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# Tributaries<sup>12</sup>

a journal of student writing

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## A Word from the Editor

A quick note:

Months ago, Drew Davis asked an interesting question: What does *Tributaries* mean to you? It's a question that has stuck with me.

The literal definitions of *Tributaries* are as follows:

1. Stream feeding larger body of water.
2. Payer of tribute.

The first one I knew, the second I had not. And both accurately describe the intention of *Tributaries*.

This magazine, as humble as it is, is a conduit that feeds our larger aspirations as writers. Just like a tiny brook leading to the expansive gulf, our work on *Tributaries* serves as a first step for those who work with the written word.

Yet, as we guide we also pay tribute. Tribute to the authored words printed within. Tribute to those who didn't make the cut. Tribute to those who read this now. But, most critically, tribute to those who seek the impossibility of becoming a writer. To become implies attainment. Of arrival. Of cessation. Of the culmination of growth. Let this never happen.

Let this also serve as a declaration of vigilance. The act of writing is never finite. It is telescopic in its infiniteness. Never, for any reason, be satisfied with what you have written, of the words you have chosen.

Keep up the good fight.

Z.A. Bishop  
IUE Writer's Club President  
*Tributaries* Chief Editor



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part one

# Creative Non-Fiction

## Don't Wait

Scarlet Alton

I grew up knowing I had a biological father, James, who lived in Chicago. I had no communication with him until I was fifteen, and the only reason for this was because I thought I had a half-sister and wanted to meet her. Once my mother made contact with him, he denied this and claimed I was his only child. From this point in time he asked if he could write to me and was given permission to do so. So, thus began fifteen years of letters, cards, and gifts.

I remember the first letter as if it were yesterday. The excitement which I felt inside was as if I had been handed a million dollars yet, on the other hand, I quickly felt a heavy weight of guilt overshadow my heart because I feared hurting my dad who raised me. I was mixed-up and did not know which emotion to feel. I carefully opened the envelope immediately, eager to view the contents. First, I looked to see if he had sent any current pictures; he hadn't. Next I read, taking in every word as he described his life, job, family, hobbies, etc. Last, I specifically remember taking note of the style of handwriting he had to see if there were any similarities.

I had just gotten home from school and begun to help my mother make preparations for supper when she handed me an envelope. She told me it was from James. She was eager for me to open it. The banging of pans, stirring swishes of spoons, slamming of the refrigerator door, and the dinging sound of silverware being placed on the table all came to a halt.

Slowly I sat down at our round kitchen table and took my time to open it.

I did not want to tear any part. Upon finishing the letter my mother asked what my father had written. As I began to tell her I looked up and noticed my dad was leaning against the kitchen sink with his head hanging down. I could feel a coldness enter the room, then I was afraid to finish. I did not want to see my dad cry. My parents were quiet and my little brother went to his room seeming not to be interested in the event taking place. When I finished telling my mother the details my dad left the kitchen.

The first Christmas after we began writing, I received a box and card with a letter inside. I was in awe. The contents held a small television, combined with a radio and alarm clock, a beautiful pastel striped sweater, and ankle socks. After reading the letter and observing the gifts lying around my knees, I looked up and noticed my dad. He looked so sad. Again I felt the same heaviness I had experienced when I opened the first letter from James.

These struggles of excitement and guilt fought against each other for many years. I did not know whether to be happy or to be sad. The situation caused me to withdraw. I would not talk about James in front of my dad. I felt trapped in a room with no doors or windows to climb out of.

My father and I were always on good terms as long as the subject of James did not arise. We have been close and would always take time out of each week to eat out, just the two of us. We have always agreed on most everything. I don't believe we have ever had a disagreement. I have always respected his opinion. My mother had no problems

with me communicating with James and supported any decisions I made. My half-brother, Mike, was younger. He never opposed the fact I wrote my father. His main concern was, as he has stated many times, "You are my whole sister, not my half." My little brother knew how to make me feel better. I could lean on him or my mother for support.

At the age of sixteen a flicker of hope came to life within me when my mother and I were at my grandmother's home. She took me into her bedroom, which housed a bed decorated in beautiful colors of white, pink and purple. The drapes hanging in the window matched and had butterflies of different sizes that were made of netting and wire pinned to them. At the end of her bed set a rectangular cedar chest. My mother opened it up and pulled out a large plastic cover. As she pulled out the contents, I noticed she had a large picture in her hands. I could not believe what I was seeing. It was her and James's wedding photograph. In addition to this were engagement photos and small snapshots. Another piece to my puzzle had fallen into place as I observed the close-up of his face. His eyes, yes I had his eyes. I also had his mouth. I studied his profile for the longest time that day and many times after, always thinking someday I would know for sure what exactly I have in my expressions that are like his, I would go see him. But, in the back of my mind, I would have to wait and find a way to do it without my dad knowing so I would not hurt him.

I was thirty when I got the call of James's terrible accident. The phone rang

around 8:30 a.m. on a Thursday in March of 2001. I jumped out of bed and headed down the short hallway, which led into the front room. I picked up the phone and a woman addressed herself as Liz. She told me my father had been in an accident at work, and he was not expected to live. She conveyed to me his mother thought I should know this. The room started spinning as if I were a child looking into a kaleidoscope, twisting slowly, and seeing the pieces being jumbled in different directions. I wanted to scream. Why was this happening to me? I had my life planned out, and I was going to meet James on my terms when I was ready. I had all the time in the world. I fell back into a blue recliner wondering what I was going to do. I wasn't ready for this. Once I came to my senses I ran back to the bedroom and woke my husband. I explained we had to make a trip to Chicago. We packed and purchased airline tickets.

Our flight landed, and we made arrangements for transportation to take us to our hotel. Once in the van, the driver decided to take detours and shortcuts throughout the city instead of taking the interstate. I remember hating it because the drive was not getting me there fast enough. As I laid my head against the window I kept telling myself I was not ready to meet my father in this manner. I imagined him severely injured with a distorted face and body. I knew he would be wrapped in bandages so I could not see his face. I was not in any shape to meet all these people who were my relatives.

Finally my husband and I arrived at the hotel, checked in, and quickly took

a cab to the hospital; yet, in my state of mind at the time I was disoriented and felt dazed. I could not comprehend time and distance. I did not realize the hospital was only three to four blocks away. We could have walked.

As I got off the elevator in the hospital, I passed a waiting room full of people who, I assumed, were my relatives. I didn't stop; I was in a hurry to get to my father. The nurse at the station directed me to his room. As she pointed in the direction I should go, I noticed it was the last room on the left at the end of the hall. It was the longest walk of my life. I felt as if I was in a movie and someone had taken a remote to a DVD player and slowed it down. I was never going to get to that room. All I could think was if I would be able to see myself in his face because he had head trauma, and I was afraid he would be bandaged up. This never-ending hall I walked down held anger, pain, sadness, and loneliness because I had been forewarned his prognosis was not good, and he most likely would not pull through. His head had been crushed and his ribs and an arm had been broken from the fall he had taken.

When I saw him for the first time I was okay for a moment. I could see his face, and as I looked like him it gave me some relief. His head injury did not affect his features even though most of his head was wrapped in bandages. I was so lost in trying to figure out who I was by searching what little I had because of no response when a voice spoke to me and brought me into the real world. I looked up and there stood my uncle, which I knew because of photos. He said, "I'm your Uncle

Tiny." Then he began to explain the accident and how he had not left James's side since it happened.

Quickly, different relatives started entering the room to get a look at me, which were my grandmother, Dorothy, Liz (who is married to Tiny), and Dottie, James's wife. The news had spread that James' daughter was here. At first I was angry when they came into the room. I needed time to grieve alone. My resentment quickly subsided when I found myself searching the faces of my family. I looked like them, especially like my grandmother. I had her eyes, the shape of her mouth, and high forehead—which most everyone in my family had.

I do not remember leaving the room and walking back up the hall, but when I stopped next to the waiting room I became overwhelmed with grief. I leaned against the wall and could not move. My tears felt like warm rain on a steamy summer day. I couldn't cry aloud. I had no voice. I couldn't stop them. I sobbed silently. I saw people all round, coming in and out of the small waiting room, yet focusing was impossible. I wanted to escape. I was helpless. All I could comprehend was this was not how I wanted to meet my father. I always imagined a happy time. I imagined a voice, a smile, a hug, and an excited face to see me. I was also angry because he would never open his eyes and see who he left and what he missed out on.

Over the course of two days I met my new family, and they gave me many memories of themselves and James. The last night of our stay in Chicago, my father



was taken to surgery to relieve pressure because his brain was swelling. The outcome of surviving the accident was still grim; however the doctors felt they should try anything possible at the request of my father's wife. After recovery he was taken to his room, and I was allowed to spend as much time with him as I wanted because the nurses were told by his family that I was his daughter and I was leaving soon. As I sat at his bedside the ventilator caused my father's chest to rise and fall repetitiously; his heart never missed a beat as the monitor beeped evenly. The blood pressure cuff tightened and released on his arm every fifteen minutes. He had been moved to a new room and a nurse sat at a small table near the end of his bed. As the nurse started her assessment she lifted up the white sheet near his feet, and I noted they were exactly like mine. So were his hands. His aunt came in, and sat with me for some time, and then left. When I decided it was time to go I took his hand and spoke to him for the first time in my life. My words to him were, "James, this is Scarlet. I came to see you. I have to go now."

He died four days after I left. I went back for the funeral. I felt a release because my dad and mom actually drove up from Kentucky to go with me. Although they did not attend it, they gave me support. I know it was hard on my dad, but for once in my life it seemed as if my dad was ok with me getting to know my new family. He had struggled with James and his extended family for years and conveyed to me a few times he was bothered by the fact I had another father. In times past he

stated, "It hurts me when you receive letters, gifts, and cards."

Living a life without knowing my father has been miserable. Do I share his same mannerisms, expressions, and voice? I periodically have nightmares of trying to find him, trying to see his face and hear his voice. I dream of going to see his wife and asking her if she has any videos I can see of him because there is so much I do not know. At times I feel cheated, and when I do I try to tell myself there must be a reason why we never met. This is a never-ending cycle, and my mind goes in circles because I simply want to hear his voice.

## In Particular Shame

Z.A. Bishop

The descent of night siphoned away the lingering red-orange remains of a November sunset.

As I drove home my cell phone vibrated in my lap. An unknown number was scrawled across its small screen. I answered the call while attempting to turn down the Shins blaring from my car stereo.

"Hello," I stated into the phone. Garbled words came, followed by a moment of awkward silence.

"Hello?" I repeated.

"Is this Zack?"

"Speaking."

"Hey man, it's Kenny Mansfield."

"Hey buddy! What's up? It's been a long time," I replied. It had been half a decade since we had last talked. The next twelve minutes were spent exchanging pleasantries. We asked all the usual questions: How have you been? How's your job? How's your family. And we gave the usual responses: Good. Same old shit. Can't complain.

However, there was one taboo question I couldn't ask. And an answer that was on both our minds. The question: do you remember Groundhog's Day, 2005? The answer: yes.

i.

"The Punxsutawney Club reports that at 7:31 a.m. this morning, in front of a crowd of 18,000 Phil the Groundhog saw his shadow. Looks like six more weeks lie ahead for us. This is NPR."

Kenny's hand reaches out and turns off the radio as he pulls into my apartment's parking lot. He watches an

EMT close the back doors of an ambulance. He wonders what is going down as he counts two sheriff cars, a heavy rescue vehicle, and an ambulance sitting outside my apartment building. Their lights spinning silently in the grey February afternoon.

He dialed my number as he parked next to my '91 Ford Ranger. Two rings, then to voicemail. He would have been on edge as he entered my apartment building. The creak of the stairs as he climbed toward my unit would have been the only sound in the otherwise quite building.

The perfume of rotten trash and molded dishwater greeted him as he entered my dark apartment. He called out my name. No response. His confusion grew into foreboding as he surveyed the apartment. The living room was covered in the detritus of fast food wrappers, Chinese take-out, and dirty dishes; same as it had been a week before. In the living room stood a beige plastic lawn chair, one of the four normally surrounding the kitchen table. It was the only thing out of place. Yet, something was off. The distinct absence of life.

He tried my cell again as he walked toward the bathroom. The only light in the apartment poured out from the cracked door.

He called out my name again as he approached the door.

His hand pushed the door slowly wide. His eyes darted. His breath would come hard and fast. He began hyperventilating.

He did not notice. Instead, he no-

ticed blood.

Blood streaked the walls. The blood splattered toilet. Dark puddles on the sink, in the bathtub, on the floor. If he would've ventured deeper inside the bathroom, he might have noticed the razor oxidizing in the tub.

He backed away into the living room. Coming to the beige plastic lawn chair, he noticed the white long sleeve T-Shirt sitting next to the lawn chair. He would have slowly bent over, without any conscious thought. He picked it up.

He noticed how heavy it felt. Blood lent it mass.

He noticed its chill. Blood not recently shed but wet. Still wet.

He might have still been hyperventilating. I imagine he didn't notice.

Remembering the cavalcade of emergency vehicles, he runs outside desperate for news about his friend. He rushes down the stairs two at a time, and bursts through the doors.

The parking lot is empty, save for the handful of cars belonging to the residents. The four emergency vehicles are gone and not a soul dares to stir. The citizens of the south east side of Indianapolis hide when the authorities are called.

In the steely air of a grey February afternoon, Kenny begins to wonder if he lost a friend.

ii.

*Tomorrow. I'll fix everything tomorrow,* I thought to myself as I went to bed.

The semester had started three weeks prior. I had yet to attend one class. And I knew I had a tough choice. Fix

school. Or give up.

As I laid in bed that night, I thought of Mom and Dad.

I remembered their faces veneered with disappointment when I flunked out of Purdue a year prior. It had been haunting me for weeks. It was something I never wanted to see again.

I remembered the lies I fed them when I answered their calls. "Yeah, I'm doing OK." "Yes, I'm going to class." "I should get all B's and C's." "I promise."

I remembered dad's words when I left for college the second time: "If you fuck this up Zack, we're all fucked."

That morning my alarm went off at 7:00 a.m. I got up. I was back in bed by 7:03. I don't remember why. Maybe I couldn't face it, that looming decision. I knew I had to do something about it, but that day wasn't the day. "Tomorrow," I thought. "I'll fix everything tomorrow."

Hours later, I rolled over and looked at my alarm clock. In sinister red, it read 1:30 p.m.

Hung-over with too much sleep and having smoked too much pot the night before, I got up. I stumbled across my bedroom floor carpeted with a mosaic of dirty clothes. My head was muddled as I walked into the living room. In my pajamas, I stood trying to blink and yawn and scratch away the haziness of oversleeping. I walked into the kitchen. Scattered across the table were seeds and stems. Amongst them rested a holster for a package scanner I used at work. Next to it sat a legal pad. On the first page was a to-do list. Not one thing was scratched off.

The gravity of my situation began

replacing the lethargy. The third week of classes began today. I attended one class. I felt anger. And hate. Hate for the hole I dug myself into.

My mind raced with uncertainty. Can I go back? Can I fix it? Is it too late? What are my professors going to say? What are my parents going to say? Will they be mad? How mad? Did I really do this? Did I repeat the same mistake?

I clutched the back of one of the four beige plastic lawn chair standing around my kitchen table. I leaned heavy on the flimsy plastic. Hard breaths. Not fast. Deep and long. My eyes bored holes into the table.

My eyes bored holes amongst the leftovers of the bag of pot I finished the night before.

And then I saw it: a small, clear plastic box containing half a dozen razors.

I picked up the little plastic box. Slowly a finger slid out a blade. It was a small rectangle with small U-shaped notches on the small ends. One long end was sharp. One long end reinforced with a band of steel. Its surfaces were greased to keep it sharp. Pristine. And it was both.

My mind blanked as my finger felt the greased steel.

I pushed one sharp corner into my forearm skin. I pushed hard. I felt the skin break.

I remember it well.

Through the blade, I could feel my skin give, submitting to the metal. Cutting into my flesh felt like cutting into leather. It felt gratifying. It felt like control.

My left arm felt the blade sink in.

The cold metal and the burn of a new wound. The bearable pain. The release of submission.

When I pulled the blade back, I watched the small cut give birth. A speck of blood grew into a drop. Gravity lured it down the slope of my skin. For a moment, it hung. Then fell.

I stared at the small red dot on my carpet. The drop took root like a seed that had fallen to earth. I had an answer to all the questions I couldn't face. I had a way out.

iii.

I opened the fridge. Such bleak contents. The ninety-seven percent empty bottle of Heinz Ketchup. The unopened bottle of Newman's Own ranch salad dressing. The Dijon mustard. Molded Chinese leftovers. The unopened bottle of hard lemonade mix. The half empty bottle Disaronno Amaretto. I checked its proof. sixty.

I checked the lemonade. Twelve proof. And it had been expired for six months.

I mixed them in an old 7 11 Big Gulp cup. I didn't bother to rinse it out. The dried up splotches of red Icee bled into the booze as I filled the cup. When I was done, the Disaronno bottle was empty. The lemonade was half gone too.

I sat down at the dining room table. I drank heavily. I picked up the legal pad. I did not fail to see the irony as I ripped off the to-do list to write a suicide note.

I drank hard and slashed the paper with a red pen. A brutal thirty minutes

spent writing and drinking. Seven pages later, I stood up. I had a strong buzz and knew that was only the beginning. I ripped off the six pages that encompassed my final words. Folded them together. Stored them in my left pocket. The right contained the little plastic box of razors. I headed to the bathroom.

It had been the second time I sat on the toilet that day. This time, however, I was much more motivated and much more drunk. Neither time had the slightest thing to do with normal bodily functions. I looked at my arm.

Before I had scoured my fridge for booze, I had made four cuts. They were already scabbed and crusted over with blood. Four false starts. Four warm ups, evenly spaced. Each line drawn heavier and longer than the one before. As the distance increased from the wrist, length and depth grew accordingly with my courage.

I slid a fresh razor out of the small plastic container.

I took a deep breath. Held it. Pressed the blade to my skin. Drew a fifth line. And exhaled.

A sixth, seventh, and eighth line appeared in as many minutes.

I looked at my newest brushstrokes. Specks on the riverbeds I dug into my skin grew into each other and filled the troughs. Out of the troughs, gravity pulled red slugs. They slid down to the under-flesh of my arm. Their pace was quick. Satisfying. Warm red slime trails were left behind.

Deep breath. Hold. Cut. Exhale. Repeat.

The blood followed the plow as I cut the deepest trench yet. No specks this time. This cut needed no time to bear fruit.

I felt grim satisfaction as I watched the blood-slug sprint down my arm much faster this time around. I felt gratified. Accomplished. The tension was broken. I was free. I could do this. No going back.

Breathe.

Hold.

Cut.

Exhale.

iv.

Within minutes of being home, I was digging through the files on my old computer. I had to find it. To finish it.

Not long later, my leg trembled nervously, jack hammering the floor as I wrote. As I edited. Revised. Revisited. Every few sentences, I would look at my arm. Over five years, almost six, the baker's dozen of cuts have faded. Only half a dozen can be seen without close examination. Almost a half dozen years have passed as I write. And even now I can still feel those feelings. My heart palpates. I draw shallow breath. My skin and teeth on edge. I'm scared. Scared of the feelings I felt then, and scared of the grim accuracy I write now.

One scar I can always clearly see, the one I hate to see. The one that wasn't a false start but a near finish.

v.

There were tears. Many tears. Not tears of pain. Tears of drunk frustration shed in hot sputtering sobs. I fucked up

school. And I was fucking up dying. I was frustrated, and I hated it.

The source of frustration lay in that valley I dug deep into the pit of my elbow. I could see it: the Cephalic Vein. I could see it. Thick, black. A tube rocking back and forth under my razor. I could see it but couldn't cut it. And I cried because of it.

Suddenly music. A song. The Flight of the Valkyries, digitalized. It was the ringtone I assigned for my parents. As picked it up, the words "Mom and Dad" were emblazoned on my cell phone's small screen.

I answered it. I thought it might've been important. And I did not fail to see the irony in thinking that.

"Hello?"

"Hi Zack. It's mom. I was afraid I won't reach you before you left," she stated.

"Oh, I'm on my way out."

"I was just calling to say we put some money in your account. You said you were running low."

"Thanks."

"Zack, is everything ok? You sound... hurt." In her words, I did not fail to see the irony.

"I'm fine," I say flatly.

"Is it still ok if we come visit tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"K, I love you Zack."

"Bye Mom, love you too." I wrote these words because I don't remember saying them. I hope I did.

As I hung up, new tears fell. Tears of guilt. She's going to hate me for what I'm going to do. But she would hate me if I didn't. I was resolved by the dichotomy.

I went back to digging.

vi.

I'd expected it to flow; steady, slow, and voluminous. Like syrup squeezed from bottle.

I had no concept of the true power of a man's heart exerts.

Without flesh to hold back the pressure, the flow from a pierced and exposed Cephalic Vein is indeed voluminous. But it doesn't flow. It sprays.

In time with the spasms of my heart, blood erupted from my arm. Into my face and into the air and onto the walls and toilet seat and sink and mats and linoleum—all in a couple seconds.

I remember the sound it made as it landed on the hard surfaces. Like drops of hot water falling into snow.

And I remember the fear. Over half a decade later, it was still palpable. The terror of death being a tangible reality is impossible to ignore.

I learned the truth of a man's heart.

vii.

"911 emergency."

"Um, yes, um, I need an ambulance."

"Ok, what's the nature of the emergency?"

"Um, well, I'm bleeding. The vein in my arm, ya know, the one in the pit of your elbow. I cut it."

"Ok. How did it happen?"

"I cut it. With a razor. To kill myself."

"Ok. What's your address?"

"3930 Breen Drive, Apartment 7."

"Ok. What's your name?"

"Zack."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes." Tears fell again. I was alone. All alone. There was no one. Just me.

"Ok, we're sending help. I'm going to ask you to stay on the line until they arrive."

I remember I couldn't answer her with words, just sobs. I checked my arm. Under the shirt I used as a bandage, blood rhythmically squirted from the ravine I cut into my arm. But just squirts. Not sprays.

Maybe it's clotting, I thought. Or maybe I've bled too much already. The long sleeve T-shirt was tie-dyed with blood. No longer white. Now crimson. Almost entirely.

And it was heavy. And it was wet and blood hot. And I felt cold.

"Are you still with me, Zack?"

"Yeah," I said as the sobs momentarily subsided. Awkwardness pierced through the drunk fear. I felt the need to make small talk.

"So how's your day?" I ask the dispatcher.

"Good. It's been a slow one," she said.

"I guess that's a good thing. Do you like your job?" It felt like years since I had talked to anyone. Lifetimes.

"It can be hard sometimes. But sometimes, when I get to help people like you, it makes it all worthwhile." I remember I smiled. A faint smile holding back the return of sobs. I felt faint. I remember feeling nauseous.

"By the way," she continued, "it takes a lot of courage to reach out for help. You should be proud."

I cried hard. I had never heard words so beautiful. I never felt so loved.

viii.

Three sharp, deliberate knocks echoed through the apartment. A gruff, muffled voice declares the intent to enter. The door opens. A sheriff enters, followed by a couple of paramedics, then two firefighters, then another sheriff.

"I'm in here," I called.

"You Zack?" the first sheriff asks.

"Are you alone?" the second sheriff asks. That word. It cut like a razor. I remember hating that word. Alone.

"Yes."

A sheriff and a paramedic crowded into the bathroom. The paramedic helped me up from between the tub and the toilet. The sheriff glanced around.

"Got the weapon. Its in the tub."

"Where's your gun?" the other sheriff called out.

"Gun?" I replied confused, as I was lead by the paramedic into the living room.

"Yeah, there's an empty holster on the kitchen table. Where's the gun?" The authority of his question made me think I actually had a gun.

"It's not a holster. It's a thing for work."

"Oh?" kitchen-sheriff said as he picked up the Velcro and plastic contraption. "Oh! I thought this was a gun holster!" the sheriff chuckled.

"If I had a gun, do you think I'd cut

myself?" I asked.

"Good point!" the sheriff snorted.

"What we got?" one sheriff asked the other sheriff.

"Some marijuana residue. Seeds. Stems. A roach. Clips. Not much really. Nothing to raise a stink about."

"Yeah. He's been through enough."

I remember their words, but not pity. As I was led out into the living room, one of the paramedics brought over a beige plastic lawn chair. The other paramedic sat me down in it.

I felt ashamed. Ashamed that my dining room chairs were cheap plastic lawn chairs. Ashamed of the remnants of Chinese take out scattered amongst Taco Bell bags and Pizza Hut boxes. Ashamed of the big trash bag sitting next to the door, the bag that had been sitting there for two weeks. Ashamed of the kitchen sink full of moldy dishes and stagnant water. Ashamed of the smell. I felt guilty for them having to be there, to endure the filth in which I had surrounded myself.

"He's in shock." stated a paramedic.

"Easy, easy." The other says as she slowly pulled out my arm. I remember her gentle touch as she pulled away the shirt. There were no squirts, no eruptions. She examined my handiwork. "Fourteen self-inflicted lacerations on the top and bottom of the left forearm. You're right handed, right?"

"Yep."

The paramedic laid down a foundation of compresses, then wrapped my arm thickly in gauze.

"Zack, do you want to go to the hospital?" the other paramedic asked. I nodded solemnly. I was too tired to cry. But I felt like it. As they help me up, blood left my brain. I felt lightheaded. Disoriented.

"Easy," said the other paramedic. "You lost a lot of blood."

"Do you want to change before we go?" one firemen asked me.

I stumble to my room. I emerge in the cleanest clothes I could find on my floor.

"Do you have everything? Keys, cell phone, wallet?" the fireman continued as I entered the dining room. I liked him. I located the things he suggested.

"Ok, let's go." The fireman exited first. Then the sheriffs. Then the paramedics with me in tow. The paramedics waited on me as I locked the deadbolt. Everyone else was outside when I turned to descend the stairs.

"Easy, take your time, you've lost a lot of blood. Take 'em one step at a time," the bathroom medic instructed.

At that moment, that was my life's mantra. One step at a time.

ix.

Despite the sky being gunmetal grey, my eyes ached as they adjusted to the light. The parking lot was deathly quiet. In silence, the lights of the emergency vehicles spun. A fire engine, two sheriff cars, and an ambulance. All this for me, because of me.

They slammed the back doors to the ambulance. I thought thick, drunk thoughts: *I am sitting in the back of an am-*



*balance because I'd cut myself. Intentionally.* Reality slammed back into me with those doors.

"Did you hear about Jenkins?" one paramedic asked. Reality was that he was a wise looking black man. He was the driver.

"No. What happened to him?" The other paramedic asked. Reality was that she was a young white woman with long bushy dishwater-blonde hair. She was sitting on chair in the back with me. She filled out some paperwork.

"So him and Johnson pick up this guy, right? Johnson is driving and Jenkins is riding with him. They were responding to a call about some crackhead that was sitting on the side of the road, all bleeding and shit. After they get him loaded up, runs back to get his bag, right?."

"Yeah?"

"So Jenkins tells me, when he comes back, right, the crack head was jerking off! I mean really going at it!" he tells us, glancing back towards us.

"Oh my god! That's so gross," she laughs, looking towards me. I want to laugh. Somewhere inside me I laugh. Maybe. All I remember was the reality that I couldn't.

"So, Zack, why'd you do it?" she asks, turning to me. Reality causes me to cry.

I looked up. Glancing out the back window of the ambulance, I remember seeing a black Acura TL with gold trim and a Purdue vanity plate had pulled up next my truck. I remember thinking it looked like Kenny's car. *It couldn't be his. Can't be his,* I thought. My phone rang. I re-

member two rings before I turned it off. "Kenny M." was scrawled on the caller ID.

I don't remember why I turned the phone off. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the shame. Maybe I couldn't handle knowing Kenny was about to see the mess I had made. In my apartment. Of my life.

I don't remember any questions the EMT softly interrogated me with on the way to the hospital. I don't remember any, save one.

"Is there anyone you would like to notify?" She asked.

"No."

x.

I was left in the care of the sheriffs when we arrived at the hospital. One was stationed in my room. He was leaning back in a short office chair. His hands were resting on the top of his head.

"So, I just got to ask. Why'd you do it?" he asked, as he crossed his arms across his chest.

"Can I go to the bathroom?" I asked in response. "I have to pee. I promise I won't do anything."

"Sure," he replied.

As I passed him on the way to the bathroom, I gave a shy nod to the sheriff leaning against the counter of the nurses' station as he turned to look at me.

Immediately upon entering the bathroom, I was horrified by the thing in the mirror. I barely recognized the blood crusted, tear-streaked face staring back at me. I scrubbed my face with cheap soap and brown, tri-folded paper towels. I scrubbed furiously.

xi.

I turned on my phone as I was checked out by the doctor. Immediately it began to vibrate in response to the texts sent to me when the phone was off. All from Kenny. I sent him two texts. *Did you go in the bathroom? Can you pick me up?*

To both he replied: Yes.

Only two cuts required stitches. Three for the cut on my wrist. Four for the pit of the elbow. Seven stitches.

"So, why'd you do it?" the nurse asked as she sewed me up. Tears fell again.

xii.

She saved me from the purgatory of waiting, and I remember her for it. She was a kindly middle-aged woman with shoulder length, bushy hair. She wore dark olive-green khakis with a tan turtleneck. She found me sitting outside the psyche ward, waiting for a doctor to judge me. Judge whether I was a threat to myself or others.

"Excuse me, did you need help?" she asked.

"I'm waiting to see the shrink." I remember her puzzled expression. "I tried to kill myself." I remember how unmoved, how matter-of-factly, the words fell from my lips.

"Oh! Have you been checked in yet?" I shook my head. Her expression became one of annoyance. Not at me, at those that forgot me. "How long have you been waiting?" I shrugged. "Damn, they should've told me. Follow me honey, we'll get you all taken care of."

"So, why'd you do it?" she asked. I don't remember her first dozen questions, but I do remember that one. The tears I had been holding back since I left the emergency room began to burn when she asked me that. My eyes refused to look at her. Instead, they searched her desk. Cluttered with pictures and files. I remember her pack of cigarettes. Marlboro Methanol 100's.

"Is there a way I could bum a smoke from you?" I asked. "I've had a long day." My voice cracked as those words dribbled out. She handed me the pack.

"You need a lighter too?" she asked with a smile.

xiii.

Menthol smoke infiltrated my lungs. Calm deep breathes. Vulgarly white halogens pierced the night. They were his headlights. He had called. I don't remember the conversation. But I felt fear. Fear of judgment. Fear of anger. I remember him walking up.

He hugged me and burst into tears. And his weakness gave me strength.

"It'll be ok," I said as I stroked Kenny's hair. "Everything's going to be just fine."

In the waiting room we talked and laughed. It felt good to have a friend again. The hours until I waited to see the shrink flowed by like rain.

xiv.

"Do you hear voices?" the psychiatrist asked.

"No," I replied.

"You should seek help."

*I waited three hours for this?*

xv.

We got back to my apartment around 11 p.m. that night.

"So, um," Kenny said. "Did you write a note?"

"Yes," replied.

"Can I," Kenny stammered. "Can I read it?"

"Yes," I said. I didn't mind, I had no shame left.

I went into my room, and I found the blue jeans I had been wearing. They were absurdly heavy, like they had been pulled out of the washer before the spin cycle had begun. Blood had soaked through the cloth and was clotting in splotches all over the paper.

Emerging from my room, I handed the pages to Kenny. To this day, I have no idea what was running through Kenny's mind as he read those damp pages. When he was done, he didn't say a word.

xvi.

It took an hour to convince to him it would be ok to leave me alone for the night. I told him I had a reason to stay. I don't remember sharing that reason with him. He would not have understood.

After he left, I entered the bathroom for the first time since we arrived.

For the next four hours I cleaned. First I began with the bathroom, then my room, then the living room, and finally the kitchen. I stuffed the stained clothes in trash bag. As I tossed the bag into the

dumpster at the side of my building, I wondered what would happen if someone found them. A morbid part of me hoped that someone would find them, and spend their life wondering whose clothes they were, whose blood that it was. I doubted they would think they came from the same person.

It was 3:00 a.m. before I went to bed that night. Groundhog's Day lay three hours in the past. In those three hours I managed to do one thing I hadn't done before, clean my apartment.

The first day of the rest of my life was off to a good start.

xvii.

I sat silently eating the dinner my girlfriend, Vicki, had made for me. Vicki sensed my tension as I sat eating the stew she made me.

Without warning, I broke the silence, and I told her everything I had been writing. I told her all about Groundhog's Day. And I told her the impending truth that filled me with apprehension. The reality I withheld each time anyone asked me why I tried to kill myself. The truth was I never tried to die.

xix.

And I wondered, as I wrote these last few lines, *why now and not all those thens? Why has the dust been blown from the words I sought?* I looked back at my story. I looked at the different versions of the story I tried to write over the past five years. I looked at what truths were left out and which lies had been added. I pondered the distortions.

Looking back, I lacked a validating purpose. To lie was my purpose. Like a caught criminal, I couldn't get my story straight. Couldn't come up with a convincing alibi. I couldn't fess up to what I had done. I wanted to be the victim. Now I find purpose in telling the truth. The truth: every word of this story is based on a lie.

I never wanted to kill myself. I wanted an excuse.

For a week, maybe two, I had been thinking about faking a suicide attempt. I knew I wouldn't be taken seriously if I tried to pop some pills. If I tried to hang myself, that wouldn't work. I couldn't shoot myself. The only way to do it was to cut. But I had to make it look legit. I had to be vicious. I had to make it authentic. I had to cut deep and hard and long.

That day, Groundhog's Day, I made sure the door was unlocked. I made sure that I had my cell phone in the bathroom. I even had full medical insurance to pay for the medical bills.

I had it all worked out. Everything went according to plan. All I had to do was lie.

And I lied the lies. I lied to my mom and my dad and Kenny and the paramedics and the 911 dispatcher and my therapist. I lied to them all.

Yet truths were sheathed in the lies. The terror I felt, that indescribable terror, that was true. Impossibly so. All the tears too. The hate I felt, and the desire for escape were real. The control and submission of cutting were real. All of it was real, just packaged in lies.

And I accept it. I accept the

words. I accept the lies. I accept the shame. I accept this story. As it is. In it's entirety.

## I Have No Legs Yet I Must Run

Zack Small

I remember a cross country meet from a few years ago. It had to have been mid-October because there were a few centimeters of snow crunching beneath my running shoes. The wind was brisk to say the least, what with only my short-shorts and paper-thin tank top to protect me from the elements. My breath steamed out in front of me in a rhythm of "breath-one-two-three-exhale-one-two-three." Rhythm is very important when you run, you know. Three miles at competition pace can be a bitch sometimes, especially if you're not prepared for it up there.

I didn't want to be there. Well, I did and I didn't. You could say it as a bit of a masochistic thing really. Running hurt. It drains you, but God in Heaven, there aren't many feelings better than a runner's high. Finishing a race is right up there. That feeling of accomplishing something, of doing something that you didn't, or at least didn't feel like, you could do. Those endorphins, ahhh. Memories.

Plus there was the comradery. I knew that as soon as I was done, one of the girls would have my sweatshirt and warmup pants there waiting for me at the finish. (The girls' team ran first, so they were done with their race. We'd had their stuff ready too.) When we all finished, we'd all huddle under a warm blanket while we waited for the awards to be announced, and it was just so...pleasant. I always have yearning for the nostalgia, and memories like those always tug at me. There was a communal tau about it, a feeling of bonding that you can only achieve through mutual suffering. We'd come, we'd seen, and we'd conquered.

It was lovely.

Another memory I have was the last time I drove home from work. I was in a bit of a funk that night. I'd been talking to this girl from work and things had gone a bit south on that front. We weren't dating or anything, we'd just hung out a few times, and I liked her.

I managed to get a kiss out of her once. Granted, we were both pretty hammered at a friend's party, but it was a good kiss. Her lips were so sweet. I remember my heart was pounding right after, but it slowed down while I held her close that night as we both drifted off to sleep.

That was a good night.

Anyway, things had cooled, and I was in a bad mood. Nope, wasn't happy right then and there. I remember having a cigarette between my lips (I wasn't running anymore) and a lighter in my hand (it was neon-green, the same color of her nails that night). The flame was bright orange.

The brake lights of the semi were bright red.

That was the last thing I remember seeing. I can't open my eyes right now. I can still hear though. From what I've pieced together, I hit the back of that semi at about seventy-miles an hour. I always hated wearing my seatbelt. Thankfully the airbag was there to halfway catch my ass, but it fucked my neck up something fierce.

I don't know for sure how long I've been here. My friends and family all came to visit at one point or another. Some of them talk, some don't. My mom cries all the time. My dad does when no one is

around.

The girl from work came in once. She didn't say much, but she kissed me on the cheek. I felt it. I felt it! I can't move a muscle, but I felt it. But nothing happened. My heart just kept on in its own steady rhythm. "One-two. One-two. One-two." If only it'd gone wild! If only I'd have twitched a finger, curled my lip, done anything! Then she'd have known I was there, the doctors would've known I was there! They'd have given me some sort of miracle drug, or hooked me up to a new machine, or something! Anything!

I was so close!

\*ahem\*

The phrase, "I have no mouth yet I must scream" comes to mind. That's true in some ways, not so in others. You see, for all intents and purposes, I have no mouth. I mean yeah, it's still attached, but it may as well not be there. Doesn't do me any good. I have no body. I have no hands, I have no arms, I have not legs, no feet, no eyes, no heart. Nothing that makes me human. I'm stuck here. Alone. But I don't want to scream. Sometimes, yeah, but not really. That's not the worst thing.

I have no legs, yet I must run.

## Crossing Over: An Elegy for Aunt Ruby

Holly Walls

I was the only person with her in the tiny borrowed bedroom that smelled of mothballs and disease. I held her cool age-speckled hand, my fingers lightly tracking the slowing and fading away of her pulse through the gauzy skin that had yellowed like antique paper. I looked at my watch and counted her respirations as they, too, slowed and faded, becoming more and more shallow as the rising and falling of her chest went from expectation to surprise.

\*\*\*

Aunt Ruby, the only one of all my mother's sisters and brothers who still spoke as though she'd just glided out of a tall and swaying grass meadow near the Kentucky hillside cabin on Coffee Mountain where they'd all been born.

The rest of the bunch was loud and brash. Their voices and speech had adapted the clang of the factory work that had enticed them to come north. Their throats sounded rusty from chain-smoking filterless cigarettes. They cussed and laughed with the resonance of thunder and lightning. The men sat and drank and told jokes in smoky garages over euchre on holidays. The women corrected each other's stories about growing up "back home" and of their "mother" and "daddy," (my Grandma and Grandpa Taylor) as they sweated over boiling potatoes and filled the kitchen with their own cigarette smoke.

Aunt Ruby, however, drifted sweetly in and out of the room wearing her unchanging smile, always listening, never joining in the banter that engulfed us all. When she did speak, her voice brought

mint juleps to mind, even though I've never tasted one. It had that sugary sing-song quality of a lullaby, and her laughter danced and bubbled, hinting that there was always a competition going on inside of her between real innocence and plain old orneriness.

"You want Aunt Ruby to get you something to drink, Sugar? Don't you pay those mean ole big cousins of yours no mind, Baby Girl, you come on in and visit with Aunt Ruby, Sweetness."

I loved to hear her. It was simple as that; I loved to hear her talk in that sounds-like-Scarlett O'Hara-straight-out-of-the-movie voice. It might have been her and Aunt Bonnie (or all the aunts who were still living) telling stories about growing up on the mountain (my mother has no memories of it to share because she was just a baby when the family headed north), or it might have been them reminiscing about their own lives as young wives, or maybe they'd be gossiping about whoever happened to be absent that day, but it didn't matter. I stood in complete wonder that anyone could really be so genuinely tender.

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The others (my sister, my mother, my aunts and cousin) had wandered in and out, up and down the narrow beige hallway between the cramped kitchen and congested little bedroom where she lay over the previous days—watching, listening, and waiting. They had seen and heard Aunt Ruby, who by then the hospice doctors said was barely wavering in and out of consciousness, as she raised her hands up to an invisible vision and

spoke of men on horses coming from the east and apocalyptic visions straight out of Revelations. They saw her lift her hands, yellow like the rest of her by then, and reach out to the unseen, the unknown, welcoming the coming end. Somehow, I had missed all of that; by the time I was able to free myself from my own family's needs and once again sit by her side alone, she had slipped away into unconsciousness again. Sorrow and guilt fell upon me in a mist.

\*\*\*

I was too young to know or understand when my father died. Instead, I stood at the front door thwacking it with my pink toddler-palms parroting "daddy, daddy, daddy..." whenever a car that sounded like his drove by. Or at least that's the story my mother tells. I have no memory of him or his big warm arms lifting me into the air, his mustache tickling my chubby cheeks, or of his voice as he called me his poodle. One day he was there, and that same day he suddenly was not. It should have been easier for me than the others; they were almost teenagers. I was the lucky one with no memories of the father I once had to follow me and stalk me into the future.

I didn't see his body and was left home during the funeral. What difference would it have made to an almost two-year-old? I hadn't even had a real beginning with the man, so how could I need closure? Or perhaps it was just too hard for them to handle my carefree ignorance of the death that would shroud our family from then on.

Six months later, my mother lost her

own mother. Again, I was too young to need to see or hear or understand. Another person around whom my family's and my own tiny cosmos orbited simply ceased. No one has ever told any stories about me happily banging on doors or windows while innocently calling out for my grandma.

These early losses helped shape me into a young girl who was intensely afraid of Death, which I saw only as vengeful, hateful, and cruel. Death showed no sympathy; it was not a friend, but robbed the living of those they so needed leaving us to suffer through lives with ever-present burning holes as our only remembrances. Death had taken my daddy, and had then followed by taking my grandma, too. And I was excruciatingly aware that He would come again – for my mother, for my brothers, for my sister, and then finally for me.

\*\*\*\*

I had been there just days before, helping my mother roll her over and clean her as she apologized pathetically and needlessly for no longer having any control over her own body. I was there with giant spongy swabs that were supposed to be lemon flavored, wiping them along the inside of her mouth, begging her to suck them for some relief from the dryness that was overtaking her even as her belly swelled from fluid retention. I was there, telling her she was still pretty even as I stared at her teeth in a glass on the bedside table and realized I didn't remember the last time I'd seen her lips glossed over with her signature poppy color.

\*\*\*\*



Aunt Ruby hadn't become a fixture in our daily landscape until later in her life, but her occasioned presences at each holiday gathering were always reason to smile. Not only did she have that twinkling light of joy and playfulness about her, but she carried herself the way I'd come to think a real and humble lady should. Her neatly curled gray hair was always tinted a dark strawberry blonde or light red. Her nails were always long and polished, and she never went past breakfast without fixing her hair and makeup, putting on something pretty, and accessorizing.

And always, she wore that lipstick. I don't know if this was something my grandma told her daughters, or maybe Aunt Ruby decided herself, but even my mother, who never wears jewelry or makeup or curls her hair, still follows this rule.

"A lady should always wear a touch of color on her lips; your face looks washed out if you don't," my mother still reminds me. I've never found a color that will stick with me through a day, so she thinks I don't appreciate the advice...

Aunt Ruby, however, never badgered anyone about how they looked or dressed. She led by example, I suppose.

"Sugar, you're just beautiful the way you are, don't let nobody tell you no different," she'd whisper as she leaned over balancing her china coffee cup and saucer in one hand and patting my knee or my pouting face with the other. She had no idea how much I – "the chubby one" with "those Baker thighs" and "those cheeks" - needed and appreciated those words.

I clung to all of them, even those that wounded my girlish pride with their offhanded, unintentionally hurtful remarks. The years passed, and we all grew older. And Death called again, intent on proving his viciousness. While driving home from a bar, Aunt Myrtle's husband, my Uncle David, suffered a heart attack; he died instantly, and his car crossed over the center line and took the lives of an entire family as well. Death's cruelty knew no boundaries in my eyes; he needn't have taken those other people or have left my Aunt Myrtle with such a burden to bear. But, like always, he did.

I don't remember the funeral, so I suppose I was kept from that one too, even though I was nine years old by then. But in the coming years of such family losses, I would become able to imagine it. Experience would teach me that while I lurked in corners avoiding caskets and hiding from Death, Aunt Ruby would circulate—wiping tears, giving hugs, offering assurances of God's divine plans and Christ's promises. She would begin stories of happier times that would cause all others to put aside their grief long enough to celebrate the life and memories they'd all shared.

"Y'all remember that time when Mother and Daddy borrowed Aunt May and Uncle Will's car to take us to visit Myrtle in the hospital? Boy, we sure had a time laughing and cuttin' up and just being thankful to be together again. We'd sure missed each other, in spite of having fought like cats and dogs sometimes... The good Lord's sure taken care of us all these years; and he'll keep on taking

care of us, you can count on it." She was resilient; they were all resilient in the face of Death and Sadness, which often made me sad - that I was not.

\*\*\*

She was quiet when I came back that day. The whole house had gone quiet by then. Almost everyone had gone, and those who remained flitted around preparing to grieve, to receive guests, to be finished with sickness for the moment. I still wasn't ready.

I had only been absent a couple of days, and those were the days when she spoke to Jesus and rejoiced over moving on. By the time I returned, Jesus had left the building, or had at least taken a quiet seat in the corner of the room out of view. She'd descended into sleep and would never resurface. There was only Death left behind, so I pulled up a chair, sat down, and took her hand.

\*\*\*

Sitting by her bed so many years later I began trying to track - with only observation - the physiological changes her body was undergoing as it, too, prepared for Death. I pulled from all my meager knowledge from high school and college chemistry and biology classes and from experience in healthcare, but I was a pharmacy technician—not a nurse. Sixteen years of counting pills by fives and answering telephones politely weren't much help, so I did what I could: I counted how many times her heart beat per minute and how many breaths she took; I counted how many seconds lapsed between each inhale and how many seconds before each exhale; I counted.

Heart rate seventy, eleven respirations per minute.

\*\*\*

At twenty-one, I had walked slowly down the long hospital hallway annoyed at how much noise my heels were making on the tile floor and how the sound of my steps echoed and bounced down the pink-walled corridor.

When I finally turned into the room I tried hard not to look at anything but my paternal grandmother's face. I didn't want to see the way the blankets now abruptly plunged toward the mattress at her knees, but I had to enter from her feet – or where her feet should have been. I suddenly remembered taking my mother's sheets and blankets and draping them over furniture to build myself a tent as a small girl. And I remembered then how neatly my grandma always made her beds, and how all her furniture was covered in plastic with plastic runners along the floors. And how she never talked to me about my dad or told me stories about him as a boy or young man. Now she lay shrunken, small and helpless.

This woman, my grandma - who had truly been an enigma to me my whole life, with whom I never seemed able to build a relationship, in whose presence I felt an immense weight upon my chest – smiled at me, and began to talk about how she planned on having her car fitted out with whatever it would take to get her driving again as soon as she got home. She'd never been a hugger (she actually shrank from such close personal contact), but she allowed me to kiss her and hug her goodbye as I left. I think she even held

and patted my hand.

Two days later, I walked down that same corridor, and turned again into that room, where I would have the first opportunity of my life to actually say goodbye to someone knowing it would be my last. The pain of lost time and lost possibilities gripped my throat and snaked its way downward to spread out and fill my chest with an acidic burn. But for the first time, I felt some comfort in having been... present, in having been allowed to know a star was about to burn out before it actually happened. For once, I wouldn't look into my sky and suddenly realize that a light I'd known there was missing – or worse yet, look into that now less-sparkling sky and not realize anything had changed. My tears were salty-sweet that day; they were flavored not only with sorrow, but also with gratitude.

My view of Death was altered that day. He had, for the first time ever, shown me just a little humanity; he had waited and given me a chance to say goodbye. Death had conceded me this small but meaningful favor. I felt more like the grown woman I almost was, but when faced with the reality of losing someone for whom I deeply cared, I was in many ways still a child. I couldn't let go of my distrust of Death; we'd been enemies for far too long.

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Ruby accepted her cancer diagnosis with the same tenderness and grace with which she seemed to have accepted all the tragedies of her life. At nearly eighty years old she began chemotherapy. When the chemo failed, she was re-

signed to enjoy her last months reminiscing with her sisters, watching her great nieces and nephews grow, and worshipping the Christ she'd soon meet face to face.

Yet even as I looked upon that bloated yellow-skinned shadow of my beloved aunt and saw how disease had ravaged her, and tried to accept that she had chosen to welcome Death as an old friend who would carry her to her Savior, I could only hold her small age-speckled hand and count. I recognized my own paralyzing fear, carried over from all previous losses and confusion, but I could not run. I was resigned. I had watched this woman gracefully live a life full of tragedy, full of loss, often hampered by what must have been loneliness, and I could not pull away. I couldn't let her die alone in that oppressive tiny room where everything seemed to be slowing to a stop, dwarfed by the enormous hospital bed that hospice had provided, while the world outside buzzed with life.

\*\*\*

When I got married in 1997, Aunt Ruby was there with smiles and hugs. "You take care of each other and love each other, you hear." She sat at a long table with all of those to whom I'd clung my entire life—laughing, telling stories, rejoicing over those who were still there to celebrate with us, and remembering those who were not.

She was at my baby shower a few months later, with nothing but loving thoughts and wishes for our new baby girl. When our first son had open-heart surgery just two years later, at ten months old, Aunt Ruby was there with prayers and

encouragement. And when our third and last child, another boy, was born in 2000, Aunt Ruby was one of the first to hold him. Such a small and quiet woman compared to the thunderous presence of the rest of the family, but hers was a steady and constant kind of energy, like the subtle and dependable tide that always made me feel grounded in gratitude when she was near. She was always the prettiest old lady in the room—always gentle, always kind, always hopeful, always gracious, and always, always grateful to God in all things.

\*\*\*

I counted, and counted, and looked around the room that had begun to feel and smell like a dilapidated greenhouse where the moisture and heat that once had quickened growth and life had instead begun to quicken decay. It was May. No one wanted any windows opened. Dust specks danced in the bright beam of sunlight that split the room in two and came to rest on a menagerie of ceramic animals, jewelry boxes, bottles of Avon lotions and perfumes, and us – Aunt Ruby and I. The room was heavy: pale gray-green walls, dark orange plastic covered chair, peeling laminate dresser and thick olive tapestry drapes. Gilded metal frames with moisture-bubbled cardboard backs encased art deco prints and peeling black and white photographs. Only dust could transcend it the burdens of that room. It wasn't at all the kind of room I would want to die in, nor the room I wanted her to die in either. Little there reflected any of the vibrancy or softness I had always associated with this tiny, pot-

bellied yellow woman. Thirty-eight beats and ten respirations.

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Her "one true love" had married her and taken her to live with his family in Cincinnati, but he died young leaving her a young and childless widow. I've heard my mother say he was terribly handsome, but also sickly and weak, and that's why he died so young. I've also heard them talk in resentful tones about him taking her to live with his family just so she could help his own mother do everything for him. But I never heard Aunt Ruby say any of that. When she talked of him, her voice took on the sadness of a child and her eyes still glimmered like those of a young girl. Those were the only times I could ever remember her seeming sad, and even then she would smile as she spoke of him.

"He was my husband, and the Good Book says 'your people shall become my people,' so my place was with him and his," she told me once after I was a married woman myself, finally old enough to have grown up and have womanly conversations with her.

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I think she met her second husband in the factory. He was of an even harsher weave than my own family could be at their worst, without any of the fun they could be at their best. Herman seemed cold and cruel and distant. All of us kids were a little terrified of him. He sat in corners, always seeming to be watching with beady, angry eyes, so I never wanted to get close enough to figure out if we were wrong about him. He did, however, my mother said, "provide well for her. She

had a nice home, nice car, nice clothes, and pretty jewelry with real gemstones in them" like she'd never owned before. And even though she remained without the child she always longed for, she seemed happy enough. Eventually, that emptiness was filled when they took in Herman's niece's son to raise. "That boy" as we all call him (though he was several years older than me) was to Aunt Ruby a blessing.

"That boy" however, was simply no good. Aunt Ruby spoiled him. She'd finally found an outlet for all that love and attention and spoiling she'd saved up for the babies she'd never been able to have. He drank and did drugs; he stole and fought; he even went to prison for rape. And he always, always had his hand out to Aunt Ruby, who always, always made sure that hand was never empty.

He called her once a week—collect—from jail, and in return she sent whatever money he asked her to send to whomever he asked her to send it to, including his drug friends and girlfriends on the outside. She was totally naïve, and he took full advantage of her and anyone else he could. Even now, he'd probably try to sue me for money if he knew I was writing about him. He's that wicked. But Aunt Ruby never saw the evil he carries in him; she never saw anyone she didn't think just needed some love and a good dose of Jesus.

By the time he was sent to prison, Herman had died and left Aunt Ruby widowed a second time. "That boy" lived with her for a while, but somehow she

ended up losing her house (seems like he swindled her for it, but I don't honestly know for sure) and had to move in with my Aunt Bonnie, also a widow. After years of kind of drifting in and out of our lives from Cincinnati, she became a regular and welcome sight.

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It wasn't her home, but merely the room she'd been given when she'd come to live with her sister two years before. A dead man's clothes—dark polyester suits, wool dress coats and long tan trench coats from Sears & Roebuck—pushed and shoved against the pant-suits and various floral nylon blouses in rose and green and yellow and red that still just faintly smelled of gardenias. His shoes still lined the floor; his gray tweed fedora still rested on the shelf above. Her things were squeezed and crammed among his, and I wondered whether she'd avoided moving them out of respect or in response to her sister's demands.

But that didn't keep her from displaying what seemed like every little gift she'd ever been given though. I watched the dust drift and settle on a smiling snowman holding a pair of ice skates, a Christmas gift from my three small children. The glass cat wearing a big pink bow curled up next to him, with an Easter basket empty except for the green plastic grass beside it. A metal brush with matching mirror. A white King James Bible. A lottery ticket. Her rose-tinted bifocals. A stuffed dog hung over the back of the bed, smiling goofily to greet guests that didn't arrive. A color photo of a tattooed man in a dirty white t-shirt and prison-striped pants

leaning against a plate decorated with a painting of Jesus holding a lamb. *To Mama with all my love.*

He'd had the nerve, after she'd told him she was dying, to send his girlfriend to her to collect her valuables and ask for money, and like always Aunt Ruby had provided. She cashed in her life insurance, keeping only enough to pay for her funeral and giving the rest to this stranger, this woman he'd sent because he was still locked up. And while she was there, she'd been caught trying to steal my Aunt Bonnie's jewelry as well. He had taken everything she had to give, and didn't even send flowers or a card to her funeral. He didn't deserve her, and yet she'd be upset, I'm sure, to hear me say that.

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Though I am ashamed to admit it, I resented and envied my mother-in-law, Julie, in the same way that most new wives might. She was, along with her mother, the center of my new husband's being, the one to whom he took his problems and in whom he could always count on finding love and acceptance – even when she knew and told him he was wrong. She longed to be a grandmother and was ever-present during my pregnancies. She did our laundry while I was at work (because I'd refused to let her), she stocked our shelves and refrigerator with groceries, she bought baby clothes and baby bedding and baby everything. She infuriated me with her perfection; she was everything I was not and everything I knew my husband would expect me to become.

But standing by her bedside, listen-

ing to the ventilator fill and empty her lungs for her, smelling the scent of infection and decay, tracing the jagged red incision the surgeon had carved as he followed the cancer's progress from mid-chest upward and down, I begged her for the forgiveness I knew she'd gladly give to me. I had been blessed with a rare kind of second mother and had never appreciated her. She'd loved me as the daughter she'd not had, and I had come to depend on her soft-spoken honesty and patience, her example as mother and wife, her quiet feminine strength to guide me in successfully navigating and reconciling my new roles as wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and woman. Just as we'd grown closest, she would be leaving, too.

I found myself unable to recapture the comfort I'd felt in getting to say goodbye to my grandmother. I wasn't ready; my husband wasn't ready to lose his mother; my children were too small to grow up with memories of her. My daughter was just weeks from turning two, and I was bitter that she, too, was starting her life with such an immeasurable loss as I once had. All I could do was promise, *Mom, I'll do everything I can to make sure they know you and never forget* as I kissed her forehead one last time before leaving my husband, his brother and their dad to share her final minutes.

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No machines were present this time to help me keep track of what life remained or to force me to realize that none did. So with one hand I held on and searched for that fading pulse while I ran my other hand as gently as I could up

and down her arm, humming and willing my mind and body to commit to memory what her warmth and life felt like before it was gone forever. 22 beats and 7 respirations per minute.

*I should tell the others to come say goodbye; I should have already called my mother back from home by now; they should begin making the calls.*

I stepped into the living room that felt like a different world where life was the same dull routine as all the days before that one just long enough to say “You should come say goodbye; I’m calling Mom to tell her to come back right away” over the sound of a game show blaring from the television. I felt strangely calm as I looked softly at my elderly Aunt Bonnie. She was rocking gently, humming a hymn as I turned back into the kitchen to call my mother.

The rotary phone took minutes to click off the numbers individually. “Mom, it’s time, come now. She doesn’t have long.” And with that, I turned again and headed back down the hall, back to Aunt Ruby.

She went so gently. Like the wings of a butterfly alighted upon a snapdragon, her pulse simply slowed and faded into a distant rest. She didn’t wait for my mother or aunt or cousin; she and I were alone. She didn’t cry out or wince or gasp—she simply and softly sighed and there was nothing more to count.

Someone once told me that dying would be much like blinking; one moment you’re alive and of this earth, the next you are face to face with Jesus. He simply reaches out in that briefest moment and

takes your hand, and you leave this world. I had seen enough of Death (I thought) to believe that could be true. Aunt Ruby, however, with her usual method of teaching by example, showed me how wrong I truly was. In that briefest moment, when my aunt passed from this world to the next, I was blessed to witness an immeasurable compassion I had ignored before—and Death was its deliverer.

The image features a white background with several large, dark, irregular ink splatters. One large splatter is at the top center, another is at the top left, and a third is at the bottom right. The text is centered in the middle of the page.

p a r t   t w o

# *Fiction*



## God Save the Queen, Intro

Hilary Cameron

Ian and I had been best friends since our mothers in Sanford's Park introduced us as drooling babies. When he burped, I giggled. When I cried, he screamed loudly in sympathy.

Now, nearing eighteen years later, not much has changed. Scratch that, everything almost has.

We each have our set group of friends, our cliques—for him, the soccer team and for myself, the outcasts. I'm into poetry and writing while he loves math. And though we hang out sometimes at school and often during the summers, we've still drifted.

Some things are still the same. Both our families love for the other to visit. Oh, and did I mention Thursday night sleepovers? Since we were in elementary school we've had this secret tradition. I stay the night with him every Thursday night during the school year, the only exception being if one of us gets sick. I'm usually there by the time he gets home from practice; often I help his mother with making dinner. He walks in, pats my shoulder, and heads straight for the shower while my mind boggles as I drain the pasta or the salad or God forbid more rancid veggies that I can't stomach such as asparagus.

And, though he never caught it, as he came walking out of the bathroom in only a towel, I would nearly drop the dish I was carrying. Every freaking week.

We'd eat dinner, watch a movie, or play a videogame and then crash after doing last minute homework. It didn't matter that we were nearing eighteen

now; we still slept in the same queen-sized bed. I always could tell when he fell asleep. His breathing would grow shallow and then he'd give a small groan—one that sent tingles down my spine. I slept with my back to him.

Then, about six forty-five on Friday mornings (he'd been doing it for some weeks and I happened to notice it was always about this time), he would roll over and wrap his arm over me, his body pressing close against my back as he would sigh in my hair and breathe deep. Still asleep, though. He would stay in this position for about thirty seconds to sometimes a full minute before rolling over on to his back. The alarm always went off right after this. He'd reach over, slap it a few times and grumble before sliding off the bed to walk groggily to the bathroom. I would lie for another few minutes in the quiet, absorbing yet another Friday morning cuddle.

Inevitably, he'd walk back next to the bed and say quite sexily (just because that was how his voice sounded when he first awoke), "Morning, Sunshine."

"Morning," I would mumble back. He'd poke my sides to wake me up and then would leave to shower.

We always went to school separate on Friday mornings.

## God Save the Queen, Chapter 1

Hilary Cameron

"So, how was this week's Friday morning cuddle?"

I stare across the track field as Lydia paints her fingernails black. "Like usual."

Lydia huffs and blows over her nails, drying them. She smooths her black and white plaid skirt before giving me the pity look. Expected. "I think you should do something when he does it. Might, you know, get a reaction."

Also expected is my response. "Mm."

Lydia is the only other person in the entire world who knows about Friday morning cuddles. She is one of my best friends in the gang of weird outcasts. Her sin to be shunned for? Having a fantastic fashion sense way ahead of its time for this place. I often wished I were straight so I could actually be the decent guy that she deserved; so has she. Instead, I was the typical hidden gay in the big and very scary closet with only the light coming through the keyhole of high school.

"Lyd?"

She checks her makeup in her small mirror and plays with her hair cut, which I have to admit is pretty amazing. It's platinum blond (naturally near that color) and currently in a tall mohawk style. Yeah, you read that right. Her reflection blows me a kiss. "Yeah, Benj?"

"Why are we cowards?"

Lydia stares at me. "Because we're afraid of putting ourselves out there and getting rejected."

"Or accepted."

"I agree. Even worse," she answers

and puts on some lotion. We stand to get to class. Friday mornings after I leave Ian's, I come here to the track's empty bleachers and meet Lydia. When the bell rings, we leave. She grabs her Sex Pistols bag with a label on the side reading "God Save the Queen." It's her favorite.

As usual, just walking into school is harsh. Lydia gets nasty looks from the preppy girls who are all too jealous to admit that they hate her because she's sexually threatening and not because she's a so-called freak. Their boyfriends all watch her walk in front of me, her hips swishing as she walks in her army boots without her realizing it. (Jocks always want what they can't have.)

Usually, we make it through the first half of our days, then lunch and the rest of our classes. Lunch is always the best time though. Our table consists of five people including myself: There's Lydia, whom you've already met; Kenneth, the badass already eighteen-year-old who smokes and loves to work on motorcycles with his dad; Sierra, our resident bookworm who ironically isn't afraid of Kenneth at all as she gives him smirks through her big glasses; and there's a black kid we call "Tamer." I don't know why or how he got the nickname, and frankly I don't want to know. He usually sits quiet to himself, but when he does speak one finds that he is hilarious.

Our table is often loud because Lydia blares her iPod of metal and punk while Kenneth and Sierra argue. Tamer, whose real name is Clint, flips through magazines as he eats, and I smile to my-

self. These are my friends, my real friends. We have everything and nothing in common. My parents know them all, and they honestly don't approve, but Lydia's the only one who ever comes over. My macho hetero step-dad, of course, doesn't necessarily mind her. Perv.

Here's the thing, too. All four of them know about my big secret and none of them give a shit. Kenneth still gives me his friendly arm punches, Sierra gives me safe sex lectures (which is painful—not the idea of safe sex, but her lectures), and Tamer simply nods and reminds me that life is life, so what. I absolutely love these guys.

Today was different, though. As we all sit down to lunch, an announcement goes over the PA for us to watch our own little TV program the mass media kids make. It flicks on to the two big screens in the cafeteria.

Our principal, Mr. Porter (who constantly reminds us that he is our "principal"), comes up to the camera with a strange look on his face. The man is usually extremely cheerful, so just by his expression a collective rush of nervous excitement runs through the room. He's bewildered from what I can tell, and immediately my stomach twists into knots. Across from me Lydia tightens her grip on her bag's strap, and across from our table way over to Ian's, Ian's mouth drops open.

"Students, I am very, very sorry to inform you today of something quite tragic and terrible that has happened to one of our own. A short while ago we

received news that Nick Fitzgerald died this morning...by suicide. When he failed to show to class and had no parental phone call, the school contacted his parents, who went to see where he was." Mr. Porter takes a step back and rubs his eyes with his palms before looking at the camera very seriously. "Please comfort each other and his family and friends. If any of you need to go to the counselors' offices, you are free to do so at this time or throughout the day. And remember, students. If a friend of yours is talking about doing something like this, please tell someone you trust such as your parents, your friend's parents, a counselor, or even myself. Let us have a moment of silence for Nick."

My fucking jaw hits the table. Lydia's sharp intake of breath catches the attention of everyone around us in a ten-foot range during the utter silence. Tamer's eyes watch mine carefully. I know why. Nick was gay, openly gay and horribly bullied. And though we weren't close friends, I always looked up to him. He knew that we had something secret in common and befriended me in a unique way when we had library page duty. He dared to show himself to the world, and the world chewed him up and spit him back out. My eyes close against the tears I feel coming. What a lesson to have to learn.

Somehow, I distantly feel Ian look my way.

Mr. Porter's cough draws everyone's attention again. He always knows when to do that, even when he isn't in the

physical room. "Nick left a note about being bullied. Therefore, I am going to start a new policy in this school concerning bullies and victims."

The televisions go black suddenly. Kenneth murmurs something about Mr. Porter wanting to make a dramatic effect, but we all know that it's just one of the mass media kids being an idiot and tripping over a chord.

Sure enough, he comes back on the screens. "Technical difficulties on our end." Kenneth snorts. "Anyway, the counselors' offices will be open for the rest of the day as will the nurse's office. And bullies, please think next time you make fun of someone just because they're different from you."

I want to shake Mr. Porter's hand at that moment, but in the back of my head I'm afraid he's going to lose his job for this, for standing against the other staff that ignore what their star players do. Every face turns slowly to look at Ian's table where all those stars sit. We know, our eyes say. We know who pushed him.

Ian, of course, is looking back at everyone with a clueless expression. He's not part of it, but he's probably seen it happen before. Something inside me hardens into a brick wall.

As I look back at my group of friends, I find them all staring at me. Lydia has tears ready to erupt. Kenneth's trying not to look concerned, but failing miserably. Sierra's debating how to ask me if I'm all right. Tamer's not going to say a word. He just knows.

The bell rings and no one stands

for nearly two minutes. After that, people begin to file out, still hushed but whispering among themselves. Lydia wraps her arm around my waist and places her pretty face against my cheek as we walk. I'm speechless.

Kenneth bumps my shoulder, his way of letting me know he's there as he walks past us, his own small black mohawk shining under the lights. Sierra rushes in front of us and gives me a sympathetic look. Tamer just walks on, but not before tapping the back of my hand with his. Lydia leads us straight down the hall to the counselors' offices before I even realize where we're going.

The moment I do, I come back to reality. "No, Lydia."

She looks confused, unsure of what to do and her new mascara is streaking. She's going to be pissed because the bottle said it was waterproof. "Benj, you need this."

"I wasn't close to him like a bunch of these people were. They need it."

Lydia sighs and sits me down on a bench, straightening her hot pink, black, and white designer shirt as she does. Her nose ring glints at me. "Benj, are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah."

She sighs and holds my hand. No wonder half the school thinks I'm dating her and lying about it, Ian included. I squeeze it back because I need to know it's real. Lydia chews on her lip, nervously. "That's it, we're getting out of here."

"Skipping?"

"What's two classes in a four-class block schedule?"

"A ton of crap to be missing."

She scrapes her boots across the tile. "I doubt they'll be doing much except letting people just talk to each other. Pisses me off that half of them act all sad and they didn't know him, actually made fun of him in reality." I say nothing because she's right. "Well, all except Mrs. Macomb, but she's just a heartless bitch."

"Well spoken." Mrs. Macomb is our residential crazy Christian health teacher. Don't get me wrong, I know that there are lots of great Christians out there; she's just not one of those. As she passes with a group of teachers, she has a strange smile on her face. It takes all I have not to get up from the bench and strangle her.

Lydia stands, bringing me up with her and holding tightly onto my hand. "Then let's go, Benj. Let's get the fuck out of here."

We walk out the back doors by the cafeteria without a single faculty member stopping us. Any other day, they would have gone nuts. Today, we aren't even noticed.

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We all assemble for the funeral, my friends and I. Even my parents come. Nick's mom is a wreck. She's crying hysterically and stuttering out that she wants revenge for her son's pain. Nick's dad stares across the room as if no one else is there. We get in line early, luckily; it's already begun to swell.

Lydia squeezes my hand. "Do you want to go say goodbye?"

It's an open-casket funeral viewing. Apparently Nick hadn't sliced up his arms or anything gruesome. Instead, he had hung himself from his closet's beam with a rainbow tie he had bought. I remembered him showing it off to me in the library once.

It's for Pride Month, Benjamin. Don't you have something to show off?

No.

"Yeah," I hear myself answer her.

We weave our way up through the crowds into the viewing line. There's news media outside, and I want to take a pipe and beat the shit out of the reporter. I glare at her crew as we pass the doors they are standing outside of and clench my fists. Kenneth places a reassuring hand on my shoulder; it means, "Not only would I want to let you punch, but I'd make sure they didn't punch back."

When we finally make it up to him, Nick is dressed in some stiff suit with makeup to cover his bluish colored face. In reality, he was very colorful, and just seeing even that taken away from him made my insides turn cold. The choice of his burial clothing seemed to be the last straw I could handle.

My pent up tears finally come streaking silently down my face, racing each other to see who can make it to my chin first. I reach in and touch his lifeless cold, waxy hand and shudder. And suddenly, I can't breathe. I see my face on his body.

Tamer catches me as I fall backward into him. He and Lydia walk me into another room that no one is occupying and sit me down on a sofa. Their faces

are swimming in my line of vision.

"Benji?" Great, my mom is hovering now, too.

"I'm fine," I answer. I'm not fine, but she needs to hear it. She pesters me for another five minutes before leaving. Lydia comes back over to my side and wraps her arms around me.

"Tamer went back in line."

I waited a moment before speaking. "I saw me in that casket, Lyd."

"Why would it be you?" Her voice goes up a notch. I frown and gesture for her to calm down. She does, but her eyes are wary.

I take a deep breath, blinking away the image from my mind. "I'm scared because I don't want to be like Nick, Lydia. I don't want to get pushed like that. I...I think I want to be more proud of who and what I am. Like a last request from him I need to fulfill. Should fulfill...for both he and I. I don't know how though."

Lydia stares at me while voices swirl in the background. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah. I want to go out and do something. Change myself one step at a time."

"How about a makeover? Ooh, or a piercing?" Typical Lydia. She winks at me, her pink eye shadow glittering. Kenneth and she had been nearly thrown out of the funeral just for their hairstyles, though both were dressed very appropriate for the occasion—her in Morticia Adams, him in a leather and metal studded jacket. Just the way Nick would have

wanted. Jesus.

She hugs me tight. Once again I ask God why I like guys; I absolutely love Lydia, and she's stunning and smart. What else could I ever want in a girl? She pulls back and smiles tiredly.

"Hey guys," Sierra says next to us. The trio's back. Kenneth's beginning to fidget under his cool exterior. After his mother's funeral, it's understandable.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his gloved hand. "I need a smoke break." We watch him walk outside in his leather jacket, pulling out his pack of cigarettes. Sierra looks worried. She hugs me and threatens me to be a good boy before saying she needed to go check on "Mr. Wrench." We know they're not dating. They're far too scared to move past their own personas, but they have an intense bond they can't ignore.

After a few moments, Tamer licks his lips and rubs his hands together. "We should probably make sure she doesn't piss him off accidentally."

We get up and follow him outside and see a young man in tears in the parking lot. I run over to him. His dark hair is disheveled, as if he had been repeatedly pulling at it. The usually handsome features are red and blotchy from tears.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"They won't let me in! I've been banned from his fucking funeral," he cries and nearly chokes.

"Who won't?"

"Everyone. His dad, the people here," he says angrily. "His dad demanded the funeral director not let me in. Can

you believe that?" Another guy gets out of a car behind him and hands him a tissue. The first guy looks at me a second time.

"Did you know Nick?"

"Sort of."

"You're Ben, aren't you?"

My nerves grate against invisible sandpaper. "Yeah, how did you know?"

The guy smiles and takes a deep breath to calm himself. Lydia keeps a steady hand on my arm. "I'm Matt, Nick's boyfriend...was his boyfriend." He pauses a moment to take a deep breath. "He told me about working with you in the school's library a few times. I guess I recognized you from how he described you."

"And how did he do that?"

"Well, for starters he said you were close friends with a girl who has a...her," Matt replies back, eyes finally taking in Lydia next to me, or more specifically Lydia's hair. His expression is approving. He extends a hand and I shake it.

"You're not from here, I take it?"

Lydia pipes up next to me.

Matt shakes his head. "Nope. I'm from the city. Nick's dad kept making up excuses to not let us date, but Nick finally argued that he was an adult, age eighteen and finally was able to see me...still pissed his dad off anyway." Matt looks past us and grows furious. "They're still going at it with the fucking cameras?"

I turn and sure enough, the reporter is standing in front of the funeral home's side doors all serious as she delivers yet another "live" coverage. Something in me snaps. Maybe it's the smile on Mrs. Maccomb's face still haunting me. Maybe it's

my own fear manifesting into vengeance. Either way, I hear my footsteps echo from the pavement before I even realize that I am running right at her. A strong arm catches me from the front and pulls me into a tight grip. Kenneth. I can smell the leather jacket and his cologne. I begin struggling in his grasp while the woman steps back, finally realizing what was just averted by the punk. Part of me knows he's doing it to save me from cop trouble even though he'd rather let me hit her, but I'm too pissed to care.

"Get the fuck out of here! You don't deserve to be here! You didn't know him, and you don't care. You only want your goddamn press coverage so you can pretend you're sympathetic to a gay kid who killed himself. Get out of here!" I start almost hyperventilating.

Kenneth literally picks me up off the ground and swings me around to walk me back to the parking lot. I kick and fight the whole way, still shouting obscenities. The woman is standing in shock while her camera crew begins stepping back toward their van.

Lydia's hand is over her mouth when Kenneth sets my feet back on the pavement; he doesn't let go. Not yet. Matt stares at me in surprise. I look at the van as it leaves, my gaze burning.

"Let him go," Matt says. Amazingly, Kenneth obeys. I take a deep breath, and Kenneth grins at me and scratches his head. Matt steps up to where I am standing and takes my hand. "Derek, get me a pen!" The other guy in the car, a redhead I see now, comes over to us with a pen

in hand. Matt scribbles a phone number onto my palm and then fixes my sleeve, which has scrunched up. "There. That's my number. If you ever need anything, and I mean anything, don't hesitate to call."

"Thanks."

He smiles. "No. Thank you." Matt sighs and looks back over at the funeral home. "I'm going to have to wait until everyone leaves his place in the cemetery just to say my goodbyes." He pauses. "I wish...I wish he would have told me. I knew they were bothering him, but I didn't think it was this bad."

"I know what you mean," I say absently. Lydia places a hand on the small of my back. "I'm sorry about this for you."

"It's not like you're banning us," Derek says, arms crossed over his chest.

I sigh and run a hand through my black hair. "I know, but I can't help but feel bad. And maybe, in some way, you should feel a bit better being out here. If you saw the stuff they dressed him in, you'd get even angrier."

Matt's eyes roll. "Oh, I figured that much. He hated suits, well typically any his parents picked out." After a moment, he sighs. "Ben, I need to ask something before I get out of here. Did he ever say anything about taking his life to you?"

"No, he didn't. He always seemed cheerful to me, to be honest."

Matt nods. "He hid a lot of pain. Don't you do the same, okay? Looks like you've got yourself a good set of friends here," he gestures toward the gang. I quite agree with him. "And now you have a few new ones, too. Get in touch soon,

all right?"

"Okay."

Matt turns and climbs back into the car's passenger side as Derek gets in the driver's seat. A raindrop lands on my head.

"Caster's?" I ask, looking up at the sky.

"Caster's." My friends simultaneously echo.

Within about fifteen minutes we all are sitting around an empty, unsatisfying quick meal at the neighborhood restaurant. Lydia glances over at me, mischievously.

"What?"

"Benj, you said something about wanting to take some new steps, change some things, right? Why don't we go to the city and get you that piercing we talked about? I think you'd look sexy with a lip ring."

I feel myself pale and bite into my burger. "Maybe. I don't know if a piercing could qualify for what I want to do."

Sierra pats my hand. "I think Nick would think it's a fun idea, anyway. He had one for a while."

That's true. I guess it could be for honoring his memory, then. No tattoos like that for me. "I want to take this new 'pride' thing one step at a time. No sudden 'outings' for me," I say warningly. I have very creative and enthusiastic friends, a dangerous combo when they have a fun motive like this.

Kenneth laughs. I look at the studs on his leather jacket, which move as he plays with his lighter. "Puss."

"I'm not as empowered as you



two," I say. One look from Tamer has me correcting myself. "Three."

"Ahem!" Sierra pouts and flings her long brown hair back.

"Four."

She smiles and sips her pop.

"Much better. Do you think it's painful? The lip ring?" she asks.

"It is a tiny bit," Kenneth admits.

"Got mine done ages ago. And remember, you can always take it out later."

I munch on some fries. Tamer chuckles to himself. Lydia moves her bag, the Sex Pistols one, and winks at me. "You know what Nick would have said, right?" Her fingers tap the side of it.

"What?"

"He would have told us to be there with you for something like this, and if you started shrieking, for us to come running to save the queen."

"He was much more of a queen than I could ever be."

Tamer laughs again. "I'm sure we could drug you and dress you in drag."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Nah," he says, but his eyes look like he's considering it.

Her bag stares at me. God Save the Queen. I wipe my mouth with a napkin. "All right. Let's do it."

## Coarse Times and Blundering Minds

Nick Beattie

In the cluttered, damaged confines of a small bedroom, a boy sat at a makeshift desk peering at a blank sheet of paper, while tapping a shoddy pencil on his leg to the beat of a dusty, worn ceiling fan that was desperately struggling to circulate the hot air. In times like these, he would imagine he was at the North Pole, playing with the penguins. That mental trick would aid him against the summer heat for some time, and then the occasional drop of sweat would tumble from his hair to his nose, returning him back to reality. All around him was an unusual stillness, which he appreciated greatly. Nothing ever seemed to be this quiet, he thought. Looking away from the paper, he noticed the hole-filled walls which seemed to stare at him accusingly; they invaded the darkest chambers of his mind. Suddenly feeling fearful, he decided it would be best to turn his attention back to the task at hand.

Today his teacher, Mrs. Harrigan (a withered old woman on the verge of retiring), had instructed the class to write a brief paragraph describing who they were. Since it was the first day of class, Mrs. Harrigan said it was a good homework assignment to get the week started and that it shouldn't be too much trouble for the boy and his fellow students. Stupid teacher, he thought, not everyone has interesting stuff to tell about themselves. She is just trying to embarrass me, just like everyone else does. She wanted them to have it done for the next day so they could trade and read each other's work to the class. He really didn't want his paper read aloud, but he also didn't have much choice in the matter. He contemplated

not turning in the assignment to elude possible humiliation, but he had gotten in a lot of trouble the previous year for not turning in work and, as much as he disliked school, he did not want to get held back. So with that, he began to write:

Hi im Art Stanton and I know my name is stupid.

My parents are Joyce and Ralph and they work all the time.

My mom is a waitress and my dad works in a factory.

I have 2 brothers and 1 sister. I am younger than my brothers but older than my sister. My oldest brother is Taylor and he is 16.

My second oldest brother is David. He is 13 years old.

My little sisters name is Leyenda. She is 8 and she is my favorite.

I am 11 years old and in the fifth grade.

I can't do anything special and I am not very smart.

He left it at that and with a yawn rose from his desk to prepare for bed (which consisted of collapsing onto his mattress). He took one last look at his room. He could see the dust falling from his fan, dancing in the light. It all fluttered down to his clothes-covered floor. His mom had been telling him for weeks to clean his room, but he just didn't see the point. He wasn't getting in trouble for it, so he didn't feel the need to bother with it. He looked over at his mirror; he was short for his age and his light brown hair was shaggy, hanging just slightly above his

nose. He hated the way he looked, especially his nose. It was long and crooked, and his brothers said it made him look like a bird. They would run around him cawing and flapping their arms as if they were trying to fly. He couldn't understand why they were so mean to him. Maybe if they knew he cried himself to sleep most nights they would stop. Yet, he knew that it would probably just spur on more harassment. Art's father had told him that it was because he was the youngest of three boys. "But I can't help that!" Art would say. His father would just shake his head, saying that was just how older brothers were. I'm Leyenda's older brother and I am nice to her. Art didn't feel that he would ever understand his brothers' cruelty, so he just accepted it and moved on.

Art's eyes were heavy and he knew he couldn't stay up much longer, but he had one last thing to do before he went to bed. Drowsy, he made his way across his room and opened his door, then peered out into the darkness of the upstairs hallway. He wasn't sure of the time, but he knew it was late and that if his parents caught him up he would be in some serious trouble. It was hard to make anything out due to the lack of light, but it seemed to be safe. Tip-toeing, he steadily crossed the hallway to his sister's room. Luckily for Art, she was afraid of the dark and preferred sleeping with the door open. Once inside, he walked over to her bed and took a little moment to examine his slumbering sister. Her soft face slightly rose and fell with each breath she took and her golden locks of hair were tangled around her cheeks. It was hard for him to

imagine that she would be turning nine in a couple of months. Oh how he loved her. She was the one good thing in his life, he thought. She never judged him, laughed at him, or made fun of him like his brothers did. "Sweet dreams Leyenda," he whispered and gently kissed the top of her head.

The next day Art sat at the kitchen table eating buttered toast and drinking a tall glass of milk. The toast was a little burnt, but he liked it like that. He enjoyed how it scraped against his tongue, like tasty, edible sandpaper. His brothers would often tell him that the reason he didn't have any friends was because of things like that. He despised his brothers. They did nothing but make his life miserable. He even made a habit of waking up earlier for school just so he didn't have to deal with them in the morning. Today though, he had woken up late, so he was getting increasingly nervous. He knew that at any moment his brothers would be up and he didn't want to be around for that. He finished his breakfast as fast as he could and began getting ready to leave, but it was too late. His second eldest brother, David, stumbled into the kitchen in a lethargic manner, his blonde hair a tangled mess from a long night's sleep. His cold brown eyes stared menacingly at Art, even through their puffy, tired eyelids. Art couldn't recall having done anything to annoy David the day before, but with his brothers you could never tell.

"Morning butt face," David said as he walked by and shouldered into Art. I wish Mom and Dad didn't have to leave so early for work, this could get bad. Art

tried to escape through the kitchen doorway, but right as he got to it Taylor, the eldest of the Stanton children and substantially the most vicious, greeted him. Taylor was over a foot taller than Art and was heavily muscled. Art was terrified of him, and had good reason to be.

"What do we got here David? Looks like the little turd bucket is running late this morning. That isn't being a very good boy now is it? How do you think we should punish him David?"

Art looked over at David anxiously, hoping this moment would just end, but he knew it wouldn't without something bad happening. He could see it in his brothers' eyes.

"Hmmm, I say we lock him in the pantry for time out!" David grabbed Art by the shoulder.

"No!" Art screamed and jerked away.

"You little shit, don't move away from me!" Fuming, he shoved Art to the ground.

Suddenly a deep anger rose within Art. He was tired of them bullying him, he wouldn't take it anymore. He got up with a speed that took David by surprise. Art stayed low and hurled himself onto David's legs and with a groan rose up, taking David off his feet. Art took him up as high as he could; he stood on the tips of his toes, and then brought him down with a loud thud to the hard kitchen floor.

"Hahahaha David, don't let that little punk drop you like that," Taylor laughed. Art's adrenaline was pumping so profusely he hardly heard Taylor. Everything hap-

pened faster than Art could think; his body seemed to have a mind of its own. Within moments of landing on the ground, Art had climbed up and sat on David's stomach, pinning him to the ground. Art then began drop his fists upon David's face over and over again, without mercy. The amused look on Taylor's face quickly turned to one of shock and then to one of anger. He ran over to the brawl. He drew his foot back into the air behind him and then ferociously swung it into Art's ribs. With a gasp Art fell off of David. Taylor continued to kick him repeatedly. "You stupid little fuck!" Taylor yelled. Art rolled over to protect his face and stomach, but was still vulnerable at the sides. He had no idea how to stop the onslaught of kicks to his ribs and was even less sure of how far Taylor would go in his rage. He had never seen Taylor this angered, probably because he had never actually stood up to his brothers like this before.

"Stop it!"

At the sound of the sobbing scream Taylor stopped mid kick and turned his attention to the kitchen entrance. Art raised his head from the protection of his arms to look as well. There stood little Leyenda, tears streaming down her face. "Leave him alone," she cried. Art sat up and she ran over to shield him from any further assault.

Taylor holding a look of disgust said, "I guess the little baby has learned his lesson this time. Come on David, get your ass up."

Humiliated, David brought himself to his feet. He and Taylor took their leave,

but not before giving Leyenda and Art one final heated glare. Leyenda stared back defiantly, looking like a mother bear protecting her cub. She was so mature for her age and Art loved her for that. "Are you ok Art?" she asked once the two older boys had left.

"Yeah," he replied, "We need to get you to school, come on" He pulled himself off the floor, wincing in pain all the while. He heard the sound of Taylor's car start and watched his brothers leave through the kitchen window. They never gave him and Leyenda a ride to school, so like always, they prepared for the walk. Art and Leyenda arrived just in time for their classes to begin. Yet before going their separate ways, he reached down and gave her a big hug. "Do good today sis, I love you."

"I love you too," she said as she turned to go her separate way.

Art felt terrible. School sucked hard enough without just getting the snot beat out of me. He made his way through the halls and to his class. Most of the kids were already seated, so he quietly put his backpack on the shelf with his name. He then took his assigned seat and put his head down with a heavy sigh.

"Good morning!" Mrs. Harrigan was energetic as she greeted the class. He couldn't make up his mind on whether it was a good thing she was so brisk this early, but he liked her well enough. "Well class, I hope you all remembered to complete your assignments for the day, hmmm?" As she said that, she was glancing over her kids. When she saw Art

her face seemed to sink to the floor. He looked downright ragged and, on top of that, he had a large bruise under his eye that he had yet to notice. She tore her gaze from Art's face and told the class to exchange papers. She then made her way over to Art.

"Art, can you step out into the hall for a second please?" She asked. Knowing that she really was just commanding him in a polite way, he didn't answer and just walked out to the hall. Art didn't know how long Mrs. Harrigan would be, so he took a seat on an old wooden bench against the wall next to the classroom door. Right as he sat though, she burst out into the hall.

"What happened to your eye, Art?" She asked, "You can tell me the truth now, its ok."

"Me and my brothers got into a fight before school, that's all," Art answered.

"Are your parents aware of what happened?"

"No, they had already left for work. Am I going to get into trouble?"

"No Art, but I am going to have to call your mother."

Art's stomach churned, he knew this was going to be a long day. He just hoped that his parents wouldn't be too mad at him. They didn't like him and his brothers fighting. Usually they didn't know when it happened because they worked so much. They said they were really tight on money and that they had to pick up as many shifts as they could. Because of this, they relied heavily on Taylor to be in

charge. *Great one Mom and Dad.*

The end of the day bell rang, but Art remained at his desk. Mrs. Harrigan had gotten ahold of Art's mother, and she was to arrive shortly after school ended. He played all of the possible outcomes over in his head and couldn't decide what ending would be the best. He really didn't think any of them would be very good.

Shortly after the students in the classroom cleared out, his mother arrived. She was still in her work clothes, her name tag reading "Joyce." She always seemed so worn-out; Art wished she didn't have to work so much. She had deep dark circles under her eyes and her lips looked as if they were weighted to the ground.

"What happened today, Art? You know I have told you guys over and over again not to be fighting. Why can't you just listen to me?"

"It wasn't my fault," he exclaimed, "They always pick on me. I couldn't take it anymore, I can't stand them!" Art couldn't contain his emotions any longer and began to cry. His mother grabbed him up and comforted him with soft words.

"Now now, it's ok." She said.

"It's because I am a freak. They say I am weird and that I don't belong in the house. They are right, I don't belong anywhere." Art sobbed.

"Honey, you aren't a freak and you aren't different. I mean you are certainly unique and special, but that isn't why they pick on you. You see, when you were born your father and I had to give you most of our attention. We didn't have

as much time for your brothers and they didn't understand why, so they were jealous of you. With having a third child, we needed more money to support the family. This led for us to have to pick up more hours. While your brothers are old enough now to know those things are not your fault, they still hold those bitter feelings toward you. It is something they don't really think about now, but will when they are older. Do you understand sweetheart?"

"I think I do. So I'm not a freak?" Art replied.

"Hahaha not at all honey. Art, remember that your brothers do love you, even if at times it doesn't seem like it. Ok?"

"Ok." Art said while sniffing up his last teardrops. "Am I going to be in trouble?" he asked.

"No sweetie, I think you have had enough trouble for one day," she laughed, "Now how about you and me go out for some ice cream, our secret. What do you say?"

"Our secret!" Art cheered.

His mother turned to Mrs. Harrigan and said, "Thank you so much for calling me in here. I promise this won't happen again."

"Good, I have to worry about these little tikes." She said playfully. And at that Art and his mother left to enjoy their time together.

Art couldn't help but to be surprised how good the day had turned out. He knew that his brothers would probably still pick on him for a while, but at least now he understood why. It pleased Art to know that there was nothing actually

wrong with him, that this whole time he really was just as important as his brothers. He kind of felt good actually, knowing that his brothers were jealous of him. He also felt good knowing they were missing out on ice cream. *Yeah, today turned out to be pretty good*, Art thought.

## The Key

Cecil Dixon

The silence hung in the air as dense as smoke. Neither of them had spoken a word in over an hour. With a deep sigh he turned to the girl and looked at her for a long moment before speaking.

"We need to get out of here for a while. Let's go get some coffee."

She nodded in agreement and pulled her worn shoes onto her feet. When they both were appropriately shod she opened the apartment door and a gust of cold air welcomed her.

Shivering she said, "Winter's here again."

Turning in the hallway she removed a green army field jacket from the closet. As she slid her arms into the sleeves she inhaled the scent of the fabric deeply—nothing left, only the smell of last year's coat that needed cleaning.

Outside the cold air made a mockery of the bright sunshine, which seemed to promise warm temperatures. Eyes squinted against the sun, the couple walked slowly up the street.

Once inside the diner they sat, warming their hands with cups of coffee, each seemingly lost within their heads. Reaching for the sugar packets at the same time their hands brushed against each other's. The act of touching seemed to bring them to the present. For a few seconds they each studied the face that looked at them across the table.

He was first to break the silence. "We can't go on like this. It's not good. In the beginning I thought by sharing our grief we could work through things together." He paused before continuing. "But instead of working through it, it has

become what we are, the sad people, wrapped up in the past. Not able to move toward the future."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want things to be like this." Her voice was barely audible. She looked at the murky coffee in the cup, as if it held some answer.

"Look I'm going to make this as easy as possible, you finish your coffee and I'll pack a bag and go to my sister's. We can discuss everything else some other time." For the first time that day his voice was strong and animated.

She watched as he paid the check and walked from the diner. She felt if she should say something, call out to him, but there was nothing to say. It had already been said, many times.

Instead she gave him time, time to make his escape. She sat there sipping on the now cold coffee, refusing the waitress's offer to warm it. She kept her face turned to the window, not seeing the traffic or the people.

When the sun was almost gone from the sky, she decided he had been given enough time to pack a bag. She stood and once again she slid her arms into the field jacket. Suddenly the oversized jacket made her feel small and alone. When she walked from the diner's door she placed her hands into the pockets for warmth. Her right hand came into contact with something cold and hard. Pulling the object from her pocket she saw that it was a key. Large, brass colored, it was the kind that opened doors. She stood in the cold, fading sunlight staring at the key, a single tear slid down her cheek.



## Brushing the Neighbor's Dog

Micheal Gibbs

Henry was eating an egg sandwich, staring out the back window, when he decided to brush the neighbors' dog. The brown chow had been shedding its winter coat and had thick patches of hair sticking up in random places reluctant to leave. She was bathing in the shade of a jacaranda tree, which had purple petals just beginning to bloom.

*A dog like that should have a nice looking coat,* thought Henry.

The old man had always wanted a dog ever since he married Mildred, his wife of forty-six years, but she would never allow him. Dusty, the golden retriever of his childhood, had given him much joy. Henry missed the companionship of a dog. Each time he saw one of his neighbors, Ron or Janet Carver, he would tell them they needed to brush out that dog's hair. The young couple always said that they planned on getting Sandy groomed the following weekend, but Monday would come and those ugly patches would still be there.

"Mildred," he called. "Bring me one of your old brushes. The large one... with the lady bugs all over it."

"What?" She yelled back, eyes still glued on Victor, the handsome stud on her favorite soap opera. "Henry Lee Johnson. You up to some nonsense again."

Henry grumbled. "I'm going to brush that dog's hair dammit!"

"You need to leave that poor couple's dog alone. They don't talk to me anymore. You've made them hate us with your constant bickering about that silly dog."

Henry mumbled unpleasentries under his breath, popped the last bite of egg sandwich into his mouth, stood up, and walked to the bedroom.

"Don't be messing around with my brushes, Henry," Mildred hollered. "Leave that dog alone."

Henry searched through Mildred's dresser chest. He found the ladybug brush underneath a pile of Reader's Digests and stuffed it into his back pocket. As he walked by Mildred, she eyed him. Not seeing anything in his hands, she turned back to the TV. Victor was about to ruin his marriage by sleeping with Fiona.

"Tramp!" Mildred said.

After grabbing a piece of leftover meatloaf out of the refrigerator, Henry slowly opened the back door, trying not to make too much noise, and stepped onto the back porch. He looked around and only saw one person. Tommy the young neighbor boy was sitting under a tree in his Boy Scout uniform, practicing his rope tying. Henry walked across the yard up to the Carvers' back fence. Curious, Sandy lifted her head.

"Would you like some meatloaf girl?" He held out the meat. Sandy walked over and snatched the meatloaf from Henry's hand. Determined, Henry grabbed the back of his thigh and lifted his right leg on top of the fence. Then he rolled his body over and fell flat on his back; the brush in his back pocket sent a jolt of pain through his hip. He grimaced while reaching behind to rub his flabby glute.

Sandy ignored the old man until she finished the last bit of her meatloaf.

Henry had finally made it to his knees when Sandy walked over and began licking his greasy hand. Smiling, Henry pulled out the brush from his back pocket and began to run it through Sandy's matted coat. Large clumps of light brown hair began to fall to the ground while small strands floated through the air.

"How's that feel girl? You're going to be pretty enough for one of those dog shows on TV when I'm done."

Sandy continued to lick the old man's hand as he brushed her. He had most of her left side done when he noticed the brush had filled with hair. Henry was picking clumps of hair out of the brush when he was startled by Ron Carver's voice.

"What the hell are you doing to my dog old man? Come here Sandy."

Sandy walked over to her owner, hoping to receive more food.

"I was brushing your dog." Henry stood up. "You keep saying you're going to get her groomed, but you never do. A dog like that should have a nice-looking coat."

"You just don't go on someone's property and start brushing their dog."

"Maybe if you would brush your dog's hair, nobody would have to come on your property and brush her for you."

"You need to climb back over that fence Henry and go home."

"I'm going to finish brushing that dog's hair."

"If you don't move your old ass over that fence right now, I'm going to throw you over the fence myself."

"I dare you, numb nuts."

"What did you call me?" Ron stepped forward.

"Don't come any closer or I'll..."

"Or you'll what?"

"I'll..." He lifted the brush. "I'll comb your hair".

Ron stepped forward again, but lunged back after Henry swung the brush at his head. Ron's black hair was flat with bangs that hung straight down. He had worn the same look since high school.

"Are you out of your mind, Gramps?"

"Yes I am. I'm a mad old coot with a lethal brush in hand."

"What's going on out there dear?" Janet appeared in the door way.

"I caught the old geezer brushing Sandy's hair, and now he thinks he's going to brush mine," Robert said.

"Henry, don't you be touching my husband's hair."

"Janet, you should be ashamed of yourself too, letting your dog walk around with a coat like that. Bunch of animal abusers."

"That's it old man. Bring me a brush hun."

Janet disappeared into the house.

"Come over here Tom. Tie us up."

Robert glanced at Tommy, who was standing at the edge of the fence with a figure-eight knot in his hand. While untying the knot, Tommy walked through the Carvers' gate and up to Ron and Henry. The men clasped hands. Tommy tied them together. Janet stormed out of the house with a black brush in hand.

Janet gave Ron the brush and kissed him. "Fuck his hair up baby!"

Henry still had a full head of grey hair.

The men leaned back, left hands connected, crouch walking in a circle. "I'm going to show you how to brush your dog." Henry lunged forward, swinging his brush. Ron ducked, as the bristles grazed the cowlick on the back crown of his head.

"Don't you dare touch my baby's hair," Janet yelled, before running back into the house.

The old man felt a sharp pain shoot through his shoulder when his arm was pulled from Ron retreating his attack. But he would not show it.

"Nice try you old fart. My turn." Ron swung his brush and clipped Henry in the ear.

"That's my ear you sonofabitch!" Still holding his brush, Henry rubbed his ear with the back of his hand and then looked at it. Blood smeared over wrinkles and large blue veins.

"You ready to quit old man?" Ron asked.

Janet stormed out of the house with a frying pan. "Leave my husband's hair alone."

Ron looked over at his delirious wife. Henry saw his opportunity. He brushed Ron's hair from flat to spikey.

"You bastard!" Janet shouted as she ran towards Henry, pan cocked back behind her head. But then she saw her husband's hair through the corner of her eye and immediately lowered the pan.

"Oh, it looks so much better."

"Really?" Ron dropped the brush and began touching the spiked tips with his fingers.

Tommy untied them, grabbed Henry's hand, lifted it above his head (which was up to Henry's solar plexus), and proclaimed the old man winner.

Ron began to cry. His wife consoled him, running her fingers through his new hairdo. "It's okay baby. Your hair looks so sexy."

Sandy sat under the jacaranda, wishing the old man had more meatloaf to give her.

Henry said nothing. He walked through the Carvers' gate, across his yard, and into his home. His wife was sitting at the kitchen table. Henry sat down next to her and placed her brush on the table. It still had Sandy's hair tangled in the bristles.

Mildred picked up the brush, examined it, and said, "I think it's time we got ourselves a dog."

## Nipples

Micheal Gibbs

A sexy stripper was stripping at the strip club. She was stripping to the song "Control" by Puddle of Mud and lip synching the words. "I love the way you smack my ass." She shot her hip out and gave it a good spanking.

When she removed her bra, her nipples fell off.

"Not again." She said.

She picked up one nipple and began placing it back on her breast, using the metallic stripper pole as a mirror. The other nipple had rolled off the stage and disappeared into a dark shadowy corner next to the steps.

I sat at a small table nearby, sipping on Killian's Red, and thinking whether I should pick up the nipple for her. Would I get kicked out? Touching nipples was not allowed, and The Golden Bunny was strict about their rules. It could get me kicked out – or even worse – banned. But I'm only picking up the nipple for her. It's the polite thing to do. It's not like I'm grabbing her boobs.

Just when I was about to stand up, a man who looked like Danny DeVito walked up to the stage, leaned over that dark shadowy corner, and picked up the nipple. The stripper walked over to him, smiling, slightly embarrassed, and reached out her hand. Instead of giving the stripper her nipple back, the man tossed it in the air and caught it in his mouth like popcorn.

I sat my beer down and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Hey. Give me back my nipple," said the stripper.

"Mmm...Chewy. Like bubble

gum," the man said.

He let out a goofy laugh then walked off.

"Get back here with my nipple creep," the stripper yelled, walking near the edge of the stage.

I followed the man. He was headed for the back exit.

"Hey pal, come here," I said firmly.

He took off, busting through the back door. I chased him. Fast little fucker he was. I chased him down the alley and up St. John Avenue.

"Get back here, you crazy bastard!"

I gained on him.

He was about to turn the corner, when I tackled him into a trash can, knocking it over. Fast food bags, used condoms, and soda cans poured out onto the sidewalk. He resisted for a moment. I dropped all my weight on top of him—my knees digging into his back.

"Spit out the nipple!" I demanded. Nothing.

I smacked him in the back of the head with my palm. "Now!"

"I'm going to swallow it," the man mumbled.

"You best not goddammit." I grabbed his chin and the top of his forehead and tried to pull his mouth open.

He swallowed it.

"You motherfucker!"

I lifted him off the ground, wrapped my hands around his torso, and squeezed violently. The nipple shot out of his mouth and landed in the middle of the street.

I let him go. He turned around. I punched the man in the face, and he fell into the pile of trash.

"You just don't go around stealing nipples," I said.

I turned around and was about to step down from the curb when a yellow Hummer drove over the nipple.

"Nooooo!"

I ran into the middle of the street, crouched down, and peeled pink flesh off of asphalt. The nipple was flat and mushy like Silly Putty. I placed it inside my shirt pocket.

When I got back to the strip club, the stripper stood near the back entrance. She wore a white button-up top. I could see her one erect nipple through her shirt.

"Did you catch him? She asked, eyes full of hope. "Do you have my nipple?"

I pulled the nipple out of my pocket and placed it in her hand. She looked down at it and started crying.

"I'm sorry." I said.

"Where am I going to find another nipple?" She cried harder.

I put my arms around her. She pulled me in tight. Her nipple-less breast smashed against my chest. We fell in love right there, under a flickering neon golden bunny.

## The Runner

Micheal Gibbs

Walter Cobb is a runner. He runs five miles a day, six days a week. Today he decided to run eighteen miles in preparation for the Town City Marathon, especially since his wife and daughter were shopping. The Town City will be the seventeenth marathon Walter has finished. His goal is to finish three more before the age of forty.

He was on his ninth mile and continued to weave through the curvy roads of Greene County. Cornfields and patches of woods outlined the roads. A few clouds hovered above. Cool wind kissed his wet face. Much of the roads needed to be repaved. Walter remained alert while he ran, so he wouldn't fall victim to potholes.

It was not a pothole that caused him to stop but an earth trembling bark.

Startled, Walter ran into the ditch and tripped over an old rusty hubcap. He hopped up and quickly looked toward the opposite side of the road. A large cow barked at him—loud like an old tractor without a muffler.

The cow put its hooves over top of the wooden fence, a dark brown female with a white forehead. Her tongue hung out of her mouth between barks. Walter relaxed once he realized she was being playful. After wiping dead grass from his shirt and sweatpants, he picked up the hubcap and tossed it as hard as he could. It landed thirty yards inside the pasture. The cow dropped its front feet, fetched the hubcap, and returned it, releasing it over the edge of the fence. Walter walked over to the cow and patted her head. She licked salt and sweat from the side of his face, leaving his auburn hair

sticking up at the top-right side of his head – an authentic cowlick.

“Come on, girl.” Walter wiped his face with his arm. “That's gross.”

The cow panted, big dumb smile, her tongue drooping.

Walter returned the smile. “I'm gonna call you Sandy”

He picked up the hubcap and tossed it again. “Fetch it, Sandy”

The cow took off.

Walter was suddenly startled a second time by a low pitched moo that came from behind him. He turned around and lowered his gaze. A basset hound stood in the middle of the road.

“Moo.”

Sandy was running back when she spotted the dog next to her new play pal. She dropped the hubcap, threw her hooves back over the fence, and began barking viscously at the dog. The dog stood motionless and continued to moo.

Sandy barked, pacing back and forth near the fence.

“Calm down, Sandy.” Walter said. The dog moored again, stepped forward, and ate the grass near the edge of the road. This riled Sandy even further. She spun around in a circle and leaped over the fence.

“No, Sandy,” Walter yelled. “Stop it.”

The dog's moo turned into high pitched yelp as Sandy locked her jaws around its torso. Walter backed up. Sandy snarled as she shook her head violently. Pieces of fur, blood, and dog innards fell to the road.

“BAD COW!” Walter screamed.

The cow tossed the mangled corpse into the ditch and walked over to Walter like she wanted to play another round of fetch-the-hubcap. Blood dripped from her mouth.

“Why Sandy?” Walter shook his head.

He looked over at the lifeless dog in the ditch. It had mooed its last moo. Walter turned back to Sandy. “You’re a bad cow. If I had a giant newspaper, I would hit you with it right now.”

Sandy hung her head.

Walter turned around and walked down the road. Sandy followed, hooves clicking on the black top. Walter turned back around.

“GO HOME!” Walter screamed

Sandy stopped, looking at Walter with sad dull eyes. Water turned back around again and began running. As he ran, he thought about the strange and violent world and all the mad cows in it. He wondered if his wife and daughter were home. He ran faster, as fast as he could. He could not make it home fast enough.

## Theodore the Thrasher

Micheal Gibbs

A boy wrestles with a folded-up metal chair in his front yard. Holding its legs, he raises the chair above his head and body slams it to the ground.

"That'll teach you to mess with Theodore the Thrasher." He leaps and lands a drop kick.

Sitting on the back patio deck, Elmer, Theodore's grandfather, a professional wood carver, whittles wood between sips of iced tea. He is forming a wind-up knob for the back of the three-foot Superfly Jimmy Snuka he carved out of an old stump dug up from his son's front yard. Theodore's mom made the clothing for the Snuka, a small Hawaiian button-up shirt and wrestling briefs made from leopard print fabric. A shark tooth necklace was purchased on Ebay.

Folding and unfolding it, Theodore wrestles on the ground with the chair. Elmer smooths out the edges and holds up the knob.

"Finished." Elmer takes another sip of tea before placing the end of the knob into a small hole on Snuka's back.

He winds the knob, hollers out, "Hey Theo? Your Superfly Jimmy Snuka is ready to rumble."

Theodore lets go of the chair and sits up. "Sweet! Bring it on, Superfly!"

After winding the knob a few more times, Elmer lets go. Snuka runs across the deck and leaps into the air, using the deck railing as a launch pad, arms and legs spread, soaring through the air in his classic trademark move. Theodore just makes it to his feet when Snuka smashes him back down on top of the metal chair. He then picks Theodore up and sling shots him

into a tree before close lining him against it, spinning around, and sending a "superfly kick" to his head. Theodore falls flat on his face. Snuka grabs a hand full of Theodore's hair and picks him up. He clamps the boy's head inside his wooden armpit and grabs his belt, lifting him up vertically.

"Superfly stop!" Elmer yells, standing near the railing of the deck.

Snuka looks over at the old man, gives a sigh, and then sets the boy down on the ground. Theodore lies there, groaning, blood trickling down the side of his face. Snuka runs over to the deck, jumps onto the corner edge of the railing. He perches himself like a gargoyle.

"You okay Theodore?" Elmer calls out to his grandson. "I think I might have wound him up too much."

No answer. The old man slowly walks down the steps to the boy.

"Theo," he calls.

The boy opens his eyes.

"I don't want to wrestle no more."

Theodore extends his hand out to his grandfather. "I hate wrestling."

"Good." Elmer takes his hand and lifts him up. "Now we can watch *Law and Order* instead of those meatheads pumped full on steroids who like to fake fights in their panties."

Elmer helps his grandson walk across the yard, up the steps, and onto the deck. They sit down in rocking chairs and take turns sipping on the iced tea. Elmer starts whittling wood again. Theodore watches him, wondering if he should become a wood whittler like his grandpa when he grows up.



## Turtle Shell

Michael Gibbs

A man in a turtle shell walks down Ocean Avenue at night, looking for a bar with a door big enough for him to fit through.

Earlier that day, he lost his job at Karl's Auto Shop. While he waxed the roof of a Lexus, an old rust bucket of a truck backfired in a nearby station. The loud pop startled the man, causing a reflexive response in which his head, arms, and legs instantly disappeared inside his turtle shell. The shell dropped and left a large dent on the hood of the Lexus before falling to the cement and spinning like a top. When his shell stopped spinning, the man poked his head out. His boss looked down at him—large frown, red face, tapping his greasy boot.

"Sorry, boss."

"You're fired, Turtle."

His real name is Tom, but most people called him Turtle.

Tom enters the large double-doors of Pete's Saloon and, unable to sit down, stands at the end of the bar, near the juke box that is playing "I'd Love to Lay You Down" by Conway Twitty. He orders a Gin and Tonic on the rocks. The bartender in a black leather vest, black cowboy hat, and a black scruffy beard, pours his drink and slides it over to him.

"Five bucks."

Tom tosses a twenty on the table, downs the Gin and Tonic, and orders two more shots. A slim brunette in a short purple dress sits down on the stool next to him.

"I like your shell." She pulls out a cigarette.

Tom is struck by her beauty. He grabs a pack of matches from the bar, strikes one, and lights her cigarette. "You want a drink?"

The brunette blows smoke and smiles. "Sure. I'll have Tequila Sunrise."

Tom orders her drink.

"May I touch it?" The woman asks.

"Touch what?" Tom replies nervously.

"Your shell?"

"Uh, okay."

The brunette starts to gently move her hand across the hard surface of Tom's shell. Although he cannot feel much, the contact makes him tingle inside.

"It's so smooth and hard."

Tom takes a swig from his pint.

"Your purple dress is stunning, almost as beautiful as your green eyes."

She blushes, and then takes a sip of her drink. "So, Mister...?"

"Mister Harris. Tom Harris. But my friends call me Turtle." Tom holds out his hand. "And you are?"

She takes his hand. "Rachel. And my friends call me Rachel."

They both laugh.

"So, Mister Turtle, would you like to take a walk with me on the beach?"

"I'd love too."

They walk to the ocean. She asks him what it's like to live in a turtle shell. He says it can be a pain—like being unable to fit through small doors. Tom prays she doesn't ask him what he does for a living. They walk the shore of the beach for a while then stop to look out at the dark

ocean, shimmering with white ripples from the moonlight. Tom feels an urge to dive in the ocean and spend the rest of his life at sea.

Standing at the edge of the tide, Rachel says, "I always wanted to swim with sea turtles."

She strips down to her black bra and panties. They grab hands and run into the sea. Tom lets her sit on the back of his shell as he rides the waves.

Back on shore, they lie on their backs in the cool sand.

Tom points into the night sky. "That's Orion's belt."

Rachel looks at Tom and smiles. "Where's the big dipper?"

He returns her gaze. "Would you like to come inside my shell?"

"I thought you would never ask."

Tom drew his head and limbs inside. Rachel climbed in through the top opening. Tom forgot all about losing his job. Inside, time stood still, and nothing outside mattered, not even the tide that lifted the shell and washed them out to sea.

## Eye for an Eye

Zach Small

Well...shit, Durandal thought.

He opened his eyes and listened to the sounds of home. A fountain tinkled cheerfully a few meters away, and the ever present breeze rippled the canvas shade above his head, and birds sang to each other in the tree line. He breathed in deep, savoring the fresh spring air.

He took a sip from his steaming coffee and looked around. The Zionc countryside was lush in its greenery, with fresh grass sprouting and new leaves budding. The vestiges of winter were still there in the far off woods; brown leafless fingers reached for the sky on the horizon, but they too would soon come to bloom. He set his earthen mug down and started again at his lunch.

Durandal cut himself a thing slice of ham and dipped it in its sweet brown sauce. As he ate, a pair of wide-eyed cats sat across the table from him. They watched every move his fork made with rapt attention. One of them, ever so slowly, crept up towards his plate. A flick on the nose failed to turn it away, as did a swat on the head. He finally had to pick it up and toss it into a chair across the table. It landed deftly on its padded feet, turning to give him a Cheshire grin before it climbed back on the table. Durandal cut a few pieces of fat away and tossed them to the cats as a concession prize.

He left his plate at the table and sat down on a floor cushion. Durandal closed his eyes for several minutes. What did I do to deserve this? We're fucked, he thought. All of us. He stretched his right leg out and curled his toes, flexing each

appendage one at a time. He rolled his ankle in slow rotations, stretching his thigh muscles in a spiral pattern. He repeated the process with his left leg, flexing and relaxing each muscle group in turn.

When he was finished, he situated himself in a lotus position and breathed very deeply and slowly. He breathed in through his nose with his diaphragm, keeping his shoulders and chest still. He held it in for several seconds, filling his lungs with life. He exhaled slowly again through his nose, letting his stomach flatten out in rest. Find your Chakra, my friend. Find the warm red fire at the base of the pillar.

He focused on a point just above his tailbone. In his mind's eye he could see a crimson glow rising up from his roots. It filled him, powerful yet peaceful, illuminating all the mindspace below him. He thought of all the troubles that lay ahead and behind him. He thought of the battle to come, and the piss-poor odds they faced. He thought of the responsibility that had been laid on him, leading his friends and foes alike towards survival. He thought of Cassandra and how in this last critical moment, she wasn't with him. He thought of the destruction of Zion, and how the reproduction around him was a poor substitute for his lost home. He thought of how he'd quit smoking. Meditation is nice, but I'd kill for a fucking cigarette.

He thought of a thousand different things, each more terrible than the last as they weighed down on his psyche. And with each inhalation, he let it all fade away. He felt the red warmth spread up his spine, and he simply let go.

The warmth rose up his back, glowing like the morning sun. He breathed deeply, holding the air in his chest as the warmth climbed slowly up his spine, vertebrae by vertebrae. Durandal held it there in his chest, clenching the muscles in his abdomen while the chakra did its work. He felt the cushion beneath him, the wood grain of the deck, and the warm grit of the soil below that. His mind ran with the wind over the countryside. He danced through the trees, across valleys and streams. He exhaled.

*Climb to into the light*, his mind whispered. The warmth spread upward, rising to his stomach. It blossomed in his solar plexus, embracing his chest in brilliant yellow. He felt something powerful stir inside of him, something strengthening itself. It grew and multiplied exponentially, filling his entire being with a glorious, calming power. He breathed in again and felt sunlight flowing through his veins. His spirit bristled with energy, indomitable, impregnable, unbound by any walls. He felt like a great ship, plunging through the waves of an unknown sea, slowly pushing its way to new sights and sensations.

*Higher still, my friend*. He moved his chakra upwards from his chest and rested it in his throat. It flowed upwards like a river, slow and unstoppable. Yet it was a serene tide. It flowed like a leisurely canal, carrying his worries along like fallen logs. It pooled brilliant blue in his Adam's apple, where it illuminated his mind with newfound clarity. He could see flashes of the battle ahead: how it might happen, who might die and who might live, tacti-

cal maneuvers and weapon's readouts. As he drew air into his lungs, he could feel the freshness of it, the pureness of the alpine peaks of home. He felt in control. He felt solid. He could communicate with the world then, with anything or anyone. His thoughts flowed in a universal language of peace.

*Now perch yourself at the summit. Rest upon the crown and see!* The energy climbed upon his neck, slowly reaching up the back of his head and rising up and through. It permeated the back of Durandal's mouth, billowing up to the bridge of his nose and coming to rest right between his eyes. He breathed in deeply and focused on that single, glowing point. Slowly, like an alien sun peeking over the horizon, Durandal saw an indigo brilliance shine through his consciousness. *The inner eye is open!* A wondrous sensation bubbled up from within him—a sense of weightless ecstasy that carried him up and away. He gazed in with the third eye, staring deeper and deeper into his universe. A voice spoke to him from some distant part of his mind. "This is my time," it said. "Focus on the now. Live in this one moment. There is no future. There is no past. You're free. You can leave at any time you choose, and you can do anything you please." He drifted through the cosmos of his inner space for a long time. His body, left far behind him in the real world, continued to breathe in a slow and regular rhythm that came and went like the tide.

Finally, Durandal took in one last lungful of air and exhaled. He came down from the indigo height like a leaf

from a tree, gradually drifting back to normalcy. He sat very still, listening to the fountain and the birds. He looked around for the cats, but they had left hours ago. *Probably hunting out some rats. Damn things always manage stow away on-ships.* He reached up towards the table and took a sip of coffee. It was ice cold, but sweet.

Out of nowhere, a metallic voice jarred him out of his reverie. "Commander, you are needed on the bridge." Durandal sighed and brought up his retinal display. The images of home faded from his mind's eye, revealing the blank ebony walls of his private quarters.

"I'll be there in five minutes Adjunct," he said.

Durandal picked himself up off the floor and slid his boots on. Despite the attempted soundproofing of his quarters, he could hear the never-ending clank of machinery like distant thunder. It had never bothered him; on a kilometer-long warship like the Swift Hand such noises were inescapable. Durandal could also feel hum of the slipspace drive buzz the core of his stomach. It was a strange feeling if you weren't used to it, but like all the "old hands" of the fleet Durandal had to think about it to actually feel it. As he laced up his boots he struggled to hold on to the serenity from his meditation. *We're all scared here, he thought. Running blind. But they put their trust in me, the bastards. Now I have to go and make it count.* Durandal motioned at the wall to reveal a wardrobe. He pulled out a uniform and threw it on while he thought.

*Our only chance is Masada. He snorted. Now that's just fate fucking with me. I spend millions of resources to build my own goddamned fortress of doom; I keep it beyond top-secret during the biggest war in centuries, and then me and my buddies end up leading every rat bastard we ever fought there by the hand so we can all go Bonnie and Clyde against goddamned aliens. Twenty thousand years of immortality, twenty thousand years of a human fighting humans, and only now do we find the fucking bug-eyed monsters. Really? Seriously? Fuck me.* Durandal fixed his tie and motioned at another wall panel. Obsidian planes slid away on silent motors to reveal his private armory collection.

He brought out an ornate device shaped like sabre hilt. It was a bright and valuable thing, adorned with gilded inlays depicting a triumphant battle from years past. An enemy fleet was represented in sinister ebony on the handle. The eighty inverted stars formed a checkered pattern for the grip, all pointing down towards a thin ivory crescent near the pommel. Durandal beamed as he ran his finger over the meek white arch. Nine golden stars stood in shining defiance below it, each one inscribed with the name of a dreadnaught from the battle. He swiped his thumb over them and smiled. *Now that was good fight. A damn good fight. My own personal Thermopylae, he thought.* He gripped the hilt and squeezed. *Except that I won.* A bead of green light shot towards the ceiling. The bead, no larger than a grain of rice, stopped a meter out.

It bobbed in the air as Durandal waved the weapon around. It was impossible for him to see, but a thin line of matter connected the warning light to the hilt. He was extremely careful where he moved the not-so-imaginary line; its monomolecular blade would cut through almost anything. The monowire was held in a stasis field, one of the peculiar tricks of physics that allowed it to hold its shape no matter how much force was applied. Stasis fields were normally used as planetary shields by Neutrals, to keep the Gameplayers and their exotic weaponry *out* and keep the sanctuary *in*. To have one able to fit on a ship, let alone in a hand-held sword, was beyond rare. It was *impossible*. The things were ancient, and no one knew how to build them anymore. To many, such a device would be worth more than a small fleet. But to Durandal it was beyond priceless. It was called a Niven blade and was a gift from the master of the fleet he'd defeated. The man had been a legend, a dream among Gods, one who once ruled the Cosmos unchallenged. The keyword there was once. Durandal turned the blade in the light to read the inscription on the handguard.

*Manus Celer Dei / Ne Cede Malis / Bi-la Kaifa / Infinitum.*

*The Swift Hand of God never bows before malice. Let it be so, forever.* He nodded to himself and slicked the monowire back into the hilt, then clipped the device to his belt. His next weapon was also small and sleek. It gleamed a silky black like carved ebony, but it had a glow from within that only high technology

could bring. He flicked a safety on its grip and a full heads up display appeared on his retinal. A neon green targeting reticle showed him where the muzzle was pointed. On his upper left he saw readouts that told him the weapon was fully charged, along with an icon that meant automatic fire. He flicked the safety to a third position and the pistol's shell split and reconfigured. The reticle changed to show a ballistic trajectory and an icon resembling a grenade replaced the automatic symbol. Durandal adjusted the lever one more time and the pistol reconfigured again. This time the reticle was merely an open circle with a range finder to the side, and the grenade icon was replaced with a red X. Satisfied, he shut the pistol down. He started to holster it, and then paused. With a snap of the wrist he twirled it around his finger sighted down his reflection in the wall. *Walk softly, he thought, but always carry a big ass stick.*

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"Are we there yet?" Durandal asked. He walked onto the bridge and sat down in his plush command chair. His aid shook his head.

"Not yet, High Commander. We should be within range of the first beacon in thirty minutes," Adjunct said. Adjunct was Durandal's aid, and he was Durandal's most trusted companion after Hannibal. "He" was a biotic, which in layman's terms meant a robot made of meat. On the outside he looked like a man of about forty. He was thin, with sandy colored hair and slightly Asiatic eyes. But on the inside, Adjunct was an entirely different crea-

ture. The phrase, "If you cut me, do I not bleed?" held no meaning for his kind. He could bleed, of course. But he couldn't bleed. Synthetics were the perfect replicas of the human form, but in spite of a millennia of work, man had never been able to build the human spirit. Durandal had always thought that Adjunct was off though. He always had a knack for knowing just what to say, and Durandal swore that the synth was sarcastic with him at times. "I called you to the bridge because we received a private communiqué from the Britannia that I felt was, ah, urgent. Madame Cassandra is on the line." Durandal's eyebrow shot up.

"Patch it through." he said. Adjunct also had a knack for subtlety.

A pop-up video feed appeared in Durandal's retinal. In it, the face of girl with flowing brown hair turned to the camera. "Cass?" he asked. He was surprised. He'd been expecting Hannibal. Cass smiled, but he noted tightness around her bright blue eyes.

"Hey," she said. There was a pause, just long enough to feel awkward. "I...I just wanted to tell you...before all of this happens that...I..." She looked away from the camera. Durandal felt his heart sink. *Steel yourself*, he thought. *You knew this would happen. You've already reconciled and accepted it. This is just the aftershock.*

"I just wanted to tell...I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything. I..." she trailed off. Her eyes misted. *Sorry? What?* Durandal's heart beat a little faster. "Stuff happens," he said. He smiled, but

his voice was tight. There wasn't really much else to say. *Why couldn't you have just come over? Why couldn't we have worked it out? Is it that hard to just be happy?* The two shared a silence for a moment. *We could all be dead in less than an hour. This isn't how I want to say goodbye. Not alone, not like-* he stopped himself mid-thought. *No past. No future. Only the now.* He took a deep breath. "Don't sweat it, Cass." He put on his best poker face. "I mean sure, this is the goddamned apocalypse and all, and we are about to plunge face first into certain death. But once I save our collective asses, like usual, things'll work out like they should." She laughed, but it sounded forced. All the same, he stopped himself from admiring how much it sounded like the fountain from his memory.

"Whatever you say, o' fearless leader..." Her face clouded over. "But it really is that bad, isn't it?" Durandal nodded and looked over at Adjunct. The synth spoke in coded hand signals. *Showtime. Cut it short.*

"Yeah. It's... pretty bad," he said. "Look Cass, whatever happens...it's been fun." She smiled again, and this time it was genuine.

"It's been a lot of fun. Now as you always say, let's go kick some ass."

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"We are in the pipe, five by five," Durandal said. He clicked off the microphone and leaned back in his chair. *Five by five alright. Strait shot in, strait shot out*, he told himself. The nav beacons around *Manus Celer Dei* were starting to ping the

fleet's sensors. They were almost there, and he needed to focus.

*These may be the last few minutes we've got alive*, he thought as he closed his helmet visor. *God, if you can hear me, I really hope I don't die*. He counted off the seconds until they transitioned. A knot tightened in his stomach.

They'd be sitting ducks as they jumped in. With a fleet this large, the transition could take up to a minute. The Enemy could be right there waiting for them on the other side. There could be mines; there could be repositioned orbital guns... *Hell*, he thought, *we could jump right into an enemy fleet. Or flock. What exactly do you call it when the ships are alive?* He grimaced at the thought and went to the open channel.

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"Realspace in five..." Durandal's voice came in scratchy over the radio. Hannibal eased into his console. The man's face was long and grim, and his fingers hovered over the controls like a gunslinger's hand. A part of his mind interfaced with his ship's computer and thousands of acknowledgement lights flickered across his vision. The fleet was ready.

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"...four..." Brutus lay with Miranda in the dark. The lights on her medical equipment were dimmed. They'd fought over it, such as they could, but had agreed that if anything happened this would be the best way. Brutus could feel her heart pounding against his own. *It is better this way*. He thought. *You were right babe. If anything happens, at least we'll*

*be together*.

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"...three..." Cassandra tapped her fingers on her console. She sat with crossed legs and an unlit cigarette hanging from her mouth. *Let's get this over with*. She had a white knuckle grip on the arm of her chair.

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"...two..." the rest of mankind sat in huddled silence in their collective transports. Survival, or its bleak alternative, was only a second away. The entire species waited with baited breath.

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"One." The vanguard ships of the Armada popped into existence, finding themselves right in the middle... of absolutely nothing. *Thank you dear sweet God*, Durandal thought. They were on the "upper" side of the system's disk, and after a full second the rest of the bloated fleet began to blink out of hyperspace behind them. "Well that went well," he said to no one in particular.

Durandal brought up the command-line interface on his retinal and pinged his old homeworld. It was a short, coded transmission that would've showed like a blip of static to anyone else. After what seemed like an eternity he got a reply. A faint reply, intermittent with actual static, but a reply. A smile slowly crept over his face. His old home may have been burnt down and broken, but damned if the garage door opener didn't work. After ensuring a secure link, he sifted an electronic hand through his old home's virtual circuit breaker. Terabytes of



data poured in to answer his requests, all through concealed superluminal channels. There were no survivors on the planet, human or biotic. The data being broadcasted across the solar system came from hidden computers, left behind for just such a contingency.

Hundreds of priority alerts flashed red on his visor. As he skimmed the surface of the messages, a pang of regret lanced through his heart. His home was truly ruined. Agricultural computers reported that the once green fields of Zion were now blackened and cratered, that the air was polluted with radioactive ash, and that the star spawn of the enemy now choked his once teeming ocean. *Woe is me, but first things first.*

With a great deal of trepidation he queried the status of the lunar jumpgate. The feedback froze as the computers attempted to reroute through broken channels and relays. Durandal sweated inside his suit. The entire plan hinged on this one moment. The jumpgate *had* to be operational. *C'mon, he thought. Talk to me damn you.* Data was beamed back and forth between the lunar base and the surface, until finally a direct link was established. Durandal tensed as the text scrolled across his eye. The jumpgate, their only passage to the far-flung fortress world Masada, their only passage to survival, was fully operational. His body slumped in relief. He contacted Hannibal on the command channel. "Zulu-Actual to Hotel-Bravo, jumpgate is green, repeat, jumpgate is green. We're golden. Repeat, we are golden. How are things on your end,

over?"

"Null contact on any locals. Eyes up for pop-up threats." Durandal noted that Hannibal's voice sounded tinny over through the speakers. *Electromagnetic distortion. Not a good sign.* "Probes are en route to the inner system now, randomized trajectories," the general said. "Sorry about your planet man. Looks like they really trashed the place. Over."

"Yeah, me too comrade. Keep me posted. Zulu-Actual out." Durandal left his friend to worry about any immediate threats while he focused his attention back towards Zion. He chewed his lower lip.

*Now I do wonder...*

He opened up the command-line interface again and searched through the most important systems. The orbital defense grid wasn't responding, nor were any of the orbital telescopes. None of the industrial cities answered either, and both the orbital and groundside shipyards were quiet. It seemed that what little had survived the fortress world's fall had been mopped up after he'd retreated. It made sense from a military standpoint, but it surprised him all the same. He'd thought the aliens simply too...*alien*, to think with that kind of prudence. But as he searched, one system did show up in the green. Hundreds of interplanetary missile silos called in, just as operational as the jumpgate. *Well, well, well,* he thought. The automated silos were miles underground, with slipspace chutes to launch their weapons *around* the planet and strait into space. He queried the status of their attached manufac-

turing systems. They *too* were still online. A shit-eating grin crept over his face as Durandal set the machines in motion. By the time the fleet would be in the inner system, he'd have several hundred nasty little tricks up his sleeve.

After a little bit more snooping, he decided that the best thing he could do then was just that—wait. The planet's computers could tell him all about their own status, but he couldn't yet see what lay in orbit. He counted the seconds until Hannibal's probes returned. *You know, for the most important operation in human history I'm doing an awfully-damn-lot of waiting.* Waiting was not a good thing for him just then. With nothing to do, his mind wandered to the thousand different things that could go wrong. This fleet, known in whispers as the Final Armada, was absolutely monstrous and mostly unarmed. It was comprised of cargo ships from every human territory in known space, packed to the brim with every treasure and stockpile that was deemed worth taking. The cargo ships were simple, rugged, and dependable vessels designed for clean and efficient transport in bulk; in laymen's terms that meant they maneuvered like shithouse bricks. *Half a million* of the ugly gray blocks packed into a few hundred spherical kilometers were any defender's nightmare. But Durandal and Hannibal didn't have to worry about defending them. No, they were *attacking* with such a fleet. Or at least running a gauntlet with them.

Durandal felt himself start to hyperventilate. His suit was suddenly tight and

constricting. The data pouring in from his homeworld was too much, too fast. He wanted to paw at his helmet and tear it off his head. *No. No! Clam down. Back to the chakra, Durandal. We've got time. Go inside.* Durandal closed his eyes and took long, slow breaths. He felt the yellow glow again. *We'll make it through.*

The handful of warships that guarded the Armada was the best of the best they could assemble. Hundreds of Durandal's angelic Valkyries patrolled its periphery, each winged battlesuit being more than a match for one of the enemy, and the menagerie of warships that carried the rest Armada's guns were no less formidable. Nearly every warlord and self-proclaimed emperor had brought some sort of fleet to the mix, some sort of offering to long forgotten gods of war in the hope that mankind might survive. The ships bristled with the every type of weapon that the Great Game had forbidden for centuries. Weapons too inhuman for humanity finally saw the light of day, ready to be unleashed on the alien horde. But above all, the crown jewels of the armada were eighty moon-sized Dreadnaughts that Hannibal had brought to bear. Each ship mounted enough firepower to crack a planet in half, and they formed the tip of a planet sized spear. The cuffs were off; no punches would be pulled. *If mankind is to fall, it will be with a bang, not a whimper,* Durandal thought.

The probes finally came back. Hannibal sent him the espionage reports, and a lead weight shot through the pride in Durandal's stomach.

"They're here," his friend said.  
"Lots of them. All of them. Simulations are giving me a sixty-five percent chance of failure. And if we do get through, we're set to lose half the fleet." The weight sank deeper. *We've made it this far. I knew our luck wouldn't hold out much longer. Once more unto the breach dear friends. Once more unto the breach.* He cleared his throat.

"Alright. Do you wanna tell them or should I?" he asked. Hannibal grunted and gave his friend the go ahead. Durandal cleared his throat again and affected the best relaxed drawl he could muster. "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your captain speaking." He blinked on a camera feed and his face appeared on every screen in the fleet. "I have some good news and some bad news. As you can see, we have safely arrived within the Manus Celer Dei system without incident. I have made contact with my old home world, and the Gate is fully functional." He paused. "That's the good news. The bad news is just as we expected."

Tophur, Durandal's greatest rival from the Great Games, spoke up over the comm. He asked a simple question: "How many?" Durandal maximized the images from the espionage report. At his best resolution he could make out an angry gray smear around the dead world.

"All of them, I think," Durandal said. His ex-rival swore. "Plan A is still in effect, people. We're going in, and we're going in hot." As the Armada's drive flames began to shine en masse, Durandal thought back to the first time they'd encountered

the monsters. *Only a few months ago. Has it only been that long?*

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Six months earlier, an ad hoc strike team (or lynch mob, depending on the point view) made up of Hannibal, Tophur, Durandal, and a few others had been hunting a rogue called the Berber. He'd been using illegal weaponry all across the front, going so far as to actually *kill* other humans. They had tracked him down to an uncharted planet on the edge of known space, but not before he'd taken Cassandra with him. In their rush avert a hostage situation, the team ran into an ambush.

Their shuttle had been destroyed, their synth marines killed, and orbital bombardment had driven them underground. They'd become separated by a cave in, and the group had groped blindly in the dark for hours. Eventually they came upon what seemed to be a structure in the darkest bowls of the planet.

It was like nothing they'd seen before. The stone was ancient, foreign to the rock around it. What they could see of the edifice rose from a great chasm. It was far too deep for them to see the bottom. Durandal remembered pointing a range finder down into that hole; it never gave him a reading. The thing was like an underground tower, and it seemed to be carved out of a single piece of rock. Glyphs covered every inch of the structure—strange symbols that seemed forgotten yet familiar, like a word stuck on the tip of the tongue. The tower peaked in a crude pyramid at their level, culminating

in some sort of temple. There had been some sort of sacrifice. A great mass of smoke billowed from the altar, and blood at the foot of the ziggurat was still wet. Durandal remembered hearing someone throwing up in their suit.

He'd crouched near the altar to examine the remains. There hadn't been much to look at. A few bones lain out in the form of a man. Scraps of flesh still attached here and there. *There's so much blood*, he thought. *My God. There's blood everywhere.* Every step of the pyramid was covered in a slick red veneer. Durandal took care as he bent down not to touch anything. He measured the height of the body as best he could. *Too tall. Male, judging by the build. It wasn't her. Whoever the poor bastard was, it wasn't her.* He felt a large weight leave his shoulders then.

He climbed higher up the ziggurat towards the smoke. "Odd," he told the others, "I'm not picking up anything on thermal." When he moved closer, he could tell it wasn't smoke. More of a fog, or a mist. The closer he got, the more it seemed to billow, until he could just make out...

"Fuck!" he screamed. He stumbled and nearly fell over backwards. Hannibal had his rifle up in an instant.

"What is it?" he asked. Durandal backed away from the miasma, pistol drawn.

"It's alive! In the fog!" he screamed. Before anyone could ask what was alive, it spoke.

"Flesh of the Earth, you are so

close. Come closer, that I may know you." The voice came from nowhere and everywhere at once. It thundered the core of Durandal's body, but he wasn't hearing it with his ears. "I have tasted a drop, but I hunger still. You are so close. Come. Closer."

As the thing in the fog beckoned, Durandal felt his legs take a step up the pyramid. Inside his head he felt something burrowing. Clawing. Chewing. It dug through his memories like a hungry maggot.

"Who are you?" he heard himself ask.

The horrible thing whirled in the fog. For a moment he hoped it had left them, as the worm in his mind slowed, but its terrible voice answered. "I? I have been called many names by your kind, many names when you were many. But now you are so few." The voice stopped and Durandal felt the worm burrowing through his head again. He screamed and clutched at his head. He could see doubling over behind him. "You think yourselves as Gods. You play amongst the stars, making a mockery of war and conquest in your... games. You are nothing. Specks of dirt in the wind of our creation. We know you well. Come closer, that you may know us. That you may speak our true name."

The worm dug deeper into Durandal's mind, and he felt himself take another step closer. He saw, and he *felt*, flashes of memory spring up like a slideshow. Ancient memories, almost forgotten.

He was a child. His mother and father screamed at each other. Something

broke against a wall. He cowered behind a table. *Stop*, he thought.

He was older. Flailing on the water of a forgotten lake. Drowning. He felt his head slip beneath the waves again. *No*.

He saw other flashes. Unfamiliar ones. Image after image flashed before him and he realized he was seeing his friends' memories. Miranda; crying in a bathroom over her first experience with womanhood. Hannibal on a surgical table with tubes and scalpels penetrating his flesh. Tophur hiding in a cupboard from a drunken uncle. They went on and on, ancient and long forgotten memories shambling back to life. *Stop. Don't do this. Please.*

The flashes gave way and he could see with his eyes again. He was near the top of the pyramid now, standing in the edge of the mist. He could feel the thing reaching for him as it spoke. "Look upon us and SEE!"

At first he could only see an impression of the creature. Something primal screamed in his brain, something instinctual. He tried to recoil, tried to run, but the neurons in his brain were firing at dead ends. His body took another step into the fog.

As he did so, he felt himself go up. Then, like a rocky shore looming out from the fog, he saw it. Its body stretched out to infinity, and a thousand impossible wings beat soundlessly against the void. It drew him deeper. What he saw became sharper still, more focused. He screamed and looked away. Around he and the creature, separated by an immense gulf,

was the wall of a glittering hurricane, and they were in the eye. Above, he could see dark outlines of other monsters. They circled far away like fat vultures in a desert. He looked towards the storm. Shimmering walls, impossibly immense, circled in slow revolutions. Below was only blackness. When he saw it he realized that there was no light, that brightness that let him see wasn't really light, just a different shade of nothing. He folded in on himself. *Please God, let me go blind. My eyes aren't meant to work here. Don't let me see anymore!*

But his eyes had no lids in this place, and with nowhere else to look he peered back towards the monster from the cave. Millions of eyes peered back. In each and every one of them, he could see the light of entire galaxies blossom and die. Its glowing, ethereal body was not as solid as he'd thought, but filled like a sack by endless streams of galactic filaments. Its wings were nebulae, and billions upon billions of stars couldn't have made up a fraction of their reach.

Durandal was crushed by the immensity of the thing. Absolutely shattered. Countless civilizations must have lived and died within this creature; they were born from its exhalations and extinguished by its idle passing. He looked away again, towards the storm wall. It was impossibly distant. Whatever this hell was, it obeyed no natural laws. The black gulf that separated him from the storm was eternal yet minute. It was an impossible space, something that man was never meant to perceive. Yet as he looked away from the monster in

front of him an even larger terror loomed. His vision warped, and he could see more shapes writhing and flapping in the starry mist, and the realization turned him over the edge. Though his mouth would not work, he screamed, and he screamed, and he screamed.

There was no storm. There were no clouds. The shape that he saw, spiraling around them more massive than the universe, was made up of these creatures. If the storm were a wall, they were the bricks. If it were matter, they were the atoms. These eternal things, whose bodies each filled entire universes, circled him; watched him; and reached for him. All of them at once, across all of existence, were watching *him*. These, the things that swam in the abyss before God's creation, the eldritch horrors of the *Outside*; they, all of them, were watching *him*.

There was no number that could count them as they spiraled. The worm fed faster and bored deeper. Part of Durandal's mind reared against him like a viper. He felt something shift.

"She doesn't love you," it said.

"What?" he asked.

"The...girl," the rumbling voice hissed. The worm in his head moved again, and he could see through a different set of eyes. He was *her*. He was Cassandra. He saw himself through her eyes, leaning over as if for a kiss. But it was off. It was *wrong*. He felt nothing. No, not quite nothing, but...it felt empty. Hollow. It went on.

He saw Cassandra leaving Zion in secret again and again. He saw her land-

ing on a familiar planet, one that Durandal had seen, and bombed, from orbit. He saw her quietly entering a fortress-monetary. Entering a set of private quarters. Again and again.

"She doesn't love you," the voice rattled. "She never will. You will die here, and we will feed, and you will die, and she won't love-you-and-youwilldiealoneyou-willdiealoneand YOU WILL DIE ALONE!"

"ENOUGH!" he screamed. His voice echoed through the cave. His arm was held rigid in front of him; in his fist the pistol glowed a nuclear green in its fourth and final setting. He fired once into the thing on the altar.

On the back end of the forever, the Elder God screamed as it died.

\*\*\*

Back in the present, Durandal mulled what had happened afterwards. He remembered that there'd been a lot of running and screaming in their escape from the cave. What had happened in the cave had been mere intelligence gathering; a probe. The rest of the monsters had begun to emerge into realspace not long after, and they came *en masse*.

In their haste to escape the group became split up. It was all kind of hazy. What Durandal did know was that the monster in the cave had broken him. Not only had it crushed him, spilling his brains across the universe, but by turning his own heart against him. It had possessed The Berber months before, and it was his sacrificial flesh that had fueled its foothold into reality. Cassandra had just happened to have been there when it took him. What

she was doing there before that...Durandal didn't care to think about.

The next few months had gone by in a blur. Battle after battle, always a series of holding actions and "strategic retreats." Entire worlds fell until almost all the great powers were down to their homeworlds. Durandal himself lost the bulk of his empire. Eight worlds had fallen, one by one, until all that remained was his home, Zion, and a far flung fortress world on the other side of the galaxy.

And then, finally, they had come to Zion. It wasn't a long battle. Durandal shifted in his seat.

But neither would this one be. The Armada burned in towards the system at full speed. Biotic crews throughout the fleet checked and rechecked weapons systems. The warships were arrayed into formations, establishing firing lines and maneuver plans. The fleet formed up in a column behind Hannibal's' Dreadnoughts, like a massive train hurtling through the stars. Durandal idly listened while Hannibal roused the troops over the comm. He was impressed. Hannibal was being uncharacteristically poetic.

"-at the end lies the beginning! If we were to disregard every other struggle, every *kampf*, every crusade, every jihad that man has ever embarked upon, this is it! We will rail ourselves against the darkness, and we will hurl them back from whence they came! We will not sink into history, into bleak obscurity or slavery. No, we shall *rise*, we shall burn like ancient Apollo en route to the Old Moon! We shall climb higher and higher towards the stars

that are rightfully ours! Our blood may boil, our lungs may burst, the darkness may consume our forms, but it will never touch our souls! We will not go softly into that dark night! We will rage, comrades, we will rage against the dying of the light!" Durandal, never one to let anyone else have the last word, keyed the mike.

"We ride, comrades, upon the biggest, baddest, most motherfucker'in fleet the universe has ever known. If mankind lives another hundred thousand years, and we will, people will look back and say 'This! This was our finest hour!'" He leaned back in his chair. If Hannibal could reference forgotten poets, Durandal could call up forgotten warlords.

"Thanks for that. Real legitimate," Hannibal said over a private line. "I like how you threw in 'motherfucker'in'. Classy." Durandal laughed, and it wasn't long before Hannibal joined in. Before long they were both snorting hysterically.

"Famous last words my friend," Durandal gasped. "Famous last words."

"They just might be. Enemy vanguards inbound," Hannibal said. "They'll be all over us in thirty seconds."

Durandal practically giggled as he sealed his helmet. Biotics all across the bridge did the same. "Let's do this."

He uploaded into the *Swift Hand's* command system and he felt his consciousness shift. His eyes became the ship's sensors, his skin became the ship's armor, and his fists became the ship's full array of wave-motion cannons.

He saw the antimatter bullet exactly twelve picoseconds before impact.

There were no survivors.

Durandal shuddered at the thought. *Not like that. Not yet.*

He could see the first wave of the enemy in the full range of the ship's sensors. Infrared, hyperspectral, radar, ultraviolet. He could see them in every way they could be seen, and right then and there? They didn't look so tough.

This wasn't like the hell they'd dragged him to before. No, this was reality, and they were on *his* turf now. Here, they were small. They were weak. But they had numbers. By God, they had numbers. The monsters came by the millions, like the reaching tendrils of a deep ocean behemoth. They moved through space like parts of a whole, like they were a singular animal. Schools of them darted towards the Armada like fish, but Durandal and the Allies had the net. He lanced out with his ship's cannon, cutting down the enemy scouts like a scythe through wheat. The rest of the fleet opened up at once, and the space around the Armada tore itself apart.

Yet still they came.

"Heavies inbound," Hannibal called at one point. Durandal swept his scanners a full three hundred sixty degrees. For a fraction of a second he caught a glimpse of the titanic creatures amid never-ending waves of starspawn. They loomed like black whales, trailing their infinite young in their wake. The leviathans stood directly between the Armada and the Gate.

"Valkyries, clear a path!" he ordered.

The Valkyries swept out of the melee around the fleet and into the thick of the enemy, weaving in between schools of adversaries with the grace of falcons. The massive humanoid biotics flew like birds in the vacuum, spewing radioactive death that cut the monsters like white hot knives. With every beat of their great wings they spread their destruction, but for every foe they killed a hundred more took its place. Valkyrie after Valkyrie fell, simply overwhelmed by the never ending waves. Durandal tried his best to cut the signal from each of them as they died. He couldn't stand to watch the enemy feed.

Regardless, not a single foe made it past the fleet's parameter. Countless arrays of antimatter guns, black hole cannons, fusion missiles, and every other weapon mankind could muster held them at bay. The cargo ships, huddled together safely in the center of the fleet, burned through unscathed. But as the fleet cut a deeper and deeper swath of destruction, the enemy only encircled them. They choked off the stars with their numbers, and they stabbed again and again at the Armada's defenses. It wouldn't be long before they drowned the fleet in their blood.

"Dreadnoughts Fifty-Four through Fifty-Nine are not responding," Hannibal said. "Requesting reinforcements to their firing line." His friend's voice was tinged with panic. "My fighters are gone and that wing is getting hit hard. It won't hold much longer."

Durandal routed a wing of Valkyries towards the weak spot in the



formation. He'd lost nearly a hundred of the fighters already, but this was still below projected losses. He shifted his attention to the moon-sized hulks as they drifted along in front of the fleet. They were dark except for stray secondary explosions. As the fleet accelerated, they slowly sank back towards the formation. As Durandal watched, a trio of battleships, each nearly five kilometers long, impacted one of the wrecks. A mass of screaming poured in over the comm. Casualty figures streamed in by the hundreds.

"We're not gonna make it," he said to himself. "We're out matched. Surrounded."

Durandal keyed up a tactical computer and ran a quick simulation. The way things were going, the fleet would be overwhelmed in ten minutes, long before it would reach the jumpgate. He ran simulation after simulation before he came to a solution.

He looked with the ship's eyes at the wreckage of the crashed battleships, and Durandal knew what he had to do. His hand fell to the sword at his waist. *I am the ship that breaks the stormy tide.*

He keyed the fleet-wide com channel.

"We're switching to Plan B," he said matter-of-factly. "Whatever happens, burn for the gate at full speed. *Do not* deviate from your bearings. I repeat, no matter what happens stay on course." As he spoke, Durandal slid the Niven blade into a panel near his command chair. A high pitched hum rattled the ship.

"You've got a Plan B? Thank God,"

Topher said. Durandal flicked a series of switches and punched in an authorization code.

"Yeah. I've got an idea," he said.

"I'm transferring situational command to Hannibal Barca. It's all yours good buddy." The radio exploded.

"You said you could get us through!"

"You're giving up? This was *your* fucking plan!"

"We're all gonna die! We're all going to fucking die!"

Durandal pondered his next step before speaking to the open channel. *Fuck it. Might as well tell everyone.* "People, the entry code to the fortress world is XK-Masada," he said over the panicked chatter. "It's a verbal code that will work for anyone who makes it to the other side. When you get there, buckle down and finish the fight. It's our..." He stopped. "It's your only hope."

"Durandal, what are you doing?" Hannibal asked. The roar over the mike had died down. Durandal laughed. It was a hollow sound.

"It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done, and it is a far, far better fight I go to than I have ever known." He slid his helmet off and dropped it to the deck. "How are those for some famous last words, eh?"

Hannibal, face obscured by his own helmet over the screen, merely nodded.

"It's been an honor serving with you, my friend."

"Likewise," Durandal said. The

comm went dark again save for the static of battle and the occasional scream, until one more voice spoke up from the darkness.

"What are you saying Durandal?" Cassandra asked. He opened a private channel. His heart pounded in his throat. *No past. No future. Only the now.*

"I've always loved you Cass," he said. "Whatever happens...be happy. See you on the other side." Before she could say a word in reply he blinked, and the line was dead. He opened a new line to Hannibal. "Get her to Masada. Get her safe." With that, he killed the mike and flooded the engines, and the *Swift Hand* erupted in a pillar of fire. It shot off like a bullet, strait into through the heart of the enemy flock. "Adjunct?" he asked.

"Yes High Commander?" Durandal reached into his suit and pulled out a small crumpled box. He slid a bent cigarette between his lips.

"Call up the silos. Tell them to target this ship with everything they've got," he said.

"Aye, commander." Durandal's cruiser smashed through the horde like waves in an alien sea. The shields held, and the ship gleamed an unearthly gold.

"Full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes." Durandal drew his pistol and held it to his mouth.

\*\*\*

On the bridge of his own vessel, Hannibal watched the ship ride away on a titanic white flame. Bits of debris shook themselves off; the cruiser was tearing itself apart. He looked over at Cassandra. Tears

were running down her face. He was too numb to say anything. That battle wasn't over yet... was it? His sensors showed that the enemy was pulling back, converging en mass on the *Swift Hand*.

"What's he doing?" someone asked. Durandal's ship started to flash like lightning. It exploded again and again, blasting away the grasping alien limbs that lunged to crush it. With his link to the ship's optics, Hannibal could see every missile warp in and detonate them with high speed cameras. They blinked into existence mere feet off the hull, but Durandal's ship kept on unscathed. Another voice shouted something indistinct from across the bridge. "That stasis field from his sword. He must have rigged to cover the entire ship. Clever bastard...but what's he going to do, ram them? There's too many..."

The crewman shouted again, more urgent this time.

"Sir, stellar mass is decreasing!"

Hannibal reeled on the crewman.

"What?!"

"Sir, the local star is...it's dying! The gravitational field is buckling! Is it...is it the enemy?" Hannibal focused his attention back on the *Swift Hand*. A ghostly ring of fire flickered around Durandal's ship. It blinked in and out of realspace like a fluttering eye, flaring off in every direction. The flames spewed from the star's newly emerging core at relativistic speeds, purging the abominations faster than they could flee.

"You crazy bastard," Hannibal muttered, and he smiled grimly. "You

crazy fucking bastard." Cassandra looked at him in bewilderment. "He's dropping a star on them. He's dropping a god-damned *star* on them."

The crewman, hesitant this time, reported again, "Sir, we reach the gate in twenty seconds."

"Aye," Hannibal said. He wasn't paying attention to the gate's approach. The eye around Durandal's ship blinked faster and faster. Then all at once, the great eye opened, and it watched the Armada enter the eye of a needle.

A green flame lit from the end of Durandal's gun. He took a slow drag from his cigarette.

## Winds of Ice

Bridgor Hannon

The cool rain fell quietly amongst the trees, a gray sheet pulled tight across the forest. The steady drizzle stole color from the world, rendering all who felt it mere shades of their former selves. It was cold, far colder than an early summer rain should be, lacking the warmth that comes with the renewal of life. The winter still remained in the mountain passes, frozen and unyielding to the spring, now driving back the warmth of summer. The lower paths through the stone giants were still impassable, something heard often with the snows but never in memory during the arrival of the summer suns. No avalanches, no melted snow, the cold white remained stubbornly coated upon the peaks and passes. A new wind had begun to blow, a chill breeze that brushed lightly past the warmth of the new season and rustled the memories of those close to the earth and her kingdom, a memory buried deep in the blood of those who know the touch of the forest and what truly lies within.

His horse staggered, heavy hooves tangling in the tall, wet grasses. The dun-colored beast whinnied in panic, blood streaming from heavy gashes in the thick shoulder as it lurched, eyes rolling and foam spraying from its distended nostrils and mouth. The heavy shouldered man sawed at the reins as he cursed, his dark eyes peered fearfully into the surrounding gray as he regained control. His scale armor lay heavy on him, the wounds to his legs and the use of the broadsword in his fist had drained him greatly of his strength. His horse could not last much longer, exhausted as it was.

Beyond the heavy, labored breaths of his steed and his own gasps, no noise emanated from the forest about them. Trees pushed forward in the gloom, the dull rain a cadence to their advance. He drew a gauntleted hand across his eyes, smeared blood replacing the water that streamed down his coarse, unshaven face. From behind him, hidden behind the rain-shrouded trunks, a low chattering sounded.

The man jerked with a hard curse, his horse wheeling at it screamed in panic. From within the misty lumber, a heavy shadow materialized. The noise sounded once more, low and fast. With smooth action, the form began to move forward, drawing closer with frightening confidence.

The dun screamed once more, panic overriding exhaustion as it reared, pawing at the rain soaked air as water flew from its battered hide. The man gritted his teeth as he gripped the reins, his face betraying his fear, yet a stubborn light shown through. He slammed down his helmet with a gauntleted fist as he hollered his defiance. He drove his spurs in again and again until the weary horse leaped forward, fear of the rider overriding its reluctance. Sword held high, they charged into the face of their nightmare.

The quiet wood echoed with the sounds of a mortal struggle. The screams of man and steed intermingled until they were indistinguishable. The ring of a blade reverberated in the wet air, a sound of metal on something equally hard, not steel but something as resistant. One voice

fell silent, as if it had stopped for breath and merely forgotten to continue. The remaining voice howled in agony, a cry of profound and desperate pain. Then, with shocking finality, it was cut off. Somewhere in mist, a low chatter echoed, a quiet and foreboding sound, touched with a malignant glee.

The background of the entire page is white, decorated with several large, dark, irregular ink splatters. One large splatter is in the top left corner, another is in the bottom left, and a third is in the bottom right. The splatters have a textured, splattered appearance with some smaller droplets around them.

part three

# Poetry

## Life...

Haley Asberry

“Life is what you make it,”

They told me. So

I made mine

sit down and

shut up.

I stuffed it

into a small, neat,

square and shiny

box.

I crammed a

ball gag

in its mouth

lest it embarrass me or

scream for help.

I chastised it

for coloring

outside the lines,

for singing too loud

in the shower—

for thinking for itself.

when my life

dared—to fidget,

I tied its hands together

with good, strong rope

made of moral fiber.

It starved—

became

weary and pasty.

Its limbs & lips

are now

colorless, dead.

Its eyes

faded and sank.

That neat and tidy

box is now

its casket— its tomb.

## **Next Year I'll Be Engulfed By Dementia**

Haley Asberry

The green leaves have no help from the wind in their quest to dance.  
This town is small—almost too small to be on a

weather man's radar and  
late August heat makes folks feel like they're melting.

I sit back in my rocking chair on the porch and I  
wish that Thomas Jefferson could come to dinner tonight.



**Ora Hays**  
Z.A. Bishop

i began as the ward of  
a pious monarch  
whose castle stood veneered in dust  
perfumed with paper's decay

afternoons  
spent dancing with dust motes coryphées  
in rays spilled from curtains  
transitory coryphées tumbled from the world  
as they left the light.

the spring  
tethered to the screen door was our herald.  
In a twanging yawn it would announce our  
arrival or departure,

in the sun she pointed  
*Look there! See the robin, see it? They're  
breasts are stained because they fanned  
Jesus's face while he hung for your sins!*

her life ended in  
Alzheimer's fundamental loneliness.  
exiled from her kingdom of memory

in Golgotha there are no robins.

**Superimposed**  
Z.A. Bishop

in a dream framed in  
blue skies the backdrop  
of spent summer  
memory superimposed  
on your present tense.

wake in a room that hadn't been yours  
in a house that hadn't been ours  
on the bed as it had been  
its head at the foot  
of a window sheathed  
in miniblinds  
through slats  
a view dominated  
by a church clad  
in asbestos

He stood  
in the window's periphery  
a corporeal silhouette

Drift now through the glass and vinyl laths;  
like smoke through a vent

he gestured a smile  
an ash snow began to fall.  
up toward the flawless blue  
and watched soot flakes fall  
by gravity's mere suggestion

## The Night Athena Died

Hilary Cameron

The night Athena died  
I slept in a lover's tousled dreams  
Of crispy leaf coquettes  
And impressions of clawing sheets.

There, her armor fell,  
Golden, glinting, clattering to the floor,  
And broken spells whispered,  
Sifted from  
Leftover sound.

The night Athena died  
I was held in her statue's stare of missing  
arms,  
And the only words I ever knew,  
Apologies,  
Were lost in her submissive, eroded face.

And her victor danced, but danced  
alone,  
On a cross  
As the commons stared down marble  
noses;  
Ancient emotions froze and felt no more  
In heroes left from forgotten adventures.

The night Athena died  
I choked on knowledge from her rotting  
scrolls.  
The faith  
Drying in them  
Left its marks on my hands,  
Already begging for recollection.

Silence befell upon Nike's still, virtuous  
stance,  
And Echo,  
She never responded again;  
The bustling courtyard, never the same  
after,  
Dried like water abandoned from old,  
married rains.

Thus is why the night Athena died I awoke,  
And so, too, did her battle-scarred, heroic  
world  
To church bells,  
And in the quiet of a past civilization was  
left all that lived:  
Dead statues blinking nevermore.

# Untitled

Hilary Cameron

i  
just drift  
up, up as the  
ideas let go  
{ }  
---  
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o  
ul  
d s a  
... u v  
y o e  
m ter  
y i 's  
w r s  
s  
o  
u  
l?

## Loss of Reasoning

Michael Clark

Shuffling stomping shoes, black boots  
Faces taut with angry eyes  
Sizzling hair circling upwards  
Gasoline upon their lips  
Reaching hands only gripping

Men crying behind a cordon  
Streets lit in blazing reds, yellows  
Putrid flesh mingled with perfume  
Stale tobacco stench drifts throughout  
Open hands struck across a face

Screaming voices, one then another  
Veils white and black envelop gender  
Gunpowder eerily drifts across the square  
Red wine dipped in pain flows from men's mouths  
Stones against a myriad of heads

## Wires

Beth Crose

Birds on telephone wires,  
what do they talk about?  
Something amazing,  
like taking that trip to Europe?  
Prolific,  
like creating a shelter for battered birds?  
Life changing even,  
like moving out West?

"George, where are you flying today?"  
"Up over the ridge,  
I heard there are good nest building ma-  
terials."

Lined up on telephone wires,  
just their rest stop?  
Breaking from flight.  
Momentarily pausing their journey.  
Why hurry?

Sitting on the wire two birds exchange  
glances.  
"The wind is really strong today."  
"I know. I could barely fly today,  
I'm stopping to rest for a while."

Truck stop perhaps?  
Hundreds of birds,  
searching for work.  
Looking for something better.  
Warmer place, bigger tree, or escaping  
the early birds  
that always get the worm.

Pecking at the ground for worms,  
Peter indignantly chirps,  
"I can't stand Freddy. He's always up  
at the break of dawn and gets all the  
good, fat worms."

With a sigh Betty chirps,  
"Yeah, I've been thinking about getting  
out of here."

They could be the same birds, every day.  
Just stopping to share the latest gossip  
about the preacher and his mistress,  
"did you hear they almost got caught by  
her husband?"  
Or dear Mrs. Reynolds down the street,  
"I saw them take her out on a stretcher  
the other day."

## Afternoon Drive

Jason Coblenz

Every so often/  
I get in just the right state of mind/  
To take a drive out in the country/  
On the back roads that few travel/  
There are rolling hills outside the city/  
Where purple wildflowers grow/  
Alongside the streets/  
And where clumps of trees meet cornfields/  
Wheat fields, bean fields/  
The sun shines through them/  
Casting a golden glow all around/  
I sometimes picture myself/  
Getting out of that car/  
And taking a long walk through the fields/  
Letting the grain touch my fingertips/  
And I'd wander around/  
Until the orange sun finally sets/  
Over the distant hill/  
Then I'd find myself running/  
Running, running, running/  
Letting the grass bend beneath the pressure  
of my feet/  
Feeling a gentle breeze finally at my back/  
And not in my face/  
Other times I imagine laying down/  
In the long, soft blades of grass/  
At night, with the wide open night sky/  
With all of its shimmering stars/  
And just rest for a moment/  
Those other people, they'd never cross my  
mind/  
I wouldn't be lonely anymore/  
In that peaceful field/  
Because I wouldn't feel that persistent  
need/  
To impress the people with whom I cross  
paths/  
Instead, I would just lay there/  
And smell the air around me/

Scented with all of the wild things/  
The tall wildflowers/  
The towering oak trees billowing softly/  
In the nighttime breeze/  
And I wouldn't be tired/  
No, I wouldn't be tired/  
Because I was exactly where I wanted to be/  
I wouldn't worry about my clothes being dirty/  
My ears/  
They would never hear anyone else's words/  
But instead/  
I would hear something else/  
Telling me that I was fine/  
If I just rested there for awhile

## Kismet

Sarah Davis

Time holds sway o'er all your life.

No recompense,

No compromise,

Can be made to avert subjection.

Thus are you sentenced to desolate servility,

'Till by Time's rod you are made mature.

In this interim,

Aspirations and dreams,

So deferred,

May fall to inanition.

Forlorn in the road of kismet.

A narrow, invisible path,

Yet as inevitable as the rising sun.

So close your eyes, taste your tears and take  
a step.

Untwine your fingers from the tender hands  
you hold.

Bid them farewell in silence; kiss them with  
negligence.

This is your providence,

So close your eyes, taste your tears, and  
take a step.

## Los Exiliados of the Melting Pot

Sarah Davis

We came *para vivir*,

To work, to provide,

*Para comenzar*

*De nuevo.*

In this place,

*Sin embargo,*

I have no place to turn,

*Sin lugar a donde ir.*

*En las calles,*

I have no *lengua*.

*En las escuelas,*

I have no *palabras*.

*En este pais,*

I have no *voz*.

Yo soy "the tired."

Yo soy "the poor."

Yo soy "the huddled masses,"

*Anhelando*

To breathe free.

¿Where is

*La Madre*

*De los exiliados?*

## Whiskey from a Spoon

Cecil Dixon

Now my grandma, she was a teetotaler. She wouldn't tolerate liquor anywhere around her. This forced my poor Irish paw-paw to keep his pint of whiskey hid out in the barn. On cold mornings Grandma would be at the stove stirring a pan of gravy. The smell of baking biscuits came from the oven. The sound of my paw-paw stomping snow and mud from his boots meant that we would be eating breakfast soon, before the sun had broken over the Kentucky hills. Paw-paw would come in the kitchen door bringing the cold air and sweet hay smells with him. Walking to the stove he would pour himself a cup of steaming coffee. As he sat down at the table, he would pull his pint from his coat pocket. With a glance at Grandma's back he would add a generous splash of liquor into his coffee cup. Then he would stir the mixture with his spoon. With a conspiratorial wink he would hand me the spoon to lick. Without turning her head Grandma would grumble, "You gonna make a drinker out of that gal yet." Paw-paw would chuckle as he returned the pint safely to his pocket.

I still like my whiskey fed to me from a spoon.



## Fighting the Ivy

Monica Hardwick

A scorching sun hovers  
over the late afternoon.  
With knees planted in the grass  
I lean into the English ivy  
grasping at the sturdy vines  
attempting to remove the  
suffocating overgrowth  
that has been silently  
choking the flowering almond  
and creeping up on to the brick  
of my parent's house.

My mother planted this vine  
at least forty years ago,  
its roots are deep and  
rope-like tendrils happy  
to be where they are,  
their suckers fixed with  
an untapped source  
of industrial adhesive.  
I pull and tug throwing  
at times, my full weight  
into the struggle only to  
retract a single three-foot strand.

With muscles burning, I  
turn to gauge my success and  
though I think that progress  
has been made, the paltry pile of  
debris is less than what  
my mother's would have been  
the remaining growth appearing  
untouched. I attempt to stand  
but the knees are locked and  
I flop over into the hot grass  
sweating, blind from the  
pollen and dust, my  
breathing heavy.

Amid a slur of cursing  
I pause to reflect on  
the strength of my mother,  
her mastery of gardening,  
her love of hearty plants and  
how the ivy and I were going to  
negotiate an understanding  
about who the master  
of the garden is now.

## **Shapeshifter**

Monica Hardwick

Dancing round the fire  
I see you through licking  
flames, your blue black hair  
braided, your movements  
ancient and instinctual  
keeping time with drums  
that quicken. I see you  
quicken and drop  
to run on four legs,  
the blue black pelt  
covers a muscled frame  
that bounds by me  
with a sting of  
coarse hair on my leg.  
Your speed is lightning.

## Memorial

Krisann Johnson

Walking through the rhododendron path  
Clearing into the potent hibiscus room;  
The birds are cradled in the stone bath  
Above the chrysanthemums still in full bloom.  
The concrete pathway made a circle around  
To view Mother Nature beyond the garden ladder,  
Because where the peonies and lilies are bound,  
In the wild field there are patches of white aster.  
Yet there are only two roses among the seas  
Of impatiens, tulips, orchids, and sweet peas.  
Light illuminates from the cloud crevasse  
Giving off enough light to heat the day,  
Beaming upon blossoms of the lilac terrace,  
Also where the roots of my family lay.

## In A Dream

Krisann Johnson

Empty hallways of concrete  
And tiled marble  
Gets larger as the room  
Opens up to  
A rigorous snowstorm  
In the middle of a glacier.  
Domes of icy arches  
Break the sky  
Yet I am not cold.  
I am feverish.  
I stop at the mouth,  
My sneakers  
Slap to a halt.  
I look back down the hall  
Toward where I began.  
Shapeless figures walk by  
Ignoring me silently,  
As I stare at them  
In their hazy yellow wake  
That bleeds off them  
Like smoke from a campfire.  
Empty yellow  
I follow them to a cavern  
Of brown mildewed ash  
And each one drops,  
Angels falling down to Earth.

## **Matriarch**

Corinne Jorgenson

Monarch with marred wings  
And fried antennae,  
Your life was marked with brilliance  
And by transformations inconceivable to  
the human eye.

In your infancy, abject poverty  
Colored you  
In adolescence, marriage  
Bound you  
And only heartbreak freed you.

You fly with grace  
And dignity  
And the devastating pages of your history  
Have long since been lost to wrinkles and  
dust.

The quilted squares of your wings  
Are pinned in a box  
On my living room wall  
As a testament to your diligence and  
beauty

Long since past are the days  
Where your fluttering wings  
graced our lives,  
But we long for them with unprecedented  
appreciation.

## Scars

Corinne Jorgenson

She knows you see those scars;  
She can feel your uninhibited stare  
Warming the thin, fragile tissue.  
Those scars tell stories.  
They tell her history  
Like rings on a tree.  
Those scars speak of a requited life  
Missed exits, near escapes,  
Bike chains, barn doors,  
Apple trees.

Don't pity her for them,  
Pity yourself for thinking you should.  
She has lived a life that resisted caution  
signs,  
Firm warnings, and counting to three.

Her toes have been stubbed on chalked  
sidewalks  
Bringing tears and boo-boo kisses  
Since she was two.  
Her shin has kissed the toe cleat  
of a competitor's misused baseball shoe.  
Her knees have tasted the bark  
Of a hundred different trees.  
Her hips have been hugged by doors  
Made for dogs  
And the scar on her ribcage  
Breathed when she couldn't.  
Her arms have met many challenges  
And serve as a map of her full life.  
And that one on her forehead  
Mommy says

Is an angel kiss.

Her scars are inspiration  
Not only to her  
But to you.

They are symbols of love,  
And of pain,  
Of joy, and of being a child.  
They are physical memoirs of  
Life-ending efforts  
life-saving efforts  
and life-living efforts;  
Those scars are her lifelines  
And they will fade into eternity as  
Mementos of appreciation--  
because they are  
Just scars  
And not fresh wounds.

## My War Class

Miranda Knight

Class is over.

We do not have to hide in an attic  
stealing time to write in "Kitty."  
We no longer have to rip

through chapter after chapter of Graves'  
family tree. How he hits the floor when  
the phone rings.

We have not lost a brother, a lover, or a friend.  
No more visiting Edward's majestic gravesite  
nor wading through an O.R. floor covered in blood.

We are not worried about being ambushed in the jungle.  
The old man at the well is not forgotten  
nor are we having to waste anymore "Charlies."

Our parties between the helicopters are gone.  
No more piecing together soldiers to send them back to war.  
Mary will not need to pass the fucking salt during dinner.

The sand is gone from unknown crevices.  
Soldiers in Iraq won't have to kill their travel agent.  
We are not worried about running over a roadside bomb.

We no longer have to look into those  
angelic faces at the crematoria  
in midst of the horrors of selection.

The violence, guilt, greed, power, money  
is gone. Between those evils, we found  
hope. Hope that the blood stops,  
the mud hardens, and the rains ceases.

# I Start My Day with Tea

Deidra Purvis

Water on the stove.  
I hear the roaring build.  
Louder, louder,  
like a flock of birds coming near.  
Steam pushes through,  
whistle blows, and  
life is brewed.

White

Green

Oolong

maybe Black.

Depending on my mood,  
Or the day.

As I pour the water,  
flashbacks to  
fresh  
hot  
milky tea,  
in my Christmas bottle,  
when nothing else mattered.  
And I know,  
nothing does.

As long as,  
I start my day with tea.

Early Monday  
before sunrise, full day ahead,  
Black to get me through.  
Strong

Brisk

Earth

dances on my tongue  
And I go.

By Wednesday  
I need a breath, a friend,  
Oolong is my guide.

Calming

Warm

Smoke

kisses my lips  
And I breathe.

Late Saturday morning  
I'm tired, moving slowly,  
sipping on white.

Gentle

Soft

Silk

glides past my tongue  
And I smile.

Sunday morning is  
a new week, a new me  
with a cup of green.

Fresh

Spring

Vegetation

blooms inside my mouth  
And I grow.

I drink to feel  
good.  
safe.

like an infant  
drinking mother's milk.

I start my day with tea,  
and I know this feeling will stay.

I can breathe.

I can smile.

because

I start my day with tea.

## The Squirrel and I

Deidra Purvis

I see a squirrel,  
surviving in a world of deforestation.  
Pines, oaks, and walnut trees  
replaced with sky scrapers and highways.  
But never does the squirrel complain,  
he simply says, "Screw you,  
society; I am staying here."  
Turning power lines into playgrounds  
and feeding from bird feeders,  
refusing to run away.  
Unlike Alexander Supertramp,  
The squirrel is bound to stay.

I am the squirrel, amongst crazy beings.  
Forests, gardens, and open-minds  
replaced with men in suits and ties.  
It's not for me.  
Society;  
it's not my scene.  
But like the squirrel,  
by adaptation, I survive  
satisfied.



## Feelings of a Mistress

Megan Shaw

How does it feel to be kept?  
Held in the hand of a man—  
Desired for pleasure then hidden away.  
Uncontrollable want for love and comfort;  
Nobody knows what the lonely heart hides.  
In the shadow of his presence—waiting.  
How does it feel to be a mistress?  
Sneaking through dark allies,  
Parking in the misty shadows,  
Constantly fearing conviction;  
Still going back again and again  
Even though the love is all wrong.  
How does it feel to be a sin? Blackened  
With immorality, shunned by the world  
Around, craving only one thing—knowing it is  
Wrong. A parasite thirsty for blood; feeding off open  
Wounds. How does it feel to be a paramour? Married  
To one and lover to another. Like Catherine the Great  
And Lady Chatterley; sharing power with one passion  
With the other—clinging to happiness and slaving  
For society; rendered merciless through  
Corruption. How does it feel to live a  
Lie? Unraveling the tethered string  
—Holding heart to conscious.  
Keep bleeding as feet drag  
Across the floor, leaving a  
Trail of deceits and  
Depravities. Locked  
In an oubliette  
Ceaselessly  
Clawing for  
Existence

# Jibber Jabber

Megan Shaw

Pervasive Developmental Disorder

Autism Spectrum

Sensory Integration

Oral motor

Fine motor

This is how doctors describe

Tantrums, sensitivity, drool;

Labels and descriptions,

But all I hear is jibber jabber.

Blue eyes in pain

Sounds come out

Face gets redder

Blood rushing

Breath holding

Body shaking

Scooped in loving arms;

Squeeze you tight,

But all I hear is jibber jabber.

Every day therapy—every day hope

Speak?

Learn?

Grow?

Maybe Never—

Maybe tomorrow?

Three words—

A Tiny mumble "I wub woo Ma,"

this is not jibber jabber

## Becoming Art

### Holly Walls

I am the canvas  
breathless yet alive  
gathering layer upon layer  
of rich oil,  
                  tempera,  
                          charcoal...

a mantle, of jewel tones—  
no coat of many colors,  
brushstrokes like velvet,  
                          silk,  
                                  brocade,  
  wool...

transform me  
from creature of flesh and bone  
to abstract,  
an impression of myself.

Thick golden tears suspend upon my  
cheeks.  
I am beautiful.

Trace the curve  
of my ample hips & arms,  
glorify my aging skin,  
delight the life in my eyes,  
adorn and adore me,  
gently restore me,  
wrap my Motherness in  
rose and bronze,  
gather shades of red—  
crimson, scarlet, ruby...  
to clothe my shimmering form.

Glorify my bare feet;  
frame me in a landscape  
of fantastic seas and trees that  
run violet and tangerine  
and crash aquamarine.

Kiss my dry lips  
with new and holy strokes of tempera,  
contemplate my curving form,  
caress my bare shoulders and  
my skeleton with linseed.

Lovers gather to gaze upon me.  
I am eternally young.

## Little Black Bird

Holly Walls

I stare numbly  
out the kitchen window.  
A raindrop dances  
across the glass in  
stutter steps –  
a two-step, perhaps?

Surely not on such a  
dull and dreary day as this.  
Why would even a raindrop  
dance today?

But as I stare—  
contemplating  
a solitary  
dancing drop of rain...  
I slowly come to know  
You,

Little black bird,  
hopping and pecking  
at the edge  
of the melting  
white-gray snow,  
searching for your  
breakfast  
this winter morning.

## **Mother Sea Turtle**

Holly Walls

She labors  
from the silken sea  
to a bone and shell-strewn shore  
leaves all her hopes behind &  
slips into the deep once more

## **Rapture**

Holly Walls

You kiss my instep,  
tongue at the back of my knee—  
Smooth lips trace the curve  
in my elbow... Dark lashes  
brush the small rise of my belly.

## **The Journey**

Brittany Wilson

There is a lot of wide open space between Georgia and Ohio.  
Miles of blue skies and highways with dead armadillos on the side.  
We left in search of something we had lost, or wanted, or needed to find, the reason was not clear.

We did not need a reason. We wanted to find Prince Charming maybe, or to know if love existed.

"If it doesn't work out", she said, "There is always the nunnery".

It was hot and sticky in the south, too hot, too sticky, the air too thick to breathe.

We work our way north passing palm trees, and mountains, and hills,  
we work our way back towards home and things that are familiar.

There are exit signs for Comfort Inns, and Cracker Barrels, and tourist attractions.

We were happy to head back, it was tangible in the air; we realized what we were looking for was not back there. We assumed my car would break down on the way there, not me on the way back.

Of all the beautiful, happy, and brightly colored places, of all the sophisticated towns passed, we pulled over somewhere between Kentucky and home. It was an old parking lot, with brown weeds sticking up in between cracked tar on an abandoned piece of land for lease.

I climbed out of the car, and she slid over to take my spot behind the wheel, her blonde hair swung in the sunlight, and her purple flip-flops shimmered.

My tears fell, and I couldn't see as she pulled back out on the highway, but in that car I could feel us both heal. She said, "There is always the nunnery".

# ONE LAST THING...

Like what you see?  
Let us know!

Don't like what you read?  
Send us something better!

Want to see your name in print?  
We would too!

Want to be a part of a fun and productive club?  
We would love to have you!

Send comments and submissions to Faculty Advisor, Beth Slattery:  
eslatter@iue.edu

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Submissions must be sent to Beth Slattery (eslatter@iue.edu) as an MS Word attachment. You will need to either scan the signed submission sheet or drop it by Beth's office (WZ #273) before the deadline.

Please include your personal information on the title page of each entry. Call 765-973-8549 if you have further questions.

I hereby give permission for the above pieces of my writing to be published in the Indiana University East Journal of Student Writing.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

# B I O S

**SCARLET ALTON** is a junior majoring in Secondary Education with a Concentration in English.

**HALEY ASBERRY** graduated in 2011 from IU East with a degree in Humanities with a Concentration in Creative Writing. She is 28 years old and from New Castle, IN. She is currently pursuing a Master of Divinity degree at Christian Theological Seminary.

**NICK BEATTIE** is a student at IU East.

**Z. A. BISHOP** is a senior who is in danger of graduating. He likes kittens and embedding an undeserved feeling of superiority into bios written about him.

**HILLARY CAMERON** is hoping to graduate next fall by the seat of her pants. Or maybe the seam. Either way, it should be a close finish. Also, she writes randomly for fun and is fascinated by David Bowie in Jareth's costume. Those tights!

**MICHAEL J. CLARK** is a student of IU East, where his major is English and will graduate in the spring of 2014. He is a columnist for the school newspaper "The Howler", president of the Environmental Club, and an SI Leader. He volunteers at the Boys and Girls Club and Amigos Latino Center.

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**MICHAEL GIBBS** is a student at IU East.

**BRIDGER HANNON** is a 23 year old, fairly bitter sixth-year student that finally settled on a biology degree. Of course, he has absolutely no idea what he is going to do with it. He likes writing, fishing, hunting, working with animals, eating animals, and practicing sarcasm. Other than that, he's just enjoying the ride. Well...not really.


**MONICA HARDWICK** is an English major and a senior here at IU East. Deriving inspiration from everyday life and the altered states of consciousness through meditation, she enjoys writing poetry and creative non-fiction. She is addicted to the written word.

**IAN HOLT** is a double major in Business and English. He loves the shit outta his momma. She done right by him. He would like to take this opportunity to give a shout out to all his homies living in West Philly. Word.

**KRISANN JOHNSON** is a Fine Arts senior with a writing minor. She has an itch to keep writing and make the art to go with it. She likes mystery, action, science fiction, suspense, and horror, stuff that twists and turns. Tim Burton is a god. Dean Koontz is a genius and Krisann is awesome.

**CORINNE JORGENSEN** lives in Carlisle, Ohio with her better half, Tom and their dog, Sherlock. Corinne enjoys creative and historical nonfiction and would eventually like to put these interests to work as a local historian.





Corinne graduated from IU East with a Bachelor's of the Arts in English in August 2010 and works as a ghostwriter in Dayton, Ohio.

**MIRANDA KNIGHT** is a student at IU East.

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**MEGAN SHAW** is a 24 year old senior at IU East. After graduation, she plans to teach high school English and obtain her Master's Degree. Her top five all-time favorite things EVER are: her family, reading, writing, the color green, and the smell of grape Kool-Aid.

**ZACH SMALL** is a student at IU East.

**HOLLY WALLS** is a student at IU East.

**BRITTANY WILSON** is a student at IU East.



# NOTES



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