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*Body*

by Emely Sanchez

My soul suffocated

under the fingertips of many.

Men, who gripped my waist as a claim of authority,

and dug their uncut nails into my hipbones.

They claimed my existence as theirs,

making sure I knew it

each time I strayed from their side.

I learned to pretend

I could breathe under the weight of their palms.

Men taught me I was made of plastic,

malleable and weak.

Last Sunbeam

 by Grace Schulze



R. I. P. Merrill

 by Stephen Dodds

Last fall I finally parted ways with my favorite footwear. They were boots I had purchased, almost thirty years ago. These boots were worn-out, badly scuffed and had begun splitting at the seams and flex points. Their inners were almost falling out through the lace holes and it was truly time to end our relationship.

Their once half inch-deep treads were now no more than a faint impression and the soles were hanging limply from the uppers. When I walked, there was a resounding slap so that it sounded like I was wearing frogman’s flippers rather than a good pair of hiking boots. These wonderful boots had begun life a shining tan color and gleamed whenever I applied the waterproof polish to their sleek leather uppers. Over the years, they got more and more use but they also got less and less careful attention, which led to their polished finish becoming gradually lusterless. Comfortable as they were I wore them often – not just when I went rock climbing, hiking or simply out walking. Eventually they became work boots, which is what I suspect, led to their demise; my clambering up and down ladders certainly did not help their longevity.

England’s Peak District in Derbyshire was where I first seriously tried out my boots in the hills around Matlock, and tested them out by climbing some of the small rock formations. It was certainly much easier with these sturdy boots compared to the tennis shoes I had worn on previous excursions there. Wales beckoned soon after that, where the slabs of Idwal were a joy to climb; massive slabs of granite were an easy climb, especially for a novice like me. Soon I was as they say, hooked; I had caught the climbing bug and wanted to do it more and more. I saved for a climbing harness of my own so I did not have to borrow one every time I ventured outdoors. Then there was the hard hat and the carabiners, the safety hooks that these days you are more likely to see used to clip key rings onto belts and of course, no decent climber would be without their own rope. All these essentials were on my shopping list, but I started with the boots, the Merrill’s, to whom I dedicate this story.

I ventured south a few times to the tip of England and visited Cornwall, where my favorite climb was a two hundred foot climb called Alison’s Rib. I remember it appeared very much like a small v-shaped notch cut into the cliffs. It was memorable because during the climb, if I looked upwards, all I could see was the sky above while directly below me were the pounding waves of the Atlantic Ocean. This is one of my favorite climbs because apart from the views of European sky and the roaring Atlantic Ocean, there was the sense of exhilaration I felt as I navigated the distance between beach and cliff top. It was one of my first major climbs, and was my first experience of every climber’s nightmare: falling during a climb. This just added to the tension of this adrenalin-junkie pastime as well justifying the cost of the safety equipment.

The memories conjured up by these boots are not just of England and Wales: these boots took me as far afield as Lithuania, Malta and the Colorado Rockies. Only a dozen or so miles long and five across, Malta is a small island in the Mediterranean Sea, and on it there are plenty of small fishing villages with uniquely Maltese names like Marsasloxx and Birzebugge, and tiny marinas where shiny new yachts and rusty old hulls floated serenely side by side. At one point, I envisaged actually living on a small boat in one of these small harbors, just outside Valetta. Valetta is one of those historical cities that many people know nothing about. I have my own memories after several visits there, including one involving going there for a job interview when I was trying to get into radio.

I had listened to the island’s popular music station, Island Sound quite a lot on my first trip there and when I saw an ad for a radio announcer for this contemporary hits radio station, I applied and much to my surprise got an interview. This interview trip was more fun, because I had a pen friend living on the island, and she had a family friend, who let a room, but the rental season was not open yet but she arranged for me to stay with him and his family, as a guest. Another memory I have is of witnessing a dispute between rival business owners at the harbor side, who argued over turf and resulted in one unfortunate business owner losing his food cart to the ocean as the competitor literally picked it up and hurled it into the water! The businesses in question were street-food vendors, who adapted three wheeler tricycles to make their food carts and were trawling the tourists in the hopes of earning a few Maltese Pounds.

Not long after the fall of the iron curtain, I had the chance to sample what life was like after the demise of the USSR, visiting several cities where the cars and buses looked like they should be in a WWII movie. I commented to my guide and friend that I found certain buildings to be beautiful specimens of architectural delight; this prompted her to ask if I knew that every building I felt some admiration for was a former home to the KGB. In Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, I enjoyed a night at their magnificent opera house to watch a performance of Don Carlos.

My Merrills were hardly haute couture for the opera, but they were perfect for visiting a place just outside of Siauliai (pronounced Shoo-lee) known as the Hill of the Crosses. This Hill of the Crosses is just what it sounds like: a small hill where hundreds of crucifixes, both plain and ornate were planted on the hillside, often at odd angles like flowers in a spring basket. I am not religious, but I do appreciate that some people have their faith and rituals. Apart from the obvious Christian connotations, these crosses also symbolized a protest against the communist government of the time who tore down such religious displays with monotonous regularity. As fast as the crosses were removed they were replaced and in the end, the authorities decided to leave the hill intact.

On my first trip to America, I was fortunate enough to arrive in August. As a non-skier, I was sure the Rockies would prove an inhospitable place in the winter, so I was glad to arrive while the deciduous trees were still preparing for their fall foliage displays of fabulous colors.

I spent my second day on American soil wearing these boots rooting for the Rockies at Coors Field. This was my first ever visit to a Major League Baseball stadium and made more memorable for me because The Rockies bested the Pirates by three runs to two. It was also my thirty-ninth birthday!

That same weekend, I accompanied my best friend’s ex-husband on a climbing trip over some of the ridges in places like Silverton and Georgetown. As my hiking guide and partner, he was convinced I was some sort of athletic freak because he had seen many Europeans come to Colorado, take off into the Rockies only to come unstuck because of the rarified atmosphere. He asked me if I had been in training and when I asked why he asked, he replied, “Well most non-Americans who come up here for the first time are usually puffing and panting in a short while and here you are, a sprightly mid-lifer running around like a toddler.” He was amazed when I said I had no special training regime, other than walking several miles every day.

One of the most amazing memories I have with these boots is of something that happened shortly after this conversation. We were walking through a wooded area when off in the distance I saw what looked to be a fallen tree in an aspen glade. But it was no ordinary tree; it appeared to have been painted scarlet. And not just painted, but completely immersed in a bright scarlet cloak. I was horrified that someone could have done this. I thought I was witnessing some vandal’s artwork, but when I got closer to the tree, it seemed to shimmer as though it were still alive – and in a way it was, even though decidedly dead. It turned out that this tree was indeed painted; not by some earth dwelling vandal, but by Mother Nature herself. This old dead tree was completely scarlet. This was a tree with a diameter of about two feet and I marveled at its luminescent quality once I got close enough to appreciate its extreme and current beauty.

It did not seem to matter that its golden quake was now a thing of memory or a line in some future poet’s musings. Its cloak of scarlet was nothing more destructive than ladybugs, but there were millions of them in a huge swarm. The air was thick with them, too. It was a strange feeling to be able to walk through this cloud and barely feel it as I inched my way through like a ship’s bow cutting the ocean surf and closing up like water behind me. To this day, I remember this vivid diorama every time I see just a single ladybug.

 As the years rolled by, I had no idea that these boots would remind me of people and places I had never dreamed I would meet. For the memories you gave me, you deserve a far greater send off than I afforded you, merely wrapping you up in a tattered grocery sack before discarding you in the dumpster.

Goodbye, Merrill, and thanks for the memories.

Traces

 by Jamie Scheffel

I never answer your calls

and you never stop trying.

The messages you leave

are cold and automated.

I hear your voice as you say your name.

The calls have become

less constant over the last year

and now you only call

once a month.

I thought I would have

answered at least one time,

but I haven’t.

I don’t think I should.

You call collect from

a prison phone.

I let it go to

voicemail.

I hear your voice as you say your name:

*You have a collect call from* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

I barely know yours from the machine.

Sometimes I keep

your voice for a few days,

but never longer than that.

I have to let it go.

Before the calls,

there was me and you, dimly lit

escaping from our lives in the confines of a square room

where smoke and white noise filled the air and your skin told stories I wasn’t there for.

On the edge of a cheap bed,

I traced the scars on your open back with my fingers,

wishing I could heal you by my touch,

wishing you could heal me by your love.

Blu

 by Courtney MacNabb

Int. Theodore Blu bar/lounge: Retrouvailles - dusk

The dim lounge is lit with blue undertones and tea candles that adorn each metal table. Few hotel patrons occupy the space. A drunk bachelorette party with 6-10 guests is in the corner, a group of middle-aged men are idealizing them, and the pair of young twenty-somethings are in the farthest corner of the empty lounge. Theo, a young man with a chiseled face and light hair, is speaking to Ania in a soft voice. She’s clearly listening, but she idly runs her fingers over her platinum diamond bow necklace and glances over Theo’s shoulder occasionally when the other Retrouvailles guests roar with noise.

Theo has one, half full, pint of beer cupped between both of his hands and is leaning towards Ania, who is directly across from him. She has two empty martini glasses scattered in front of her and is working on a blue concoction in a third martini glass.

THEO

 I can have them thrown out if they’re bothering you.

ANIA

 No, no, it’s fine.

Theo sighs deeply before reaching across the table and taking Ania’s hand, which he has to pull away from her martini. They share a warm smile.

 THEO

 What are we going to do?

 ANIA

 (shrugs)

 Honestly, Theo, I have no idea.

 THEO

If you were outside the situation what advice would you give me?

 ANIA

 I can’t just-

 THEO

 You’re great at giving advice. Just pretend.

 ANIA

 I suppose I’d probably suggest telling Caleigh.

 THEO

 That’s very bold of you.

 ANIA

 But-

Ania’s attention is drawn to the bar, which has one patron.

The beautiful middle aged woman was not there moments ago, however, the multiple empty glasses in front of her, the expensive coat draped over the chair beside her, and her body language make it seem like she’s been there a while. The woman reaches for her Louis Vuitton hand bag and pulls out both a black tube of lipstick and a compact. She flings her long, dark, hair over her shoulder and begins applying the red lipstick, which matches her red dress.

Ania stands up, her mouth open in a dull trance.

 THEO

 Ania?

Ania pushes out her chair with her eyes fixed onto the Retrouvailles bar. Once a few tables away from Theo, she breaks into a run.

Theo calls out to her. He’s now standing, turned towards her

ANIA

 Momma!

Ania’s call is loud, but the woman at the bar remains fixated on her drink. Just as Ania is about to make another attempt to gain the woman’s attention, she runs into a waitress carrying a tray of appetizers and drinks for the large bachelorette party. The tray’s contents crash to the floor. The lounge is silent.

 ANIA

 Oh my God!

WAITRESS

 Don’t worry, Miss Watson. Accidents happen.

Theo rushes towards them and puts a hand on Ania’s shoulder.

 THEO

 What happened? Is everyone alright?

 ANIA

 Yeah I’m fine.

The waitress straightens her posture and brushes a few stray food particles off her apron. Theo has his arm around Ania and directs his attention to the waitress when he speaks.

 THEO

 How about you go wash up and comp that order?

 ANIA

 Theo.

She pulls at the sleeve of Theo’s thin long sleeve sweater.

 THEO

 Hold on, babe.

He whispers to Ania, pecks her forehead, and addresses the waitress again.

 THEO (cont.)

 Let’s not let my father find out about this, okay?

The waitress smiles before she nods and heads off towards the bachelorette party, who are whispering and pointing towards Ania and Theo.

Ania pulls on Theo’s sleeve again. Once she has his attention, she points towards the bar.

Where the woman with the red lipstick once sat is an empty bar stool. Although the area was just adorned with used martini glasses and the woman’s possessions, there is no sign of anyone sitting at the bar all day, let alone a few moments ago.

 ANIA

 Where did she go?

 THEO

 Who?

 ANIA

That was my mom at the bar. She was just here. Where did she go?

 THEO

 But your moth-

 ANIA

She was putting on her Mac lipstick. Same color as always: Lady Danger. Her favorite purse. Her gray Burberry coat. She was right there, but where did she go?

 THEO

 Ania, baby, your mother can’t be here. She’s-

 ANIA

 I know my mother when I see her.

A man in a white suit walks into the lounge and heads straight for Ania and Theo. He looks worried and, only a little, annoyed.

MONSIEUR BLANC

What’s all the commotion about? Is everything alright?

 ANIA

Monsieur, are there any reservations under the name Veronica Vanderpool-Watson?

 THEO

He can’t just give you information about hotel guests. Besides it would be impossible for your mother to be here.

 MONSIEUR BLANC

 I’m afraid no such reservation exists, Mademoiselle.

 ANIA

 What about one for Ania Watson?

 MONSIEUR BLANC

There is a long standing reservation under your name, Madam.

 ANIA

 See! She’s been staying here and using my name!

Ania looks at Theo in an I-told-you-so type of way.

Theo sighs and pulls Ania close. He speaks to her in a careful whisper, clearly not wanting to upset her.

 THEO

I requested my father keep a reservation open for you when you started going through all your... issues. Caleigh and I wanted to make sure you had a safe place to stay.

 ANIA

 I don’t remember that.

 THEO

Do you remember anything between your eighteenth and twentieth birthday?

Ania opens her mouth to speak.

 THEO (cont.)

I don’t think I want to know the answer. Anyway, Ania, no one except for you has ever stayed in that room. Ever.

 ANIA

 Except my mother.

 THEO

Ania. You’re mother died four years ago. I sat right next to you at her funeral. I was there when they lowered her into the ground. Your dad didn’t get out of bed for weeks. She’s-

ANIA

Don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot. I could never forget. I’ve tried and failed for years. I know her when I see her.

Theo groans and runs his fingers through his hair.

 THEO

Things are finally getting back to normal. Please, let me help you see that this can all be explained somehow.

 ANIA

 Then take me to my room.

 THEO

 What?

 ANIA

If she’s really not here, the room will be empty. If it’s normal, I’ll drop this and we move on.

Theo studies Ania’s strong face, waiting for her to say something else. She stays silent and Theo starts to nod slowly.

 THEO

I’ll take you up there. When you see there’s no sign of her, you drop this and we focus on telling Caleigh about us.

 ANIA

 Deal.

 THEO

 I can’t believe this is happening.

Theo mumbles under his breath before returning his attention to Monsieur Blanc, who is standing patiently beside them.

 THEO (cont.)

 Can we have the key to Ania’s room?

 MONSIEUR BLANC

 Shall I send champagne, Mr. Blum?

 THEO

 That won’t be necessary.

 ANIA

But if you could send some up to Theo’s room in about an hour, that would be great!

The Monster

by Ben Monet

It was eleven in the evening when I first heard it drag its’ claws across the floor.

I stayed perfectly still in the bed, looking at the ceiling. My bird chirped once and then fell still.

I thought, as I lay there, that I did not want to die. I did not want to leave this earth, no matter how many times I had insisted on previous occasions that that would be the best course for me.

But did I have another choice?

The dog whimpered and rolled over in his sleep and it was then I realized that no matter what I said now, death was inevitable. So I might as well try out the crazy idea in my head.

“Are you a monster?”

The scraping stopped as the creature breathed as though confused by my question.

Then, a small voice: “Yes.”

“I am, too,” I answered, and sat up.

We talk now, he and I, staying up late at night to trade secrets while the wind howls outside. He likes my book collection.

There are days when I feel that I should have said nothing when he first came for me, and been devoured, but he assures me that this would have broken his heart.

He has been here a long time and has only the ghosts in the attic for friends.

He says to me, “They ask about you sometimes, Michael.”

But when I ask him what they are asking, he won’t tell. I suppose it is something I must find for myself.

In the morning, I get up and make coffee. He takes two sugars. I have to help him drink it as claws are not meant to hold coffee mugs. Sometimes he asks me how long I will be out. I say to him, “I don’t know, Alexander. The roads are bad this time of year.”

He thinks life would be better if humans could fly.

I’m not so sure.

Some days, I ask him if he would like to ride with me on the subway.

“You know, Alexander, that it would be nice to get out of the house for awhile.”

He always refuses.

“I am tired, Michael. And besides, the world is a large place.”

“You are large.” I point out, handing him a sandwich.

“Not like that,” he answers, piercing it with needle teeth.

On the nights that I cannot sleep, he sits with me, singing strange music that sounds like snow and the howls of lovelorn wolves. At first, I expect the neighbors to complain, but they never do. After awhile, I stop thinking about it.

After awhile, I sing along.

It was on one of these nights I interrupted his singing.

“Are you a monster?”

The singing stopped as Alexander breathed.

Then, a soft voice: “No.”

“Neither am I,” I said, and smiled.

Barn

 by Jane O’Shea

An old red woman reclining in slumber

Dreaming of decades gone by

Her yawning mouth has snored through many a winter

Her oaken ribs creak and groan in the bitter wind

Her eyes cracked and cataracked

Have ogled the demise of the four-footed engine

Have gazed upon Henry Ford's dream come to fruition

Have tended the passage of seasons' quartet

Year after year after year

Within her belly cavern

Bovines have dined, and farted, and let down their creamy milk

Mares have whinnied to wobbly wet foals

Mice have skittered and scurried

Chickens have scratched and worried and shat

The gentle cloven foot, the clopping hoof

Have pattered goodbye over her tongue

Wandered from sight to invisible pastures

Only the bright-eyed field mouse remains

To keep the swallows company

She could tell many tales, this Dear Red Lady

Of happenings shrouded in her mane of cedar shakes

Of agonizing births and kamikaze swallow deaths

Of midnight trysts deep in the hayloft

Of lies and truths and laughter and tears

And people who do not come anymore

Wandered from her sight to greener pastures

Stop Teaching Cats To Use The Toilet

 by Jozee Becher

On the toilet seat, reading *Cat Fancy* magazine,

I heard a pawing at the door.

Another came,

with claw clicks.

Then not a mindless chirp or feline coo,

a voice.

*I need to use the bathroom*.

Nasal, drawn out

as if there were a yawn between every few words.

Clenching and cold,

I waited,

silence standing beyond the white bathroom door

like a ghost.

An urgent hiss erupted

and a thought plopped into my mind.

Cats don’t even have butt cheeks.

I rinsed off my hands,

spritzed the room with Febreze,

opened the door to Jake,

waiting with puffed lips,

fur on end, and *People* magazine rolled up in his tail.

Polaroid

 by Jamie Scheffel

Some people think Polaroids fade over time, but in my case, they simply disappear. And it was me. I’m guilty. I threw it away one day without giving it much thought. I had held on to it for so long just to have one of you, and now it’s gone.

But I still remember you. You looked like the nameless cowboy extra I once saw cross the screen while my grandma watched Clint Eastwood in one of her westerns, just without the hat. You were a good looking man. A face built with strong lines, a squared off jaw and a tall forehead, and your skin was deeply tanned like you lived outside. But your eyes—your eyes were blank and unfeeling, and your smile, I can’t remember if you were.

I do remember that your hair was brown like mine. It was short up top and long in the back. A mullet. It reminds me of a picture of myself as a little girl in the late eighties. I had a mullet too. It wasn’t by choice, my grandma used to cut my hair. Should I have been embarrassed? Maybe, but I wasn’t. I pulled it off and it was all the rage. I wore neon and sunglasses and pursed my lips just so. I was six and an image of naive happiness so opposite of yours.

In your photo, you were a passenger in a pick-up truck, or maybe you were in the driver’s seat. I don’t remember now, but I remember the subject of the photograph fairly well. I stared into your unblinking eyes with fascination. Who are you? You were awkwardly frozen in time with a tight, clenched jaw.

I remember now, you weren’t smiling.

There are times I wish I hadn’t thrown you away, but when I think about still having your picture, I know I would have done the same thing. Having your image in my possession felt too close for comfort.

I remember how you would surface every now and then usually as I was going through keepsakes or moving. If I was alone when you made your appearance I would look at you for a few quiet seconds and then put you away until next time. If someone was around I would flash them your figure and say “This is my dad.” They would ask questions and my vague answers entailed topics like prison, drugs, and abuse—or worse. I told tales of you I heard through my childhood, the tales that filled me with anxiety. I don’t know much about you, but that. By one picture, how was I to know you? I don’t. The only thing I knew looking down at that picture was that this was the body I was derived from and these were the troubles I inherited.

*You can’t miss what you never had*, a phrase I’ve repeated to myself and to others in head-held-high disclosure, but something in me does. It’s not necessarily *you* I miss, but it’s for *that*. That role was left open and unfilled. The closest forms were the furthest away and at the mercy of others, I was left feeling like collateral damage.

There was my grandma’s friend who came around the house like a stray cat ever since I was born. He would end up in the house sitting in the kitchen drinking Coca-Cola and smoking cigarette after cigarette with her. He would give her a twenty dollar bill here and there and fix the dishwasher or the snow blower. This was no grandpa. This particular man had his own family at home—he already had grandchildren who called him grandpa. My grandma was his secret and thus I was too. She was appreciative of any grain given to her, expected nothing more.

Me, I’m unforgiving.

There was my stepdad, an Indiana transplant with a mustache and thinning hair who carried a plastic bottle with him wherever he went to spit his chew in. I was in my early teens when we moved out to the country in the middle of ten acres of land. Trees surrounded us. I remember enjoying and despising the woods, my exact feelings towards him. He was either all jokes or belittling, insensitive to my mom’s feelings. There was no in-between. After a few years, it was over. I’m not sure what strike broke the marriage, a build-up of incompatibility or something more. He had told me that I didn’t help matters much and I agreed. Even at fifteen I realized I was still my father’s daughter.

From there, my mom and I moved back home to the city and I reclaimed my old bedroom of my grandma’s house. All the creaks and imperfections of her house was what I was accustomed to, growing up in this home without men, it felt right, like being in the arms of a mother.

And then there was you. There will always be you: silent, remote, abstract, dark. And the one picture I had, gone. In an impulsive state as unfeeling as your eyes, I threw it away. I don’t remember the details of my act—the when or the where—I only know that I threw it out on a whim. After keeping that Polaroid for what I knew as a lifetime, without care or conscience, you were gone, but your image never fades.

Life In Scale

 by Christopher Fleming



**I**nto **T**he **K**itchen

 by Micala Burns

I open the fridge

seal

suction

breaking!

While he sits on the counter

Chomping into a crisp apple

or peeling back the thick skin of an aromatic orange-

We look for miracles.

Eggs with thin shells

and limp rainbow carrots,

Round vibrant tomatoes lounging on the counter

in their colored glass bowl--

We delight in possibilities.

We imagine spaghetti sauce bubbling

at a fine simmer

Lasagnas layered thick and covered in foil

cheese melting under the heat of the oven

We crave the savory, the sweet, the adventurous

hidden in odds and ends

of leftover feta and wrinkly cucumbers

and a spice cabinet full of herb blends.

Working in close proximity

we brush arms in our whirling

or hands in our reaching and deliberate chopping.

We find creativity

in the substitutions and accidents,

the secret successes,

the combinations of mad scientist

and crazy artist working together.

We huddle together over big mixing bowls

Take turns slicing and dicing

and find triumph in the trying

We food warriors

We wielders of knives and spoons

Whipping air into eggs as we whisk

Folding bits of ourselves between layers of cilantro and garlic--

We create

regenerate

and leave new pieces of ourselves

in the kitchen

every time we enter.

My Best Friend

 by Jane O’Shea

Perched on the curb, my small hands smoothing mud into old tins.

My very first memories; I was all of four years old.

Pies perfectly patted; Sand smoothed on for the perfect crust.

Go across the street. Honey, they have a little girl your age.

My very first memories: We were barely four years old.

Her front door glowered down at me; My hands shivered; my fingers smelled like ice.

Go across the street, Honey. They have a little girl your age.

Our brown eyes kissed, her mother pushed her forward. We bonded like library paste that day.

The door towered over me: My hands shivered; my fingers smelled like ice.

Her name was Carla: her eyelashes were curly caterpillars.

Our brown eyes kissed, her mother pushed her forward, our bond like library paste from that day on.

Clasped together, we leaped into a California childhood.

Her name was Carla: her eyelashes were curly caterpillars.

We held hands and walked to school with the Mexican ninos across the street.

Clasped together, we leaped into California and childhood.

The sun toasted us brown like the walnuts in the grove down the block

We held hands and walked to to school with the Mexican ninos across the street,

Captured grasshoppers and sealed them in discarded mayonnaise jars.

The sun toasted us brown like the walnuts growing down the block.

Every day was summer, the sun's breath crisped Mommy's garden to shriveled bones.

We captured grasshoppers and sealed them in discarded mayonnaise jars,

Ran wild like tiny ponies, skipped through the sprinkler in our underpants.

Every day was summer: the sun's breath crisped Mommy's garden to shriveled bones.

Long past dark, the streetlight glowed while we hid and sought each other.

We ran wild like tiny ponies, skipped through the sprinkler for hours in underpants.

The sun bleached the grass and our hair to straw.

Long past dark, the streetlight glowed while we hid and sought each other.

An earthquake shook our gangly houses, shuddered them in a terrifying dance.

The sun bleached the grass and our hair, too, into straw.

Dad lost his job; Drought lingered and fire left ash on the windowsills.

An earthquake shook our gangly houses, shuddered them in a terrifying jitterbug.

I begged my parents to leave me behind at Carla's house.

Dad lost his job, drought lingered and fires left ash on the windowsills.

We crammed a tiny U-Haul and piled the remains to sizzle on the August sidewalk.

I begged my parents to leave me behind at Carla's house.

I was seven years old, the last time I saw her.

We crammed a tiny U-Haul and piled what remained on the sizzling August sidewalk.

Carla turned her back to hide her tears, her curls waving goodbye.

Seven years old I was, the last time I saw her.

Perched on the curb, her small hands patting mud into my old tins.

The Stages of Falling in Love

 by Elisha Patmon

You feel so lonesome sometimes, you know that the bottom of the ocean is black and silent but it still doesn't feel as lonely as the blue coursing through your blood.

Maybe you've even danced in your room alone to slow music in the middle of the day and your empty lover ghosts themselves over your arm.

Maybe you temporarily fell in love with that stranger you saw walking and laughing with their friends. And when they smiled at you, your insides lurched and you smiled back.

And you're standing in a field with kites of every shape and colour drifting in the wind above but sometimes you wish that wind could take you away to fill up the dead in your heart.

Maybe on the train and you saw hands intertwined and looked at your own but curled them into a fist.

You’ve never sat on the kitchen counter in nothing but your pajamas, watching the leaves fall outside and while the temperature is dropping, your smile is rising.

I've never held gloved hands with someone and felt the warmth between them, I'm with them down a crowded street and the only thing I notice, the only thing I feel, the only thing I see is them.

And all you can see are people in love

From the post office

To the subway

To the leaves falling

To the dumpster by the side

Then you met them

and their smile lights up your world

then you're attached

and your heart explodes

into a stream of pinks and yellow

Everything becomes clearer, to the clouds to the cars, to the snowflakes and the ice and the negativity runs down like a candle’s melting wax.

You’ve held their hands walking down a deserted street with your head on their shoulder and all that’s guiding you are the frosted street lamps.

You've been crying and your eye sockets are dry and your vision blurs grey but they're there to wipe your uncertainty with the pad of their thumb.

You're standing in a field of white and it's so cold that your breaths are clouds and your face is sore and the wind is warming up along with your thoughts.

And you're on the subway again but you’re smiling at the ceiling because you know when you get back to the apartment with a cold spot and shitty wifi that you won't be alone.

And sometimes you sit in their car and talk shit for hours and drive around in circles because they understand you even more than your best friend.

I've been nervous to tell them my past but they hug me with shaky hands and soon we fall into silence that isn't hollow.

It creates this feeling of being whole

That you just wanted

All this while

For someone to love you back

And you feel you are at home

And all you can see are people in love

From the lobby of your apartment building

To the flurry of coats

To the sleet by the pavement

To the children playing outside

You’ve screamed so hard that your head was as heavy as lead and you see red, but instead of a solution you were greeted by the slam of the door whilst you look away from the black mess you’ve created.

You see flowers bloom in different hues but the hole in your chest is filled with the dead ones on the floor.

You’ve argued so much with glares and pride in your way and venomous thinking of them being so absolutely and utterly wrong that you don't care anymore once they've put on their shoes.

And you're standing in a field, rubbing your hands together for some warmth when the sun comes out and you look to your side but all you see is the snow melting.

Maybe you went back on that subway and saw a teen couple laughing together and it created this ache in your veins so deep that you were trembling.

Maybe you remember the love once in their eyes now turned into disgust because they found everything that was once endearing a nuisance.

I’ve tried to forget the nights me and you slept on my lumpy mattress and I shift to your side because I convinced myself that it’s better and not because it still smells like you.

And all you can see are people in love

From the flowers blooming

To the squirrels on the road

To the litter on the street

To the bugs on your window

This hole can’t be stitched

and you pick up the pieces on the floor

and they don’t come together

no matter how hard you hold them

You’ve seen someone who looked like them from behind and for a minute you couldn’t feel your legs.

You’ve sat and drank alone in a coffee shop and seen someone smile your way and they don't look like them but you can't help but smile back.

Maybe you go back to that apartment and walk upon countless amounts of stairs and endure the horrendous orange walls because the lift harbors memories that leaves a bitter taste in your mouth.

Maybe you got a new mattress because the old one fucking hurt your back and maybe, just maybe you didn't want to smell them on that bed anymore even if you try to convince yourself you didn't.

Maybe you remember talking to them when you get sad and you pick up your phone and dial their number on reflex but realize that you can't do that anymore.

One day I hope they see you and ask you out for lunch and your hair is longer than before and you have the widest smile and they realize they made the biggest mistake.

And I’m standing with my back to the wall as I scan the crowd for a familiar face and my eyes land on you and your hair has changed and your clothes aren't the same but you raise your glass to me in a salutation and I do the same with a smile.

You can laugh

Without feeling your mind

Is going to cave in

With one whisper of their name

And all you can see are people in love

From the movies

To the sun heating your limbs

To the wrappers in bins

To the grass in the park

It’s harsh

that this person that was once in your system

is now as relevant

as the rocks on the ground

You curl up with a book

You put on your robe

Brush your teeth

Get a drink

Walk home

Ride the bus

And seeing holding hands

All over the street

Doesn’t irritate you

Because for the first time

In a really long time

You feel it

You know it

You’re all right.

You’re okay.

And okay is just enough.

Again

 by Ruth Miller

the message read like a poem

something out of a movie

we met

again

the joy shimmering in your emerald eyes

you called me beautiful

you said I was smart

that we could never be

apart

again

your perfectly combed golden hair

combined with your unforgettable cologne

the scent of hard work and confidence

made me fall for you

again

I fell asleep

it was more comfortable than as if a cloud were made

of goose feathers

it was like I was home

again

your text said:

 it isn’t working.

 I want someone better.

 you’re not important

 and never will be.

the bitter words cutting my heart in half

leaving me alone

again

Modern Anubis: Inmate Number 14036-023

 by Jamie Scheffel

I dig into you

like an archaeological site

in the Nevada desert.

I find things:

a paper trail of evidence,

of distant recollections,

petroglyphs

unknown to me.

In here:

the writing on the cave wall like

a greeting card.

It surprised me when I saw it,

the delicateness of your hand:

*“…and I am working on seeing you—*

*it just takes time.*

*Hopefully you will be able to see me before the snow melts…”*

I touch what you once touched so long ago,

slide my hand across it like sandstone,

leaving prints that will fade

like I was never there.

Back out

in the burning sun

my flesh melts away

and I keep moving

forward like

the undead

while

you

remain

there

so evident

and abstract

forever

in the cave.

There

like a man

with the face

of a jackal

dressed in

an orange

jumpsuit

waiting

and

waiting

and

waiting

for

mail.

Dead or alive:

does it matter?

Maybe Baby

by Emily Pearson

EASY TO USE

* 1. Remove cap and place absorbent tip in urine stream for **5 seconds.**
	2. Lay test flat while developing.
	3. Read result in **3 minutes.**

I sit perched on the edge of the tub.

A lonely red line.

This typically insignificant scrap of pink and white plastic,

Its message was clear:

A lonely red line.

Nothing but the apathetic scrap in my hands.

I know my feet are frigid on the cool tile,

But I don’t care.

A lonely blurring red line.

FIRST RESPONSE™ EARLY RESULT PREGNANCY TEST

Discovering Ways to Tell You First™

I know I have obligations pressing,

But I don’t care.

A lonely blurred line.

And I know my wife wants to know the scrap’s fortune,

But I can’t bring myself to say it out loud.

A lonely blurred red line.

I have always known I wanted to be a mother,

It’s no easy task when you love a woman.

Blood tests,

Pain,

Counseling,

Planning and advice.

Donors,

Clinics,

And family who don’t think it wise.

Science is not often found in love poems.

It’s clinical, factual, and isn’t swayed by emotion.

Much like this scrap I can’t look away from.

A lonely blurred red line.

She knocks on the door and slowly peaks in at my silence.

Wordlessly I am joined.

For weeks we glowed and prayed for two parallel lines.

A lonely red line.

Already armed with mortar, and little gems of wifely love,

She laboriously puts me back together.

I look up at her smile covered disappointment,

We won’t give up.

FIRST RESPONSE™ is >99% accurate from the day of the expected period in laboratory studies.

Going Numb

 by Megan Stratford

Forgetting the crooked smile,

his one blue eye, the other a mystery.

Without a lullaby,

without a kiss on the cheek and nothing more.

Falling asleep to the rocking motion, him whispering

for me to remain still,

a lifeless rag doll, permeating the center

of the king size mattress.

Going numb,

eyes never blinking,

never asking him to stop—

tortured by the continuous grunts of the man

who was *loving me.*

Finishing what he had started, readjusting the

princess big girl panties over my

not yet developed figure—

chest flat, hairless V,

his favorite destination when the lights were off

and the house was quiet.

Strictly No Hiding

 by Delphine Nyabando

![https://images.submittable.com/s3/submittable-files/83379673-43c0-4413-9cb2-1f5d10295e49/120921/IMAG0804_1_1_1[1].jpg?width=380&mode=max&scale=both]()

Shake, Rattle, and Row

by Benjamin Mikkelsen

Once more did that old diesel rumble and roar I was awoken by my father’s snoring. It’s always been a nuisance to me, the way The Old Man snored. At home we had walls and doors muffling the noise, and the steady pumping of his apnea machine often drowned it out altogether. But out here in the bush, amongst the trees, lakes and fireflies there was nothing to break the sound of his soft palette turning over. I was surprised I stayed asleep this long, even though The Old Man hit the ground and was out like a light, he must not have begun breathing until now. Any other time I would have been upset, but my stomach was churning from lake water and wall-eye. So I took inventory of myself, determined which way was up and emerged from my cocoon, donned my sweatshirt, then slowly unzipped the door to our tent.

I took my first steps stumbling in the direction of the hole we had dug earlier for such an occasion. I stepped cautiously through branches and over roots, and despite it being well past midnight, the moon still hung high enough and shone brightly enough to guide me to our little latrine. I sighed in relief as I dropped my cargo pants to my ankles and plopped down on a fiber glass bucket. There was a peculiar duality in the air as I felt my spine shiver in relief: The sky above me was clear and the air was crisp, while from below wafted the stench of wet mud and excrement. In my right ear was a chorus of crickets chanting on the wind, while in my left were the grumblings of The Old Man shattering the insect harmony as he snored along. Off key and off cadence. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. For months he talked about this trip like it were an expedition; just us, roughing it in nature like we used to. He was gonna quit drinking, he was gonna start exercising, he was gonna take care of himself. He never followed through. And instead of swallowing his pride and calling the whole thing off, he phoned an outfitter and elected to bumble his way through the boundary waters with me in tow.

As I turned my attention back to the woods around me The Old Man’s breathing ceased. He had quit snoring for the moment. Part of me was certainly worried about his breathing, but I figured this was my chance to get some real rest before he resumed. Heaving a sigh, I pulled my pants back up and headed back to the tent. I had three more days as a geriatric nurse to go.

I was late to rise the next morning and The Old Man had let me be electing to do most of the packing himself. I heard his sighs and grunts as I slowly awoke, accompanied by the creaking of knees and clicking of ankles as he trekked between the shore and our campsite, collecting our gear and hauling it to the canoe. Deciding now was as good a time as any, I grabbed my sweatshirt and weaved my snarled curls into a ponytail.

 “You awake Jen?” I heard him call as he lumbered towards the tent. “I have some Peanut butter, wheat bread, and that trail mix the outfitter left us with out here if you’re hungry.”

 “Yeah, I’m awake now.” Picking myself up and unzipping the tent door as I spoke. “You know you could have gotten me up to help.”

 “Of course, but I heard you leave the tent last night and figured that with all my snoring you could use some extra winks.”

 “Thanks. I guess.” I would have said more if I wasn’t already grazing on trail mix and peanut butter bread.

 “That didn’t sound too sincere.”

 “It wasn’t. If you had gotten me up we could have been on the move already.”

“Okay smart ass. If you want to get going so badly plan us out a route on that map while I tear the tent down.”

He sure didn’t need to tell me twice. I unfurled the map I had packed in our bag of supplies. It was a to scale topographical map covering a fifty square mile stretch of the Minnesota boundary waters, an ambitious proposition for a pair of city slickers no doubt. Especially since it had been a good five years since we tried anything like this.

 “So I’m thinking that if we paddle north of us about two miles to this little inlet we can portage a mile to this smaller lake, it has four potential fire pits marked along its perimeter and we’ll have plenty of time to fish.”

 “How near are they to the water?”

 “Looks like the ones nearest our point of entry are about five feet above the water line.”

 “That doesn’t sound too promising kiddo,” The Old Man said as he wrestled the rolled up tent back into its bag. “With all the rain up here in the last week they could easily be washed out and maybe even flooded.”

 “Not five feet of rain, Dad. And look, there’s also two more just a little higher up further along the coast. You should be more worried about the walk.”

 “So you think.”

 “So I know.”

 “Well than, little know-it-all, let’s get moving. We gotta start fishing before dusk today. Otherwise we will be stuck with nuts and raisins for the next two days.”

With that we walked down to the canoe and heaved the last of our junk with us. I resented that Dad went through an outfitter to get all of our supplies. I knew we could no longer afford a canoe, tent, and gas stove of our own, but the appeal of our outings for me was always in the realization of an individualistic philosophy The Old Man had aimed to instill in me, the one he himself adopted after Mom left. And anyways the outfitter sure as hell skimped on the food, meaning if we wanted a real meal, we’d have to catch it. But more than the food, I hated the reminder that he was getting along in years. The reminder that sometime soon he would only have me to take care of him. A reminder that the man who used to paddle and rudder the whole canoe for the both of us was making me take the lead, as he leaned back in the canoe and lazily steered our course.

Going was quiet at first between me and The Old Man though the world around us was anything but. Dragonfly’s slid along the smooth waters pushing away the incessant whisper of mosquitoes that crept behind my ears while loons honked in beck and call to one another as we parted them in our wake. And the river was so calm, yet deep, that you could only see you’re reflection in it, cast in viscous glass. Distracted by the surrounding spectacle I neglected the pace we made. An hour and a half in I realized that we had yet to reach the inlet and my pace quickened. While The Old Man, sensing my tension, began to paddle himself. He then broke our silence.

 “You know if you keep this up I might have to take a nap when we beach.” It was a joke, but a poor one. Exhaled between wheezes, and creating more tension than it released.

 “You better not,” I scolded. “I can carry the packs and canoe on my own, but I can’t carry you.”

I was more than relieved when he was too winded to retort, yet I couldn’t shake the feeling that what I said hurt him more than intended. As minutes passed our pace gradually slowed as my father could no longer keep up. It was alright though I could see our inlet now, tucked away in a pocket of cattails.

 “We there hon?”

 “Yeah, we are. I’ll dig my paddle into the banks and keep us beached while you off load the gear.”

 “Oh sure, make me do the heavy lifting.”

I could only roll my eyes back at him. “Well, we’re gonna have a whole mile of heavy lifting. Sure you can handle it?”

“I’ll be fine kiddo, you know this ain’t my first rodeo.” He fucking loved that stupid expression.

I took the lead as we started our march over to the lake. I was carrying our tent and sleeping bags in my pack while square on The Old Man’s shoulders was the bag containing all of our food, water filters, cooking gear, and most significantly, our map. A few years ago I would have been allowed only a compass while he carried an entire campsite himself. I should have felt good about my growing responsibilities, yet I could only resent my father, the specter of my father, who tread uneasily behind me. I could feel his energy drain with every step we took, with but a half mile to walk we ended up leaving his pack and the canoe.

“Shit kiddo I’m sorry, that paddling took more outta me than I thought.”

“You think? I’m gonna go back for everything. And please don’t keel over when I’m gone.”

I left before he could respond. I knew I was throwing a tantrum, but I didn’t care. I was his child, he was supposed to be guiding me on this trip, and instead I was stuck picking up the little pieces of him he kept leaving behind.

It was twenty minutes more to make the back and forth from where I left The Old Man and where he dropped the tent and canoe. Twenty minutes of sweat, mud, and mosquitoes. By the end of it I could no longer distinguish between the whispering insects and the ringing in my ears, and was almost relieved when I heard The Old Man’s voice over the droning.

 “I hate to say I told you so, but I took a minute to survey the campsites here and, well, it ain’t good.”

 “How...” I heaved “… So?”

 “Well, the first two are flooded, which wouldn’t be too bad if the two campsites further along the coast here weren’t washed out.”

 “Washed out?”

 “Mudslide. Must’ve pushed the fire pits straight to the lake.”

With a grunt I smashed the canoe down on the glassy water’s surface and went digging for the map that was left in The Old Man’s bag. I knew there had to be more sites within range of us, I only needed to plan a route and make sure he would follow through on it. I only needed the map to be dry.

 “Goddammit! You got the map wet!”

 “How so?”

 “You set the tent bag right down in the mud when you bailed on the canoe, it must’ve soaked through to the map!”

 “Well is it still legible? Can you read it?”

 “Mud, Dad! You set it in the mud. I can’t make out a damn thing.”

 “Well… then we have to go back, don’t we?”

I took a deep breath and held it to my heart.

 “Jen, I know this hasn’t been the trip of a lifetime for you. And I’m sorry I’m not the same man who showed you how to handle yourself out in all of this murk, but you’ve already done so much. I would hate for something bad to happen you, or me. Let’s go back.”

He was always bad at speaking his mind. I could tell when he had something eating away at him, but he rarely spoke up. In hindsight I suppose it was this show of humility that allowed me to forgive him, forgive him for getting old, forgive him for not taking care of himself, and forgive him for making me take care of myself when I wanted and needed him most.

 “Yeah. We need to go back. Can you manage it? The winds picking up and I’m not liking the look of those clouds.”

 “I’ll manage kiddo, let’s get moving.”

We set back the way we had come, through the wood, mud, and bugs. And for the first time in the whole trip, it felt like he was back. Churning and sputtering like an old diesel perhaps, but for once in a long time I had my father back. Only a little worse for the wear.

It took almost forty minutes to slog our way back to the inlet and shove off towards our previous camp. The winds had picked up and even on this small river the swells were enough to broadside us if we weren’t careful. I wasn’t scared though. The muscles in my arms were taught and pumped, and I had that old freight train backing me up. No damn storm was gonna stop us.

 “Think we’ll beat the rain?” I called back.

 “Oh, I know it.”

Cornfields

 by Cody Rogers

I remember Shakopee before the St. Francis Hospital was built. Almost everything north of Marshall Road were cornfields. Now Marshall Road has spread into a web of side streets with businesses that weren't there when I was in middle school. It's closer to my childhood home as well. New Prague, for example, used to be nothing but a main street, it was basically like Montgomery (where I grew up), but it's changed. About ten years ago townhomes sprung up out of the ground like a scene from a child's pop-up book, cornfields used to stretch from both sides of the small road just like in Shakopee: green in the summer, yellow in the fall. The whole street was covered in corn. Now the corn has been replaced by a different sort of row: townhouses. It seems every few years new ones spring up somewhere where there used to be cornfields. It's almost as if the townhouses grew out from the cornfields in a way. One crop replaced with another; dark patches of earth inter-weaved with golden crops replaced by paved roads and rows of identical houses. Farmers combines replaced first by construction equipment and then by minivans like the vehicles are shrinking, becoming more mundane.

Savage is the newest victim of this cash crop craze of townhouses. Along Highway 42, there is a farm. I imagine the family owned all the land on the side of the road once. You can still see their cows grazing in front of Lifetime Fitness. They had a cornfield once too. Now it's been replaced by row upon row of identical pale yellow houses. When I see them, I can only picture them wrapped up in husks and harvested at the end of the fall then put in storage in the winter before ripening in the spring and, at last, being bought and sold in the summertime. Realtors acting like the local corn farmers who sell their crop across the street from me.

I grew up in a small farming town. I always hated corn. I saw it as a symbol of the town, and I hated it. I hated driving a half an hour to go to the nearest fast-food place and seeing nothing but cornfields the entire way. As I grow older and watch those cornfields I used to hate so much slowly replaced by townhouses, I kind of miss them. I miss the earthy smell they gave off on a summer day and when the stalks were ripening, and the bright golden color the stalks turn the earth when it's time for the harvest.

Now, whenever I roll down the windows all I smell is tar, and it stinks.

I’m Sorry, What?

by Jody Smuckatelli

This is the story of me: how I changed from a young Minnesota boy into a man from many places, how my vocabulary has adjusted over time, and why I speak the way I do. I believe language is fluid; in my own life my language has changed due to subcultures, location, and where I call home. I never resisted these changes and adaptations, instead chose to embrace them. Over the last few years I have been many places and experienced life outside the Minnesota bubble. I’m proud of my life and what I have become. This is how it happened. This is my language story.

“GET OFF MY DAMN BUS RIGHT NOW!” he screamed. I was in shock. Off the bus I went, feeling like a child who got separated from his parents at the mall. Everything was new, exciting, and horrifying all at once. I left a world where I was confident in my speech and my understanding of slang, to one which made me feel like I needed a translator half the time. My hands were no longer hands- they were "dickskinners." My pen was an "ink stick," my shoes were "go fasters," and nothing made sense. My name changed as well, from Matt to Recruit to whatever rank I happened to hold. It was as if I spent three months in a cocoon; before I was a young boy, then I burst out as a man with a glowing vocabulary comprised of ‘F bombs and dirty jokes. I was a Marine, and this subculture has a language all of its own.

I was assimilated into this world fully and completely. To say I understood you was “I’m tracking;” to say I was on my way was “en route.” If you raised your hand during my class I would respond simply with “send it.” It got so ingrained in my head that when talking with my family I would have to think about every last word I said to make sure it wasn’t that vulgar “Military lingo,” which happened to come out without warning every time. I thought I had it all down after a few months and I was set in my ways. Then I moved to a tropical paradise that shifted me completely again.

I got off the plane to a wreathing swarm of “hey brahs” and “alohas.” I was in the land of the big waves, sun-kissed skin and mai thais on the beach. My winter coat was out of place, my skin color was normal for Minnesota winters, but here I was the epitome of a pale mainlander. The locals observed me and smirked to themselves, knowing full well I was going to have the worst sunburn in my life in the following few days. I kept my mouth shut, listened, and observed my surroundings. The land itself seemed to breathe with life. The ocean would speak, the land would listen, and the people would respond in kind.

It sounds like a large man talking in his post feast nap- similar to listening to a group of people far away laughing, yet too far away to make out individual words. It is a tightly woven thread of English and Hawaiian that is so complex none of it sounds even remotely familiar. They call it Pigeon, where foreigners are “haoles” and we continent dwellers are mainlanders. A place where a greeting is “howzit” and every question ends with “yeah?” Some words have specific meanings, while others are given meaning through shared emotion and experience. “Dakine” is both happy and sad, night and day, empathetic and distant. If one thing can be said definitively about this word, it is synonymous with “island life.” The people have a life force that flows through them and binds them together: that is “Dakine.” When haoles come and visit the island some are receptive and happy, some are angry and want haoles out. These are both Dakine.

The island is a melting pot of two different cultures, Polynesian and American. Its location in the Pacific makes it ideal for a culture clash, still close to the mainland, and close to the Polynesian islands farther west. These cultures coming together produced a language all on its own, a language with a laid back no worries kind of feel. I soaked it all up, and happily adapted to the island life. My sandals became “slippers,” I don’t care became “ainokea,” and crazy became “lolo.” I was never fully fluent in pigeon, and even after years I had to ask people to repeat what they said because I “wasn’t tracking.” I left the island shy of a year ago to return to Minnesota. Many things stuck with me from Hawaii. You have to get lucky to see me in anything besides sandals and board shorts with a tank top in the summer months. I throw up the shaka when somebody lets me merge in traffic, or for just about any picture. One thing I have noticed since I have returned home late last May is that Minnesotans sound weird.

Growing up here I never took notice of it. Nobody had an accent to me, we all just sounded the same. I never understood why people would always make fun of my accent when I was outside the state. Telling people where I was from almost always followed up with a sarcastic “Minnesota eh?” or “dontchaknows” (thanks to a certain movie about a city in North Dakota). After leaving home for four years and only returning a few times it finally became noticeable to me. It’s a friendly accent, warming and accepting if pronounced. Minnesota nice is really visible in the innocent accent and helpful people.

I got off the plane and was immediately reminded of the brisk temperature outside, the land of the cold air and “yeahsureyoubetcha’s”. Minnesota: the land where the trees grow tall and mosquitoes multiply unfairly, the saying “going up north” needs no explanation and Paul Bunyan is a household name. This is the land where laying down by the lake all day is not a day wasted, but a day well spent. I call Minnesota home. My family is here, my friends are here, and my life is here. However, upon my return I was almost an outsider. Over the last few years I had dropped the accent, got a tan, and developed a serious loathing of the cold. Most people did a double take when I said “soda” instead of “pop”. People asked me why I looked like I just came back from the beach all summer long, or what did I mean by “howzit?” Nowadays I find myself slowly losing part of my Military and Hawaiian language, shifting back into the Minnesota way of speaking.

I started as a typical Minnesotan; now I am something completely different. I have experienced different subcultures, lived in different places, but have still only had one home. I say strange words nobody understands, I can explain the Minnesota accent from an outsider’s perspective, and sometimes I still say "boot" funny. Your language might seem set in stone, but it will start to change as soon as you say, “I’m sorry, what?”

Fifty Shades of Red

 by Emily Pearson

I sat parked, in my 1998 Nissan Maxima, on the side of the deserted frontage road that was next to the highway I was actually supposed to be on. As I read through the map I had stashed in my car for just this sort of situation.

I was burning up in the dry Wyoming heat. No air conditioning for me, my car was off in order to save gas. Being a struggling, independent 21 year old who worked at Sam’s Club didn’t allow for such luxuries. I could hear sand tinkling on my window as the wind picked up and the roar of traffic on the highway next to me.

The only phone number I had was the creepy guy who had first contacted me, there was no way I was calling him to rescue me. I had joined Fetlife, a website that was a kinky version of Facebook, a few months back and had been opened up to a whole world I had no idea existed. As for why I was headed out to a part of the town that I had never been in, to go to an event I had never been to, to meet people who had never met before? I would say that the answer to that lies in the simple fact that I have a difficult time turning down a life experience, even if it is a bit questionable.

Creepy Guy John had been one of my solicitors, he looked nice enough online, but I honestly hadn’t been interested. Being the overly nice person I was back then, I went to lunch with him once and he immediately attempted to dominate me. He informed me that the next time we went out that I was to wear a dress. I nodded, but inside I was thinking “fat chance guy.” If he knew anything about body language he would have known I was not interested. It wasn’t just his Dom cockiness that threw me off or even that fact that he was a man and that was definitely not what I was looking for, but simply the vibe he gave off. My instincts were shotty more often than not, but I subscribed to the “Better Safe than Sorry” club.

I pulled up, surprised, to a fairly nondescript, middle class house. I don’t know what I was expecting, a menacing, dark, dripping castle maybe or something other than a house that looked like my aunt’s. There were a number of vehicles parked out front, forcing me to park a block away. Which was fine with me, I was definitely not ready to be seen.

Through my friend Jill, I had been given the contact information to some of the more influential, upstanding kinky people in the area and had contacted one, a Miss Mindi, who had informed me that I would be more than welcome. Before the event she had invited me into their, very exclusive, club on Fetlife. Where I had, sort of, met a few of the people and been given updates on what the club was up to.

A few of the members had already added me on Fetlife and been very generous with their compliments and support. Though, one in particular, had caught my eye. Her name was Jouko and her profile picture was of her in a cute 1950’s style dress with red lipstick and perfectly done up hair. She was standing next to a brilliant red Dodge Model 30 with a bright blue sky and puffy, white clouds as her back drop. Needless to say, I was very interested. The only issue with her was that she was married and had a Dom of her own. Subs typically aren’t part-time.

I checked my make-up for the hundredth time, it was perfect, but I was fidgeting and stalling. I hadn’t been sure what to wear to this event, Miss Mindi had said I could wear whatever I felt comfortable in.

I had been too intimidated by her to have her clarify.

In the end I had chosen to stay casual, in my comfort zone. I was wearing a deep red tank top and dark cutoff denim shorts. My brown hair was long and artistically messy down my back. I knew I looked good, there was no way I would have left my apartment otherwise. The pile of discarded clothes on my bed was proof of my painstaking efforts--to not look like I went through painstaking efforts.

“You, can do this,” I said to myself as I gripped the steering wheel. My stomach swirled with anxiety. Phone in one hand and keys in the other, I made my way to the house.

One car stood out from the other average cars, trucks, and crossovers. It was a red Dodge Charger with a black racing stripe and tinted windows. “Dang.” I whispered as I passed it. I am not a car person by any means, but it’s the kind of car that makes a statement with its hard lines and look-at-me color.

A tall, stern looking woman in a leather vest and high wasted jeans answered the door, she looked me up and down for a second, ending in a mildly lecherous smile: “You must be Persephone.” So, this was Miss Mindi.

Persephone was my name on Fetlife, it was one of my favorite Greek myths and I wasn’t about to give anyone my real name, that’s how you got stalked and sold into a sex trafficking ring— it was a surefire way to find yourself in a situation that you don’t want to be in. Names hold power.

“I am,” sound more confident than I am, I encouraged myself.

“You’re late,” two words, my mental balloon of confidence deflated with those two simple words.

I gulped audibly, “I got a little lost.”

“Come in,” she said, stepping out of the way to let me in.

I stepped into a small foyer and all eyes in the living room turned to me. I immediately regretted coming. I was not used to being stared at, or being the center of attention.

She guided me into the room and sat me down on one of the chairs. There were plenty to go around, but there were men and women sitting on the floor. I figured that they were subs (if not for the submissive positions) the collars gave it away. One woman, probably only a few years older than me, had bruises up and down her arms and legs. She offered me a shy smile when I took my seat. Miss Mindi sat down on the chair beside her and the woman hugged her leg. I now knew there was good reason Miss Mindi intimidated me.

I looked around the room at the generic country art hung on the walls. The kind with elk, bears, and colorful sceneries. Again, not what I was expecting. I half expected there to be chains hooked to the walls and ceilings and tortured souls locked in rusty cages.

That was when I saw Jouko who had been standing next to her husband who now was seated in a chair off to the right. She smiled at me and I felt my face flush. I turned in time to see Creepy Guy John notice the exchange and stomp outside. A few of those seated in the chairs rolled their eyes.

Miss Mindi introduced me to everyone and they all welcomed me. One man, in his early 40’s, sat down next to me. He had the kindest doe eyes I had ever seen. He was wearing something that looked suspiciously like a collar, but could have been an odd necklace.

“Hi, I’m Arnold. What brings you here?”

I shrugged as a few others shifted closer to us. “Curiosity,” I said simply, and that was the truth. I didn’t have a desire to be beat up or disrespected. I was drawn to the power play of it all. Power play because you put up thinking for a while. There was something to be said for what my friend Jill had described when talking about her own experience. She’d been in the community for a while and was what some might call a professional. She was the most confident self-assured person I had ever met, and she ate from a dog bowl on the floor. She introduced the idea of a human sushi table to me and a few parties after this one, I found myself blindfolded and naked on a table with salmon rolls being eaten off of me. The height of objectification, but I was the one who decided to do it. If I would have made it a hard no, it would never have happened. In the respectable kinky community there are rules. You never ever break a hard no and consent from a mature knowing adult.

The pain aspect served a purpose, not to keep a person in line in the way most would think. For me it made me feel… alive, as cliché as that sounds. I knew in that moment when my brain registered pain that I was still living, breathing, and feeling. When people ask me why I did this, it is really hard to give a simple answer. “Curiosity” was the truth back then, but over the years, upon countless hours of introspection, I found it was never that simple. Recreate to conquer, is a term that gets the closest to the truth.

Arnold nodded “you gotta open doors. You can sit and stare at a door and never know what is on the other side, never know if it is something you will love or hate.” He looked up at me. “So, you can stare at that door and never grow. Or you can open it,” he paused, “and jump.”

He was the sub to a kindly African woman who sat quietly in the corner watching him.

I caught them sharing a look once and knew that that was what I wanted. I later found out that the year previous she nailed his scrotum to a board.

Relationships are complicated.

Jouko waited an hour to come sit by me. When she did she--purposefully, I’m convinced, sat close enough so our legs were touching. Oh, she had my number. I hardly remember the conversation and I am sure that I did not sound as intelligent as I had wanted.

She was dressed very casually in jeans, black boots, and a red long sleeved shirt. She had on the same bold red lipstick she had in her profile picture, it looked good combined with her pale skin and black hair. She was older, in her mid-40’s, but that had always been my thing. I liked older people.

There was low hum of conversation all around us punctuated by the occasional burst of laughter or a lightheartedly barked command. Some were in the kitchen eating and others were engaged in lively story telling. Everyone seemed to know everyone else it was a very close group.

Jouko’s husband sat with a few of the other Doms, he was a heavier man with a red goatee. He looked pretty daunting, and I was nervous I mean--I was clumsily hitting on his wife.

Miss Mindi announced that they were about to begin demonstrations. Daniel, which I found later was Jouko’s husband, was going to be the one demonstrating cutting.

My eyes widened. Cutting! No. Friggin. Way.

Jouko smiled at me when he was set up with a very professional kit at the table. “Are you going to volunteer?”

Shit, I thought, like I had a choice now. “Sure.” I said casually.

Her smile broadened, “I assure you, he is very professional.”

I nodded, if she said it, it must be true.

I climbed up on the table, my legs over the edge. He stood in front of me, black gloves on, scalpel in hand.

My hands were twitchy, ready to catch my heart as it threatened to pound right out of my chest.

“Where would you prefer?” He did not sound as scary as he looked.

“I guess,” I thought for a moment, “my leg.” That shouldn’t hurt so bad.

He and Jouko smiled at each other and she took my hand. Okay, yup, I could definitely survive this.

Daniel wiped off a section of the outside of my thigh with an alcohol wipe then slowly lowered the scalpel. I held impossibly still, afraid I would jump and sever an artery or something. Her hand felt soft and strong in mine and I tried to focus on that.

“Breathe, Persephone,” she said sternly, as she squeezed my clammy hand, in a tone that offered no room for argument.

I inhaled stiffly as the blade cut through my skin. I felt every inch of me break out into a cold sweat. It hurt, but not as bad as I had anticipated. He ended up cutting three small parallel lines into my thigh. When he sat up from the last cut, I felt a pressure rising in my chest and a weird high took over my body as I looked down at the red blood slowly dripping down my thigh.

I started giggling.

I was embarrassed by my reaction, but I couldn’t stop. They all looked at me with knowing smiles and I felt slightly better for my odd behavior. Daniel cleaned my leg off and put several butterfly strips on the cuts and covered it with a large Band-Aid.

Jouko helped me off of the table and we spent the rest of the evening talking.

A few of the other Dommes came over to talk to me, I noticed they all looked to Jouko for permission. Even then, she had staked her claim on me, and I remember smiling to myself. It felt good.

The time had come for everyone to go home and she walked me to my car, gave me a hug, and told me to drive safe. I watched her slide into the passenger seat of the red Charger I had noticed earlier.

When I got home, I plopped down on my couch and I thought back on what Arnold had said to me. Was I going to open the door?

There was fear, any sane person would be scared but there was far more intrigue and excitement. This was something I would always remember. This was something most would never experience. Would I regret it if I stopped now? Probably, good or bad, I wanted to open that door. Not to mention the fact that I was insanely, bashfully infatuated with a certain woman with soft hands and red lips. I rolled over and threw open my laptop. Fetlife was open. I opened my message box, my fingers hovering over the keys.

I flew into motion.

*Persephone: Hey* ☺ *I had a great time tonight.*

*Jouko: I did too* ☺

*Persephone: By the way, my name is Em.*

Seven

 by Grace Schulze



The Ritz, Piccadilly

by Courtney MacNabb

His chest rose and fell in opposition to mine. We were left intertwined: my leg wrapped around his, his arm cradling me against the right side of his exposed body, and my hand, which was placed over his left pectoral, was being tapped in the calming rhythm a clock has when it ticks. The aftershock of what just occurred was pulsing through the hotel room we shared. It caused a hum to echo around the bedroom, carrying through the opened double doors that led to an ornate sitting area, complete with marble statuettes and a chandelier straight from the ballroom in *Beauty and the Beast*. Something about the hum made the London skyline to our right less exciting, less bright, less of an object to be desired.

A laugh tickled his lips, ceasing the hum like an off-switch. I remember the sound breaking my heart. It was a reminder of the feelings I knew Jake had. I knew them more than he could understand.

“You’re telling me that’s not worth staying in London for?” His words were silk gliding down recently shaved bare legs. “I know you think you can’t, but what does Vegas do that you can’t do here? I’m telling you. There’s good flow out here.” Jake kissed the top of my head, leaving the spot ablaze with guilt.

He leaned across me and flipped on the bedside lamp, as if I need a reminder of how attractive the guy is. If his skin color had ingredients they’d be three quarters freshly brewed, medium roast coffee, one quarter skim milk, and two packets of sugar, which, if you believe in coincidences, is how I prefer my pick-me-up in the morning.

 “Being honest, the songs I’ve written lately are about missing someone.” The navy ring around Jake’s espresso eyes stood out in the light. He was looking down at his hands while he added, “I miss you, Cicely.”

 “I need to tell you something.”

 “Anything.” He straightened his back. His multiple tattoos seemed to shift from inspirational quotes to: ‘this is it, she’s going to tell me how much she cares about me’.

 “I slept with Carter.”

The expression on his face didn’t change, his back didn’t crumble, he didn’t break eye contact, Jake just waited. For what, I still can’t be sure. Perhaps he expected me to say more? Maybe one is supposed to explain themselves when they talk about sleeping with another man.

I raise my eyebrows.

 “You’re staying with him. It’s to be expected. It was a mistake.”

 “It wasn’t just *one* mistake.”

 “Oh... Um...” He looked at the defiled sheets, taking them into his hands. “How many... mistakes have you made?”

If I had any pride left at that point, it was gone. Attempting to put a number on it would have been impossible and probably more painful than what I eventually was left with: a pathetic shrug.

Jake nodded. “Did it start when I left?”

I addressed the hearth of the slate fire place which sat on the side of the room closer to him. The flames licking the stone interior seemed to become angrier as I explained what happened. But my state of total inebriation and therefore lacking sense of morals didn’t cause a reaction from him. I doubt he wanted to know why it started. Any proper minded person would be interested to know why it continued.

Guilt pulsed through my veins like my blood was replaced with the flames from the fireplace. My word vomit ceased. The hum became a pulsing sense of shame. I waited for Jake to scream at me, to curse me, and all of the emotions he had been through over the last few months. On occasion I would chance a look into his eyes just to catch a reflection of the rising sun inching over the building tops.

Roadside Wildflowers

 by Cody Rogers

They provide the pigment on the grey canvas

afternoon yellows morning oranges and dusky purples

 Zipping along at highway speeds

making the drive home tolerable when the radio is broken

Dad too busy staring at the red MACK truck to converse

They make time fly on the drive home

thirty minutes gone In a blur of sunflowers

hawk weed and lead plant

Hues of paint spread across the roadside

a pop of yellow against the guard rail

At least until snow comes to wipe the slate clean

Ruminations of a Guitar

 by Jeremiah Gregori

There was a time

when you bent

me over your lap

and ran your fingers

sensuously up and down

my smooth neck.

There was a time

when you would use

your fingers to

masterfully tug and pluck

my body

There was a time

when I wailed and screamed

There was a time

when we would move

up and down the room,

knocking over the furniture

in our way.

Now I sit untouched

in a corner of the room.

I think it was the neighbors

that poisoned you against me.

I hope it isn’t that goddamned Xbox

you got last Christmas.

Sixteen

 by Emely Sanchez

The last night I saw you

we sat on your father’s porch

creating promises toward the warmest summer.

Six months away from June first

our breaths decorated the January air

Your hushed voice did not stutter.

Did not tremble, did not worry.

Your illness was not a variable.

Tomorrow would continue to arrive.

You proclaimed it would, without doubt.

I attached weight to your words.

I believed there was a cure

refusing to accept the approaching end.

You would still exist come summertime.

No longer tired, no dark circles

No rattling pills in your bag

No stomach pains, no fear left.

It wasn’t a date

 by Jamie Scheffel

but we went out to the Korean restaurant

to sing karaoke.

All the rooms were filled, so

we got it to-go and ate outside

in the fading summer sun.

When we left

you gave me a black bag

full of little white boxes.

Each held a porcelain bobblehead,

eight of them in all,

that you got from the Hmong market.

The monkey was my favorite.

It wasn’t a date

but with our plans to sing badly

to songs like Billie Jean

squashed,

we decided to grab a couple drinks,

even though neither of us drink.

You requested one with a tropical name,

minus the alcohol.

I thought that was funny.

I requested one that I’ve had before,

my go-to when I’m forced to make a decision:

a vodka tonic with lime.

It wasn’t a date

but when we left

neither of us were drunk.

We sat in the dark and talked

in your parked car

and then you

subtly

leaned

in—

The monkey is still my favorite.

Chosen

 by Ben Monet

Hezekiah’s earliest memory was of a very tall teacher handing him a very large book and telling him in very soft tones that he was very much okay.

Since that day, he had done just that, and over the months and the years, he had memorized most of it.

The school was cool and damp and all of the books smelled mysteriously of salt and copper, but Hez didn’t mind as long as he could stay out of the headmaster’s way and keep up with his studies.

After all, top marks were top priority and everyone knew that the student who was the highest of the class was chosen.

Chosen for something special.

Of course, the headmasters only smiled when you asked them what the special thing was.It must be something wonderful though, Hez mused as he poured over his books. Because when someone was chosen, they never came back.

So they must like it, wherever they went. Maybe it was a family. He had to find out.

So he had studied hard until one day, Doctor Ronston Van Borlock kept him after class. He sat, waiting, until the Doctor called him out of his seat.

“You.” the tall man intoned, staring piercingly at Hezekiah for a solid minute.

“You.” he said again after this interval, but this time he tacked on, “are chosen.” as though it pained him to shove the words from his throat.

“Chosen. For great things.”

Hezekiah watched him in awe….and dread.

“Chosen.” he whispered, tasting the word.

Then he had been instructed to pack his things.

Now, two days, four hours, and thirty-two minutes later, his traveling coach was nearing a dark, crumbling castle at the very tip of the craggy mountain that the terrifyingly rutty road ended at.

Hezekiah looked out the window, wondering at the size of this massive building, crouched like some dark beast in the shadows of….what?

There was nothing looming over this structure, and yet, no moonlight touched it.

Not a single beam.

Before Hez could think this over, the door swung open seemingly on its own and the ancient driver croaked, “Out.” in a monotone vibration of decaying vocal chords. Shivering in the cold mist of violently early morning, Hezekiah did as he was told, dragging his small trunk with him.

Moments later, he was at the doorway, staring up at an iron gate, its tall slats capped with razor-sharp points, ivy that seemed both rotting and somehow alive in a malevolent, unnatural way twisting and snarling its slimy paths over and around the barrier.

Hez turned to ask the driver of the carriage how he might get inside, but the clatter of hoof beats had started up again and his way here was already gone.

“Boy…” a voice like a sigh of wind rattling through the carelessly piled bones of some ancient mastodon groaned.

Hezekiah whirled.

A tall, stooped knight stood outside the gate. The gate that had stood, devoid of all human life when he had seen it only moments before. The knight seemed to take no notice of Hez’s surprise, but it was difficult to tell what his expression was exactly, as the visor of his helmet obscured his eyes.

The slit he must be looking through was as black as the night around them.

“H...Hello?” Hezekiah ventured, watching him cautiously. “I...I was chosen...may I—”

“Boy child…” the knight sighed again, and Hez noticed that the man’s armour was very old and rusting around the joints as though he had left it carelessly out in the rain.

“Chosen…cho—” the knight broke off suddenly and for a moment Hezekiah thought he was going into a coughing fit, but then he realized the other wasn’t sick. At least not visibly.

The rusty guard was laughing.

“*Oooh,* chosen! Yes. *Chosen*. For... great things? Is that what they told you? *Oooh*, *mercy*!”

This last was cried out, not as an expression of exasperation or good humor but with the intonations of a man making a desperate plea.

“Sir...I…”

“Right this way.” All unsettlingly frantic energy vanished as the guard spit the words out like rotten teeth.

Bewildered, Hezekiah followed him as the man unlocked the gate using a key that the boy couldn’t see, clanking through the entrance without turning to see if the other was following.

*I could run right now,* Hez mused, then shook his head in confusion at the idea.

He followed the knight, pondering what might be inside this new place. He had read a great many books on wealthy people’s properties and had seen his share of taxidermic examples on their great walls. That was when he asked the question, the answer of which would haunt him until death and far after, looking up at the rust-spattered sentinel.

“Do you have dead things on the walls?”

He was unprepared for the knight’s answer, which he spoke in the voice of a man who have given up and now finds a sort of black humor in his own hopelessness.

“Boy, *everything* here is dead.”

\*\*\*

Now he walked down the hallway to the room he had been told would be his. His oil-deprived doorman hadn’t given many instructions beyond the weirdly specific direction to the corridor he must take, but Hez was sure he would find it.

After all, there must be someone, a maid perhaps, who would help him if he got lost.

And so bound was he in his boundless thoughts, Hezekiah almost didn’t see the faces covering the right wall.

He had reached the corridor.

The stones underfoot had an odd, rusty coloring to them as though someone had spilled some rich chocolate along the floor and left it to dry.

And the faces *(taxidermy dead they’re all dead)* were looking at him.

Hez tried to tell himself that this was all in his mind. Dead faces couldn’t see you anymore than the “eyes” on the wings of a moth could determine your expression.

Still, it was very much disarming.

He had decided to walk a little faster when a curious thing began to happen. His feet had begun to feel somewhat *gluey*, as though the strange, slightly tacky substance on the floor were slowing him, making him *(staystay with us so delicious so wonderful so much knowleeeddggeeee)* slow down.

He flinched, glancing wildly around. Was someone there? Hez could have sworn he’d heard…

“H-Hello?”

 A sudden chill enveloped him.

The heads glared down from their places, some livid, others only

*(hungry)* agonized with some terrible emotion. He tried to look away, but some minute motion drew his eyes back unwillingly, yanking them to that ghastly wall again.

One of the faces was slowly rolling its glassy eyes towards him.

Hezekiah watched, transfixed.

Suddenly, he knew what that substance he was standing on—*glued to—* was.

*(blood oh no oh please oh mercy it’s blood)*

A thick black tongue, dripping with a sick, yellowish-green saliva, unfurled from the thing on the wall’s mouth. It lolled like a viscous poisonous streamer, sucked back in, and then the mouth’s teeth began to work as though testing their strength.

Click. Click.

CLACK.

That horrid tongue was back out again, dark and squirming like a monstrous, bloated leech.

Hez was still unable to move, unable even to scream. His last thought, formulated in the miniscule, frozen bit of time, was very simple and very small for such a capable brain. The other faces took to imitate their nightmarish leader.

*They are not dead.*

Then the feast began.

 \*\*\*

He did not know where he was.

He did not know *who* he was.

Hezekiah *(you are not you are not him not now no more)* had only the knowledge of being...up.

A distant memory, full of violence and agony and *(feast)*

screams, flickered like a dying light bulb in his mind. Before he could latch onto it, it was gone, and now he could hear footsteps.

A corridor lay out before him and he faced a cracked wall on the other side of it.

The floor *(below so far below)* was smeared with great swaths of something that looked like *(blood so good so full of knowledge)*

dried chocolate.

He tried to move about but found his limbs unresponsive. And when he forced his eyes down, he could just see the top of a head. The very same head that had—*(feast)*. The face below abruptly rolled its’ glassy eyes up to his.

And winked.

*(ours and us you are us you are)*

It was then that the boy formally known as Hezekiah Unknown at Ingrid Ightenson’s Institution for Unusually Astute Orphans became aware of three things.

He was only a stretched and leering face, mounted to a wall in a crumbling, cursed castle.

Someone was coming.

And *oh*, he was so… so…*hungry.*

Zig Zag

 by Grace Schulze

****

*Body, part two.*

by Emely Sanchez

He

was my

makeshift shelter.

forged my permission,

allowed himself in.

seeped

into my spine.

corroded

my bones.

I

was tender,

half grown.

had no experience,

hurried myself for him.

learned

about my anatomy,

without desire

became his.

**Contributor’s Notes**

**Jozee Becher** Jozee Becher loves to write poetry. Her advice to her readers is, "If you don't get it, try harder."

**Micala Burns** is a current undergrad at Normandale Community College. Next semester she will complete her communications AA. She has submitted to multiple poetry competitions in the past, including Creative Communications and the American Library of Poetry (both of which she has been published in).

**Stephen Dodds** is in his final year at Normandale Community College. He is a member of the AFA program in Creative Writing and anticipates graduation next fall. He has studied communications in the past and aspires to become a proofreader in the publishing industry.

**Christopher Fleming** is a Gulf War Veteran. He served in the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. He has been Battling PTSD for over 20 years and through Photography and Writing, he has been able to discover and share his feelings and experiences with others. By telling people of his disability, he is able to help others that are struggling with their feelings. PTSD, Anxiety, Depression and other mental illnesses should not be swept under the rug, but realized that without treatment and support of loved ones, they will lose the battle. He is a father of five children. His oldest three are his biological children, and two youngest are his step sons. He is remarried to a wonderful, supporting, and beautiful wife. Through her, he has maintained a positive outlook. He still battles the demons of war, but has come to grips that the war will wage on for the rest of his life.

**Jeremiah Gregori** is a student at Normandale and a junior at Mankato State University through the Partnership Center, studying Communications and marketing.

**Courtney MacNabb** is a writer in the Creative Writing (AFA) program at Normandale Community College. Story telling has been a life-long passion, starting with prose at the age of 6, focusing on novels by eleven, and realizing an interest in Screenwriting just recently. Courtney has written three, unpublished novels and one feature length screenplay. Fall semester 2016, she will begin her BA in Screenwriting at Metropolitan State University and is working on her next novel.

**Benjamin Mikkelsen** is a second year Normandale student in his first creative writing course.

**Ruth Miller** is 21 years old and has lived in Minnesota for most of her life. She is in a poetry class at Normandale and wanted to share her work.

**Krystyn Moe is p**ursuing two passions. She has recently completed an Associates in Fine Arts through Normandale Community College and is currently working toward her second degree from Normandale, an Associates in Computer Science. Between work and school, she still finds time to play with her art.

**Ben Monet** is a 20 year old creative writing major. He has been studying at Normandale for a year and a half and enjoys horror and poetry.

**Delphine Nyabando** is a Normandale student and an aspiring artist.

**Jane O'Shea** loves pantoums, introduced to her by her professor, Anna Meek, and the doors they open to keening away the grief that collects like sand and old candy wrappers in the bottom of her backpack.

**Elisha Patmon** says, “I'm not good at a lot of things, but I hope I'm relatively okay at this.”

**Emily Pearson** is an AFA student at Normandale and an aspiring writer. Although, she is not certain which genre of writing she wants to focus on quite yet.

**Cody Rogers** is in his last semester at Normandale and he wrote this piece last semester. He really enjoys how it turned out so he wanted to submit it to the paper lantern.

**Emely Sanchez** Fall 2015 has been a time of learning for her. It has been emotionally and physically straining but art always spurs from these moments. Here is her good-bye and attempt for renewal.

**Jamie Scheffel** is in her last semester at Normandale, finishing up her AFA in creative writing. She looks forward to transferring in the fall to get her BFA in creative writing. "HI," to her number one fan, Jasmine! :)

**Grace Schulze** is pursuing a degree in Creative Writing. She is a Minnesota native who enjoys writing, literature, music, theater, and art.

**Jody Smuckatelli** says, “Jody is a pen name, you Veteran's will understand. Marine Veteran, Normandale student.”

**Megan Stratford** has been writing poetry about her life as a former sexually abused/physically abused young person since she was in high school, just coming into her own sense of self. Her main purpose in life is to be the very best individual that she can be and now that has shifted into spurring other young women to be the people they can become. She hopes that her poems give others the same transparency and the baton of, "yes, I can and yes I will overcome!”

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Editors and the following members of the Spring 2016 AFA Capstone class produced this issue:

Lauren Tabor, Editor-In-Chief

Jamie Scheffel, Fiction Editor

Grace Schulze , CNF Editor

Megan Stratford, Poetry Editor

Cody Rogers, Artistic Editor

Marcel Egbe and Courtney MacNabb, Editors at large

Amy Fladeboe, Capstone Instructor

Front Cover: “Brittle” by Krystyn Moe

Back Cover: “Curl” by Grace Schulze

Submit your work to the Fall 2016 issue of *The Paper Lantern*! All work is reviewed anonymously and acceptance is based on merit.

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This publication is dedicated to Kris Bigalk and Amy Fladeboe, the women who fostered our desire to become our best. These words are as much ours as they are theirs for inspiring each of us.