

# The Paper Lantern

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The Paper Lantern considers for publication original creative writing submitted by current students of Normandale Community College. Opinions expressed therein are not necessarily those of the college administration, faculty, student body, or the Creative Writing Club.

This semester The Paper Lantern is proud to include some 2018 winners of the Patsy Lea Core Award. The following pages feature winning stories and poems. Anna Gergen won first place in poetry, and her poems are found on pages 15-21. Jane O' Shea won first place for fiction and her piece "A Fishing Story" is found on pages 27-32. Additional winners include Katie Miller Chang's "A Full Life" which won second place in fiction, and is found on pages 50-59 and Rachel Lindo's "Denouement" which won third in fiction and is found on pages 69-76.

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# Telelangapathy

by Leo Kellogg

I will write you something:

It will be full of suns and moons,  
in the way that Earth is full of songs  
and moons and suns and  
tides and

your fish eye gaze. I will write  
something very big and tall  
like a Shanghai skyscraper

with empty desks and loose  
cables drawn across the floor  
behind solar shaded windows.

In a room I imagine you'll sit, on a bed  
beneath a collapsable A-frame roof  
and read it wondering how I got your  
address.

Ink covered in handprints will fill the page;  
no words, no apostrophes or commas;  
just a hand pressed to paper  
a half-dozen times.

# Selene

by Isaiah Porter

I stared at the singular moon  
far in the abyssal vacuum,  
her craters; infinite, gaping eyes,  
and gravity; hands molding the oceans,  
like obedient children,  
dancing under her merciful grasp.

I laid in my wife's grasp,  
arms around me, the midnight waves crashing by the moon's  
will. I never wanted to have children.  
The beach, soaked our dripping wet feet into a watery vacuum,  
as a singular turtle, crawled back to the ocean,  
not wanting her eggs, leaving them without ears or eyes.

I asked my wife what's in my eyes.  
She said, "An abyss I couldn't begin to grasp.  
A murky and expanding ocean.  
What do you see?" She asked. "A vigilant moon  
so vast and void around a hazel vacuum."  
I replied. We giggled. So childish.

There was a cry, a wailing child.  
But we couldn't find where it came from through her nor my eyes.  
Sea stretched over the sweet spring bed horizon, like a mattress  
sheet, yet a swirling vacuum,  
churning at a ladle's grasp.  
Why must she be so violent, the moon?  
Must her wishes be so harsh on the ocean?

The screams had stopped, swallowed by the ocean.  
Gone. The waters calmed. Grounded children  
contemplating with my feet as they surveyed across the sands; a  
rover on the moon,  
desperately moving through with a singular eye.

My wife tried to jump above the waves when they chased her toes,  
but their grasp,  
too strong, pulled her; sucked her in the dense sandy vacuum.

We would die in the vacuum.  
Too weak, too insignificant for that vast ocean,  
teaming with Earth's, Mars', and Venus' grasp.

Too distant to be depending children  
clinging to hugs too tight to let go of. We would never leave their  
gaping eyes,  
tethered down, like Earth's moon.

And who is that grasping Mother Moon,  
claiming our eyes with her light? Are our eyes mother's too? Do they  
fashion  
our hands as their will like Selene's obedient ocean cast waves  
of influence? And are our hands not mothers of their own grasp? In  
spindling  
labor of those children we call fingerprints and these words  
put on page. Sucked in a maternal vacuum, stuck on legacy;

I and her are the same, as my wife is to that child-like ocean and so am I.

# Hey Pudding! Do You Have a Dollar?

by Vicki Erickson



# Bonnie and Clyde

by Emily Rova

Large raindrops fell from the gloomy, grey sky. Despite this, the city below was still as busy as ever. The lights of the cars driving by reflected off the wet street. Two pairs of feet rushed across the street, not taking the time to avoid the puddles that had formed. Neither of the two hesitated as they ran on the busy street. In the distance an alarm began to ring, rather than making them stop and look, the two only began to run faster. Travelling further away from the alarm, the sounds of the busy street began to quiet down. Soon enough the only sounds they heard was an occasional car, their feet hitting the ground, and the constant patter of rain falling down. The pair slowed down as they started to lose their adrenaline rush. After coming to a full stop, the two locked eyes before bursting out into a short-breathed laughter. The shorter of the two pulled down the hood of her coat, revealing her short cut, blonde hair and pale face flushed in pink from the cold and breathlessness. A smirk crossed her rose tinted lips as her eyes caught sight of something just behind the other. With a gesture, the other turned to see a convenience store only a few feet ahead.

The bright, white lights of the convenience store starkly contrasted the dreary sky outside. Inside the store the pair split, the girl made her way to the small section of food, while the other went to area with personal items. The taller of the pair had on a beanie that covered most of his hair, only a few dark brown strands could be seen peeking in the front. Above deep brown eyes, a pair of thick eyebrows furrowed in concentration while he searched for

something on the shelves. They relaxed once his eyes landed on a bottle of pain reliever. A gloved hand hastily grabbed the bottle as well as a roll of bandages right next to it. Not a second later, the girl appeared at the end of the aisle, her hands holding up a basket with various types of snacks and drinks. A sigh escaped the male, shaking his head in defeat he set the items he had in his own hands into the basket. As they checked out, the noise of the small tv behind the counter filled the otherwise silent store. The voice of a news anchorman interrupted whatever show had been playing previously. "Police are in pursuit of two suspects in a bank robbery that happened only two hours ago. The pair are also suspected to have been involved in three other robberies that have occurred in the past month."

The cashier paused for a moment to look over at the tv, two mug shots of a man and a woman were shown on the screen. The woman looked to be in her early 20s, with short, blonde hair, hazel eyes, and pale skin. The man looked around the same age as the woman, his hair was dark brown, with eyes that matched with a similar shade. Both of them looked as if they could be just an average citizen.

The sound of a hand slamming down on the counter caught the attention of the cashier and he snapped his head in the direction of the sound. He was met face to face with the barrel of a pistol. The woman had the gun in a steady hold, keeping it aimed between the eyes of the cashier as her accomplice reached over the counter and grabbed handfuls of cash from the open register. The cashier kept his



eyes locked on the gun, fearing if he looked anywhere else he would seal his fate. He was shaking, yet his body was frozen, not allowing him to move even if he wanted. A low voice broke through the soft noise of the tv, "Press the emergency button."

Hesitantly the cashier turned his head to look at the male miscreant in confusion. Only receiving a slight nod in confirmation. Slowly, the cashier moved his hand under the counter to find the button to alert the police. Not a second later the alarms began to blare throughout the small convenience store. The woman lowered her gun, the calm look on her face remained throughout the whole ordeal, even with the sound of sirens in the distance. Both the man and woman made their way to the exit, only to be stopped by the unsteady voice of the cashier.

"Why didn't you kill me?"

A short scoff came from the woman, "What? Did you want me to shoot you?" she sighed with a slight shake of her head, "It makes it more fun when there are witnesses."

Without sparing another glance, the two young fugitives ran out of the convenience store and into the now sunny streets. The rain had stopped and the skies cleared, the only remnant of the storm were the puddles that two pairs of feet dashed through, not wasting time to avoid them.

# You

by Jane O'Shea

Curls, bobby-pinned, shrouded:  
tiny son clinging like baby gibbon;

You emulate the maudlin Madonna  
obscured in a cobbled brick niche, veiled from the floating,  
bleeding god-man.

You beseech Mother Mary for a daughter.

She gleefully boots your ribs,  
tiny Sasquatch  
floating smug in her skin globe.  
Saltwater bursts and gushes  
she arches her back and swans:  
effervescent otter  
belly-flopping a glassy slope.

Leather manacles imprison  
your tender wrists like raptor claws.  
Doctor general commands silence.

Your teeth press your bottom lip,  
till iron blood espouses brackish tears;



Your primordial scream escapes,

duets with lusty newborn wailing.

Hoisted by her clacking baby ankles,

slippery buttocks slapped, she caterwauls

her brazen indignation.

# Smash

by Angeline Roehl

I want to wrap my fingers tight  
around the taped handle of a metal bat,  
feel my sweat slicked palms pulse in time  
to a raging heart as my back muscles pull  
and my shoulders crackle with the force  
of my bat colliding with forgotten glass bottles.

I want to see the bottles fold into themselves  
and the jars blow up like landmines as the shattering rings  
like broken little bells in my ears  
while the glass flies around me like jagged little fireflies  
glittering under the pounding rays of the sun.

I want to hear the glass crunch beneath my beat up boots  
as I stalk across the yard to the rusted shell of a car  
before I break into a run; raising the old bat like a great sword  
as I charge with a scream rising out of me like a Wednesday tornado  
siren,  
starting low from the depths of my burning belly only to grow  
louder as it rises into a roar of a savage warrior, drowning my ears  
in a voice bigger and stronger than my whole being.

I want to smell the mildewy musk of the old patterned seats  
as my weapon breaks open the cracked windshield or  
the sweet dusty metallic smell of oiled machinery  
as I beat the rusty hood like a cheated woman  
from a Carrie Underwood song, watching the metal bend  
and flake off like oxidized scabs as my bat bites into the metal.

I want to taste the bittersweet blood

dripping out of my nose from my aggressive exertion  
as it drips to the trash covered ground  
and stains the front of my dusty shirt,  
but I won't notice because I'll be glaring into the sky  
when it's on fire and feel the burning of new calluses  
forming on my soft palms, scratched up and swollen  
as the beast behind my hissing teeth is finally soothed.

# The Sign Says Not to Touch

by Anna Gergen

*After Robert Henri's "Edna Smith (The Sunday Shawl)"*

*Oil on canvas, 1915*

He gilded her body in a moulded frame,  
her lips in oiled light, her nipples he daubed  
from the same rosy pigment of her navel.  
I researched flowers to compare, *hydrangea*  
*double delights* fit the pink rococo. I think  
Henri would have approved. Nipples as  
pointed petals. Girls as breasts as flowers.

He *captures the sitter's sensuality with erotic*  
*spontaneity*. A three-inch mounted plaque captures  
his capturing. Edna simpers. She sheds dresses  
for kicks. A *self-possessed woman*, it says, what fanciful  
femininity. But where is the plaque denoting  
the connotations of the original plaque? The curator  
must *deem the subject an agreeable woman, likes*  
*long walks on the beach, has a penchant for disrobing*.

Teenage artists throng through the gallery.  
A baggy military jacket with a nose ring  
describes the allure of portraiture, what you can do  
with a permanent eye. Break fourth walls. Cast  
eternal shade. Edna peeps at the next portrait, a maid  
who slides her fishnets wide for the world  
but not the artist. "It's interesting what you can do  
with a look," they mumble, and then disappear.

Oh, Edna. The shit  
you put up with. Teenagers snorting charcoal  
and plaques with smarmy agendas. Artists  
painting your lips shut and writers prying  
them open. And you:

*Come and get me.*



# Get Ready for Me Love, 'Cause I'm a Commer

by Anna Gergen

*Slap!* His hand hits the desk, hits  
like a body, *thud thud thud*, it's not  
a knock, it's an fireman's axe  
through a lock, the way a man  
spreads his arms, grabs the world  
by her shoulders, and *shakes*. He tells  
me to *fix it!* like he's climbed Sinai  
with an ice pick. Oh boy, has he seen  
the light, has he *ever*. There's blood  
in his eyes, age staining his lips. *Fix it!*  
he chants, like he's grown to sky heights  
and *multiplied*.

*Fix it!* he and he and he says.

*Fix it!*

*Fix it!*

*Fix it!*

*Fuck it.*

I am electric. I power whole  
cities, crackle through every  
wire, signal, and impulse firing  
in every brain. I stretch my fingers  
to the sky and lighting whips—  
*cracks*— though empty skies.

If you don't catch the flash,  
you'll hear big ugly thunder.

It *booms* in his ribcage, splinters  
every bone he picks with me.

I hit back.

He slaps the desk and  
spits on his chin and  
tears his old hair and  
peels his dull skin and  
*rages, rages*, a blind bull.

He doesn't deserve another metaphor.

I will write this a million  
ways on a million walls:

*Light has no eyes.*

*It does not see you.*

It's *you* who can't see without the glow.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Italicized title taken after "Don't Rain on My Parade" by Barbra Streisand

# Ribcage

by Anna Gergen

My bird heart beats its bird skull on bars made of bone, *thwap*, again and again. She's had a bad hair day, all that banging, all those barbs hanging limp with blood. Poor thing. She doesn't know about the poison, how it's snaking down my throat. She has seconds, tops. *Thwap, thwap*. The liquid burbles like swamp muck, hissing like it has a grudge. I mean, it probably does. I can't hear over my little goldfinch whimpering. She flaps her wings, hops from foot to clawed foot. *You're too late*, I want to say, vision fuzzing like mold. She's incessant, she's insane. She doesn't understand cages, how they're meant to keep in, not out.

# A Valentine's Primer (on Ash Wednesday)

by Anna Gergen

A is for apple, even Eve couldn't resist. I'm going biblical because I, too, self-select sweets over cards and roses crumpled in a littered backseat. Today, at least, I say it is intentional. Sooty evangelist ashes cross foreheads while pinked people French kiss in the crosshairs of saints: Valentine versus God's resurrection, what a Wednesday. I eat it up.

H is for humdrum, as in ho-hum, as in Harry Styles insisting I *light up his world like nobody else*. The shame just floors me as I wail like a rockstar in my Taurus. It kills my dignity to shimmy shoulders, wiggle hips. I deny loving anyone, defy the crush's placid shrug. I sigh, meaning to huff, or maybe that's backwards. Harry wails *nobody else* like a wolf serenading sheep. At least he's decisive.

O is for "oh, baby" and variations on the theme. Please please honey leave the poetic waxing to fridge magnets: quivering loins and engorged something-or-others, ew. Really anything that heats cheeks should be quarantined to sheets and showers. I'm the prude, duh, the habit that puts the sense in abstinence. In a word: blush. I'm the under-experienced, over-it-all sensibility. And yet

V is still for Valentine, at least in the carefully kerned white space of this unholy thing. I strike a match so x's and o's burn like crosses on foreheads, like liking you and all your illicit iterations. Like coupling "zeal" with "feel" and calling the baby a lovechild.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Italicized line taken from "What Makes You Beautiful" by One Direction

Snow Deer  
by Jane O'Shea



# Bites from Winter

by Angeline Roehl

Avalanches don't exist in Minnesota  
because our white Winters already bite the cold  
cuts of frost nestled deep in our bundled bodies.  
Dark snow already slicks our roads, tasting of bitter salt that  
eliminates the glossy shine our cars bore last  
Fall, a season that filled our ears with crispy leaves and the  
ghost of pumpkin spiced everything that filled the world with orange.  
Hell has frozen over here, leaving a white desert  
ill with negative numbers glazing my eyes over with ice,  
jagged breaths being pulled from chattering teeth  
killing my small body slowly with sharp stabs  
lacerating the strings that hold warmth to my shell.  
Mother's soup is savory on my tongue but  
not enough to free me from  
out of this body of ice, crackling first from my hands.  
Poplars taunt me from the window, telling me I'm no Snow  
Queen just for silently coming into the world in a  
rain of frozen crystals glimmering in my mother's pained eyes  
true to her panic punching her swollen gut  
until her first babe born shy of being blue, left her  
vulva as a tiny doll of wrinkled flesh in the cold dead winter.  
Water tickles my cold body warm with its rising steam as I think of  
Xs made by footprints in the snow on my long trek home.  
Young lovers cuddle in for warmth, smelling of cold desire but  
Zzz's are all I get from my sleeping boyfriend who works nights.

# The Prairie

by Jane O'Shea

At summer's wane the bluestem waves farewell  
Over fading wild sunflowers and starry purple asters  
Seedheads spread like spindly monkey hands  
Whitetail melts into the flora

Over fading wild sunflowers and starry purple asters  
She flags her snowy tail like a referee  
Whitetail melds with the flora  
Only coneflower's shiver reveals her

She flags her snowy tail like a referee  
Fades into tall and crispy native grasses  
Only coneflower's quiver betrays her  
Raucous pheasant erases deadens footfalls

She fades into tall and crispy native grasses  
Burgundy and gold against chilly cobalt sky  
Raucous pheasant drowns footfalls  
Crickets' chirping drones like a sermon

Burgundy and gold against chilly sapphire sky  
Milkweed pods stippled, pregnant with silken seeds  
Crickets drone, an endless Sunday sermon  
Wind parts prairie grass; startled whitetail leaps



Milkweed pods dappled, pregnant with silken seeds  
Prairie bends low, reveals a squatting hunter  
Wind parts prairie grass, startled doeling leaps  
And the skirmish to the death commences

The prairie bends, unveils the squatting hunter  
He shoulders his rifle, presses cold steel to cheek  
The skirmish to the death has commenced  
And the odds are stacked against his quarry

He shoulders his Remington, pressing barrel to stubbled cheek  
Gunpowder and surprise are powerful weapons  
And the odds are against his quarry  
Whitetail limbs become springs; she bolts and zigzags

Gunpowder and surprise are powerful adversaries  
Adrenaline launches the doe like a fighter jet  
Whitetail limbs become springs; flying, zigzagging  
Fence but a few leaps beyond

Adrenaline launches her like a fighter jet  
Heart pounding like a woodpecker in her breast  
The barbed wire fence just one leap ahead  
Haunches bunch: a final bid for life

Heart pounding like a woodpecker in her breast  
Breath a drowning child's gasp  
Haunches bunch: a last bid for life  
She leaps skyward

Breath a drowning child's gasp  
Deadened by gun's cracking  
Leaps skyward, clipping the *No Trespass* sign  
Crimson stains her pure white stockings

Silenced by rifle's cracking  
Lashes at the void and tumbles into the field beyond  
Crimson taints her stocking' pure whiteness  
Staggers, finds feet, and races for the forest

Thrashes at the void and tumbles into the field beyond  
Stunned hunter's eyes follow her escape;  
She staggers, finds her feet, and races to the trees  
Melting into tangled vine and fading limb

Hunter's mouth closes as she merges with the prairie  
Seedheads span like spindly monkey hands  
Whitetail collapses in the gully to lick her wounded hock  
At summer's wane, the bluestem waves farewell

To the hunter, slouching home.

# A Fishing Story

by Jane O'Shea

At dawn the lake is flat and silver, a newly minted fifty cent piece strewn with lily flowers, waiting for the first kiss of the morning sun. The canoe is roped to the aluminum dock, tied up like a horse at the hitching post, wooden paddles idle across the seats. The soft thump of Georgia's careful footfalls echoes in the silence, broken only by the whistling of the earliest birds. Coffee is already flowing in her veins, kicking in the adrenalin rush of the fisherwoman, the huntress, the provider. The steel dock is slick with last night's dew, and she lowers herself carefully, slipping off the edge to the bottom of the narrow, unsteady boat, settling herself and her fishing rod on the seat in the bow. She does not allow herself to shiver in the damp air, but quickly unwinds the rope tethering the canoe.

She pushes off, the soft plop of paddle on water rinsing away her sleepiness. Grey mare's tails flit across the eastern sky, and a soft, rosy pinkness blushes on the horizon. Georgia chooses her weapon, a red and yellow buzzy bait, and the casting begins, a soothing, regular rhythm. The line whirs off the spinning reel, the lure plinks in the shallow water, the bail clicks over and she winds in the tiny, shiny trap, churring and diving, leaving a vee in the water like south winging geese. In the reeds, the great blue heron also stalks her breakfast, her legs lanky, like wooden chopsticks. There is an aerie made of sticks in a dead box elder leaning over the lake. Safe and warm, still sleeping in feathery balls, her hatchlings await brunch.

*She wonders if her own young are awake yet. She left them curled up like squirrels in their sleeping bags, the edges of the bags rolled around their sleepy heads like fluffy gray tails. Her heart sinks then as she remembers her oncologist's face yesterday afternoon. "Early stages," he had said, his steel eyes veiled; eyes accustomed to puddling themselves into quicksilver when his*

*thin lips formed the "C" word-cancer. She had coiled herself like a mama kitty around the boys last night as the campfire slowly burned to ash, numb at even the prospect of leaving them orphans. She wrapped her arms around her breasts as she lay awake in the tent, wondering how they could have betrayed her, still stinging where the needle had drawn the biopsy.*

On the third cast, the first bass rises to take the bait, striking like a hungry lion. She is startled out of her reverie, lifts the rod tip, and reels furiously. The fish flips out of the water, slaps the surface with a webbed tail, and spits the lure back at her, disappearing into the weeds. Adrenalin rushes through her veins. "Next time, you little bastard," she says through gritted teeth.

The lakeshore, a perfect circle, forces the meandering arc of the canoe southward, then east into the sunrise and a carpet of lily pads. A sleepy painted turtle blinks at the intruder, and spotted leopard frogs spring off their pads and plop into the water. The southeast curve of the lake, just beyond the lilies, is called Bass Cove by those who know its secrets. A cormorant dries her wings on a craggy log hanging out over the shallow water. Georgia knows a well-placed lure will sting the bass resting in its shadow. She breathes deeply, rears back, and plinks the shiny, buzzing bait just off the point of the log. The water swirls, then explodes, and the game is on. The tip of the rod bends nearly double, and it takes all of her biceps and triceps and forearms to keep it from touching the lake. Her wrists scream under the weight of a fish fighting for its life. The bass is game and feisty, darting left and right, pulling out line even as he is drawn in. The fisherwoman reaches for the net, her deltoids on fire, as she one-hands the rod and sneaks the net into the water. Dipping underneath the wriggling fish, she sieves it from the cool depths of the lake, triumphantly grinning at the trophy. The slippery bass writhes like an angry eel, and the lure, barely anchored in the corner of its lips, dislodges. With a final buck

he exits the net and flops back into the water, disappearing with a saucy *touche'* of his tail.

“Fucking Goddammit all to hell!” The vulgarities sound too loud in the quiet morning, and the dirty echoes bounce off the boat ramp and fishing dock. “Shit!”

She startles a family of rowdy otters sliding down the muddy bank, belly-whomping with utter glee, sleek and dark and shiny. She is so close she can see the glint in their eyes, their quivery whiskers. The round-tummied, stumpy legged, awkward pups flop in the water, splashing madly. They climb up the slope again and again, bunting their watchful mother constantly, to make sure she is there to protect them from the unknown, needing her guidance. Their games have spooked the Northern Pike from their haunt near the dock, so she paddles the curve on to the north shore of the lake. Dipping, dipping, swinging the paddle back, over and over. The sun is ascending, and there are ripples on the water. The magic fishing hour is evaporating. She promised the kids a fish in the fry pan for breakfast.

*Yesterday, the oncologist said promising words, too, like Stage One and curable. She remembers her own mother, the grandmother her boys never met, dying before they were born. She remembers her own anger that her mother had accepted the terminal diagnosis, had seemed to slide into death too easily. There had been no Hollywood scene of sentiment at her deathbed; rather she had slipped so willingly into the morphine cloud. She had faded into the white hospice sheets and wisped beyond the curtain without a last goodbye. The cancer word sticks in Georgia's chest like a broken arrow. Even the pure joy of otters at play does not cheer her today.*

The last weed bed promises nothing. A whip-poor-will mourns from a willow tree at the edge of the lake. The sun is glary now, and her sunglasses are back at the campsite. Her wrists ache from fish battles and reeling, reeling, reeling. Her dock nears, and she can count the remaining casts on one hand. When the fish hits, it startles her with its ferocity. She

cranks the reel handle, tucking the curled rod under her armpit and winding her arm around it to hold its weight. There is no cheeky leap, no slap of tail. The fish dives deep, and heads under the canoe. Even a novice knows a Northern Pike is on the line, and it feels like a whopper. Georgia forgets to breathe as they battle. She pulls in a yard of line, and the fish takes two back, straining and diving into the weeds in the fight for its very existence. Each moment is suspended animation: an adventure movie in slow motion. At last the line shortens, and the fish is there, two feet under the surface. It shies when it sees the shadow of the net, and dives one last time. Georgia dips the net into the water, lifts the rod with the last of her strength, and scoops the behemoth into the canoe.

The battle is not yet over. The lure is hooked in the roof of the Northern's bony mouth. Its teeth are those of a carnivorous dinosaur, jutting fangs slanted backwards. He is as long as her arm, and angry. Georgia's heart hammers. The Northern Pike flops wildly, sliming her with his fishiness and slamming his drowning body against the wales of the canoe and her leg. She grabs the ratty towel, wraps it securely around the monster's jaws, and pries the barbed hooks from the bony palate of the fish. They are jammed deep in between the bones, and she reaches into her pocket for the pliers, gritting her teeth as she twists the treble barbs. He squirms in pain as the hooks dislodge. Her hands are trembling as she wrests the third hook out. The lure clinks into the bottom of the canoe. The pike's eyes are golden and glassy in a perfectly carved prehistoric face. His body is long and shimmery, striped in saffron and black, full of juicy, mild white flesh. But he is not a he; the pale, swollen belly is engorged with eggs. She is a she. And an expectant mother, too. Her time is running out as she drowns in the oxygen above the water. Her mouth gulps for breath. Her flopping slows and her eyes bulge. Georgia wraps her arms around the giant fish and places a tiny kiss on the top of her head. She gently lowers the

rubenesque creature over the side of the canoe, like a mother settling her baby into a bassinet. She watches the fish's body resurrect in the cool water. The Northern floats and pauses, unconvinced she has been liberated. Then she wriggles wildly and darts into the soothing depths of mother lake.

*There will be a fierce battle with an unseen enemy. There will be pain and fatigue. There will be needles and nausea and her hair will may run down the drain. She will keep Will and Levi close, and let their youthful optimism buoy her through the deepest waters. She will fight for the chance to raise them into manhood, and the chance to hold her grandchildren to her battle-scarred bosom.*

All that remains is the slime and the stink of fish, splattered over Georgia's ragged sweatpants, scruffy boots, and old undershirt. The bottom of the canoe is littered with the detritus of the battle: a wet net, a smear of blood, stringers and spools of line tossed about like potato chips. She clips the lure to the second eyelet on the rod, and rinses her hands off in the soft water of the lake. Georgia paddles the final bend of the lake slowly, catching back her ragged breath in the clean air of a new day. The busy buzz of the redwing blackbird and the hollow hammering of the woodpecker tickle her ears. The kids are waving from the dock, barefoot in their crumpled pajamas, with cherry cheeks and bedhead. There will be pancakes on the camp stove for breakfast, with lots of butter and syrup.

# Still Wet

by Jane O'Shea





# Edward Albert

by Kelly Bort

Grandfather was a curmudgeon  
He was also a kind protector  
When he was not drunk

He smelled like unfiltered Camels  
Coughed into an empty milk carton  
Wheezed, gasped, tried to breathe.

He did not work, no breathe  
Instead, he cooked all the meals  
Sat in the kitchen all day.

He had time for her  
She slept in his warm lap  
Safe from her mother

He sold Lemon Water Ice  
Delicious, sour, sweet, refreshing  
She helped him push the cart.

He was always gruff to her  
“Go over there and don’t bother me”  
But his push was always soft.

One day the kitchen was empty,  
The girl searched the house.

They said he was “in hospital”

She begged to see him

The Doctor gave special permission

She entered the room sad and scared

He lay in a huge white tent

Trying to breath he gasped to her

“Please, bring me a cigarette”

# Anxiety

by Jane O'Shea

Slithers between sheets,  
uninvited, serpentine

Coiling deep inside my corroded core,  
sinking icy fangs into my nucleus.

Adrenaline eddies and surges,  
brawling with the fuzzy rodent  
curled in my brain.

The bravado of yesterday is lost  
in the tangle of high-count cotton,  
and scales, and slippery doubts.

Sleep dissipates with a laconic whimper.

Little dog gurgles and vomits  
on the imported Indian rug,

and I envy her talent at regurgitating  
her pain.

# Not My Father's Daughter

by Clarissa Schmieg

The dark water beat against the boat in a soft 'thump' that was so rhythmic it could put a screaming infant to sleep. It was often the only noise you heard on the lake, apart from the birds and the occasional motors that passed by. If you listened intently enough you could hear the reeling of the fishing rod and the *splat* of the red and white bobber as it hit the surface. I tried not to pay much attention to that, I normally wouldn't because I would find myself reading a book at the stern of the boat, with both feet dangling in the water. The cool liquid would hug my toes and the occasional fish would come up for a nibble, tickling my feet.

I would spend hours on this boat and once the afternoon came, the sun would glare violently against the water, so that I could barely keep my eyes open because it hurt so bad. And as bad as the sun on the lake was, nothing compared to the burning against my shoulders and back when the sunburn starts to set in.

Despite how hot it was; it was equally peaceful. Once in a while a breeze would come through the open space and my hair would tickle across my nose as well as the faintest smell of fish and dirt from the worm bucket that rested on the deck behind me. As much as I disliked the smell, it felt glorious as it stopped the sweat that would trickle down my back for a moment as I cooled off and I couldn't complain about that. Above the birds would swarm in flocks waiting to see if they could get one chance at a worm or a fish, looking for a moment to strike and as they circled it gave a wonderful break from the rays when they flew so perfectly over you. They would squeak and squawk ruining this silent bubble I had created for myself.

My father, whom I had just become acquainted with, disliked them with a passion. He disliked anything that disrupted him. Once I had found my spot at the tip of the boat I wasn't to move – he'd give me some time to figure out the most comfortable point and have my can of soda in a spot that it wouldn't get warm in – then I was to freeze. Every turn of a page in my book was to be as silent as the fall of an eyelash to my cheek. It didn't matter if we were there for 2 hours or 10, it was what he wanted and what he liked so who was I to get in his way; even if I was his kid. However, I didn't mind at first, I loved reading, it was my thing. Besides Growing up in the small town of Reedsburg, Wisconsin, didn't leave much room for entertainment and only left room for hunting, hiking and fishing. All things that were against my very nature but they made him who he was and I wanted to be a part of that.

He wasn't a clean man: his house was dirty and he had empty gun shells everywhere along with mud stained boots laying in the front entry as a trap for anyone who entered without caution. The one room we shared together was just as messy, I had a little corner to myself that was all neat and tidy; and sometimes I found it hard to believe this man was my father. His life was always in chaos, he never had any jobs either. Which was frustrating for him because obviously with kids you need money so he did things such as cash paying jobs like white washing; where he didn't get a check that had the child support automatically taken out. I remember he would come home covered in paint, he had about 300 bucks for his job, he'd lay it on the table and crack a beer in victory. As if telling himself job well done.

I think these things jaded him slowly. He was mean and angry most of the time and I couldn't blame him. I had found myself angry when things didn't go how I had planned and I imagine his life was not where he wanted it at that time. However, one day he seemed to lose his mind and he

snapped. When you hear someone snapped you imagine that they went on a killing spree, started a shooting or went screaming through town naked. It wasn't like that really, but it was dark and it was violent. I don't think I have ever seen so much blood and so many things broken like I did that day.

\*

When I was on my way to meet my father for the first time I didn't know it would have ended up like this. I wouldn't have let the old lady in the coral pink dress shirt take me from my foster home if I did. I would have thrown a fit and dug my heels into the ground until they decided I had a screw loose in my head and the only solution was to lock me up in a padded cell. Anything was better than there. But I didn't know that my life was going to change so much and instead of the fear I soon became accustomed to, I had a swell of anticipation. Growing up all I wanted was a family and finding out that I had one that wanted me was more than I could have hoped for and here was this man who wanted me. My surprise was unlike anything I had felt before because I had thought my step father was my real father and once I found out that was a lie, my mother gave me the depressing news that my real dad was dead. Shortly after that I was placed into the system with no hope of a family, but here was now a sliver.

The whole ride up I watched cars go by, they were speeding faster than we were as the old lady gripped the wheel tightly and drove ever so carefully. Her driving had to have added 2 more hours onto our long journey. But I found plenty to do for a while. I would pick the first letter I saw on a car and think of an item that started with it; and I did this until my brain could think no more. The highway driving was not bad, the comfy cushions from the light blue car made it bearable, but the rural drive was a different story. The smell of cow poop invaded the car, covering the old musky perfume the lady wore. Both were so awful I wasn't sure which was worse.

Sometimes it looked like it was just a painted picture of farm land, other times our car would spook the animals to run away freely and I could picture myself running alongside them all day long, I was prepared to pick up after them and take care of them with all the love I could muster. I wondered if he would let me get a dog, it was what I always wanted. I wondered if I had brothers and sister and if so did we look alike? Did I look like my father? Was I like my father?

\*

As it turns out, I am not like my father very much. To an extent I am angry, I've always been that way and mean but I work on it. He had it hard growing up, I guess, which is where I may be too compassionate; because I make excuses for him and forgive him, yet my life was not much better than his, in fact it was worse. But I can still understand him. His mom was an alcoholic, when I first met her I could smell it coming from her pores. She married this guy who is my "Grandpa", but I don't even know his name to be honest. So this guy, who we will call Grandpa, pretended to be my dad's father until he snuck out one night. He had snuck out to go hang out with some friends after winning a wrestling match and he drank a little then drove home. Grandpa, not unfamiliar with the smell of liquor, caught it right away and it had to have been hard to hide the disappointment. Here is your 'son', the boy you raised to be better than this and the mother that birthed him, a boy that is on his way to becoming a successful athlete, a boy that could have a better future than you ever had, sneaking around like a low life. This was literally how my Grandpa explained this to me. In response to my father's actions my Grandpa yelled at him, told him he was no son of his and that he spent all his life pretending to be his father but his real father walked out on him, probably because he knew what a disappointment he was going to be. Then he knocked him upside the head and shoved him into his room, locking him away with the windows already nailed shut. The branch on a tree can only bend so far before it breaks. However, the same

thing happened to me too. I was abandoned, I didn't know my father was even alive and I lost an entire family and through this I lost a piece of myself. And from that point I understood that was what we had in common, our noses and our loss.

When he realized he didn't belong to my grandpa he lost a part of himself, I understand that now more than ever. He looks at this man and his whole life something must have felt off; he must have felt like he was a misshaped puzzle piece that was trying to squeeze its way into a picture that he didn't belong in. His personality traits, his looks. They didn't come from his mom and now, as it turns out, not from his dad either and as far as he was concerned he didn't have a father. I think that was the day that ruined him, that complete feeling of despair and emptiness, it can make a person crazy. He became cynical and mean, violent outbursts with my mom; which she warned me about years later when I visited her. When I confessed me living with him and that he hadn't changed, she laughed, actually laughed like I had told her a joke and asked me what I had expected. Not this Mom, not this.

\*

Despite it all, some days were good. Especially in the beginning. There was fishing that was routinely done every Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. I will never know how we afforded it. We watched WWE wrestling matches and he would go on long tales about him in the good days while I secretly fell in love with John Cena and Randy Orton. Every morning I would get up for school and he could be sleeping on the couch, he would wake up a little and give me a wave; then reach to take a swig of whatever liquid was available on the coffee table. Unless it was a fishing day I would usually find him in the exact same spot when I got home. And while some days were good others were obviously bad. He drank a lot, punched a lot of holes in the wall, shoved his 'dad' around and got pretty handsy once



he got comfortable around me. He had a pattern of seeming perfect at first, he did it to my mom, he did it to me and as far as I know he did it to the girlfriend that came after me.

It had changed so much and only gone downhill that the day I left was a day of horror. He had gotten a call from the school saying they were concerned about me, that some of my friends had voiced concerns and the school would like to speak to him. He had come bursting into the bedroom, not even bother to open the door all the way and taking off the framework. He just started screaming, I had seen his fits before but not like this. I wanted to go through the window and run but I couldn't, he had put boards up much Grandpa had done to him. So, I opted to run through a tiny gap between his body and the door while he made steps closer to me because with each step he would find something to throw. I was scared if he got too close to me I would be next. His rough and tanned hands were too calloused and cruel that I didn't want them on me. With fear driving me forward I got around him, he was drunk and with lack of coordination it was an easy win on my part until I got to the hall way. It was a weird hallway, there was a room on each end, a bathroom in the middle and a big, random mirror on the wall from the floor to about a third of the way to the ceiling. I felt a hand on me and suddenly I had found myself on the floor, with shattered remains from the mirror covering me.

\*

My father, who was a master manipulator, ended up not going to jail. He ended up going to a psych ward for a little bit until we had court. I won't forget that day either, we were just walking through the hallway and my lawyer was with me when suddenly the air shifted. She grabbed my arm and flung me into the nearest bathroom. There must have been something about him that just tipped her off, but she still asked for a description of him. She looked at me from the crack in the door with sad eyes and told me she wasn't sure if it was him because he was turned away, she told me I had

to look. Here I am, shaking against the tiled wall, my body slowly turning to stone from fear and she was asking me to look at the man who had bothered my dreams every night since the incident. I plucked what little courage I had and peeked through the tiny crack, my nose squishing against the wall as I tried to identify him. His back was turned and I recognized the gray hair that had peppered his once chocolate brown hair. But more than that, his right back pocket had a circular indent from his canned tobacco chew. I knew it was him and quickly nodded my head, jerking myself from the door like I had been electrocuted.

That was the last time I saw him.

# Good Morning

by Kelly Bort



# The Phoenix

by Kaitlin Kramer

Timid buds, slowly peek  
their faces out of their coffins,  
rising like vampires at night.

The sun coaxes them up  
and they peel the shields  
off of their backs  
revealing hues,  
striking cobalt  
flaming crimson  
lovely blush

And the sun a proud mother  
gracing them in gold  
and crying tears of joy  
which crash upon her children

Their miraculous birth forgotten,  
novelty here and gone  
like a firework burst,  
the bellflowers, marigolds, and peonies  
lie weary in the torrid,  
caramel heat that  
beats down in drumming waves  
Stalks swaying and sleepy,  
hunchbacks with scorched garments,  
the sun forsake

them long ago now  
treated as bastards the lot.

They take on a dusty tinge.  
Wind is too often a visitor  
of the battered blossoms.  
The crisp air making hollow shells  
of their vibrant, velvet limbs  
bodies now jade and jaded  
by the piercing, biting breeze  
that carries the smell  
of cinnamon and rot.  
Corralled by burnished  
brass and bronze,  
hellfire occasionally floating  
down from the heavens,  
their grave determined from the start.

Hoarfrost wheedles its claws,  
latching deep in their tired bodies.  
Shards of ice burden  
creaking bones,  
rigid and brittle.  
Their glowing hearts  
smothered, and blazened black  
cough and sputter.  
In their final moments  
wrapped in glass,  
they curse the rosy hues

that they used to hold  
now bouncing tauntingly  
off of the snow.

Still among skeletons,  
wickedly furled and coiled,  
and bodies spoiled to ashes,  
a single spark lay comatose  
waiting to be thawed.

# Windy Wind I Cannot Breathe

by Leo Kellogg

It's one of those nights  
where thoughts get carried by the wind  
to your brain. Thoughts that say *Hey, do you  
remember when...*

What once were dreaded curiosities got  
sent into the wind long ago  
to be forgotten. Somehow the wind came  
back and incarnated into conversation.

It's a night with memorable  
chats that I've already  
forgotten. A night where pizza boxes  
make a leaning tower of pizza  
boxes. A night where you hate to know  
that your eyes aren't compatible  
with usb-c charging.

It's one of those nights with old friends you thought you had forgotten.  
Old friends you once saw walk into the suction of a tall twister that wisped  
them away to Boulder, Grand Forks and Menomonie.

A perfectly crisp blow sends a snowflake to our  
faces—a snowflake that we saw once before.

A snowflake we swore was sawn in the woods

of Bredesen Park at our hippy hut—at the peak of

Edina where we sat in detached car seats looking down on  
Highway 62—The Bunker where we  
hid from our battlefield of invisible bullets.

Then, our shelters were wood and ramshackle,  
rebuilt by three generations of high-schoolers who  
did what they could to resist wind. Teens who now

sit like us tonight, not far but at their favorite bar.  
And though it's cold, not even my friend's  
sliding glass door could stay shut to  
stop the wind from getting inside.

When the wind passes, it takes an  
old broken thought, moving it on to the next girl  
or boy. The forests and backyard shacks  
filled with smoke create a vortex for these echoed caws  
'cause my dread didn't get dealt with. I threw it sidearmed like a  
boomerang frisbee whirling into a

cyclone. Inside were scrawling  
notes on paper asking why we fall in line, why the  
steps in the snow we take stick. Inside  
the cyclone was glass and ash and crunched  
up water bottles drowning active soul like a sewer  
fish trying to breath  
sunlight. Inside were pictures, oh how I thought  
I was becoming Pollock or Kandinsky. Inside was  
genius untethered



but unconsciously boyish. Inside the cyclone,  
I gave away every thought that I thought was fruitless, but  
I birthed a giant and put it in a basket.  
When the basket broke and the giant rose, he found me.  
Those shuttering screams rose back to ground zero  
because I never really left them behind.

wind

wind

wind

stop finding me

# A Full Life

by Katie Miller Chang

I had already examined every aspect of the oak tree cloaked in spring's first leaves just outside the window, so I had to look elsewhere for a while. When I didn't look directly at the fluorescent lights, I could tell one was flickering. Every day I tried to make new observations to keep my mind from everyone's pain. I always noticed something different, even in this boring history classroom.

I had a problem. Some might call it a gift, but so far, it wasn't useful. Maybe it would be if I wanted to be a doctor or a psychiatrist, but focusing in school was becoming harder. I could sense the pain of others, often acutely enough to tell exactly what was wrong with their bodies or minds. I could read emotions and interpret what caused them. As I grew, this ability became more distinct, and powerful enough to detect strong emotions from the other side of the school building. Until I was nine or so, I couldn't detect emotional suffering, but I had felt people's physical pain since I was four. I figured the development of my ability had something to do with growing up.

"Tobias, are you paying attention?"

I shifted my gaze from the ceiling to Mr. Strom's eyes. They held a strange mixture of concern and sternness. I searched the room's emotions, looking for a connection to his last words before addressing me. My classmates were anxious, especially those toward the front of the room, the ones who cared most about their grades. Now that I'd been snapped out of my coping method, everything poured in—Tim McClellan was afraid his cat was going to die, Janice Woodsworth was having intense menstrual cramps, Drake Seller was upset about an argument he'd had with his mom that morning...

"I am now," I said. I'd always found that honesty was the best policy—to a point.

Mr. Strom sighed. "Tobias, I'd like to speak with you after class."

I nodded and continued examining the ceiling, trying to block everyone out again. I felt his gaze on me for a few moments before he continued with his lecture.

The class period was almost over, and I sensed the atmosphere of the room change as my classmates mentally prepared for the usual rush to leave. They were better than a clock. I winced as Amy Bergman got a paper cut in the webbing of her index finger and thumb as she put papers in her folder. I hated paper cuts—they made me think of that slit of open flesh, the sides like almost-closed lips sliding past each other, that special kind of pain that only came with a paper cut. Someone was always getting a paper cut.

After my classmates left the room, I remained at my desk. I was used to this routine with all the teachers. Mom was the only person who could maybe have helped me, and she had been in Riverview Cemetery for the past two years. All I had left were well-meaning teachers. Mr. Strom straightened a pile of homework on his desk before strolling around it to me.

“Tobias, when you were in first grade, I subbed for your class. I was just starting out as a teacher.”

I stayed quiet, but I was impressed. He was taking a different tack than most teachers did. “You’re probably wondering why I remember you. Am I right?”

“I guess,” I said, feeling it would be rude not to break his expectant silence.

“You participated in class. You looked at the board, at me. You were there. Not like now—you’re very distant. I know people have probably told you this before. I know it doesn’t help you when they do.”

This time, I didn’t speak when he stopped talking. I watched a fly buzz around the room and land on Mr. Strom’s finger. He shook it off and continued.

“Even that’s not why I remember you. No, I remember you because of my last day here. The day before, after school, I had slipped on the ice and landed on my hand.”

I frowned as the memory came to me. He watched my face. His eyes were the color of walnuts.

“During class the next day, I picked up some construction paper and my wrist hurt. You came right up to the desk...” He chuckled. “You said, ‘Why does your wrist hurt?’ I said, ‘I fell on the ice yesterday.’ Then you closed your eyes for a few seconds and said, ‘You should go to the doctor. It’s serious.’ You walked to your desk and didn’t say another word about it.”

“I remember,” I admitted when the pause grew too long.

“Well, then, you ought to know—I did go to the doctor, the next day, at my wife’s insistence. She was sick of me complaining about the pain. It turned out to be a sprain and I needed a brace.”

“I know, that’s why—” I stopped myself.

“I thought so,” said Mr. Strom, leaning on a desk. “It seemed to me that you knew.”

“I was just a kid,” I mumbled. “I probably thought everyone who fell should go to the doctor.”

Mr. Strom laughed and straightened up. “Good point. But you’re in eighth grade, Tobias. You’re still a kid.” He walked back to his desk and started writing on a piece of paper I couldn’t see.

I recognized the mood of dismissal and stuffed my things in my bag. He met me at the door. “Here’s a hall pass for you,” said Mr. Strom. “And there’s an exam next Friday.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“And, Tobias...I would tell you to pay more attention in class, but something tells me you’re zoning out for a reason. I just want you to know you can talk to me, if you want to.”

I almost told him right then. Really, I almost did. I knew he had a prep period next. It had been so long since I had shared my secret with anyone. He’d already almost figured it out for himself, anyway...

“You can call me Toby,” I said quietly, and then I went to Biology, the last class of the day.

Miss Heckleburr, a new teacher this year, took the hall pass that bore Mr. Strom’s feathery handwriting, and I felt a pang go through her as I walked to my desk. I traced it to its origin, as I always did before saying anything. Miss Heckleburr’s pain was emotional in nature, and somehow, the hall pass brought it to the front of her mind.

People’s emotions took their toll on me, and I never got used to them. The strongest emotions even invaded my physical senses. Miss Heckleburr’s heartache over Mr. Strom registered as a conflicting cascade of tastes and smells in my mind. Her feelings of rejection and hurt tasted like sour grapes and spoiled milk. Under

that was a dark, smoky scent, and I recognized that as sexual repression because my father had felt that since Mom had died. Some nights at home were horrible for that reason.

The attached silent mental film confirmed the emotions: Miss Heckleburr remembered standing in front of her mirror, making sure her makeup was perfect, a troubled expression on her face. Now, another memory: Miss Heckleburr talking to Mr. Strom in a deserted corridor after school. I couldn't hear their words, but I saw Miss Heckleburr's mouth move, saw her move toward Mr. Strom, and saw his uncomfortable expression and his reflexive step away from her. His mouth moved as he held up his hand, displaying his wedding ring. I could tell he was speaking gently, but Miss Heckleburr burst into tears. Raw. Vulnerable. A fresh wave of bitter-almond-flavored misery followed as Miss Heckleburr relived this memory, unaware that I could see it, too. What happened next was worse yet: a fantasy.

Memories looked different than fantasies—memories didn't have that extra shimmer around the edges. I had seen plenty of fantasies, but this one was a whopper. She imagined him showing up at her house after school. No, showing up at her house late at night. Wearing a suit. No, dark blue jeans, with his white shirt unbuttoned. Apparently, she thought he had a six-pack. She kept editing. Some people's fantasies were well-rehearsed, but maybe this was a new obsession. I could see the visions because they were strongly associated with negative emotions—I never saw gleeful fantasies.

I stared desperately at the movie on cell structure, trying to hear the voice of the narrator, but the silent, shimmering fantasy kept creeping in at the edges of my brain, so vivid it threatened to obscure my physical vision, and it drowned out all of my classmates' woes in a tidal wave of something I could only describe as heat. The fantasy Mr. Strom was taking off his shirt and draping it on a chair while saying something I couldn't hear. He approached Miss Heckleburr, who was wearing skimpy pajamas, and began touching her. First her cheek, his mouth moving as he talked, and his hand slid down her neck as he leaned in for a kiss. YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT THIS HERE? AT SCHOOL? my mind roared at the oblivious Miss Heckleburr, but no amount of noise, real or mental, could mask the next images—THE MITOCHONDRIA ARE THE POWER PLANTS OF THE CELL I screamed in my head. It didn't help.

When Miss Heckle Burr began groping at the fantasy Mr. Strom's jeans, I finally wrenched myself out of my torpor and groaned out loud.

"Miss Heckle Burr, I think I'm going to be sick," I said, because it wasn't that far from the truth.

I felt her confusion as she surfaced, and the fantasy collapsed into a pile of disconnected images, leaving only wisps of longing and disappointment in Miss Heckle Burr's mind.

"Toby, are you all right?" she asked, worried. How did she switch mindsets so quickly?

"I just need to go to the bathroom," I said.

I spent the rest of the class in the bathroom, trying to distract myself from Miss Heckle Burr's inner saga, along with everyone else's. When we were little and the only adult was the teacher, school was a lot easier. The subject matter was simpler, and the pain of my classmates was simpler. Children were like diluted adults. As my classmates and I matured together and most of us hit puberty, school became a roiling stew of emotions, strange pains and discomforts no one understood, and the ever-present, coppery taste of anxiety. Add in the teachers' dramas, and I was in for a difficult school career.

I couldn't stop thinking about Mr. Strom and Miss Heckle Burr. I'm thirteen! What am I supposed to do with that? I raged. He's married, for crying out loud! And as usual, I worried that I was supposed to help. What can I possibly say to her that wouldn't freak her out? "Uh, Miss Heckle Burr, you need to stop fantasizing about Mr. Strom. It seems unhealthy." I had the impression that she had already known he was married, but had taken the chance anyway and got the door slammed in her face.

When the bell rang, I went straight to the bus from the bathroom and was home within half an hour. I usually spent as much time as possible outside or reading, away from my two little brothers and especially my dad. Mom had died of cancer two years ago, but Dad's grief was fresh. His pain was a double echo of mine; it was impossible for me to endure both for long. Mom was the only one who had known my secret. She would have known what to do about Miss Heckle Burr.

Today, Dad seemed tired and faded when I got home from school. "Toby, would you give Alex a bath?" he said. "He must have played in the mud today."

Dad worked at home, so he never hired a babysitter for my four-year-old brother. Dad worked as a translator, fluent in English, Finnish, and Russian. He used to joke about it: “Machines don’t know what slang is, so I have to interpret things the way a person would, or we could end up with World War III because of some misunderstanding with Russia.” I hadn’t heard him joke about his job in a long time.

I took Alex up to our second-floor bathroom because it was his favorite. I liked it, too—the tall cedar trees were lined up outside the window, protecting the house. As I bathed Alex in the old clawfooted tub, I wondered if I should tell Dad he should send Alex to day care. Obviously Dad wasn’t keeping a close eye on him. At the same time, I noticed that Alex was humming under his breath and splashing me playfully—he usually hated baths. Maybe he should be allowed to play unsupervised.

Supper was pleasant enough on the emotional front. For once, Dad focused on his children.

“So, what’s new with you, Toby?” he said.

I tried not to stare at him. He hadn’t asked me a question like that in ages—it was like he was seeing me for the first time in two years.

I said the first thing that came to mind. “Um, I have a test next Friday in history. I didn’t hear Mr. Strom say that in class, but he told me later.”

“Oh, that was nice of him,” Dad said.

Shawn, my ten-year-old brother, scowled at me over his food.

“Were you spacing out again?” Dad sighed. “I was going to talk to you about this alone, Toby. I got a call from Mr. Strom today.”

I had my strategies to avoid exactly this. I usually pretended to pay attention for a few weeks after being reprimanded, until the teacher forgot about me again. Mr. Strom’s call seemed to have triggered a favorable change in Dad, though. I had to admit that I missed individual attention from Dad. I finally started to understand why some kids acted out in school.

“How do you do it, anyway?” Shawn asked me.

“Do what?” I stuffed some noodles in my mouth.

“Pass all your classes when you don’t pay attention,” Shawn said.

“That’s what a textbook is for,” I said through my noodles. In truth, no one usually worried about their personal lives during tests. They were too busy

stressing out about the test, and their mental films often poured into my head whether I wanted them to or not. The very best test-takers didn't feel many negative emotions during tests, though, so I couldn't glean much information from them.

"Mr. Strom was worried about you," Dad said. "He seemed to think something was wrong."

"I'll talk to him," I promised.

"Good idea. Let me know how it goes." Dad shifted in his chair. "Shawn, how was your day?"

There was no strong emotional pain on the surface of Dad's mind. I couldn't feel anything specific from him as he listened to first Shawn and then Alex, other than the persistent aching of his thick fingers from typing all day. This new attentiveness from Dad seemed too good to last.

And so it went. Miss Heckle Burr continued to moon over Mr. Strom at school, mostly right after lunch. For some reason, I was becoming extra attuned to her unrequited feelings for him. I could pick up flashes of them when I was in unlikely places, such as the bathroom or the locker room.

Dad started to drop away again. His alertness dwindled until all we were saying was, "Pass the salt." I couldn't blame him. Mom's birthday was coming up. I doubted he would understand if I told him what was on my mind all the time. His mind was nearly as full as mine was.

The day before Mom's birthday, I received the full version of Miss Heckle Burr's rehearsed fantasy because I wasn't in her classroom and couldn't distract her. I stood in a bathroom stall and considered running away. It wasn't that I only saw things from Miss Heckle Burr—I saw plenty of things I'd rather not see, but it was exponentially worse when they were about a teacher I saw every day. I didn't know how much longer I could take this before I'd have to move to a cave in the mountains. Or to a padded room.

Finally, there in that bathroom, I decided to open up to Mr. Strom about my ability. I was having additional difficulty concentrating in his classes because I had been seeing Miss Heckle Burr's version of him, sometimes while he was lecturing.

My discomfort hadn't escaped him. He had expressed his concern again, but I told him I'd talk to him about it soon to keep him from bugging Dad for now.



I thought it would be a relief to tell someone my secret. Dad was unreliable, Shawn would think I was a weirdo, Alex was too young, and Mom wasn't there. If I had friends...but people my age tended to avoid me. They probably knew I was different. Their eyes always slid straight from me to someone right next to me. It was enough to keep me from trying anymore after second grade.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I returned to Mr. Strom's classroom during his prep time, skipping Biology entirely. I liked the subject, but I didn't want to endure Miss Heckle Burr.

"Toby!" he said. "Don't you have class right now? Come on in! Just let me finish grading this one..."

I watched a little dent appear under each of his eyebrows as he concentrated. He had a throbbing headache behind his right eye. It must have developed in the fifteen or so minutes that I'd wasted in the bathroom since the end of his class, trying to plan my first words to him.

I figured I might as well spill the beans. The headache was broadcasting so loudly, it was hurting me, too. "You know, Mr. Strom," I began, "maybe you should take something for that headache."

Mr. Strom stopped writing. He put his hand to his right eye as if making sure it was there. At last, he looked up at me. "I knew you knew, that day when you were in first grade. What changed your mind? Why are you confirming this now?"

He wasn't reacting the way I thought he would, but at least there was no disbelief. I sat down. "I need someone to talk to. There's really no one who can help me. This ability takes up my whole life. I can tell you what people are worried about in the room next door."

"It must be a burden."

"You don't know the half of it." He threw back some ibuprofen with a gulp of water and drank until the bottle was empty. I felt the water seep into his system and the relief it brought. Wait a second...

"You mean, there's more?" he asked, unaware that I'd just had a breakthrough.

"Yeah, there's more," I said with a slight smile. "And something just changed."

"Your ability is still developing?"

I nodded and closed my eyes, immersing myself in his experience on purpose. Each of his sensations and emotions, good and bad, registered in my mind. The world was no longer a sea of total negativity. I was no longer limited to feeling people's pain. Awed by the change, I described my ability to Mr. Strom. I abandoned caution. I started giving specific examples. Before I knew what I was doing, I was explaining in detail how Miss Heckle Burr had been suffering due to her unrequited love for Mr. Strom.

I stopped talking. There was a stunned silence.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to blurt it out like that. I got caught up..."

"It's really that bad?" Mr. Strom said in a hushed tone.

"If you want my opinion, I'd say it's obsessive," I said, dropping all pretense.

"I suppose you know from experience."

"Yes...well, from everyone else's experience."

"And you've read a lot of books. Have you read up on psychology?"

"How did you know that?"

"Your father mentioned it on the phone when I said you were inattentive during class and I asked him how you were maintaining B's. And you use big words." Mr. Strom stood up and splayed his fingers on his desk. "You haven't told your father about your ability, have you?"

I hesitated. "No."

"I'm sure you have your reasons, but I think you should put them aside. Your father probably doesn't know you very well if this ability is as life-consuming as you say it is."

That was true. When Mr. Strom called Dad about my behavior in class, it woke him up for a while. Maybe Dad would wake up and be there for me if I told him my secret.

I realized I was staring at my hands and raised my eyes to see Mr. Strom regarding me with compassion in his heart. An image of his wife cooking and the hunger in his belly also registered with me.

"I'll let you think about that one," said Mr. Strom. "But back to Miss Heckle Burr...I've already talked to her about her, uh, interest. She's still...?"

“If anything, it’s gotten more intense, unless I’m just picking it up more.”

Mr. Strom buried his face in his hands. “Ugh, I’m sorry you have to see all that. I’m sure it’s affecting your concentration.” He raised his head. “I should do something...what do you think?”

I was fascinated by the richness of his mental imagery. He was embarrassed and felt bad for me, but I could feel his love for his wife predominating as he rejected the concept of cheating on her. He pitied Miss Heckle Burr. *Isn't there a limit to how much stuff a mind can process? Am I going to go insane?*

“Toby?”

I blinked. “Sorry, Mr. Strom. This is going to be harder than I thought. I thought I couldn’t concentrate before, but it was nothing compared to this.”

“Well, you got used to new stuff with this ability before. Give it some time,” he said.

“I don’t have any ideas about Miss Heckle Burr.”

I felt Mr. Strom push down a laugh. “I don’t know what to do,” he admitted. I felt a rush of my own emotion in response—empathy. Lately, the strongest emotion I’d been feeling was irritation. It was refreshing to feel something else for a change.

“Well, I don’t know what to do, either,” I said. I was glad I wasn’t the only one.

The bell rang. We listened to the students tossing books into their lockers, gathering backpacks, and getting out of the building as fast as they could. Only now, I could feel their hope, pride, peace, and happiness, and other things, jumbled in with their desperation, anxiety, anger, pain, and sadness. I didn’t know what to do with all of that information, but it was so much better than living halfway.

# Contrast

by Jane O'Shea



# Drinking It All In

by Anna Gergen

They sat around the basement table holding bright glasses of wine, filled-to-brim pints, and ciders I could smell across the room: sunny, effervescent, inaccessible. Between the servers and wait assists and maybe an odd host or two, eight of them sat on mismatched IKEA chairs and broken stools hauled from upstairs. Their faces were washed of color; some propped themselves on elbows, others reached their arms out and linked their fingers with other wanting hands. There was laughter, laughter everywhere, voices rising and dipping and rising further. The tableau was cast in chiaroscuro lighting from the overhead fluorescence. It was straight out of a Renaissance scene: sinners breaking pizza dough between themselves, alcohol pouring freely from cans and bottles into tired, thirsty mouths. I hadn't yet learned their names.

I bundled silverware on the other side of the room. It was my second week on the job. The percussive rhythm of rolling forks and knives into napkins grated my every nerve, and it wouldn't be long before my fists clenched with strain. My carpal tunnel had not yet been diagnosed. The persistent dry patch I would develop under my thumb was still smooth. I was still the newbie. I knew it, and so did they, the raucous disciples clinking glasses over by the employee lockers. They did not invite me over, and I did not ask to join them.

At twenty five years old, the pizzeria was my second job ever, the first lasting just shy of one year. The squirmy little line on my resume about working in a suburban diner seemed wholly unfitting compared to their employment histories: most of the servers had been there four, five, six years, with a prodigal few starting work the day the pizzeria opened. As it

happened, I would not join their server ranks for another ten months; but what bothered me most that day was a question nagging my thoughts: how was I ever going to fit in?

The question trailed behind me through the coming days as I bustled around the floor and learned the machinations of a high-volume establishment. The busiest Sundays at the diner seemed like calm, unstirred waters compared to the tsunami waves of guests streaming into the restaurant each weekday evening. I watched my new coworkers navigating the tides with precision and intuition. A server carried in his arms three scalding rounds of pizza and swivel around the crowd until he landed square at his table. A wait assist— responsible for bussing tables, stocking glassware, and a myriad other tasks— easily handled ten wine glasses in one hand, and stacked them on the bar counter as if she had waved a magic wand and sent them to their places. The sous chef sliced an oven's worth of pizzas in a matter of seconds. And the host, the job I was training to take on, smiled his way through a mob of guests displeased they couldn't sit down immediately, as if they were at a Domino's or, maybe, a suburban diner. That smile— thin, wan, shy of judging by a miniscule degree— floored me. I saw it all across the restaurant: my coworkers could deflect even the reddest of faces with cool, seemingly empathetic grins. I needed to learn that. I needed to learn how to not let my insides curdle like old milk every time something went wrong.

I watched them. Jesus, I watched them all the time, coming together and floating apart like little tidepools ebbing in the chaos: a joke was whispered here and there, screwed up lips tried not to laugh too loudly, a hand rubbed another's back or passed over a sagging shoulder. They were silent reminders that "honey, we're in this boat together." The Midwestern summer heat drew sweat from all their faces, and the steam of too many bodies crowded around an open oven cooked their skin until it was bright

and shiny. Those hands, the ones that shared wine and food and each other, kept moving and moving until the manager drew the shades and the last guests had stumbled into the night, drunk and full.

And the nightly commune commenced again. I didn't drink—wouldn't, until late that winter— but curiosity made my mouth water each night. What did wine taste like? Was it sweet or sour? Did it make you instantly giddy, like bubbles were passing from your lips? Or was that sensation a product of their friendship? I didn't yet understand how flavors could be complex and have contrasting layers. My coworkers understood this too well. On the floor, they snapped their teeth at each other, shook their heads in disbelief, and threw up their hands saying, "I can't even deal with this right now." But at the end of each night, when the manager blared rap music from the stereo, so unlike the carefully selected folk rock during the day, they would fill each other's cups up past the rim again and again. They would talk and bitch and laugh until they were just as drunk and full as the last stragglers to leave at 11:00 pm.

I watched this, too. I learned how the no-nonsense mother of twins could hold her liquor like no one else until a final sip tipped her over the edge and she was leaning on the arms of others. I catalogued every shade of pink the world traveler's skin blushed as she drank. The firecracker with the purple stripe in her hair could pound back pints long after the heavyweight chefs had called it for the night. At first I thought it was just the alcohol— that mystery substance I had avoided for twenty five years— but even after I learned what *buzzed* felt like, the question remained: what would it take to be welcomed into their ranks? How could I make friends after years of friendless solitude, with one heroic bestie as the only exception? What would I have to become?

Summer passed too quickly. We navigated "Hell Month," aka August, with such dogged persistence that when Labor Day arrived, and the crowds suddenly dissipated into the fire-hued world outside, we were all a

little shell-shocked. I must have lost ten pounds over that summer, but I gained the weight back in part by the pizzas I gorged upon each night. It was September, and while I could now hold a conversation with my coworkers with only a minimal degree of awkwardness, they were still that— coworkers. It was my own fault, I told myself. I wasn't outgoing like they were, or didn't put myself out there, wherever "there" was. When Queens of the Stone Age advertised their knockout concert, I didn't ask to tag along with the rest of them. When they pooled tip money to buy lottery tickets at the gas station across the street, I didn't put in my two dollars. The lottery was a waste and a scam, I believed. The chances were much too low; taking a risk would never pay off.

One fall night, in my corner of the basement, I watched my coworker Maria linger after the others so she could check the padlock on her locker two, three, four times. She kept tugging at the metal to make sure her belongings were secure. "Don't judge me," she said with a sheepish smile.

"No way," I replied. "If you knew half my story, you would know I couldn't do that." I was a little stunned by my own boldness.

She motioned between the two of us. "We should talk sometime," she said.

And that was it. I had wedged myself into a sliver of their circle. I had begun to earn my keep as a host; now, I had a friend who could loop me in on conversations, get togethers, inside jokes. Instant camaraderie, immediate gratification— I was in.

Alex was next— the snarky bartender who wore tight jeans and a devil's grin. He was always touching other people, rubbing shoulders, kissing cheeks, tapping asses in a way that, for some reason, others let him do. As Maria's roommate, he held extravagant dinners. When I tasted his carrot risotto the first time they invited me over, I wanted to grab seconds,



thirds, fourths. I was too intimidated to ask. A couchful of pizzeria people leaned on pillows and each other in the living room. When I couldn't find any room to join the fray, I knelt on the floor. "Come here, Anna," they said, and reluctantly I squeezed my way in. They kept on jabbering. I cracked a joke. They laughed, and it felt like salvation.

I had dealt with mental illness through my teenage years and into my adult life. "Dealt with" it, because "suffered" was too pathetic, and "survived" sounded so corny I wanted to gag. Sitting on a couch with these beautiful, golden-haloed people, who curled into each other's shoulders and threw bits of rice at each other's unsuspecting faces— it was almost too much.

It wasn't just Maria and Alex. Maddy, the firecracker, had a laugh that worked its way into my ribcage. Brooke, the mohawked writer and seamstress, seemed genuinely interested in my writing. Even Grace, who was not about to take shit from anyone, warmed up to me. There was Ky and James and Vincent, the two Jamie's, Linda and May and Addison. The ever-smiling Sarah and her best friend Erin cast sunlight into every room they entered. And Carly, the host who was hired alongside me, would become my roommate after my best friend found her own place. These people, these coworkers, had become something like friends. The thrill of being able to laugh and share drinks with them rumbled in my chest, and I found myself shaking with the feeling of belonging, belonging, belonging. Omar, one of the sous chefs, would always give me crap for being the one who sometimes had to roll silverware and answer takeout calls in the basement, rather than hustle like the rest of them on floor. One night, as I sipped on my half glass of Vinho Verde at the bar, he called from the kitchen, "Bet you were really busy tonight." He knew I wasn't; he was responsible for making the takeout orders I took over the phone. It didn't bother me, at least not in a way I was willing to admit. Then Alex picked up a champagne flute from behind the counter and pointed it at Omar. "Don't

bring the last good ones down with you,” he said. Shortly after, Grace turned to me with her bubbling glass of Prosecco. “I appreciate you,” she whispered. That night, the humming warmth in my chest was not a product of the alcohol.

A fine dining restaurant debuted in Uptown sometime in late autumn. A former server roped Maria into serving their part time, and what started as a couple days a week became a near full-time job. “I’ll still be here on Mondays and Tuesdays,” she reassured me, but my school schedule kept me away from the restaurant during the weekday, so I almost never saw her. Maddy followed her there in the winter. Brooke moved up to Duluth. Erin found her partner, and moved out to Wyoming to be with him and his son. I began training in as a server to fill in the gaps they were leaving behind.

As we approach the busy summer season once again, more gaps will need to be filled. Sarah will soon follow Erin out west, refusing to be parted from her best friend. Another server is having her second child, and yet another is considering leaving now that the landscape looks so different. It is like the pizzeria is a pitstop on a road to bigger and better things— money, love, family, opportunity. I have begun considering what exists past my stop in the road. But that journey is still a far off dream.

These people, these coworkers and friends, came together as if by a dance or converging tracks at a waystation. But dances end, and tracks move only forward. When Maddy left, I hugged her in a dive bar I never would have considered visiting even months before. We were never the closest of friends, but I remember our goodbye well. I clasped her hand, then decided to circle the table and hug her briefly. In many ways I was still that shy girl secretly pining for friends in the blooms of spring. I hugged her for a second, tops. Now, I wish I had held onto her— onto all of them— for a little longer.

# Making Apple Butter

by Jane O'Shea

To prevent sticking or scorching,  
dip your heart in paraffin wax  
and store it deep in the pantry.

Do not remember her voice like Crystal sugar,  
her wrinkled, capable fingers,  
the way the paring knife chased her thumb  
around and around

or the way she could skin a whole apple  
in one long peel of comforting, concentric circles  
striped in jade, red, and amber.

Never recall her optimism  
at a battered cardboard box  
full of mottled seconds and thirds:  
worm-pocked and misshapen rejects.

You can adjust the taste  
with teaspoons of cinnamon and allspice  
and a long simmer on the back burner  
in a dented Dutch oven.

Headspace can affect sealing and the preservation  
Of long-dead memories.

Stirring occasionally will unleash

hot butter that scalds and blisters.

Bring to a boil,  
add two cups of granulated grief  
until thickened and numb,  
then cool and store.

Believe the lie that you can adjust,  
if desired.

# Denouement

by Rachel Lindo

Staring at the overcast sky, Camille laid with her back nestled in the snow-covered ground with her legs open and spread out, so she could be a star. Despite how the cold pricked her cheeks and nose, she had been out in her mother's front yard for a half-hour, waiting for any snowflakes to fall instead of searching for another dead-end job. She closed her eyes and breathed in the sharp, iced air through her nose. Camille started to cough, disrupting her elegant snow starfish form. After a few moments of calming her lungs down, she plopped her head back into the snow. She hoped that maybe, *just maybe*, there would be a blizzard that would vomit a thick layer of snow on her body and suffocate her phone bills, credit card bills, and the reality she moved from her cozy apartment and back into her childhood home at twenty-seven-years-old. She had been living there for four months now, it was humiliating.

Her day dream of being buried under layers of frozen procrastination came to a halt when she heard snow being crunched under boots. Camille let out a sigh, opened her eyes and cocked her head ever so slightly to see her adopted kid-brother, Harry. Her mother, Patricia, swept him up from foster care five years ago when her home just felt too empty when Camille's father packed up and left for a much younger, thinner, more active woman six years ago.

Harry's light brown, freckled face, blocked Camille's view of the sun being swaddled by the clouds. Henry himself was swaddled, his body puffed up by layers of thick jackets, his hands swollen by bulky gloves, and his dark brown mop of hair covered by a big, wool cap. No doubt done by Patricia before he even gotten close to the front door. "You're going to get hypothermia if you stay out here, y'know."

"It's *hypothermia*, smarts," Camille said. There was a small smile on her lips. This kid was cute, but she couldn't help but feel jealous of his young age. The only responsibility he probably had on his mind was not be caught with his finger up his nose.

"Well you turn blue like a hippo, Mrs. Tupper told us," Harry said, defending his honor.

Camille snorted and her puffs of air fogged from the cold. "Sure, sure. Now get out of the way little guy, you're blocking my view."

Harry looked around and up at the sky, confused. "Of what?"

"Intrusive thoughts," she replied. Harry furrowed his brows and twitched his upper lip. He was quiet for a while, probably because he was trying to figure what Camille meant.

"Mom told me to get you," he said eventually.

Camille groaned, "Tell her I'm *fine*."

Harry stomped his foot and kicked a small pile of snow onto her stomach. "She's not gonna believe me! You've been like this for years!"

"It's only been a week!"

"C'mon, Cammi! Geddup, geddup, geddup!" Harry kicked more snow onto her stomach but missed. Snow lodged itself in the crook of her neck and right ear.

The frozen wad in her ear felt like earwax that had jumped into a freezer, then jumped back into her ear to clog it. Camille jumped up and hit her left ear with her head cocked to the side, trying to free the snow from her ear canal.

"I'm going to get you for that little guy!" Camille straightened her back, then hunched her shoulders, and let out a growl. The nine-year-old yelped and ran, only to trip over a miniature snowman. At least for a half hour, her worries were replaced by childish giggles and snow ball battles.

Eventually, Camille lost the battle and she wandered back inside the house with Harry. She felt light, despite her winter clothes weighing her down. As she shrugged off her jacket, she stopped herself from laughing while she watched Harry wiggle around to escape from his winter-gear. Camille stopped laughing when her mother entered the living room. Her mother was professionally dressed and usually was as if she chose to never leave her psychologist office downtown. Her mother held out a cordless telephone, her wrinkled lips pursed with concern.

“Belle called while you were out,” Patricia said. “She wants your help to pick out bridesmaid dresses.”

*Whoopy dingus, tell her I'm just so so happy her life is wonderful.* She pressed her lips in a thin line as she observed her mother observe her. No doubt she was looking at her through the lens of Patricia Dubois, PhD. Camille replied in a flat tone, “Thanks. I’ll make sure to call her back.”

She wouldn’t.

Camille kicked off her boots and made her way to her room. Her room, actually, wasn’t her room anymore. It had rid itself of anything relating to a punk teenage girl. Patricia made it into a guest room/office, managed to paint over dark red walls with a bright yellow coat of paint and peel off Camille’s old plethora of metal and punk band posters. The only thing punk left of Camille was her continuation of cutting her hair short and buzzed on the sides. She used to stylize the remaining blond tuft of hair, but now it just seemed pointless.

When she laid back in what was now her bed, she pulled a green comforter over her body and closed her eyes. As she was swathed by stifling darkness, she remembered how going out for a simple cup of coffee last Friday became her unfortunate catalyst that jumpstarted her melodramatic existential crises. For all of this, Belle was responsible.

Camille had been looking at the newspaper critically for job openings while she sat at a local coffee house, with that cliché red pen jammed between her teeth. It was the only place where wearing three-day-old PJ's was acceptable in the morning. Over the whirr of a coffee bean grinder, Camille heard a familiar voice ordering a specialized latte that almost had her choke on the pen's cap. It was vibrant, filled with a thick, energetic Minnesotan accent. She flicked her eyes up to capture Belle in all of her beauty with her dark hair in a neat bun, wearing a clean white blouse, sleek pencil skirt, tights, and chic coat hung in the crook of her arm. She hadn't seen the woman since their college days, back when they were both filled with competitive and idealistic drives that would bring them one step closer to working for the *Star Tribune*. Both of them secured an internship there, but only one got the job: Belle.

Camille spat out her pen and felt suddenly self-conscious over her unruly blond tuft and well-worn PJs. She reached for her winter jacket, which she hung on the back of an empty chair next to her. She licked her lips and thought, *She won't turn around, she'll just keep on yapping. Making an escape is easy.*

It wasn't.

Belle in all her successful glory, turned around and it seemed that the morning sun caught her face and made it shine bright over her tasteful make up. Her mouth opened into a wide smile and she raced over to Camille after picking up her order, graceful in her high heels.

"Oh my god! It's been *forever* since I saw you last!" Belle chattered.

Camille quickly flipped over her newspaper to hide her evidence of unemployment. She forced out a chuckle and took a sip of her coffee, which had gone cold. "Yeah? It really has, hasn't it?"



Belle slipped into the open seat across from Camille, uninvited. She set her latte down on the table, her paper to-go cup between her hands. “We have so much to catch up on! How long has it been? Two years? Three?”

Camille took a slow sip of her cold coffee. “Just about.”

“I looked all over in the phone book for you, I’ve been meaning to call. *Have you? Have you really?*”

“You have?” Camille asked in a kinder tone than her thoughts.

“Yes! You won’t believe it but Trevor, you remember Trevor? From the internship?”

Camille had been ready to respond with, *vaguely*, but Belle carried on without her.

“We’re engaged! Just look at the size of this rock!” Belle jutted her hand across the table, almost hitting Camille in the nose with a three-carat diamond and flawlessly manicured nails. “Can you believe it? God, he was such a *dork* about it too!”

Camille, again, was about to respond but Belle carried on about the explicit details of not only her wedding, but how her job at the *Star Tribune* was going great, how her brand-new house was great, and how, really, everything in her life was going. Just. Great.

Camille’s stomach churned the cream from her cold coffee into hard, heavy butter in her stomach. “Belle, I gotta leave,” she finally interrupted, standing up to collect her things. “I’ve got work.”

Camille wasn’t concerned about the possibility of being cornered with her lie, Belle had her head so far up into her clouds it hardly worried Camille.

Belle frowned, looking disappointed. “Oh, jeez, I’m sorry if I made you run late—”

“It’s fine,” Camille rushed out. *You almost sound sincere*. In a moment of stupidity, Camille took her red pen and scribbled down her new number—which was her mother’s, which wasn’t hers, which would show

that she didn't have work and she didn't have a perfect life. "Here's my number if you want to—"

*"That's right!!* I want you to be one of my bridesmaids! You just have to be!"

The hard butter in Camille's stomach turned bitter at the overbearing innocence of it all.

Camille was startled out of the memory from a knock on the guest room/office door. She closed her eyes and whispered, "Go away" to herself, over and over. The door's hinges whined while it creaked open and Camille slowly slithered out of her blanket cocoon. Patricia stood at the threshold, one hand on the knob while the other held onto the bane of her existence. Her mother cleared her throat and motioned the cordless telephone in her hand, raising a penciled in brow. "Belle called again."

Camille groaned and covered her face, "Mom, don't you get it? I'm not going to call her back."

Patricia took a seat on the bed and Camille felt it shift from her mom's weight. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

Camille threw her hands from her face. Her mother's question only pricked her temper. "Don't go all shrink on me. I'm not one of your patients."

Her mother frowned and placed the cordless telephone in her lap to reach over and place a comforting hand on Camille's arm. "I'm only concerned."

Camille shook her mother's hand off her arm and got off the bed, waving Patricia off, ready to leave the room. "I don't want to talk."

"Dammit, Camille, will you just cut your crap?" her mother snapped.

Camille leaned on the doorframe, feeling sick. “What do you want from me? To open up? For you to just give me the psychologist cure-all?”

“We both know that’s not what I want to do.”

Camille licked her teeth and the inside of her cheek, then crossed her arms over her chest. She bit her bottom lip, knowing all too well that her mother, like her, was a persistent one. “Alright.”

Patricia sighed. “You can always call Belle back and tell her that you don’t want to help her—”

“That’s not it!” Camille snapped, turning around. “You don’t get it! Belle is just going to be all nice about it, so sweet about it, then make me feel like crap and then before I know it, I’m standing there in an ugly bright pink dress forced to watch another person succeed in their life! Then I’m always the bridesmaid, never the bride, but this time it’s never marrying my shit together!”

Patricia closed her eyes and nodded slowly, taking one of those intellectual pauses before she made a judgement. Camille scoffed and thought, *Yeah, I’m just a patient to her.* Her mother started to chuckle through her nose, which only annoyed Camille.

“What?” Camille snapped again.

Her mother sighed, “None of us ever have our shit together. I still don’t.”

Camille pursed her lips.

Patricia patted the open space next to her and Camille sat down begrudgingly.

“Belle is just faking it,” her mother said and before Camille could protest, she continued her thought, “She doesn’t have her life completely figured out. Even if she’s got a job at the *Tribune* secured down, it doesn’t mean she’ll be able to keep it that way.”

“That’s not—”

“Yes, it is. You’re my little girl, I know how you think,” Patricia said, then paused. Both mother and daughter were quiet for a while. Her mother continued, “And just because she’s getting married, doesn’t mean it’ll last. Look at your father and I—”

“That’s a bleak outlook for a therapist.”

“It’s a real one.” Patricia rested her hand on Camille’s shoulder. Her touch felt warm. Her mother then took the cordless telephone from her lap and placed it in her daughter’s hands. “Give her a call.”

Camille pressed her lips together and gazed at the phone in her hands. She let out a slow breath that had been trapped in her throat. Camille grazed her thumb over the smooth, raised buttons. “Is it even worth saying anything?”

Patricia sighed through her nose and squeezed her daughter’s shoulder gently. “I left her number on the fridge.”

Camille chewed the inside of her cheek while she contemplated. *Belle won’t stop calling. Mom won’t stop badgering.* Camille looked at her mother with wide eyes, the kind she gave her mother when she was little for reassurance she was doing the right thing. Her mother gave her daughter a slow nod.

Camille got off the bed, her legs trembling while she made her way to the kitchen. On a bright-yellow post-it note stuck on the fridge door, was Belle’s number neatly printed out with pen. Camille pressed her fingertips on the piece of paper and dialed the number. She leaned back on the fridge, raising the phone to her ear. Her heart throbbed in her chest, its intensity reaching her throat and choking her breath.

“She doesn’t have her life completely figured out,” Camille said through a shaking sigh. *Riiiiing....Riiiiing....Riiiiing*

“Hello?”

“Hey, Belle, it’s Camille...”

5:47 A.M. One Day My Poems Won't Be  
About You Anymore

by Samantha Hendrickson

Now

You are just a stranger holding all my secrets,

Whose laugh I recognize on street corners of cities you have never been to,

And the voice in the background of all my sober decisions.

## Contributor's Notes

**Bort, Kelly.** I am an artist exploring a different medium, writing. I graduated from the University of Michigan and have worked as an artist for my entire life since then.

**Chang, Katie Miller.** Katie won second place for fiction in the Patsy Lea Core Award.

**Gergen, Anna.** Anna is pursuing her AFA in Creative Writing at Normandale Community College. She writes in little pockets of time when she's not studying or waitressing. She would like to answer Shel Silverstein's invitation as a dreamer, a wisher, a liar, hope-er, a pray-er, and magic bean buyer. You can find her at her local tea shop.

**Hendrickson, Samantha.** Samantha is a student, a sister, a poet, and aspiring journalist. Storytelling in all forms is her passion, and she hopes to bring that love of story to the world of news and give voices to those who feel voiceless. She writes to process and to give.

**Kellogg, Leo.** Leo Kellogg is the type of guy to break all of your bones and say "whoops." Leo Kellogg is the type of bad mama-jamma to take off his sunglasses only to reveal that he's wearing another pair of sunglasses. If you see Leo Kellogg working on his AFA in Creative Writing at Normandale, look the other way because if you make eye contact, he'll write you into his next poem or screenplay and make you look like a complete rube and you won't be able to get a girlfriend/boyfriend ever again.

**Kramer, Kaitlin.** I started writing as a class necessity. I later continued as a means to relieve stress by playing with the musicality of words and phrases. And almost absurdly juxtaposing this, I am planning to double major in Biomedical Engineering and Neuroscience.

**Lindo, Rachel.** Rachel won third place in fiction for the Patsy Lea Core Award.

**O'Shea, Jane.** Jane O'Shea dwells in a yurt in the forest and milks ewes.

**Porter, Isaiah.** Selene is the Titaness/Goddess of the moon in Greek mythology. The sestina is probably my favorite form of poetry. It's just really fun to play with. Anyway, this is my 5th semester here and I'm part of the creative writing AFA program. And yeah, stories are my peanut butter and jam.

**Roehl, Angeline.** My name is Angeline, but I usually go by Audrey Burne when writing. This is my third year at Normandale working for an AFA in Creative Writing. I usually prefer to write short stories, but will occasional write poetry if an idea hits me that isn't long enough for a story or flash fic. I'm hoping to get a novel series published once I finish my time here at Normandale. I hope you enjoy my work as much as I enjoyed writing it.

**Rova, Emily.** Emily Rova is a Normandale student and hopes to become an English teacher in the future. She has many hobbies including writing, dance, drawing and photography.

Schmieg, Clarissa. I would like to thank the Paper Lantern for considering my work. I am a writer that has a lot of works but none published. I appreciate the time and effort it takes to review my piece and look forward to hearing from you. I am a college student going for a double major. The first Literature and Composition so that I may teach at a college some day and the second Creative Writing so that I may continue my passion for it while enhancing my skills. Thank you.



# Back Matter

The Paper Lantern is the student literary journal of Normandale Community College, 9700 France Avenue, Bloomington, MN., 55431. It is edited by Normandale Students. The project is made possible by the Normandale Student Life Activity Fee.

The following members of the Fall 2018 Creative Writing Club produced this issue:

Jerry Carrier, Amir Carter, Anna Gergen, Marietherez Glime, Christine Horner, Leo Kellogg, Joshua Medley, Anna Mshar, Jane O'Shea, and Isaiah Porter.

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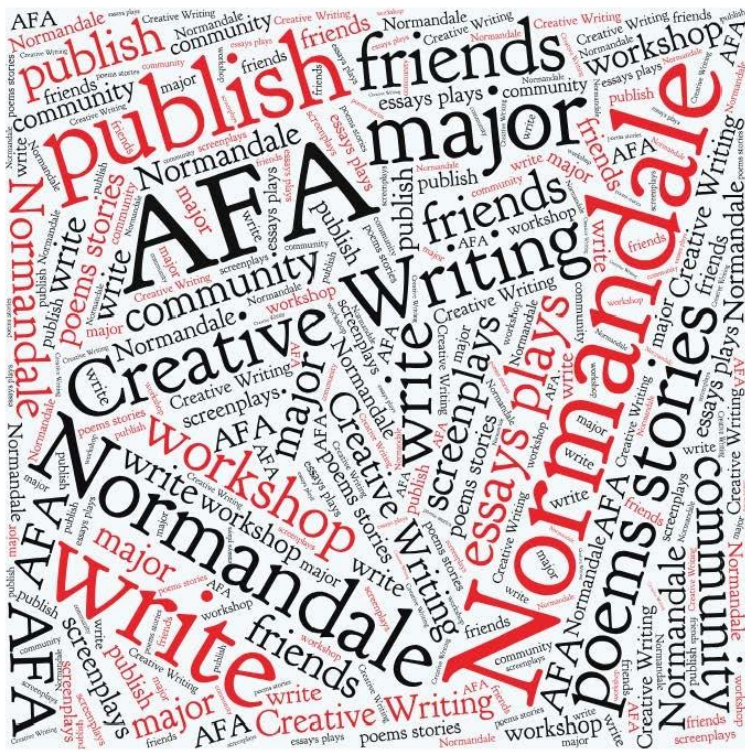
Front Cover: "Umbrellas" by Jane O'Shea

Back Cover: "Midnight" by Vicki Erickson

Submit your creative writing to the Spring 2019 issue of The Paper Lantern. All work is reviewed anonymously and acceptance is based on literary merit. Submission links and more information can be found at [www.paperlantern.org](http://www.paperlantern.org).

Works in all genres of creative writing (poetry, fiction, memoir, short plays, etc.) are considered with a limit of 1,000 words for poetry and 2500 words for prose and drama. Multiple submissions accepted. Submission is open for registered NCC students only.

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