted to move out of my mom's home, it seemed like all I wanted to do was go back and visit every day. Needless to say, we had some heated arguments and there were lots of tears, but we stuck through it.

We always had this black cloud following us around. You see, my husband is from Mexico, and he was undocumented. I had tried doing research on my own to find out what we would need to do to get his residency, but it was such a complicated process. I really think they do that on purpose to discourage people who may qualify from following through, which is what happened to us. In 2000, I filed the initial petition that was required so that he would be able to do all of the paperwork here and not have to go back to Mexico to complete the process. Several weeks later, we received a request for additional information in the mail and he didn't want to provide it. He was scared, and I was too. So we ignored the request and went on living our lives with that black cloud still hanging over us.

The black cloud is hard to describe. It was everywhere. When he would leave to go to work in the morning, I worried about him getting through the day without an immigration raid at the job site they were at that particular day. When he would drive, I would worry about a police officer stopping him because of the color of his skin and take him away from me and our son. Normal everyday tasks that other people take for granted were a constant, overwhelming fear for us. We had discussed giving the whole process another try, and had even had a consultation with an attorney. She had said that our case was a little more complicated because we had filed that initial petition but never followed through so it was denied. It would be harder, but she thought it was possible. Ricardo still wasn't confident that he wouldn't be ripped from his family, so we just let things be and tried not to worry too much. We lived in that constant state of worry before something, or rather someone, happened that made us realize we had to do something. That someone was Donald Trump.

We didn't take him seriously in the beginning. Seriously, who would think that Donald Trump would win the Republican nomination, much less the presidency? The more he campaigned and the more we heard about his plans for the undocumented individuals that were here in the United States, the sicker and more scared we became. I consulted with a couple of different attorneys, and we decided on one in Virginia Beach whose parents were actually immigrants.

We were lucky. We had saved up over the years and we were able to afford all of the filing fees and attorney fees. Not everyone who would actually qualify to become a resident would be able to afford that kind of money.

Applications were filled out and filed, his background check was done, but then we had another obstacle slap us in the face. I was to be his sponsor, which means if for some reason he is not able to find work right away, I will support him. It also meant that if he was approved and he ever (even if we were to divorce) received any type of help from the government such as Medicaid or food stamps, I would be responsible for paying the government back. So of course, they wanted me to be making a certain amount of money, which I was not. We were frustrated beyond belief.

Once that was worked out, it wasn't long before he received his work permit and was able to apply for a social security number. He began studying for the driver's test so that he could get a driver's license, and things seemed to be going well. But we still had that little black cloud following us that we couldn't ignore. We still had to go for our interview with the immigration officer, who would then recommend (or not recommend) approval.

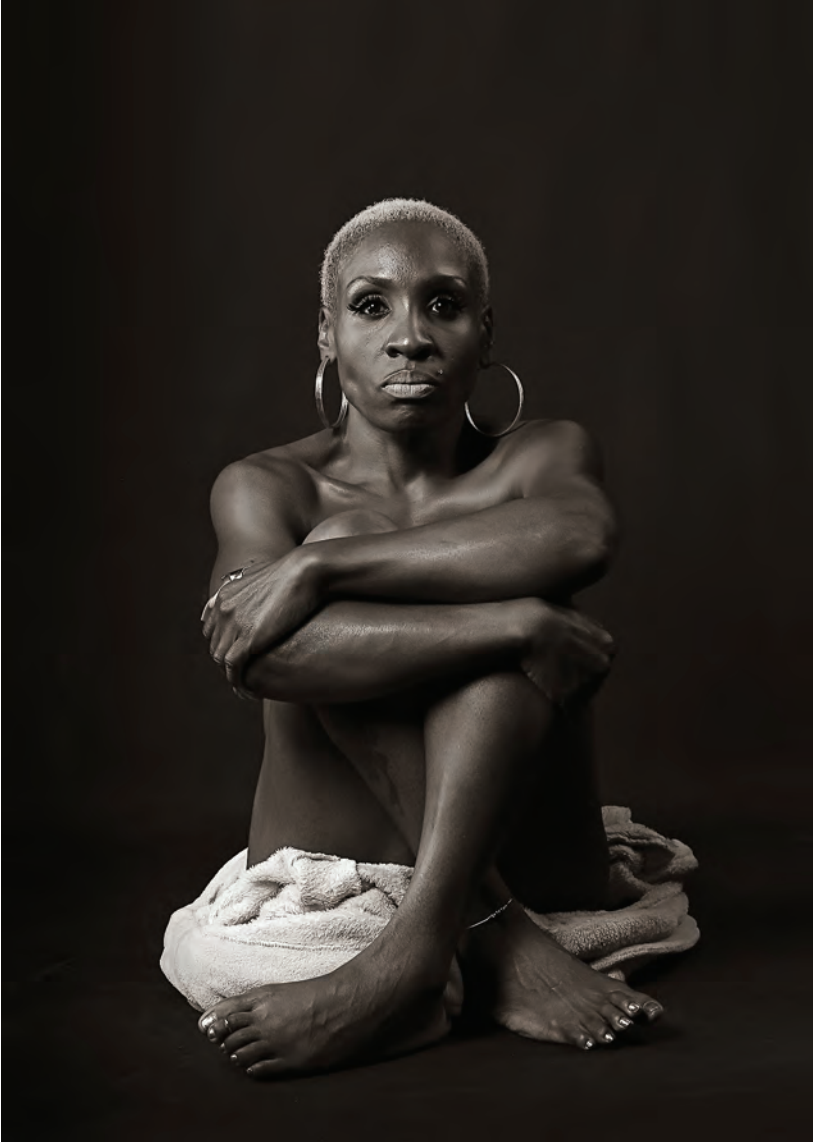
So there we were, waiting in the car, when our attorney pulled up. We met her at the door and worked our way through security. While in the lobby waiting for our turn, we went over possible questions, how we should answer, and our attorney told us we needed to relax. "Everything is going to be okay," she said. As badly as I wanted to believe her, I still wasn't sure. Had we made the right decision? What if I had to leave that building without him for some reason? What if I answered a question wrong? And as nervous as I was, he was so much more so. This was it. There was no turning back. As we sat there in the gloomy lobby, the only sounds were our breathing and the occasional cry of a child. All we could do was wait.

When his name was called, we followed our attorney and the translator to the immigration officer's office. I watched her, trying to gauge her, to see if I could tell if she would be sympathetic or just plain mean. She was pleasant, and while all of our questions were easy, I wasn't able to read her. What was she thinking?

Then the unexpected happened. Most of the time a person has no idea when he or she leaves the interview what the recommendation will be. Someone can be left to wait several weeks longer, still living in fear each and every day. When the interview ended we all stood up, and as she shook our hands, she told us that she would be recommending

approval of our petition. I had held myself together so well through the years of living in fear as well as the previous months going through this whole confusing, intimidating process. When she told us what her recommendation would be, I lost it. I cried like I had not cried in years. Our attorney wrapped her arms around me and cried with me while my husband was standing there wondering what was going on since he had not heard what the officer had said! We all shed tears in that gloomy lobby where I am sure more bad news is handed out than good news. We were two of the lucky ones.

When his green card came in the mail a few weeks later, it was real. He could no longer be called illegal or undocumented. We cried again, happy tears, because finally we could be normal, if there is such a thing.



LaShawn Henderson, *Christina*. Digital photograph, 2018.



## Here I am

*Myesha Chanton*

I am of the unknown  
Not yet brought into the world  
Existence out of my control  
But yet here I come  
Birth was something you didn't have to do  
My sister your first born  
Thoughtfully your last  
And yet here I come

Crying, pushing, breathing heavily out your sorrows  
Congratulations a beautiful baby girl  
A mother you've become  
A daughter undeserved  
Proud father; rare resemblance  
Creation of a family out of wedlock  
I am no longer of the unknown  
Yet here I am

Growing older into a woman  
Hard road to get here  
Sneakiness, arguments, beatings too often  
Molded into a legacy of Queens  
Thoughts of you being the enemy  
When actually you were my savior  
Thankful for the life given  
Here I am



## Gymnopédie No. 2

*Melyssa Mizal*

Molly ordered a chamomile tea and sat in one of the booths inside Wilson's Cafe. She watched as the sun was setting. Immersing herself further into the seat, she thought James is rather late. He's probably getting off work. Nothing to worry about. The clock chimed on the wall.

"Hey, sorry I'm late."

"You're fine. How was work sweetheart?"

"Good. Nothing new."

She looked at his nails.

"Honey... I thought we already talked about this."

"I'm sorry, I'm trying my best. I-"

"I know, I know. I just want you to be ok. For us to be ok."

"We are ok. I'm ok."

Molly looked out the window.

"Hey you're ok, right?"

"Yeah. I am."

"I really don't want to see a therapist. I'm not comfortable with it."

"Helena told me-"

"Helena doesn't know what she's talking about."

"All I'm saying is that her therapist helps her, that's all."

James didn't order anything.

"Are you going to order anything sweetheart?"

"I might just get a water- I'm not really thirsty for anything."

"You know how much I care about you, right?"

"I know Molls. I just don't know how to get better."



"Maybe we can go visit your mother this weekend. Maybe that'll help. She always knows how to get you to be happier."

"I don't know... It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know. I just don't know anymore."

Molly finished her cup of tea. She offered her gloves to James. He didn't take it.



Rachel Taunton, *The Girl*. Linocut, 2018.



## Home with a new set of eyes

*Emily Zehir*

I've always found a comfort in airports, the long hallways that seemed to go on forever, filled with people from all over the world, all the different languages that are spoken, and the smell of cleaning products mixed with the smell of old coffee and sometimes food. I didn't think I would be able to be in that setting again until my parents announced that my brother and I would be going to Turkey to visit for the summer. I was super excited to go back to Turkey, but what I didn't know is that the place I once called home would not be what I remembered at all, and the memories of my childhood would prove to be an illusion.

After planning for the whole year, the day had finally come, finally I would be going back to Turkey. We got to the airport four hours after we left our home, and my brother and I checked in. We said our good byes to our parents and made our way through TSA to our gate. Shortly upon arriving to our gate they called our seat numbers and we boarded. The plane was cold, and the lights were dimmed making my brother and I tired as we found our seats. The anticipation was building up inside and I had a feeling in my stomach, kind of like when riding a roller coaster. My brother automatically fell asleep and I was left alone to my thoughts. I closed my eyes and tried to remember the Turkey I knew, I remembered eating watermelon, the sticky juice running down my chin as I danced around to the music playing in the house, my friend dancing with me. My mother would tell me that it was time to go to the beach and without hesitation my friend and I would run out onto the hot, stone street. The scolding stone would burn my feet as I looked at the ocean below me and ran, determined to swim in the beautiful bright blue waters of the Aegean Sea. Finally, my mother would catch me and force me to put shoes on. Again, I was off to the water that was calling my name, this time with protection on my feet. I remembered swimming in the cool, healing waters of the Aegean Sea, and feeling comfort. I would swim for hours and then sit on the beach with my best friend and devour corn like I was breathing. I smiled to myself, opening my eyes and looking out the window to the city of Istanbul below me.

Finally, we had landed, and my brother and I rushed to get our luggage and go through passport control. I could feel my heartbeat in my chest as the feeling in my stomach amplified, and my brother and I walked out the gate into the city that was beaming with people. I looked around and what I saw impacted me forever, men, women, and children dressed in rags, crying and begging or selling anything and sometimes everything they had for money or food. The streets were littered with all kinds of garbage, and a few moments later the smell of rotten eggs, wet dog, and week-old trash filled my nosed. I covered my nose and gagged, I would never get used to the smell. The next week we traveled to Izmir and it was completely different that from what I remembered, people living in the streets, cars driving without rules on the roads, and street dogs laying on the ground. I went to the bathroom at our apartment and cried, my whole life I had remembered a place that was just sunshine and happiness, but in reality, Turkey was messy and broken and no one knew.

That day I realized that my whole life I took everything I had for granted, I disregarded every privilege I had and thought it was a right. My family came to America to save my brother and I from the wrongdoings of their countries and, while yes, the Aegean Sea was still a beautiful blue and the corn was still delicious as ever, I saw Turkey with a different set of eyes. Not only did I see the beautiful place I had once called home, I saw a poor country with so many problems. Since that day I vowed that I would appreciate everything I had and not take anything for granted, living here has given me opportunities that I would have anywhere else and while upset at first, I'm happy I was able to experience my home through a new set of eyes.



## Last Breaths

*Heather Means*

I had never watched someone die before. When I was little, I knew of people who had died; I had just never seen it happen. I always thought of death as being a spectacular moment when angels would fly down and escort the person up into white fluffy clouds. When I got a little older and I learned that only the spirit left the body, I imagined the spirit peacefully floating away like a dandelion puff blowing in the wind. However, I now realize that death is a somber, still moment, marked only by the lack of a single breath.

Uncle Bill, Mom's younger brother, had been battling cancer for several months. Mom and I had traveled to Ohio multiple times to visit with him in the hospital. During the last trip, I knew he did not have that much longer left. He had no strength to get out of bed. He felt nauseous constantly, and it completely exhausted him to talk. The decision was made to transfer Uncle Bill from the hospital to my grandparents' house, so that he could be in a comfortable, familiar place. Mom and I returned home, knowing that we would be traveling back to Ohio soon.

A week or two later, the phone rang early one morning. As soon as I heard the shrill sound, my heart sank. I knew what it was for. While Mom answered the phone, I packed clothes and toiletries in a bag, not knowing how long we would be gone. Mom walked into my room with tears in her eyes. "Grandma just called. She said we should come up."

After a nine-hour road trip, we finally arrived at my grandparents' house in Ohio at about seven o'clock in the evening. We quietly shuffled into the dark living room where the rest of Mom's family were already sitting. Uncle Bill lay on a hospital bed in front of the window. He looked extremely weak and exhausted. I hung back as Mom walked over to the bed and hugged her brother. The last rational words I heard Uncle Bill weakly whisper were to my mom, "I told you I'd see you again." For the rest of the evening, he lapsed in and out of fitful sleep.

The next day, Uncle Bill lay quietly, his sides heaving with every breath. Great-Grandma came to see her grandson one last time. I held

her hand as she sat alone in a corner, crying. Family members and a few close friends milled about. As I sat on the floor, I noticed that Uncle Bill was so tall that his feet hung off the bed, even though it was an extra-long hospital bed. I could not believe that this great hulk of a man was dying right in front of me. Besides appearing tired and weak, he did not look sick at all. He still looked like the tall, bulky uncle that I had always known.

The rest of the day proceeded slowly. No one talked or moved. We just sat, waiting for the inevitable moment we knew was coming yet dreaded horribly. Sometime that afternoon, Uncle Bill sat straight up, trembling, shaking his arms, and in a panicked state, cried out, "Dad! Help me!" Grandpa rushed over and folded his son into his arms. He rubbed Uncle Bill's back, comforting him. Grandma went over and sat behind Uncle Bill so that he could lean back on her to support his weight. Grandpa whispered, "Go to Jesus, Bill. It's okay; just go to Jesus. It's alright." As Grandma sat supporting Uncle Bill's weight, she sang 'Amazing Grace' to him while stroking his head. She no doubt sang her son into the world when he was born and was now singing him out of it. Mom and I gathered blankets and pillows to make Grandma and Grandpa more comfortable while they sat there comforting their son for the last time. After Uncle Bill was completely calm, they laid him back down.

A few hours later, just before seven thirty in the evening, I noticed Uncle Bill's raspy breathing become shallower. His sides barely moved. Straining my ears, I quickly leaned forward, listening. A breath in, a breath out, in and out. A breath in.... a breath out. There were no more.



## Lone Wolf

*Mackenzie Leshner*

The wolf sits near the moon,  
On silver snow  
With a puff of frost  
Exhaling from its muzzle.

The wolf sits near the moon,  
A lone survivor,  
On the snowdrift  
That sits at the top of the world.

The wolf sits near the moon,  
Yellow eyes,  
Burning with anguish  
In contrast to the cold midnight skies.

A wolf sits near the moon,  
Howling,  
A tormented cry  
On the tip of frost laden lips.

A wolf cries near the moon,  
Despairing,  
Always alone  
In the desolate edge of the world.



*Perdida*  
(lost)

*Maria Llanos*

I woke up in a land I did not know.  
Walked down the street and, tightly,  
I held my mother's hand.  
When I listened to people's conversations,  
I pretended to understand.

Growing up, restraint,  
there were places I could not go.  
Permission slips declined for my school trips.  
"Shhhh" ...my mother would whisper.  
No one should find out about our little secret.

Children in the playground  
called me Mary, Marie,  
Mariah, Maree...  
no one said my name.  
I was tucked away in a corner;  
they put headphones over my ears.

"Quack, moo, oink, roar, meow."  
"Quack, moo, oink, roar, meow."

I glance over at the others.  
They are learning to multiply.  
They are reading poems.  
They are learning history.  
It seems fun.

"Quack, moo, oink, roar, meow."



I learned from young  
what the word betrayal meant.  
“repeat this”, “say that”,  
my so-called amigos would say.  
Under my name, no golden star  
appeared for that day.

Red and blue lights  
would make my hands shake  
Those lights meant hide.  
Those lights meant good bye.

I worked hard to become one of them.  
I learned the pledge of allegiance;  
I learned to play the same games  
I learned to dream the same way.

Yet, the man on the screen states, bigly,  
That the bread we shared at my house  
was stolen bread.

However, back then,  
I could not go back,  
and I could not stay.



Stephen Jackson, *Baree III*. Digital photograph, 2017.



## Coiled Conscious

*Skye Lauren Moss*

Maybe it was the Rapunzel length French braids in Samantha's hair that made her so beautiful, or perhaps the silkiness of Charlotte's bone straight hair which allowed her to use these cute sparkly rubber bands without them getting lost or tangled that made her hair much more aesthetic than mine. Half of my seventh-grade year was spent admiring the backs of other girl's heads, wondering what hair products they could've used in their hair to make it look so shiny and long. I always find myself comparing the growth of theirs flowing down their backs, to the tips of my curls lying just above my ear. When I would count the number of times a peer would choose to complement their hair over mine, it felt like counting sheep, but never falling asleep. I learned at a young age that some people simply have preferences that my appearance won't always match, however it seemed as if no one had ever preferred my hair over the more fair skinned girls in the classroom. I remember just wanting to feel as beautiful as the white girls with the long, straight hair. The next day, that want became a reality. I had never felt more beautiful and I had never felt more unlike myself until the day I chose to straighten my hair.

I bolted off the school bus like never before, key in hand, prepared to quickly open the front door, ready to race upstairs into my bathroom. I plugged in my straightening iron and blow dryer. I decided a few moments later to also plug in my curling iron just in case, because I had just remembered that curly hair was only acceptable when minimally and manually done. After 30 minutes of washing my hair, with a well-earned limp wrist and strained neck, my afro was ready to be tamed. I began sectioning off my hair into eight puff balls and began to straighten bit by bit, section by section. Blinding myself by the smoke and steam in the bathroom, and suffocating from the burning oil and hair grease perfume, I continued to smile at my reflection in the mirror, because I felt that with each tightly coiled curl that was straightened, I was becoming what society considered more beautiful. Disregarding the damaging effects the heat had on my hair, I actually started to believe that myself.

As I took my first steps into the school building the next day, questions immediately flustered my brain. Would anyone notice? Would anyone recognize me? Would the other kids laugh, or praise me? When I finally found the courage to walk through the threshold of the classroom door, everyone turned in my direction, gaping at what they were witnessing. I stood, feet glued to the ground, waiting for a vocal reaction from someone, anyone to reassure me that I shouldn't feel embarrassed about how I looked or the decision I abruptly made less than 16 hours prior. Within seconds, Samantha, and Charlotte, along with other friends ran up to me with glistening eyes, running their fingers through my silky, long hair. Overwhelmed with compliments, I remained silent and simply smiled as I proceeded to my seat. I had never in my entire life been given so much attention over such a simple change. Completely disregarding my Math teacher's entire lesson, I spent the rest of that class period asking myself why I had not made this decision much sooner.

For once in my life, I was the "pretty girl." For once, I was just as beautiful as the others. Although, for once, I didn't feel like myself. Even with all the compliments from every single person I had hoped to hear them from, I knew what my hair would look like if someone were to pour a single drop of water on my head. I knew that the second I washed my hair and didn't repeat the process of straightening it again, I would no longer be considered attractive and that no one would again glance in my direction. The worst feeling to have as a teenager was knowing that who I tried to be was a million times better than who I truly was.

I soon realized that flat ironing my hair was me searching for approval from others, and as a result gave others power over my self-esteem. Straightening my curls made the unhealthy statement that I was willing to conform to society's standards of beauty. Embarrassingly to admit, I changed my hairstyle merely to impress children who were indecisive about their own favorite color, which changed about five times from sunrise to sunset. No child should ever feel the need to change their genetic features to feel accepted by others. There would be no explanation needed if I chose to do it without any outside influence, however, that was not the case. In the attempt to please others, I ended up hurting myself. But what is to be expected when young black girls are humiliated every day for our unique features. When we are constantly criticized for our naturally curly hair that we are advised to tame, and other black features that we are taught to be ashamed of.

After that seventh grade year, my hair became so damaged that it

fell out until I was left with nothing but patches of tightly coiled curls. I had no choice but to stop adding the heat to my hair because I barely had any left to add heat to. I eventually discovered wigs which seemed like the middleman between what others considered pretty and the only option I had left for a hairstyle. Staring at my reflection a year later, I couldn't believe how I could ever let someone else blind me from my own beauty. Undoubtedly, the hardest decision and biggest mistake I had ever made was deciding to straighten my hair. Not because it wasn't how my hair naturally grew, but because I couldn't look in the mirror and say I made that decision for myself.



## Roulette

*Anastasia B. Pagnotti*

The rules of this game are simple: load a revolver with a single bullet then give it whirl and you're ready to go. Make sure to count to three before you pull.

Now let's begin.

With a steady hand, full of youthful arrogance and a bloated self-worth you place the tip to your temple.

One.

Two.

Three. A hasty pull of your finger, and you play your luck.

*Click.*

Your first love.

You meet her while attending a party at the house of a friend you barely know. Through the help of Miller and Gordon and Evan Williams, the two of you hit it off. She has a pretty smile with a dimple on her right cheek and teal eyes that shone with the gleam of inexperience. You have perky breasts that look perfectly hand sized and a shy yet enticing giggle. It starts with a hot and heavy tumble in a closet with barely enough room for clothes. The flame of passion burns a hot, blinding white, and like a thermite flame, it simmered out by the end of a month.

Despite the dying embers, you two stay friends. Time for round two.

A calm hand lightly presses the barrel to your temple, a slight, almost unnoticeable waver is the only hint of your nerves.

One.

Two.

Three. A moment's hesitation leads to a count of Four. You set your jaw and pull your luck.

*Click.*

And in walks a great man of obsidian, easily a foot and forty pounds your better, with a pearl filled grin and calloused hands. He's one of your wealthier classmates, who bucked his parents and chose to learn with the peasants instead of the ivy league. You offer to help him learn of our world's past and he helps you with the teachings of Newton and Einstein.

His parents hear of the many rumors swirling around you two, and he begs you to help trick them, so they wouldn't know his preferences. You're showered with the finer things and treated like a queen as payment for your role. Over time, real feelings form, not of lust but of a gentle, soft love. Despite his preference and your hesitation, the two of you attempt to make real what was previously fake. Years later, just before graduation, enough was enough; as nice as it was, you support his decision to be true to himself.

With heart full of sadness and pride, you start round three.

A tired hand holds the gun a finger's width away and just above your ear.

You steady your breath, determined for this to be last round.

One. Get ready!

Two. Get set!

Three! You slam your eyes shut and pull your luck without hesitation.

*Click.*

You stride towards the receptionist desk with a façade of confidence, your heels clicking loudly on the polished linoleum floor. A woman with thick, black hair laced with a navy blue undertone that pops in the right light greeted you with a practiced smile.

You both flirted with the compensating confidence of trying to hide the jitters of a first day at work. Quickly, you two become friends and after a month of café meetings before and after work, she invites you out for some drinks; the beginning of your office fling.

A few months later and its getting serious.

You go apartment hunting with her, mix your finances with her, meet each other's family; you and she are happy, until...

She comes home early on your day off, a box of the nacks that decorated her desk in her hands.

This was the first of many times she came home early, each time quicker than the last.

She starts to drink to numb her pain, and when that stops working, she lashes out at you.

Buys you flowers after each violent tantrum, promising she won't hurt you again.

For years she breaks that empty promise, and for years you cover for her.

You lie to the nurse that sews shut the gash above your eye, and to the responding officers.

You lie to dwindling number of friends about being clumsy and falling into doors.

You lie to yourself about her love for you, even after you watch her bring strangers home and forces you to share your bed.

You lie and lie and lie and lie, until you no longer know what a truth is. And then it ends. A local hospital informs you that she got into an accident while driving drunk.

Just like that, you're free. Free to play another round.

Your weathered and scarred hands gingerly pick up the revolver.

Should you play another round? Will there even be an end to this cruel game?

You shakily hold the gun just behind your eye and start to count.

One. What if you get another round like your last? Is it worth the risk?

Two. And what if they aren't? Are you too broken and damaged to even know?

Two and a half. You can't do this. Just give up and be alone forever.

Two and three-quarters. No. No you can do this. You are worth it, after all.

Two and four-fifths. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in.

Three. You flinch hard in anticipation as you pull your luck.

*BOOM!*

After you last round's death, you move back to your sleepy home town of only a few thousand. Your parents have left, and minus a few of the kids you knew from high school who couldn't escape, everyone you knew has either died or moved.

You are effectively new in town.

After you settle in and find a new job, you visit the local library that is miraculously still standing to catch up on the last series you were interested in. You ring the bell at the checkout counter to inform whoever is working that you are waiting. Out walks a young-looking woman rocking firehouse red hair that covers one side of her face with matching brows and slight limp on her left side.



You compliment her hair as you hand over your ID, invoking a pause from her as she looks from the ID to you and back again a few times. She pulls her hair back behind her ear, revealing a deep scar that runs the length of her cheek to where an earlobe should be. You discover she was an old classmate of yours from high school, though she was a grade behind you, and that you two played on the same volleyball team for a year. She informs you that she gets off in an hour and you agree to meet for dinner. During the course of the dinner, you discover that she enlisted into the army shortly after graduating, deploying no less than four times and earning the scar on her face.

She also did some time as an agent for the FBI, before several gunshot wounds to her gut and pelvis put an end to her career. You give her an edited version of your life experiences, informing her about your previous jobs on IT teams and pretending to hack into your company's systems to protect against real intruders but omitting any details about your round three.

Dinners together become a regular event, growing into movies and lunches and drinks after work.

Occasionally, you two drink too much and wake up the next morning in bed together, but you both agree that good friends can do that and think nothing of it.

A burst water pipe forces her to seek a new place to live, and you invite her to stay in the spare bedroom for the time being.

Your house becomes much cleaner with her around, despite the initial clutter of the move, and you ask her to stay. She does, adding life to your otherwise lonely home.

Years go by, with you two growing ever closer, weathering fights, jealousy, and two free-loading exes that briefly moved in.

Eventually, she moves yet again, this time from the old spare bedroom you let her crash in all those years ago, down the hall and into yours.

It doesn't stay spare for long, and the two of you proudly decorate it in anticipation of a new resident.

So now, after thirty-four long years of life, you find yourself lying in bed watching her sleep, her hand resting protectively on your swollen belly, and you think to yourself:

"Eden. What a fitting name for the love of my life."



## I Am Only Myself

*Michelle Edwards*

I do not know how to write anything that is not pitifully sad  
Born from the gooseflesh on my arms  
From the way my heart always aches  
If I could find a poem between the petals of the ugliest rose  
Or shape an ode from the softest touch  
Would I settle?



## Room 23

*Andrea Blackman*

The man I was staring at was not the man I've known since birth. He had bruises scattered on his body. Tubes placed where skin should've been intact, in a bed that was not his own. Twenty pounds lighter. A pale, thin face with chapped lips. He had a white, plastic wristband as an accessory and a white punching glove taped to each hand used as restraints. An irritable attitude. I had never seen him this way before. The beeping of the alarms became louder as I zoned back into reality of the situation. My 90-year-old grandad was in the ICU, Room 23 to be exact.

"What do you want for dinner?" My mom asked on a rainy, summer night. I shrugged my shoulders, as her iPhone started ringing. I continued to scroll through Instagram, under my favorite blanket. When I heard my mom cry out loud, it made me jump to her side to figure out what the matter was. The country accent through the phone was evident. I knew it was from the lips of a family member in North Carolina. My mom started asking questions, one after another, finally saying, "We will go down to see him." She hung the phone up and started rushing to pack some clothes, drinks, and snacks, throwing them into her purse and telling me to get in the car. It was like a moment in time where all I could do was listen, afraid of what the cellphone call was all about.

My grandad slipped going up brick stairs and cracked his head open. A puddle of blood oozed from his patchy scalp on to the concrete was a sure enough sign for his wife to call the paramedics. He was sent to a local hospital. After a night spent there, he was on his way back home.

Weeks passed, my grandad is fine. His walking was a little unstable. His breathing was a little short and shallow.

One morning, my grandma cooked him breakfast, the normal scrambled eggs and a piece of toast with butter spread on it. My grandad, sat at the table, slowly picked at the eggs with his fork. He wasn't feeling hungry this morning for some odd reason. My grandma left the room and came back. She saw my grandad's shoulders slumped forward, not responding. She, immediately, called the paramedics.

They put him on the stretcher and drove quickly to the more equipped hospital, where he stayed majority of the night. Then, the doctor needed him to be transferred to an ICU as soon as possible due to the condition he was in. They told him that there was no ICU room available in the 212 mile radius of Greensville, North Carolina. They searched and found a room in Hampton, VA, but the paramedics would have to drive him 5 hours to get there.

The ride was long, really long. I felt every bump in the road. The eerie feeling as we rode in silence, on small winding roads was not reassuring. When we went through the tunnel, it seemed like it was a dark hole. A tunnel that seemed like it lasted forever.

After he was poked, pressured, questioned, and positioned, we finally made it to his room. He was alert, stable, oriented, and talkative. I looked at his pale, thin arms. A port of an IV was inserted on the inside of his elbow. I saw how when we started talking, he would move his arms around to get in a comfortable position. The alarms would start beeping, meaning there was an occlusion in the IV. I looked at the fluid bags that were hanging from the IV pole, one of them saying Normal Saline. Looking back, he was once a strong man who would cut huge trees down with his chainsaw, feed his two goats, ride his riding lawnmower to cut his grass, to such a fragile man lying in a bed that wasn't so comfortable. He complained of the food, the eggs weren't salty enough and the sweet tea wasn't actually sweet. He was never a man that would complain. He was always patient, relaxed, and caring. His persona changed over the course of three weeks.

Instead of him using the air to keep his lungs expanding and deflating, he was using a ventilator. His heart was monitored every second. I watched deeply at the monitor screen as it would move up and down to the way his heart's ventricles pumped. He wasn't able to talk as well, only seeing his mouth move back and forth almost like a quiver. No words came out. He was diagnosed as gravely ill.

One night, I went into his room by myself, the hospital policy being two visitors at a time. I honestly thought he was coming to the end of his life. I started thinking that his last breath could be when I was in room. I talked to him and kept him updated with my life. He couldn't speak, because of the monstrous ventilator, the only thing keeping him breathing. He would barely crack his eyes open, due to the weakness of his muscles and all the company in and out of his temporary bedroom. My grandad would still nod his head in understanding. He was always a good listener.

The night had gotten late. Visiting hours were over and it was time

for us, my family, to leave. I held his rough, crackled hands and told him, "I love you." I watched his face as a small teardrop slowly rolled down his cheek, disappearing underneath the bulky clear mask that forced oxygen in his mouth and nose. He nodded his head and I slowly started pulling my hand from his. My grandad pulled my hand a little stronger, trying to get me to stay. It made my heart tear in thousands of pieces. I didn't want to leave him, not in the vulnerable state he was in. "Good night, grandad," I said as I pulled my hand away from his, brushing the tear off my cheek. That was hard for me. He has never been so vulnerable in his life. He has always been that old man that didn't have any hair on his head but could race you once the traffic light turned green. He was the one that did the grocery shopping and the yard work. He took care of the dog, letting him outside when he had to go "pee pee." It was rough for the family to see him like this.

Two weeks went by and doctors had rotated. His new doctor was the miracle we needed. The God-sent angel to help the mess we were in. The answer to our prayers. This doctor weened him off the ventilator and got his heart under control. My grandad was talking again and showering us with love, telling us how much he appreciated us being there at the bedside. He started eating much better than just the Subway chocolate chip cookies we would bring to him. Things were starting to get better. A lot better.

My grandad, finally, got discharged. At first, he was suggested to keep an oxygen tank with him around the house. He didn't enjoy it, but it helped him breathe better. He was on the road to recovery.

There are two lessons I've learned from this experience. One, to let the people that I love know it. I never will know when someone will take their last breath. Someone, a family member, or a friend could spend one last moment with me and I wouldn't tell them that I appreciate them or how much they mean to me. This experience showed me how I will affect people later on. I want to go into the Nursing field, and it is important that I take accountability of a patient. A patient could be a parent, a grandparent, a child, an aunt or uncle, or any relative to someone. They are not just someone laying in a bed that I will have to take care of until they are discharged. There's more to them than that. The nurses in the hospital showed me what type of nurse I want to be. I don't want to be a nurse that does the job halfheartedly. One that doesn't check on a patient for hours or even get to know them. Room 23, thank you.



## Land of the Free

*Julianne Jones*

As we neared the brick building surrounded by high wire fences, the car grew silent. My normally energetic brother stared blankly as we pulled into the lot marked “visitors”. My grandparents, still stunned by our new reality, unsuccessfully tried to remain calm and collected. A small white building that resembled a bus stop stood between us and our large brick destination. Inside, there were forms with many prying questions: *Do you have any narcotics on you today? Are you carrying a weapon? Any electronic devices on your person?*

No. No. No.

After filling out paperwork, I used the landline on the wall to dial the brick building. A man answered.

“Last name and number of visitors?” he asked gruffly.

“Uh, Jones. Party of four,” I responded shakily.

“Come right on up with your paperwork,” he answered.

We walked the sidewalk up to the entrance and into the doors.

Immediately, the outside world felt distant. We were greeted by metal detectors, correctional officers, and signs enforcing visitor dress code. I handed the C.O. our collection of forms and ID’s, which he examined carefully before showing us toward the metal detectors. After the formalities, we were led through a barred door and into the opening of a hallway. To our left was another barred door; behind it, blurry spots of khaki stood out amongst blues, reds, and greens – colors of the free. The C.O. led us to this door and opened it, revealing the only room I would see my father in for the next five years.

It was about the size of a tennis court. Down the middle of the room was a path cleared for walking. On either side, families and friends sat with their loved ones. In the back corner were several vending machines stocked with treats exclusively for visitation. As I took everything in, we followed the C.O. down the path to six plastic chairs surrounding a plastic table. He told us to sit and that it would be a few minutes. The anticipation made the eight minutes feel like thirty. Finally, my dad emerged from another door in a khaki jumpsuit, his hair longer than I remembered.

When visiting a felon, each person is allowed one hug as a greeting and one as a goodbye. He got his first four from us and sat down, as my grandma and I wiped tears from our faces. Aside from the jumpsuit, he looked like his old self. His face lit up when he told us about the friends he had already made, the job he was assigned, and how he was choosing to spend his time there to learn and be creative. I could not help but notice, however, the sadness in his eyes as we shared some stories of our own, especially of my baby brother and sister. At the ages of two and four, they were too young to understand why my dad had disappeared. Their mom decided against them visiting due to the trauma that going home without him may cause them. I think this upset him more than anything. His little ones were growing bigger and smarter every day, his involvement limited to phone calls and pictures in the mail.

As hours passed, we played cards, cleared out the vending machines, and shared laughs like we had all the time in the world.

"Time's up! Tell your loved ones goodbye," the C.O. boomed, interrupting my thoughts.

We shared a frown, and, as my family stood to hug my dad, I grew heavy in my seat. We hugged last and the longest. I cried into his jumpsuit while families all around me said their farewells.

My brother snuck in an extra, forbidden hug, and we headed towards the doors. I could not help but glance back at my dad as he watched us walk away, his smile soft and sad. We gathered near the C.O.'s desk with the other visitors to collect our ID's, while our khaki-clad friends lined up across the room. I thought of all the memories, strength, and emotion that I was surrounded by in that moment, as the last of us were given our identification. The aura in the room was indescribable, as loved ones left their fathers, sons, grandsons, husbands, best friends, uncles, and brothers to confinement as we prepared to walk into the rest of the world.

As one can imagine, leaving a prison is a guilty task; the walk out was silent, except for some sounds of muffled crying. Approaching the parking lot, I turned over the day's events in my head and concluded that time is fleeting. It struck me how suddenly days turn into weeks, and that there are only fifty-two of those in a year. I realized how much can change in such a small amount of time and wondered what my life would look like in five years when my dad could finally see for himself all the hard work I had done. Nearing the car, I made a silent promise to my dad and myself that I would take advantage of my time and freedom.



Julie Arrington, *Possibilities 7*. Digital Photograph, 2018.





## I Matter

*Christina Purkiss*

As I walked alone in the forest,  
soft, peaty grass under my bare feet,  
the only sound grasshoppers rustling their wings.

Alone with my thoughts.  
Fog swirling around me  
trying to tempt me into a dance.  
Choking me with its thickness.

'Til I came to a pond  
where I sat and stared at my reflection.  
Thinking about life wasted,  
opportunities lost,  
choices made.  
Wishing for a time machine  
to take me back to my younger days.

Rain started to fall.  
Gently at first.  
Then as if to match my mood,  
it started to pour,  
mingling with the tears on my cheeks.

I sat for a long time  
with only the soft trill of a bird for company.  
The tree branches bowing low  
as if to give me a hug  
and comfort me out of my mood.  
The sun came out,  
warming me with its soft caress.  
Telling me without words  
in the grand scheme of life,  
I matter.



## An Unusual Place

*Caitlin Carl*

Crowds bustle. Shoulders rub. People hurry off to their destinations. Some strut through the streets with earbuds in, some chatter on mobile devices about various topics, and some just take in the busyness of life. Nearby restaurants with various tantalizing scents invite the taste buds to their tables. Children giggle as water from fountains splashes their outfits, providing a cool relief in the hot summer weather. Tourists pose for pictures. The slight smell of cigarette smoke and the sound of laughter, along with an evening breeze and the beginning of a sunset, elicit a feeling of comfort.

Distinguishing sounds is difficult between the noise of the different languages and the melody of a spontaneous music show in the street. Pickpockets lie in wait as their prey become distracted. Homeless people sprawl on the sidewalks, begging for money. Cons in costumes attempt to persuade the gullible to take photographs with them. It could be any corner in any town. It isn't. With this realization, the feeling of comfort soon turns to confusion as it becomes clear that Maidan, the center of Kiev, Ukraine, is not an ordinary square.

Hanging from a building, two enormous fabric posters catch the eye. Almost identical except for the language of the script, these cloths cover two entire walls of the structure. The strange designs on these involve a long set of chains, shattered at the corner where they meet.

Above these illustrations is a mysterious message. With one written in English and the other written in Ukrainian, each display reads, "Freedom is Our Religion." Underneath them, serious damage is visible. In the small gap where the posters meet, scaffolding and burn marks exist, extending slightly beyond the banners. The damage to the building is masked by an announcement of freedom. Why is this characteristic so significant here?

Across the street, a tall statue rises into the cotton-candy-colored clouds. At the top of the figure appears to be a gold-covered, almost

angelic structure. This connects to an elevated gathering area by a solid, concrete pole. At the bottom of the structure, graffiti, both in Russian and Ukrainian, marks the inside of the gazebo-like gathering place. Covering this creation, inside and outside, images of young faces line the building. Who are these people, and why are their pictures here?

The details of this troubled scene continue. To the left of the monument, a cobblestone street with dislodged stones attracts visitors. People hover near a brick wall which separates an exquisite, colorful flowerbed from the broken street. Along the border, a seemingly endless stream of candles, flags, flowers, and young faces, one after the other, line the path of this memorial. Upon inspection, a noticeable pattern exists. The dates all range from late 2013 to early 2014. What could have happened during this time?

At the top of this cobblestone path, a steep stairway exists with steps almost unnatural to the human gait. The heart-pumping climb up the steps provides a rewarding view. The multicolored sunset turns into night now. The awakening evening sky, along with a beautiful outlook of the area, creates an atmosphere of deep reflection. The burned building containing the mysterious message on the cloths, the faces of young depicted almost everywhere, and the street, housing a significant memorial, indicate a tragic circumstance occurred here in this unusual place.



## A Dance of Champions

*Anastasia Pagnotti*

The bell sounds with a shrill ring, signaling to Kela that her turn has come. She steals a glance to her left, comforted by her girlfriend's presence at her championship match. Nimbly, she ducks between the ruby red ropes that marks the confines of the fight, ignoring the darker splotches she has to believe are water or just miscolorings. They announce her name, making sure to remind everyone of her underdog status and her depressingly low odds of winning. She does her show; spinning in a small circle with her hands held defiantly high in a façade of confidence while the crowd cheers and boos, before pointing towards the love of her life. This fight is for her. She hops from foot to foot, shaking out the nervous tremors while she watches her opponent swagger arrogantly into the ring. A cold sweat clams her hands up, while the gloves around them feel hot and heavy. She played the fight out in her mind like a home movie, as she had done a hundred times before, watching her foe's body bounce and weave between her attempted blows, studying his footwork as he floats around the ring, searching for any weakness in his movements that she could exploit. Time and again her opponent taunts her into blind punches and time and again she is rewarded with devastating blows all over her body. Blood clouds her eyes as she drops to her knees, spitting in defeat. The shrill bell snaps Kela back reality, and the two fighters start their dance.



## FLORENCE BEGETS A STORM

*Kevin Johnson*

Hurricane Florence is making her way up the Atlantic threatening to unleash her fury on Hampton Roads any day now. I am sitting at Wal-Mart waiting on a prescription that my doctor had called in, knowing I was in for a wait. I could see the panic on the faces of the recent transplants who had never experienced the threat of a massive storm before. The woman seated next to me was watching a local weather update on her phone. The boyish exuberance of the often-maligned meteorologist was spilling from her I-Phone's speaker. It sounded as if he was trying not to appear too excited while predicting the impending disaster headed our way.

I just left a 9-hour shift at the pharmacy that I work in a half hour ago and am starting to finally relax. This moment of peace is soon interrupted when I hear the angry grumblings of an irritated patron turning the corner. I realize this man is not paying attention to his path and he clips the wing display too close and the entire side-cap comes crashing down to the sales floor. I chuckle a little because I think this is the kind of chaos everyone is anticipating with the upcoming tempest, though I am sure we all share the hope that this tumbling grocery store display will be the extent of the damage on the horizon.

I decide to get up and walk around and take in the sights and sounds that surround me. I am an avid people watcher, so I do enjoy the hubbub that is created in the current climate. I am heading toward the grocery side of the store when the din begins to increase. I look around and see a few groups of people suddenly headed in the same direction that I am going. They are not running but they do remind me of the race walking that I first witnessed at the Rio Olympics. Once again here is something brings a smile to my cheeks amid this gloom and doom. I round the corner and stumble upon the reasoning for the thundering herd; pallets of water are being brought to the floor for a suddenly thirsty mob. This is my cue to get out of the way, so I head back toward the pharmacy to wait for my medication.

I notice my seat is still empty but my weather watching neighbor has moved on. I open my Nook and begin to immerse myself in the world of Terry Pratchett when the woman who is now sitting next to me strikes up a conversation. She exhales deeply and shakes her head all while mumbling under her breath. I take the bait and say "Sorry?", and she begins her angered rant at a level that not only I can hear but most of those around us can as well. She is unloading her frustrations about it taking so long, why don't they have more employees getting the medicine, and of course she has more important things to do.

As I mentioned earlier, I work in a pharmacy as well. I just breathed deeply and smiled at her and told her they were working as hard as they could. I can tell no amount of reasoning will satisfy her, so I don't try assuaging her anger.

I check my phone and realize my order is ready and politely excuse myself. I make my way to the counter, express my empathy for a tired and stressed out pharmacy compatriot, then head back to the comfort and quiet of my home to ride out the storm.



?Artist name?, *Claw*. Digital photograph, 2018.





## Cinders, Smoke and Ash

*Mackenzie Lesher*

Cinders, smoke and ash,  
The air fills with their macabre dance,  
A celebration of the mortality of humans.  
White burning ash layers the earth like a light snowfall,  
Blowing around in like white dandelions in the wind searching for a home.  
A gray ephemeral snake writhes high in the air hypnotically,  
Searching for an escape from the scorched earth below.  
The smoke whispers sorrowfully as an unfeeling breeze tears it apart,  
Preventing the pilgrimage to the heavens before it began.  
A slow glow begins similar to a flickering crimson firefly,  
Casting a soft light around the blackened ground.  
The evanescent radiance flickers gradually out without protest,  
Leaving only the branded earth to tell the tale.



## My Best Friend, Jax

*William Fisher*

In my travels around the world I have heard people say that a dog is not man's true best friend. While a debate often flares among pet owners as to whether cats or dogs are the most human friendly, for me, dogs remain this man's best friend. My best friend is Jax, a Golden Retriever. In order to show how and when I realized Jax was a true four-legged friend to me, I need to go back to a time in my life that was dangerous but exciting. At the time, I was on active duty in the Marines, which was about 13 years before I adopted this four-legged ball of energy my wife likes to call Tigger.

Back in 2004, I was on active duty in the Marines and assigned to 2nd Transportation Support Battalion also known as the Red Patchers, based at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I loved my job as a Motor Vehicle Operator. I always felt like a kid playing with his Tonka toys whenever I had the chance to take one of those big 6x6 vehicles out for a spin.

That year, I was in Bravo Company, and on my second deployment to the hellish sand box that is Iraq. So far our deployment had gone by pretty uneventfully, well in Marine standards anyway. My unit had been in some pretty sticky and scary situations that tested the metal of every Marine in Bravo Company, but we all made it back every time. On the night of July 19th that almost changed.

Around 9:30pm my driver, Howard, and I were on a regular supply mission to Al Asad Air Base in the western part of Iraq in the middle of the God forsaken desert near the Syrian border. We were driving down a narrow one lane road, and I was struck, as I often was, by how dark the night was. It was so dark that the only lights we could see were those on the trucks in front and behind us. On nights like those, when I looked up into the vastness of the night sky, the sheer beauty of all the stars, the white streak of the Milky Way stretching away into the horizon always took my breath away. In that moment, all of the wonder disappeared in a flash when my truck struck a roadside bomb, an IED. The tremendous blast destroyed my truck, and my life changed forever. My driver Howard walked away, but I needed a little bit of help because

my right knee was hurt and my ears were ringing. At the time, though, I felt pretty fortunate.

A year later after getting off active duty, though, I found out that not all wounds are visible, that some are much deeper. I came away from that deployment with PTSD and traumatic brain injury. Many vets return from the battle field suffering from these invisible injuries that take a tragic toll, and isolate us from our families and friends. Too often, these injuries can and do claim the lives of increasing number of vets every year.

There are many treatments out there for PTSD. Most involve taking huge amounts of medication that, in the long run, do more harm than good. One treatment, though, that I thought was weird at the time involves therapy animals. Most of these animals are dogs. I grew up around dogs and other animals, and even though they were great pets I never thought they could be so much more, as a real pivotal part of the healing process for PTSD and traumatic brain injuries.

About four years ago, I adopted Jax, a six-month-old Golden retriever from a coworker. My wife was not too thrilled because we already had two large dogs in the house. He was and still is a ball of energy, like a hurricane with four legs and a tail, a typical Retriever. Even though he is a great dog, loves to play ball, and go for car rides, I never thought anything more of him than that he's just a dog.

Not long ago, I took Jax with me to Lowe's to get some supplies for the house in preparation for hurricane Florence. Jax was sticking his head out the window of the passenger side of my truck. Like dogs always do, he was enjoying the cool breeze on his face when a loud, custom Harley Davidson came flying by us. The windows rattled, and caught off guard, Jax and I cringed at the ear-piercing sound of his exhaust. The Harley went on down the road. Later we came up behind him at a red light but didn't think much of it. We were in our own little worlds, him with his head out the window and me going over the supply list in my head to make sure I didn't forget anything. Suddenly, I heard the loudest bang I have heard in a long time, one that immediately took me back to that July night in the middle of war-torn Iraq. The loud bang made me duck down in my seat for cover. My ears ringing, I immediately started looking for the source of what seemed like an explosion. It was that damned motorcycle again. It must have backfired at the light when he revved up the bike.

Even though I realized what the sound was and where it had come from, I still had this uneasy feeling come over me, a feeling that made my hands shake and made me feel like I was out of breath, like after a

long run. A feeling that, unfortunately, I knew all too well. It was the onset of a panic attack. I have had many since that night in 2004, and while I always think they are getting better, often times I'm wrong. The feeling swept over my body and my mind. Sitting there at the stop light, I felt all alone; until I felt a cold nose and wet tongue on the side of my face. It was Jax. He had come over to sit next to me in my time of need. He just sat there as close as he could get, almost sitting in my lap. Every now and then he turned to look at me and lick my hand as I petted his head.

Almost instantly my hand stopped shaking and that out of breath feeling subsided. I felt better; but how could this happen by just petting a dog? He refused to leave my side for at least ten minutes or so and after that he went back to his side and continued to look out the window. After a minute of being over there on his side, he turned to look at me as if to see if I was all right. Without thinking I said "Thanks Jax." as if he was an old friend who had helped me through a bad time.

I had never realized the power of man's best friend until that point, certainly not the power a dog might have to help vets in their times of need. Such power is medicine not found at any pharmacy, nothing to alter the mind or warp the senses. This four-legged, fluffy tailed, cold nosed friend loves me unconditionally. Jax has really opened my eyes to what a therapy dog can do to help vets with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries. I will forever be grateful to him. I will never think of him as just a dog. He is my best friend that just happens to be a dog.

Sure, they were cute, but most of the time they either played too much or not enough. Older dogs did nothing but sit around and slobber at me, younger ones were so full of energy that I couldn't keep up. However, I think the main reason I didn't want a dog was because I knew I would be moving away to college soon. Deep down I knew that if we got a dog, I would love it, and when I left it would be unbearable. So I convinced myself I didn't want a puppy, and even went as far as to argue (albeit half-heartedly) against getting one. Of course, once it seemed that we really would be getting one – my mom was looking up breeders and had even gotten my dad on board – I caved. I wanted a dog.

It was the day after Thanksgiving, and the air was chilly. We all bundled into the car and drove for an hour to reach the breeder, a kind Amish farmer. When we reached the farm, I eagerly jumped out. The farmer opened his barn doors and eight black furballs raced out, surprisingly big for their age. When I knelt down to pet them, they swarmed all over me, too cute for me to ignore. We wasted no time in finding the cutest puppy there, a little girl whose curly fur was all black

except for a white spot on her chest, and another on her chin. She was playful and attentive, and we knew immediately she was the one. Even before we had gotten her into the car we had chosen a name for her: Stella, to match our black cat named Luna.

The car ride home was long, and Stella had never been in a car before. Unsurprisingly, she was drooling within the first few minutes. About half way through the trip she threw up on my lap (luckily I had thought ahead and had put a towel under her face). I realized I was completely in love with her, mess and all.

As expected, Stella required a lot of attention and work. However, to my surprise, I found I didn't mind. Despite all my assertions that I didn't want a dog, that they were too messy and difficult to train, that they were more weren't worth the effort, she had stolen my heart completely. Somehow, the puppy that my mom and sister had wanted so badly ended up being mostly mine. I took her to puppy training classes and ran around with her in the snow, I fed her and cleaned up after her, took her on walks and let her sleep on my bed.

Of course, there was still that one nagging complication: college. This year, I moved out of my parents' house. Of course, that means that I also moved away from Stella. Sometimes I miss her so much it hurts, and I can't wait until I can go see her again. However, I have to say that I don't regret becoming attached to her one bit (not that I could have avoided it anyways).

I had never experienced the pure sort of love a young dog gives to its people, and I think it changed me. Not only did Stella love me completely, I could also love her with no reservations. She didn't argue with me or embarrass me, the way friends and family sometimes do, she just gave me her love. All she wanted was for me to play with her and pet her, and it was amazing to see just how much joy she got just from being with me. Now I think I can truly say I am as much a dog person as I am a cat person, and I am sure anybody who doesn't like dogs has just never owned a good dog.



## A View from a City Window

*Alexis Snyder*

I stare from a barely open window, crouched to view the life that goes on below, on the street of the city that never sleeps. I watch as residents and tourists alike continue on, completely unaware of my presence. A crowd of faces slightly brightened with synthetic illumination, yet mostly shadowed by the late hours of the night. Pattering feet move hurriedly underground toward the screeching of their train, apathetic of the man in tattered clothes holding a sign in request of spare change. I can imagine they briefly glance at the musician with a dream and an open violin case playing a melodic sonata as they step onto their transit. Taking my eyes from the subway station, I close them, giving mind to my other senses. The sound of tires moving along gravel echoes in my ears, along with a soft laughter in the distance. I take in a breath, the pleasant scent of cuisine from various cultures filling my lungs. With its prominence I can almost see the food truck; a chef slicing lamb that will adorn a gyro, another roasting sweet, sugar coated nuts. A slight smile stretches over my lips; how beautiful this metropolis is even in the dark hours of the night; how perfect the view is from this window.



## As She Dances

*Kayla Robinson*

As I sit in this chair, I witness something truly magical; a beautiful woman performs with grace and elegance. Smooth on her feet never missing a single beat, she lives for her audience. At ten-thirty in the morning is when the performance begins.

Reaching for her materials to create her masterpiece, she sashays over to the stove with a zip lock bag that she intends to fill with flour. As she reaches the stove, she greets the frying pan. With a fierce look in her eyes and a quick flick of the wrist, the meat tumbles into the heated pan. The flavorful aroma coming from the pan is so enticing that it makes everyone in the kitchen sit back in their chairs and admire the effort that is put into it.

The sound of cast iron pans and other cookware clacking against one another, followed by the sharpening of a knife, is very loud. The woman pirouettes to the refrigerator and pulls out an onion, briskly walking to the trashcan to peel it. Looking over her shoulder, she cracks a smile. Not just any kind of smile, but a smile of confidence; she knows what she is doing. Swaying over to the sink, she goes to cut and wash the onion. Throwing her onions in a pan with a slight bend in her knees, she makes a faint grumble and flips the meat once more.

She's taking her intermission to enjoy a sip of her favorite drink. Cocking her head back with her hand on her hip, she indulges her beverage. As she is sipping her drink, she turns around and looks at me with a joyful expression and excitement, knowing that she is preparing this meal for those who she loves. I can see how anxious she is for me to taste this homemade recipe. Clearing her throat, she sits her cup down and cracks her knuckles.

Back from her intermission, she adds a third pan to the stove. Speaking to the pan as if it were able to respond, she tells it, "Hurry up and get hot," letting out an annoyed sigh, realizing that the pan won't heat any faster. As she keeps a close eye on the pan, it gradually increases to the correct temperature which satisfies her greatly. Therefore, no more ill feeling towards the pan; everybody's happy.

Using the juices from the steaks she pours the remains into the third pan. Now she's throwing a compilation of seasonings in the pan while moving her arms in a rhythmic motion. She is careful not to use too much seasoning, in fear of ruining the dish. As she stirs slowly, she looks for a spoon to taste the gravy. The spoon is being dipped into the pan. She tastes it smiles and says, "Ahhh, that's good!"

The sparkle in her eyes returns once more. No pain or sorrow, trials or tribulations will stand in her way. This is her time. Walking over to the cabinets, never taking her eyes off the stove, she lets out a soft, hardy laugh. The show is over. My grandmother is finally done and coaxing us to come join her in her dance.





# Welcome to 2050

*Analyssa Keller*

Welcome to the year 2050. It's halfway through the century and there are upwards of nine billion humans inhabiting the Earth. The world is technology dependent and a society where teens spent their first jobs at the cash-register are obsolete and nostalgic. Menial jobs are now taken care of by artificial intelligence. The interconnectivity of the internet reigns supreme. The old saying, "I don't understand technology" is a joke from those who remember the 20th century, and a concept foreign to those who grew up in the 21st.

Love is trans-human. If you hate the needs of your partner, ditch them for an android. However, be forewarned: your android may develop a thinking mind of its own and become deviant to your commands. Then, you must treat it like a human being or have it destroyed.

There is a permanent human presence on the moon, and moon tourism is now easily accessible for the middle class. Frequent human expeditions to Mars are commonplace as the groundwork for the first settlement on another planet is being created. Elon Musk, hailed as a main-contributor to humanity's presence on Mars, still acts as an advisor to the expeditions, despite his claims that he has "retired". Humans are on their way to becoming an interplanetary species as knowledge of the universe and solar system becomes more complex and advanced. Microorganisms have been found on other bodies in the solar system, causing a drastic paradigm change. Earth is no longer unique in its cradle of life.

Virtual reality has taken the public by storm. It's now possible to be fully immersed in video games as if the player is having an experience in another body and world. Controversy about the popularity of VR began earlier this year after a glitch caused 60 MMORPG players to become trapped inside the game-world, unable to disconnect and properly return consciously to their bodies. Proponents against it claim the 2012 Japanese series *Sword Art Online* was eerily accurate in its predictions, and deaths could arise from glitches "in the VR matrix" that

cause players to be stuck there permanently or die upon their character's death. Supporters of VR claim using an outdated anime to fear-monger is nonsense.

Many countries are aging as a whole. The average person is over 65, causing the working class to become strained to keep up with the needs of the retired. This has caused tensions between age groups and discrimination motivated by age is a highly debated political hot button issue.

William and Kate, King and Queen of the United Kingdom respectively, are now both 68 years of age. Prince George, the second in line of succession, is now 37 years of age. The royal line continues as an ancient tradition in a rapidly transforming societal landscape.

The 70th anniversary of John Lennon's death will pass in December of this year, making all work written solely by him accessible in the Public Domain. Many works by the Beatles are still copyright protected, as Sir Paul McCartney lived well into the early 21st Century.

New York City is the first city in the United States to implement android officers. Some argue faulty programming will lead to an increase in police brutality. Others say it will help decrease it. As a result, the subway stations are now without human employees and fully automated by artificial intelligence.

The average life expectancy is around the age of 80. Research breakthroughs have led experts to believe the first truly immortal consciousness will be uploaded into the cloud by the year 2060. By 2100, mind-upload will be commonplace amongst the upper classes, slowly trickling down the middle and lower financial brackets. The Singularity predicted earlier in the century is now reality.

Welcome to the year 2050. I hope you enjoyed your rest in the cryogenic chambers. I know this is a lot to take in, but this was just a short overview. Please keep in mind culture shock is an initial symptom of those being revitalized. You have "time traveled" in a sense. If you'd like to speak to a human, please notify me. Otherwise, I hope your decision is worth it to you. The future you were wishing for is now.



## She's Fine

*Alexis Snyder*

"She'll be fine," the women in pressed suits say with confidence, disregarding what the little girl has witnessed. As she sits with a new seed of fear sprouting in her heart and mind, she knows not how to proceed, knows not how to process what she's seen. The memory flashes through her mind again; a bathroom door splintered, hinges twisted and broken. A shouting man enraged and armed with the belief that it was his right to put his hands on his wife. Did he know that he'd scar this little girl for life?

As his brother tried to calm him, the little girl ran, holding the wife's hand, her best friend in tow. The bright orange, oversized t-shirt brushed against her legs with every step that pressed into the dew dampened grass. Together they jumped into the car, praying their safety was near. The little girl breathed a premature sigh of relief in the belief that she was free. In her innocent mind, the danger was over, the continuation of her life no longer in question.

There was no such luck for the three when the husband found them. A new wave of adrenaline rushed over the little girl, her heart once again racing. The sound of blood pumping now echoed in her ears so loudly she could not hear her own thoughts. He was after them, and the little girl knew it. This was where the memory became a blur; the little girl forgot how they ended up in a stranger's backyard. What she did remember was what she wished she could forget. The angry husband pinning the wife against steps that wrapped around a deck, the sound of a fist connecting with its target over and over again. The bright red liquid that seemed to darken against the wood of the steps. The sight of her friend pounding on the back door of the stranger's home with panic in her voice as she cried for help. It was too much for the little girl to bear.

She ran away from the scene, tears staining her cheeks. "Back there!" the little girl screamed to anyone that could hear. "Back there!" she screamed to the jogger than ran near, a trembling finger pointing to the back yard. "Stay here," the jogger commanded as she ran towards

the gate. Once again, the memory blurred, and red and blue flashing lights now reflected from every surface they could reach. With the sight of the people in blue uniforms and badges she knew: now it was over, now she was safe.

Here sits the little girl, now a woman, with the events far in her past. If only that were true, she thinks, recalling how even today, these memories dictate her fears. "Little thought of are the consequences of domestic violence on the lives of children present," she breathes out a sigh, remembering how she was so insistently reassured that she would be able to forget.



## i am constantly surrounded by bees

*Michelle Edwards*

the flowers that sprouted from the cracks in my body  
when i met you won't stop growing  
the daises under my fingernails are the worst  
they showed up when i first heard you laugh  
and i have held everything carefully since



Tazz, *Untitled*. Digital Photograph, 2018.



## Quiet, in the Closet —

*Brandon D. Kohler*

When you are young, confusing situations all seem like noise. Chaos, strife, and sadness over problems incomprehensible to a young mind congeal together to form an unintelligible racket. It can be so confusing.

It can be confusing to be pulled away from your childhood home and coaxed into a silver sedan by a lady with a comforting smile and sad eyes while the noise surrounds you. An angry mother who turned out to not be a mother screams unintelligible profanities from the porch as neighbors, pretending to water the plants or get the mail on a Sunday, steal glances at the noise. Police stand by like black, looming obelisks laced with static. Any onlooker could tell that what was happening would be painful and traumatic, but to a young child, a child as young as I was...it's all noise.

I sat in the back seat of the sedan, my first time in a booster seat – my family never got me one – thinking through the noise of the lady's questions. I don't remember what was said, but I know it was meant to be comforting. I was scared. All I knew to do was protect myself. I said little and showed nothing. I did what I could to blend in with the upholstery; if I was invisible and silent, then I could not be hurt. For the entirety of the car ride I was quiet, but not too quiet; I was still, but not too still. After, when I sat in the sterile office and stared at the beige, blank walls while the sad lady (caseworker, as I came to find) busied herself making calls and offering me sweet, encouraging words that changed nothing, I sat just as silently. I was terrified, confused, angry, anxious, sad, unsure – full of noises, but I couldn't let any of the noises out; I only sat stoically, unyielding, and silent. As a child, that seemed natural; didn't everyone protect themselves that way? Didn't every child learn early on how best to make themselves unseen to shield themselves from the ogres and orcs and uncles? It was just tuning out noise, inside and out.

The lady tugged at my arm gently to tell me it was time to go. I had no way of knowing where, and I had no say in the matter – what five-year-old would? I was filled with questions. What was to become

of my family? Did they know where I was going? Was this happening because of them, or because of something they did? Was it...because of something I did? Was it my fault...? Was I going to see them again? Were they angry? Did they know? Were they going to hurt me? What did I do? Was I in trouble? Was I a bad child? But I said nothing. I simply looked out the window, saying and showing nothing – like a smart boy does.

We made it to a new home. I have few memories of that time, just shards of a window into the past – broken, but what remained was clear and sharp. This family was the Boyds. I greeted them politely and said nothing unless asked. I was relieved that there was a boy, Ms. Boyd's son, only a couple years my senior – we would have made great friends if his mother had permitted me to speak to him after the caseworker left. The Boyds, my caseworker told me, were going to give me a place to stay for a while. I asked how long. She said it would be a few months while my family "worked on some things."

Three weeks later, I was in a new home. The Readers, this time. I said nothing when I met this family. The last family wanted me gone after three weeks, saying very little unless they absolutely had to in that time, so why would this family want me? They seemed so happy, and friendly, and loving, with their big family table and big fridge full of food and the big rooms where children could have beds and toys and a place to feel safe – too big for me to fit. There was no place for me there; this was a place for happy, lovable children.

Mrs. Reader must have known what I felt. She pulled me aside one evening after everyone else ate dinner while I stared at the food on my plate. She saw what I felt and told me, for the first time I could remember, that I was loved. So much rose up in me that it almost escaped, but I stopped at a few tears. I couldn't make any noise. The Readers opened to me, and I, in turn, opened as well – very, very little. The home was nice, and the people were friendly, but there was still so much that I didn't understand; there was still so much noise.

Two months passed and the Readers, teary-eyed, hugged me goodbye and gave me a suitcase for my things – the same suitcase I have carried with me for almost twenty years – as I went to the next place. I didn't dare for a home as nice as Readers', but I wanted to. The door at the new home opened to two ladies wearing nametags and matching shirts. They exchanged words with my caseworker and helped me bring my bags in. This house was larger than the Readers', but it was...different. The walls didn't have any family portraits and there were three tables in the dining room. It was a noisy place; many other kids, each looking more different than the last, wandered around the



house – some chipper, some hollow. I learned later that this was called a “halfway home,” though it felt far less than halfway. The directors, as they were called, helped take my bags to my room. It was tiny and cramped; one wall had a dresser only a foot or two taller than I was, and the other wall had a window with thick metal bars. It was dawning on me that this new place was not going to be as nice as the Readers’ home.

The rest of the day was noisy, a cacophony of voices from children and directors, TV’s blaring children’s programs, and the coming and going of caseworkers and other adults with no time for children. I sank into myself to hide from all the noise. I said little at activity time and ate nothing at dinner. I rebuffed attempts from other children to make friends. I couldn’t say anything; I said and showed nothing, like a smart boy does.

Later that night, after lights-out was called, I sat in the cramped closet of a bedroom, staring out the window and wondering what was going to happen to me. So much was changing, and none of it was making sense. I had nothing and no one. I felt as no five-year-old should ever feel – truly, deeply, desperately, and terrifyingly alone. Even amid the noise and the chaos, I was trapped, isolated. I did what I was taught never to do – I let out the noise. All the fear, anger, confusion, and sadness poured out of me in that moment. Scared and alone, gasping for air in a tiny white room with barren walls that moved ever closer, crying in the joyless light of a streetlamp shining through a barred window that seemed to pull the air from the room...I wept, and I fell asleep, my pillow damp with tears that no one else would see.



## Siblings

*Faith Nelson*

The ground is a sink, and someone pulled the plug, draining the warmth from your body. You can imagine the heat- your heat - slipping out of you and swirling down into the earth. The sleeping bag is a flimsy mesh and you wonder if your wife just gave it to you to stop your complaining. There wasn't enough time to make sure everything was right; your brother wanted to go camping just right then and he wouldn't wait. He had news about his engagement and you can't help but wonder how or who he tricked into that. He wouldn't accept that your wife had already told you the news either, they just had to go camping to celebrate. You wiggle down further in the sleeping bag and pull the opening to you, using it as a pillow. All the past camping memories are coming back about how much you really do hate camping and maybe your brother.

Gilbert, your brother, starts snoring. You can hear him snoring from across the campsite. You tried to set up at a distance from his tent. It obviously was not far away enough. He brought a pillow. He had time to pack and prepare. You could take it from him, or, better yet, smother him with it and take his sleeping bag. It would already be warm from his body heat. You close your eyes and enjoy the delusion of being that warm. You think of your own bed with your wife. Or, more importantly, being under three heavy, fluffy blankets and in your wife's arms.

A drop of rain hits the tent and jolts you from what could have been a great dream. It isn't going to rain, you tell yourself, it wasn't in the weather forecast. Another raindrop hits the tent. Now you are fully awake, praying that your wife got the *waterproof* tent and not the *water-resistant* tent. She still didn't get the difference. The rain starts building up to a dull roar and water starts dripping onto your face. You shift a little, out of the line of fire.

You start to think about killing your brother again. He dragged you out here; you didn't want to come. He should have thought to check the forecast or listened to it on the way here in the truck. The truck. The *waterproof* truck. You sit up and feel around the bottom of the tent for

the clothes you have thrown everywhere. Most of them are shoved into a corner that is filled with water, you wonder how in the hell that much water even got in here. The shoes were also in that corner and are also soaked. You slip them on anyway, knowing that it's better to have wet feet than muddy ones. You can't find the bag for the sleeping bag, so you tuck it under your arm and unzip the tent quietly.

One of Gilbert's snores catch, and he groans. He's waking up, you think. Carefully, you put one foot out into the rain and onto the ground. It sinks into the mud with a soft *squelch*. You step out and zip the tent back up. The cold bites into your skin more and you shudder. It will be worth it in the end. You try to quiet your steps, but the squishing can't be helped. You walk to the truck and open the door, putting the duffle and sleeping bag into the backseat of the cab. You slowly close the door, leaving it cracked open. Next is the tent. You pull up the stakes and the metal stings your hands. You pick the tent up by the top, not bothering to take out the poles, and slosh back over to the truck.

He's awake now; you can hear him shifting and moving in the tent. You throw the tent in the bed, run to the truck, and lock the doors behind you. His tent unzips and you can see his confused face through the rain. You see that he's gathering his stuff looking pretty pissed. Keys. There has to be keys in here. You move all the trash and candy wrappers that he has thrown everywhere and find them. You turn the truck on and blast the heat until the cab is warm. Your brother is pounding on the window, yelling that he's wet and to open the door. You ignore him and turn the truck back off, enjoying the warmth. He must have gone back to his tent, because now all you can hear is rain pinging off the metal cab. You recline back, smiling, knowing you'll have hell to deal with in the morning. Maybe next time he'll listen when you say that you hate camping.



Ron Cross, *Cotton*. Digital photograph, 2018.



## Losing the Farm and Fair Trade

*Brandon Kohler*

“Loss” and “gain” aren’t mutually exclusive. I’ve found both at many points in my life, and they often go hand-in-hand. It’s easy to become so discouraged by loss that it’s too hard to see what’s to be gained from it, however. I learned that when I lost my farm.

Yes, I know. It’s odd hearing a 24-year-old man talk about losing his farm. I didn’t expect it, either.

Years back, I moved to rural nowhere in the middle of Virginia for a fresh start; the city began to feel...claustrophobic. My fiancé and I found a place in Vera, a sparsely-populated neighborhood in Appomattox County. We had two neighbors; one was a sweet man with a thick and difficult-to-understand accent. The other was a cow pasture. The first couple weeks were culture shock, but it didn’t take long for the dreamy-eyed cows ambling around the rolling hills to grow on me.

I built a life there; I got a chicken coop and some of the fluffiest, dumbest, and most lovable chickens we could find at the neighboring market. I found a job, I made friends, I built a farm, and I laid down roots. Unfortunately, it was doomed from the start.

I set out on this misadventure with a woman who had no intention of building a future with me. A week after our four-year anniversary, she told me she wanted us to go our separate ways. I was crushed, speechless. We had only just become settled into the farm, and my life was upended. Thousands of dollars and a four-year relationship – gone. She broke the lease and told me I had a month to vacate. I lost my life savings, my car, my farm, and her. She never said why.

I think, in a way, I did love that farm. It became a home to me, and even now I get homesick thinking about it. But losing it was by far the best thing that could have happened to me.

I moved there under the pretense that country-life would make me happy. The reality? I was entangled in an unhealthy, emotionally abusive relationship with a woman who stopped loving me and who I feared would leave me if I didn’t agree to join her. I was ensnared in a psychological web. I’d become dependent on her, as was her plan; she

knew she had me where she wanted me, and she wanted me to feel like I'd be lost without her. In a way, she was right.

I was so torn up by the loss that, for a while, I couldn't see it for what it was. She did me a favor by walking out, because I lacked the strength to do it myself. Soon after, I leaned on my writing to help me make sense of this new world in which I found myself stranded. I learned to believe in myself and trust in myself in a way that she would have hated – I went back to school; I got some of my work published; I reconnected with myself. Three years have passed since then. I lost the farm, but found out who I was, the strength that I possess, and the unlimited roads ahead of me, unburdened and unfettered to the constant refrain that I would never be able to go far. Losing the farm meant gaining a life in return, and I'd make that trade any day.



# Spider-man Figures Won't Take Away Your Femininity and Neither Will Respect

*Cass Haskins*

My mom pulls away a Spider-man figure I had been playing with.

"Sweetheart, that's *Jake's*."

My three-year-old mind processed this as, your brother has his toys and you have your toys.

You wouldn't like if he played with *your* toys.

So, I handed the figure back to my mom and smiled up at her.

"Okay, mama."

My grandma pulls me from the backyard.

There's dirt underneath my nails and sweat caked into the hair she had just washed that morning.

"Cassie Jo, can't you just keep clean for a *minute*?"

My brother had been teaching me how to do Rainbow's and slide tackles.

Soccer was fun! I was going to be a professional soccer player when I was older.

My sister's piano recital was in thirty minutes and it would take that long to get there.

The whole recital my grandma traded glances between my sister playing and glares at me.

I didn't notice.

I was grinning and thinking about how tomorrow we were going to work on my juggling.

My teacher frowned down at my assignment.

I was going to build a toy race car.

"Don't you think you're *reaching* a little? I mean your friends are making a birdhouse."

I didn't want to make a birdhouse. I wanted to make a toy race car.

I was going to be a mechanical engineer when I'm older.

I was going to make cars that were more energy efficient and better for the environment.

My toy race car was green with thick black stripes and doors that swung out on hinges.

On the track I built with little Lego pieces, my car flew down the hills and gracefully curved around the turns.

He put a big red B- on my project rubric and told me it was unfinished.

A coworker follows me from where I'm holding a large box from our most recent shipment.

"Oh, here let me grab that from you."

Without listening to my answer, he grabs the box and carries it to the stockroom.

It's not the first time.

I'm torn between wondering if my male coworkers don't want me to hurt my small girl arms by carrying something or if they think they are being chivalrous.

I am cutting avocados without a cut glove.

I know better, but I have cut at least fifty in the past half hour and I'd rather not waste the time.

A manager asks me to make drinks on the barista screen while he finishes up here.

"Don't want you to hurt yourself now."

He is confused by my annoyance.

I am not going to be a line cook when I'm older.

I look at myself in the mirror.

"You are going to be *anything* you want to be."

My reflection smiles and gives me a nod in the way my mom responded when I told her I was going to be a Power Ranger.

I am twenty and look at myself in the mirror again.

"You are a girl and you are powerful."

I am adventurous, curious, inventive, strong.

I am *powerful*.





## Flash Forward

*Jessica Wassenaar*

The starting point is 2004. We met on the bus, and I knew early on we would be friends. Shared ear buds and bagels bonded us through his first years of high school and my last years. We became an interwoven unit of friends that seemed unbreakable. His blue eyes and golden skin were the only thing I could think of.

Flash forward. It's 2008, the beginning of summer. Stumbling into my room after a night of drinking under the May moon, I hear my phone ding. *"I really had fun tonight. I can't believe I am graduating tomorrow."* I smiled down at my phone. *"I know!! I will be there! I'm glad you had fun tonight."* *"I know you will. I want to ask you something; it's something kind of serious."* My smile started to falter, and my heart started beating faster. *"What's up?"* *"Would you wanna come to my graduation as my girlfriend?"*

Flash forward. It's 2010 and I am 21. We drink vodka on the back porch of his momma's trailer watching the moon lazily dance across the summer sky. The boy looks over at me and I can tell it's going to be a long night. We talk of the future and what it holds for us. We have been together for two years, and it has been everything I imagined it would be. We keep talking, our sweaty arms and legs draped against each other, the now empty bottle of vodka in front of us, a safe haven for our cigarette butts. The sky starts to pinken, and we watch from the back porch as the sun kisses the moon goodnight and takes over for the day. He grabs my hand and we go inside and climb in the nest of blankets and I fall asleep listening to him talk.

Flash forward. It is 2012. We have been dating for 4 years. The blue eyes I fell for four years ago are bloodshot and tinged yellow from too much drinking. I watch, almost as it were slow motion, as his mouth forms words that should never be said to someone you love. I stare at the spittle gathering in the corners of his mouth as he continues yelling. Who is this person in front of me? I blink once, then twice and turn my eyes up to his. Time speeds back up as I try to figure out what he just asked me. *"I...I don't know."* I watch as his face gets redder and out

of nowhere his hand is now around my throat. My eyes shoot open in surprise, meeting his. He pushes back until I am against the wall, my legs barely able to keep up with me as he pushes. One. Two. Three. My head bounces off the wall, each time a little harder than the last. I claw at his hands, gasping for air, trying to get away. His hands loosen, and his eyes meet with mine. He didn't mean to.

Flash forward. It's 2014. My sister lowers the dress down, the other zips it up. My mom straightens my veil. I look over at the mirror. I am a floating cloud of white. Time stands still as I look at myself in the mirror. I blink once, twice, three times, and the spell is broken as I hear my name being called. I gather the dress and start walking.

Flash forward. It is 2016. I stretch out in bed, the sun streaming in through the window. The boy's face is relaxed as he sleeps. I can almost see the boy that I fell in love with. This one is a stranger to me. This one drinks all day and hides away his phone when I walk in the room. My belly tightens at the thought of what he could be hiding. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and hoist myself up. I pull my pants on, one leg at a time, and tuck my shirt down over my belly. I look in the mirror, turning my face side to side. It has gotten fatter over time, my cheeks like little chipmunk pouches. I breath out a sigh and try to deal with my hair situation. As I walk down the steps to get my shoes and keys, I hear a buzz. I look over at the couch and realize that the boy has left his phone downstairs to charge. My pulse quickens, and I leave my shoes as I silently cross the room towards the phone. It is like a planet, pulling me into its gravitational pull as I get closer and closer. I pick it up and see missed calls from a number I don't recognize and unread texts. I click it open and hold it to my chest. This is the moment. The moment of contemplation that we all take before we do something we know we shouldn't do, but we do it anyway because we know we have to. We know we have to, otherwise we will never know the truth as it's meant to be. I look down and start reading. *"Where are you?" "I need you, are you with her right now?" "I love you" "I love you too. Don't worry. She doesn't know. She wouldn't understand, Buttercup. I need you in my life." "My marriage is dead, there is nothing left" "I know baby, I will take care of you."* Picture after picture, text after text. I felt an imaginary hand reach down and pull my heart out of my chest. I watch as the hand squeezes harder and harder, memories and feelings dripping out of the heart onto the hardwood floors. My eyes fill with tears as time moves backwards from now until the beginning. I run outside and let the cold March air bite into my bear arms and face. I look around, the grey sky a bleak backdrop to the dead trees. *"My marriage is dead."* What does he

mean dead...it had just started? My hands tremble as I dial the number that had called. It rings, once, twice, three times. It goes to voicemail. My voice shakes as I record my message. I shiver as the wind bears down on my already numb skin, and I turn back towards the door. My shirt pulls taut across my stomach as I climb back up the stairs. I feel ten years older, my back aching, as I climb each step towards the truth. I stand in the doorway and throw the phone at the boy's sleeping body. It hits him, and I see his eyes shoot open in surprise. He looks at me, still groggy from the abrupt awakening. "How long," He looks at me quizzically, and then looks down to the phone, and then back up to me. "How long." He closes his eyes and lays back down, covering his face with his hands. "*Since November.*" November...that was Thanksgiving, and then there was Christmas, and then our second married New Years, and of course then Valentine's day and most recently my birthday. I look at him, my face screwed up in pain and anger. "November..." "*I love her...*"

He looks at me, tiredly. I look back, then I look down. I look down at the round, watermelon shaped belly under my shirt. I put my hand on top, and I look back up, holding onto this bump for dear life. He loves her, which means he doesn't love us. I look around our bedroom, and out into the hallway to the room across from us. I see the edge of a crib peeking out, and dinosaur decals dance across the walls. He loves her. I look back at him and take the biggest, deepest, bravest breath of my life. I lock eyes with him and say "**OK.**"

I walk out the door, down the stairs, out the door, and keep walking. He loves her.



## Mimi

*Jacqueline Agbay*

The ties that bind family together exist somewhere between obligation and adoration. It's an invisible balancing act, the strings pulling and pushing the behavior and dynamics of each member. Sometimes the strings become too tight, heavy with the weight of tension in a family drama. The strings that bind us can be broken, and that's how my de facto grandmother found herself at my door late one night in early October.

Diane, or Mimi, as we all affectional called her, had been a fixture in my life since I was 16. She was technically my husband's grandmother, but never made the distinction in the love she gave to everyone. We cared deeply for her, and despite concern being raised more than once over the condition of her living, she had refused many times to come live with us. Maybe that's why it was surprising, on that fall night, that we all understood her appearance at our door was not a visit. In the same way that dogs were often brought to her country home, she was being left. The ties that bound her to her other life snapped. A complicated dispute over housing and money and theft, paired with tangled connections to her other family, lead her to us.

On first inspection of the situation the only word I'd use is panic. While she was loved and adored, I was on the precipice of being a single mother to 3 kids with a baby on the way. My husband was preparing to leave with the Army for at least a year. We were strapped for cash and space, 5 people and two dogs already inhabiting a small 900 square ft. home. Mimi had her leg amputated and it left her wheelchair bound. She would need help with almost every aspect of daily life. There would be Doctors and shopping and the burden of extra cooking all to be done by me. To top it all off, we would be selling our house and moving in just a year. I admit I did seek out alternatives, but they all seemed to fall through in one way or another. She was there, with me, and it would have to be enough for both of us. In so many ways, looking back, I am happy that she was.

As our time together went on, something unexpected happened. The pull of obligation to her faded away. As we talked over coffee, we

became friends. She taught my daughter to sew, and their relationship grew every day. She was a renown crafter in the family. Mimi's years of living with so little gave her an uncanny ability to create from anything and she readily shared it all with us. We laughed together as the kids ran around and asked her about her robot leg, a prosthesis she rarely wore. She befriended a host of colorful neighbors I never knew, sitting on the porch and speculating about everything from conspiracies to the bible. Life with her brought a level of companionship that eased most of the previous doubts I had.

In comparison, my own grandmothers were strict women. They lived by rules and bedtimes and a belief in well behaved children. In another timeline, if it was them who needed a home, I'm not sure the same relationship could have developed. What I found in Mimi was an unconditional friendship.

Mimi and I shared so much in our time together. I was accustomed to bringing her to her doctors and knowing all her current health problems as an elderly woman. She has some recurring illness that seemed well managed, but at the suggestion of a doctor, she went in for a routine surgery. She would be home by the following night. As often happens in women her age, a minor complication quickly became devastation. In an early fall night, almost exactly a year later, she was gone as sudden as when she showed up.

When the ties that connected our lives together first became intertwined, it was out of an obligation. Our time together turned that obligation into adoration. In her absence, the absence of her ties to me, I long for more. I wish we had more trip to the grocery store. I wish I had one more load of laundry to fold with her. I wish I had one more conversation that would let me feel that presence again. All I can do is be grateful for my time with Mimi.



Kevin Chigos-White, *Leveled Poise*. Glass, 2018.



## Gymnopédie No. 3

*Melyssa Mizal*

Helena Glass tasted her cold brew that evening in Wilson's Café. She faintly listened to the radio. Instead, her focus shifted towards the grey sky. *I'm so tired.* Theodore never failed to say hello to her in the hallways. He even invited her to several parties and tailgates after classes ended. Sometimes she would watch him pitch during baseball games. His smile radiated in her mind although she had not seen him since high school graduation. *His face looked altogether different in the casket.* She found out during her shift. She would not remember what his corpse looked like in the following months. She supposed that the shock blocked it out. Helena just remembered that his head was somewhat disfigured from the gunshot wound to his temple. *That wasn't his face. I just stood there.* Her body frozen, unable to move. Unable to breathe. *Everything was a whirlwind.* The first day after knowing was the hardest. Blinking, she forgot until it hit her.

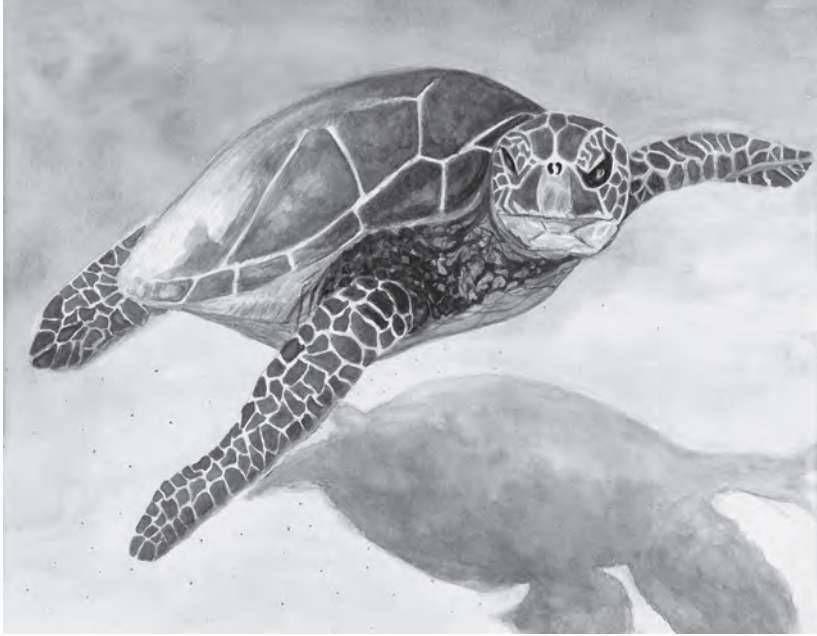
She observed the fellow café's guests. An older man with remarkable blue eyes was looking away from his mug to the windows. She wondered if he knew. If he could sense her pain. *Theodore would know.* Sometimes, she would wake up and pretend that he was still there. He would become alive again in their high school's hallways. In the classes. At the ball field. Back to when the weather was lovely. The air would be golden. She took herself to the films a few days after his funeral. Just to forget about it, even if it was for a little while. She found herself driving to her aunt's house several times to spend time with her little cousin, Madison and she would watch *The Iron Giant* on a loop. Even to the point where Madison stopped paying attention. The clock chimed.

Ordering another brew, she noticed that the older man with the blue eyes met with someone. She looked nearly his age. *Her coat looks so comforting* she thought. Helena wanted to hide inside of her coat until she got lost in it. *He would have been twenty in the spring.* Theodore would forever be immortalized at nineteen. She would age without him aging. She heard rumors that the cops suspected foul play. They were just rumors though. *Was it in a car?* She came to the realization that she

had no idea where he did it. She thought he left no note, although she was not certain. *Maybe he did leave a note and they kept that private.* She could have helped. She was unable to forgive herself. Helena reluctantly ordered yet another brew.

*I would have been able to do something. Anything.* Theodore was one of the brightest of her class. Apparently, he could recite pi to the twentieth digit. According to the pastor who presided over his funeral. She never liked funerals. The coldness was unbearable when they buried him. She thought of the coat again. *Velvet.* Helena looked up from her brew and noticed that they were gone. She had not noticed when they left. *Had it been a while? Where did they go?* A sense of grief washed over her. Maybe she could see them, even at a distance, if she went outside. She went to light her cigarette out of Wilson's, but she could not spot them. She started to walk back to her empty apartment. By then, night arrived. The skies comforted her as she saw the stars. *Theodore would like those stars.*





Linda Jaglowski, *Graceful Glider*. Watercolor, 2018.



Monica Muhlich, *Zeke*. Scratchboard, 2018.



Christina Raab, *Spring Forward*. Glass, 2018.

