the echo
2013
The Echo has been a part of Furman life for many years, and we are very excited to bring you this year's issue. All of our authors, artists, and editors have worked hard to produce a work that celebrates student creativity. We hope you enjoy this issue.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>An Attempt at Drowning</td>
<td>Kristen Layne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>When the Night Falls</td>
<td>Lindsay Dennis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Webster Street</td>
<td>Lorin Stanley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Of Time and Winter</td>
<td>Anne M. Powell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Peggy Danvers and the Terrifying Figure</td>
<td>Sarah Harrod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Growing older</td>
<td>Brett Stonecipher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>An Unlikely Companion</td>
<td>Thomas Nantz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Sean McBratnie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>The Tale of the Troubadour</td>
<td>Dan Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>Julia Kauffman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Bloodlines 1988</td>
<td>Kristen Layne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Vermivorous Vincent</td>
<td>Lorin Stanley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Bubble</td>
<td>Laura Hayes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Haley Gray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Stained</td>
<td>Sarah Harrod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Land of the free, because of the brave</td>
<td>Thomas Nantz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Haley Gray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Grace Anne Foca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Buddhist Temple</td>
<td>Emily Blinn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Haley Gray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Kendall Driscoll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Books</td>
<td>Laura Hayes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Haley Gray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Johnny Knoxville</td>
<td>Madeleine Wright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Behind Venice</td>
<td>Sarah Harrod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>Don’t forget to look up</td>
<td>Thomas Nantz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Haley Gray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Fight Club</td>
<td>Madeleine Wright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Fancy</td>
<td>Kimberly Hydrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>Furman Rain Storm</td>
<td>Thomas Nantz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Haley Gray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>La Lindsanity</td>
<td>Madeleine Wright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>Beyond the Comic Books</td>
<td>Thomas Nantz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>Brett Stonecipher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>The Humble Moon</td>
<td>Emily Blinn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Things We Don’t Talk About</td>
<td>Taylor Davis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82</td>
<td>the halogen lights of harpersville</td>
<td>Jared O’Neal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>Maps</td>
<td>Brett Stonecipher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>Offering</td>
<td>Ben Keiper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>Next to the Fire and Beneath the Stars</td>
<td>Josh Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>How’d You Know</td>
<td>Lindsay Dennis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>Forever</td>
<td>Connor Samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>Things Fall Apart...No, Love Falls Apart</td>
<td>Kendall Driscoll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Sketch</td>
<td>Ben Keiper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Attempt at Drowning

Kristen Layne

I call him Yorick – the bear skull in my backpack. He – I guess “he,” knowing
that a male bear is far more likely to actually die of natural causes in our park
than a female – still has little pieces of sinew attached, where the flesh didn’t quite
peel away. Oversized nasal cavity, small eye sockets, strong grinding-jaw – it is my
example and model. In my Smokey-the-Bear hat, I lecture with it, tell stories-with-
a-purpose around a campfire. In the front pocket, there is a paw from a “managed”
bear, a forearm-pelt with paw pad still attached. Female. Brown spikey fur, like a
stray dog, but more harsh, scratchy. Not cuddly like you’d think. Pet the bear, you
know you want to.

No grizzlies here. Just black bears, even if they’re brown.

I give “the talk” on Thursdays at five in the campground, when the long
weekenders come in with their coolers and cheerio crumb car seats and Yogi the
bear pic-i-nic baskets. The talk is titled, “Seeing the World through a Bear’s Nose.”
In their minds, most of the people who come to my talk, bears are the biggest,
baddest, scariest thing we have here. We, the rangers, laugh about it but their fears
are real enough. The gruesome maulings at Yellowstone and Glacier and other
Grizzly parks have made their way into the news – six people dragged out of their
tents in the middle of the night over the course of two bloody weeks. Most of them
were partially eaten. But not eaten completely – they weren’t truly prey. It was as
if the bears lost interest halfway through, decided that their predatory action had,
after all, been misguided. Or maybe human flesh didn’t taste particularly good.
Either way, we’re scared of bears like that too. We’re glad we don’t have grizzlies.

People get nervous, terrified even, knowing that there are bears in the area. No
one has ever been killed in our park. Not ever. But still, there’s always a first, in
theory. The people who come to the bear talk – a lot of them think they’re the first.

But worse, in a way, is the extremist enthusiasm of those, the college guys,
or the middle-aged men who are pretending to be college guys, who want to seek
the bears out, and bait them while backpacking and try to sneak up on them. Then
there are those who want to leave ribs smoking over a fire and ketchup bottles
on the table along with the remains of the last night’s s’mores while they go off in
search of a bear, heading, no matter which way they go, in the completely wrong
direction.

We worry the most about them.
Thus the five o’clock bear talk.
And Yorick.

Also a box of bear scat. Droppings. Dried out and perfectly safe, scentless.
It’s an interesting tool, mainly because people simply can’t get past the fact that it’s
poop. And it is, yes. But like owl pellets, it allows us to track diets and illness and migrating patterns.

Teenage boys won't touch it.

We're young, us new rangers – 17, 18, 19... People don't know that – the hat and the badge and a good pair of aviators work wonders, adding five, even ten years. Suddenly, we've been thrust into the role of super adults.

Tor is only 18, but he knows these mountains. Grew up here. Learned to ski, snowshoe, hike, climb. He wears the badge now, has since 16, when they pushed it on him after six years of volunteering. He's just as awkwardly tall as he was then, surprisingly strong underneath the too-big uniform pants he holds up with a thick belt, black leather visibly cracked. It was his dad's, when he worked for the Park Service. I guess that's why he doesn't get a new one.

I'm 20 and from “back East”, the South if it mattered. I don't let it matter, because “out East” is vague, meaning Boston or New York or Acadia. “The South” means Texas, or worse, Alabama, and “Why don't you have an accent?” I don't have an accent because then people ask me where I'm from. I don't say where I'm from because then people ask why I don't have an accent. I'd never heard of crampons, much less actually strapped them onto my boots to trek straight up icy slopes. I'd never seen snow above my knees. Enough said. I made it out here on a college-kid whim, an internship gone delightfully awry. When I merged onto I-40 the first time I didn't know California had mountains. I saw the foothills – golden in the searing San Joaquin Valley June temperatures. “Why do you think they’re beautiful?” the locals ask me. “They’re dead.” I thought the foothills were the mountains, and then there was an afternoon thunderstorm, an event that in most of California continues to be discussed for weeks after it occurs and shuts down the state in the same way a North Carolina snowstorm does. The perpetual smog from China and Los Angeles cleared and I saw them – the hazy purple and gray peaks stalwartly impeding the expanse of groves of square-topped orange trees. Alta with its elephant of snow, visible nearly to the end of summer. Sierra Nevada – mountains of falling snow. And the coastal range: California does have mountains. The Eastern Sierra Nevada, forty miles of wilderness east of our station has the not-so-minor distinction of containing the highest peak in the 48 contiguous states, Mt. Whitney.

I applied for a permit four months early and trained for a year to climb it. I got to 12,000 feet before its perpetual snow slopes turned me back. Not even close.

It's so hard not to personify them, although we're adamant we won't after being instructed every day of our training not to do so. But. Mammalian instincts kick in and anything smaller than us which we perceive as having big eyes is automatically “cute.” Evolutionary instinct. Protect. Survival of the species. And so many of the animals are. But the stakes of personifying bears as opposed
to chipmunks, Yogi as opposed to Alvin, are much higher... Where a chipmunk may steal a bag of Fritos, yes, a black bear, even a small one, will smash through a car window, peel open a closed trunk like a tin can, overturn a tent all to get at a mushed granola bar or an unopened can of baked beans. Then it learns that humans have food. It will begin to charge, to get people to drop the trail mix and walk away. They’re just bluff charges – usually. We protect the land, the animals, yes – but the guests, the *Homo sapiens* themselves, will always come first.

The man comes to our cabins, nestled away, hidden down-mountain. Screaming for help. To come here, he must know this valley. Yelling. Words. Banging on doors but it’s Wednesday, so most of us aren’t here. Tor is in the middle of making a peanut butter and banana sandwich, a quick snack before he heads to the coast for the weekend. Len, who first responded to the cries but is too frail for a mission like this, has a radio harness and emergency first aid pack when he knocks on Tor’s door. Tor scarfs his sandwich in the truck on the way to the trailhead.

Through the snow
Downstream
Water bottle
Dug out
Blue

Our cabins have no electricity, so no televisions intrude, no music. The generator sometimes runs the washing machine and the hummus-making food processor. It roars with its own kind of silence.

The people too are the kind who don’t need a lot of noise. Words, hurried words, frantic words – they’re not a part of the sugar pine grove into which we’re nestled.

Falling football-sized cones, no, larger, break windshields sometimes.

Hypothermia. The first signs: shivering, clumsiness, mumbling and stumbling. Then confusion, drowsiness, and a slow loss of consciousness, breathing, and pulse itself. It’s terrifying because you don’t know for sure when you have it, assume you have it when you don’t.

It’s so hot. I rip off my sleeping bag, my hat, my socks.

No it’s not. He shoves my socks back on, forces me back into the bag.

Zipper.

Stay in there.

It’s two a.m. in April at 12,000 feet. I stay.

We live in a park known for its trees – the biggest, by volume, in the world.
Not the tallest, not the oldest, not the widest, but simply the biggest. Each tree adds the equivalent of 170 basketballs to its surface area each year. It takes the entire class of third graders bussed in from LA to encircle the tree, to hug it as one. Then they trek back to their busses and packed cardboard box picnic lunches which can overwhelm even the small army of trashcans around the Giant Forest.

Our area doesn’t deal with the school busses, the RVs, the drive-by Grand Canyon-Death Valley-Sequoia-Redwoods-Airport types. Our valley is one way in, one way out, no RVs allowed. People don’t come to us for the giant Sequoias, though we have them, tucked away on Paradise Ridge. On Paradise Ridge they’ve been reborn; a fire coursed through seven years ago, and between the blackened logs and the fire scarred old giants, chest high Sequoia saplings six years old have sprouted.

The big tree pilgrimage is through the main part of the parks, and dumps out conveniently within an hour of the Fresno Airport. The path to the General Sherman tree is paved; there are split rail fences, grow-your-own-Sequoia in the gift shop. People come to us for the backcountry – now referred to solely as “wilderness” as per a superintendent memorandum two summers ago. Backpackers leave from our trailheads and disappear into the wilderness for two weeks at a time. It’s a communion with nature for them, sometimes, or maybe just a shoestring weekend getaway. We’ve seen honeymoons and bachelorette parties. Ashes have been scattered off our cliffs, at special campsites near lakes – you need a permit to do it, but we never check.

The contract with myself for soloing – no taking clothes off after sunset. No matter what. I write it on my hand in sharpie because I know that this time there’s no one to zip me back into the sleeping bag. Plus, it’s more embarrassing to die of dumb mistakes when you’re in uniform.

There have been no bear deaths in this park since its founding in 1890. Over that same time period we’ve had only two injuries due to bears. In a Potwisha campground a bear ambled into camp, slamming itself up against the bear boxes in the hope that one was not securely latched. A bag of Fritos abandoned on a picnic table was easy pickings, and the bear took it. The man, the first injury, attempted to snatch them back. He was swatted for his efforts – a bear swat, which carries with it claws and 200 pounds of power.

The second injury occurred when a day hiker fell asleep with a Snickers in his pocket. Not a problem in itself, but it melted, as Snickers do. The hiker awoke to a curious bear attempting to extract it. He was understandably alarmed; there was an... altercation. The bear won, earning the Snickers back – as well as a nice chunk of thigh.

On my third hike of the season I followed the tracks of a black bear
through the snow up Timber Gap. To follow tracks in one direction is relatively easy; to trace them back is incredibly difficult, especially once it begins to snow again. It snows in our valley until June sometimes. I never crested the ridge; the road runs through the low point of the valley — down is safety. Crunching through the thin layer of ice glazing the powder, whuffing through the powder itself, still never touching the actual ground, hidden beneath the snow. The powder brushes off like sand, not like messy wet slushy east coast snow that permeates clothes and seemingly skin in an instant. When it gets inside your boots, though, sifting between the tongue and laces, your feet get heavy, needling, absent.

Blue lips. The flowers have yet to poke up through the snow. Blue lips. Too early. Hers are literal. Teeth too tired to chatter. Muted eyes.

Stoned. Brown with black muzzle. Female. *She's* stoned. Personification. *It's* stoned. 140? We're talking pounds, bear pounds, still the same 16-ounce human pounds or bean pounds but now we're talking bears. She's right in front of us and her skull is still perfectly intact and covered in rough hair, more like a cow than the stuffed animal.

Hardly. Take off the fur — lighter than you'd think. Not that big. 125 max. We've brought Danny in — Danny the frazzle-haired bear tech — to radio collar her, mechanically but gently, still with the excitement of a 10-year-old but with the practiced and gentle hands of a lifelong nursemaid, tattoo an Auschwitz-number into her lower lip, tag her ear with orange plastic, and eat razzle dazzle pie at the Silver City store. Standard spa treatment for an interloping bear. The rules are strict — bears can't be humans, can't visit campgrounds or eat razzle dazzle pie even if they can wear hats and suspenders and carry fire line shovels. The Smokey the Bear poster hanging in our station reminds us what we don't want to be — personifiers of cuddly, hat-adorned animals. A black bear has the mental abilities of a human three-year-old — very smart on the animal spectrum, yes, but not quite at the level of developing a fire-prevention stance. Unlike the Forest Service, to whom Smokey belongs, we're not in search of a Mickey Mouse mascot.

The bear was captured with a milk gallon of dog food suspended in the back of the bear trap, a glorified old-Chevy mint green tin can. Pull the milk jug, the latch catches, the door slams and locks. Then it's wait all night on the sparse bed of pine straw until the trucks drive up and boots get out and a curiosity comes through the moon holes and horsefly bites and denning sleep.

An LED flashlight through the air holes elicits no growl. Eyes can't track it. Not yet. When they can track it, when it growls, bares her teeth, pulling her lips
back to make the tops of the numbers just visible in a menacing, spider-veined smile, we'll draw our weapons, fling open the door and, firing caps and birdshot and paintballs, blowing whistles and yelling, we'll drive it into the woods. Often the terror of being captured alone will prevent any repeat in behavior.

But we can't release yet. It's not safe for either of us. Wait for the tranquilizers to wear off.

Drowning wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. When the floor disappears and there's water, rushing water and its shock of – just pure sensation – and breath is an afterthought.

Not that I didn't know it was a risk but prepare or not it's never expected, solid ground melting out from underneath in a sudden rapture of substance...

she says.

Cold. Ice-heat. Where there was no floor there is now ceiling. Purchase is impossible.

An alpine spring is 70 degrees and snow bridges. Shorts and crampons. Snow and ice linger well into July, August, looping the calendar some years, the heavy ones.

It looks like a mountain lion has dragged a dead mule deer across the snow, leaving a bloody smear. Crimson splashes stain snow that is beginning to be oddly pocked, like an egg carton. The shape is suncupping – as the snow melts, it melts from the top down but in uniform patches, leaving strong elevated ridges and weakened low points. At the same time, the ground warms the bottom of the snow, melting it from the ground up. The result are suspended layers of snow, sometimes a foot deep, sometimes ten, sometimes merely a few inches, over open air. The stain is "watermelon snow," an algae that feeds off high Sierra snowfall and sunshine.

The edges of her fingers are blackened. A trail runner. No gloves, no jacket – shorts and a t shirt and a water bottle that had been birthed from the entombing snow.

The story arrives in triaged pieces.

Three guys out for the afternoon, Sierra Nevada beers chilling ironically in the snow. Light jackets, back to the cabin well before dinner.

Walked away from the trees, from the others to piss.

The apparition of a camelback. "Hey guys, was there a –"

A foot away is the wound in the watermelon snow.

Something moves.

Kneels.

Three feet down, the face of a snow queen, blue in the fragmented crystal-refracted sunlight.
No voice left, mute tongue flashes through cracked cerulean lips. "Help me."

The fawn trembles in the middle of the road. Instinct has felled it here: immobile, scentless spots ostensibly blending into the habitat, essentially invisible to predators.

But the steel predators with round rubber paws - noisy glowing eyes don't see, and scentless spots don't help.

Picking up a fawn deposits human scent on it, yes. Don't worry, the doe won't abandon it. It's most likely watching, waiting for you to put down its young (don't say baby or child - breeds personification and Smokey-the-Bear empathy) and walk away. It will come back.

I wonder sometimes whose valley it is. We all wonder that: the owners of the sixty log cabins nestled in the trees have a longstanding feud with the park service, who came in in the 1970s to block a Walt Disney ski resort. The avalanche chutes have a feud with us all. They kill skiers, take out trees, whole cabins. I saw my first avalanche from across Eagle Lake. We'd planned on backpacking, but decided we wanted to be back in time for Silver City movie night. The avalanche buried the best Eagle Lake campsites.

It's hard to say where the animals fit in, if they really do at all. People come to see them - they like the idea of them - but only under proscribed conditions. People don't want to be surprised - neither do the animals. People want their space - their campground, their trails, their stores, their roads, and the animals - well, they're supposed to stay outside all that. In exchange for our protection of their habitat, that same habitat is encroached upon, trail by trail, visitor by visitor. We adapt our park to the changes of our world - WiFi at Silver City, solar panels on the ranger station - and expect the animals to remain the same, year after year. We confine the land to save it from ourselves - every policy choice is a careful balancing act.

I lit the park on fire for the first time as part of a continuing education eco-literacy class. We used drip torches, the Wizard of Oz Tin Man's oil can but with a flaming tip. We poured fire onto the ground like watering daisies.

As we walked away, back to the already dug-out fire line, the sequoia cones began to pop in the flames.

It was a beautiful day, columbine flames licking the bluebell sky.

The mission of the park service is to protect, preserve for the enjoyment of future generations, but the mission is inherently self-contradictory. Natural processes are in constant motion, constantly changing - so to preserve is to take away the natural. And each human who enters our park to enjoy it introduces
an element of the unnatural – a camp stove, tent stakes in the ground, a trail 
switchbacking across a slope, fishing hooks in the stream – even the traces of boot 
prints in half-melted snow.

When the ground disappeared over Franklin creek and became frozen 
ceiling, ice-fire makes breathing impossible and thus drowning harder. Too much 
current to sink – seven months’ snow melt galloping through an undersnow artery 
to the San Joaquin drainage 8,826 feet below.
Swim it is, ghost-light-search for a bank. Protect the head, protect the neck.  
Blue is light and light is air and air is not-water.  
Clawing fingers blacken-freeze, upward, upward, scraping, warm with 
purple -- crimson running warmth drips down, rejoins the river-vein. Returning.

The bear, orange tagged and tattooed and radio collared came back a 
month later, ripped off the side of the Silver City Store and sent its two cubs in 
to forage. The cubs smashed the pie cabinet, eating the razzle dazzle, leaving 
the secretly store-bought fruit of the forest alone. They ignored the off-brand 
chocolate chips, picking just the bags of Nestle to drag back through the hole in the 
siding. On the other side of the building, ten of us were projecting Brave Heart on 
a sheet tacked over the window. We heard nothing, and for awhile, assumed that 
the notorious late-night-snacker Josh was to blame. Then we saw the pie-filling 
smeared siding.

The Armenians are our favorite campers. We rove at dinner time, at seven, 
and make it a point to hit Site 4 last. Campfire tongues lick browning spit-meat.  
Goat, they say.
Homemade white sauces with crunchy pan-baked flat read, popping warm 
bread-air bubbles.
Strips of striated thigh meat, catch juices in the bread. Once a summer 
they come up, this particular family. They camp for the week. For most people our 
campground is a jumping off point to the backcountry wilderness over the passes. 
Not the Armenians. They come for the camping itself, the rustic excitement of tents 
and cooking over the fire. There are four generations in that site.
Site 3 comes back up from the creek. They flag the badges over.  
“We saw them chasing deer. They chased the mother away.”
(personification) “They took her fawn with them.”
The savory juices run from the bread onto our hands. We try to wipe it off, 
but the green woolen uniform pants are oddly resistant.
It isn’t goat.

Guns were illegal in the parks until 2010. Then the Supreme Court issued 
a verdict that concealed carry was permitted in all federal lands. This includes
national parks. The central office mass produced brown metal signs to tack up over the existing ones. It is now illegal to discharge a firearm within a national park. This isn't exactly true: you have to be a certain kind of person to discharge a firearm.

Cindy had an outline of a human torso nailed to the wall in the cabin we shared. I rarely thought about what she did for a living – we talked mainly of hikes we wanted to try together, backpacking trips we were planning for the end of the summer, what it meant to leave home, what it meant to be in love, what we could cook each other for dinner on the nights when we worked late. I only noticed the job when she was getting dressed. Every morning when she clipped on her duty belt, she'd check the taser, pepper spray, and handcuffs. Then she'd walk an ambling lap around the kitchen – once, twice – then whip around and draw, one eye staring down the barrel to the bulls eye, right over the paper heart.

Parker was the horse, Shadow the mule – size of a horse, rabbit-long ears, three feet on the ground at a time always. That’s why they use mules in the Grand Canyon. More stable.

It was Parker that did it, that bolted on patrol, that actively forgot his training in a moment of panic? Was it really that?

The bulletproof vest saved her life, or at least her ribs. A desperate horse on a trail at a gallop – bailing is best, perhaps, but sixteen hands is a long way down for a 5’2” 98-pounder, even with her vest on. The Franklin trail is bone-splitting hard.

I pull the straps that lashed Cindy to the backboard, spider straps. She screams. She screams and swears and says that that is enough and in between screaming and crying she locks her eyes on mine. “Fuck you,” she says and I am her paper target in the living room. But I have to pull harder, have to immobilize so that the helicopter can come. That’s what I tell her. She’s crying once they drug her. Tears run into her ears. I wipe them out for her as best as I can. Once lifeflight comes in and they airlift her to Fresno, I throw up in the sink. That’s when we get the missing persons report.

Helicopters make me nervous now.

She’s freezing to death. Safe from drowning, but who cares? Soaked and buried under snow bears the same result as never leaving the river at all, and with a much slower progression.

Upward, upward.

Punch through. Light. Oxygen. Face pressed against the portal. Ring around the rosie burn.
Rise to widen, then emerge...
Knees. Fingers. Not happening. Three feet away, but three feet up.
Water. The one thing not in short supply. The bottle. It can go.
Upward – upward – out.
Watch the pinkening blue.

The smoke of 40,000 acres funnels into our valley over the passes, clogging the air. It is a claustrophobia-inducing haze, blocking out the skyline of the mountains. Trapping us. The poor air quality – slide the indicator above the counter to red – makes leaving the valley by foot impossible without scorched lungs and wheezing.

The road from grocery stores, gas stations, and fishing license issuing is twenty miles, takes an hour and a half. It’s only paved where you wish it wasn’t. Helicopter is the only answer if you actually want help in time to save a life. You need a ranger for that. A radio. Station closes at 4:30. It’s 5:15. The payphone at the Franklin trailhead is broken; it always is.

The same bear trap was set up in the exact same place, rigged once again with dog food. The same result: caught after a few days – the sow and one of the cubs. Call Danny the bear tech, drugged, measured, and documented. Pie break: razzle dazzle. But this time there’s no loud punishing release, no pellet guns fired, no chase into the woods. When there is a response to the flashlight, more drugs are given. They hitch the trap, bears and all, to a dirty white government truck, then haul it down the 625 curves of the Mineral King Road to headquarters. Then law enforcement puts a bullet through each of their heads. The mother, because she didn’t learn from her mistakes. The cub, because he doesn’t know any way of life but the one he has been taught.

The other cub, on his own for the winter, has just as much of a death sentence.

She was under the snow for three hours and 26 minutes. Her watch kept ticking, the backlight luminescent in the hazy bluish darkness. Fumble with the buttons with oversized numbed thumbs. It’s still timing the run. Once the bottle’s out, tossed out onto the surface snow, somewhere, that’s it. Hope that someone sees the red in the snow, pinning everything on the off chance that someone will come across the six-inch portal to the under-snow river. What would anyone do down there? she says. You pray.

Alpenglow is the red on the mountains, the moment just at sunset when... something happens.
Dusk-dark mountains glow like blood, and plunge, just as quickly, to
blackness.

The long-time policy of the National Park Service has been one of fire suppression. Put out fires, save trees. Save animals. Save people. We still save people – we preserve human structures at all costs. But we let fires burn. Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires? Well, only we can set them.

We, the park, had been putting out fires for decades, when the park botanists noticed something very strange, something very troubling – there were no sequoia saplings. Almost none at all. The only thing that had changed from the natural forest environment under Park and Forest Service management, the only thing that could possibly have negative impacts, anyway, was the fire suppression. Scientists, botanists, took to their labs. They took sequoia cones, lit them on fire. Sequoia cones don’t burn. Neither does the rest of the tree. Not easily, anyway. Their bark, like Styrofoam, is fire resistant, and blackens and scars long before it ever burns.

They exposed the cones to fire, held them in the flames. Nothing happened.

Then they exposed them to smoke.

The smoke of burning underbrush sets off a chemical reaction in the semi-serotinous cones, which linger on the tree for decades at a time, waiting for fire below. The smoke opens up the cones, releasing the seeds to scatter on the ground now cleared of underbrush. Sequoias may be the biggest trees in the world, but their saplings are weak, and can’t hope to compete with young fir trees. They’re fast, though, and given an even start, they can outstrip any arboreal competition.

So, we burned the Redwood Mountain Grove. That was in 1964. It worked.

Despite public outcry and protests and internal worries, the forest was reborn.

To burn a sequoia grove is a strangely beautiful thing. Flames kill. Animals flee with personified terror on their personified faces. Whole trees crash down, embers exploding like sparks off an anvil. The flames, for the most part, burn themselves out. The gray remains are a defeated war zone, a sparkling and dulled winter wonderland. And then, softly on your shoulders and the burned and blackened ground, a rain of oatmeal flakes falls, a gentle snow of sequoia seeds.

EMS arrives in the afterglow, checking pulse and response. Better now, much better, after the backpacker passing by donated his subzero thermal down sleeping bag. One of the men curls inside it with her. Necessity. A bag can’t reflect heat that isn’t there.

The first time I’m out solo it’s a perfect sunset 200 feet above the half-frozen lake and two thousand feet above my valley. Clear the snow from the
campsite, pitch the tent facing west. Watch the sun set. Pinks, golds, fir trees in silhouette – look at the needles, flat for white fir, round for red. Attached to the branch like a hockey stick.


I’m secretly cheering for him, the defeater of Eastern Orion – I dread his reemergence, dread Sirius and the Atlantic and electricity and turning in the badges. But I get to keep the hat.

Back to this sky. Dolphinius. Blurry, dizzy, foggy glow – “I can’t believe I’ve never seen the Milky Way, and the sky’s this clear.” “Look up. Those aren’t clouds.”

The not-clouds signal just how late it is, just how cold it’s getting. It’s California in July and it’s 28 degrees – and I’m still wet because the river was just as deadly today as it was two months ago.

She walks back across the snow bridge. Further down, far away from the break. Tor tests it – snow-solid, not-trusted ground.

She refuses treatment, self-medicates with our wood stove, rejects the ambulance, drives herself home. Her fingers are still charred.

Two weeks later she runs the Franklin trail again. Ultramarathoner, she calls herself. She comes by to thank us.

We hang the newspaper clipping on a thumbtack in the station, warn people with her story, still send them up the trail.

Months later I plunge through a sun cup myself – a foot of snow suspended above ten feet of open air. No water below, so I’m lucky. Just bruises and scrapes and a water bottle sacrificed to the not-ground.
She packed her things and wearily sighed her farewells in the expanding light of morning. She kissed me and I could taste her mouth and the holes of her heart filling with alcohol one lonely Friday night. She hugged me tightly and I felt the burden of her book bag dragging her down faster than whatever useless degree she decides to pursue. She drove off and I’ve already designed her “I went to college and all I got was this disappointment” novelty tee shirt.

This was two months ago, but the troubles began the moment she decided on the university. Her parents swelled with pride and their house has since settled into a perpetual state of orange and black. This was inevitable after the tacky sweatshirts, neon logo stickers, and the orange car that gives off a shade that, in my opinion, is a terrible match. The car that took her away from me.

I guess you could say that we were having problems prior to her leaving. She grew distant and threw herself into the laps of her friends and seemingly endless school activities. Attentiveness became more and more fleeting each day, like a bird mocking me as it ascends from the ground and gets a little too close to the sun. Perhaps she prepared early for a departure to a place in which I do not belong. Even still, I can’t shake the feeling that she just doesn’t care.

Her first visit home brings little relief. After a long catching up with her parents, we make our way back to her bedroom. “I’ve missed you, Stevie.” She holds me close, but only briefly. I lie on her bed, quietly anticipating, hoping, and pleading for any affection. Our disconnectedness takes form in the book she has chosen, written in a language I do not understand. Le chat gris dort toute la journée. I close my eyes and recount her touch; how our bodies intertwined under summer sheets. She could smother me with her soothing voice and I would not mind. A voice that once spoke only of me now fills with pointless academia babble. She never stays for long. Her friends filter back into town and she runs off until all hours of the night. By the time she crawls into bed, I am too tired for talking. I pretend to be too tired for much of anything she enjoys, just to teach her a lesson.

Oh, how I miss the snuggling. What good has teaching ever done anyway?

A closet full of clothes and she can only find sweatpants. All of hair on her head inspires her no further than a ponytail. It swings like a golden string, so tight it seems to protrude straight from her skull. If that were so, pulling it may
end my competition against her brain. She has grown less fond of my pulling her hair. Taking my usual position on the bed, inconveniently and irreversibly in her blind spot, I think of that skirt. Those jeans. Perfect to latch onto without skipping the view. The perfect combination of form and function. The only function allotted for sweatpants, I have learned, is eating ice cream dangerously close to a laptop screen. As if they haven’t taken enough from me, her school materials get more food from her than I do these days. Cookie crumbs line the bindings of books. Cheese-dusted fingers caress uncaring pencils. Pizza-greased calculators solve the mystery of her new calorie intake. These long weeks have faded the memory of her cooking from my tongue. Months of fresh, home cooked meals. Occasionally frozen fish sticks, but still made with love for me. Who could complain? Well, I didn’t complain then. She let’s Domino’s do all of the cooking now. I gave thought to her cooking for someone else, but who can be too jealous of the guy who just made off with sweatpants and fish sticks?

Perhaps in an effort to mimic our current status, her bedroom is always messy. It’s as if signing your left away to years of busywork and debt excuses you from the important things in life. The clothes of beauties-past line the floor. It’s as if she has broken free from her cocoon and emerged, not quite as a butterfly, but as a lowly moth that I can’t seem to capture now that she has found her wings. Capture her. A thought: Like the simple moth, she has merely become enthralled with a light, which seems promising, but ultimately is a meaningless distraction. She is under an enchantment that is being dished to generation after generation in the form of stickers and pullovers that brand each one who choose to get in line for the slaughterhouse. They are all sent to go after these crazy dreams, only to return home with their tails tucked between their legs. I have to save her. I have to save us. As she stumbles over her words by the window, I plot my construction of a grand gesture.

Les animaux sortent pour jouer.

She wakes me to say that she is leaving. In my half-conscious state, I can still make out the obligation in her touch. Her car vanishes around the corner and I pull the same act across the sea of lifeless linens, strutting out the front door to retrieve her once and for all. Things would be different this time. I should have never let her go, but going after her now must hold some merit, considering how far I had to go. Heat leaps from the pavement and is little help for calming me down. The occasional tree pats my shoulder reassuringly with its shade and I keep moving forward. When I see her, she does not see me. She is wearing a playful dress, her face buried in a book beside a fountain. For the first time in what seems like a lifetime, I really see her. My body was already moving closer to her by the time my mind caught up with it. The air was calm and I was ready. The car hit hard.
I like to imagine she ran deliriously towards my body as I lie there, wishing I were back on her bed. I’m not sure of the details, but she came. I heard her exclaim my name and I didn’t need anything else. “There has never been a love truer than theirs,” they would say. Who would say this exactly, I am not sure, but they would say it nonetheless. “They looked so peaceful as they lay together one last time.” Our two figures finally reconnecting against that blazing asphalt. “She was crying, but he was happy. They were happy.” She and her cat.
Of Time and Winter: A Villanelle

Anne Marie Powell

No tree could love its parasitic vine
Which strangles with its serpentine embrace-
Face forward and wait for your turn in line.

I draw a breath; savor the scent of pine
My lungs expand into an empty space-
No tree could love its parasitic vine.

The beasts are tamed, and walk the world benign
But lassitude moves into passion's place-
Face forward and wait for your turn in line.

Fear most the silver strand and stooping spine-
And hate the way those lines map out your face
No tree could love its parasitic vine.

Lady Cadaver- body placed supine-
Like melting wax, her features out of place
Face forward and wait for your turn in line.

The days grow short, and summer must resign.
The air turns still, and color falls from grace
No tree could love its parasitic vine--
Face forward and wait for your turn in line.
One Tuesday morning in autumn, at about 8:17 a.m., Peggy Danvers pulled on her fading turquoise robe, walked downstairs into her kitchen, and died. As her body fell to the bare, wood floor, her head hit the corner of the kitchen table. She came to rest face down, arm awkwardly hooked on the kitchen chair, a few flakes of its peeling, white paint falling in her hair.

Peggy watched her blood pool on the floor. The vibrant red rolled across the rough grain of the wood and matted her gray hair. She stood there over herself considering whether or not she should get some pledge and a mop. She stood there considering so long that her blood started to congeal a bit. Peggy ultimately decided that dead people really shouldn't be concerned with bloodstains on their kitchen floor, as unsanitary as it was.

She heard Mrs. Kingston's screen door squeak on its hinges and knew the old bat was coming to pester her about helping to organize the Sunday School Christmas pageant. The two widows had been friends before their husbands died, but while Peggy moved on to knitting and putting out food for stray cats, Sheryl moved on to church pageants. Thus their friendship ended. She had said no to Sheryl's pageants for the past 14 years and now, gazing in slight consternation upon her own dead body, Peggy Danvers smiled perversely at the surprise the nosey woman would be getting this year. What a final and resounding "no" this would be. Still befuddled, but much happier about it, Peggy passed through her back door and into the clear, morning sunlight, not at all feeling the autumn chill in the breeze.

As Peggy walked away from her house and towards town, Sheryl Kingston made her way uninvited into her neighbor's kitchen and released a scream that woke the stray cat living under Mrs. Danver's porch.

Peggy strolled down Main Street, casually window-shopping. She wasn't sure where she was going, but she thought that maybe she should go somewhere. Standing next to her own dead body didn't sound like a worthwhile way to spent the rest of her morning. There were people inside the shops and businesses, getting ready for the day, but the sidewalk was relatively deserted. The people Peggy passed didn't look at her and Peggy didn't look at them. She came to a stop in front of Lou's Haberdashery to admire a deep purple bowler hat adorned with an electric blue feather that certainly didn't come from any bird around here.
"Lovely hat, isn't it? But it's far too young for an old fart like me," a rusty voice mused to Peggy's right.

Peggy turned to find her dead father standing next to her, inspecting Lou's array of hats. She probably would have died from shock if she hadn't already watched herself die that morning.

"Papa?"

He turned towards her and looked confused. "What? No I'm not—Oh! Oh right! I forgot that's what I looked like. Sorry, sorry, I'm having a slow morning. No I'm not your father. I should introduce myself properly before I go on blathering about hats."

He held his hand out and bowed slightly, "I'm Death. It's a pleasure to meet you Peggy Danvers."

Peggy shook his hand. If she still had nerves and muscles she thought she might have trembled. As it were, whatever substance she was made of stayed steady. Death's hand was cold but his smile was peaceful and genuine.

"Why do you look like my father?"

"Ah," Death exhaled and his smile fell a bit. "I don't really. You just see what you want to see. I'm a far too terrifying figure otherwise. You understand don't you?"

Peggy wasn't sure she did but she nodded anyway.

Death clapped his hands together in a cheery, finalizing way. "Right then! Let's get going."

Peggy felt unsure for the first time that morning. "Where are we going?"

Death pulled her father's face into the happiest grin she had ever seen on that somber, wrinkled visage.

"Down the river, of course." He gestured vaguely towards the dinky, little creek that ran through the center of Peggy's small town.

Peggy followed the gesture and caught a glimpse of the sun flashing against the shallow water between the orange and red of the trees.

"It's the same place I took your husband. And let me tell you, that man complained the whole way. I can already tell you're a lot more pleasant. Or at least
you’re quiet. I get along a whole lot better with quiet.”

Peggy looked back at Death, who was staring dreamily at the light, fluffy clouds that were futilely attempting to cover the sun.

She looked briefly back down Main Street, towards her neighborhood, towards her home. She thought about Mrs. Kingston’s Christmas pageant. Peggy nodded and said, “Okay.”

Death shook himself out of his reverie and beamed at her. “Excellent! Good choice. In my opinion, sticking around to haunt people is overrated.”

He held out his hand and she took it, feeling the familiarity of her long-dead father’s palm, the grooves and curves some part of her never forgot, and the unfamiliarity of Death’s cold grip.

“You’ll like it down the river,” Death continued to babble happily as he led her away, throwing one last longing glance at the purple bowler hat.
Growing older

is putting everything you have
into square brown cardboard boxes
with sharpie labels on their flaps
and moving them across a country
you haven't ever seen.

it is taking all of your crinkled receipts
and the letters you thought you might need again,
realizing you won't, and placing them nostalgically
into the wastebasket.

it is unpacking your books and your records
your clothes and your photos and your bicycle
in an unfamiliar home with an unfamiliar garage
and putting your kitchen table together again
in a room where it doesn't quite belong.

Brett Stonecipher

An Unlikely Companion.

And suddenly, a black cat crossed my path.

I didn't think much of it; I was never one for superstitions.

This day was no different. I just knelt down, unafraid, and hoped the dark shadow
would return.

It did.

I spent the next little while petting that kitten. It seemed to want my company, and
I kind of enjoyed being around it. I was feeling lonely, and something about that
feline reminded me of home.

I think my kindness towards it, and our short yet uncommon interaction, bought
me some time. But in the end, the misfortune found even me.

That black cat and I never saw each other again.

Thomas Nantz
Anonymous
Sean McBratnie

I am escaping. Globes of light flash past me. The top is down and my sunglassed eyes are gazing at the dusking sky. I hear the engine of my steed roar with urgency as I flint-stone-foot the accelerator. As I cross the Georgia Stateline, I quickly release it. Currently, everything felt too familiar: Speeding to get to the end. Why so eager for death?

Only after our first sojourn you chose to be down on one knee. You are saying those words that will scarily chain me. I hate to see the grimace as I sadly drop the bomb, yet it is inevitably I who constantly gets bombard with missiles emitting from my phone.

Then there’s searching, for something, but completely neglecting the cars around you. Why not slow down?

I was walking on the quad, nose buried in the smart phone. Crash. Would finding you in this non-cyber world be considered a hopeless place?

Lastly is crashing, feeling both exhilarated and scared of this instant connection, to quickly realize that what just occurred was the typical hit and run. What happened to that gentle touch?

Gut instincts felt that something was not right, but that human need. No. That savage need took over. I was listening to the wrong head. Your detrimental passion mark is just a scar that has caused me to be ostracized. Look at you, sitting pretty and desired by all. The funny thing is that if memory serves correctly it was you that jumped on top of me.

I am different now. For, I do not know my own destination. I’ve given up searching. I’ve been in one hit and run too many. This is why I am now driving with extra caution.

The basic mechanics to living may just be a journey down Interstate 95, but I don’t think that is the full scope of human existence. No. The action of life is, more like, a masquerade. Parading around, acting out a show, only posting the highlights and mindlessly liking each other’s. Here we live, simultaneously in two worlds, always choosing to focus on the cyber one in order to have that stronger feeling of control. Yet we patiently await the miss-posts of others, and grin when they occur. Constantly moving, in and out of rooms. In them you are divulging your secrets, and concurrently unleashing your foes. People no longer see the soul, but search for that Adonis mask instead, yet at night they are merely ghostly silhouettes floating along the walls, in and out of rooms. They are lucky.

I wish I could just eat their lotus and dance to their siren songs, but I cannot. I wish I were ignorant. I wish that I could just be my immaculate mask. This is futile. I try to fetter myself with the chains of Marley’s ghost, but the longing
to be who I am always seeps through, disintegrating the ideal façade. The evidence of my fallen mask was overwhelming, but a victory for the commons. I can no longer follow this social code.

Groans. The systematically robotic life of college. No one ever changes class. Life is put at cruise control pace. Eagerly awaiting those scripted conversations. Hunggrily listening to every word of drunken actions. There are whispers: harsh comments about fellow peers. What were you snappy chatting that Saturday night? Did you kiss the wrong one? Or too many? The eyes of “god” are watching. For the people who speak the loudest are always the angles. Right? Slowly, you look down at your letters for protection and comfort. Beware, though, even brethren have turned on each other.

The whispers are at a constant crescendo. The walls are collapsing. The projection is collapsing. I can no longer stand this oppression of my mind. I looked around this picturesque place. Where it appears everyone is easily treading above the depths of savagery, but it is only God who can walk on water. “Screw this.” I’m gonna be plunging down.

All I need are my car keys and wallet. The baggage of the iPhone is left behind. I jump into my car. I am good to go. Speeding away. The mask is left behind. Heading to the city to take my daring plunge.

Lying on the beach. Shirtless. The sand is a wonderful sensation on my back. As well as the gentle wind that soothingly pets my hair. The aroma of the sea salt air is comfort. Home. Nothing cannot beat however my front row view of the celestial sky. This is such a big galaxy, which then shrinks down to my reality. My tiny insignificant spec of a reality. No matter how small a spec, I do feel that I must play a role in the mechanics of what keeps the universe going. I cannot help but question whether if it is just destiny or if I chose to play my role. Due to the Wasteland I’m surrounded by, with the only pure beauty coming from my celestial sky, and what it left of nature. I guess the answer to my mentally ubiquitous question is the latter.

The colors come back to life at night. The location: a rave in the club. Here in this cityscape I am just an anonymous soul, daring to drink the Kool-Aid and discover...

The music booms at a level where there is no need to think. Buzzed bodies move together as one, breaking down that personal bubble. Bright lights flash, disorienting the mind, obscuring reality, but just for the night. Euphoria blossoms in my mind.

You don’t have to put up those false projections. You don’t have to worry about those superficial cares. Finally there is no need for you to follow the code. This is my break. This new world is my adventure. I no longer feel like an empty shell. My mind is swimming, my body levitating. This is a place where I can finally
understand the meaning of freedom. Even though in this smoky atmosphere, they are still constantly searching, and praying to wake up with a gilded piece of treasure, I am happy. But is that the only thing that I will find? Maybe my perceptions are slightly askew. The libations here, give me the most mind-boggling lush, making things appear different.

As I move in this crowd, as I become one with this crowd, I realize that when it comes to the rationalization of deindividuation, psychologist have gotten it all wrong. It's not the crowd that is making me turn away from my individual and personal values. Instead it’s allowing me to grasp them. This place allows me to act out those dark and disgusting actions that constantly pervade my mind. My peers, a world away, would judge them. They have been caged for far to long. I like this. Admired by all, for a change. The hunger for the light. I would have never known that I had such skills at working a pole. Who knew I had such a good body, yet it must be paired with a stone cold exterior. I am not looking for mental intrusion tonight. Yet it still looks like the rose will finally be picked. Hunger for that intimate touch controls me, is me. The gift though better be wrapped.

Break the mold and live the life of anonymity. There are never any worries or cares. Ugh why must I place such a high value on people’s cares?

Running bare foot on the beach. Finally, I feel the connection with the earth. Everything in its place, and everything fulfilling its purpose. What is my purpose? Taking anonymous trips? Loving nature? Living my way and not falling into a hypnotic culture?

The crashing waves on the beach cause musical eargasms, which nature, thankfully, keeps on repeat. No need for that iPod of mindless lyrics about make up and break ups. Just look at the vanity of their material.

I lie on the sand, exhausted. Endorphins however, the ultimate drug of my mind, leave me in a magical daze grinning from ear to ear. I look at my fellow runner, who finally caught up. The runner lies down next to me, and looks up at the sky. Finally, I found someone to look at the stars with me. Perfection. I have a feeling of completeness.

My ruminating mind wanders to the history of North America. I thought of the Native Americans, and their liberated way of life that they lived. Chasing the buffalo, living the life of nomads. There genetics must have somehow sneaked into my DNA, for I realize that I long for this life. Maybe I should head into the wild, and try to follow their ancient ways to live such a blissful existence. How could anyone call them savages? When we are just vultures waiting for things to die.

I casually wait for Dawn, a time when this heaven vanishes and purgatory begins. I will however, be returning mask-less.

So much gleaned from a brief anonymous journey. Will you ever dare to take one? Or are you afraid? Ask yourself....What will you discover?
Wayward trees seem but an afterthought along the dim-lit streets that lead to the screened porch where the old man swings. The peach grove at the mouth of the gravel drive plays his summer symphony, the cicadas clicking their reverberating tymbals in salutatory assent. The light flickers above his Holmesian pipe as he carefully cups his hand to ward off the light summer breeze. His worn eyelids threaten to close as he blissfully exhales the sweet billowing smoke, remembering the first time.

Indiscriminate conversations hovered around tendrils of smoke that enveloped his bowed head and shaking hands. Noah filled his lungs with the stagnant air in a vain attempt to relax before he downed his diluted drink and reverently picked up the battered leather case. Dexterously avoiding the landmines of warped floorboards and wooden chair legs, he made his way up to the stage he dreamt of in moments of wistful quiet. Not this particular stage, surely, but the stage—a blessing and a curse, a place of judgment exacted justly and unjustly, of a life’s work being laid out in carefully examined phrases and sounds and short bursts of clarity and a peek at the face behind the curtain, all to be taken in or thrown aside at the whimsy of a jaded jury whom we know—just know—will surely tear down the fallacious walls that guard our hopeful hearts—this was the stage he now found himself upon.

“Good evening, folks. My name’s Noah Pelfrey, and I’m here to play you a couple songs.” After a few locals begrudgingly applauded this meek entry, miffed that they’d been interrupted to appease the young man, Noah began to play. His fingers danced over strings that bent just so to his bidding; he became entranced by the small darkened orifice. It was the ordinate abyss from which his worn Martin made its contribution to the world—from which its voice came pouring out, an incandescent song ranging from a nearly inaudible murmur to a brimming crescendo. At least, this is how he had wanted to begin.

Yet Noah’s fingers felt stubby and unfit to the task. The strings he had tuned five times over in the half hour leading up to his “performance” (if he could even bring...
himself to call it that, it’s not as if the drunk masses that inhabited this small dive bar would even care to listen), were now horribly out of tune. He fearfully plucked the E string twice before he sat back in his chair and breathed in the dust and sorrow that surrounded his withering entity—or so he felt. It was at this juncture of hapless dissonance, when his soul seemed to break the final string between hope and despair; that an ethereal calm came over him.

Looking out on the crowd of people, of which only a few had even turned away from their drinks and conversations, Noah felt a surge of righteous anger from something he couldn’t immediately grasp. It was beyond anything temperamental or even accessible to his mere self—it was the rise of an age that had been sequestered by mores and manners and people who were scared to hurt someone else’s feelings or damage their sterling reputations. He didn’t understand why or where it came from, but he couldn’t help but to stand and address the crowd. He began haltingly at first, slowly becoming more stern and confident in the feelings and thoughts that came spewing from his suddenly erudite tongue.

“You know, none of this matters. You people sitting here, imbibed and abrasive, perfunctorily complacent in your ignorance—I don’t know why I even got nervous for this. Because whose going to listen anyway? Oh sure, you may feign to listen for the approval of your friends—even for my approval, so you can feel like you did your good deed for the day and made the wayward musician happy—but it’s not real. Because none of you—and clearly nor I—know what’s real anyway. We think we know what we know, and there’s the first problem with complacent knowledge. And of course then we worry about what we don’t know—yet we don’t do anything about it—and then we allow that worry to overcome us and we say that it’s all too much. There’s simply no way we can learn it all, so what’s the point? What’s the point of discovering something when there is some greater, deeper discovery out there that we will never experience? That some one else has? And here is where envy and despair and greed and disdain is borne from, here is where we fall into a deep malaise about the meaningless specks of dust we really are, because it’s not like we’re famous or something. We’re all so wrapped up in this shitstorm that we forget that none of it even matters.” He paused to catch his breath, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. When he could breathe again, he began his final flourish.
“All that matters is your soul and what you do with it. Will you harden your heart so you don’t get hurt, making it brittle and easy to break? Will you hide your deep beliefs behind dumbed down, routine conversations so you don’t seem intellectually arrogant, avoiding any sort of meaningful debate? If you do, you’ll leave your spirit without the light that brings you peace. Or will you render your soul something greater than self-interest and unanswerable questions and ridiculous jargon, something beyond what you can immediately access and perceive? For your sake and mine, I hope you do. Anything less is a goddamn disservice to yourself, to whatever or whoever you believe in, and to those who passionately and unconditionally love you—for reasons I can’t understand.”

Everyone in the bar sat in rapt attention. None of them had stirred during this unforeseen outburst, their only movement being to turn and stare at this spectacle, mouths agape and eyes widening in surprise. One man timidly raised his hand, an offense to which Noah jumped on instantly. “And what the hell do you have to say?” The attention of the crowd shifted to the young man, whom, after staring at his shoes for almost a quarter of a minute, simply asked, “Would you care to play a song for us?”

Forty years later, as he lightly taps the burned leaves of tobacco over the side of the porch bannister, Noah remembers that night and smiles. Yet as the breeze blows away the worries of tomorrow and today, he’ll forget it all in an instant. Half the battle is in the relearning of what we think we already know. Even a simple troubadour knows that.
They were called the Pennypackers
(the doll-children mother bought me for Christmas)
And I was their god,
Putting them in their rightful places.
Mother in the kitchen
Father in the garage
And daughter in her room.
At night, I imagined they led
Different lives,
Daughter silently clicking the lock
On her door to stain her lips
With a friend’s borrowed lipstick.
Father, sucking the dry end
Of a cigarette on the backyard swingset,
The toes of his oxfords dragging
In the dust underfoot.
And mother, slumped over the last
Load of laundry, breasts vibrating
To the rhythm of permanent press.

Julia Kauffman
BLOODLINES 1988

Kristen Layne

Author’s Note: By the end of 1988, 82,362 cases of AIDS had been reported in the U.S. Of those, there were 61,816 deaths. Treatment, though newly available, was largely ineffective.

SAN FRANCISCO, 1985-1988

LONDON

You can’t.

AVA

I’ve been here for months, London.

LONDON

No you haven’t. It’s a mistake. I would have-

AVA

You would have noticed me? Think about it.

LONDON

Think of what?

AVA

Think of when.

LONDON

Think of when?

AVA

January.

LONDON

January.

AVA

You were sick.

LONDON
It was January. I had the flu.

No you didn’t.

It was you. It’s been that long?

Yes. January.

What did I do?

You know what you did.

But I don’t. You can leave. Anytime you like.

I can’t. You know that.

So what now?

We could be friends.

We’ll never be friends.

Won’t we?

I could never-

People started guessing. It was 1986. Mostly she stayed home and I stayed home, but she went to work with me sometimes and we went out to dinner and around town and to buy sweet potatoes when they were at the farmer’s market. You can forget a lot of Georgia but you can’t forget sweet potatoes. So we’d go to the farmer’s market.

AVA
She didn’t see her friends as much. I wouldn’t let her. They thought she had a lover. But she didn’t. She just couldn’t risk it.

ALLEN
Ava, she’s complicated. Not everyone can see her, right? She’s like an imaginary friend... but she’s very, very real.


So you can type.

Yes, sir.

You don’t need to “sir” me.

100 words a minute on a good machine, sir.

Now you’re toying with me.

The speed or the sir?

Oh boy. You’ll be doing obituaries. Evans handwrites his on yellow legal pads. We’ll be doing his soon enough, though.
AVA
I can’t kill you by looking at you. So watch how you look at me. You might’ve met me yourself and don’t even know it yet. You think you’re so much holier than thou.

LONDON
Or maybe you just think you’re safe because you’re white. And make $30K a year. And live in Berkeley. Well let me tell you -- I’m white and I live in Berkeley and I wasn’t safe. Fuck 4H. I’m not Haitian, hemophiliac, homosexual, or a heroin addict. I’m white, clean, straight, and whole-blooded. Or at least I was.

Sure I’ve shot up. I’m 22 years old and I’m a writer in San Francisco.

ALLEN
But it got too old.

MATT
Not to mention expensive.

LONDON
Did I meet her at one of those parties?

ALLEN
Maybe, maybe not. I mean, she’s everywhere now.

MATT
Walk up Haight and you’ll brush elbows.

LONDON
Bathroom stall,

ALLEN
bar fight,

MATT
one night stand,

LONDON
she’s there.

MATT
Maybe you met her at a party or maybe an old boyfriend introduced her to you.
LONDON
You just know, after awhile, that you've always known her.

ALLEN
She's sadistic. The emerging bruises, the achiness, the headaches, even the control of food. She'll starve you if you don't watch out. She'll starve you anyway.

The San Francisco Enquirer

ALLEN
You eat lunch late.

LONDON
It's quiet.

ALLEN
I know. It's my quiet space.

LONDON
You're eating peanut butter and jelly.

ALLEN
Peanut butter and banana.

LONDON
On Wonder Bread.

ALLEN
On Wonder Bread. I'm secretly eight years old.

LONDON
Diversions is short again this week.

ALLEN
Diversions is always short.

LONDON
Do you take submissions from the floor?
Do you have something?

LONDON

I have a lot of somethings. But I think I have something that will work.

ALLEN

Give it here.

(beat. He holds out his hand.)
Give me the pen.

(beat)

Well, your lead’s atrocious, but we could run something like this. The Haight angle, twenty years later. It would add some flair.

LONDON

I know.

ALLEN

But you’re not leaving obituaries anytime soon.

LONDON

So can I keep submitting?

ALLEN

We’ll run this one and see.

-----

LONDON

I still went out with my neighbors from the Haight. There was a bar in the old fallout shelter across the street from our building. We’d shove tables together and line up Jagarbombs and run lines of coke from the backs of chairs, using scribbled copy ripped in half and rolled in place of the hundred dollar bills we heard they used uptown.

Allen took me to the Examiner editorial Christmas party, where they drank champagne in bowls, not flutes, observed the legs of burgundies and blondes and ran lines of coke from pin-striped suit sleeves, using Benjamins. We got bored and left early and stumbled through the park and met up with the guys at Valhalla. That was the name of the bar.

-----
LONDON
You know, I've never liked crab cakes.

ALLEN
You know, I've never liked cheese with little toothpicks shoved into it.

LONDON
Look at them. They take themselves so seriously. Their little champagne bowls...

ALLEN
The artichoke hearts.

LONDON
The bouquet of the Merlot...

(beat)
Do you think they know I'm just a copy editor?

ALLEN
Of course not. They probably think I hired you to come with me.

LONDON
What is that supposed to mean?

ALLEN
That you look like an escort?

LONDON
An escort?

ALLEN
In a good way.

LONDON
In a good way...

ALLEN
Do you want to leave?

LONDON
With you?
Well, I brought you here.

You just called me a whore.

I called you an escort.

Are we going to debate specifics?

Are you going to leave with me?

Yes. I suppose so.

Then we ran to the Golden Gate Bridge.

I was stoned of course with stilettos in my hand and in stocking feet. And we leaned too far out over the edge, reading the signs aloud that say “Life is Worth It. Don’t Jump.” And wondering what would happen if we did.

We kissed in the mist off the ocean and ran to the Ritz Carlton where we made hot toddies. We registered under false names and never paid for the room or the room service.

-----

I took a week off in October. I flew to Georgia for my sister’s wedding. When I got back, Allen was sick.

They were fine, they took a sick day, they were dead. It happened over and over and over and finally you wonder if it was like this when the bubonic plague came through London. I remember writing a paper in high school; the doctors wore these beaks stuffed with herbs. They thought it would protect them. We laugh about it now, make a joke of it, and then you tell us that protection really works.
And now we get it. But you tell that to lovers in 1986 and it doesn’t make sense.

For a long time I didn’t visit Allen. A long time -- a month. I was scared. I thought if I worked, if I edited enough copy and Chloroxed the copy desk and took enough showers I could... not.

1987. A BERKELEY APARTMENT: A hospital bed, containing ALLEN, is set up in the living room. AVA sits quietly in the corner.

Hi, you must be London.

Yes, is this--


Matt...

I’m... I live here too. He didn’t tell you.

No. But...

Well...

Doesn’t matter.

It never occurred to me to ask why he hadn’t told me about Matt; it was 1987. I locked up the apartment in the Haight and moved into Allen and Matt’s room. Matt slept on the couch.
MATT
We took turns changing out the fluids -- banana bags, the nurse called them.

LONDON
She would have changed them but we had to do something.

MATT
He had an infection. He had pneumonia.

LONDON
The infection got better. The pneumonia got worse.

MATT
The pneumonia got better. The infection got worse.

LONDON
He got a new infection.

ALLEN
I’m trying to decide how old I am.

LONDON
What do you mean? Your birthday’s next week. You’ll be 34.

ALLEN
Right. But I feel 90.

MATT
Well, maybe you can be both right now.

ALLEN
I feel old.

MATT
You’re not old.

ALLEN
I know. But I feel it.
You should get tested. You look thin.

LONDON
It’s because I’ve been worried about you.

You should get tested.

-----

A waiting room.

You’d think they could get the posters right.

You’d think.

Or at least update them regularly.

They do. They just update the numbers more regularly.

They could at least put cushions on the chairs.

Stop complaining.

Stop worrying.

You get what this means.

Of course I do.

(beat)

Well, that’s me.

*MATT stands and leaves the waiting area.*
Next. *(stands)*

*They stand opposite each other, open letters. The results are as they expected.*

Did they invite you into the trial too?  

*Matt*  

Yeah. Yeah they did.

-----

*A coffee shop.*

I think I'm on the placebo.  

*Matt*  

What's your count?  

*London*  

Average.

*Matt*  

Average negative or average positive?  

*London*  

Average positive.

*Matt*  

Could be keeping you from crashing.

*London*  

Could be. But look at you.

*Matt*  

What about me?

*London*  

Can I buy you a bagel?
I'm not hungry.

LONDON

I know you're not. Can I buy you a bagel?

MATT

Why?

LONDON

Look at you.

MATT

It's helping. My numbers are good.

LONDON

Let me buy you a bagel.

MATT

Enough with the bagel! (beat) Why are you being like this?

LONDON

(pained pause) Because Allen won't eat anymore. And neither will you.

MATT

Allen is dying.

LONDON

And you—

MATT

My numbers are good.

------

March 1987

LONDON

They legalized AZT in March. $10,000 to put a kitchen timer on the electric chair. But of course we bought in, who wouldn't? The rope was a little bit longer. One fewer bullet in six-cartridge Russian roulette. Maybe it would make a difference.
And then Allen died.

MATT exits.

And then Matt hung himself. He left his bottle of pills on the bathroom counter for me. I was alone in their apartment. They’d taken the rope away when they came for the body; it was thin cord, only rated to 100 pounds. That’s all he had needed.

-----

A Mirror, 1988

Well.

Well.

How long do I get?

How long do you think?

What is this to you, a game?

Maybe. You said yourself it’s like Russian Roulette.

That’s sick.

I mean, the odds are getting better for you. How many bullets down?

Allen, Matt. But that’s not how odds work.
You can't pin Matt on me.

LONDON Yes, I can.

AVA You look different.

LONDON I look tired.

AVA You cut your hair off.

LONDON It keeps falling out. I’m shedding.

AVA But the drugs are working.

LONDON I’m still sick.

AVA But your numbers...

LONDON Fuck the numbers. It’s binary. There’s positive and negative. Nothing else matters.

AVA You look tired.

LONDON I’m 24 years old and I haven’t been able to live.

AVA That’s the drugs.

LONDON The drugs are because of you.
And I’m because of you.
How long are they going to work, anyway?

My heart’s beating too fast. I feel like I’m running out.

Which of us is killing you?

I’m running a fever. Constantly. I’m 97 pounds.

It’s the drugs.

It’s you.

I’m you. I’m going to win.

I know.

Why destroy yourself?

To keep you from doing it.

Do you hear yourself? What do you want?

My life.

You can’t have that. What do you want?

What do I want? I want sweet potatoes.
AVA
What?

LONDON
I want sweet potatoes. In Georgia. But you can't give me that. You can't give me anything.

AVA
You're stopping the drugs. You're picking me over them for some reason.

LONDON
$10,000 a year for AZT. I'm taking my year. I'm taking my $10,000. I'm going to Spain. Then I'm going to Georgia. I'm going to eat sweet potatoes. And I'm going to die.

At this point, it's the only way I can win.
Vermivorous Vincent
by Lorin Stanley

Vermivorous Vincent stood alone in the park.
He hid under the bridge where it was nice and dark.
Chomping on worms, devouring flowers,
these kept Vincent busy for countless, long hours.
Poor little Natalie was his only friend.
She watched him sit lonely for days on end.
She loved to see him bite the heads off of worms,
to mutter to himself, and laugh at the evanescents.
Natalie too felt alone, for you see,
poor Natalie has narcolepsy.
No one in the park would let her come play
for fear she’d fall asleep alone the way.
It was just her luck that Vincent was there,
even though he had worm eggs in his hair.
She thought he was lovely in each and every way,
but little did she know that soon one day,
poor Vincent would wind up dead.
When instead of a worm, he munched a poisonous multhead.
Bubble
Laura Hayes
Haley Gray
Stained
Sarah Harrod
Land of the free, because of the brave

Thomas Nantz
Haley Gray
Grace Anne Foca, Photoshop
Buddhist Temple
Emily Blinn

57
Haley Gray
Kendall Driscoll, painting
Books
Laura Hayes
Johnny Knoxville
Madeleine Wright, acrylic
Behind Venice
Sarah Harrod
Don't forget to look up

*Thomas Nantz*
Fight Club
Madeleine Wright, mixed media
Fancy
Kimberly Hydrick
La Lindsanity
Madeleine Wright, pencil
Beyond the Comic Books

In a way, we all kind of have super powers. Our bodies regenerate,
just at an extremely slow and almost unnoticeable rate. We experience déjà vu,
which could be the start of futuristic thinking and higher intelligence. Some have super vivid dreams,
which I like to pretend could develop into foresight, and matters in the grand scheme of things. Our brains have the capacity to store unlimited knowledge and memories,
which can be recalled in a second, years and years later.

Humans are so incredibly strong; we can live days and days without sustenance, and are quite adaptable to the world around us. We even can connect with, care for, and empathize with each other. And what a gift that is.

Our abilities may be slightly difficult to see, since they are not as swift, flashy, detailed, and obvious as those told in the stories, but in a way, we all have super powers.

Thomas Nantz
Surprise

One day age will creep up on you
like one of your childhood friends.
He could be hiding in the closet now,
waiting for you to walk towards the foyer
so he can tiptoe out and startle you,
quickly wrapping his skinny arms around your stomach
and sending you both down onto the hardwood,
laughing.

Brett Stonecipher

The Humble Moon

He reaches out
With soft, white tendrils
To caress her freckled cheeks
A silent sentry
Ever watching as she sleeps
The Light in Darkness
Hope in night
Forgotten with the morning light

Emily Blinn
I hung up the phone, walked into the kitchen where my girlfriend was cooking dinner and said, “I’m going to hell.”

Lily didn’t look up from the tomato she was chopping. “You don’t believe in hell.”

“Yeah, but if there is one, my place is reserved.”

Lily smiled. “You’re a lesbian and an atheist. I figured that was a given.” She put down the knife and tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear. “What’s wrong, love?”

“My grandmother’s dead.”

“Oh my god.” Lily stepped away from the counter and wrapped her arms around me.

“That’s not the bad part,” I said, my face pressed against her shoulder. “That’s why I’m going to hell. Because my grandmother’s dead and that’s not what I’m upset about.”

I pulled away from her, grabbed some lettuce that was sitting on the counter and began to shred it. Lily picked up the knife again but didn’t use it, her eyes still on me.

“I mean, I am sad, but...it was time. She’d been in a nursing home since I was in high school. She didn’t know who we were anymore.” I looked at Lily. “Promise you’ll shoot me before that happens?”

She set down the knife, reached out and squeezed my hand. “Only if you do the same for me. We can sign a pact.” She paused. “Also we’ll have to buy a gun.” I gave her a weak smile and went back to shredding lettuce. “So what are you upset about then?” she asked.

“I have to go to the funeral.”

“So I assumed.”

“Which means I have to see my family.”

“We had dinner with your parents at Christmas.”

Lily picked up one of the slices of raw tomato and bit into it. She offered me one and I shook my head. “Not with my brother.”

“Ah, the mysterious brother.”

I finished the lettuce and looked for something else to do. “Is this defrosted?” I asked, picking up a package of ground beef.

“Yes.” Lily picked up the last tomato and started chopping it without looking away from my face.

“You’re gonna lose a finger,” I said, but she didn’t stop cutting or staring. I opened the package of ground beef and emptied it into the pan I’d set out on the stove before the phone rang. “I’ve told you stuff about Gabe.” I turned the stove on.
"You've told me you're twins and he paints. Other than that you just shake your head and act cryptic."
"Gabe has – issues." I shoved the beef around the pan with the spatula.
"See? Cryptic."
"You'll get to meet him soon enough."
Lily scooped the tomatoes into a bowl. "So you want me to go with you."
"Of course. Why wouldn't I?" I tore open a packet of seasoning and added it to the meat.
"I don't know. It still kind of blows my mind that you want me to meet your family." She carried the bowl of tomatoes and the bowl of shredded lettuce over to the table.
"I want to show you off. Plus I'm going to need all the support I can get." I stared down into the pan. "Does this look done to you?"
"I'll take care of it." Lily took the spatula from my hand. "You should go look up flights. Tickets are gonna cost a fortune with this little notice."
I groaned. "Can we just not go?"
Lily leaned over and kissed my cheek. "We've dealt with worse."
I couldn't argue with that, but it didn't make me feel better.

The small airport was almost deserted at six-thirty in the morning, the few people there wandering around with a dazed look I knew I shared. When we reached the sign demanding that we have our tickets and government-issued ID ready Lily stepped behind me. "Go ahead," she said.
I'd been so distracted by my family I'd forgotten how much she hated airport security. I squeezed her hand and handed the elderly man my driver's license and boarding pass. He glanced down and waved me on. I looked back at Lily as I removed my flats. The man was staring at her license, then back at her, his brow furrowed. Lily shifted her feet and started twisting the ring on her right hand, a habit I'd noticed the first day we met. I realized later she only did it when she was nervous. She saw me looking, gave me a quick smile and motioned for me to go ahead. I hesitated, but she waved me on again, so I lifted my bags onto the belt and kept walking. As I left I heard the man ask "Mr. Ellison" to step aside.

I was sitting in the boarding area with two coffees in hand when Lily finally joined me. "Have I mentioned how much I hate showing my license?" she said, dropping her bag at her feet.
I handed her the vanilla latte as she sat down.
"You have no idea how happy I'll be when it's finally fixed." She rolled her eyes. "They patted me down and went through my bags about four times. The man glared at me when he saw my pills."
I kissed her cheek and intertwined my fingers with hers. "I'm sorry. Thanks for doing this."
"My motives are mercenary. Really I'm just curious about the mysterious
brother."

"I'm not trying to be mysterious. It's just – not something I enjoy discussing."

"Yeah, I got that far on my own."

I glanced around at the other people in the boarding area. A mother wiped chocolate from her son's face. Across from her an older couple was arguing over whether they needed to leave their IDs out, and a young woman in a pencil skirt glared at them as she typed on her laptop. None of them were looking at us, but I couldn't shake the feeling that they were. "I'm sorry. My family doesn't talk about it, so I never have." I took too big a sip of coffee and burnt my tongue.

"You're doing the thing again," Lily said.

"What thing?"

"The thing where you're thinking really hard so you start mumbling under your breath and no one can hear you. Want to try talking like a normal person?"

"Look, you'll find out soon. Can't you just wait?"

I set down my coffee and pulled out my old copy of Cat's Cradle. Lily didn't mention the seven or eight times I'd read it already, just reached for the New York Times and disappeared into the Science section. I glanced over at her, but she didn't look back.

Gabe answered the door. My stomach tightened when I saw him. He had always been thin, but he'd lost even more weight, and the dark circles under his eyes stood out against his pale skin. His brown hair stuck up at odd angles where he'd been running his fingers through it, and his black tie was crooked. He looked younger somehow. Like a teenager. A dying teenager. "Grace. Thank god," he said, keeping his voice low. "You have to save me."

"Gabe, this is Lily," I said, stepping aside.

Gabe looked startled when I said her name, as though he hadn't noticed someone else was with me, but he shook her hand before turning back to me.

"I've counted four racist and two homophobic comments in the past half-hour, no one will let me work, and Mom has pulled out my altar boy pictures. I will slit my throat with my keys if I stay here any longer."

We were interrupted by footsteps and my mother's voice. "Grace? Is that you?" Gabe escaped into the kitchen before Mom entered the hallway. "Put off getting here til the very last second, didn't you?" she said as she hugged me.

"I'm sorry. It's crazy hard to get flights with this little notice."

"Hello Lily." Mom gave her a brief nod.

"Hi Mrs. Reilly."

"Grace, you're staying in your old room. Lily, I have you in the spare bedroom upstairs. Hurry and change. We're leaving for the church soon."

I gave Lily an apologetic smile as I dragged my suitcase to my old bedroom. Once the door was shut I stripped off my jeans and Led Zeppelin t-shirt and tossed them on top of the pink and white flowered quilt I'd had since I was a child. I was fumbling for the zipper on my black dress when Lily came in. She walked up be-
hind me and zipped my dress the rest of the way.

“Thanks.” I turned around and kissed her. “You look lovely.”

She wrinkled her nose. “My shoulders are too broad for this jacket.”

“They are not. You’re gorgeous.” Lily looked away from me. “Sorry about the separate rooms,” I said.

She shrugged. “I’ve decided to take a vow of chastity anyway.”

“That should please my parents.”

Lily bit her lip, and I could tell she was choosing her words. “Your brother...”

“Yeah. He’s, uh... he’s in pretty bad shape right now.” I couldn’t look at her.

“Withdrawal.” I felt the need to explain, to tell her about Gabe’s art, how he’d introduced me to Raymond Carver’s stories, how he made peanut butter and marshmallow sandwiches for both of us when we were kids. I couldn’t think of Gabe in the terms other people used, couldn’t stand for Lily to think of him as an “addict,” “functioning” or not. I’d never been sure what those words meant in the first place.

“Girls! Let’s go! We’re going to be late,” my mother shouted from downstairs, and for the first time I could remember I was grateful to be interrupted by her voice.

Lily squeezed my hand and turned to leave. I followed behind her.

I sat between Lily and Gabe at the funeral. Lily wasn’t Catholic, and since I’d quit practicing long before I met her, she had never been to a Mass. She looked lost as she followed me through the old motions. Gabe fidgeted the entire service, rubbing or scratching his covered arms, and during the Eucharistic prayer I noticed his hands trembling and placed my hand on his. I had to put my other hand on Lily’s knee to keep her from joining the line when it was time for communion.

Gabe and I didn’t go either, and I saw my mother giving both of us accusing looks as she stood up. My father didn’t seem to notice. He hadn’t spoken to me since I’d arrived. I doubted he’d spoken to Gabe either.

After Mass was finished and my grandmother buried we headed back to my parents’ house. I went to my room to change, because I needed to get my heels off and because I needed a few seconds away from my family before dealing with a flood of sympathy from old ladies in heavy rose-scented perfume. Lily followed me. She pulled off her blazer, tossed her cell phone and wallet onto my bed and stretched out on her back, staring at the ceiling, while I put on a pair of ballet flats.

“How are we going to do this?” she asked.

I sat down on the bed beside her. “Force a smile, nod a lot and eat enough macaroni and cheese to keep Aunt Gloria happy.”

“No, I mean – am I your girlfriend, or your platonic friend and roommate?”

I looked down at her. “Girlfriend,” I said. “I’m not hiding anything.”

I would have called her anything to see the smile she gave me at that.

“All right,” I said, standing. “I guess we can’t put off the suffering any
longer.” Lily sat up, smoothed down her hair and followed me from the room.

The food was the typical fare served when my family got together – turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, macaroni and cheese, green bean casserole. I thought it was strange that we ate the same food at funerals as we did at Thanksgiving.

My mother dragged Gabe and me around by the arm for at least two hours. “This is my daughter Grace and my son Gabriel,” she said to streams of older people I’d never met before. “Grace is in graduate school” – never mentioning my field, because my mother and I had learned through years of arguments that the phrase gender studies should not be spoken in her house. “And Gabriel is an artist.” Here was where the smile came. “He’s been in several galleries, and his work has gotten wonderful reviews. Ground-breaking, they call it.” My mother has never liked Gabe’s paintings. She thinks they’re dark and disturbing.

Lily was left alone in a corner, holding a plate of green bean casserole and not meeting anyone’s eyes. I tried to get back to her as often as possible, whisper complaints about the other people there and squeeze her hand to let her know I was with her, but after a few seconds my mother would pull me away, and the routine would start again. Gabe’s trembling was getting worse. It was no longer just his hands – his entire body shook, and the corner of his left eye had started to twitch.

“And do you have a boyfriend? Getting ready to settle down?” asked a woman my mother called Aunt Maggie but who wasn’t my aunt. At least I hoped not, since I’d never met her before.

“Grace isn’t very settled yet.” My mother smiled.

I wanted to say something, but I was suddenly too aware of my tongue, of my lips, of every word they might form, like in elementary school when I’d considered calling out in class without raising my hand just to try it, but couldn’t bring myself to.

“For Christssake,” Gabe said.

“Gabriel!” my mother said. Somehow she was still surprised her son would take the Lord’s pseudonym in vain.

“No, mom, fuck it, I’m sick, I’m just fucking sick of lying all the time.” He didn’t raise his voice, but every other conversation stopped, like when someone shattered a glass in the college dining hall and there was a moment of silence before everybody started applauding. Except there was no applause.

“She – ” he pointed to Lily – “is Grace’s girlfriend. Not her friend, or her roommate. And she’s not gonna disappear if you don’t look at her; it doesn’t work that way.” His voice grew louder, cracking with anger. “Grace is a lesbian. And I’m a junkie. A goddamned drug addict.” He yanked up the cuff of one of his shirt sleeves and rolled the sleeve above his elbow, revealing the track marks across his skin.

My alleged Aunt Maggie gasped. Gabe turned to our mother. “I know you hate me right now, but trust me, it’s nothing compared to how much I hate me right now. So...” He shrugged and looked around. I saw him sway on his feet and
crossed the room just in time to catch him before he collapsed.

"Get him out of here." My mother’s voice had dropped to a hiss.

Lily had joined me, but I knew Gabe would be worse if he were with people he didn’t know well, so I said, “It’s okay. I’ve got him.” I lowered my voice. “You’re welcome to my room if you need to get out of here. I don’t think anyone would notice.” The room was still silent except for clearing throats and shifting feet.

Lily shook her head. “I’ll be all right.”

Gabe leaned against my shoulder as we left. I helped him into his room and lowered him onto the bed.

“Brilliant idea, saying fuck in front of senior citizens at a funeral lunch,” I said.

“I don’t care.”

“All of this is hard enough without you trying to make it harder.”

Gabe looked away from me. He started to fumble at his shirt, but his hands were trembling too badly to undo the buttons.

I knelt and helped him take the shirt off. He saw me look at his track marks and covered some of them with his hands.

“You should lie down.”

He shook his head and mumbled something.

“What?”

“I’m gonna –” He clamped his mouth shut, and I realized what he meant in time to help him to the bathroom. He hadn’t eaten, so nothing came up, only dry, racking heaves.

I brought him water to rinse his mouth out and helped him back to the bed. “I’m sorry,” he said as pulled the sheets over his chest. I could have traced the bones of his ribcage. “I really am. You shouldn’t have to deal with all my shit.”

I sighed. “You’re my brother.” I owe you, I wanted to say. Because when I sat on the edge of your bed and said “I think I might be a lesbian” you nodded and said “Cool.” Because for weeks in a row I heard you arguing with our parents, defending me, while I lay on my bed with my face pressed so hard into the pillow I couldn’t breathe.

“Fucking withdrawal,” Gabe said.

He started scratching at his scarred arms again, and I grabbed his hands and held them still. “I wish you would think about rehab,” I said. “I could help pay –”

“I went, once. My agent insisted.” Gabe gritted his teeth in pain and I squeezed his hand. “They made us pray every day. We had to keep a spiritual journal. Ask God to make us clean. Fuck that. I said if I got clean it would be on my own.” I brushed his hair back from his forehead and didn’t speak. “They say it’s not God’s fault you got on the drugs, but he gets the credit when you get off them? Pretty sweet deal for him.”

“You could ignore the religious stuff.” I looked down at his face, contorted with pain, at his thin, shaking body.
Gabe was silent for a moment. “Mom and Dad used to ask me to pray for you,” he said. “Every night after you told them. Pray that you would make the right choices.”

I blinked a few times and turned away so he couldn’t see my eyes. “Please, Gabe,” I said. “We can find a secular program or something.” I touched his arm, avoiding the scars, and felt goosebumps. I pulled the blankets up to his shoulders. “You shouldn’t waste your time worrying about me,” he said.

“I can’t help it.”
“I’m a bad person.”
“No, you’re not.”

He took a deep, shuddering breath. “I did a bad thing.” His voice caught. “A really bad thing.” He pushed himself up on shaking arms and started to fumble in the pockets of the dress pants he still wore. Finally he removed a wallet and held it out to me.

“I needed money,” he said. “I saw it in your room and thought it was yours. I was gonna pay you back. I thought maybe you wouldn’t even notice. But then I looked inside, and I – I couldn’t do it. The money’s all there.”

I opened the wallet and my stomach twisted. Lily’s driver’s license, her student ID, her debit card.

Gabe lowered his voice. “Mom and Dad don’t know?”
I shook my head.
“Do you have any idea what they’d say if they did?”
“Yes. Which is why I’m not telling them.”
“Neither am I.”

I looked at him and tried to keep my voice steady. “Thank you.”
“I thought that was a given.” Gabe gasped and bent over. I squeezed his hand. “Cramps,” he said with a faint smile. “This is worse than usual. I almost never go this long.”

I turned away so he wouldn’t see my eyes were wet.
“You love her?” Gabe asked.
I looked back at him. “Yeah.”
“Good. You need someone to love who might deserve it.”
“Gabe…”
“It’s okay, Grace.” He smiled at me. “I’ll figure out a way to get on my flight tomorrow, and you won’t have to worry about me anymore.”
“I always worry about you.” I helped him lie down again and kissed his forehead. “I love you.”

“Can’t imagine why,” he said. I stood and turned to leave, and as I reached the door he said “I love you too. I’m sorry.”

As soon as I walked into the living room Lily joined me. She didn’t say anything, just kissed my cheek and took my hand in hers.

I spent the rest of the day going back and forth between Gabe’s room and
the living room until the last visitors had trickled out of the house and just my family and Lily were left. I was the only one who went into Gabe’s room. My parents refused to go near him.

After I was sure my parents were asleep I snuck into the guest room. Lily was sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a white camisole and blue pajama pants. She held a glass of water in her hand.

I waited for her to finish swallowing her pills, then sat down on the other side of the bed and kissed her.

“Affectionate tonight,” she said.

I took a deep breath. “I wanted to give this back earlier, but things were so crazy and I didn’t want to draw attention from my parents or one of my fake relatives.” I held out her wallet.

“Did I leave it in your room?”

I nodded. “Gabe had it.” I looked at her face, waiting for a reaction, but her eyes were blank. “He said he didn’t take anything.”

Lily’s fingers drifted to one of her hands, searching for the ring she’d taken off. “So he –”

“He promised not to tell,” I said.

She bit her lip. The fear on her face made my chest ache.

“Gabe never outed me,” I said. “He wouldn’t do that.”

She looked at me. “You trust him?”

I nodded.

“Okay.” She opened the wallet. “It’s there. The money.” She laughed. “Not that it’s really my first priority, but...he told the truth about that, at least.”

She set the wallet on the bedside table and stared at it for a moment, then lay down on the bed. I curled up next to her. “I’m sorry this was such an unmitigated disaster.”

She shrugged. “Family always is. My parents still think you’re straight.”

I could tell how hard she was trying to keep her voice casual. I reached out and brushed a strand of hair back from her face. “Let’s not let our parents meet. Ever.”

“Deal.”

I kissed her. “Thank you for doing this. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“All I did was stand there and eat too much dessert.”

I shook my head and ran my fingers down her pale freckled arm. “You’re beautiful,” I said.

Lily laughed. “You shouldn’t lie.”

“I lie about some things, but not that.”

Lily didn’t say anything, but she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. She fell asleep a few minutes later. Lily always fell asleep more easily than I did. I lay beside her, listening to the sound of her breathing. Tomorrow we would
be in our own bed and I would be pretending that I didn’t have a family outside of that apartment. That I’d never watched my brother draw dinosaurs on the back of collection envelopes during Sunday Mass. That I didn’t turn my phone’s volume up all the way every night because I was waiting for a call from the police, or the hospital. I gazed at Lily’s back and remembered the wallet in Gabe’s shaking hands. “It’ll be all right,” I said. “I’ll do something. I’m not letting it go this time. I’m not.” Lily didn’t move. I brushed her hair from her shoulder and thought of Gabe in the room below us, trembling with a withdrawal that meant nothing because it would end as soon as he got home. I held still and listened to the house creaking, the same sounds I’d fallen asleep to as a child, and I wondered if he could hear it too, if he too was lying awake, waiting for the morning.
the halogen lights of harpersville

Jared O’Neal

a sleepy comatose little town on the skirt of rock slide highway. steady buzz of loggers drowned out by the preening call of 17 year cicadas and camouflaged katydids.
The spartina mixed with burnt diesel.
Her long legs and boots dangled down off the cab of my grandfathers 95 f150 i borrowed for the day. each scissored kick knocking cakes of mud to the concrete curb of some insignificant mexican restaurant.
summer sun already called freckles out across Her cheeks in early june. a light sweat on our foreheads as humid air settled on our skin.
Her skin dried by rays of gold heat. blonde of Her hair draping Her face as loose bobby pins allowed.
i stood beside Her with my arms across my chest if i touched Her id never be able to leave.
Her world cast in the same glow the halogen lamps above poured down and my body ached like bricks for no reason.
days death dripped over us. the dusty heat smell of time doled out like dandelion seeds in a hasted breath.
when will you come Home again? She cocked Her head over at me. Her long neck still swan white despite the sun.
i felt the kiss of Her smile graze against the back of my head. She slinked a hand into my jeans pocket. Her small hands tugging on clay-caked denim.
you dont have to be distant.
ill keep that in mind.
you know im not going anywhere. ill be here.
i cant take my eyes off Her. the halogen lights burned down like a flaming field of goldenrod.
ill keep that in mind.
leaning Her head against my back She sighed. calming slight of parliaments still on Her breath.
youre kinda stuck with me. She laughed now. each soft chime like a prison bar. i am tethered to Her by my everything.
theres no escape from white camellias or sweet tea or the red-faced-preacher. no escape from coal mines and steel mills. no escape from brown-orange flooded rivers or the sweet stick of pine tar across fingers. no escape from the cream belly of water moccasins or dark blue shale stones skipped across clear creek beds. no escape from the white chip of day-moon behind milk puddle clouds or the creak of that heel-gnawed wood under heavy boots. no escape from screened in porches or the steady roll of hand finished rocking chairs before the blueberry bushes. no
escape from star-strangled silence or the glow of firefly. no escape from the call of wild country dog or hum of dirt dobber. no escape from dew-battered grass that loves like a grandmothers hands or the sun-baked skin cracked to the bone. no escape from Her.
i shut the door on the truck. She stood by my window one last time hands perched on the door like a yellowhammer.
I love you.
ill keep that in mind.
Maps

Before you woke up this morning,
I crept quietly down the stairs
and spread every map that I had in my head
across the wooden table of my memory.

By candlelight I sat,
back straight and fingers drumming,
glancing at the scales and legends
as I waited for the coffee to brew.

I traced the familiar routes,
traveling along them once more:
the winding road up the mountain from campus
and the faint red-clay trail from the cliffs down to the creek.

I strolled again from the hotel to the piazza
where we paid too much for wine,
and descended the steps between my bedroom
and the old garage door that stuck on cold mornings.

I was wandering by the harbor in the rain when I saw you
standing on the bottom stair, rubbing your right eye and smiling in your
night-gown,
returning from someplace far away.

Brett Stonecipher
Offering
(Ascending tetracola)

this morning i
love, trust, hope (and, in some cases,
woke: arms afire –
as common Atlas from a pro-
praise God, to whose
- long-
all-blessers flow
-ed,
money)
grip-
“praise Him-all, creatures there: be-
-low;
-ping
dream.

“praise YE above Him, heavenly host;
“praise!” “Holy Son or Ghost;”
Father,

Ben Keiper
Have you ever slept outside, next to the fire, underneath the trees, seeing their leaves outlined against the faint light of the star speckled sky? Have you sat there, watching the blue and yellow flames dance sporadically along the logs, while underneath the embers and coals glow red and orange, like bright sparking mirrors of the stars in the night sky above? Have you laid there on the ground in your warm cozy sleeping bag and looked up at the constellations formed by the thousands, the millions of cold, silvery-white diamonds that sparkle and twinkle like ice crystals on a dark blue cloth which has been left out in the early morning dew. Have you ever fallen asleep listening to the sound of crackling and sparkling as the embers slowly burn themselves into ashes? Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night and seen the trees and grassy filed around you bathed in silvery moonlight? Have you marveled at the brightness that the full moon lends to the night, creating moon shadows behind every blade of grass and illuminating every leaf on the trees above you. Have you ever seen any of these sights and wondered about their creator? Have you looked up at the countless stars and thought about, even briefly considered for a second, how vast and amazingly huge God must be? Have you ever looked up at the full moon, seen the pits and craters pockmarked across its surface from asteroids, and thought about all the processes that had to be put into place, all the events that had to happen for you to enjoy the bright, silvery glow of a moonlit night? And have you then thought about the fact that God put it all in motion? If not, you should. You should sleep out under the stars and watch them as they twinkle all through the night. You should lie down next to the dying fire and watch as the coals and embers happily pop and spark and glow beside you. You should marvel in the splendor of a moonlit midnight. You should do these things and be constantly reminded of God, who made them all possible, and who made you with just as much care.
Forever

Connor Samples

His legs dangled over the edge of the world, casually kicking the concrete he sat upon. Water streamed down his legs and off his bare feet, adding to the growing puddle of oblivion below him. Sweet smoke billowed out of his mouth as the embers at the tip of his cigar ebbed and flowed. It was quiet. Surprising, considering the sun would be directly above the mass of steel and stone had a cover of clouds not hidden the sky away for the day. The blanket wept, wetting the grey jungle below. No car engines, no drone of conversations from people trudging from offices to the sandwich shop on the corner of 21st Avenue, no sound from the civilized world below reached the man in his slice of heaven. Only the shattering of tears on concrete and glass engulfed him.

Ashes trickled off the tip of his cigar into the wasteland below. His gaze followed the falling black specks to their demise. Above, lightning ripped through dead flesh of clouds, showing flashes of life before being swallowed back by the vacuum. In between the flashing fury, darkness peeked up at the sentry, teasing him. But his vision was already elsewhere, a thousand yards beyond the flirtatious void. Hints of a smile formed ripples on the dripping man's face. Even as he faced the black depths of the Mariana Trench, a tether still wrapped itself around his waist, connecting him to the surface of the world above. Yet this wire was worn thin. Climbing it would require more strength and oxygen than this diver had left in his tank. So, he tossed his burned out stump of a cigar and cut the rope.

Seconds melted into forever as the jumper fell faster than the rain, allowing his dirt-colored eyes to gaze up into the grey haze without being stung. Wind wrapped around him like a winter coat. His eyelids had borne the weight of iron mountains for so long. Finally, they found rest. His body clumsily danced with water and wind.

Light blinds shut eyes. A hand reaches towards the heavens to stifle the light. Eyes flutter open and peak through the cracks of the fleshy shield above. Amber rays pierce the guard and force the eyes to slam shut once again, but only for a brief moment. The hazel saucers fight against the brightness, refusing to be sealed. As the orange flood evaporates, the sting diminishes. A pale blue sea, rippled by thin strands of gold, replaces the suffocating light.

Soft wind wipes the sea clean as a dazed boy sits up. Chocolate eyes widen as they absorb the surrounding world. Tall grass, golden like the messy hair of the drowsy dweller, looms above and around the young boy. The same rays that once attacked him now bring him comfort, breathing warmth equal to a hot spring atop of Mount Everest into his skin. Sweat wets the boy's forehead and trickles down from the straw nest sitting atop his head. Cicadas cry, filling the humid air with the sounds of summer while the scent of honeysuckle lingers in the vibrating air. Waves of
nostalgia wash over the dreamer. He drowns in memories of a place untouched by time. A foreign, human yawn nearly shocks him from his trance. Beside the boy lies a girl also in the spring of her childhood. Silky hair, orange like autumn leaves, gives way to two crystal pools, as soft and blue as the ocean above the waking pair. The aqua pools take in the gawking boy. A smile, far brighter than the blinding rays of the sun, illuminates the young girl’s face, revealing teeth as white and pure as a December’s snow before the flakes are blackened by the dirt of the Earth.

No words are spoken. The boy simply basks in the girl’s radiance, absorbing her aura into his own. Long dead embers begin to glow deep within the boy’s core. Steadily, flames build upon flames until a bonfire gently rages. At this moment, he knows that the existence of this girl is more important to him than that of the sun or even the blood flowing through his veins. Their hands find each other, fingers weaving through fingers tailoring a bond tighter than fabrics of time. Hands joint, hearts joint, beating with such harmonious union it would bring even Beethoven to tears. Together the children rise and stroll through the field of gold, making their way to the only source of shade in this desert of innocence: a thousand year old oak tree. Doves cover the branching arms of the ancient guardian, complimenting the shrill songs of the cicadas with a soft chorus of coos. A weathered and worn scar warps the tree’s rough skin in the shape of a heart. No words, nothing else, simply a hundred year heart in a thousand year tree. Two fingers trace the smooth lines of the scar, starting from the tip and meeting at the crevice. They touch and unify once again. The sun still shines and the cicadas still cry. Boy and girl lie side by side under the shade of a tree in a field lost in time. Nothing matters but the warmth of the pair of hands locked together. Forever melts away as the boy drifts back into peaceful slumber. Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt.
“When a mommy and daddy love each other so much, they decide that they want to have a family together.”
This was how my mom’s speech began the day she announced she was pregnant with my baby sis, Annie.
At the time, she was convinced the four of us would make one big happy family.

Five years later, my mom’s speech began the exact same way,
But after five years of late night fighting, a layoff from work, and a hell of a lot of bills to pay,
So much has changed.
A cavernous whitened sheet is my mother’s face
With two darkened pits for eyes.

“But things fall apart.”

Toothpick bridges fall apart.
Apple pies exploding in the oven fall apart.
Newspaper articles, five year old tennis shoes, and bikes crashing down steep hills all fall apart,
But we can still find a way to mend and preserve them and continue with life as it is.

At seven years old, I had a hard time believing marriage and love and every fairytale I had ever hoped for was capable of falling apart.
“Can’t you just say, ‘I’m sorry’?”
“Sweetie, things don’t always work that way.”

Things fall apart.
They fall apart and they can’t and won’t ever mend no matter how many stars we wish upon,
No matter how much glue and tape we lather on to make things appear repairable,
No matter how many birthday candles we blow out or child’s dreams we dream,
Things fall apart.

We all must come to the realization that those great pillars we once imagined would hold up
Aren't impervious to time, hate, and feuding. Love can fall apart. I learned this when I was just seven years old when my parents got that divorce that was "better for everyone in this family." I learned this when I was just seven years old, and I look back on it at age eighteen as a college freshman experiencing the ache of a breakup. Love falls apart when we least expect it to. It falls apart like a baby grand piano set on fire from the inside. Passionately with intensity, it burns and deteriorates from the inside out Charring our heartstrings until they play no more. Things fall apart, but what can we do except cut our losses and move on? Things fall apart... Love falls apart.
sketch

i

surely

knew

music was written of this

you

and delivered backward through

falling

time to just this moment

for

why?

how long

i couldn’t say

but you

and i could try to tell you all of how i

seemed

felt in just that moment, but i think

reluctant

now i’ve lost it or otherwise find it so

to

little of worth and so much of code

lay

that it would be like telling a lover my

flat

frightful dream.

What I erase I can’t get back,
And so I stuck in you in the stack.

Ben Keiper