



*Ceci n'est pas un livre*

# **Sam Houston State Review**

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# Loop

The Indians decided  
zero was boundless.  
The deficiency of the whole  
kit and caboodle was not  
nothing—  
so they drew a cage for it.

But, in reality  
zero is nonentity,  
which exists, indefinite  
in the tie draped  
across the loveseat.

It is not  
an emblem of eternity, angled  
potato chip on the plate, smashed  
cirlet of gold. It is  
nothing.

Take the loop-tie of infinity,  
and a divergent twist,  
zero. They took a truth  
and a stick, they

beat the living hell out  
of a suggestion, a dance,  
two blank expanses, colliding  
and endlessly entwining,  
conversations, matrimony of  
the absolute symphonic, crescendos  
of warming forms, they

opened the pale skin  
of a vow, scrutinized  
as it hemorrhaged.

They removed a ring  
and positioned it on the page, whispered  
there is so much to say  
about it all.

# Rebekah in Radiology

Four centimeters  
is the width of an egg.  
“Those things are inside you,”  
he says. Two eggs,  
of course they are, I think  
it is only natural. Everything must grow  
within something. My voice does not  
sound like much of anything.  
The blackbody on the screen  
does not say much of anything.  
To be barren, to depart  
from the skill that has become malignant in me,  
isn't that the point?  
Everything becomes cruel  
within something. Don't we all  
come in parts?  
An aggregate of some primordial  
mixture. Stealing, always, from its cluster—  
his eyes are approximately the size  
of two almonds, a thirty percent  
growth range from infancy. Before that,  
infinitesimal potential  
between two sets of almonds, both  
reaching for its counterpart in the night.

# I Threw Away My Ferret's Only Bed

Today is Monday.

My ferret has crawled up my boyfriend's pant leg  
and eaten the ball-and-socket joint of his right hip.  
She mistook him for a familiar creature,  
a danger from an abandoned life.

He has just returned from Cupertino.  
He has brought his MacBook and a wreath of coffee beans—

When I return from my French literature class, to find  
him in my kitchen, in a lake of himself, I gasp  
“The grout!” I say, “It is all so unfinished!”  
He lifts the coffee beans from around his neck,  
as his dark body drips a mixture of blood and fluid,  
and sets my gift on the countertop.

“I brought you seeds from the gardens there,” he whispers,  
in a thin rumble. I almost tell him that I cannot plant roasted beans  
when my ferret squeezes out of the crawlspace above my oven.  
Her body pops from the ceiling, rushing to the floor,  
and her costume jewelry scatters across the tile,  
little beads clinking about the ceramic.

“I have done you a great favor!” she says,  
“He can no longer return to Mexico!” I laugh,  
she is a ridiculous creature, half cat and no wit.  
He is no longer a cross-country runner, no longer  
a trampoline master jumping-juggler, his country  
has been peeled away from his skin, blanched  
like my black-footed ferret's little fingers  
have become so white,

**Esmond**

*You have done something, alright,*  
I think back at her.

# The Disappointment of Coconut-Filled Chocolate

“This is what I want from you,”  
I say, pointing to the great silver trident  
far from the coast. We are waist deep  
in saltwater. This is only  
a sandbank. It probably stretches  
until it reaches another coast, you know  
there are probably only jellyfish  
and flatfish. He looks at the solitary scepter  
a couple hundred yards from us, out there  
in the shallow water and then he looks to me.  
“This is not what you want from me,” he says.  
“This is not a book of my mind. This is not  
a home or a baby. This is not the story  
of a bent tree knitting into a chimney,  
or a man who grows twelve arms so that  
he can catch the love of his life  
when she falls off the back of a gorilla.  
What is it that you want?”  
*I want*—well. I blush, recognizing  
the end of a lie. I want you,  
most of all, and perhaps I want  
to be folded like a napkin, carefully  
catching an errant laugh from the turnings  
of your mouth. I want  
to be told that I make gardenias  
breed inside your bones. I want  
you to swim through rock and sky  
just to make me dissolve thoroughly—  
he laughs. “I’ll go for the grey  
pencil in the water,” he says.

# Assassinate

Before the knife  
was a king. Spiced

root voice. Whetstone  
within tongue. Helix

of music and maelstrom.  
And soon, came the knife

from the mind, before  
the king. *Heave*, he said

and the long muscle  
of trees split. *Go*, he said

and the flowers buried  
into the dark. *Part*, he said, so

she brought him  
a tool of cleaving  
in the night.

# My Sister's Machine

## I

She had succeeded. All the times she tried before, she had failed, so we got to spend a little more time with her, but this time she had done it.

We found her when we had gotten home from church. None of us had wanted to go, but our parents had convinced us that maybe God would appreciate it. But my sister stayed home to work on her machine.

When we walked in the house, we called her name. The house was a little bit hotter, and our parents knew she was in the bath. Our mother went in first, walking through the steam to call her name.

She was there, lying in the tub. Her long, dark hair whipped around her pale face. Her fat body stuck out over the red and gray water. Small rivers of blood swirled around her. The twin pale moons of her breasts peeked out of the water, as did the mound of her stomach, like a volcano in the crimson ocean. Her legs made slopes in the bath, and our mother screamed that she was dead. She ran out of the room and I stepped forward.

My sister was beautiful. Her lips looked like pink silk Persian slippers and they curled into a smile, and I knew that she knew that she had succeeded. If it were not for the blood drifting from her wrists, I would have thought that she was sleeping, dreaming, in the bathtub. Maybe she would have been dreaming that she was a mermaid, floating on the ocean and looking at the sky, something she could never experience, being a creature from the land. I wondered what it was like to experience sky, to experience things like my sister did.

I sat on the floor and watched the two men from the hospital pick her up out of the water, the shampoo bubbles sticking to her skin like sea foam, like they were birthing Venus. Her arms dropped over the side of the gurney, and the blood from her wrists dripped onto the ground, leaving a trail behind her. She was still naked and wet, and the men had tried to cover her with a white sheet, but it soaked up the water too fast and you could still see her body through the wetness of the sheet. Our neigh-

bors came out and watched her being taken into the EMS truck, and the women on our block stepped onto our lawn and held me and our mother, whispering their apologies, while the men and our father looked at the ground, sending their sorries to each other. We followed the truck to the hospital, where my sister was pronounced dead on arrival. Too much blood had drained from her wrists, and even if they had tried to stitch it up, it wouldn't have worked. She was dead, so we went home, stuck with ourselves in a house that seemed empty, although only one person was absent.

After a while I stepped back into the bathroom where she had been. I followed the thin trails of blood all the way to the front door, where they led outside and onto the concrete driveway. The rest of the blood was pooling around her in the morgue where she was now, freezing and turning a whiter shade of pale on the metal slab, where we could not visit her or cover her and where she could not hear us weeping for her.

## II

The machine had sat there in the garage for twelve years, because she had started working on it when she was nine. She had started working on it one morning after church, when we still believed. She said she got this huge feeling in church to make something, that she didn't even remember the sermon because this feeling of needing to create overpowered every one of her senses.

I still remember her running around the garage, grabbing tools and bits of metal. She begged our parents to take us to a second-hand shop so that she could get what she needed. She'd search through large bins of scrap metal, buy small gadgets and take them apart for her machine. Time and time again she cut her fingers, or would accidentally burn her arm while she welded the parts of the machine together, but it never mattered to her. She'd work hours, sometimes weekends, in the garage on the machine, and would run home every day from school to clang about and build whatever it was up, up, up until it touched our ceiling.

She never told us what the machine was, or why she had to build it. She just made it imperative that it was only she who could build it, and that only she could activate it when it was finally finished. We never knew when that day would be, but we let it alone. She worked on her machine in the garage while our parents sat out in the living room and I sat in my

bedroom. The whole house was quiet, sans the sounds of her tinkering away at the machine. The sounds of metal softly clinking against metal still fills my dreams at night and, during the summers that I'm home, makes me feel like she's still alive, working away in the garage. But I get up, turn on the lights through the hallways all the way to the garage, and look out at the machine that still sits there, dusty because our mother was too sad to cover it with the sheet like she used to and rusting due to the moisture that leaks in from the garage door because our father was too sad to fix it. It remained there, collecting dust and rust, as it had for twelve years, except she wasn't there to maintain it, to toil away on it.

### III

After my sister died, our father began to dismantle the machine. At first, he didn't tell anyone. He grabbed a wrench and a screwdriver and began to take it apart, selling the parts to cover the costs of the hospital bills and the funeral. For a month, no one knew. We hadn't even stepped into the garage after she died, because it was her territory, and because we were superstitious people.

The day I found out that he was taking apart the machine, I attacked our father. I found him sitting on a stool, unscrewing a metal panel that led to the buttons on my sister's machine, and I tackled him to the ground and began to hit him. Our father kicked me in the stomach and pulled the both of us up, but I was still hitting him and crying. He held my arms tightly to my sides and looked me in the eyes, but I could barely see him through my tears. He said, "She's dead, Esther, she's dead and we need the parts."

"But it's her machine."

"We need them," he said. He let me go and I saw tears streaming down his face. He was angry and hurt. We were all angry and hurt. My sister was dead and her machine just sat there.

He walked out of the garage and left me in there by myself. I gathered up the parts and placed them in the machine. It was like a small room, the machine. I had no idea what it was. She had had plans and no one knew what they were. We were just supposed to wait for the day she finished it.

She loved the machine. She even went to a college near our house so that she could work on the machine on the weekends. We still ate dinner together when she was here. She had become brighter, happier in the

months before she died. She said that the machine was almost finished, that she had done some test runs and that it worked. The days felt longer when she was here at the house. I'd get home and hear her familiar sounds, pattering around on the machine. She would look up and smile at me and continue working.

The last dinner we had as a family, she told us the machine was ready. It had only been an occasional topic in the last few years, but when she mentioned it, the machine's mysterious nature commanded our attention. She smiled and we indulged her. What was the machine for? Why had she spent so much time on it?

"I can't tell you, but you'll see. It's almost done. The whole project. There's one more thing to do, and then it'll be done."

She smiled and continued to eat dinner. Two days later she got into the bathtub and slit her wrists.

#### IV

After our father dismantled the machine, my sister's ghost began to build it again. Every night we'd hear her in the garage. It started simply. We'd be asleep in our rooms, and then we'd hear the familiar clinking of tools against metal. The first time we heard it, it was like she was alive again. Our mother, in a state of sleepy confusion, called out, "Deborah, stop that and go to bed," and turned over in bed.

The noises continued and our parents woke up. I was already at the garage door, listening to the sounds, when they came up behind me. We put our ears to the door and heard the whir of the drill, making holes in the sheet metal so that the nails and screws could go inside the wood for the frame of the machine. Our parents locked eyes with each other and turned the lock of the garage door. The noises stopped. Our father locked the garage door back and commanded that everybody go back to bed.

The noises in the garage kept on. Night after night, we would hear her working out in the garage. Our parents never even looked in the garage. If they ever needed something—a ladder, a hammer, food from the freezer—they sent me out to the garage, leaving me alone with my sister's machine. She really had been working on it. Parts were rebuilt, things were screwed on again, and there was even paint on the panels.

One night, as I went to sleep, I had a dream. My sister was working on the machine, and I was watching her. She was nineteen, and I was

seventeen. It was a memory. I had needed to ask her something, to get her advice, but she was working on the machine. It was two years ago. She worked on the machine until she turned to me and said, "I need more parts."

And when I woke up, I knew what she meant. I got up, put on my clothes, and went to the second-hand shops to look for the parts that our father had sold.

I saved up money. I got a job. I went into three different counties and numerous shops until I found all of the parts that he had sold. I bought them and placed them all in the machine. I knew she would put the pieces back together again. I closed the door to the garage and went to sleep.

That night I had the last dream she sent me. I dreamed of a copper telephone that was ringing on a table in our kitchen. It rang and I walked up to it in the dream. It was sunny, and the copper telephone kept ringing. I picked up the handle and she whispered, "Find me, Esther."

## V

The copper telephone was twenty-six dollars. The man at the counter wouldn't sell it for any less, though Deborah had gotten it for five in a thrift store. I bought it for her and placed it inside the machine. The keypad of the telephone was worn, and some of the buttons stuck, but it was the one that my sister wanted. I didn't know why. I just knew in my heart that that was her wish, and I wanted to give my sister everything she wanted, even when I could not see her reaction.

That night I waited for the sounds of her ghost in the garage, but heard none. My heart hurt and I began to cry. All this time my sister had been gone, and I had been waiting for her to come back. I knew that the machine was finally going to be complete, and that meant that I would no longer hear my sister's ghost working out in the garage, and that the comfort of the ring of the clanging metals would no longer lull me to sleep. I cried and cried until our parents came to my room. They kneeled over my bed and held me. I was nineteen, my sister had been twenty-one, and she had spent most of her life working on a machine which had a function that none of us had ever understood. I was nineteen, my sister had been twenty-one, and she had slit her wrists in the bathtub when we were gone from the house. She killed herself when we couldn't see because her machine was done. Had it failed? Had her machine not worked? We were never going to get the answers, and my heart choked me until I sobbed.

“I miss her,” I said. “I miss her and it hurts and I wish I could slap her face and break the machine. Why did she even have it?”

Our mother shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything about that machine. I never understood. I loved her so much. I’ll never understand why.”

“She loved it. It was her work. I don’t know why. I don’t know what was wrong with her,” said our father. He wiped his face, but tears kept coming. He put his face in his hands and said, “I wanted to work with her on it, but I knew it was hers. I miss her so much. I lost a daughter. We lost a part of our family.”

“Why do you both pretend that you can’t hear the noises?”

Our mother shrugged. “It just hurts too much.”

I shook my head. “It’s her, out in the garage. She still works on it. She was rebuilding the machine.”

Our parents looked at me. “Don’t speak like that,” our father said. He stopped crying, looked at my face and into my eyes. “You sound crazy. She’s dead. Honey, Esther, we buried her.”

“No, you don’t understand,” I said. I sobbed harder, and my chest lurched forward. “I bought the rest of the parts so that she could build it back up. I’ve been saving up money so that she could have her machine.”

Our mother stood up. “Esther, you know we need every cent to pay off her funeral bills. We still need to pay the hospital, the morgue, the mortician,” she said, shaking her head. “You brought more junk into the house?”

“What even is that goddamned thing? Why’d she make such a goddamned mess in the garage for half her life?”

That’s when we heard it. A big roar came from the garage, and we ran out in the living room. Lights were coming from underneath the garage door, and we heard an explosion. The door leading to the garage was blown off its hinges, and we heard the garage go quiet. A grin spread across my face and I stepped into the garage, with my parents following after me. The metal garage door was bent forward, and smoke poured out of the garage.

The machine was gone. In its place was a scorch mark that burned hot on the concrete. I bent down and brushed it. The debris was still warm on my fingertips. Things all around us were destroyed or on fire, but it didn’t matter.

“See?” I said. “I told you she was fixing it. I told you that she was rebuilding the machine because she needed it. We just didn’t know what for, but she needed it.”

They were speechless. Our father started to cry. I smiled and whooped and ran out of the house, shouting my sister’s name.

My sister’s machine had finally worked. She was somewhere. I knew she needed it for something.

We heard the doorbell. It was nearly three o’clock on a Sunday morning, nearly three years after she had died. The doorbell rang again and I heard my sister. She was shrieking. She was happy. I could hear the machine in our front yard. My sister’s machine.

She had succeeded.

# Astringent Reality

Maybe it will come to me  
As I pour my first cup of coffee into the mug  
I got on our last camping trip.  
The way you held me in the tent,  
When I thought I heard an animal outside.  
The way you held me.

Maybe it will come to me,  
As I step out to check the mail.  
My silk, blue bathrobe discolored with use.  
I'll wave to the neighbors, trying to appear  
In a hurry to avoid another patronizing conversation.  
Sympathetic eyes, meandering their way  
To my naked finger.

Maybe it will come to me as I feed the dog  
That you never wanted me to get.  
He was just a surrogate child,  
You swore.  
A placeholder for the one  
I could never have.

Maybe it will come to me at dinner time,  
When the empty placemat next to mine screams out  
In tongues I can't comprehend.  
As I pierce the burnt chicken with steel,  
As though killing it myself,  
And mindlessly chew like a grazing cow,  
Alternating my gaze between the placemat  
And the door.

**Coder**

Maybe it will come to me when I'm on my knees  
Striving to believe in a God  
That would take everything away.  
Hands clasped tightly as though holding to something  
More than air.

Maybe it will come to me  
When my eyes close,  
And darkness diminishes  
All but one fear.

Tomorrow,  
Maybe it will come to me tomorrow.

## Dead Goldfish and Ants

Maybe you felt the need to amount to something.  
Oblique droplets of saltwater splashed  
the granite countertop, creating puddles that could drown  
an ant.

You already did amount to something.  
The light brush of his fingertips along the ledge  
of your lower lip proved so,  
but this did not convince you.  
*It's interesting, you think,  
how no two people have identical fingerprints.*

Your thoughts analyzed the significance  
of fingerprints, to keep you from fixating your vision  
on the negative  
sign, which marked the stick that shook like a dead goldfish  
in the hands of a confused child who didn't understand  
that goldfish could die.

You hadn't realized how much your hands were trembling  
until his were on top of yours,  
an attempt to pacify their nervousness.  
He removed the stick from your hand and tossed it,  
just tossed it,  
into the wastebasket,  
as though it were a fish you could flush down the toilet,  
and buy an identical one the next day.

"We'll try again next month," his words,  
so unintentionally hurtful, pulled your thoughts from  
fingerprints. He stared at you  
staring at the wastebasket.

You shuddered at how strange it was to arrange sex dates. You might as well scribble it down in your planner next to your dentist appointment.

“It’s been eight months,” you managed to murmur.

One more month and you’d have given birth to the baby that was never conceived.

You should have stayed a virgin,  
maybe,  
you’d have gotten lucky like Mary.

Why did your mind go to these places?

You tried to focus on the uniqueness of his fingertips, the way they felt, caressing the exterior of your thoughts.

As he lifted your chin up to kiss you, you tried to pry your eyes from the wastebasket, to resist the flow of tears that could drown more than ants.

As his lips traveled to the base of your neck, and lower,

you tried to sigh a sigh of passion.

But clothes dropped to the floor, forming a line like ants marching to their harvest.

And as he carried you to the bed, all you could see was the negative sign, on the stick, in the wastebasket, floating amid the rest of the trash, like a dead goldfish.

## Eight Lives Too Many

Cold feet nipped by the morning air  
Forage frantically for blankets or sheets to shield  
Them from the reality of waking up.

Waking up, you find the sun is shining too glaringly,  
Glaring rays blind your view of serendipity—  
Nature's serendipity, rustling the trees, the wind  
So strong it tackled your mailbox once again.  
Again, you make a mental note to fix that.

On cue, your cat knocks over the vase  
Holding your single, wilted, off-white rose,  
Leaving a stain on your now off-white carpet.  
You kept it so long, a hoarder  
Of decayed romantic gestures. You gesture  
To your cat to go to Hell. Your cat  
Talks to his empty water bowl, so you know  
That is why. And still  
You ask God why you ever brought him home.

As you venture to the kitchen, you stub  
Your toe along the way,  
And cry out in a way that makes your cat  
Forget his thirst. He prances  
To your rescue, you know this, but still  
You shove him out of the way, and grumble  
About how you wished he came with  
Eight less lives.

As you pour your week-old milk into the bowl,  
You feel like you are drowning  
Dozens of people, not dozens

of stale cheerios. Genocide  
Flashes your mind, like the headline  
Of that missing fourteen-year old girl  
On the news.  
Is this how Hitler started?  
You could pray for her, but what good is prayer  
When God let her get stolen  
In the first place?

Speaking of stolen,  
Your library books are gathering mildew  
Like a Bible left in the rain. Their eyes  
Glare at you each time you walk by. It's worse  
Than the beady eyes of your cat,  
Who has forgiven you too quickly,  
And is performing figure eights  
Around your feet.

Forgiving your cat,  
You feed him too, the two  
Of you chew, staring at each other. Then you glance  
At your watch and realize you are late for work.  
You work on downing cheerios like Hitler  
Downed emaciated bodies.

You shower for five minutes  
Too long, and choose a shirt with wrinkles  
That match the wrinkles around your eyes.

The minute you arrive at work,  
You realize it is Sunday.

# The Archaeologist Dreams of Sleep

Gazing in the mirror over  
The bar in the Honky Tonk Haven,  
Weldon, the archaeologist from  
Kalamazoo, saw a redneck gal  
Who looked just like his  
Sixth grade teacher, Miz Blewit.

He thought often of her  
Because when he was learning to drive  
He ran into her, and  
Spent twenty-nine weeks  
Doing community service for putting her in traction.

Traction hadn't done the old biddy  
Any harm. Instead it gave her  
A mysterious, nebulous, almost  
Haughty air, and made her walk  
The object of admiring stares.  
As she hop, skip, glided down the hall.

Now here she was in the Haven  
Of Honky Tonk teaching the  
Young 'uns to dance.  
With a hop and a skip and  
A gliiiiide to the side,  
A line of cowgirls scooted in time.

Weldon found the synchronicity  
Exhausted him.  
He sipped his longneck, wishing  
He could lie down and sleep.  
Insomnia had been plaguing

Him since September, and  
Wild-eyed, he sat and stared.

## Dream Girl

It was February 11th and we had to plan an event for the residents so they could possibly find a date for Valentine's, a holiday where people are forced to finally give two shits about someone. A huge heart hung from the ceiling. It was washed-out red and hung by a black thread that looked like one of those thick, fuzzy, black caterpillars. A black banner wrapped around a few of the posts and in bright pink marker that exemplified something a teenage girl would wear on her first date said, "Stop Saying You Want A Valentine And Make It Happen!" This was another failed attempt for the Resident Advisors to try to help build community. The flyer I made for this program said, "Speed Dating At Its Finest." Such a brainwashed expression to attract people to find future love, but the Department of Resident Life requested it, therefore it couldn't be helped. Valentine's is just a regular day when we hope for love because society says we should . . . I hate it, but yet we enforce this way of thinking and pretend we are the God of desire, Cupid. A holiday where we finally have to give our significant other a gift and have to show our affection for them for one day of the year. I don't hate Valentine's, I just hate the idea behind it.

Everyone sat at tables, eager to meet someone new, but there was this one guy who couldn't stop moving. He had this nervous pitter-patter about him, his feet would pitter one way and his hands would patter another. He was drinking soda out of a can and pressed it against his dried lips, and each time he picked it up to take a sip he would always place it somewhere different. It made rings on the table every time. Rings that were overlapping and entwined with each other, as if they were dancing. I was so fascinated by what he was doing and the rings that I didn't notice the person holding the can. He wasn't anything special, nothing about his hair or the way he walked really stood out. When I went up to talk to him to see if he was ready to have some fun, almost as if I was saying it to make myself believe it, he kept answering "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." Other than that he really didn't stand out; he seemed to just blend in. He told me his name was Audley, and said it in a way that was like he was trying to remember it for the first time. He seemed a little off, so I kept my eye on him when I had to leave.

Once the program started, the RAs introduced the program and we said, "Welcome to our first annual SPEED DATING!" We all said it verbatim and at the same time as if it was drilled into our heads along with all the other rules and fines. We explained all the rules of the game and the time limit of speaking to one person and the way of rotating. When we started the timer I saw Audley sitting alone. I didn't pay much mind because I thought someone was surely going to sit with him in the next round. The five minutes flew by. Not even enough time to remember someone's favorite food. Once more Audley was alone. I waited one more round. Maybe it was just an accident or maybe they didn't see him because they too thought he blended into the walls, but no. Another five minutes passed. Not even enough to see if she smiled the way you like or smelled like vanilla. Audley crushed his empty can of soda and tossed it to the trash as he got up to leave. He walked past me with his head down, his eyes drowning in agony. As Audley walked away, he grabbed the smallest chocolate-covered strawberry and stuffed it in his mouth and went to the elevators. I tried thinking of a purpose behind love and how it related to a stupid elevator so I could try to convince him to stay. I began to think how every relationship is like an elevator. Sometimes it takes forever for it to open and sometimes the elevator is empty and alone. Other times it's just too full for you to get in. Sometimes someone presses the "Close Door" button and it will close before you get the chance to get in. Maybe it is like love in the way an elevator will not move till you press one of the buttons. Sometimes other people press different buttons for different destinations and you must ride through all of them to finally get to yours. I wanted to ask him what button he was going to press and what his destination would be, but before I had the chance to go talk to him he had already pressed the "Close Door" button on everyone.

When the program finally finished we stayed in the lobby to clean up the mess. It looked like a love volcano erupted all over the place and covered the floors with glitter, paper hearts, chocolate that would soon be half off, and heart-shaped cookies. After we finished cleaning, we got a call about a suicide attempt in room 529. I ran up the stairs to the room and saw Audley's name on the door. The police arrived shortly and they kicked down the door with ease. We split up in the room to look for him and out of the ten people in that room, I found him standing right outside his window on the building's ledge. The police shoved me out the way as

they tried to reach for Audley to get him down but that just made it worse. They bombarded Audley with questions, trying to pry out of him what possibly could have caused him to stare the night in the face from a ledge. I don't know what came over me but I pleaded with the officers to give me five minutes, enough to try to convince him of love.

I stuck my head out the window and he was there all alone again on the thin edge of our decaying building. The window had a safe lock to prevent things like this from happening, but Audley had broken it. Right under the window lay a perfect ground of pavement that Audley was aiming for. Audley was sobbing and walking farther and farther away. Then he stopped; the harsh wind must have frozen him.

"Audley! It's me, your RA! Please come down." I swear, I said it at the top of my lungs, coughing as if I had been smoking a pack a day.

"No!" Audley closed his eyes and wedged his head into his shirt.

"Okay, okay, just tell me what you are thinking," I said once I calmed down.

"A dream!" he replied in a steady and monotone voice. "You are walking in what seems to be a dark cave. There is a light at the end, I think. It is this hope for a light that impels you to keep going. You know? So you continue walking, but it seems like you really aren't because the light does not seem to be getting any closer. You close your eyes because there is no point in looking at something that is so far away, right? But nonetheless, you never stop walking. Abruptly, BANG!" Audley slammed his palms together and startled me.

"You hit something and you open your eyes and that small light is still the same: faraway, distant, alone, and lost. You think to yourself. Self, what possibly could have caused me to hit myself? You are at full attention now. You cannot even see your hands, but it's that kind of thing where you know you cannot see them but you know they are still there. You know? So you go to touch whatever is in front of you, your dark shaking hands feel around and it is like a wall. A door, maybe? Then it clicks. It is a door." He tried snapping his fingers twice but couldn't get it.

"The light you see is from that small little peephole that mocks you from what is outside. There is no doorknob, but the fact that it is a door is enough. You know? Enough to keep you going, striving, and looking for a way out, because after all, it's a door, doors must have a way out, right sir?"

"As long as you are still breathing it can be better!" I said stupidly, as if trying to convince myself too.

“Well actually I met someone at the speed dating thing!” He smiled in a crooked way. “All I saw of her today was her reflection and the shadow that followed it. But it was enough to keep me going. Her name is Ree!” He seemed to be pulling all of this from his dreams. “Her favorite number is 72! She said when she was younger her mother asked her to guess a number and 72 was it. Her favorite color is every shade of blue, except turquoise. Her favorite food is anything Mexican, and best of all she smells like my favorite smell...vanilla.”

I tried to recall any girl that I saw interact with Audley, but no. “Where is she now?” I asked him, trying not to freak him out.

“I asked her if she believed in soul mates. She said no, but that she does believe that there is someone for every moment in your life. Ha, she is so beautiful and smart. She is better than all these girls here. She is my dream girl.”

“So she is in your dreams? In your head?” I couldn’t make sense of things.

“Nope, she is right next to me.” He looked to his empty side and nodded as if saying “Right?”

“Audley, wake up, this isn’t a dream, there is no one there and you can die, get back inside!” I wanted him to wake up from this bad dream we were both in.

“You know, sometimes I feel like life is passing me by. Or is it that I am passing life by? Sometimes I do not feel right; right in heart or mind. I lose the little grip I have on reality and feel as if my brain will shatter into a million pieces . . . to be lost forever in a parallel world. Sometimes I wish my brain had an off switch for nights like these. Those harsh silent nights when you are on the brink of insanity. It is as if the dark has engulfed me and turned my insides to ash. I think about a lot of things when it is only me and the darkness. The darkness does not judge. It just listens, you know? Listens to my stories and dreams. It clears my mind if only it’s just for the night where the shadows are my friends, my only friends. These shadows know all my secrets and stories. They know about all the loves that were once in my heart, but to no avail. It is weird how I can feed off one moment, a lost moment, a scattered moment. It fogs my head every night, different memories of different days, of different pains, of different people, and of different loves. The only time I get to breathe is the same time the moon is out shimmering in the middle surrounded by darkness.

They say the moon is the source of emotion and controls us. But it is also the keeper of my stories.” Audley let out a cry and jumped and reached for the moon.

His body hit the pavement like a sack of potatoes, a sack of potatoes that had no chance in this world. The world went silent and the officers shoved me away as they began to talk their police code into their little walkie-talkies. I hit the room floor but it felt slow, as if I was the one who hit the cold, outside pavement where Audley now oozed his life away. I began hating my job. We share the blame of instilling the idea of a broken holiday in people, a holiday based on fake love. And then we have people that get shunned for not being shown any. Nothing trained us for this. We have rules, fines, and how long pointless meetings should last drilled into our heads, but never how to give two shits about someone for Valentine’s.

# Memories Like a Grocery List

lips press  
on lips

hands lift  
dress hems

husbands edit  
student-wives

glass breaks  
rings slip

fathers leave  
children cry

time passes  
no relief

children yawn  
mother sings

tucked in  
sound asleep

tears fall  
doors closed

towels folded  
under doors

letter written

dream  
ended

## Babes and Fools

Faith is for babes and fools, the man said pulling a cigar  
to his long crooked smile, toothless, ammoniac  
filling the air, even before he lit the end,  
the smoke swirled around my eyes  
lifting the bag, he turned to me  
his smile fading, leaned in close  
his body, a collection pool of disease  
whispered  
I wish I had been born a fool

# Revelations

the rain barked loudly on the floor  
as Jupiter rose above an airplane  
the lights shown brighter than Jesus  
and no one can touch the hot hot heat.

mornings have be so cold lately  
and the nights won't orgasm quite like you.

white dresses hang like dead men  
waiting to be relieved but never revived.

so forgive me for writing love letters to  
the moon, whose love for me lessens  
like the forgotten fingernail clippings,  
which are romantic to liars  
who were once us.

## Rent's Due

*“he’s the wrong man, you are going to do things  
you cannot imagine you would ever do”  
—Sharon Olds, “I Go Back to May 1937”*

Doors closing are the only sounds you hear anymore.  
Even your own voice moaning against his ear  
seems like it’s coming from far away.

You fake it—he knows those aren’t real,  
but somewhere between grasps and gasps  
he falls for you, but you aren’t his pretty woman.  
So you tear at his back, and he tosses some cash,  
and you beg forgiveness in front of a dollar store candle,  
but wax Jesus can’t save you.

The rent’s due in the morning, and you swear  
this is the last time.

It’s gonna be the last time,  
you say, bobbing your head.

And before you know it  
rent’s due.

# Left Me Wondering

The empty pillow next to my dizzy head  
Still smells like your Armani cologne.

A single strand of DNA,  
A little brown straggle of hair.

The indentation of your hips  
That once rocked next to mine.

The lines you traced within my inner thigh.  
Your lips, still pressing against my ear.

The once warm sheets  
That tuck so tightly against me.

Reminders that you came  
And that you quickly went.

Like thieves and murderers,  
You took what you deemed right.

Leaving me in a half-awakened daze,  
Grasping at someone already gone.

A Polaroid camera next to empty wine glasses,  
A pill that took away my thoughts.

A voice that screamed out of distress  
But was silenced with pillows and fists.

I often sit back quietly  
in my bedroom-named-crime-scene,

pretending that I am still a virgin,  
a beautiful unblemished rose.

You left me wondering  
why?

# The Windcatcher Knows

*In response to James Fenimore Cooper's The Pioneers,  
Chapter III, "The Slaughter of the Pigeons"*

The Windcatcher watched the wind  
    as the birds lit their way across the midnight sky,  
        tasting the feathers of the pigeons,  
            almost touching their wounded wings.  
They fell to the ground and lay in waste,  
    rotting.  
        The smell of decaying bodies without heads,  
            the aroma of a simmering stew of deception.  
Those overzealous sons of pilgrims at the banks of the Susquehanna  
    far from the dream of Christopher Columbus,  
        eating the raw flesh before it even simmered in the pot.  
The bougie of their day,  
    sportsmen,  
        with their French ducking-guns and pistols,  
            dogs following close behind, sniffing the distasteful carcasses,  
                running away like disgusted little girls.  
*Oh, said Mr. Jones, a cannon will do nicely.*  
*Ah, yes, let's finish the job, said Benjamin.*  
The sulking Windcatcher listened to the sky,  
    flocks of feathers  
        falling,  
            floundering,  
                floating upside down,  
  
"I'll feel that sickening sound the rest of my life."  
    They could not stop the beautiful nightmare,  
        that uneaten pot of mangled stew.  
*C'est la vie, said Mr. Jones.*  
The branches disagreed.

*Finney*

Those branches laden with lost,  
limp,  
lame,  
decaying bodies without heads,  
Eyes staring in disbelief.  
The Windcatcher said,  
“I knew it all along,”  
as the pigeons  
plunged  
to  
the  
ground.

## Reflections of a Revolutionary

When I was ten, everything was a projection of my eyesight: grass unfurling beneath my feet as I navigated the farm, the constraints of the world relaxing and drawing in images in a single, fluid movement of diastole. As I walked home, running my fingers against the puckered leaves, the world contracted, and the field gently reeled in with me. It was early spring when it happened. The earth's complexion flushed as it roused from its anesthetized state, sprouts of various shades bubbling from the moist ground, colorful petals yawning to reveal their fruits. I emerged again from the resonance of a tiny footstep, a fertile wave of sound that smoothed into my childish body, light flooding from behind me as I entered the place that was once my home.

The aroma of freshly burnt wood and parsley perfused the room, passing freely through the synapse that bound twenty-two years and flowed into my nostrils, tracing me on whim. The affection between scent and memory admitted a dining room table, but I couldn't remember whether it was round or square, so it fidgeted uncomfortably between the two shapes, trying to regain composure. My father and two older brothers, all dead now, were revived and turned to greet me. They inhabited costumes of themselves, years distilling any imperfections and leaving them with golden palimpsests for faces, the leaden erasure marks where wrinkles may have been glinting dully in the light. They experimented with the newly burnished bodies I lent them, smiling and stretching their stiff, puppet limbs, black eyes flashing like the jeweled backs of scarabs. "There you are," they said in a homogenous voice, the sound echoing and suspending in the air even after their lips had closed. Then, my father said, "Did you remember to clean the horse's hooves?" Everything sharpened and shuddered, a tectonic shift that caused my back to stiffen in both the present and in memory.

I engineered a quick excuse and returned outside. The alcohol from his breath condensed and stuck to my lips, the clinging aroma a mnemonic device to help me remember my dad as a person. As an economy of complex emotions, and not as a summary fossilized in memory, abstract-

ed adjectives jutting from the topsoil of my consciousness. I watched my mother pass soundlessly through the window, knowing that she was an anachronism and her invocation a grammar, always trailing closely behind thoughts of my father and his extremism. She died whenever I was four, which is why she never looks at me in memories. I can't recall her face, only the long, curled black hair that swung like a pendulum inside a grandfather clock as she drifted, slow and ephemeral, as if counting down the little time she had left. She had been vomiting for two days, so instead of waiting on the doctor to make a house call, my father had frantically taken her into town, where she was admitted into a small, foreign-owned hospital. She died quickly of sepsis, and my dad blamed the "filthy, fucking Jews" while transubstantiating his sorrow into the liquor he poured down his throat, and the hysterical jingoism and religious extremism that fermented his hatred. I was a spectator, watching the misery and addiction adhere to his face as algae clings to a rock in a stream, both acting to chase him into an early death that I quietly understood he welcomed with as much fervor as he welcomed a collapse of the New Republic. Each line engraved on his face recorded a piece of her eulogy, and when I ran my fingers across these marks, I knew I was actually reading their private story in Braille.

We lived ten miles from town, but symptoms of discord resonated from my father's increasing obsession with the military general who would, in his words, "control the infestation of radical sympathy," an illegible and genderless sentence that I would sometimes stretch with my tongue, testing its flexibility and enjoying the buoyancy of its vowels. Pro-nationalist paraphernalia grew in patches around my house, pictures of handsome men with strong jaws and dutiful light eyes staring stoically above my head. "You'll marry one, soon enough." He would beam proudly at me, appraising my slender frame and long black hair, an heirloom I'd inherited from my mother.

Crops faded in and out of sight as I watched myself run toward the area where the horses grazed, enjoying the cool grass that flossed between my toes, the generative smears of color from which cows would spring forth as I turned my head to look at them. Conscious of what I was about to encounter, clouds coalesced into letters admonishing me not to think about it again but my childish incarnate pressed forward.

Indistinct words rose from the fields, seeming to grow from the earth

in accord with the vegetation and wrap around my ankles, temporarily fettering me to a standstill. Curiosity overtook me; I had met few people before, other than my family and the farmhands that arrived on weekdays, though they frightened me with their thick, purple fingers and looming height, so I never spoke with them. The sound was originating from the cornfield. Shepherded by the foreign voices, I wove my way through the thick husks, hesitating only to admire an unusual looking bug as it clung to a piece of stalk I had knocked off like a raft. The volume of their voices increased to a barking crescendo, and a nonsensical word to my ears, “treason,” sheered through my hiding space. I dropped to the ground and crawled forward, peering out from between the stalks at the scene enacted before me, one that would adapt to many different theaters but always remain essentially the same.

Two men were kneeling in front of a small group of soldiers, dressed in identical uniforms as the pictures, though none were as handsome or as friendly as they had suggested. One, seemingly the youngest of the group, was brandishing a large, brown gun that I am regrettably very familiar with now: the dreaded Mauser rifle. Sunlight poured its tawny light across the barrel, inspecting it. Though he appeared almost emaciated, the tendons of his wrists bulging as thick as tree roots as he gripped the weapon that seemed cartoonishly large for him, he had an oddly round face, his adult features crowded together and not yet carved from a template of baby fat. He spoke excitedly, spittle dripping from his lips as he recited the prisoner’s transgressions as if the embodiment of words somehow fetishized their crimes. “Conspiracy against the country, atheism, socialism,” are the only three that I can pluck from memory, not having any idea what these words stood for at the time. The men on the ground, dressed in plain clothes blanketed with dust and petal-shaped spots of blood, had hoods pulled tightly over their heads, making them look oddly reminiscent of the turnips we would grow in spring. They spoke quickly, voices muffled by the fabric stretched across their faces, shadows on the dark hoods thickening and dispersing as they breathed, creating small shapes evocative of shadow puppets; I could almost see the cupid’s bow of their lips protruding through the fabric. One’s voice had an unusual viscosity, words aggregating together and slopping heavily to the dirt as an unintelligible, sticky bolus of sound, intimating that he was beginning to cry. The two men, indistinguishable with their shrouds, were divorced

by the long shoot in front of me, and I felt as though I was looking at only one man, sitting next to a mirror, though the subject of that mirror didn't seem to matter. The soldier carrying the gun snickered at his tears, though there seemed to be an underlying anxiety leavening the sound, making it border on hysteria. I heard the second man mutter the word "newspaper" but before I could crawl closer to decipher what he was saying, the soldier raised his gun and shot both of them in the head, the thunderous crack cleaving through the air and overwhelming a tiny cry that escaped from my lips. They slumped forward, a grotesquely thick solution of blood and brain matter blooming away from their foreheads, spilling freely from their open skulls; the young soldiers stared, transfixed by the simple conversion of people into bodies, their quiescence. A quiver undulated through the gunman's face, his features grown small and blunted with a temporary shock at having proven to himself that he had the power to extinguish a person.

As everyone watched the bodies, growing pale as they poured their lives into the dirt, an empty libation, a shadow passed by me. The soldiers turned to look in succession, impassively, as my mother roamed without speaking onto the field, a non sequitur transposed from a grim fantasy. Like the dead men, she, too was wearing a hood, her black hair pulled up and crowded at the top, only a single strand dangling down her back. She methodically circled the soldiers, her house shoes scuffing softly against the ground, and then slowly, carefully, she got down on her knees and lay next to the dead men. Everyone was silent, but I could feel the pressure of her eyes as she stared at me through the fabric, communicating something she wasn't capable of turning into words.

I often wondered if the dead men had families, or if they even had faces. At night, I can still see them, sometimes with my mom, imprisoned in their velvet hoods. Lost and lonely revenants roving blindly through the dark, widowed desires grieving their cathexis, painting phantoms in my room, staining my walls with their silhouettes. Sometimes, I think I can hear them call my name. But no, it's just the sound of me breathing, breathing softly against my pillow.

## Field of a Lost Voice

I watch over you, friend, whom I spoke my last breath of air to.  
You always ask questions about my departure in your prayers,  
“Why did God take him?” While I say, “Why didn’t God take you with me?  
Since the good do die young.”  
Even though questioning him is something neither of us should do.

I sit at the end of the bed like always when I use to sleep over  
But you don’t pay any attention.  
It’s like I’m not even here.  
Why don’t we play the videogame anymore?  
I can tell by the dusty controller you’ve given up.  
I know my knock on the window scares you at night now  
But I don’t want you to be afraid.  
I just want you to play with me like the good old times.

“A dark night in this neighborhood is no place for kids,”  
Said the unbalanced drunk on the corner,  
But my decision to not take his advice now scolds you.  
We were mischievous and just living in the moment so we just went.  
That rusty white soccer goal was too heavy for my slim bones to bear.  
If it wasn’t for the knotted net I would have made it.  
There would still be a friendship between you and me.  
And there would be no cause of heartbreak.

As I lifted as a spirit  
I saw your eyes flood with sadness at the dropping temperature of my flesh.  
I know you felt the pain once my blood suddenly stained your fingertips.  
But I’m here, my friend, to wash the guilt from your conscience;  
And on those lonely days and boring nights,  
Pick up the sticks or let’s hit the park  
Just as long as someone knows, and  
We are back before dark.

# Math Was Beautiful

In the last few seconds of lunch,  
The ticks in that clock couldn't tock fast enough  
For the arrival of sixth period.

I walk in class to see you in a high chair of dominance,  
Legs crossed in a fitted skirt of astonishment;

If only I was old enough to give a compliment.

Our age difference wasn't exactly  
In the order of cooperation,  
The light from that overhead couldn't square root the glamour  
That was birthed into this lovely equation;

I never got to say thank you for the days you would yell my name  
Out of frustration  
Just to get me to snap out of the daydreams I was having of you,  
But nothing could change the fact  
That one day these teenage thoughts would never come true.

I always felt a sense of fondness  
From the smiley faces you left on my paper,  
The verbal praise you gave  
Made my heart blush in great favor,

Oh how I wish I didn't portray such bashful behavior.

"Tutoring" is what I secretly named your lovable scent,  
If we could ever have another session it would probably consist  
Of one mathematical error,  
I would love to have a problem with.

# North Side Of Houston,

Urban area,  
No subdivisions,  
Just streets of broken homes.

The sun shines  
But from the porch,  
A broken basket that hangs on a rotten tree  
Steals its elegance,

I wish for better.  
So on the weekends I still wear my backpack,  
And pedal my Huffy to the next block,  
With a face covered in obvious suspicion.

Two knocks, a pause, another knock  
Then I enter.  
Once I count this, and he weighs that  
We exchange and receive the cause of trouble.

In relief, I travel back home with what can help grant my wish,  
Recognizing every screeching noise  
That exceeds over my annoying kickstand  
Scraping the pothole-infested pavement.

My journey through the back streets,  
Out of sight of the eyes that see only green,  
Brings me back  
To that broken basket I'll soon replace.

Cop cars rally race around corners  
Every so often I'm insensible to them.  
Red and blue lights  
Couldn't possibly symbolize freedom anymore

As I awake to a stunning shine through my window,  
Along with the sirens that also triggered the ears  
Of those I share this roof with,  
Mom asks,

“What did you do?”

# Apache Tree Song

A branch laid broken, briared, barbed  
Upon the highway, cracked and red  
It looks to be a monster's limb  
A carnival-sized ribbing stem

Its brother from a burnt-up tree  
That stands sideways, crooked too  
As black, suspicious in a way  
These phallic spokes in such noonday

Sun. My body, marching in the sand  
Eyes softly watch the side of the road  
A message in the tree's hollow  
A word of warning in the ground below

The sound of whirling whipping winds  
The Navajo and the Karankawan  
The axes made of dripping blood  
Their feathers in the noonday sun

Caught in a rope laid in the leaves  
The work of some sagacity  
The tree bent straight and straightened still  
Oh, I am dead by Apache will

# The Messenger

*14 February 1918  
South of Rostov-on-Don, Ukraine*

The sky hung heavy over the steppe. It pressed through the man's coat, and his horse shivered with each gust of the frozen wind. Blowing snow stung his face, blinding him. The only sound was wind in his ears. The horse trudged through snowdrifts, dragging its hooves, leaning into the gale. Frozen claws gripped the reins, and the man wondered how long the horse could continue.

And then what? He supposed he would freeze to death. For what? No, he must go on. The memory of his Katya demanded it. If he could not do this one small thing then why had God spared his life?

The images from that day still sat—a carrion crow feeding on every beautiful memory, devouring every reminder of the happiness that went before it. He had dismissed his morning French class early and headed home to surprise Katya. With a small bouquet in one hand, he whistled a little tune as he walked along the cobbled street. He had been a professor of languages at the University of L'viv for three years, and it was the first anniversary of his marriage to the beautiful Katarina Nikolaevna Piotrowski. The bright autumn day was golden.

Approaching his house on Nalyvalka Street, he heard a commotion; several young men ran past him.

"What is happening?" he called.

"Cossacks!" returned a boy, his eyes wild. "They're killing people!"

The young professor, Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski, walked faster, then ran as he caught the scent of smoke. When he came to the bottom of his street he could hear the screams. Chaos unfolded before him. Houses were burning and women were running hunched over as they tried to protect their children. Soldiers on horseback ran them down, shooting and slashing and impaling people indiscriminately. Soldiers on

foot went from house to house raping women, slaughtering children, and setting what they did not steal alight.

Aleksandr found Katya in a pool of blood just outside their house. Her dress was shredded. Her throat was cut. Her mouth and eyes were open, and blood stained her beautiful hair.

“Katya, oh my God! Katya.” Aleksandr ran to her and cradled her in his arms. The flames from his burning house singed his hair as he sat rocking her on the steps. The flowers he had carried lay in a crimson pool, and he wept as he waited for one of the horsemen to thunder past and impale him. None came.

Through frozen eyelashes he saw a smudge in the clouds ahead and stared at it unsure if he could trust his eyes. He prayed that it was smoke, and then he prayed that it was not smoke as he imagined the smoldering ruins of yet another village waiting up ahead for him to bear witness. The horse made a rumbling sound deep in its chest that vibrated up through its body. The exhausted animal threw its head up and tried to dance sideways. The snow was too deep and all the beast could manage was to bounce up and down, but the horse’s hope gave the man hope, and he leaned forward in the saddle, pushing his hands forward to encourage the animal to try harder. The promise of warmth pulled them on.

Cresting a small hill, Aleksandr was able to look down on a small dacha with a stand of bare trees to the northwest; it was just a shepherd’s cabin with a small sheep pen and some outbuildings. Someone else was there. The snowy ground around the buildings had been pounded to mush. Fresh snow had not yet reclaimed the muddy earth. No one was outside, and the path leading in from the north was beginning to frost over. They must be inside. At least it was not a burning village.

This was a land of confusion and suspicion. Sometimes only a small strip of color on a hat or sleeve marked a person as friend or foe. He had no way of knowing who waited, but he must warm up, trade for a fresh horse, then get underway again as quickly as possible. The message he carried from the French general could be vital to the Red Army. He had been riding for three days from the southern tip of the Ukraine, and he could afford no delays.

As Piotrowski trotted into the space between the buildings, his breath formed a cloud around his head. A wolf-sized dog roared out from somewhere and barked a warning from the end of its chain. The horse shied, and Piotrowski leapt off its back, stumbling on frozen legs. He somehow managed to calm the spooked horse and tie it to a post at the northern end of the muddy space between the buildings. Sheep bleated from the pen to the south, while a barn and some sheds blocked the cold east wind. The cabin with the smoking chimney squatted in the lee of the barn, its porch in shade as the weak sun approached the western horizon at its back. Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski knocked on the door of the cabin where he could see the dirty boot prints of the men who must still be inside. The barrel of a gun greeted him as the door opened. He backed up, looking above the gun to a pair of Cossack blue eyes and a dirty scarf. The woman was short and stout, her creased face stern.

She waited for the man to state his business.

“Please, Missus, is there a seat at your fire? A stable for my horse? I will only trouble you for a few hours.” The old woman stepped back and allowed him to enter before too much precious warmth escaped.

The room had a fire, a stove, and a long table with benches on either side. The men at the table turned wind-burned faces and suspicious eyes on him. They wore the tall fur hats and long coats of the Don Cossacks with short sabers at their waists. Their ammunition was sewn across their breasts beneath badges of honor and gilded ribbons. The silent question on each man’s lips was plain: “Who is this? Who does he fight for?”

The Dons were White Army, and Piotrowski’s heart skipped a beat. He had hoped to avoid them on this journey, but the unexpected storm had slowed his progress.

“You have something to bring to the table?” the old woman demanded.

He pulled a bottle of vodka and a loaf of frozen bread from his pack, and the men at the table relaxed, and resumed their conversations.

“I can pay,” he said. “I just need a bite to eat and a chance to warm up. Then I would trade for a fresh horse if you have one.”

“Humph, you and all the rest,” she said, letting him know that the men at the table were travelers too. Her face creased in what passed for a smile. “Maybe one of them will trade his horse for yours.” And she laughed. The

soldiers laughed. A Cossack's horse was dearer than his wife. There would be no horse swapping this day.

The man took his time arranging his great coat near the fire before he walked over to the table and took the only empty seat.

A bowl of porridge, a cup of weak tea, and a vodka sat waiting for him. He tossed back the vodka and began on the porridge. His mind raced, and he kept his head down, making a production of eating while he rehearsed his story. The questions would begin as soon as he looked up from the food. He had been lucky up to now, but if these men discovered that he was a Bolshevik, he would die before he could stand up again. He poured a second vodka and drank it before he leaned back, letting the tea mug warm his hands. The leader of the group, with the bars of a kapitan, addressed him.

"Where do you travel in such a hurry?" he asked. The man scowled beneath his black fur papakha.

"I might ask you the same thing," the newcomer replied.

"We were in Novocherkassk when the Reds took it two days ago," the man said. "We got separated from our regiment in the storm. We will re-join them in the morning once the storm has passed."

"I am riding from Pavlovskaya, south of here," the messenger lied. He hoped he had chosen a town far enough away that he would not be questioned too closely.

"And what is so important that you ride in this weather?"

"I carry a message to Alexei Maximovich Kaledin. It must get through." The lie rolled easily off the messenger's tongue.

"Well . . ." The Kapitan leaned back and gave the man an appraising look. "Kaledin himself. You must be special," he said. "I had not heard that the command had moved so far to the south."

"No, you misunderstand my mission, Kapitan. It is not a message from the command that I carry. It is a message of a personal nature. I am no soldier."

"And yet you ride as if it were a matter of life and death. Is it a matter of life and death?"

"It may be, Kapitan. It may be."

"What is your name?"

"Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski."

"And your papers?"

The messenger extracted the documents from his coat. They showed him to be a teacher from the southern Ukraine.

“A teacher. Who sends you on this crazy ride?”

“It is a woman, Kapitan. I cannot say any more.”

“A woman!” The Kapitan laughed and slapped the table. His men laughed with him. “Of course, some woman believes herself to be as important as the fate of Mother Russia! Ha, ha, ha! I suppose this woman offered you some very special payment, did she?”

The messenger made no reply, just stared at the floor trying to appear embarrassed.

Turning to a young cavalryman who had yet to acquire braid or medals, the Kapitan barked, “Vlodymyr, show this very important messenger to the stable with his horse.”

“Thank you. That will be good,” Piotrowski said. He threw back one last shot of vodka and passed the bottle to the nearest man.

Vlodymyr pulled the barn door closed as Aleksandr Nikolayevich turned to his horse.

“Sorry for leaving you out in the cold, old fellow. I had to introduce myself.” He unsaddled the horse and gave him hay while the soldier carried a bucket and an axe outside to the water trough. The axe was necessary to break through the surface and reach the water beneath. The messenger took the opportunity appraise the other horses before Vlodymyr came back.

After holding the water bucket while the horse drank, Vlodymyr walked to the other side of the animal and joined in the rubdown.

“You must not be a Cossack. We would not leave a horse in the cold after such a hard ride. This poor beast is exhausted.” He reached down and lifted one of the animal’s hooves and began cleaning it with a small hooked knife he produced from his pocket. “Where did you say you came from?” The horse tried to jerk his hoof away as Vlodymyr touched a tender spot.

The messenger was not listening. He looked around the barn as he worked. There was a big black stallion that looked fit and rested. He imag-

ined sneaking back out here and riding silently away on that big strong horse. It might be several hours before anyone missed him. The wind and the snow would work to his advantage, and they would never catch him. That assumed, of course, that he could make it back to the barn without alerting the Cossacks. He would have to leave before the wind died down so they would not be able to follow his trail in the snow.

“Don’t answer then, I like talking to myself,” Vlodymyr said.

The messenger brought his distant gaze back to the face of the young soldier who was looking at him across the horse’s back. “Sorry, I was lost in thought.”

“How long were you riding in this storm to wear this poor horse out this way?” His tone of voice had grown rougher.

“I started at first light. I was told this message could not wait. What town is near to us?” The messenger made half-hearted swipes at the horse’s side while he tried to visualize the map of the region. He should have been in Rostov-on-Don already.

“Poor horse. He’s lame, and half frozen to death,” Vlodymyr mumbled. “Should have been seen to immediately.”

“We must be close to Rostov,” said the messenger, thinking out loud.

“You say you rode for six hours in this storm? From Pavlovskaya?”

“What is the nearest town? Zemograd? Kirovskaya?”

“Where are you trying to go? General Kaledin? Where did they say you would find him?”

“Rostov. On the Don. I am supposed to find him in Rostov-on-Don.” Of course, it was not Kaledin that Piotrowski was to meet, but rather the Red Army Lieutenant Golubov. He was in control of the Red Army in this region.

“You missed him. Maybe we will find him when we meet up with our troops tomorrow or the next day. You should ride with us.”

“Yes, maybe then. That is a good plan.” The messenger knew that his only hope was to leave before the storm was over.

As darkness fell the men settled down to get what rest they could before returning to the fight. But as the Cossacks began to snore around him, the messenger lay waiting. He watched and listened until all was quiet around him, then he eased up and made his way out, as if he was going to the outhouse. Vlodymyr woke the Kapitan as the door closed.

His heart racing, Aleksandr Nikolayevich threw his saddle onto the big black horse. It was a powerful animal, and he worked to hold it back as he ducked to ride out of the barn. He thought he was clear when the damned dog rushed out at him. This horse also reared up in response to the challenge of that demon beast, and this time Aleksandr landed on his back. The horse jerked the reins from his hands, but Vlodymyr caught them.

Vlodymyr pointed his handgun at the messenger and said in a jovial voice, "Ah, there you are. I came to pry your frozen ass off the seat, but I see you were just trying to do the Kapitan a favor and give his horse some exercise." At that, the Kapitan strolled over and led Piotrowski back into the building while Vlodymyr tied the horse.

"It seems our new friend was trying to leave us in a hurry," he announced to his men. He forced the stranger to take a seat and walked around to confront him face to face. "Where have you come from?" he demanded.

Someone had lit a lantern that hung above the table, and the Cossack soldiers stood just beyond the pool of light it cast, growling like a restless pack of wolves.

"Pavlovskaya. I told you," the man said. He tried to sound exasperated, but he only managed to sound tired. He had accomplished nothing. He closed his eyes and saw Katya.

"And we told you that you might ride with us, but instead you have tried to steal my horse. Why is that?" Steel had come into the Kapitan's voice.

"I apologize for that. I was in a hurry, and I left mine in exchange." The men all laughed.

"Perhaps you do not know how these things are done in the Don. It is like arranging a marriage. I think you have not a big enough dowry to take this horse. Maybe you should have traded with one of the other men!" The others laughed. "Why do you try to run away in the night?"

"I have an important message for General Kaledin. It cannot wait until morning," he said, attempting to maintain the lie.

"A message from a woman. What message from any woman can be so important? There is always another woman in the next village!" The men laughed. "Let me see this message."

“I cannot do that. I am under orders that it should be placed in the general’s hands only.”

“Orders? I thought you were not a soldier. What woman commands you?” Again the men laughed.

“And she sent you on a horse? Was the telegraph broken? The train?”

“Indeed. The telegraph lines have been cut, and the train tracks are blocked with snow,” he said. Of course he knew that traveling alone on horseback was supposed to give him the greatest chance of getting through without being intercepted, and here he had ridden right into a nest of the Don Cossacks.

The Kapitan leaned down and looked into the eyes of the messenger, “Kaledin is dead. If you were any part of the White Army you would know this.”

“I told you. I am no soldier. Please, I have been traveling night and day,” the man tried to counter, but the Kapitan kept on talking.

“I can see you are not a Cossack. Are you even Russian? I think maybe you are not one of us at all. Maybe you are a dirty Red sympathizer from Germany?”

The messenger answered with the only plausible explanation he could come up with, the truth. “No, I am from L’viv originally. My father was Polish. I am a teacher for the children in the small villages to the south.” It was almost all true.

The Don Cossacks, now members of the volunteer White Army, had rolled through the old town near the University in L’viv. They had raped and murdered his Katya, and he tasted bile in his mouth as he recalled that day. Maybe these same men had been there. Maybe one of them had raped her and slit her throat. He remembered their flared coats and their tall wool hats. He remembered their sabers and their pikes and their guns.

Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski had traveled to Kiev and signed on with the Red Army. His gift with languages was prized, and he had been carrying messages between the Red commanders and their foreign allies for months. He had seen villages destroyed and ordinary people slaughtered by both the reds and the whites. He was tired. He had seen too much.

One of the soldiers jumped up and removed his hat. “He looks like a German to me.” The rumbling of chairs on the floor and the hissing

of sabers followed. The shepherd woman ducked behind a curtain in a doorway at the back. Best to become invisible. No telling what this pack of killers would do once the bloodletting began.

“Is this true? Are you German?” asked the Kapitan. He had fought the Germans in 1915, and would be happy to send all of them to Hell personally.

“No. I am from L’viv.”

“So you said. We know L’viv, don’t we boys?” The Cossacks laughed, but the messenger could contain himself no longer. Now he knew that these were the very men who had destroyed his life.

“You bastards. I saw you there—on my street. You killed my wife.” Two of the soldiers grabbed his arms as he lunged at the Kapitan, who stood his ground, cool and calm. The bench tumbled over as they dragged the messenger outside.

“Your wife. Is that what this is all about?” The Kapitan turned his head to speak to the men behind him. “It’s true then, a woman drove this poor fool out into the storm,” said the Kapitan. “Get my horse out of the way.”

The soldiers led the horse to the barn, and tied the messenger to the post. The old woman peered out of the cabin and made the sign of the cross. Her craggy old face softened with silent tears.

The Cossack Kapitan touched his revolver to the messenger’s head.

Aleksandr Nikolayevich Piotrowski gazed on the stars in the frozen black sky that went on forever.

# Cats Can Dance

In the back alleys  
behind the streets  
on the darkest of nights,  
we dance and parade the night away.  
The tabbies were performing  
their musical magic while the mollies sing and swing.  
Trash cans were beaten like drums while  
we were playing fish skeletons as cellos.  
Everyone sang on top of the wooden planks  
till their lungs exploded.  
Dogs fled the alleys in disgust  
And the humans started to get annoyed  
by our beautiful meowing.  
Someone threw a shoe in anger  
but we kept on swinging  
and jiving.

When the sun rises,  
we disperse the streets and return  
to our homes, saddened and bored, but  
when the moon shines high,  
we jive jive  
jive.

# Poster Obsession

I'm trapped by distorted corpses.  
Blood spatters cover every wall.  
The undead clawing for me.

Heads separated from bodies,  
broken bones piercing rotten flesh.  
Zombies stumble forward,  
craving fresh meat.

Reaching out,  
my fingers glide over smooth paper.  
Silver words stand out on a glossy finish.  
Sharp edges slice tender skin,

and a single drop of blood  
glistens against the faded background.

# Hollywood Glamour

The director is barking orders,  
Extras are running about,  
“Hey Fred!” calls a crewmember.  
I raise my hand,  
Nod my head.

We’ve got a bright, colorful, fake dressing room to my left  
And a black, crowded studio on my right.  
Ginger is rushing back to set,  
Beads of sweat covering her forehead,  
Her chest rising and falling fast.

We actors living in this Golden Era  
Are always practicing in bland  
Rehearsal halls. Only to go back  
To a stuffed dressing room,  
The lights from the mirror baking us.

That’s Hollywood glamour for ya.  
One minute you’re running all over the place,  
The next, you’re standing still, up against a door  
Looking into a gorgeous woman’s eyes,  
Lips moving in a mechanical

Motion, having delivered these  
Lines fifty times beforehand.  
I place my hands on her shoulders,  
Lean in.  
And the director yells “Cut!”

## Our Only Shot at Telepathy

As people, we have to communicate. It's a fact. If you don't agree, sorry. You're wrong. From talking to texting, the language arts are at the center of everyday life. From the moment my head leaves my pillow every morning (and even before, if you want to talk about dreams) I am a part of an organic and living universe that utilizes communication as its foundation. It's how we cope. It's how we express our ideas and hopes and fears. It's how we determine our futures, find the people we love, and figure out what's for dinner. Language is a necessity—that much is certain. One way to communicate with language is writing, and when someone else reads what you've written, that's called literature. Okay, not really. That would be nice, but not all writing is literature. I'm not going to go into an exact description of what literature is exactly, because I really couldn't tell you. In my brain (and in most other brains I think) literature is a distinctly ambiguous entity. Before you continue reading this essay, it's vital that you know that. However, because this essay is primarily about lit, it's also imperative that you know literature is stuff like *The Scarlet Letter*, *East of Eden*, Emily Dickinson, and Uncle Walt—not Lil Wayne and those little pamphlets that come in DVD packages. Anyway, literature is important. Like, *really* important. In order to tell you just how important it is and why, I'll have to split my argument into two categories. There's the Life in General group and the School and Learning group. Both will apply to you, reader, as you are undoubtedly alive and are either in some sort of school or have been in one at some point. Let me warn you, though. I couldn't possibly include every reason why literature is important to every person in the world in this paper. It would be about four million pages long, I think. Maybe more. That being said, I'll start slowly. Let's start with school and learning.

Reason number one in the School and Learning group is pretty obvious, I think. Literature isn't about grammar and mechanics. It's not a discussion of setting and symbols, metaphors and mood. It's about life. When you go to history class, you learn about history (duh). When you go to psychology, you learn about the brain and synapses and neurotrans-

mitters and stuff. In science lecture, the teacher talks at you about the air speed velocity of unladen swallows (maybe not that, but you get the picture). Sure, all of these subjects have something to do with life. But they don't explore it like literature does, because lit is multidisciplinary. It's only in literature that you can go directly to the source. I would argue that Whitman's "O Captain, My Captain" is a better depiction of Abraham Lincoln's presidency than the chapter on the Civil War in your history textbook. I would say that *Flowers for Algernon* more completely analyzes the psyche of a mentally challenged person than your psych professor can. Literature is true, even when it's made up. A story doesn't have to be factual in order for a person to learn something from it. Math, science, and history are concerned with facts, not life.

In school, literature is also important because it allows students to see beyond the black and white. Life isn't  $2+2=4$ . It's a series of broken rules. When I was in high school, I was so overwhelmed with the areas of cubes and the name of the 19th president (Rutherford B. Hayes) that I forgot to remember that there is life beyond facts and equations. Literature taught me that breaking the rules is okay. Yeah, there's the whole spelling, punctuation, usage thing, but look at Cormac McCarthy. Try telling him he's wrong. Once I knew the rules of writing, I knew I could break them because literature told me it was okay. I won't ever misspell words on purpose, but I can write from the perspective of a child and do whatever the heck I want. I can omit commas in a list and it's okay. It even has a name. You can probably see from what you've read so far that I really like to break the rules, and I do it often. Literature is the only subject in school that has names for broken rules (polysyndeton), and that's what appeals to me. English and language arts classes prize students who think differently, and literature acts as an example of that. Aldous Huxley made up a whole future, and that's awesome in the context of literature. In writing, making stuff up is acceptable. It's preferred. What other subject can boast that? What student wouldn't want to know that they can have an imagination? I guess I am trying to say that literature can benefit students from both sides: it benefits them when they're reading, but it also bolsters their writing ability by example.

As an avid reader, though, literature has to exist apart from school—it plays a huge role in my everyday life. Here's where the Life in General part comes in. I was exposed to lit at school, like everyone else, but it really

takes on a different meaning when you read for yourself. When I read, and when others read for enjoyment, I get immersed in a story and I want to know everything about it. I think that heavy readers read literature for one reason: we are all really nosy. I like to know everything about a character's life. I want to know their thoughts, their dreams, and their most intimate emotions. Think about a writer constructing an entire life, an entire world, an entire future. I think it's pretty safe to say that literature is one of the highest forms of self-expression. No arguments there, right? The act of writing forces the writer to give up a little part of himself for others to see. The act of reading a work is almost as intimate as a bear hug. It allows the reader to live in the mind of someone else, if only for an hour. As far as life goes, I think self-expression is pretty important. But what might be even more important is the ability to read someone else's self-expression, process it, and understand it. That is a skill, my friend. It's all a part of the communication thing. You have to be able to speak and write, yes, but you also have to be able listen and read. Or you'll have no friends.

Literature can also act as the world's sneakiest equalizer. Think about it. How were writers like Olaudah Equiano, Anne Bradstreet, and William Apess treated in their lives? Probably not very well. In the society they lived in, they were thought of as inferior in some way, yet their writing is now considered literature. I think that's awesome. Through the portal of writing, these people were able to transcend their stations in life and prove their worth in an avenue deemed credible by those who oppressed them. Anne cleverly carved out a niche in poetry for women in a time when women had three jobs: kids, hubby, and home. She is remembered today because she broke through the expectations of her gender and somehow became equal to those dead old white guys that we study today. When I read her poetry, it's an instantly gratifying reminder that writing allows us to be whoever we wish to be. You don't have to be rich, white, or privileged to be remembered. In literature, Anne Bradstreet can be considered equal in merit to John Donne or John Smith when she wasn't in life. How cool is that?

What might be cooler, though, is a shot at telepathy. What, you didn't know that literature is a telepathic activity? Yeah. I can't claim that I knew either, until Mr. Stephen King enlightened me in his memoir of the craft, *On Writing*. He explains it sort of like this: Hello, my name is Brooke. I am sitting at a table with my laptop in the Hastings in Huntsville, Texas

on a rainy evening in late January. I am trying to figure out why literature is important to me and I'm writing my thoughts down in this word processor. I have some other things on my mind, too. I'm looking forward to a *Game of Thrones* episode with my boyfriend tonight. I still have to read a manual for my environmental lab tomorrow morning. My tea is slowly dwindling next to me. But none of those thoughts matter right now. I'm in what Stephen calls my "far-seeing place." He says it's "a basement place where there are lots of bright lights and clear images," and I'm inclined to agree with him. This is where I do my best transmitting. I am supposed to give this paper over to some peer reviewers in about four days, and then a professor a week after that. You, reader, are somewhere down the line of time from me and where I am now. You're probably doing a great job at receiving my thoughts and I am probably murdering you with my methods of transmission, but we are practicing magic together. We are having "a meeting of the minds." In Mr. King's version of this explanation, he gives a really great image of a white rabbit in a cage on top of a red tablecloth. The bunny has pink eyes, an orange carrot, and the number eight marked on his back in bright blue ink. He sent me that image when I read it, and now I'm sending it to you. Do you see it? Our lips never moved, but I sent you a picture. An idea.

Now, I'm not saying that this essay is literature necessarily. I'm just trying to make a point. Think about every book you've ever read. Was the writer able to supply you with an image? An idea? The life of a character? Chances are, the answer is yes. Words are power, man. That's all I'm saying. If the transmitter is good enough, words can make you a different person. Literature changes lives every day. According to Greek philosophers, its primary purpose is to amuse and instruct, but it's so much more than a TV show or an instruction manual. Literature is telepathy and immortality. It's an escape route or a soapbox, a teacher and a friend. It's history, psychology, philosophy, and science. It's a

Case Study

Time Machine

How-To Guide

Mirror

Walk in Someone's Shoes.

## **Selover**

Literature is the human experience preserved on paper for you, reader. And for me. And for your best friend, my librarian, and the girl who made my tea behind the Hastings counter. It exists for anyone who wants it. Sorry, but Life is hard. It's short. And sometimes, it sucks. But it can also be great and beautiful and simple. Literature is the middleman. He records the best parts of life so you know they're out there and the worst parts so you know you have it better. Literature exists for you and because of you. So stop asking why, sit down, and enjoy it.

# A Vulture Perched on a Power Line

Bruised clouds loom above the wooden pillar.

Four rods, coupled, converge midway at the peak.

Obsidian wires flaring from the arms,

reaching

Electrical life lines

find theological countenance

The vulture sits

waits

prays;

Counting on death to live.

# It's Raining Men

The spectacle begins!  
Men line ledges  
And cherry top clock towers.  
Jewelry is discarded first.

Wind blows, swaying tailored suits  
While women smile  
From the pavement.  
They reach for descending hats.

Branches beat like drums  
And leaves scratch like snares.  
The trees hush the crowd  
As the clouds carry crows.

The men peel from the edges  
And fan open like  
Hands done praying  
To begin the praise.

Every man falls differently;  
Swirling or pushing with his  
Chest, back, or head.  
Welcoming the earth with

Force.

The women scream:  
Hallelujah!

# My Face in the Urinal

It sat in its porcelain frame,  
fragmented by an uneven rip,  
sticking to the right side

without yet hitting the water.  
I stood over it with a bladder of  
an oversized water balloon.

The bar's bathroom only had  
one urinal and one stall,  
both walled with key-carved graffiti.

Jake's a pussy.  
Kevin likes dick.  
And my teeth were white porcelain.

I aimed to the opposite side and  
tried to remember when it was  
the picture was taken.

Who I was  
with and why, assumed  
by my toilet-white smile,

we were so happy.  
My hand hovered over the urinal's knob as  
I remembered taking the photo.

That satisfied smile  
pasted under bright saline eyes.  
I flushed.

# Alien

When you came here  
They classified you as an Alien,  
A non-immigrant one.  
You liked the term no more  
Than the people who gave it to you.  
An Alien, not quite like E.T., but E.S.L.

They asked you a lot questions.  
Are you a Communist? Anyone in your family?  
Any diseases? Mental illnesses now  
Or in the past?  
Aliens must be healthy, you know.

(Wouldn't it be better though  
That they were so sick  
That they couldn't proliferate?)

They did let you in, but  
They kept asking these questions.  
Some of them wanted to know your credit history.  
Non-existent? We are afraid we can't help you then.  
No insurance? The doctor is not taking any new patients this month.  
By the way, you shouldn't carry so much cash,  
It's dangerous around here, don't you know?  
And how come you don't have a social security number?

Many of them were being just nice.  
They wanted to know where you came from.  
What's that cute little accent?  
Iceland? Is it next to New Zealand?

**H.H.**

And then there were those who spoke to you  
Like to a child.  
They probably associated accents with unintelligence.

Hey Alien, you still often feel like one  
But you love this place  
And when the band plays “America, America”  
You sing along.

# The Change

After forty years of silent marriage  
It must be something to find a person to talk to.  
I heard that she's not pretty, not even young  
But what does it matter if she is important.

You are sixty or something and you say that only now  
Did you learn what love really is like.  
It's strange to see you come home  
Good-humored and happy,

Sneaking upstairs after your secret adventures  
Like a schoolboy, a little ashamed, yet excited,  
Never explaining where you come from  
And whose smell you are wearing.

Daily jogging, diet food and mint breath fresheners.  
You absent-mindedly pat the dog,  
Read the paper, glance at your watch,  
And without a word disappear.

From your rendezvous you return  
Self-content and full of newly rediscovered youth.  
You call it a Relationship, I—Adultery,  
But words don't really matter.

## Sea Legs

“It seems fitting the old bastard was found floating with his dong in his hand.”

“Charming, Tom.”

“It happens. They toddle over to the rail and stand there, taking a whiz, backs to the weather. Big wave hits. Man overboard. If the boat’s under way, and the dumbass is the only person on deck, he’s a goner.”

“Surely that’s an exaggeration,” said the whisky-voiced barfly occupying the stool beside him. She took another pull on her Marlboro Light. The bar was empty except the two of them and the bartender. Only the real die-hards came to this grotty little hole in the wall on a Tuesday night.

“Not at all. Think about it. If nobody sees it happen, there’s nothing sticking above the surface of the water but a head, and that’s really hard to see if you don’t know where to look for it. Course, in this case, the boat was at anchor, and the old goat was alone, and he’s bound to have been drunk. Maybe he had a heart attack or something, ‘cause it doesn’t sound like he even let his pecker go to try and swim. Saw it on the *Yachting Times* website. Article said the crew was ashore and he just wasn’t there when they got back to the boat. By the time they found him, he was on the way to Union Island. It’s a wonder the sharks didn’t take him.” Tom signaled to the barman for another beer. “I couldn’t believe he still owned the boat after all these years.”

“Mmmm,” went the barfly as she sucked at her cigarette, leaving a slimy red stain on the filter end. “Where’s Union Island?”

“Way down in the Grenadines—almost to Grenada.”

“So nearly to South America?”

“Uh-huh. I told you I used to skipper for the guy, right? Well, we were in Corsica for a regatta.”

“A what?” asked the barfly, blowing a sharp stream of smoke out the side of her mouth.

“A regatta—it’s a race between the big pleasure yachts; kind of a pissing contest for the rich bastards. They like to get together every so often and find out who has the best boat and crew. It’s all broken down into classes so the boats are more or less evenly matched.”

“Oh.” She puffed another cloud up over Tom’s head and flicked the end of the cigarette into the ashtray.

“So we’d been sittin’ at the dock for a couple days. The boss was bored, and he went off exploring Bonifacio on foot. There were restaurants and bars all around the harbor. When he came back, he fell off the gangway into the water—drunk Cooter Brown. Sally and I were working. We didn’t hear a thing. The French Navy fished him out. It was lay day—that’s a day off in the middle of the regatta—and we’d spent the day stocking up and getting ready for the old man’s guests to arrive.” Cap’n Tom gazed off into the middle-distance as the memory grew sharper in his mind.



We heard “Permission to come aboard!” and Sally peeped out over the companionway steps. I saw her eyes get big and she ran up on deck. I was just coming out of the engine room, wiping my hands on a rag ‘cause I’d been changing the oil in the generator; didn’t want to get oil on anything—especially while we had the boss on board. Those Germans are pretty damn picky about the housekeeping.

When I got up on deck, there were these two big French sailors carrying Fiedler onto the boat wringing wet.

What happened? Sally asked. Then she said it again in French.

One of the officers said, *Il est tombé dans l’eau.*

Sally dithered about whether to help carry him or turn around and grab towels.

You go get the towels, I told her, and headed over to relieve the froggies of their burden.

Sally told the sailors, *Merci beaucoup*, and they left. (She always did the translating. I sure did miss that once she left.)

I got my ass chewed the next day because Fiedler’d got drunk and made a fool of himself—like I could stop him. I had to wonder who saved him from messing up when he was back home in Germany. It sure wasn’t his wife or his prissy son.

Fiedler lost his glasses when he went in the drink too, but I fished ‘em out. Good thing the water was clear. Come to that, it was a good thing those sailors saw him fall in, or we might have been the ones fishing his drowned ass out.

That was some trip altogether. The next day this big dude, what was his name? That's right, Jäger, like the drink. Guy looked like a bear, hair and all. Never was sure what he did for a living, but I was pretty sure he had something on Fiedler. And he sure had a pretty mistress. Fiedler told me she was his mistress like he was impressed. Beate—that was her name. Fiedler made it sound like she was a call girl, but she said she was a rep for a drug company.

T'any rate, Jäger arrives the next day with his lady friend. Sally had been prepped to do some major entertaining, and she had caviar and champagne chilled; polished the silver and what not, but they wanted to see the island, so they took Fiedler off in a taxi, and me and Sally had time for a nice lunch and a skin full of wine with a Danish couple we knew who were running an aluminum-hulled sloop. They were about three slips over; tied up stern-to like we were.

Those krauts come draggin' in about six o'clock and the old man was legless again. The big bear, Jäger, hauls him off to his cabin and they have some kind of shouting match in German, then Jäger and Beate go out again. Nobody seemed to want to talk to us, so me and Sally went out for a nightcap ourselves. Why mess up the galley when we were tied up right next to a whole string of restaurants and a bunch of friends we only got to see about once a year? Ended up about ten of us yachties had dinner together. We got pretty toasted, but we were still compos mentis.

Then, way past midnight, after we were all tucked up in our bunks, I hear Fiedler out tip-toeing around calling "Beate, is that you?" Like he was expecting her to come get in bed with him! It's a wonder that Jäger didn't break his face.

Jäger and his lady were packed and off the boat before breakfast the next morning. He didn't say "thank you" or "kiss my ass" to me or Sally, and the old man never came out of his cabin—just called for some V8 juice and stuck this limp white arm out through a crack in the door to receive it. Worst part was that big hairy bastard left the head blocked with the biggest turd I ever saw. I thanked God for my wet-dry vac that day, and looked the other way while it cleaned out the mess.



"Ooooooh! That is disgusting, Tom. I feel like I might be sick." The barfly made a face and stuck her tongue out. "Don't you know any stories that aren't nasty?"

“No darlin’. Those rich bastards are just disgusting.”

On the walk to his boat that night, Tom kept on thinking of old Fiedler. That led to thinking about Sally. He did a quick calculation of what time it would be in Australia, and fired up his computer.



“Tom! Blinkin’ Heck! What’s the time there?” asked Sally over Skype.

“Late, Sal, I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d see if you were home yet.”

“Yeah. Just pulled in the drive from the school run. It’s good to hear your voice. How long’s it been?”

“Too long. Listen, what got me thinking of you was I read that old Fiedler died.”

“Nooooo! Really?”

“Yeah, they fished him out of the water down by Mayreau. Boat was anchored up in Saltwhistle Bay, where we used to stop.”

“So what happened? Did Fiedler drown?”

“Apparently he was taking a piss—”

“Watch the language, Tom, little ears.”

“Right, it looks like he fell in the water, with the boat sitting right there at anchor, and nobody knew it till it was too late.”

“Likely bloody story!”

“The crew were ashore, and there was nobody else in the bay.”

“He was bound to have been paralytic.”

“Goes without saying,” Tom replied.

“If the missus had been there, I’d lay money she pushed him!” Sally said. “But seriously, what is there for the crew to be doing on Mayreau?”

“No telling. Article didn’t say, but the island got electricity in 2002. There’s a little resort there now.”

“I guess it’s all changed since we were there. Don’t suppose I’d recognize it any more. You been down island lately, Tom?”

“Nah. I did an Atlantic crossing with Billy Jefferson a couple of years ago.”

“From *Silver Fish*?”

“Yeah, that’s the guy. He’s running a sweet Perini Navi 54 meter called *Mnemosyne*. Great trip. We only got clobbered once—between the Azores and Gibraltar.”

“Oh! Wasn’t Billy Jefferson the guy who pulled us off when we ran aground in the Port of Andratx?”

“One and the same. I try to forget about that night.” Tom’s mind flashed briefly on their first night sailing with Fiedler and his gay emson. The old man had been so excited to be out on the new boat and he insisted that they sail onto the anchor. The previous skipper had warned Tom to always set the anchor really hard because the boat was so heavy, but Fiedler wouldn’t even let Tom turn the engine on. He was showing off, and they hadn’t established the chain of command yet. Tom was too green to assert himself—not on his first night as captain. They’d all gone to sleep when the boat suddenly heeled over and wallowed on her port side—stuck. Everybody fell out of their bunks and then stumbled up on deck to find that they were hard aground, right in front of Ollie’s Bar.

“Thank God the bar was closed!” said Tom.

Sally laughed. “Yeah. It’s a good thing that Billy guy kept it to himself. We’d never have been able to live that down.”

“I thought my career was over and done before I even got started. And Fiedler laughed it off. Remember? He said, ‘Ach, you should have seen the time I went aground in the Bodensee!’”

Pixelated Sally was nodding, and her mouth was moving a little out of sync with her voice. “I’ve wondered about them over the years. What made them so damned miserable, Tom?”

“I don’t know, Sally, but I can tell you for sure that I have yet to work for any happy millionaires. I should have taken up a trade or gone back to college or something, but it’s too late for that now.”

“Yeah. Those people ruined yachting for me—I couldn’t deal with their filthy lives anymore. I still wonder sometimes if you and I could have made a go of it, if we’d stayed together, but it doesn’t pay to worry about what ifs.”

“I should have quit with you, Sal, but I thought I had something to prove. I was making good money and I still thought I was immortal.”

“I know, Tom.”

“How are Kevin and the kids, anyway?”

“Not so little anymore. Julian’s twelve years old now. When you coming to see us anyway?”

“When I win the lottery, I guess, Sal. Wish I could, but I need to stick close to my old Mom.”



Hearing Sally's voice so clear brought back a flood of memories from the four years they had spent together on Fiedler's yacht. Tom stripped off and lay down. He closed his eyes and remembered the night he and Sally first met the Fiedlers. Sally had pushed him to get his captain's license. They thought they were in love, and that running a boat together would be perfect. Sebastian and Claudia Fiedler looked like aging movie stars. He had thick salt-and-pepper hair that he wore on the long side, slicked back with a little Hitler 'stache. She was tall and excruciatingly thin, with a thick accent and waves in her hair. She smoked one cigarette after the other on a long holder. Herr Fiedler had been absolutely giddy about buying the boat. It was the biggest boat he'd owned, and Frau Fiedler made it clear that she was "allowing" him to buy the boat for nearly two million U.S. dollars, since they'd just sold her father's company for undisclosed millions.

They were odd, but all rich people were odd. Tom was twenty-two years old, what did he know? This was his first real interview for a captain's job, and he would have agreed to anything. The Fiedlers had been oh-so-polite. The wine had flowed, and by the time it was over, Tom and Sally had been suckered into a shitty contract, but they were happy, and so the job began aboard the *Claudia*. As he was drifting off, Tom thought, *that should have been my warning; you never change a boat's name . . .*



Sally served boiled potatoes, roast chicken, salad, and bread. Just like Fiedler liked it. She got fed up with Fiedler's diet, but it filled the empty spot. It was an informal trip with just Fiedler and his friend, Mr. Schöll, and they invited Tom and Sally to eat with them.

"It has become completely crazy," said Mr. Fiedler. "On these new cable channels you could even see your next-door neighbor having sex with his secretary."

Sally looked at Mr. Schöll "Really? Anybody can just put up a home-made porno movie?"

"Ya. It's true."

"That's disturbing," said Sally. "How can you stand to look your neighbors in the face ever again?"

Fiedler and Schöll just looked at the table, wagging their heads from side-to-side. As he cleared the dishes, Tom wondered if they had filmed themselves with their secretaries. He chucked the chicken bones over the side and came back with a fourth bottle of Spanish Rioja.

"I don't know what went wrong," Fiedler was saying. "I worked my best years away, and now I don't even know my family. They prefer it when I am away from home. I interrupt their lives."

"Oh, Mr. Fiedler, surely that isn't true," Sally said.

"But it is the truth. My wife is so ugly. I cannot even stand the sight of her."

"Your wife is a lovely woman, Mr. F."

"No, Sally, she is horrible. Like the wicked witch. Maybe I deserve such a woman."

"But, Mr. F., you are such a nice man. How can you say that?"

"No, I am not a nice man, Sally. I am not a nice man."

Mr. Schöll nudged Fiedler, and they excused themselves.



Tom woke up with a headache. It took him a few minutes to realize he was not aboard the *Claudia* with Sally. With a sigh, he pulled on his running shorts and shoes, then jogged around the bay to his mother's bungalow. He'd been lucky to find a job on a sport fishing boat in the little south Florida backwater where his mother lived. He let himself in the back door without knocking and found the coffee pot full and hot, and smelled biscuits in the oven.

"Mom," he called.

"I'll be right out," came a childlike voice from down the hallway.

Tom poured two cups of coffee and peeked in the oven.

"Good morning, sweetheart," she said, coming into the kitchen. She pecked him on the cheek and frowned as she leaned back, giving him an appraising look. "You look exhausted. Trouble sleeping?"

"Yeah. I tossed and turned all night."

"What's the matter, indigestion?"

"Nah. I was thinking about my old boss. I read he died yesterday."

"Oh dear, that's too bad."

"Nah, he was such a miserable bastard, I think maybe it was a blessing."

The little woman frowned at her son's coarse language, but said,

“What happened? Had he been ill?”

“He was an alcoholic. Sad case. Had everything money could buy, but his family hated him.”

“Which one was this, dear?”

“Fiedler, the German Sally and I worked for all those years.”

“Dear Sally. How is she anyway?”

“Sounds good. I called her over Skype last night. She sounded happy. Said her oldest boy is twelve years old now, can you believe that?”

“Time flies. Isn’t it amazing to be able to see your old friends—even in Australia! I wish you’d stayed with that girl. She was a keeper.”

“Yeah, Mom, but I was an idiot. I wasn’t smart enough to go with her.”

“You want eggs?”

“No, got any bacon or sausage to go with those biscuits?”

“Of course. Give me a minute and I’ll finish off the gravy. So tell me again why you let her get away?”

“Cause I’m an idiot, Mom. I got my priorities mixed up.”

“But you changed jobs right after that anyway, didn’t you?”

“Old S.O.B. fired me once Sally was gone, didn’t he? Worked my tail off that summer like he was punishing me. Then, when the engine seized up in Sicily and he had to replace it, he blamed me for it.”

“And you still didn’t go after Sally?”

“She’d gone home to Australia, Mom. I called her, but she blew me off. Said she was through with yachts and the rich jerks who owned them. She didn’t care if she never saw another sailboat. What was I supposed to do? Give up everything I had worked for?”

“See where that got you. Forty-five and single. You drink yourself to sleep every night, and you have nothing to show for all those years of hard work on somebody else’s boat. You’re right, son. You are an idiot.” She reached over and gave him a hug. “Now what is your schedule today?”

“Guests arrive at nine, fishing till mid-afternoon, then home. The usual.”

“You want me to fix a lunch basket for you?”

“No, thanks, Mom. I ordered lunch from the deli. You don’t need to be cooking for these knuckleheads. They don’t deserve your good food. They’ll just puke it up. It’s supposed to be choppy today.”

# The Dancer

I was seven when I found her in the riverbed,  
A flowing syntax of tresses  
Bloomed  
In cursive above her head, diving  
Into a great, black flame,  
The burning fugue  
Bristling into a Rorschach that split and festered  
Into contorting silhouettes,  
Digressing into the slim figure of a man  
Then coiling to flirt with the pregnant girth  
Of a beetle.

Her lithe arms were thrown up,  
Surrendering  
To the movement that caused her nude body to curl,  
Her legs bent as if posed to  
Leap, but  
A delicate rift of flesh parted the hemispheres  
Of her stomach, the bulging seam serrated  
As blood emptied into the river,  
Undulating  
In red ribbons from her body, gripping her like a balloon,  
Her eyelids petrified in a permanent grimace as the tattered wound  
Pursed into a smug, rabbit  
Smile.

## Some River

He told me “I hardly wear that tie anymore.”  
But his voice tried to slip around me,  
As he zipped up my dress,  
Like a stream dodging rocky river beds.  
With shaving cream down  
One side of his chin,  
My husband spoke of Alga del Rio.  
It was a river we toured  
Where the rapids folded into red clay,  
Swaddling black, broken branches.  
I rolled my eyes while not finding  
The Dr. Seuss tie for him to put on,  
Where Cat in the Hat  
Dominated the front center  
With Thing 1 and Thing 2  
Hanging from the sides.  
“Do you remember seeing Abrahán Abonado?”  
I don’t look up and nod in the mirror  
Covering my reddening cheeks with Maybelline.  
I was swimming in liquor that night.  
In a shiny tin shack,  
That the locals called La Piscina.  
I gave way  
To the strong waves of a stranger  
That pulled me under,  
That had me gasping  
For air and grasping  
On to soaked flesh.  
Abrahán’s eyes were that of a snake.  
Blues eyes that only come out at night.  
And the morning after my wedding  
Held guitar rhythms and dry, hopeless love stories

**Hirsch**

That spilled from his handsome, crooked jaw.  
“The tie might be at the Dry-Cleaners.”  
I nod again, the gentle waters  
Drifting me down some river.

# One with the Wind

I always leave on the porch light,  
Waiting up for him, just for him.  
But not that night.  
I was still awake  
To see the clock say eleven: eleven  
And I wished I was one with the wind.

Not like my husband's fancy, but the revengeful wind,  
To rage like a fire giving off more than just light,  
To burn his lover's clothes and tell the eleven  
Others to leave town; to be stronger than the wife married to him.  
I wished I wasn't awake  
And could sleep away that night.

Listening to the noises outside, I could see him leaning forward as if to knight  
The undressed lady kneeling between his legs, arms reaching to wind  
Around his thighs. Her moans awake  
His vigorous desires, only stopping when the sunlight  
Shone through the curtains. She was still under him,  
In him, probably until they ate lunch ten after eleven.

Then the clock ticked past eleven  
Closer and closer to midnight.  
I knew I would do nothing to him.  
But the skirmishing wind  
Sounded vindictive. Even the moon hid her light,  
Avoiding the blow that would soon awake.

And it was the gusts that beat against the house that kept me awake.  
I looked at my alarm, eleven  
Forty-one. I reached out to turn on the lamplight.  
Hating myself for being afraid of the night

**Hirsch**

And the weather. The wind  
Was looking to suck out souls, or just him.

He was out in some hotel room; some chick was with him,  
Underneath the starched white sheets, still awake,  
Legs smacking, breasts slapping against chest, grunting over the wind.  
They would not hear the tornado warning on Channel Eleven  
Broadcasting tornado footage all night.  
They would not see the siren's light.

The wind sent eleven  
Branches through their hotel. One knocking him and her awake  
To the night's deathly wind. His eyes cannot reflect any more light.

# I Didn't Tell You That

I didn't tell you  
Everyone stared out  
Of boredom at our faculty  
Dinner party, like a child  
At a window.  
And when my toast concluded,  
The sound of my voice  
Just fell on its face  
Right into the silver  
Dinner plates.

I didn't tell you I trembled  
Over my signature  
Or that you could take the empty  
Four-poster, king-sized bed,  
That imitates brushing fingertips  
And lips against lips,  
That I haven't slept in for weeks.

I didn't tell you  
I still water the rosebush,  
The Lincoln green,  
We planted together  
Twenty-three years ago.

I didn't tell you  
It kills me when Amy  
Spends more and more time  
With the babysitter  
Constructing macaroni  
Faces of shiny colors  
And clumps of yellowed paste.

I didn't tell you  
I didn't get that promotion  
At work and the job  
Has been filled for weeks now.

And yesterday I stood  
In the children's sandbox  
In the backyard  
Picking up the fine-grained sand  
And letting it slip through my fingers  
In silken cords.  
For a second I imagined  
It could bend  
Itself around my neck.  
I wished for it.

**Chelsey Lynn Hirsch**

# You and I, and Her

Pushing to this moment of truth.

Expecting You to do something, expecting too much.

You couldn't pretend anymore.

If I was being honest

I stopped pretending too.

Years ago

Becoming strangers was easy.

Telling You was not.

At least best friends owe it to each other.

Her eyes looked away to the bedroom.

The look was bothering, but

I've learned the value of resentment.

I saw the change and felt the grudging acceptance.

At first it's scary, crossing dangerous societal lines.

But now I can see I let go of this relationship.

Now everything awaits us.

Everything.

## Sunflowers

Duncan sits on the threadbare seat and stares down the dusty road that stretches endlessly. Perception is unusual on the plains, buildings that appear close can actually be quite distant. He picks up his saturated beer bottle from where it rests between his legs and takes a long pull. Cold liquid pipes through his internals, cooling his body from the inside out. Juniper sits in the seat next to him, braless, the sunflowers on her tank top entwine with the myriad of gold fields they pass. The windows on the rusty '66 VW bug are down. Eating dust is worth the cool air that comes in and circulates through heat-infused hair. She lifts her beer out the window and closes her eyes, acting as if she is being stolen away into the expanse and littleness that only the high plains can offer. Her homemade chainmail bracelets jingle in the wind like sultry wind chimes, intent on communicating the only way they know how.

“Do you think it matters?” Duncan says.

“Probably not.” Juniper opens her eyes and pulls her beer back into the stifling confines of the little car. “You’ve been working your entire life for this. If you don’t leave now, then you never will.”

He grabs the oversized steering wheel and feels the worn grooves and cracks of the hardened rubber with the bottoms of his calloused fingers. The clutch pedal scorches his foot as he shifts down and turns onto Span Road. He finishes his beer and throws the empty bottle out the window and into the bar ditch. Before he can ask for another, Juniper reaches into the cooler nestled in the groove where the backseat used to be. She hands him the beer and ice slides down the bottle and then falls to the decaying floorboards.

The sun sets and fills the sky with red, sending the heat vapors of the day back to Hell where they belong. Duncan reaches to the center of the dash and pulls the headlight lever. An uneven, yellow light juts from the front of the car and illuminates the dirty road.

“You ever think about dying,” he says as he takes another drink. “It’s not like it was before. Dying used to be easy.”

“Yeah, back when it didn’t matter. People care too much now.” Juniper

shifts in her seat. The springs underneath the worn upholstery squeak.

“They care about the wrong thing. No one gave a shit about Trevor before he died. And now that’s all anyone talks about. At school, on the news, in everyone’s windows. This kid can’t even piss straight. He offs himself and bam, just like that he’s an American Hero.”

She pauses and then says, “You can be a real asshole sometimes.”

“Yeah,” he sighs and takes another drink, the road begins to rock the car a little more than before. The tire ruts leftover from the last rainstorm dance as he lazily turns the wheel in a feeble attempt to keep the car going straight. “How much beer do we have left?”

She twists around in her seat and opens the cooler again, reaching her hand into the freezing wetness. Ice rattles around in the ever-depleting cooler as she counts the bottles. He looks at her while she counts, her body contorted as if she were stretching in preparation for running a track race. He laughs and raises his eyebrows. Juniper would trip on her way to the starting line. In grade school she must have set the record for number of times someone had been first to get out in dodge ball. Jacob had been there too, before the rare cancer got him. Maybe dying really was easier, even then. They always call the disease rare when a young kid dies from it.

“We have enough.”

They meander lethargically along in the VW, not caring how long it takes to get where they were going. It is completely dark now, billions of stars pepper the sky. The plains have a love affair with immenseness, making it easy to feel the opposite. Small. The headlights reflect against the dirt particles and bugs that have come out of their daytime bowers. He listens to the hum of the engine and the sloshing of beer in amber-colored bottles. He turns the car off Span Road and onto an irrigation turn row that isn’t more than two tire tracks surrounded by tall weeds. They drive along this road for a while before he pulls the car to a stop.

He has parked in the middle of a low depression bordered by fields. He considers this a novelty. The relentless plains show little relief for those wanting something other than ceaseless oceans of sky. Duncan and Juniper call this place the Spot. In times past, fueled by a drunken fervor, they imagined that the Indians took refuge there, hiding from the likes of Custer and using their knowledge of the land to escape into the shadowy flatness that surrounded them.

Duncan steps out of the car, beer in hand. His bare feet soak in the dying heat of the parched ground. Juniper meets him at the hood, headlights still on. The light filters through their legs and casts long shadows on the steep sides of the depression.

“I’ll never get tired of this. You, me, this place, even your rusty old car. It just feels right,” she says. Her words slur slightly. She grabs Duncan’s hands and interlaces her fingers with his.

“This won’t always be here, you know.”

“Won’t it though?”

“I don’t know, maybe.” He drops Juniper’s hands and leans against the hood. With his fingers he lightly traces the deep, rusted scars of the hood. “I always thought it would be different. I spent a long time thinking about what I wanted, and now that it’s here I just don’t feel it anymore. Nothing feels like it matters. I want out, but I can’t quite make it.”

“You’re still young.”

“Yeah, that’s what they say anyway. You ever wonder if that’s really true. I mean we go to church and they tell us to be a certain way. Feel a certain way. Jesus will be there for you, he gives you your fate. Just like he gave Trevor his fate.”

“Stop this, Duncan. You don’t have to be here. It’s a choice.” Her posture stiffens and she crosses her arms in front of her chest, chopping the head off of one of the big sunflower prints on her tank top.

“It’s not that easy.” He leaves her standing there, and rounding the car he reaches through the window and into the cooler. He grabs two beers and walks toward the field to his left. He turns back and looks at Juniper. “You coming?”

Without a word she grabs his hand and follows him up the sharp incline of the depression and into a sunflower field ready for harvest. The dead sunflower heads glow white from the dim light. Each plant seems to shiver in anticipation of the combine’s swift blade. As he walks, the soft dirt between the rows squeezes into the crevices of his toes. He hears Juniper’s shorts delicately swish as they stumble to the middle of the field, where an electric motor pumps water from the nearly depleted Ogallala Aquifer. The lifeblood of all the farmers that live suspended on the plains. What happens when all the blood dries up? Dying is going to be a lot easier again when that happens.

He sits down on the soil, back against the cool water pipes that radiate from the center pivot. She joins him, humming quietly as she lowers herself to the ground. A light breeze blows and sweeps a flurry of dust into a semi-transparent brown cloud. He holds her hand with one of his and with his other he swallows beer in measured gulps.

He sits there with her for a long time before getting up. They hold onto each other as they stagger back to the car, careful not to let the other fall among the stiff sunflowers.

“You’re right. It doesn’t really matter,” he says as he turns the key and mashes the gas pedal to start the old car. Juniper looks at him lazily, her neck strains to hold up the weight of her head. He sighs as he pulls away from the Spot and drives toward one of the main roads that lead to town. The dirt, dust, grime, and last little pieces of daytime heat vanish as soon as he drives onto the blacktop. The dull headlights glare off the white lines of the sinister road. The rhythmic swaying of the car rocks Juniper to sleep. He slowly drives into town, careful to keep between the lines. He passes the ten streetlamps and single spotlight of the drowsy small town before he turns onto Juniper’s curbless street.

He drops her off and watches as she shuffles up the front steps and into her lime green house. Pulling away, he drives back onto the main street and starts to drive past the school. He notices the crosses, flowers, tributes, wreaths, and photos that line the front lawn and the flagpole that always seems to triumphantly fly the colors. This was the school he had gone to from kindergarten through senior year. The same school that he had broken into when he was fifteen, only to find the principal banging his science teacher. The school where they had found Jacob passed out in the cafeteria, never to wake up again. The same cafeteria, three months ago, that the frisky principal called everyone into to give word of Trevor’s death. Duncan had just stood there, surrounded by crying classmates he had known for years. Sitting at a table in one corner, the captain of the football team cried the loudest. A semicircle of youthful faces swollen from tears had surrounded him. Despite this, all Duncan could do was stand there. He had heard someone say, “How could God let this happen?” and then a reply of, “He was so young.” But all he could do was stand there. Feet cemented to the speckled linoleum floor. The same posture his ten-year-old self had taken when he found out his best friend Jacob wouldn’t be coming back.

## **Stanfield**

He finally passes the school and quickly retreats to the comfort of the dirt roads. He heads out to his mom's house, burrowed between two sorghum fields and a playa lake that never actually has water in it. The weathered boards of the front porch creak as he walks into the house. He turns into the living room and sees his oldest sister standing by the window nursing her newborn baby. She looks at him as he continues to his room and he wonders why she has come back.

# Contributors' Notes

**Meagan Coder** is majoring in psychology and minoring in creative writing at Sam Houston State University. After graduation, she plans on attending graduate school to attain a master's in psychology. As her minor insinuates, she also has a passion for writing. She plans on working, first, on a book of poems and then a novel. Meagan has been writing poems since she thought they all started with "Roses are red, violets are blue." She wants to thank her mom, Mary Jane, who has read much of her work, for encouraging her to "never, never, never give up."

**Kim Davis** has worked as scuba diver, yacht chef, and sound engineer, earning her living entertaining the rich and famous. Her adventures today, however, take place in one spot as she and her husband shepherd their two daughters into adulthood. Currently, Kim is a freelance web designer and an MFA candidate in creative writing at Sam Houston State University. Her writing credits include: *Crewing Aboard a Superyacht: A Guide to Working Afloat*, and numerous articles and creative essays about unusual jobs, which most recently include an article in the *Plaza Journal* about the challenges of teaching English composition online.

**Cailyn Dougherty's** love for literature has inspired her to pursue a degree in English at Sam Houston State University. She has the intention of teaching high school and showing students that literature is much more than just words on a page. In high school, she received multiple awards for her poetry and was published repeatedly in the high school's literary journal, the *Oracle*.

**Jennifer Esmond** dislikes writing about herself, but disguises it with undercover poetry. Hopefully she'll graduate August 2014. She loves God and her family; her cat is an enemy of the state. P.S., she's looking for a roommate.

**Donna Finney** is a senior at SHSU and is an English major with a minor in music, who will graduate in May of 2014. She also received an AA from Lone Star Montgomery in 2012, and an additional associate degree in 2013 for the field of study in music. She is an active member of Phi Theta Kappa and Sigma Tau Delta and plans to attend graduate school in the fall to pursue a master's degree in English and creative writing.

**H.H.** would prefer to remain a mystery.

**Cody Harrison** is an unknown quantity.

**Chelsey Lynn Hirsch** will receive her BA in English from Sam Houston State University in May 2015. Writing stories since she was a small child, she aspires to be an educator and an author of numerous poetry collections. Chelsey was born in Conroe in 1992. She's a proud Huntsvillian and a second-generation Bearkat. The daughter of a Warden and an Assistant to the Dean of Education, she is, at the moment, nobody's mother and nobody's wife. A follower of Christ, Chelsey lives it up, loves on her goddaughter, sings along with her truck's nonexistent radio, and laughs a lot.

**Kindall Jackson** is a senior at SHSU. She is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree in English lit. She mostly writes poetry, but dabbles in fiction from time to time.

**Chenelle John** is a 22-year-old English major and creative writing minor at SHSU. She is originally from the U.S. Virgin Islands and moved to Texas in 2010. Chenelle is currently a senior and will be graduating in May. She aspires to go to graduate school for an MFA in creative writing to improve on her craft.

**Anthony "Tony" Lawrence Klespis**, having endured two decades of the "Hey Tony" song, will be a senior at Sam Houston State University in the fall of 2014. He was born in Chicago and moved to Huntsville, Texas when he was two. He has lived in Huntsville ever since, and decided to stay a bit longer and attend Sam Houston. He doesn't know what he wants to do when he graduates, though he has fantasized about being a YouTuber. He needs to get off the Internet and figure out his future before it's too late.

**Jaredd Martin** is an English major and creative writing minor at Sam Houston State University. He hopes to further his education after completing his undergraduate studies to receive an MFA in either poetry or fiction and become a creative writing professor in the future.

**Abdur Olajuwon** was born in Huntsville, TX. He is majoring in a BA in studio art and minoring in creative writing. He is a professional cartoonist who creates comics and illustrations, but found a love for poetry. His

influences include Bruce Timm, John K., Howie Post and many more. He is now working on a web-comic series and working on smaller personal projects. He resides in Huntsville with his family and friends.

**Mark Reed** is a student here at Sam Houston State University majoring in English with a minor in mathematics. Along with his unusual perseverance in studies, Mark also played football here at Sam Houston State for two seasons, winning a conference championship. Following graduation, Mark plans to go back to the school district he graduated high school from to teach and coach.

**Luis Salgado** is a 20-year-old English major with a double minor in creative writing and secondary education. He is a first-generation college student and was born and raised in north Houston. He is an aspiring and upcoming author and poet.

**Brooke Selover** is a senior English major with a professional writing emphasis. She currently works at the Writing Center on campus, and this is her first publication!

**Daniel Stanfield** grew up in Plainview, Texas. He recently finished his bachelor's in English and plans on pursuing his master's degree soon.

**Emily Vega** is a writer and cartoonist. Her talents are pretending to play the trumpet, occasionally making people laugh, and convincing small children that she is a witch. She hopes to get better at writing and, more generally, not being such an embarrassment all the time.

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