

The Paper Lantern

Vol. VI, Issue 2

Spring 2011

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Almonds

By Kyle Jaeger

Everyday almonds,
Soft sea pebbles cocooned
In the veins of dried leaves waiting
For that pop-crunch
And subtle squeak,
Like wood rubbing wood,
Branches embracing in a storm.
Creak-crumble and the squeak is done,
One whole life waiting,
One small thing to say,
And that was enough.

Scales of sliced almonds
Atop pastries mom made,
Geodes of golden ivory fringed
with etched exteriors,
Mired in the white mud of frosting.
Musky, sweet scent--
Almond extract.
She carried that fragrance
Wrapped in her skin
Like dried leaves nestling a soft sea pebble,
Almonds wrapped in warm veins
Like my mother's.

When we came
She scooped her ambitions, jingling,
Into sealed jars,
Dreams deferred to the pantry.

Her kids came first. We always did.
She crunched, creak-crumbled for us,
Limbs breaking in a storm,
Saying one thing that she lived her whole life to say,
And we are that thing she said.
And, mom,
It was enough.

wHOLE

By Isela Pena

Draped in flesh and shame again, I find the rhythm of his hips, adjusting mine to his as the seat fastener pushes up my spine. With each thrust I seek oblivion, hoping that the length of him will somehow reach its way into filling the void. But he is not large enough to reach that void, only large enough to fill the gap between my legs.

His hips crash into me, climbing their way towards the peak so that he can fall from its tip and be left lax and panting groundside. I want to reach that peak as well. Instead, I've reached a plateau.

Shit floats up:

Why?

You let yourself. His face, impassive.

We're done. You and I can't be.

Don't call me. Don't look for me.

No, I didn't call him. He called me, and I answered.

I need your sex.

He moves into me like waves rolling into a cave. His skin is paled by the moon to an ethereal glow, glossing with sweat. His gaze meets my own fire and they stay locked like our bodies. We are cream and caramel entwined.

I sigh, "What's my name?"

And he screams it, each syllable drawn out like a string hitting staccato. “A-A..dal..i..a...”

Only in this way will he allow his lips to form my name. To indulge him, I scream his name, and his movements become ever more eager, ever hungrier. I want to get lost in the hunger as well, but...

I’m idling somewhere between abyss and clarity.

I’m not sorry. You let yourself. His mouth curves into a smirk.

“I’m going to come,” he growls into my hair. He pulls out, and millions of his potential children shoot out and die on my abdomen. Elias, Adrianna, Aiden, Esmeralda, Saya... All dead.

Out of courtesy, he wipes the milky fluid off me with his T-shirt, a slow, impish smile curving on one end of his mouth upon seeing me watch him. He chuckles, low and utterly masculine, a sound that rolls over my skin. I shudder and sit up, the faux leather releasing my oiled skin with a noise and viscosity like that of peeling tape.

“You didn’t come.”

“Yeah, well I rarely do. Don’t feel bad,” I say dryly.

I should’ve said: “’Cause you didn’t work it well enough.”

We dress, and I sit on the driver’s seat and roll down the fogged windows, the night chill settling onto my skin, the pungent mix of sweat and body friction carried out. He steps outside and I hear his piss hit the concrete curb of the isolated church parking lot through the crack between the glass and the rubber arc. Then I hear an upbeat, 8-bit tune chime from the back of the car. The Mario theme song.

His shoulders tense and he turns his head towards the vehicle meanwhile the sound of what has now turned to a 12-second long piss continues hitting the ground.

You used me.

You let yourself.

She means more to me than you ever did.

He is 2 feet away. Those two feet are all I need for time. I lock the doors right when his hand reaches for the handle, my pulse hammering as I see his face, previously contorted with passion, now contorting with rising anger. He didn't bother to fasten his pants, leaving his shrunken phallus exposed.

"Unlock the fucking door," he says, pounding the glass with his fist.

I start the engine, shift gears. He pounds the window again.

"You bitch. Open the fucking door, god-fucking-dammit."

I step on the gas, nearly knocking him over when he tries to step in front of the Buick. He hangs on to the hood until he no longer can keep up, stumbling off.

I drive onward.

His phone sings relentlessly behind me.

Mud

By Jodi Johnson

Dirt and water
the elements
the building blocks
together make mud,
make pies,
make art,
make the world.

We shelter behind masks and mascara,
tempt glory with blue ribbons and ballet slippers.

We order our world
with tape measure and scissors,
drive it with keys and chains.

We wrap our hands to spar,
unfurl our flags
and debate Potter, Brit vs. Yank.

But the pick plucks the string of the guitar
and a vibration becomes truer than any thing
like a glass-wrought heart
through which all can be seen.

The mystery of crafting a soul
might be found in the heart
of the canoe area,
in the wilderness
at the boundary
where fluid becomes salted tears or metaled blood
where visions flow into words and images
where spirit sings itself into music
where the mud we come from lives
with the dirt
with the water.

Regret

By Kyle Jaeger

Spread Laurel leaves along the wasting waves,
Strum the lyre for the swallowed lives,
Retch tears over the doomed sons,
Consumed in oaken tombs breached by cannon bellow.

Watch where their ghost-lights illumine descending hulls,
Where the drumbeat booms from the deep,
Where wraith boats halt for their due,
To sift souls from tattered skins
And lash them to obsidian boats.

Heavy they sink.
Boat prows imprint on submerged sands,
Sliding down dunes, sleds over rounded hills,
Paths swirl away in whirlpools of silt and seaweed,
Leaving life for the ageless abyss and the doom-doom drum.

Down they plunge, faster than before,
Guided by thick links heaved by solitary figures,
Wrapped in the tatters of ancient wars,
Waist deep in grit, pressed low by their chains. One pauses,
Looks a longing look at murky stains of clouds and blue
And turns in a swirl of smoky tears to fall with the fallen crew.

Sleeping

By Devin O'Brien

I enter my cotton comfort quarters
Hours pass
I'm running out of sheep to count
Melatonin masks insomnia
But it's so hard to swallow

10:32 PM

Fill it up
The cup, I'm waiting
Cut the clouds
And spill the heavens down
Bleach the sky

11:08 PM

Lullaby electrician
Fix the wiring in my head
While you're at it, filter out the lies
Fix what's dangerous if ever left untouched
Within my high maintenance mind

12:45 AM

A dream in another nation
Imagination chained in me
Tattooed, tainted, force-fed mud
Dying, choking on dry screams
Busted seams cleverly cloaked

1:01 AM

Shuffle up my mind
Pour it out my ears
Make any worry disappear
My mirror magician

Musically reflecting melody in memory

2:16 AM

Rest your trigger on my finger
Let it linger as the sweat drops
Sweet salt, out of ammo
To shoot my mouth off ranting
In a bitter cocaine nightmare

3:21 AM

Am I carefully careless,
Or carelessly careful?
Am I out on a limb,
Or just stuck in a tree?
I can smell bugs in the apples

3:30 AM

Sacrifice a life to fall
On an archaic altar of naught
Retract my claws as I let go
Only eight left
But it's such a pretty figure

4:45 AM

The imp in the bottle beckons
Me to let him free
My makeshift genie
Granting hollow wishes
Pitch it to the bricks

4:46 AM

Shattered reflector spectacle
Fluorescent glass confetti
Rains down on my parade
My parallel travels lead me
So my view will never change

4:59 AM

Slithering serpent skin

Husk of festering evil
Spits black ink, Rorschach venom
I think I see a man
He looks just like me

5:01 AM

Standing still in snaking lines
Every following face belongs to me
23rd in line for the guillotine
Donate a heads up piece of silver
A severed visage collection basket

5:17 AM

Scarecrow man of burlap sack
Attacks the flying feathered frenzy
Reaps the field with deaths razor
Maize on the ground with the tiny black heads
Thread a beak to stitch a smile

5:52 AM

Tech band trapped in Plexiglas
Sound bleeds through the tourniquet trap
Snapping fingers tap the walls
Spines crush under shattered pressure
We cannot raise the fallen roof

6:56 AM

Adderall wakes the ADD advocate
Addicted to the dream
Pencil lead provocateur
Reading the running words
Escaping the prison of the page

7:27 AM

Pour elixir rivers in my comatose mouth
Heaven lights chase the sin from veins
Driven spear, the railroad needle
Carte blanche is my eraser mind

Awake

Going Through

By Jodi Johnson

“I cannot do this.”

The week before the vision quest is horrible, shot through with anxiety. The night before is murder. No sleep through the entire night, the dark air hot and still. Shaking, sweating, running to the bathroom, thinking, “I *can*’t do this, I just can’t.” The night takes forever; one moment drags heavily into the next, minute after minute, hour after hour.

How long can a person stay in panic mode? The adrenaline and stress hormones pouring into my bloodstream overwhelm me, make me feel out-of-body, from another world. The phrase “beside oneself” makes perfect sense. Or just wishing myself out of my body because the tension, the high keen of my taut nerves, cannot be borne another second. But then I am in the next second and I am still here and I am still bearing this insane wailing of nerves and thinking, no I can’t possibly stand this another minute more. As the night wears on, I feel deadened inside like the numbness of a body part too long in pain. And yet, still stretched as tight as shrink wrap.

By the time I board the plane in the morning, it is with a clenched resignation. I board that impossible plane even though I feel something worse than death is about to happen. In a way, I’m right.

*

The morning I found out mother collapsed and was taken to the hospital was very like this. The panic, the stark fear: is she alive, did she die? The drive to the airport, the plane ride, not knowing. My sharp-voiced aunt, always bitter, acerbic, now disbelieving: “I can’t believe you girls. Three of you and not one of you made sure your mother had a

housecoat. The ambulance came, I looked and looked in your mother's closet and she has *no housecoat*. What is the matter with you girls, she was in her nightgown, they carried her out, what were thinking..."

"JOAN – I don't give a shit about the fucking housecoat, is my mother still alive?" So, I knew she made it to the emergency room.

*

What about the quest scares me? I don't think it's the wild animals. Well, maybe a little. The quest leaders give us the requisite what-to-do-if-you-encounter-a-cougar talk, while stressing the miniscule odds of anyone even seeing one at a distance, let alone close enough to warrant "making oneself appear as big as possible." The biggest fear, once I get there, is simply that I won't make it through. Yep, embarrassment at a personal failing – way worse than a bear with ten inch claws attacking me. Not to mention, a thousand times more likely.

I mention to one of the leaders (with great angst, of course) my desire to "just make it through" the four days and four nights out there. His face softens into a look that is almost tender as he says he thinks of that as a desire for life to make it through.

*

Mother's cancer was the oat-cell type. Probably a matter of months. It took almost a year, in fact. A year of living with her, in a different state. Driving an hour to Marquette for chemo and then, when it metastasized to her brain, radiation. Wiping up vomit, dealing with suspicious siblings. Not knowing if my job would be held for me or how I would make my house payments. The isolation, the decline, the loss of functions. The phantom child. *I'm sure I haven't called one of my kids in a while, but I can't think of which one.* I go over all four and the last time she talked with each one. I say you might be thinking of me, Mom, you call me almost every day but I've been here so you haven't had to call me. Maybe that's what you're thinking of. *No, no, there's someone I'm missing.* So I give her the phone and she dials from memory encoded in her fingers. She says *Hi sweetheart,*

it's me, haven't talked to you in a while, love you, call me. I go into the other room and press redial. The message is on my machine. I call a friend and ask her, please, to go to my house and remove the cassette so I can save it.

At times, I felt I could not do it anymore. But there was also deep joy when I returned after leaving for a short time, elated just to see her again and, for a while, the answering joy on her face.

*

In the woods, by yourself for four days and nights in a ten-foot circle and deprived of everything familiar, they say is like a death. There are many times it is. The idea is to fast, not just from food, but from all familiar routines like exercise, journaling, even meditation. You want nothing your mind can latch onto for comfort or distraction, even the beauty of scenery. You seek to be as alone as possible, in nature, so that it is just you and those things you spend your days and nights avoiding. See? Nothing to be afraid of. Just every single thing you don't want to face. Much bigger than a cougar. Well, at the moment, anyway, with no cougar nearby.

We each create a marker area near our circle but not visible from it. Each morning, near sunrise, I am to place a new marker in that area to show that I am OK. The leaders, who protect the space physically and spiritually throughout, come by twice a day to check the marker area. If my marker is not out there in the morning, they will assume something is wrong and come to check on me. My quest will be over at that point, even if it was only because I forgot to place the marker.

We "go in" just before sunrise on Monday morning, each to their respective circle. The night before was ceremony and final preparation. Until Friday's sunrise, I am alone in a circle that was once a giant redwood. Cut down by lumber companies, the space where I now quest is surrounded by "seedlings" of the mother tree. They are small in comparison to the old ones that are gone yet these children are still taller than almost any tree I've ever seen. They tower around me, majestic. Green-needled branches wed overhead and shelter me in dense shade. Decades of fallen needles create a soft,

warm nest and smell of wood and smoke. A soft red in their fibrous bark glows in the green shade.

There are times I want to scream and cry as loud as I can out of frustration, grief or the sheer unbearability of facing the pain and that infinite abyss of emptiness. Other times are quite calm, watching the quail do their two-footed jump and scratchback in the dust, the little flip-flop thing on the tops of their heads bobbling back and forth. They look like querulous old ladies in hats with loose adornments, scrabbling in the dirt. Still other times, the true root of awe-full breaks over me and floods my being. My heart stops as I gaze up at a fathomless black so overflowing with sweeps of stars I am dizzied and fear I will fall off the planet.

*

For a full day, my mother's wracking, tortured breaths rattle the house. Several times, I think she is gone but she drags in another ripped piece of air. When at last all is quiet, I hear a small, muted wind chime, high and light, ruffle in a soft spring breeze.

*

I do make it through the quest. I walk out of my circular nest, created by the giant, ancient redwood, and protected by her soaring children. I walk away from the cronk of the raven, the squawk of the jay and the soft shuffle of the quail. I carry my four markers, stones chosen for their colors to represent the directions. I do make it through. Life makes it through.

The Neighbor Girl

By Kyle Jaeger

Pressed face against fence slats,
I see her again,
Pockets stewing with maple leaves and dandelions,
Boiling dirt down summer cotton,
Fading sunflowers
Where her hands are prone to rub.

She spelunks through summer lilacs,
Swallowed into a secret nook,
And pours her pockets into a mound.
Separated by thin cedar, I watch
Thin strands of hair snap lose,
Sawn on the edge of broken bottle,
Sprinkled over mashed greens and yellows.

Dirt, she adds, and water she scoops
From a bucket left to catch the rain.
Sludge dribbles down elbows as she maneuvers
Fingertips through her collection like a pianist;
And raising her pale arms to pluck purple blossoms,
Plays them into the batter.

Her lips whispers words I can't understand
As she sculpts a loaf and heaves it into air.
We flinch like we expect it to hail down
With the sleet of sticks and leaves
That speckle our wide expressions.
But it floats away as she whirls and laughs her only laugh
While twigs whip unmired from muddy palms.

Wisps of cloud catch on the brick like cotton fibers
As it disappears into parting clouds;
And for a moment, one moment,
I see endless snowy towers,
Unfurling flags of sapphire and ruby,
Growing from a sea of golden platters
Balanced on peeling sticks of emeralds--
Unfaded sunflowers.

A screen door creaks and a man's voice roars a name.
Blinking drips from wet eyes,
We look again, and all we see is sky.
Her laugh floats away
And hair lies limp and burnt.
Her face sags into creases and folds
As she drags her body back through bushes.
I hear the screech and bang of spring and door
And voices hot and loud.
I look once more for the castles in the air
and wait again for tomorrow to show myself the truth.

The Invisible Poet

By Kyle Lenzen

You are my muse
I'm your invisible poet
Amazingness is in you
Forever beauty, you will be

Picturing how perfect we can be
Night with you
By the sea
Under the stars and moon
Together, right by me

When I'm with you
I'm at ease
Set me free
And we can be

The pieces fall into place
And they will connect
Don't ever change
You are set
You'll never know how I feel
Because I'm your invisible poet

The Dream Catcher

By Patti Lindaberry

Birch and sinew.
An intricate web woven to capture nightmares.

Woven to silence the growl of a sleeping child's belly
as he clings to his weeping mother.

Woven to block calloused angry hands
from scarring virgin skin.

Woven to wipe away
shattered mirrors and splintered doors.

Woven to hold tightly,
until sunlight streams.

Disintegrating
monsters and demons,

captured in the intricate web
of birch and sinew.

The Waitress

By Sabrina Burgmeier

Walking up the old, creaky steps, she
enters the diner and
prepares for her shift.

She goes into the bathroom and
glances at the mirror; her
long, blond curls in disarray,
twisting and turning in every direction.

Carefully she gathers them together,
pulling them back into a ponytail
with a violet ribbon that cascades down her back.

Next she ties on her apron,
stained,
presumably with coffee,
smells like last night's special.

Her sapphire blue eyes glance up, and
catch the menacing scar grinning at her,
dancing across her neck.

Self-consciously she pulls her shirt collar up to
hide this ugly reminder.

"Never again," she tells herself, as
she washes her hands, and
begins her shift.

Papa Bayert

By Kayla Griffin

Your jeans
with the handkerchief
in the pocket still hang
on the back of the door.
The strong aroma
from your pipe tobacco
still lingers in the air.
A grocery list,
in your handwriting
still sits by the refrigerator.
Your face
still smiles in numerous photographs
placed around the house.
Your contagious laughter
still rings through our memories
and old home videos.
But you,
you are not here anymore.

Eye

By Jodi Johnson

The beholder
is in the eye of beauty.
We swim in beauty
like a voice floats on air,
like a fish fins through water,
breathing and drinking in
at the same time
not knowing.

You, the beholder –
must strip away
what protects you
from life
from beauty
so you are naked enough
to feel yourself
held
in the eye.

You, the beholder –
must see with
your heart
your blood
your skin
your bones
must feel this medium
through which you move
the liquid air that you
press against
and bathe in

must taste the salty tang
and smell the blue-green
as you pass through it
and it passes through you.

Only this allows
the awareness
to wash over and around you
that you are a thing both
held and fed
by beauty.

When God Shat His Pants

By Devin O'Brien

While sliding down the black plastic tunnels of God's colon
I met knife-eared nymphs that showered me with the discarded
 gifts of the world
The gods of Greece and polytheism
Egypt, Rome
I met them all and shook hands,
But failed to remember all their names
The nymphs gave me discarded wisdom
Lost stories, songs, languages
The tongues cut out by Persians
The mass massacre of cultures
Natives living simple lives
Enter Columbus, Cortez
Intruders eat forbidden fruits and soil the land
Like the britches of this deity in which I now reside

Laundromat

By David Fanberg

Meet me outside the Laundromat
down the road
from the buck-shot freckled
White Castle.
By the rotting, gas-station
shuttered on the corner.
Sitting in the pale, strobe
of street-lights slowly
burning out.
Behind the steaming
yawns of a sleepy
bus-stop bench,
and the gray, salty strip
of road muck spattered cars.
Meet me outside this Laundromat
when your lease is up.

Fairy Tails

By Patrick Parisian

A Ten Minute play

Cast of Characters:

George: A prince, Late teens to early thirties,
Dressed elegantly

Dennis: George's servant, Late teens to early thirties,
Dressed simply

Setting: Off a road or near the woods. Anywhere secluded in
nature.

Time: Day or evening. Anytime of year.

(George and Dennis walk on stage. Dennis follows behind
George. Dennis is carrying several
bags that he sets down. George notices and turns around to
face Dennis.)

George

(Hearty) Aw, my dear Dennis why dost thou rest...there-ily.

Dennis

Perhaps it's because your greatness has dampened my spirit.
Or perhaps it's because WE DON'T KNOW WHERE THE
FUCK WE'RE GOING!

George

(Still hearty) My dear fellow Dennis... (Normal) don't be a
dick. We know where we're going.

Dennis

And that is?

George

To you know... (Valiantly) To wherever the Two-headed Goat of Misfortune rests its destructive head, err *heads*.

Dennis

“Two-headed goat,” that is not right.

George

Or the Possum of Unhappiness, whatever it is we need to defeat it to save the princess from its dreaded curse. And then we shall be wed upon the return of my quest. Prince George the Valiant and Princess Gwendolyn the Fair, it has a nice ring to it, don't you think?

Dennis

Yeah, that's great but you don't know what you need to find to remove the curse.

George

(Annoyed) I just said it's one of those feared Lagomorphs with the head of a rabbit and the body...of a rabbit.

Dennis

You're an idiot. Going through all this work for some princess. A handsome prince could get any common woman he wants. Why waste your time for some inbred throne warmer?

George

With hair as fair as golden fields, lips like roses, and skin as pure as snow. She is a beauty for the ages. The kind that troubadours and bards sing their tales about. You can keep the common folk for yourself.

Dennis

And I do.

George

I know you do. And you look down on me.

Dennis

Alright, so I have one vice that you don't.

George

More like fifty vices.

Dennis

Ha! Well, which one of us kicks peasants and beggars when the adoring masses are not around?

George

That's you too!

Dennis

Oh, right...well which one of us uses his status to not pay for his bar tabs?

George

Uh, *you*.

Dennis

Damn, well it's not fair. I don't get all the royal treatment like you so I have to take what few perks I can.

George

Maybe, and this is a big maybe. But I might, perchance to dream, that if you perform splendidly in this quest I could possibly get you knighted. Of course, then I would have to get a new squire to carry my things. But if you really want it, I guess I can put in a word, or two. If you really want. I mean really really want, maybe.

Dennis

Fuck your mother!

George

Ummm, you know that's your mother too, right?

Dennis

(Spiteful) Yessss, I know that. Can't you see I'm upset? It's total bullshit that I'm the squire and you're (mocking) The Valiant Prince of Kissmysackdom.

George

That is totally not the name. And why shouldn't I be the prince? I deserve it. You think any... ruffian can project the aura of sophistication and royalty that a prince possesses?

Dennis

And that's the problem, right there!

George

My princey-ness?

Dennis

Your smug attitude like you're better than me.

George

Well, I don't want to throw it in your face, but a whole kingdom has a similar opinion.

Dennis

I'll kill you.

George

Go ahead; your execution will be swift. That certainly won't get you *a-head* in life.

Dennis

(Indignant) We're brothers dammit! Equals! Don't treat me like trash!

George

Did you not get my joke? *A-head, A-head* because you would be guillotined...and would, you know... lose your head.

Dennis

Alright, that's pretty good but I'm still pissed.

George

Geez, don't hold a grudge. I can't not be the prince; we're pretty committed at this point. But if you want us both beheaded then I'll see if I can get twin guillotines arranged. Or maybe we can run back home, would you like that? To move back to the farm?
(Using a hillbilly impression) Gosh gee, Den-Den you want to mash the corn to meal and then go and marry our cousins?

Dennis

But since you're the Prince, isn't Gwendolyn your cousin.

George

We know she isn't really my cousin. And in the royal circle it's not weird.

Dennis

Sorry, I don't want to go back to our roots. But it sucks that I get stuck as your squire when I'm older.

George

By only a year. And we wouldn't be here in the first place if it wasn't for me.

Dennis

So it comes out! (Unable to resist) That's what she said!

George

(Laughing) you're funny.

Dennis

And it's not all you. I found the body.

George

I would have found it eventually. If you didn't harvest that part of the field I would have.

Dennis

Or our sister would have.

George

Ah, Marjorie! How do you think she's doing?

Dennis

Who cares? She was very anti-corpse robbing. The point I'm trying to make without being sidetracked by your nonsense is that I was integral in this, this...façade.

George

You think you were key? Ha! (Starts pacing back and forth)
Let's review the facts.

Dennis

Naw, we don't need to do that.

George

Fact the one: We, not you, discover a corpse. Fact the second: The corpse is one of a wealthy prince. Fact the three: You say let's steal the few coins he carries, his sword and jewelry and weigh him down and dump him in a river.

Dennis

Liar! I said leave him in the woods for the wolves.

George

But the rest—

Dennis

Is correct. I just didn't notice the book.

George

Bullstool you didn't. You said, and I quote, "why would I want a prince's book. So, I can read how awesome his life is and how much I suck, pish-posh." Pish-posh, you said. Pish-

posh. Now it wasn't a book, was it? It was a journal. A princely journal.

Dennis

You only wanted to read it because you just learned how. Teaching you was a big mistake.

George

(Ignoring Dennis) And what was inside said journal? Intimate details about the dead prince. And what was the most important thing? Do you know?

Dennis

That he had been living in a distant kingdom since he was an infant.

George

That he had been living in a distant kingdom since he was an infant. All alone, no attendants or visits to his home kingdom. That made his life a blank slate for us to take. All because *I* had the foresight to read a small leather bound book.

Dennis

Well, aren't you the best.

George

I think so...and apparently a whole kingdom does too.

Dennis

I still think you cheated on that coin toss.

George

How do you cheat on a coin toss? Are you listening to yourself? You sound insane?

Dennis

All I know is you never won a coin toss before. And that's why I said we should use that to...

George

Ha! You thought to cheat me. You get what you deserve.

Dennis

It just doesn't make any sense. You always lost. You were the one forced to give me your share of booze or stuck fertilizing the farm.

George

He looked like me anyways. Our faces were identical, we could have been brothers.

Dennis

We're brothers so ergo I would have looked like him too. If we could tell what he looked like. He was face down in a boggy area; his face was almost entirely decomposed.

George

It wasn't *that* decomposed.

Dennis

It was like maggot city. You vomited... I vomited.

George

To be fair I was hung over, that's probably why I got sick.

Dennis

I was too but the rotting corpse triggered it.

George

Well his hair was still intact and our hair was a perfect match.

Dennis

We have the same colored hair.

George

But mine has a glossier sheen.

(Pause)

(Pause)

If it's that important I'll knight you when we get back. I'll say you saved my life in the battle with the Ferret of Adultery.

Dennis

You don't need to do that.

George

Then why have we been arguing?

Dennis

I was thinking that if some sort of conflict arises I might have to fight. I don't want to do that, murdering farm animals and saying they're mythical creatures is a little different than facing down a charging line of destriers with their men-at-arms lances facing you.

George

YEAH! You're still in! I was worried what I was gonna have to do. I would need a new squire and what if he was honorable and wasn't willing to go along with my deceit? I would have to accuse him and get him hung. And it would just be a whole big deal.

Dennis

Plus to get knighted you have to take that vow of chivalry, screw that! If robbing corpses and lying to the masses is a crime then I guess you can just call me a criminal.

George

You're a criminal.

Dennis

(Laughing) Yeah, and you're an imposter.

George

A royal imposter.

Dennis

Let's just finish our quest so we can get back to our criminal misconduct.

George

Criminal intent.

Dennis

Ha, yeah, all this talk makes me want to commit a crime.
Let's go steal some horses.

George

We'll find a farmer and say it's for royal business.

Dennis

Then we can just kill one of his sheep and say it was the beast we sought.

George

(Valiantly) Then let's go my humble servant. We shall finish our quest by slaying the Ewe of Bewilderment, and then we shall ride back so I can claim the fair Gwendolyn's hand in marriage.

Dennis

Yes, my lord.

(George and Dennis run off stage in a peal of laughter)

(Lights Out)

Ocean View

By Sabrina Burgmeier

The ocean mist splashes against me
while wind sweeps across my face
brushing a few loose strands of hair

I scoop up a handful of sand
letting it slowly slip through my fingers
like time falling through an hour glass

A gull soaring high above
soothing sounds of the ocean
act like a siren's call pulling me in

The light blue waves caress my toes.
The pebbles massage my feet
as I walk along the beach

Many shells washed ashore,
some intact,
others broken,
like hearts lost at sea

The warm colors of the sky
complement the bright morning sun
as its warm inviting rays caress my face

The smell of the salty sea breeze and
the palm trees swaying from
side to side,
appearing as if they are dancing a waltz at
an Arbor Day ball.

Wanting to Live

By Kyle Jaeger

Sparks billow.
Twigs twisted to look like people
Sink into fire.
Flames fracture wooden limbs
And gnaw ten fingers off.
Wooden bodies curl in on themselves
Excreting bubbles of sap like boiling blood.
Each whistles a scream and pops,
Crumbles, crashes, sparks--then ashes.

The little boy watches with orange eyes
Aglow like lusty embers,
Lips curling up at the corners.
His knotty knuckles quicken,
Clumsy in their execution.
In flames he lay his final creation,
A boy
Made like himself.

Its fleshy wood chars
Under mocking tongues,
Lapping the figurine
Like the lick of cruel words,
Eating its flesh.
Fire breathes the dead doll to false animation.
It squirms with crackling pulse, and dying,
Breathes one breath,
One breath of glinting stars
That braid their course into the sky.
And Pinocchio says, "It's beautiful,"
And touches the fire himself.

The Boat

By Sabrina Burgmeier

The row boat drifts quietly on the lake,
Swaying side to side,
Back and forth.

The sounds of the soothing waves gently
Caress the sides of the wood planks.

As I lift the oar out of the water,
Sunlight gazes upon it,
making the drops of water
glisten in the sun.

The spray of the lake dances off my face,
As the boat drifts forward.

The crisp air smells fresh,
the seagulls fly overhead
Singing their merry song.
After awhile the sun starts to fade
I paddle back to the shore,
looking forward to greeting
the new day.

“The Squirrel Story”

By Carlin Struckman

When I was six my dad called me ‘Squirrel’ for some reason. It was probably because I had buck teeth. All of this came to an end one summer morning while my dad was working the night shift. I was sitting in the living room doing my typical fare of reading encyclopedias when some motion caught my eye. There was a squirrel sitting in the dining room. My dad was asleep in the bedroom when I screamed

“Dad! There’s a squirrel in the house!”

Groggy and pissed off he replied

“Yeah, and his name is Carlin”. I reiterated “Dad! There’s a real squirrel in the house!”

A combination of lethargy and annoyance kept him from coming out for a full five minutes while the squirrel sat staring at me wondering how long it had to live. Once my dad finally came out of the bedroom dressed only in a robe, he saw the squirrel and chased it into the fireplace before covering the door with a brick. Without another word he wandered back into the bedroom implying mom would take care of it when she got home.

Six hours later, filled with the constant background noise of a pissed off squirrel trying to break through the brick barricade, my mom got home. I briefed her of the situation and she immediately took the brick off the fireplace, releasing the squirrel back into the house. We scrambled around to herd it back in, the task eventually being achieved by our mentally challenged basset hound who in the past followed the scent of a squirrel straight into the side of a stucco garage... twice...

one collision right after the other. With the squirrel now contained again, we sat down to strategize.

The idea of calling Animal Control came instantly. There's a squirrel in your fireplace, the first call should always be to those people who are paid to take care of that sort of thing. We called the animal control company, told them the situation, and they said they'd have a guy out in an hour or so. The hour it took him to get there was also filled entirely with the disconcerting glass on brick rattle the squirrel trying to flee.

The animal control guy came dressed from head to toe in leather. He had a cage, a lasso, an additional pair of leather gloves, a mysterious box I could only imagine contained a tranquilizer gun, and the machismo of a bull driving a pick up truck. Without stopping for a second he went straight to the fireplace and removed the brick. Yet again the squirrel escaped, but for some reason he ran straight back into the fireplace. The animal control guy closed the door, took a breath, light up a cigarette, grabbed his lasso, and opened the doors back up. He flung both his arms into the jail cell and started flailing around before a panicked look came over his face. He went still, and the squirrel ran straight up his right arm, around the back of his neck, and scampered straight back into the fireplace down his left arm. With a large swath of urine covering the front of his jeans, the animal control guy slammed the door of the fireplace and put the brick back where it was being used as a makeshift lock and ran out. Not a single word was uttered from the time he walked in the door to the time he left.

Our battle plan was amended to read "call an animal control guy who isn't a total pussy."

The second animal control guy had much less gratuitous testosterone pouring out of his persona. He was dressed head to toe in leather as well, had roughly the same tool belt. He took a much gentler approach to the squirrel than barging in and trying to grab the sucker. Instead, he put a live trap baited with peanut butter in front of the fireplace, and

opened the door just enough to squeeze a squirrel through. The squirrel didn't fall for it, and hunkered in a corner making that strange robotic noise that squirrels make. Like the first, the second animal control guy threw his arms into the fireplace. Instead of pissing himself, he gave up after a minute and announced "I don't think anybody can get this sucker out. He's fierce," dashing our hopes of an easy way out.

Various other schemes were weighed now that Animal Control was out of the running. Building a fire wouldn't work, because that would leave the glass doors open long enough to let him escape. Poisonous gas was out, as I the ever animal loving child objected. The dog wasn't athletic enough to catch it if we let the squirrel free. Nobody wanted to risk getting bit, and killing the thing was off the table. After an hour or so we decided to casually call the non-emergency police line, and ask for an officer to head over whenever they got some spare time.

Within five minutes there were eight cop cars in our driveway.

To fully appreciate the scenario, I have to stop the story and explain a few things about my family. We were the weird ones on the block. Our household consisted of a hippie straight from the San Francisco underground, a metalhead luthier with a habit of playing guitar so loud noise complaints get filed, a grizzled tax evading Vietnam veteran with a gun cabinet half the size of our attic, all three with decades distanced drug resumes that walked the fine line between "extensive" and "impressive;" and a six year old boy with hair past his ass. Our minivan was painted bright neon colors more suited to road construction signs and hunting vests. We had bonfires on the front lawn, couches for the dog in the back, and a lawn that twice earned us citations at the hands of our fundamentalist peeping tom backyard-slightly-to-the-north-on-top-of-a-hill neighbor who was the only person on the block less liked than us. The rest of the block was inhabited by the original owners of World War II era houses. Even with a small

handful of young kids, the average age was 75. Eight cop cars, in *our* driveway, caused a commotion. Everybody was out on their front lawns muttering “They finally got them” between themselves.

None of the cops had any idea what to do, and were probably disappointed they couldn’t bust a massive pot farm after one of the growers called the department while having a bad acid trip. Amongst the eleven cops, three fierce advocates against mainstream culture, and a little kid who had decided the time was right to read the encyclopedia article on squirrels desperately hoping for hints they would make suitable pets, nobody had any idea what to do about the squirrel. In a stroke of brilliance the cops called for backup, summoning another half dozen cars to our doorstep, giving more fodder to the onlookers convinced they’re witnessing the arrest of drug kingpins of south Minneapolis.

The additional 10 cops stood with the rest of us in the living room all scratching our heads, until one scrawny cop with a physique that screamed “Meter Maid” walked back out to his car. He returned with a pair of gloves, and a determined look on his face. Sensing something interesting was about to go down, the rest of the cops scattered and made a clear line between the door and the fireplace. The cop walked calmly to the glass doors, opened them, and grabbed the squirrel. He pulled it out and held onto it firmly as it fought with every ounce of energy it had. Without any enthusiasm the cop asked us what we wanted done with the apprehended infiltrator, and we figured letting it go was the best option.

We all filed out of the house and let the squirrel go on the lawn. I waved to it bidding it farewell back into the world of squirreldom. The cops got back into their cars without incident, and my parents laughed at all of the extremely confused looking people watching us disappointed they didn’t get to see us hauled off in handcuffs.

When the Dimensions Converge

By Laura Thomas

Empty your mind and pull the trigger...

It was the only thought in Jason Winger's mind outside the safety of the compound.

“Another little devil latched on.”

Coming to a stop in the bar, Jason looked to the pant leg of a fellow soldier. No matter that his troop wore radiation suits, the seeds clung to everything. He had to marvel at nature's design. It was lined with wicked barbs that any sane thing would stomp to bits as soon as they found it.

And that was exactly what it needed to spread.

The spores within the seeds had infected the city so fast that it had been barred off into quarantine. They were no larger than an eraser tip but Jason knew too well how rapidly they floated in out of nowhere and congregated over flesh. In seconds there were hundreds. If allowed, they would infect a person, change them. It haunted Jason how many good men they had lost. His protective suit was a second skin with too many sutured tears. The contaminant was in his blood.

Just empty your mind and pull the trigger...

It was the only thing he could afford to think. The pollen reacted to chemical changes in the body: elevated blood pressure, perspiration, basically anything. It metastasized. Jason couldn't allow himself to get stressed or angry or afraid. Every time he did the scales ate a little further along his flesh.

“I’ve got it, Kairi,” Jason said, ironing the stress from his face, deftly plucking the spore from the young lady’s suit. They’d gassed the rest of the field with an agent that shut down both host plant and parasite from the inside out. This one he placed in a containment unit.

He stood to see two strange amber eyes lock with his.

“Rounding up the kids?” the man asked, pungent breath against Jason’s neck.

An undesirable had breached the troop’s circle. Like lightning strike every soldier’s weapon was out. Jason too went for his gun but he didn’t draw it. He could fire a killing shot at a second’s warning.

The late stages of the metamorphosis had taken hold and the amber-eyed man’s hair had shriveled away in wake of the scales. Slits in his forearms were traces of a hidden nail-like growth, sharp as any sword when extracted. There were similar people scattered; some with arched talons that clicked as they walked, some with fully evolved tails that twisted over the ground.

Lowlife and common man alike weren’t fighting the invasion. They were indulging in it.

“Did you hear me, space-man?” the man continued, tapping at Jason’s mask. Almost in tune to the tapping, the room warped. It was no normal quake, rather the woodwork seemed to stretch and change color like a broken TV set. Its texture changed into a wood/rock hybrid.

Serious as death, Jason glared at the warped space of the merging dimension until it returned to normal. He’d already broken formation when his troop moved to the counter for the commander to ask the same question he always asked. Jason had seen enough but he’d ignored the amber-eyed man for too long. Jason noticed too late the concealed weapon and he

lurched painfully at the familiar gunshot. If he'd moved only a second later the bullet would've pierced his heart.

One shot and the room was a horizontal hailstorm of bullets. Jason went for the emergency button on his utility belt. Gas shot out from three capsules on another compartment. Every other soldier's belt picked up the signal. Soon the air was thick with the artificial fog.

“Complete lack of discipline!” Commander Raynes bellowed back at HQ. “Damn it, Winger, that mission was for nothing! Can't you just keep your head down and follow orders!?”

“Sir?”

“We could've followed up that lead on that source alien! Look around you; do you see anything but those spores and the human hybrids they spawn? We could've found someone from the other side who knows about the invasion plans! Now we'll never know, we'll just-!”

“Sir?”

“*What!?*”

“You're blossoming, sir,” Jason said plaintively. The scaling started from the nerve about to burst on the older man's temple and spread with every heartbeat. It needed immediate treatment and the commander was hurried to a cot. That, of course, didn't stop him from cursing across the room. There was no break in between the shouting so Jason just started talking. “Sir, the scanners indicated that there were thirty-eight people in that bar. I did a head count, including the five in the restrooms and the worker in the stockroom. They were all human hybrids except two, probably a conquered race from a different dimension. There was no source alien, no one to question.”

The commander slammed his fist down and thunder ran through the floor. “There was no one to question because you gassed them all!”

There was the familiar prick in Jason’s arm of the anti-toxin that just slowed the process. With the suit gone he could no longer pretend that there wasn’t a horn racing through his black hair and a point at the end of his ear. Every wound of his had grown scales that spread like gangrene and there was now a new point on his chest. Such traces could be found on everyone that ventured outside.

“This is obviously a parasitic species,” reasoned Jason. “One that completely takes over its host; the individual spores within such host accumulating into one collective mind. They already have the perfect means of takeover: getting in through our respiratory system. Why would they want to be bogged down with a body?”

“As much as I’m aware that you know everything, if they’re smart enough to not get *bogged down* with the chore of building spacecrafts and navigating them across the galaxy, if they’re smart enough to instead merge our world with theirs by who the devil knows how, then I don’t think it’s that far of a stretch that they may have found a way to incorporate their offspring into horticulture! That they may have sent over one of their own to oversee the process! Getting taken over by plants, it’s outrageous!”

“Regardless, this is just a glamour mission. It’s taking me away from more important matters, like how to reverse the dimension conversion. You’ve seen how often they converge, how much longer it’s lasting. It’s a very bad sign. If you would just give me back control of my team, I could-”

But the commander was already through the door. “Denied.”

Jason had been treated, decontaminated, and was free to go. He didn’t; his hands wrung, looking for something to strangle,

before he focused on his calming techniques. Kairi sat down. She tried to lay a hand on him, though she held back sobs over the incident in the bar. Disinterested, Jason pulled away. He made his way through the sterile facility and its only two colors: stark white walls and gray floors. He took the facility's lone elevator several levels underground and a certain sealed door allowed him clearance.

An oversized book was held by small hands at a table. Blond hair could be seen but no face.

"Leo, my shift ended early."

The twelve-year-old lowered his book but continued reading. Leo was well cared for but he had little more color than the walls. His eyes no longer shone bright. Jason felt the weight that had a stranglehold over his chest loosen every time he saw his son and his soft, uncontaminated flesh: what he remembered humans were supposed to look like. He was the only child in the facility and a subject of interest to the doctors. For whatever scientific reason, the spores seemed less effective on him.

"Leo..." Jason took the boy's hands from the tattered pages. "Leo, the commander may own me when I'm on the clock but other than that my time is my own. My men's loyalty is to me."

He gripped the boy more firmly, anything to release the burden he carried day and night. Though he was sure its effects weren't as efficient as the anti-toxin, Jason was sure that coming down every day and getting that skin to skin contact with his son was helping the growths to recede. He'd seen so many other men trail off the straight path into the darkness, those with loved ones waiting for them to return, but in the end all they had were photographs. They were only tiny pixels arranged into images and it hadn't been enough.

The white walls around them shuddered like it had in the bar.

“I’m going to figure this out,” he said with greater conviction still. He pressed on with that conviction in the following days that brought unwelcome new advancements. Along with the commander’s initial mission, the troops had to handle more crowd control after the bar incident. The distractions freed up Jason’s time late at night and he unofficially assembled his troop at the front gates for what had been their original mission. He didn’t believe in magic so the aliens had to be thinning the lines by some logical means, a device or something sure to make the transfer as well. He reminded them all in case it had gotten fuzzy.

“Kairi! Do you have a problem with those orders?”

“Jason...” Pain had nestled in her for days and it showed in her gaze. “Jason, those people in the bar...they hadn’t turned. Not completely. Not all of them.” Reluctant, he recalled those who still sounded human when they’d screamed, to the dying woman that had grabbed hold of Kairi’s ankle. The same that Jason had to ram with his gun so she wouldn’t rip open a gash in Kairi’s suit.

Jason looked at her sidelong, past the tears that trailed down both Kairi’s human and non-human cheek. He pierced into her deeply as if to see the contaminant already overcoming her morning injection. Kairi had lost her entire left arm to the transformation and much more largely due to the emotions she couldn’t cap.

He turned from her sharply, discouraging her reaction to them all.

“Our facility is open to everyone,” the man stated without remorse. “These people are a threat. They don’t want to be saved.” He locked, loaded, and was off. He stopped when no one followed.

“You said you just killed the bad guys. Is everyone cast in black now?”

Jason felt that his spinal cord had been ripped from his skeleton. He turned to confirm the impossible: Leo was standing outside. And he wasn't wearing a radiation suit.

Fiery anger came off the boy in waves; Jason could feel the heat of it through his suit. He looked on in pure horror as the spores poured over the boy's unprotected body, changing it rapidly. Half of Leo's face was already gone, unrecognizable. It was commonplace on everyone else but seeing it on his child made panic gush through his gut like a geyser. His feet were faster than his mind to react. However, he stopped dead when his son pulled a strange-looking gun on him.

"It's been two years since I've been outside!" Leo yelled, pent up to the point of exploding. "Two years since I've gotten to breathe anything other than sour air that's been circulated a thousand times over! Why couldn't you just not come back!?"

Jason was struck dumb, so dumb that he could've been knocked down with a boot, let alone a bullet. Looking between the two, Kairi wavered nervously, itching to do something.

"Leo..." Jason managed. "Leo, your face...you have to get inside!"

"I don't care!" Leo fired back and his gnashed teeth seemed more pointed. "I just want to be free of you! No one's going to come looking for me once I am! I can have a life again!"

"That weapon, where did you get it?"

"There was a source alien after all," the boy spat out. "He gave me this. It's a concentrated blend of the spores. You'll become one of them." Leo's eyes burned, his grip was tight on the trigger, but he was hesitating. The shifts were getting stronger and so when the two worlds merged again it came with a quake that rocked the ground.

The boy wasn't trained. He lost his stance.

There was no time to concern his conscience; Jason switched his gun to stun and fired. Electricity surged through the boy's body and Jason caught him before he fell. He rushed inside. Even as they went through the reentry procedures, the background remained merged with the other world. This time tiny invertebrates were able to make the transfer. It had never lasted so long before and Jason gave the deepest sigh of relief when it returned to normal. That relief was short lived when Leo, weak and shaking, tried to stab him with the injector gun. With a flinch, Jason blocked him and stabbed his own needle into his son's neck, where the anti-toxin began to reverse the effects. Doing what he did made scales creep further along Jason's scalp, something that hadn't happened in a long time.

"Saw it all over the camera," Raynes said dismissively, waiting for him. He took the injection gun from Leo and handed it to one of his researchers. "Lock the traitor up downstairs."

"What? No!" Jason cried, pulling his son back. His team hesitated.

"That is a direct order from your superior officer!" Raynes bellowed and punishment would be severe if they disobeyed. Eyes apologetic, a soldier wrenched Leo away from Jason's clenched hands.

"Don't do this. This is my fault." Images of the murderers and rapists caged below plagued Jason's mind. "He's...he's a child!"

"Then I'll be sure to send him some toys."

"Sir, we are completely out of time. You saw how long that last transition lasted. You were right, you were! I apologize! But there's no time to find the source now! We need to evacuate the facility!"

"No one is leaving! I will wring answers out of that boy myself if I have to! That is all!"

“But sir-”

The commander was considerably shorter than Jason. That didn't stop him from backing him into the wall with the ferocity of a bulldog. “I am *this* close to locking you up with your brat, Winger! After this little late-night joyride without my consent! Maybe a few days starvation will temper your tongue!” He left without even a pause in his step when the white walls again turned to purple stone. With pleasure, he crushed an alien crawfish underfoot.

Jason waited for him to round the corner before he went back for his suit's utility belt. The floor at rock bottom was his destination and with any luck he could catch them. As Jason made his way to the elevator, large patches of air began to warp and go red. It pooled around him as he waited for the car to return from its long journey down. He made the mistake of trying to waft it away like gas.

He startled when his hand caught in it.

It was thicker than normal air. With a jolt Jason released what it was: a complex organism that would transition in stages, first at a cellular level. Commander Raynes would have no more reason to search for the true invaders when hundreds would soon be inside his base.

Having no desire to become an interspecies conjoined twin, Jason thrashed against the red mist until he was thrown back on the floor. From there, he stampeded down the stairs. Luckily the other world's adjoining space underground was a cave instead of a hundred feet of suffocating soil. Unluckily the shifts had become constant. His shoes had too much slide on the moistened rock. Too often the rails disappeared and he nearly coasted off the edge. When he was fifteen floors down Jason thought he was home free until he ran into other soldiers making a break for the stairs. Fully formed aliens followed and before he knew it he was falling a full level down.

Bombs had destroyed the entire sixteenth level stairs.

Jason cursed. Going back that way was now impossible. The air loomed thick with the spores and the few soldiers left unconverted were overwhelmed. He took it out on every alien he met through the final levels, leaving a wake behind in his desperation to not be too late.

He brought his elbow down on one's spiky, crowned head and turned to administer a killing blow when he felt a rush of air. But the blur of blond rushed past him without stopping.

"Leo!" Jason grabbed him back easily. Keeping him there was considerably harder.

"They – they got the interrogator!" Leo shrieked, too riled up to remember his anger. "He touched this weird mist and-!"

"I know, but you can't go that way for long. The stairs are going to run out," Jason said, gripping him in both hands. "We can take them for a few flights but after we've got to-" A flash of green suddenly separated them and Jason was on the floor, pinned like an insect. Spittle from the lizard's fangs flicked onto his face and he could hear Leo's scream.

Just as it extracted its forearm blade its chest spurted open and it keeled over.

"The commander's dead!" Kairi cried, reloading. "And I'm not following orders from a dead man! I'm with you!" She was so far gone into her transformation Jason was amazed she still had mind enough to help them. He accepted her hand up. When Leo could breathe again he passed round the oxygen tanks he'd grabbed. Jason almost wished the stairs could go on forever because too soon they had to face what he'd been dreading: the elevators that had become their only chance of escape.

The conversion was nearing completion now, rendering almost the entire level unrecognizable. It no longer just blended with what filled the same space. The matter of the

other world was overtaking theirs. And before them the only protection from it was a shaky metal box.

“*In!*” Jason roared, his voice promising every manner of terror and pain for disobedience.

Not daring for eye contact, Leo and Kairi bolted in and Jason followed, firing rounds into the oncoming masses up until the doors shut. Sinking to the floor, Kairi gave a blessed inhale. “I didn’t grab my belt, didn’t think about it. I’m out of bullets.”

“I have one magazine left,” Jason said, loading it with purpose. He saw Leo kneel next to Kairi, gripping her hand, and noticed her hard breathing. She was fighting the contaminant by sheer force of mind. She was losing that internal battle just as badly as any human still caught in the warzone was losing control over the base.

The floor buttons seemed to light up at a tenth of their normal speed but they were ascending. They were somehow being taken away from the screaming and explosions that plagued every level.

Hope rose in Jason’s chest with every level before the car lurched to a grinding standstill.

“No...*no!*” Rage exploding in his chest, Jason slammed into the shut doors. He unloaded his remaining bullets into it but only marred the finish. Exiting through the ceiling he saw the problem: a large formation of rock had busted through the shaft, merging with the cables.

He dropped back onto the car’s floor, his face saying what his mouth could not.

Fear alighted in Leo’s eyes. “No, we can’t be stuck! There has to be some way out!” But bowing his head, Jason removed his oxygen mask, took theirs too. He had deployed the gas so many times, extinguished so much contaminated life, and he

gave a defeated grunt that it should end this way. The gas began to stream into the tiny space. Leo backed up and slammed into the wall. “*No!*”

“We’d be caught in a bomb blast and filled with shrapnel,” Jason droned, deadpan. “The electricity is fried and this elevator will never move again. Either we wait for it to drop us or be found by them.”

Still Leo continued to scream at him to make it not true. He tried desperately to cover the gas that was filling his lungs, shutting him down. He fought until the minutes blurred, choked on his breath when Kairi’s hand went limp in his. Tired beyond measure, Jason longed to let it take him and his tainted body just as fast but, watching his son suffer with so much life left in him, he couldn’t give in yet. At his beckoning gesture, Leo stumbled into his chest, hacking and crying.

“It’s going to be all right now,” he said in a murmur, stroking the boy’s hair. He did only that for several long seconds. “I know you think that I was wrong for rejecting that foster family that wanted you, that I was only using you to heal. I was...and I’m sorry for being selfish. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize how unhappy you were; maybe I didn’t want to see it. Please understand...”

The man’s voice caught in his throat and not from the gas.

“Understand Leo...if I had given you away then I would’ve never regained custody. Not...looking like this.” He wondered how much of him remained human, looked to Leo’s face and the almost complete eradication of the contaminant there. Only Leo’s eyebrow remained changed and it could possibly remain that way permanently.

But it wasn’t as if a sense of permanence mattered anymore.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” Jason murmured and as he did their movement dwindled down to nothing. Jason just held his

son and, after all that had happened, Leo allowed himself to be held.

They were finally settling down, accepting their fate, but just as all thoughts were starting to ebb from their minds the car gave a mighty buck and the lights flashed. The doors cracked open slightly in erratic bursts and the two stared in bewilderment. Once he'd confirmed that he was still breathing, Jason also confirmed that would never be able to fit through the small gap.

With an exchange of looks, the both of them knew it.

Still swallowing back disbelief, Jason threw a few bombs out to clear the hordes. He rolled over and stretched the doors open as far as they would go. His hands shook but he kept them open with his last vestiges of strength. "Go. You haven't been infected as badly as me so you should still be able to walk. I showed you every detail of this city, the roads that lead you to the next one."

"Dad, I..." Leo started, looking at him and not his escape. "Back there...I didn't mean it."

Too exhausted to do anything but breathe, Jason dropped his head in a nod. He forced his frail back to stay straight as Leo climbed up and wrestled his way through the exit above.

Once he was positive Leo was in the clear, Jason collapsed to the floor. He hadn't even the energy to pull his hand back from getting repeatedly crushed in the doors. It was of little concern when his muscles had gone lame the moment he'd fallen. The only thing he could hear was the beautiful sound of Leo's footsteps taking him further and further away.

So much of his humanity had slipped through his fingers over the course of his mission. Jason lamented that it would've been lost regardless of whether he had fought or given into the contaminant. But hearing those footsteps he could finally shut his eyes and no longer feel like a monster.

Please, Don't Say I Do

By Emily Klehr

He touched my cheeks and leaned
down to hug me, his tuxedo coarse
against my lips
too soon
he pulled away smiling

Heels snapped across the tile she's wearing
the wedding dress, sparkly, nonchalantly
flipping her hair, her mouth
like two worms, lying
on the ground after the rain.
she didn't even care.

Step after step, I was crushed
the snail in the fox's way
following, her trail
time, time to go

time, losing time
losing, my chance slithering
away, his eyes slipped from me
catching on her body, magnetically
sucking him in

the crowds took seats where
directed. I stood, stone
an angel watching
a crack etched into
my skin, perfect and cold

hauling my heavy feet
the preacher calls,
"speak now or forever hold your

Peace," like a casket lid
behind me the wooden,
burdensome door shuts

The Sky Is the Limit

By Sara Groene

The second I open my eyes, my stomach drops, knowing that today won't include my daily routine. I mean, what sort of girl in her right mind jumps out of an airplane? Do I even want to get out of my bed? Should I? All sorts of emotions run through my body. The mixture of fear and excitement twists and turns my stomach in knots. I can't back down now; I have wanted to do this for years. I avoid calling my parents and telling them what I will be doing in a few hours. Instead, I get out of my bed and treat this as any other day.

Gathered in my living room are my five friends who will join me on this crazy adventure. They are all devouring foot-long sandwiches from Subway. The last thing my stomach can handle right now is food. Along with calling them crazy, I describe to them what their sandwiches are going to look like in mid-air. The last thing I want before jumping out of a plane is a full stomach.

After a few minutes of unneeded gossip we disperse into our cars. It is 85 degrees and sunny. I look at up at the bright blue sky with scattered clouds here and there. Those would be fun to fall into. The ride to Baldwin, Wisconsin seems like hours. In reality, we arrive a quick 45 minutes later. As we are driving down a bumpy gravel road, there are tiny little specks falling and floating around in the sky. That is when it hits me. I am going to be thousands of feet up in the air, helpless and vulnerable. I am getting second thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, we make our way to the building. It looks small, surrounded left and right by airplanes. My knees get weaker as we get closer to the check-in building. My best friend, Ashley, finally recognizes her fear and admits she might sit this out after all. After an hour-long tutorial and

harness adjustments, our group is number three in line. We walk outside and sit on the grass, admiring our last minutes on land.

Red, blue, and green parachutes sail around in the sky above us. They are getting bigger by the second. I can hear the swooshing of the wind as they get closer to me. I stand up to get fully clear of their way. I have seen accidents on “America’s Funniest Home Videos” of on-lookers being hit by skydivers preparing to land. I decided there is no chance that I will be the victim of a future video and walk back to the building entrance. A young girl, maybe my age, softly lands on the ground. I feel confident I can do the same. Shortly after her, an older man tries to land on his feet and stumbles to the ground. It will take him a while to untangle himself from his parachute. I will not be attempting to land on my feet.

Our group is announced over the intercom. It is our turn to board the plane. My tandem-jumper (a professional sky-diver who is attached to you for safety,) Mike, decides it would be funny to make unnecessary comments about my harness being too loose, and here I thought I couldn’t be more frightened than before. Now I am. When I threaten to stay here on the safe, familiar ground, he urges that he was only joking and won’t do it again. Thank God. I feel numb at this point. My guy friends are glowing with excitement, which help me calm down a little bit. I have wanted to do this for so long, and now here I am, scared to death. I realize that I am overreacting and regain my excitement. I am now ready for the time of my life.

We sit in two straight lines with our tandem-jumpers behind us. I am closest to the door, meaning we will be first to jump. The door slides shut, and we are ready for take-off. The plane roars as the engine accelerates. We ride along the bumpy ground before the plane makes it way into the air. Everyone is looking around in excitement and awe. The building we were once standing in becomes much smaller. The people sitting on the grass soon look like spec of dirt. My ears start to plug like

they are filled with water. I try the yawning technique, but it does no good. We make our way higher, and higher. Just as I think we are getting close to our destination feet, I ask if we have hit 14,000 yet. The pilot looks back at me and laughs after looking at his watch. We are not even half way. I feel like I am floating already, and patiently wait for the plane to climb another 7,000 feet.

A few short minutes later, I glance out the window and see nothing but clear blue sky. It was time. We had hit 14,000 feet. Mike taps me on the shoulder and instructs me to get up, and be ready to fly. My body goes back to numb, as I take my sweet time to walk the two-feet over to the door. He swings the door open and I realize that there is nothing between the ground and myself. Well, I will be shortly. Nothing can save me if I somehow fall out of my harness. I try my best to ignore any other frightening thoughts.

Mike and I stand with our backs to the door. Falling out backwards was now the plan. We rock back and forth, and on three, we are to let go of the handlebar. Three comes a lot faster than expected, and I notice I am already screaming. We let our bodies freely drop into the middle of the sky as I scream at the top of my lungs. The ice-cold air pierces my skin. I notice after a second of free falling that I can't hear my screaming because I am out of breath. I forgot to breathe. Our bodies twist and turn in all directions possible. I feel so light, as if every organ in my body was left on the plane. It is sort of like the feeling you get in your stomach when you ride The Power Tower at Valley Fair. It feels like it is just your skin and bones left to your body. Suddenly, the blue sky spinning around me turns gray. It feels like I had entered a sauna, but the steam is freezing cold. I feel like I am soaking wet. I hold my breath because it's harder to try to breathe. Just a second later, I see blue again. Once I catch hold of my brain, I realize we are in a cloud. My wish came true.

After 45 seconds of free fall we release the parachute. My body jerks to a sit up position, putting major pressure on

my stomach and shoulders. Good thing my body is still rather numb. For the next twelve minutes we slowly floated around in the air. He gives me control of the strings that will turn us left and right. I can't figure out if they were just hard to pull or if it was because my body is in shock. Straight ahead of me I see Minneapolis. The enormous black buildings I see everyday now look more like toothpicks. I look down towards my feet, and sure enough, I can see the ground again. The painful clog in my ears distracts me. I can barely hear anything Mike is telling me. My body starts to regain feeling, due to the sharp pain in my stomach. For a second, I close my eyes and clear everything from my head. I feel invisible, free. Nothing can touch me or hurt me. I can escape. I have never had a feeling like this before.

Mike taps me on my shoulder, interrupting my moment of complete freedom. He brings my attention to how close the ground is. We are maybe 100 feet away. I stick my legs up, ready to take an easy slide on the ground. I hold my breath and pray that I don't end up making an idiot out of myself and screwing this up somehow. The ground comes closer and closer. I stick out my feet and gently glide on the ground in a sitting position. I am frozen. Mike pulls me up and tells me what a great job I did, but I can barely hear him because my ears are throbbing. My body has never shaken so much. I feel like I am still in mid-air as I try to walk over towards where my group is going to meet. I patiently wait for them to join me. We all have the same looks on our face. If someone didn't know we just jumped out of a plane they probably would have assumed we just witnessed a murder. Taking it all in, we pose for a picture and head back to our cars. I am still shaken up, but I am so glad I didn't back out. This was by far the biggest adrenaline rush I have ever had. It makes me realize that you shouldn't hold back from doing something you want just because you are afraid. The sky is the limit, and any fear is worth over-coming. It makes me want to go out and find things that can give me that moment of freedom again. Whatever that may be, one thing is for sure. I will be doing this again someday.

Lonely Night

By Emily Klehr

Damp, I breathe in
Heavy, it sits in my lungs
shingles grip at my sweatshirt
shoes slip across the slick roof
breeze blows cool and thin
grass glows green even in the darkness
Maple my only friend
the sun left us both
resting on his chin and smiling
before his descent
Breeze carries a bitter smell of cigarettes or pot
I'm not sure I know
Little white dog arrives
Sharp against the neighborhood quiet
a lone street lamp
Music, monster trying to break out of a box
Rob my body
I don't care
Hook up to me, let me inhale that smoke
Expel distaste
Tree, my music
knot in my chest
Shouts of a fighting couple
Push my thoughts into
Bodies of stars, bright
and little
Here, take my abandoned
hands

Panoramic

By Caitlin Shea Robertson

It was the things she learned
and desired to teach
but would never remember to,
and the things that she wanted to have been taught,
but never was.
That realization that words could never come to-
At least not in time;
for life came at her in a leap and a bound
without a second hand to trail
with fingers on the glossy face.
It taught her all the wonderful things
in rapid succession,
And let the scalding ones curl around her wrist.
It was the thing about black ice
and the ebony winter bite.
That thing she huddled in
and the things she clung to
in ways that twisted her illogically.
Things about not getting married
during football season,
and the thing about degrading honesty.
Anything is just one to nothing,
everything is an ending note.
so make yourself something smart,
placing bets in good fortune
and vouching for all she thought
without much validation.
About playing hard to get
if only to be used.
The thing about using before you're spent.
The thing about spending all you have
before you rot
or before the other things

you haven't earned
rot.
But not these things.
Non-perishable, free facts,
so easily digested that
she would pass them unwittingly
just like the hums and whistles
that strangers threw like hollow bones to her each day.

Child's rhyme of reason

By Julius Coffman

Buzz went bumble bees
whoosh went wind
hummm went rocks
as the world spunned

Craw went crows
ribbet went frogs
meow went cats
woof went dogs

Stone started rolling
waterfall fell
river just ran
please wished well

Creek lay crying
ocean waved back and forth to the seas
mother earth turned around
wind blew a breeze

Hello shouted sun
goodbye whispered moon
hill stood so proud it became mountain
flower opened and bloomed

Cricket sat in the grass and fiddled
tree stretched so high it touched the stars
planet Venus balance herself with love
and transformed a warrior called Mars

Sky painted rainbows
cloud softened the day
warm glowed sun
color chased away grey

grass grew straight
wheat field leaned and swayed
tulip awakened from a slumber
out of the bed where it laid

Eagle soared
lion roared
rumble said thunder

Raindrop dropped
crack went lighting
over just laid on under

Weeping willow wept
crabtree bore fruit and flowers
mighty oak declared I AM
control surrendered the illusion of its powers

War retreated
peace reined
hate lost faith
love sustained

Knowledge had an opinion
wisdom said clear what it did mean
truth transformed into many things
depending on how it was seen

majority was no longer right
weak was no longer about beating strong
wild was tame
everything balanced belonged

Shadow cast darkness
light lit the way
water washed
time changed the constant day

Sand ingrained the event of movement
flyers flew
swimmers swam
growers grew

Gravity held
ground gave surface
questions asked
answer provided purpose

Listen heard
voice spoke
sight watched
death choked

Spirit breathed
touch connected
demolition destroyed
creation erected

Happiness opened
sadness closed
movement transported
statue posed

Hate separated
love came together
scales created fish
emotions mirrored weather

Everything lived
everything died
will did
try denied

A New Beginning

By Sara Groene

It's the beginning of a new year and is going to be the beginning of a long journey as well. My mom, Julie, has just landed a job as the head nurse at a new medical clinic in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The only bad thing is, my mother and I have both lived in the small town of Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, our whole lives. This move is going to be huge. Not only is it hundreds of miles away from the house I grew up in, all of my friends and family, but it is right in the middle of the school year. Here I am, Alison Warner, joining a brand new school with brand new people right in the middle of tenth grade. All of the friendships and cliques are already set, and I am going to be that odd girl trying to fit in with one of them. I know it is a great opportunity for my mother's career, and essentially will give me more opportunities by living in a big city instead of a small town, but the surroundings aren't what scares me. It's the people inside of them.

The car ride is long, as every car ride is when you're anticipating something. But everything is going far too well, until the annoying sound she calls a "ringtone" pierces my ears. My mom answers with a disgusted voice. She doesn't know it, but her earpiece is turned up so loud I can hear every conversation she has, as long as she is sitting near me.

"Hello?" she answers.

"Jules, it's me. Please don't hang up" the deep voice says remarkably fast.

"What do you want Gary? I told you not to call" she demands.

"I just - I heard you and Al were moving to Minnesota. Is that true?" he asks.

“Whether it is or not, it is none of your business. I’m hanging up now. I suggest you don’t call this number anymore. You know what will happen if you do, although I’m sure you fit right in with those other child abusing assholes in prison!” she screams, followed by a quick shut of her cell phone. “I’m so sorry, honey. I’ll have to get my number changed. I can promise you, that will be the last of your father you will ever hear of.”

I stare out my window as the small city in the distance turns to huge shopping stores and buildings surrounding me. We arrive at the front door of our condo complex and get settled in our new home. Tomorrow is my first day of school. It is also the first day back after winter break, so maybe people are still feeling joyous and will just ignore me instead of poking at the fact that I am the new girl.

Burke High School looks like a mansion compared to my old school. I take one last breath and walk straight into the fate of the next three years of my life. Avoiding any eye contact, I continue to the Administrative Office to get my schedule. First class, Algebra. Great.

I take the only open seat, right in the front of the room, of course. The surprisingly gorgeous boy sitting next to me starts a conversation with me during group time. After reaching the obvious conclusion that I am new, he offers to walk me to the rest of my classes. I accept, wondering if all my worries about being new meant nothing.

A week has gone by, and the only new friend I have is the boy from my Algebra class, Dane. I can pick out the cliques by now, and every once and a while I get a comment about my low-cut shirt by one of the jocks or a disgusted look by one of the popular girls. But, I wonder to myself, “Dane is the only person who has talked to me. Why am I getting negative comments and gestures towards me?” I bring the subject up to Dane, and he has a guess to why. Rumor has it that Dane and I were fooling around. Being that he is the quarter back of the football team and ex-boyfriend of Jocelyn, the most popular girl in school, I understand the comments. He tells me to ignore them.

As I arrive at my locker, there is a note hanging on a piece of tape. "SLUT" is written across it. When I pick it up, Jocelyn and her clique happen to be a few lockers down, laughing at pointing at me. I walk away before the tears drip down my face. Over the next three weeks, the bullying never stopped. I have food thrown at me in the lunchroom, hurtful names yelled at me, and obvious non-accidental shoves in the hallway. I see Dane high-five someone after whistling at me as I walk past them, and in return I look at him with confusion. "But, you were my only friend," I thought to myself. Suddenly, I realize that Dane never really cared about me, or wanted to be my friend, he was just hanging out with me to make Jocelyn jealous. This explains why he is not sticking up for me, his friend, right now. The name-calling and thrown food doesn't bother me as much as the physical violence. After every shove, I see his face. His angry, horrifying face. Another week goes by, and I had held in so much pain that I couldn't take it anymore.

I rush in my front door and storm up to my room. I am crying hysterically, re-playing all of the humiliation and pain brought on by my classmates. I pace my room back and forth. I am continuously wiping away tears from my eyes, but every time I do, all I can see is him. I can't escape him. No matter where I go, whom I talk to, what I do, I can't help but replay the most terrifying years of my life. Hell, the first thirteen years of my life. The blood is rushing through my veins, so hot I feel like it could burn through my skin. I am grinding my teeth, finding myself screaming at the top of my lungs. I need to stop it, all of it.

I grab my tattered baby blanket I have had since I was born. I wrap it around my neck, pulling both ends of it with all of my strength. The faces of Jocelyn, Dane, and my father flash before my eyes. "This is all your fault! This is what you wanted!" I try to scream but nothing comes out. Suddenly, I feel a quick rush of calm, followed by a face I never expected to pop into my head at this particular moment. Her face disrupts my concentration and makes my hands release the blanket. "Mom" I think to myself as I lose feeling in my body. "How could I be so selfish to have her find me

doing this to myself?” I release my blanket and gasp for air. I am more confused than in pain now because I realize that my baby blanket wouldn’t have killed me, no matter how hard I tried. “Did I grab my blanket because it brought back horrible memories of my childhood? Was I just trying to stop the pain?” I am so distorted right now, I don’t know what I was doing, I am just glad that I am able to breathe again.

I am not sure how long I have been staring at my wall. For all I know, it is the next day. My long thoughts have brought me to the conclusion that those people- Jocelyn, Dane, and my father- they couldn’t hurt me. Only I could hurt myself. I am in control, not them. Surprisingly, I couldn’t wait to get back to school on Monday. The “SLUT” notes, food throwing, and hallway violence was all going to stop.

With no surprise, as I approach my locker, I see a pink piece of paper with “WHORE” written on it. I grab the note, turn to Jocelyn and her followers, take one deep breath and blurted out, “Wow, this is SO creative Jocelyn! It’s nice to know that you’re moving up in vocabulary class and graduated from ‘SLUT’ to ‘WHORE.’ I’m sure your mother would be proud.”

The look on Jocelyn’s face was priceless. It almost looked like she had seen a ghost. Well, she sort of did. She was looking at the ghost of Alison, the old me. I couldn’t believe my eyes. The most popular and beautiful girl in this school has finally picked on someone who is willing to fight back. I don’t think she was expecting what stood right in front of her. The new me. The Alison that wasn’t going to take bullying from anybody.

That was the last time Jocelyn ever said or did anything to me. I felt a huge rush of excitement that I had finally stood up for myself. Too bad my dad was almost 2,000 miles away; I would stand up to him too! “Well, lets not get out of hand here Al,” I thought to myself. As I walk into Algebra class, I hold my chin up and take my seat next to Dane.

“Alison,” I hear a quiet voice say. Turning to my left, she continues. “I’m Penelope. My locker is a few down from

yours. I heard you stand up to Jocelyn the other day. Let me tell you, so many people would like to say the same thing to her.”

“That’s too bad,” I chuckle, “No one should take that from a girl who drinks sparkling water and eats one tiny bag of un-salted pretzels for lunch. That’s all it takes to shut her up.”

“Yeah, that’s awesome,” she replies, “Well, since there is an exam next week, and we all know how ‘easy’ Mr. Kraemers exams are, me and a few of my friends are going to have a study session tomorrow night. It would be great if you could come.”

“You know what, Penelope, that sounds like a great idea. I could really use some new people in my life.” I respond.

A Dragon Called Epilepsy

By Kayla Griffin

My body is a prisoner
to a disease that
no one can see.
My disease is like a sleeping
dragon in my brain
that, at any moment,
could viciously wake.
When it attacks,
my world goes dark.
I am under its spell.
My body convulses
trying to break free
from the dragon's
evil torment.
Nothing can stop
the torture, except time.
When the dragon
eventually falls back to sleep,
I awaken, but cannot
remember anything.
I can only feel the pain
of knowing I will always
be the dragon's prisoner.

Medusa

By Jodi Johnson

Granddaughter of Gaea and a sea-god
older than the Greeks,
from the treasures of sea and earth
I am made.

The deep, turquoise sea,
the white and purple crystals
buried below the soil,
bound together with
rich, ebony mud,
red-ironed clay,
grey and yellow silt.

I am:
Cthonic.
Deep.
An abyss so black
and impenetrable
men fear it more than death
and call it monstrous.

Yet from this rich depth
flow fruits of earth and sea
and words and images
to be caught in artists' nets,
to feed the souls of humans.

Once spent and done,
their shells return to me
to lie fallow and then
like the soup in the chrysalis
turn again into form.

Death and fecund life
as always
intertwined like lovers.

Too horrible to gaze upon.
Turns men to stone
they say.
Only part of them
and no more my account
then the sun rising.
They come,
they peer into the chasm
and cannot turn away
yet cannot fathom what they see.

Poor Perseus,
shaking,
could not look,
beheaded a reflection
and carried off
the prize I gave him
to pacify.

Even this small piece of me
held power enough to
give birth
to kings and winged horses
to kill and raise the dead
even to protect a goddess.

They pronounce me dead
but here still I am
scaring boys with my snakes
while I turn death to life
and life to death
at the heart of the world.

Venezia

By Jodi Johnson

Venice, a magical fairy-tale city,
seduces you to sink
into her muted ochres, creams and pinks
tones layered upon tones
century encrusted upon century.

Turquoise canals glitter in the sun
and snake their way through
precarious islands
packed with buildings cheek to cheek.

Bridges arch across
gondoliers crouch
poles held sideways as they
pass beneath.

The onion domes of St. Mark's
hulk over its great doors
and jeweled mosaics.
East met west here and melded;
a muezzin call to prayer as fitting
as the church bell ringing atop the campanile.

The Doge's palace
a pink and white confection
of autocratic rule and torture
connects to the prison across the
canal via the Bridge of Sighs
graffitied walls from long ago
still plead and rage.

The cold, damp walls

must have insinuated into their bones
until they no longer gave life.
They lay there, perhaps wishing for death
but still alive, languishing,
in an icy, dark cell.
While outside
carnevale celebrated the worth of flesh and
courtesans ministered to popes and Doges.

Meanwhile, La Serenissima sinks.
Water laps
people dump sewage
tides rise
music plays
tourists flock
pigeons perform
gondoliers pole
world spins
galaxies spiral.

The Cougar

By Patti Lindaberry

She has been called a “cougar,” a feline femme-fatale.

She is a woman of maturity, adorned proudly with stretch
marks,

freckles, crows feet and bunions.

She is a woman of religion, race and 2 a.m. trips to the grocery
store

for cookie dough and cough syrup.

She is a woman with holes in her shoes and faded blue jeans,
searching for her name in neon letters.

Searching, perhaps, for a man with arms of steel and a heart of
gold.

Being content with her own bedroom, control of the
television remote

and the luxury of not being a maid or short-order cook.

She is a woman who stands in a cow pasture, eyes shut,
arms extended towards the sun,

channeling energy from the world of wireless womanhood.

She has placed mops and brooms in the closet.

Turned off the lights.

Closed the doors.

Work Out

By Ida Sansom

Fresh from the fight of other academics I arrived,
No need to wait or be ushered anywhere
I was plunged into the pool
Of other willing potential athletes
Their eyes glazed over with traces of mountain dew
And cigarette smoke
Pumping their legs to
Remixes of old old music
Sweat stained the unscathed tee shirts
Of the pudgy and the pale
The nerdy and the ne'er do well
Ahead of me
A girl was on two wheels with two very spindly legs
With a nervous but gleeful smile
The smile of a girl how has never been pushed
Never been made to move faster than she needed
And here we were
Running to nowhere
But running just the same
And all going together
Hearts beating all a little bit faster
And the desire for grease stained foods
And fat filled drinks
Became less and less
As each muscle tissue was ripped and
Rebuilt
Ripped and rebuilt
And each drop of sweat was added
To our newly christened
Work out clothes.

Who Needs Hallmark?

By Devin O'Brien

It's funny
The butterflies
They aren't in my stomach
They're in my chest
Now that I think about it
That's actually where the stomach physically resides
Right at the lowest rung of the rib ladder
Either way
They are there
I can feel them, fluttering, trying to escape
I wonder if she has them too
Insects in her insides

Maybe if we pressed them together
They would relax
Stop their annoyingly intoxicating flutter
Maybe they would become more manic
Madly searching for release

They seem to control me
Their reaches stretch beyond set boundaries
Into my arms
Into my legs
And my head
I am drawn to her closely
By this otherworldly force
These polarized butterflies

They pull us together
And as we embrace
They escape
They fly freely
Carrying a golden yarn
They fly circles around us
And tie us together
Knotted forever
Everything feels
right,
This way

The Misfit's Story

By Paul O'Halloran

I'm in my favourite place. Tall golden wheat stalks, higher than my head, surround me. I'm on my own and it's quiet. If I listen real hard I can hear the bustle of the busy folk back in town. But they won't be botherin' me here, not in my special hiding place. I look down at my bare feet, covered in dirt, just a boy's feet. I wanna stay here forever, but I can't. Back in town the church bells start their hollerin' and I know I hafta go, but I sure don't wanna. Suddenly, I'm movin' through the wheat fields, real fast like. This is how it always goes. I'm moving so mighty fast, but I'm not runnin', more like glidin'. I don't want farmer Joseph to be seein' me. He doesn't like kids playin' in his fields. Says kids damage wheat. And wheat takes time. And time is money. Not after the beatin' he gave me last time. Hurt my head so bad my peepers don't aint work so good as they used to. Now I see the town. It looks small and creaky. I'm still movin' toward the chapel, same as always. I see my friend, Hiram, swingin' a fat cat by its tail. He looks mighty happy and I hear him laughin' all goofy like. Then I see his daddy, old man Crooker, the undertaker. He looks out the parlor window but I stoop my back so he can't measure me. I see Mister Spencer walking to church, and Bobby Lee tailin' behind like a scuttlin' duck. Mister Spencer always looks mad. He owns the slaughter house 'cross the way. Funny thing is, he looks like a pig, and so do Bobby Lee too. I laugh and think someday he might get mistaken for one o' his pigs, and then we'd be eating him with our morning eggs. That sure would be funny.

In the church, everyone is taking their seats. Daddy is up on altar, getting' ready to begin telling the nice peoples why they is sinners. My brother Daniel is right there by his side, Daddy's favourite, and wearing his fancy, white, altar boy gown, holdin' Holy Jesus' candle. I can see the gospel choir, getting ready for their bit, but I must be at the back.

They're 'bout to sing a sad song. Then I hear crying. When I turn 'round, I see everyone sittin' in the pews and sobbin' and weepin', wearing black. Daddy is crying too. On the altar is a coffin. I keep thinking' it's mighty small. I don't wanna see but now I'm slowly moving towards it. I already know what I'm gonna see. Daniel is white like a ghost, flat on his back with his small hands on his chest. But he is lookin' at me. I wanna escape but I can't. He tells me it's my fault. I don't understand why, but people keep sayin' it, so I guess they must be bein' true. I try'n run, but my legs are made o' lead. He tells me it's my fault. My hand moves to touch his forehead. I don't wanna, but I can't stop it. I touch his brow and it feels like cold and clammy. It makes him mad and he slowly sits up and tells me it's my fault. I fall back as he crawls outta the box. He falls to the ground and his guts are spillin' all over Holy God's clean floor, where the lumber saw almost split him in two. He is dragging himself towards me and I can't move.

My Daddy is cryin'. Ma is too. I'm standin' in the doorway 'cause I don't know what I should be doin'. I want to keep quiet but I tell Daddy not to cry, 'cause Daniel is with Holy God now. But he gets mad, yellin' and cussin'. He throws his chair back and stands up, shoutin' at Ma, pointin' at me. I can see 'em both yellin' but there is no sound, like it just disappear. Then he gets madder and comes at me. Ma is on his back, but he is strong. Don't matter much though, I can't feel nothin'. All I feel is the coolness of the kitchen floor beneath my skin.

Now I'm sinkin'. Feels like I can't breathe. I can hear my Daddy downstairs, laughin'. I can hear a lady laughin' too. Daddy tells me they are all nice ladies. I feel so hot that I just wanna tear all my clothes right off, but now I have no hands. I try to holler to Ma, but now I have no voice. Wouldn't do no good any which how. I know she is with Holy God by now. I can hear Hiram laughin' somewhere outside and it sure is bothersome. He laughs like a wheezin' donkey and it's makin' me mad. Now I'm cold again. I think it's 'cause Daniel is stealin' all my blankets. Naw, that's stupid. He's dead. He don't do nothin' anyway, just lay there and stare at me. He's lookin' mighty gruesome by now. I wish he wouldn't be layin'

on my pillow, but I won't say nothin' 'cause that would be rude. I wish he'd stop starin' at me. Why does he always look so sad?

It's dark and I'm scared. I don't like the dark 'cause of the monsters. The door to my daddy's room creaks open without making no sound. The room is mighty dark, but I can see him in bed next to a nice lady 'cause of the moonlight through the window. I'm floatin' towards him, glidin' over the empty bottles debris below. Daddy wakes up and sees me. He gets mad and starts cussin', but then he stops. He looks scared. I tell him not to be 'fraid of the monsters but it don't help, I'm 'fraid too. I can see the lady screamin', but she's makin' no sounds. Daddy sits up slowly and starts sayin' somethin', but I can't hear much 'cause there too many voice. Then he starts cryin'. I hear him say I'm one of Holy God's children. One of his own children. Now I can hear Hiram's donkey laugh and it's makin' me mad, but my belly is achin' me.

I wake up and Bobby Lee is pokin' me in the gut. Hiram is laughin' and tellin' me we just entered Georgia, and that it's my turn to drive. I feel sleepy as hell, but we switch places and he takes the back seat. I look in the rear view mirror and see Daniel, just sittin' there and starin' at me. I stare back. Hiram kicks the back of my seat. I readjust the mirror and drive on.

Broken Refrigerator

Trevor Ames

I stop some guys from hauling you away.
I look at you and wonder what to do.
Your ice box being strapped shut for one
last time. If you had lived another week
it could have been fantastic; truly great;
Thanksgiving turkey still so very cold,
a Christmas ham already waiting too.

I ponder what will happen to us now.
Your life had been a blessed ray of hope
for all the people who ate from your door.
You were, to me, a pretty thing to see.
The tear I shed is for the times we had,
my sweet: a sandwich here, a cola there,
a shelf too full of beer, some olives too!

The time has come for me to send you off.
I kiss your polished white door frame good-bye.
The men resume as I bid you adieu.
I wipe my eyes and wave bye one last time.



The Paper Lantern is the student literary journal of Normandale Community College, 9700 France Ave. South, Bloomington, MN 55431. It is edited by members of the Creative Writing Club. The project is made possible by the Normandale Student Life Activity Fee. Officers and the following members of the Spring 2011 Creative Writing Club produced this issue:

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Cover art by Julius Coffman

Submit your creative writing to the Fall 2011 issue of *The Paper Lantern*! All work is reviewed anonymously and acceptance is based on literary merit.

Works in all genres of creative writing (poems, fiction, memoirs, short plays, etc) are considered, with a limit of 1000 words for poetry and 2500 words for prose and drama. All works must include an author's name, address, phone number, and email address at the top of the page. Multiple submissions accepted. Submission is open to registered NCC students only.

Send your submission as an email attachment to club advisor Lynette Reini-Grandell at Lynette.Reini-Grandell@normandale.edu.