Cover art: “Soil, Sky, and Rust” by Kathryn Funderburg
Contents

When My Little Sister Couldn’t Sleep  7
   Julia Camp
Chicago  7
   Delia Zacarias
Just Rhiannon  8
   Courtney Elizabeth Justus
Am i  15
   Caitlin Lawrence
Is Dad Black?  16
   Briauna Barrera
A Fight to Remember  18
   Robert Smith
Christmas Truce  24
   Carl Teegerstrom
Room with a View  25
   Sarah Spence
Autumn Birds  25
   Carl Teegerstrom
Dish Soap  26
   Megan Reynolds
Rings of a Tree Trunk  26
   Delia Zacarias
The Silver Stallion  27
   Caitlin Lawrence
Andromeda Galaxy  29
   Carl Teegerstrom
Nature 5, 2012  29
   Kathryn Funderburg
What I’ve Found  30
   Julia Camp
Paradise Lost  33
   Carl Teegerstrom
Oslo  33
   Delia Zacarias
Rain  34
   DC Edwards
Geodoe  34
   Caitlin Lawrence
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good, how are you?</td>
<td>Sarah Spence</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He Gets High On Wednesdays</td>
<td>Megan Reynolds</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giganotosaurus, King of Argentina</td>
<td>Carl Teegerstrom</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crush</td>
<td>Brianna Azua</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake Thesis Title</td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pinewood Society: Mark Atkins,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austen Hall, Jeremy Siegal, Mason Stark,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Uroff, Charles Wagner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrid</td>
<td>Delia Zacarias</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drops of Sunshine</td>
<td>Dzung Vu</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masamune No Katana</td>
<td>Carl Teegerstrom</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silhouettes</td>
<td>Megan Reynolds</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moon prince</td>
<td>Caitlin Lawrence</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Little Pilot</td>
<td>Christine Gurley</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Christmas</td>
<td>Sarah Spence</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View by the Trinity Fountain</td>
<td>Beth Keenan</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Thorn In My Side</td>
<td>Melanie Orellana</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merry Cherries on Campus</td>
<td>Dzung Vu</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riding the Sandworm</td>
<td>Carl Teegerstrom</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth of Adam</td>
<td>Carl Teegerstrom</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Dusk</td>
<td>Dzung Vu</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Blue Jay</td>
<td>Megan Reynolds</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trinity Review 5
Magic Shoes
    Dzung Vu
Words
    Faith Poynor
Pocket Change
    Julia Camp
Beauty of the Death
    Dzung Vu
Hamlet
    Carl Teegerstrom
Arendal
    Delia Zacarias
The Fixer-Upper
    Megan Allen
When My Little Sister Couldn’t Sleep
Julia Camp

She’d tell me about all the terrible things
she imagined might be out there,
awaiting her in the darkness.
“The monsters, they’re coming for us! I know they’re coming!”

She imagined five-armed aliens and deadly dragons
that would steal her from her bed at midnight.
“They’re coming! I know they’re coming!”

She said in her pink, princess pajamas as she hid in my covers.
They’d steal her right out of bed, she believed,
but not if she was in my arms, the safest place on Earth.
Snuggled in all pink, a princess under my covers, she asked,
“When will I be brave like you?”

Our grandpa died on a Sunday,
so softly that the sleeping world
didn’t awake to acknowledge
our nightmare.
Innocence and the belief
of inevitable strength
awaiting us down the road
are the roots of all hope.
The desire to preserve her
outweighed any truth,
so I never told that little girl in my arms
how scared I still am
of all the things I cannot see.
The day my brother died, the infinity sign was still painted in black on our driveway. I stared at it from the end of the street. Marsha, my brother’s tutor, had been holding my hand, and after what felt like hours, I felt hers slowly slipping away from mine. Her blue eyes were wide and empty. I looked at her and tried to ask her a question, but all that came was silence. We could only look away from the street, at the house. The white paint fading at the edges of the shingled walls. The purple hydrangeas that won my mom prizes in gardening contests. The wide window at the front of my house that my brother loved to look out of while he waited for Dad to come home. That was exactly what he was doing before the accident happened. That day, when the car hit him, Oliver was just waiting for Dad. Oliver just wanted his father and very best friend to come home, so they could play baseball.

That day, Dad was late coming home from work. Oliver had become impatient waiting for him, so he decided to go find some neighborhood kids. They were playing basketball at the other end of the street. From what I heard, Oliver was trying to get them to let him play with them, but they wouldn't let him. The kids poked fun at him, calling him retarded and throwing wadded-up candy wrappers at him. When one of them prompted Oliver to chase him, he did. But when they reached a crossroads, a drunk driver ran into him. He was going three times the speed limit for that area of the neighborhood. By the time the driver saw Oliver, it was too late.

My brother Oliver had been diagnosed with severe autism when he was four years old. Mom and Dad sent him to a preschool for children with special needs, in the hopes that he would be prepared to attend my elementary school one day. His teacher, Mrs. Roberts, claimed she understood Oliver. She made efforts to integrate him, most of which ended in utter disaster. I watched my parents yell into the phone each afternoon in the kitchen, alternating between arguments with their colleagues and complaints to the PTA about what the school was doing to their son. Meanwhile, I ate peanut butter crackers with tall glasses of milk and drew pictures. When it got to be too loud, which never took very long, I went up to my room to listen to my Walkman and do homework.

The struggle with Oliver continued up through the beginning of fifth grade. At the time, I was in seventh grade. Hope was in the air, and it was filling the house with a warmth like that of the slowly fading summer. We thought for some reason that fifth grade would do away with the scraped knees and black eyes Oliver had often come home with after school. But three weeks in, after some incident involving an action figure, a hockey stick, and two other boys, my parents sat us both down at the table and told us that Oliver was getting homeschooled. A tutor would come over four times a week to teach him. Her name was Marsha, and she was a college student.

Their hope turned into disappointment.

A few weeks after Oliver started fifth grade and I began seventh grade, my parents decided that he was getting homeschooled. He had come home with scraped knees and black eyes too many times. A tutor would now come over four times a week to teach him. Her name was Marsha, and she was a college student.

The day after my brother left the public school system forever, I came back from a normal day of class and saw it in the driveway. It was an infinity sign, painted in black ink. Oliver was kneeling, tracing the dark, looping shape over and over again. Marsha watched him with a weary look.

“Look!” Oliver cried as I approached him, his hazel eyes widening as he made quick, flustered gestures. “It never ends! See? See? It never ends! It just goes around, and around, and around...”

Oliver's big, hazel eyes widened as he spoke and made quick, flustered gestures. His dark hair was matted, and sweat had gathered on the back of his neck. He wore an Iron Man T-shirt, one of many superhero shirts my parents had bought him. Most of his clothing had traces of the color red on it.

Marsha stood beside him, arms crossed. When she noticed me standing in front of Oliver, she moved a few
strands of her short, brown hair out of her face and smiled weakly. “He wanted to draw.” she said quietly. “He was getting antsy about the math problems.”

I nodded, looking straight down at the infinity sign. Oliver was still tracing it, getting spots of paint on his red shorts. He wore them almost every day, since they matched nearly all of his T-shirts. The other kids in his grade had made fun of him for his clothing, but also for the way his legs, arms, and neck twitched as he squirmed in his seat in class, often getting antsy about the way his clothing’s tags and inner stitching brushed against his skin. He got that way at the dinner table, too.

“Miss Jenna tells me to keep still,” he said to my parents over chicken and mashed potatoes one night. Miss Jenna was his teacher.

“To keep still. Sti-ill.” Oliver tugged at his shirt before eating some more of his mashed potatoes.

After the car accident, some kids from our neighborhood cracked the first of many jokes about Oliver’s death. “He was running pretty fast when that guy hit him,” one kid Jerry said. “Maybe if he’d just stayed away from us...just stayed still...”

I screamed and ran after him until my best friend Sydney grabbed me by my shirt, stopping me in my tracks. “Shitheads!” She hissed at the boy and his two friends. Their smiles disappeared in an instant, and they ran away quickly.

Sydney had long, straight blonde hair that she loved to put in fancy braids and ponytails, with clips that matched her sneakers. She wore Converse high-tops that also happened to go with most of her Limited Too T-shirts and sparkly necklaces from Claire’s. Boys and girls used to poke fun at her appearance, saying she was too preppy and chicken to fight. They never saw the bruises on her knuckles, the scrapes on her knees that she hid under her jeans.

Throughout most of sixth grade, Sydney was crazy about a boy named Kellan. She said they talked sometimes, and he had told her she was really cool. But one day, Kellan got it into his mind to call Sydney a preppy bitch in front of about two dozen other sixth graders. That was when Sydney grabbed him by his shirt collar, dragged him into the girl’s bathroom, and shoved his face into one of the toilets. She held him there until he started thrashing, his body squirming like a slimy fish. That incident got Sydney suspended for a day, but Kellan never bothered her again. And, for that matter, neither did anyone else.

Sydney had a younger brother, Bo, who had a learning disability. He got made fun of a lot too, and often ended the day with numerous bruises before he and Syndey’s parents pulled him out of school and sent him to a fancy tutoring center called Hermana, the Spanish word for sister. My parents looked into sending Oliver there, but realized they wouldn’t be able to. Hermana charged three times more than Marsha did.

Every other year or so, my parents pulled together enough money to get us all to Fort Lauderdale for a couple of weeks. We would go to see my grandmother Lily, who always greeted us with a smile and a tupper full of cookies at the airport. Sometimes, when we fell short trying to pay for plane tickets, my parents asked her if she could help us out. She always agreed. I sometimes thought it wasn’t because of my dad, who was her son, but because of Oliver. My grandmother worked with autistic kids for thirty something years, and sometimes she still visited special learning centers to play games with them and help them with their schoolwork, especially in the arts. Whenever we went to visit her at Fort Lauderdale, Grandmother Lily would take Oliver to one of these centers for a day, so that he could interact with the other kids there. The two of them always came back smiling. Oliver would show me, Mom and Dad drawings he made while he was away.

Every time we stayed at her house, Oliver and I would watch Grandmother Lily at her canvas. Fitting to her name, grandmother Lily painted beautiful lily blossoms, hibiscus, magnolias and oleanders. The oleanders were my favorite. Grandmother Lily often remarked how poisonous oleanders are, tracing her finger gently around the flower contained in the canvas.

When I looked at my grandmother, her white hair in a large bun on the top of her head, her clothes colorful and graceful like the flowers she painted, I was reminded of why I wanted to be an artist. I thought of how poison could wear beautiful disguises. I still do.
The memorial service happened three days after the accident. My grandmother Lily was there, along with all of my aunts, uncles and cousins. None of us wanted to see Oliver put into the ground so my parents ordered for a cremation. We all stood around his grave in a circle, surrounded by flowers donated by our church and neighbors. My middle school English teacher, Mrs. Janekin, had bought a bouquet of white lilies, and gave it to me the day before the funeral service. I cried and hugged her tightly, burying my tear-streaked face into her crisp, white blouse.

“It’s okay, honey.” Her voice was soft and shaky. “You’re going to be okay. He’s still here with us somehow.”

Mrs. Janekin lost her daughter Tracy in a car crash just after Tracy’s twelfth birthday. The only reason anyone knew was because Mrs. Janekin came in crying one day and heard some kids whispering about the picture on her desk, wondering if Mrs. Janekin was actually a pedophile. She sent them all to the principal’s office, and proceeded to tell the rest of us that the picture was of her deceased daughter. Her voice alternated between high, shrill tones and mere whispers. Listening to her, I felt like one of the balls in Newton’s cradle as they hit one another. Each ball rocked the others, the sound of metallic clinking hitting your ears like bullets. When that look of dread came over her face, the room fell completely silent. It was one of the few times she could get the entire class to shut up for more than three seconds.

In the picture, Tracy stood among clusters of tiny pink and white flowers. She had long, blonde hair that ran down her shoulders in two pigtails perched tightly at the top of her head. Her eyes were a greenish hazel color that reminded me of Oliver and my mom. But somehow, I saw something in Tracy that reminded me of myself. It was like we had met somewhere else once, only maybe I wasn’t myself and she wasn’t herself, but we were both these different people who crossed paths and then tried to remember each other. Maybe we were friends in another life, if you can believe in that sort of thing. But in this life, one of us got killed first, and the other one was left to do the remembering.

It’s a tragic thing, trying to remember someone you haven’t technically met. I wondered once if I would know her better if I wasn’t myself, if I was someone else entirely.

Part Two

Nearly six years later, I finished school and went on to St. Mary’s College, a small liberal arts school. Several universities threw scholarships at me, but the arts program at St. Mary’s was significantly better than those at the other colleges I had applied to. When I was told that they were giving me a full ride, I didn’t know how to react. Some nights, I had spent hours wondering if they would ever let me in.

St. Mary’s was three hours away from home. My parents weren’t sure at first if they wanted me so far away, but when I pointed out that Sydney’s parents were letting her move all the way to Illinois to attend the University of Chicago, and that most of my classmates were going out of state as well, they conceded.

Sydney and I promised to call and e-mail each other frequently. On our last day at home, we embraced and exchanged necklaces.

“I’m gonna miss you, Rhiannon,” she said into my shoulder. “I’m gonna miss you like hell.”

“Same here,” I mumbled.

We broke apart. “Have fun up there. Find yourself some cute liberal arts boy to date.”

I smirked. “You do the same.”

She shrugged. “I’m gonna be too busy with Premed to have a boyfriend. But maybe if he likes to study, we can eat chocolate cupcakes while I learn about cellular biology or something.”

“Maybe I’ll date some kind of hipster-goth dude who’s into manga and Bon Jovi,” I said with a shrug.

“Is that the kind of guy you want?” Sydney asked, laughing. “I always felt like you’d go for a quieter guy. Like Marcus.”

I rolled my eyes. When I was in fifth grade, I’d been crazy about Marcus, who sat next to me in homeroom. He had big, blue eyes and a loud laugh. I had wanted to go with him to Fall Ball, a ridiculous excuse for a dance that our school held every year. But he ended up going with another girl, who I’d seen him holding hands with in the halls as soon as I had found the courage to ask him.

“Marcus is more like a figment of my imagination than a real person,” I replied. “He just can’t get over how
“Marcus is more like a figment of my imagination than a real person,” I replied. “He just can’t get over how gorgeous he is. It’s like he’s not even real.”

“So you still think he’s gorgeous.”

“Yeah. In a really cocky asshole kind of way.”

“Oh Rhiannon. I know you can do so much better than him.”

I smiled and shook my head. “I’ll do better, I promise.”

Sydney gave me a long look. “Just take care of yourself, okay?”

“Okay.”

We hugged each other one last time, then walked back to our separate houses. I went to my room and put more things in boxes than I needed to. All the while, I played Lifehouse and The Smiths on my iPod with speakers, so that my parents wouldn’t disturb me. Some time ago, I discovered that I could keep them away from me if I played music without my headphones on, so I was not the only one who could hear it. Doing that also helped to drown out the sound of my parents yelling at each other, which happened a lot more after Oliver died.

I thought of Oliver as I packed my things. Sometimes, while our parents were arguing, I would hear him yell. It was always a single, short yell, followed by footsteps that grew progressively louder until he reached my room. He would watch me draw or do math problems. After a few minutes, though, he would get antsy and walk across the room back and forth, oftentimes asking questions or demanding things. On one particular September day, however, when I was nine and he was seven, he ran up the entire staircase screaming. His face was reddish purple when he reached my doorway.

“They’re fighting!”

“Yeah. They’ll calm down eventually.”

“They’re too loud.”

“Yeah, I know. Here, listen to some music. It’ll make you feel better.” I offered him my headphones.

“Too loud!” He swatted them away, crossed his arms and sat down. I put my headphones back on in silence.

He sat at the edge of my bed for a while. After a few more songs, I handed him a spare sketchbook and a marker. With gentle gestures, he began to draw what resembled our parents’ faces, distorted by angry creases. Their faces looked like eggs, the mouths like cracks slowly opening and showing dark spaces to the world.

I let him keep the sketchbook. Occasionally, I would pass by his room and see pieces of paper marked by bright streaks of color near his bed. Whenever he asked me for markers or a few sheets from one of my notebooks, I didn’t hesitate before handing them over. At Christmastime, I got a set of oil paints and a new canvas stand, while he got a Crayola easel. We both danced for joy, waving paintbrushes in both hands as we ran from one end of the living room to the other in our pajamas.

My parents hadn’t bothered to clean out the room since the day of the accident. As far as I could tell, they weren’t planning on going in there anytime soon. I had stepped in there briefly the day of the service, but stepped out as soon as I felt the tears coming. When I was packing, I briefly considered stepping inside again and trying to fix it up. Then I thought about the jewelry case and perfume I had forgotten to pack, and went to my bureau to get them.

I knelt in front of the bureau, staring at my jewelry case, the one remaining perfume, and the open drawer containing my shabbier T-shirts. For a moment, I thought of just ditching all of my jewelry, except the necklace Sydney had just given me. I shook my head, then took my perfume from the bureau and put it on the floor, almost breaking it. Clumsily, I made my way to the closet I had used for the past eighteen years, and I took in all the colors that were present there. My eyes then focused on my set of black T-shirts, all hanging up together on the right side of the closet. Without a second thought, I ripped them all off their hangers, one by one.

I hadn’t worn black in six years. Maybe in college, I thought, I finally will again.

Without consciously thinking about it, I followed Sydney’s advice and started dating a guy from St. Mary’s. His name was Calvin, but insisted that everyone refer to him as Cal. We met at a restaurant where I was eating one Thursday night with my friend Lana. He was our waiter, and since it was a slow night, he decided he could be a little more chatty with us. When he asked us what our names were, I told him a different one.
“Marissa.”
“Marissa?”

I nodded. Later, after he’d scribbled his number not-so-subtly on my receipt, I went up to ask him to write more clearly. Then, I mentioned that my real name was Rhiannon, but I went by Marissa because I preferred it. When he asked me why I preferred it, I shrugged. “I just do,” I said.

The real reason I went by Marissa was too embarrassing and obscure to mention to a guy I’d just met. After Oliver died, I was labeled. Everyone at school agreed to it, whether they realized it or not. It wasn’t like when people call you “slut” or “fag” or “retard”. Rather, I was known as the girl whose brother had died. I wasn’t just Rhiannon. I was Rhiannon with the dead brother.

“Hey Rhiannon!” a guy called out during recess one day. “Your brother gonna come back from the grave to poke at us? To make us plaaaay with him?” He slurred the word play, making a group of kids around him laugh. I was about to go after him, but then Sydney put a protective hand on my shoulder, reminding me that I shouldn’t. “You don’t want to stoop down to their level,” she said. Sometimes, though, I wondered if I was already that low.

The bullying continued into high school, but for a new reason as well. When I was in ninth grade, I started winning writing and art competitions. Teachers recommended that I submit to journals and magazines, as well as even bigger contests, all of which could give me cash prizes. I was happy to submit my work, whether it was selected or not. But my classmates were resentful. They called me conceited, and asked me in the halls if I was screwing Mr. Callum, the Art teacher, to make him like me so much. One girl even asked if I had felt up Mrs. Donovan, the English teacher, to make her give me an A.

To add even more salt to my wounds, people reminded me about Oliver’s death. They created chants and pointed to photos of bloody zombies, asking if one of those was my brother. I ignored them, but they always looked for more blood to spill. My poems became dark and relentless, my paintings full of blacks and purples. One day, Mrs. Donovan and Mr. Callum pulled me aside to ask me if I was okay. I told them everything, not because I wanted to, but because I just couldn’t hold it all in anymore. That turned me into Rhiannon the Tattletale. By the time I graduated, I was known as Rhiannon, Tattletale Slut with Zombie Retard Dead Brother. I wasn’t Rhiannon the valedictorian, or Rhiannon the artist and writer. As the names piled up, like a grocery list of insults, I felt that Rhiannon was no one. I was no one. The names on that list became meaningless, wilting like aged flowers, but the sting of poison remained, like from an oleander.

The days of the college application process topped all the previous ones in high school. Someone stole one of my letters of recommendation. One of my paintings for my senior year Art portfolio, which I had been working on for two months, got trashed three days before I had to turn it in. I found fake blood in my locker at least two days a week.

On the night I finished all my college applications, I went to bed at three a.m. My mind was still abuzz with all the words I had written in the hopes of making liberal arts programs accept me. So instead of actually falling asleep, I sat on my bed and remained awake until dawn. In those moments of utter fatigue and bitterness, I thought back to Mrs. Janekin, my middle school teacher. Her first name was Marissa, but we weren’t allowed to call her that. We had to call her by Mrs. and her last name, because that was what the school officials wanted. I decided that night that I would let people call me Marissa. In fact, I would make them. Not intrusively, but I would introduce myself as Marissa to everyone, so that nobody got confused.

By seven o’clock in the morning, I had finally managed to fall asleep. At seven fifteen, my mom knocked on my door, asking me to get up. I told her I was staying home, because I felt sick. That wasn’t a lie, either: my head was throbbing, and when I tried to lift it, I felt everything around me spin. I felt her pause in the doorway, doubting my word. But after a moment, she left and came back with aspirin and a glass of water. She told me to drink up. “That way, tomorrow you’ll be yourself again.”

Cal told me not to worry about the past. To comfort me, he made Italian food. When he wasn’t perfecting his lasagna or rigatoni, Cal ate plenty of sweets, watched Dogme 95 films, and played bass. He wanted to form a band.
and, by the time early spring of sophomore year rolled around, he had gathered three friends who wanted to as well. They called their band The Infinite. I told Sydney about it, and she said it sounded cheesy.

“I think so, too,” I said to her over the phone. “But it makes sense.”

Cal believed that everything in the universe was connected, and that all changes were part of an infinite cycle, like they were all part of some track shaped like an infinity sign that every human being ran on until they died. He told me that he’d gotten this idea after fainting at a cross country meet in high school. In exchange, I told him the story of why I went by Marissa. We were sitting on a park bench at around ten o’clock at night. It was chilly, and he’d put his jacket over my shoulders as I told it. After I finished, he kissed me, and I was almost able to forget how much I’d agonized over that change.

I refused to show Cal any of my writings, and only let him see my sketches if he bought me hot chocolate and Klondike bars. A few weeks after our conversation on the park bench, on a sunny Saturday, he came to my dorm with both of these. After flipping through my latest set of sketches, he asked to see my writing.

“You could show me one of your stories, you know. Just one. I wouldn’t criticize. I promise.”

We were in my dorm, sitting on my bed. I was eating a Klondike bar, observing his relaxed face and long eyelashes. I had difficulty swallowing. He had never pried after the first time I said my writings were private.

“You can’t see them.”

“Why not?”

“Because...”

“Because why?”

I tried to say something, but nearly choked on the sweet chocolate-covered treat. After a few long moments, I managed to get it all down my throat, then found that I was crying. In my head, I could see the accident all over again. Oliver’s bloody body on the asphalt, the paramedics and police officers crawling underneath yellow tape as blue and red lights dotted the ground. After witnessing that scene, I started writing stories about car accidents and autistic kids. With the first story, I thought the ending might prompt me to stop what I was doing. But they kept on coming, and my desire to write suppressed the urgency to sleep, so that I was up until four in the morning some nights crafting stories, with gruesome illustrations in black ink to go along with them.

Cal pulled me close to him, and I could smell the watery cologne on his neck. He rocked me back and forth, humming “So Far Gone” by Thousand Foot Krutch, one of his favorite bands.

“Oliver...” I said shakily. “They’re all about Oliver, and the accident. All connected.”

He gazed into my eyes for a long moment, then pressed his lips firmly to mine. We kissed each other until I got vertigo and had to lie down. Cal gave me a worried look, until I pulled him on top of me and kissed him even harder. He yanked the blinds shut, and our fingers traced over and under our clothes until the clothes were gone and the Sun was too.

Just after finals in sophomore year, Cal came to stay at home with me for a few days. I had to attend the yearly service held in honor of my brother, and do some “other tasks” that my mother had refused to specify over the phone.

After three hours of my driving, I parked my silver Toyota Camry in front of my house. We got out of the car stood in front of the driveway, staring at the infinity sign. My father had gone against his word and given it a fresh coat of paint.

“You’re quiet,” Cal said after what felt like an hour.

“I’m just thinking,” I said quickly.

“You didn’t say a word to me on the whole drive,” he replied, his words already shaky.

I stared down at the concrete and felt a hot sensation grab me with sickly fingers. No matter how much he looked at me with that face, the anger and concern written on it plainly, I would not look at him.

“Cal, he’s here...” I felt my voice tremble as I looked at him, then turned my eyes back to the infinity sign. “He’s right here. With us.”

“What? No! Rhiannon, don’t-”
I’m not Rhiannon.”

Cal shook his head. “You’re not you.”

I swallowed hard. The infinity sign began to grow blurry as the tears brimmed in my eyes. “There’s a reason I didn’t show you those stories,” I said. “I’m not getting back into it.”

“You could show them to me now.”

“No.” My throat felt tight and dry. “Stop.”

“These stories are a part of you. Your name is a part of you. These things are who you are!”

“They’re who I was.” The tightness turned to pain, and I let the tears fall, refusing to hold them back. Cal stared at me with darkness in his eyes, and did not move. My chest shook as I cried quietly, my throat throbbing with all the words I had not said. Finally, after several long moments, I took a few steps towards Cal and wrapped my arms around his neck. He welcomed me in without another word.

After our argument, there was only silence. We both still remained standing next to the infinity sign, but I could no longer look at it. My eyes were fixed on the untied shoelaces of my right boot. When I could finally look up, I straightened myself and breathed in deeply. Cal and I looked at each other again, and without another word, we entered the house and found my mom making rotisserie chicken for dinner. She held a hand up in salute as she approached us, then asked me quietly if I could help clean out Oliver’s room.

“But, Mom...” I felt my throat tightening again. “It’s been.”

“Nearly eight years. I know.” She put a hand on my shoulder. “Your father requested that you clean it. He’s working late tonight.” Her eyes were watery, and for a moment I thought she might start crying too. “Take your time. I’ll have dinner ready for when you’re done.”

“Mom...”

“Rhiannon. Please. I can’t do it.” My mother swallowed. It was then that I noticed the dark circles under her eyes, the sharp red lines running like electrical wires from her brown irises. I hesitated, looking at the red lines, those cracks in her shell, then nodded and began to make my way silently upstairs to Oliver’s room. Cal started to follow me, but my mom put a hand on his shoulder and motioned for him to take a seat at the kitchen table. I reached out to squeeze his hand before walking up the stairs. His eyes were sad and dark, like pools of muddy water. I sighed heavily as I turned a corner to my brother’s room.

Upon entering for the first time in almost eight years, I found myself staring at the room like I had never known Oliver or his love of red. His collection of Marvel action figures, his Iron Man posters and sheets, the curtains, and the pile of Legos still scattered about the floor were all red. A single black rug stood out from everything else, like a giant record set on the carpet.

I started with his nightstand. In the top drawer, I found the red seaweed from our last family trip to Fort Lauderdale. When we went, Oliver had insisted that Dad bring him a clump of red seaweed. So Dad spent an hour trying to find a clump of red seaweed, red like my brother wanted. And when he finally did, my brother was so happy that he slept next to it in his hotel bed, and let it have one of his pillows at home. Mom tried to take it away from him a number of times, but Oliver started crying every time she tried, so eventually she stopped. Eventually, my mom put it in a drawer, so that Oliver could keep it without smelling up the room so much, but sometimes my brother would take it out and let it sleep on his pillow or desk. To that, one of my parents would sneak the seaweed back into his drawer during the day, while Oliver worked with Marsha.

For the next three hours, I played Goo Goo Doll’s Greatest Hits album on repeat on my iPod without headphones, the volume turned halfway up. I took all the clothes out of his closet, folded them and put them in boxes my mother had conveniently set up in the middle of the room, both labelled Oliver’s Clothes-For Charity. When that was done, I put all his action figures in a smaller box labelled Action Figures-Attic. All the red piled up in the cardboard boxes, which grew heavier by the minute, holding action and play and diversion.

After all that was done, I saw a bin of Legos that I hadn’t noticed before. It stood on the top left side of the bed, waiting in silence. On the nearby black rug, red Legos lay strewn about. I knelt down on the rug and had started
to sweep them up when I got an idea. I removed the lid from the Lego bin and dumped everything inside on the floor. There were pieces in many colors, but I only wanted the red ones.

I took all the red pieces I could and began to strew them about the rug. Without making them click together, I made one loop, then another loop, and tied them together with more red bricks. The borders grew thicker and thicker, so that an infinity sign slowly manifested itself on the black rug. When I felt I was done, I stood up and admired my work. The red infinity sign looked like an intertwined streak of blood on the background of black. It reminded me of the infinity sign Cal told me human beings ran on until death, experiencing the changes that ran over many lives besides their own, and which outlasted them by millennia. I wondered how many miles I had run around that track, how many lives I had experienced before this one and how they had changed. I wondered if Oliver was still running around that track, playing as some other kid in a different place where people were more tolerant of learning disabilities. Maybe in that life, he didn't even have a disability. Maybe he was a boy who went about life unhinged, without thoughts of an older sister from another life, who worried every day about what he’d left behind.
My child self full of innocence and ignorance,
I asked my mom, “Mommy, is daddy black?”
She laughed at my question
and told me no, he’s not black, but Mexican.

I nodded, like I understood,
but looking at my dad’s deeply tan skin,
I didn’t understand why he was “brown” and other brown people were “black.”

Confusion only deepened.

I was a kid when my dad gave up trying to teach me Spanish.
I was too resistant and I suppose he became too tired.

At 12, I renounced Catholic guilt, streaming into me from both sides of my family like I was a delta and they were my rivers, it turns out, guilt is harder to leave behind than God was.

After 14, my dad stopped taking my siblings and I to Mexico because it was too dangerous and we were too American.

My abuelita and I never had a real conversation, parallel in our ability to understand each other’s language, but she loved us. Sometimes, love transcends language, it’s not about how you talk, but how you touch. And her hands felt so smooth and supple and worn away.

She had orange trees in the back yard. And a kitchen that smelt like Fabuloso. My dad went to my abuelita’s funeral alone.

At 15, I said no to a quinceanera. At 16, I said no to a sweet 16. I didn’t want to enter society as a woman on anyone else’s terms but mine.

In high school, I decided to take German instead of Spanish so I could go to Germany. I didn’t get to meet the family I had there. I wouldn’t have known what to say even if I did.

When applying to colleges and for scholarships,
I used my Mexican heritage to my advantage.
I knew I was playing a broken system and it worked.

In college, I took Spanish and made a D.
Now I have the splintering of both languages, and the culture of neither.

I am biracial by blood,
tumbleweed by upbringing.

Rooted in traditions from both sides;
Dia de los Muertos and St. Nicholas day,
but I don’t know what it feels like to say I come from a People and mean it.

I am ambiguously ethnic,
I am quick farmer’s tan from working in the sun,
I am Nazi great-grandfather,
I am awkward Merengue hip shaker, but secret Salsa dancing yearner,
I am big families but no desire to have children,
I am socialist leaning,
I am people telling me I’m not really Mexican my whole life,
I am people telling me what is and isn’t my identity my whole fucking life,
When I roll my r’s it sounds like a broken car,
I am mispronouncing my own last name.

I am slowly learning Spanish.

I didn’t understand my dad’s identity as a child,
like it was the precursor for me not understanding mine now.

I once prided myself on being independent.
But what I am learning is that many times independence comes from having a tribe you can go back to,
a safety net to catch you,
a home at the end of a journey.

I am not as independent as I once thought.
I am not sure of my home or
where it may be or
A Fight to Remember
Robert Smith

I

My roommate Mike Wilson was spiraling out of control. He seemed negative, angry at the world and our relationship grew tense. Recently a lot of things had gone bad for him—and for that I took sympathy—but he was dealing with it in the wrong way, taking it out on others. Passive aggressiveness would have been an understatement; lately every conversation felt like diffusing a bomb.

The baseball players live in San Antonio year round so we all sign apartment leases together. My old roommate was traded before preseason workouts and Mike was the only person left. But midway through year he got and fell in with a bad crowd—drinking every night, drugs, hookers… after a game my parents and I walked in on him banging on the couch. Most recently, he’d been experimenting with steroids; he thought they were magic pills that somehow made you bigger without trying. Instead of lifting weights he chose to drink beer and eat fast food; I was looking for a new apartment.

One night after practice, I was watching Inception when Mike came home in a fit of drunken, roid rage. “Turn that down,” he snapped while cutting up a line of white powder.

That was probably my twentieth time to see the movie so I reached over and turned it off, still couldn’t figure out if he was dreaming. Thought I’d turn on a little music before cooking dinner but forgot the volume was on max. Jimi Hendrix’s Castles Made of Sand came booming out of the living room speakers.

“I’m tired of you always annoying me with your fucking shit,” he said shoving me off my chair.

However I’m not one to be pushed around so I stood up and pushed him back, causing him to stagger. He hadn’t expected me to react; when I did it set him off on another level. Like a berserker he transformed, screaming and swinging fists. The room was full of hazards: desk corners, a glass coffee table, the open door to a fourth floor balcony. I knew better than to take him to the ground; that could have been bad for both of us. Left, right, left, I dodged each one of his punches.

“Mike, what the hell? Chill out man,” I pleaded.

Around the room we danced. I threw a few jabs and could’ve landed a haymaker but feared doing major damage. Finally I flung him onto his bed but he bounced right back up and the brawl continued. Now I held him at arm’s length and mine were longer, his swings wouldn’t reach.

“I’m gonna kill you!” he seethed between blows.

“Stop, let’s talk it out. Something bad’s gonna happen.”

I was right. I tripped over a couch into the corner of the room. His overweight frame came down on top, my left arm underneath. Bone snapped, tendons and muscle tore, and my head slammed into the door frame; I was knocked unconscious. All in an instant…crack, boom, black.

II

Just as I came to, things started to get hazy again. A pair of hands was locked around my neck and I could barely breathe. My arm was pinned underneath my body but had gone numb. All I could think about was escaping alive. I reached up with my free arm and broke the chokehold while rolling him off me. Together we stood up, prepared to go at it once again but he paused for a split second and his eyes grew wide. In an instant I knew why. A jolt of pain unlike anything I’d ever felt before surged up my body. My elbow was swollen to the size of a grapefruit and I let out a scream—partly from the agony, partly from the shock of what had just happened.

With his opponent weakened, Mike charged once again. His face was red with blood and he snorted like a bull. For a few passes I played the part of a matador, stepping aside to narrowly avoid catastrophe. But he was get-
ting angrier and angrier with each pass; sooner or later he would catch me. Even with adrenaline in my blood, I didn't stand a fighting chance. If he got a hold, no telling when (or if) he'd show mercy. Somehow, some way, this had to end.

The situation had escalated beyond a simple scuffle... he'd gone completely off the rails. There was a point where one's primal instincts come into play; this was life or death. A pair of scissors rested on the table. As he charged yet again, I snatched them up and thrust the tip three inches into his neck in one swift motion. There was no sound; it didn't even feel like I'd stabbed him. He just kept running and began to crumple, tripping over a chair and sprawling across the floor. For a few seconds he lay there frozen then slowly reached up to the gash. He pulled them out and blood gushed from the wound. Panicking I grabbed a towel and stuffed it over the gash, to no avail. The scissors had severed his jugular vein; he was going to die.

Fear began to crash over me like a wave. At one point, I'd considered him an acquaintance, almost a friend. Now there he was lying on our floor, bleeding out. In the corner of the room I stood motionless, watching as he slowly faded.

The reality of what had just happened began to sink in. I'd just killed a man. Sure it was self-defense but in the heat of the moment I didn't think about the consequences. No way the judge would let me off. Despite my broken arm, there was no way to prove that he was the aggressor. Besides—his family had connections; he was legacy to an oil conglomerate. Mine were poor farmers from Navasota; we couldn't even afford a lawyer.

Like a ton of bricks it hit me that I had to flee; my arm would have to wait. Neighbors surely heard the commotion and would've alerted the police by now; any minute they would be knocking. Slowly I backed away from his body and covered it with a blanket. The sight of his eyes, glazed over into nothingness was too unnerving. Yet, the look in them upon realizing he actually wanted to hurt me is something I'll never forget. Guess the world really is kill or be killed.

Watching someone die at your hand is much different than from an accident. My first experience with death came a few years ago in Austin. I was out with a friend on Sixth Street when a driver slammed into a motorcyclist. A loud boom sounded and we turned just in time to see the poor man rolling off the shattered windshield. Thinking my first aid training would be useful, I rushed to his side but quickly realized the direness of the situation from the look of his mangled body. It's hard to smile when watching someone die but I wanted him to pass peacefully. I didn't smile at Mike, just looked away.

Hastily I packed my canvas duffel: a sleeping bag, pocketknife, water bottle, Mike's painkillers, bananas, tuna & crackers, Copenhagen, some clothes, and a family photo. Where would I go? Disappear first, decide second. Just drive and cool my head. Get out of the city and off main roads. If worst came to worst, I could stay out in the wild for a few days. All those tedious years of Boy Scouts would finally come in handy.

The old Chevy started up like a charm. Faded beige paint, roll-down windows, 270,000 miles, and still running strong. My grandfather and I used to fill the bed with hay bales and I'd drop them to cattle in the pasture while he drove. There's a big dent in the bed from when we tried to chase down a stray calf down and slid into a tree. The truck passed to me when he passed away; my dad thought it would be a suitable gift for getting drafted out of high school.

First stop was at a bank. I parked a block away and kept my head down as walked up to the ATM. Maxed out my debit card for a grand total of $148.93 (minor league salaries are terrible). When I got back to the truck, a policeman was parked nearby inside his car. He glanced up and said something on the radio. As I pulled out, he sounded his siren and sped towards me. Oh shit! Maybe I had a taillight out. I'll pull over and play it cool, I thought. I flashed my blinker and turned into a parking lot. He kept on going in the direction I came from.

My heart was pounding, hands were shaking. For a while I sat in the parking lot trying to calm down. I
popped a few painkillers and let their soothing effects take hold before jamming the truck in gear and heading for the highway. I went south-west, wide open desert followed by the mountains of Big Bend offered the perfect opportunity to run and hide. Mexico awaited me on the other side like an old outlaw tale. There I could lay low for a while, get on my feet, forge a new identity, and come back one day a different man.

V

On the road, thick fog crept in while storm clouds lurked in the distance. Conditions were getting dangerous and I needed a chance to rest and collect my thoughts. Signs marked a place called Utopia just a few miles off the Interstate so I exited. On the outskirts of town there was a park, picturesque with willow trees surrounding the dammed up river. Some boys in overalls fished on the opposite bank while ducks swam in the middle. I hiked upstream along the water until I came upon a clearing. Out of the mist a black swan floated; the other birds left it alone. There I sat and watched it in its splendor, such a melancholy beautiful sight. Lightning flashed, thunder boomed, and rain started to pour. I let it wash over me, cleansing my conscience and washing away the cursed day. Tears began to stream down my cheeks and sobs bellowed from deep within my chest. My life was changing in the blink of an eye—the sweep of an arm, I was a fugitive now.

Hours must’ve passed before I stood up again. The rain had stopped and crickets chirped in the twilight; the air was still and humid. I trudged back to the truck in soaked clothes, leaving them to dry on the hood and sprawling in my boxers across the front seat. I reached in my pack for the family photo and stared at it. For the first time that day a smile cracked my face. My mom, dad, younger brother and sister smiled back on the porch of our old farmhouse. With a warm thought on my mind, I placed the photo on the dashboard and fell asleep.

VI

The sun was beating down when I awoke, no idea how long I’d slept. A quick glance at my watch showed it was past noon…a new day at least. The pain in my elbow had lessened but it was now purple and green. I fetched the dry clothes off the hood and fastened a sling from a t-shirt, popping a couple of painkillers for good measure. Now I needed to move. Back towards the interstate, the red white and blue spiral of a barbershop appeared. In my frenzied state on the way in, I must have missed it. Outlaws in Old Western films always change their looks so I thought to get a haircut.

The place felt like it was stuck in the Golden Age. A phonograph played Big Band music while the grandfather clock ticked along in perfect time. Photos of cowboys lined the walls, some dated as early as 1918. An old man greeted me with a trembling hands; he wore a Vietnam Veteran’s hat and had a tattoo of a straight razor on his elbow. He didn’t say much but spoke with his eyes, which were full of wisdom and stories of more hardship than most people ever endured. After sitting me down, he stepped outside for a cigarette. The only other people in the place were a shoe shiner and a fat man silently sipping Codeine in the corner. On the counter a newspaper read, “College Student Found Dead in San Antonio” in the bottom right corner. It looked as if someone had picked out the sports page then cast the rest aside without reading it. I swallowed hard. When the barber came back in, his hands were steady and he began to trim my hair with expert precision. Out in the parking lot, a tiny Mexican woman sold fresh Hill Country pears three for a dollar. With a twinkle in her eye, she reached behind the crates of fruit and handed me a book; one free with every purchase…a tattered copy of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. I thanked her and drove off.

VII

Back on the road were two more hours of dry plains followed by the foothills of the Sierra Mountains in Big Bend National Park. Tumbleweeds blew across the empty highway while cacti dotted the arid landscape. I was there on a school trip once; US Border Control is on the Park’s outer edge. Just a quick glance from the guard and he waved our school bus on through; they’re more worried about people coming into the country than leaving it. Another three
hours in, the actual border is left unguarded. The ten lane Patrol station spanned out in front of me like a mirage. The crossing was high risk, everything was at stake. With sweaty palms on the steering wheel I brought the truck gently to a halt. The customs agent sat with his boots up on the desk, eyes me intensely through his aviator sunglasses. I made some small talk and said I was going hiking. Just like every other person he was happy to get paid for doing nothing and lifted up the red striped gate towards freedom. There were a few small towns in the park where I could stock up on provisions. Bridges had been built across the Rio built for agriculture and I would drive to a town just over the border then head down through Mexico City and the Yucatán—there was so much to explore.

Plains turned into rolling hills turned into mountains near the border. Finally the scattered peaks opened up to a lush green valley with a town at the bottom. The switchbacks guided me down gently to an old country store. There I bought some jerky, water, and a pack of lightly salted cashews. A bulletin board displayed photos of hunters with their kills—a 400 pound javelina, 5 foot long rattlesnake. The woman at the counter eyed me suspiciously on the way out.

VII

Just down the street the neon lights of a motel shined brightly at dusk. I checked into a room and threw my duffle bag down, collapsing face first onto the bed. Cigarette smoke complemented the room's 70's décor. For a few minutes I laid there staring at the ceiling fan. The television had poor reception but I fiddled with the antenna and managed to get some of the Oiler's game.

Next door a man and woman were arguing loudly. I pulled a pillow over my head and tried to pretend it wasn't happening. Soon the woman was yelling about money and the guy was calling her all sorts of nasty names. Something slammed against the wall and I could hear her crying. Having been in a similar position, I couldn't stand by while he beat her. I needed to keep a low profile but went over anyway and banged on the locked door. Things went quiet.

Another minute past while I waited outside then the quarrel resumed. I kicked in the door, breaking the bolt. The man stood in between me and the girl, who cowered in the corner covering herself with a towel. He brushed his coat aside to reveal a pistol tucked in his waistband. It was a bluff; the look in his eyes wasn't there. He had the guts to hit a woman but not to kill a man. Slowly I walked between him and the girl, who now wore an expression of fear and regret. In a firm voice I told him to leave. He paused, then pulled a fifty out of his wallet and stormed out. The door slammed behind him, bouncing open again off the broken latch.

Mascara smeared across her face, the girl stood up slowly and reached for her clothes, instructing me to wait before heading in the bathroom. I shut the front door and heard the squeaking of faucets and water flowing. A short while later she came out in sweatpants and a t-shirt, dark brown hair flowing down past her shoulders. Her makeup was all washed off and her olive skin glowed in the dim light. The expression of fear had been replaced with a calm smile, teeth almost perfect except for a small gap in the front. She was beautiful.

She sat on the bed and lit up a cigarette. Her name was Rosemary Rodrigues. Her family had immigrated from Guanajuato a year ago. A cartel executed her older brother and forced her into prostitution when they couldn't pay off the debt for smuggling them in. Tonight was her first time but it never went through. She was so repulsed by the man and tried to make him leave; that's when their argument happened. I wanted to rescue her but she would have been better off without me—a killer and fugitive.

For a while we talked about each other's lives. She liked movies and could quote her favorite lines in both Spanish and English; one day she hoped to direct Hollywood films about her home. Eventually she broke the question of what I was doing in a cheap motel. I told her everything. That night we lied in bed together, holding onto each other for comfort. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

IX

In the early morning Rosemary awoke me abruptly with panic burning in her eyes. Four police cars had pulled up outside the window, sirens flashing. Two angry looking cops restrained two angrier looking German Shepherds.
I had to run. Now. There was no time to go back and grab my belongings. I kissed her goodbye on the cheek and climbed out the bathroom window in the back. As my feet touched the ground, she told me to wait. Moments later her bag dropped out the window and she followed suit; she was coming with me.

Behind a corner I crouched while she observed. My truck was on lockdown; they had already busted the window and were searching for clues. We had to escape on foot. Rosemary led the way out of the complex and down a backroad using the brush and trees as cover. A few small buildings were the only thing in sight until the mountains down a backroad using the brush and trees as cover. A few small buildings were the only thing in sight until the mountains picked up on the other side of the valley.

As we neared a gas station, Rosemary told me to wait outside. For 20 minutes I stood baking in the sun when a hot red Camaro came roaring down the tarmac. She rolled down the window smiling and told me to get in. Before I could buckle up, she floored it and we took off down the highway towards Mexico. The car flew over the hills; she drove like a maniac on a mission. I searched the cab for anything of use. In the back there was a single hiking boot, hunting knife, and small tent. A statue of the Virgin of Guadeloupe stood on the dashboard. The glove compartment was locked.

The sun was beginning to set as we passed an old wooden sign that read: CAMPsite 2 MILES. She pulled off the asphalt and took us down a gravel road that stopped at a dead end. The area had been abandoned—exactly what we needed. Tons of hikers frequented the area and I couldn’t afford to be seen. She smiled and opened her bag to reveal a feast of food she’d nicked from the gas station: apples, a fifth of Jack, and a pizza which we heated in the sun. The thought flashed across my mind to use the ignition key in the glove compartment. Inside was a roll of 10,000 pesos—it was a smugglers car. Life didn’t seem so bad anymore.

That night she slept in the car, me in the tent; the two of us wouldn’t fit together in either one. Off in the distance wolves howled but I shrugged it off went back to sleep. Some time passed before I was stirred by them again, this time closer. I clutched the knife and tried to stay awake but must’ve dozed off. Something woke me prodding the outside of the tent. Clouds cleared overhead and the moon illuminated the majestic, terrifying silhouettes of a pack of wolves investigating our campsite. Motionless I lay there trying not to make a sound. After an hour, the wolves remained and I had to pee...bad. Defying all logic I stood up out of the tent and relieved myself. About ten feet away, the alpha male stood staring at me intently as I marked my territory. We looked at each other, his eyes glowing yellow in the darkness. There was no growling or yelling, just peace and understanding. We were both a part of nature and equally curious about the other species, perhaps timid as well. Sooner or later he broke our gaze and led his pack back into the hills. Heart racing, I lay back down and didn’t sleep a wink the rest of the night.

X

When morning came, the lack of rest didn’t affect me, we needed to move. Wide-eyed, I folded the tent up and was ready to go. Rosemary and I shared the last apple and took a shot each before taking off. Another hour down the road and we were at the Rio Grande, the real border. There was nothing of significance to mark it; the landscape was just a greener. Leading up to the bank was a thicket of thorny brush and trees. The recent rainfall made the land bridge across the river unpassable. Some Mexicans sat on our side down yonder drinking beer next to an upturned boat. Leaving the Camaro parked under a tree, we approached them and Rosemary told them something in quick Spanish. They smirked at me. The younger men pushed the boat into the water and we were off, Captain Pablo was our guide. For two dollars in a weathered hand, he rowed us to the other side.

Rosemary had completed this journey once before, only in reverse. There was a small village called Medina over a hill just a few miles, our only option. Smoke billowed out of the small huts when we arrived at sunset. A man wearing a poncho wrote poems in rainbow chalk along the scarcely trodden street. One in English read:

Babylon is a state of mind.  
To this prison you hold the key. 
The more you give the more you receive. 
Open the door and set yourself free.

Trinity Review 22
I tossed some pesos into his upturned sombrero and we carried on. Medina used to be popular with American tourists but recent cartel violence drove them away. With no economy left, many residents deserted and it was well on its way to becoming a ghost town. Down a narrow alleyway a tall, slim figure leaned with his boot up against a wall, hat pulled down over his eyes. He puffed a cigar like Clint Eastwood.

The cowboy turned and walked slowly towards us and introduced himself as Ben McLewee; he was running from the DEA. He left a home, a wife, and family when he made his getaway. We followed him on down a street of dust to his one room run-down shack. He blew a smoke ring and smiled at us, said he ain’t never goin’ back. Some pillows and blankets were piled in the corner and he said we could stay for the night. Rosemary was getting tired and organized them neatly into a bed on the ground, falling asleep in an instant. Meanwhile, Ben whispered we should rent horses and go for a ride.

He led me back out to the town square, where we rented two quarter horses from an old blind man, saddled up, and rode out of the town. Now these steeds weren’t broke up to American standards—they were used to lighter riders and the saddle was built for the smaller Mexican build. At first my horse, Tejas, refused to move but after some bucking and rearing it got going. We galloped down the Rio for a few miles before turning up a creek, which led into a canyon for another mile. When the canyon ended, we steered the horses across the creek and crested a hill on the other side. A couple of hundred yards in the distance the ruins of an old military fort rose up out of the sand. We tied the horses to an ironwood tree and investigated on foot.

There were three different parts still intact: a jail cell, officers’ quarters, and large exterior barrier. Above the quarters was platform where cannons once stood, accessible by a ramp of sand that had blown in over the years. We sat up there and gazed out one of the cannon slots for a long time. The mountains and river were framed perfectly, everything was beautiful. The sun had already begun its downward path in the sky, illuminating the fortress’ decaying adobe façade to its former majesty. I wished I lived 200 years ago in the Wild West. Ben lit up a joint and passed it to me. It was hard to believe this was real life.

Before too long, we had to leave to make it back before dark. The sun rested just above the mountain tops in the distance. Everything was cast in a shade of red, orange, yellow, brown. Ben took off sprinting on his horse and I kicked mine to hurry up. At full speed, Tejas had a remarkably smooth stride compared to the bouncing trot. Wind blew through my hair and created patterns in the sand, a moment of pure ecstasy and bliss…that is until my right foot slipped out of the stirrup.

I tried to jam it back in but the stirrup kept bouncing. Next I tried to reach it but that only caused me to lean forward onto the neck—now I couldn’t pull back on the reins to slow down. The horse started bucking again while sprinting, doing a whip-like maneuver with its hind legs. Eight seconds I lasted before being kicked high in the air and slamming down onto the sand. Ben was laughing. I let him round the horse up and return it while I walked the short distance back. Tejas and I had enough of each other. When I returned, Ben was chatting in broken Spanish with the blind man, who wore a smug grin.

Apparently word traveled fast about my fall. We were met by snickers from passersby on the way home. As we neared Ben’s shack, a blood curdling scream pierced through the silent night. It came from inside. Ben busted in the door, revolver drawn. There in the corner Rosemary sat frozen staring blankly into space. Next came the sound of a maraca, but no mariachis. My eyes adjusted just in time to see a rattlesnake poised ready to strike. In a flash Ben pulled out his revolver shot the thing dead, leaving a single bullet hole in the wall. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“I need an IV, stat,” he said in an unusual tone.

He took us to the town’s best bar; its lively atmosphere was a stark contrast from the empty streets. Men and women drank while mariachis played. Glass shattered and a fight broke out in the corner but no one seemed to care, apart from a group of men who cheered them on. Ben held up three fingers and the bartender promptly poured us shots of Jose Cuervo tequila. Rosemary and I danced; I forgot about my injured arm until I dipped her. Everything felt so surreal. We kept drinking—after ten rounds, I lost count. The band was playing a rendition of Jimi Hendrix’s *Castles Made of Sand*.  

*Trinity Review 23*
The music grew louder till it penetrated the deepest depths of my soul and then the room started to spin. A voice echoed all around me but I couldn't tell where it was coming from. Suddenly I began to float up through the roof. The interstate glowed bright yellow in the distance and was like a tree branching off endlessly in every direction. I could see the motel, barber shop, the old apartment where Mike had vanished. Beneath me the ground began to quake as I hovered 100 feet in the air. My body shook violently; in an instant I was being whisked away from the world in a blur. Everything went black for a second and then light began to shine through the darkness.

XIII

I awoke on a stretcher getting wheeled into an ambulance. My head throbbed and I felt bruises around my neck. A bandage was wrapped around my left arm and an IV came into my right.

“Somerset…Somerset, everything’s alright. You’re gonna be just fine,” said a cute young paramedic as she removed shock plates from my chest.

Her nametag read R. Rodrigues. Four police cars were parked in the middle of the street and a small crowd had gathered to watch the commotion. Mike was being led out of the building in handcuffs. I was unsure of what just happened but somehow felt liberated and enlightened. The sun was shining on a beautiful day. Peeking out from beneath some papers was a tattered old copy of *The Allegory of the Cave.*
Room with a View
Sarah Spence

Letters tucked in my lunch
and sticky notes on the fridge
The doctor says it was
a close call

The faint scent of purple
seeps into my pores
As my mood ring turns the color of
sighing

I saw you
    I saw tubes
I saw stitches and
    worry

I tried not to smell all the death

Frown lines on foreheads
and someone trying to laugh
We healed but the scars are
still fading

Autumn Birds
Carl Teegerstrom
Dish Soap
Megan Reynolds

“how suddenly a simple errand, a letter — everything — can go wrong”
-Natasha Trethewey

When you came to visit
last October in the rain
I felt the shift.
You couldn’t do it anymore.
I left too many dirty dishes on the kitchen counter
and you were always cleaning up
after me.

So when you left
in November
my dishes began to pile up.
Something so simple - soap, water, sponge.
You think I would’ve learned that by now.
But how could I
when you always beat me there?

Now it’s January
and somehow I’ve managed to let my dishes
pile higher, into a blockade against the door.
I kicked some aside and when I heard the glass
shatter I scarcely looked back.

I went to the grocery store today
to buy some sponges and soap,
but when I got to aisle nine
I just couldn’t decide.
There were too many choices
so I bought new dishes instead.

Rings of a Tree Trunk
Delia Zacarias
There are a few constants in the world, such as plants, rocks, hunger, that do not wane with time. Among such is a never ending line of those dealt a bad hand by life from the moment they are born. Maybe they were an accident, an illegitimate, disfigured, intelligent, unwanted, a constant drain of a farmer’s gamble that put him one child over the familial labor the land required, or even a whole hoard of responsibility he must own up to after gambling the cows away in the city. As such, it is not surprising there is an ever evolving tradition of abandonment that humans have begun to weave. A history of intricacies and craft in making sure the locust do not return home. Some turn to the woods, others the city, still others the water.

Such was so with a son born to an impoverished farmer and his wife. They had five children before him, all girls, and each had been cared for tenderly until the ripe age of twelve. No one was certain where the daughters went then, but upon their birthday a carriage pulled by a great silver stallion would appear before the house carrying a chest full of riches. The first had brought iron, then steel, then copper, then bronze, then silver.

When curious neighbors began to pry, the farmer would always quiet them, assuring that the horse that bore away his daughters carried such a generous bounty because there were many men in the city of great fortune who desired his daughters as their wives. And this was believed for they always produced such beautiful daughters with delicate skin of ivory and white gold ringlets of hair. And their hands! So very soft, you would never have known they hadn’t spent their life in the parlor but out ploughing the fields from morning to dusk.

Yet despite the delivery of riches the farmer obtained for his girls, he and his wife were always unhappy with their lot in life and would gamble and spend lavishly beyond their means, so that it was not long before the money stopped flowing and the wife returned sulkily to her swollen belly and the husband to his plough.

And so you would think they would be delighted to have a son to work alongside his father, but the parents were far from it. At the child’s birth they were immediately distressed, the farmer exclaiming, “Oh woe is us! A son! What ever shall we do with him? He is no good to us.”

The wife too, was distressed and resentful, fearing not only that she could receive riches only for a daughter, but that when they received their riches next, they’d have to waste some on this one! And so she devised a plan to do away with her child.

“Husband, look, this child is simply no use to us. He is no daughter and his looks are so plain! Nothing like that of the daughters. I had hoped he’d at least share their looks, maybe then we could have some use for him, but the facts are the facts, and the riches from the last girl are already gone. How would we even raise him while we try for another daughter?”

The farmer pondered this for a time, before reaching the same conclusion as his wife. The child was no use away with her child.

“The midwife is due to leave for the next village tomorrow morning, when she does, we shall send the child with her.”

And so the two scraped together enough coin to pay for such a service, and loaded the child up with the midwife as she left, content the child would be out of their lives. But if only they knew to the extent! For the midwife was a wicked woman, and despite her promises to leave the child at the first church she passed, it was only a short distance out of town where she stopped her horse and tied up the child in a burlap sack. Quietly, she crept down to the edge of a swiftly running river and threw the child into the water. The sack sank like a stone and the midwife returned to her carriage and rode on.

Not long after, a sixth daughter was born to the farmer and his wife and she was met with such delight. Even more beautiful than the last, they doted on her, working her less than her past sisters in the hopes to receive more than the usual riches in exchange for her. Such a wish was fulfilled when the night that she turned twelve a silvery stallion arrived for the girl, its carriage filled to the brim with gold pieces this time.
Delighted, the farmer and his wife could hardly load the sleeping girl into the carriage, shaking as they were with delight. And soon the stallion rode off with the girl in tow, out of town by the road that flanked the river. After a time, there came to be a fork in the road with one path branching to the right up a hill and the other over a bridge. Undeterred, the horse took neither path, heading straight for the water where the carriage and all sank beneath the current.

But alas, even gold was not enough to last the farmer and his wife and soon was born a seventh daughter to the family. But by now, the farmer and his wife were very old, and began to fret over themselves, fearing: if this daughter too left, who would care for them in their old age? They soon concluded that when the carriage arrived this time, they would hide her away deep in the woods until the night had past.

But by her twelfth year, both the farmer and his wife were too feeble to make the walk out to the woods themselves, so they gave her a little lantern and a little tin of oil, some cakes, and a bit of water for her journey and bade her not to return until morning. Fearful as she was of the forest, her love for her parents was so great, though they did not deserve it, and she did as they asked.

Venturing out into the woods at dusk, she soon lost her way in the dark of the forest and tipped a bit of oil into her lamp to light it. To her surprise, the light inside began to flare and dance, lifting up to the top of the lantern and banging about. Startled, she dropped the lamp, breaking it, and the flame danced up from the contraption and all around. Curious, the girl reached out to touch the little light, but it only danced just out of her reach. Each time she tried, she could not grab it, and soon set off chasing the little light through the woods. Before long she came to the bend in the river that cradled the farm. The light danced too close to the water, and a splash put it out.

Quite tired from all the running, she girl sat down at the water's bank and pulled out her little cakes. Before she could begin to eat, however, she heard the sound of sniveling and crying, a voice proclaiming

“Shall I ever find my way home!
I'm soaked to the bone
Yet the water's so heavy,
I can’t bear this wandering alone!”

Looking out over the river, she saw a young boy sit with his head on his knees weeping softly. His clothes were drenched through and leaves and branches were caught in his long hair. He shook as he wept, though from the cold or his sorrows she did not know. Though initially frightened by the boy, she was soon moved by his sorrow and called out to him. But the boy continued to weep the same thing over and over and the girl became convinced that he could not hear her across the bank.

Gathering up her courage, she slipped off her shoes and gathered up her skirts. Though the river was slow, the dark of the water was frightening. Dipping her toe in, she took a tentative step into the river. At first she felt the slime of algae slip across her sole before the riverbed opened up beneath her and she sank down into the depth. At once the boy ceased his and rain began to fall at a frightening pace. The river quickly swelled and began to churn wildly. Then, from the dark of the river, a silver horse broke the surface of the water. It swam over to the boy, reaching out its neck for him to climb onto. His body was impossibly heavy, but the stallion strode across the riverbed with ease. As he climbed up onto the banks a carriage full of precious jewels was dragged up from the river's depth with him. The moment the last of the carriage's wheels were free from the water, the horse broke into a full gallop for the farmer’s house. In the gloom before daybreak, though none could have known, for the dark clouds blotted out the sky, the carriage arrived at the farmer's home. The splashing of hooves in the muddy earth sent the farmer and his wife running from their bed to the door and when they threw it open to find the carriage full with glorious gems and pearls, all their fear for their daughter fell away and they began to dream of what they could possibly do with it all.

The silver stallion and the boy watched as the parents opened the doors to the carriage and all the glittering jewels burst forth. The strength of the current swept them both under and the house became filled to the beams with the riches, suffocating its owners. When the last of every pearl and diamond had spilled out, the door slammed shut and the stallion shook its head, speaking “My debt is now paid in full.”

Overhead, lightning crashed and thunder shook the sky, the torrent of rain churning the surface of the earth to thick mud. Yet the stallion trudged on with the boy in tow past the fork in the road towards the church upon
Andromeda Galaxy
Carl Teegerstrom

Kathryn Funderburg

The heat of the concrete curb presses against the back of my thighs as I sit waiting for you to leave the building. Absently, I pluck a leaf from a nearby bush and roll it between my fingers, watching dark creases appear wherever the sleek surface is broken. I grind it on the rough stone of the sidewalk, and a bright green streak stands out on my off-color canvas of opportunity. The pad of my thumb is also stained green, like the lips of a child who has just eaten a lime Popsicle, but I do not lick it. Every whorl of my thumbprint is visible, a marker of my individual self, magnified by the verdant dye that has sunken into the slight valleys. I drag my fingers against the sun warmed pavement, feeling the slight pull of the granular texture against my skin. Do the laws of erosion apply to humans? Next, a smear of soil, a rich, reddish brown to compliment the thin emerald contribution of the leaf. The earth has the silkiness of clay and glides into the composition as willingly as oil paint. From the pulpy remains of a pansy oozes a marigold hue to brighten the shades of forest and rust. I am the Cassatt of chlorophyll, the Duchamp of dirt; a petal pigment Picasso. With deft swipes of my fingertips I blend nature into an abstract work of organic art. Aspects of movement, form, and despair feature prominently in my newest creation. When you exit, the automatic doors release a wave of cool air that chills the shirt clinging along my spine. Wiping my hands together I rise and follow you to the car, leaving my work untitled and unannounced—a few small smudges soon to be washed away from the hospital sidewalk.
“How’s soccer going, Julia? Did you score today? I bet you did! You always score. When do you find out if you made the All-Conference team?”
“I don’t know, Grandpa. Does it matter?”
“Of course it matters! It’s what you love.”
“It doesn’t matter today.”

It was February 4th, 2013. For the rest of my life, I’d remember that day as the day he died.

“You’re skin is so pale,” I said as I stared down at his fragile hand that gently lied inside of mine. He looked ghostly, like he was already halfway gone. His thick white hair seemed to match his face, and his vibrant green eyes had dulled into a soft grey.

“Oh come on, we don’t have to do this, Julia. I just want to be with you. That’s all I want. We don’t have to talk about the rest.”
“What do you mean we don’t have to talk about it? Of course we have to talk about it.”
I was crying. I don’t cry much. Rarely ever.
“I’ve never seen anything so sad,” he said as he stared at my face and lifted his hand to wipe the tears off my skin. “It’s like ruining a beautiful piece of art by sticking it out in the rain.”
He handed me the rosary that he’d been holding in that bed the whole time, clutching it with such faith. I held it out of fear.

“You can’t die,” I whispered. “I don’t want you to die.”
“You’re so young, honey. You don’t need an old man like me around. I just slow you down!”
He chuckled, which made his thick belly giggle, and he wheezed joyfully.
“Please, stop laughing. It’s not funny to me.”

My aunt peeked in the door for a moment and then went back out. It was her subtle way of telling me that my time with him was over, that it was someone else’s turn.

“I promise to miss you everyday,” I told him.
“There’s no need to make such sad promises,” he responded. “Make me a different promise. When you write about this moment, don’t make it seem as sad as that look on your face. Okay? Make this moment beautiful.”

“I won’t write about this, Grandpa. You’re the one who always taught me that writing is supposed to be beautiful. I don’t feel any beauty in this.”
“Just promise you’ll try. Okay? Please? Just try.”
I reluctantly nodded, and I hugged him and whispered that I loved him.
“I love you too,” he responded.

I waited out in the hospital lobby. He got taken to his surgery, and I tried to stay awake but the sadness pressed down so heavily on my heart and my eyelids that I fell asleep. I woke up to the alarm of my mom whispering, “Julia, he’s gone.”

My grandpa gave me many things: his green eyes, his whole-hearted laugh, his sense of humor, and his love of writing.

When I was young, only four-years-old, my grandpa and I used to go for these long walks. I would bring my backpack with fruit snacks, a juice box, and a notebook. To this day, I still have a strange belief that those are the only things I need to survive.

My grandpa would tell me to stop walking when I saw something beautiful. I would move along, skipping most of the time, and singing little songs. Sometimes, on days I just wanted to be with him, we would walk for hours before stopping, and other times, on days I saw too much beauty to wait, we wouldn’t even make it out of the drive-
way.

We would sit down, legs crossed, and we’d both pull out our notebooks and begin to write.

“Writing it simple, Julia. First, you just find something beautiful. Then you write what you see and what you feel.”

We sat for a long time. He would always write so much, but he never showed it to me.

“Let’s hear what you’ve got, champ.”

“The sun shines like the look in your eyes,” I said to him proudly.

It’s been fifteen years, and if I were to be sitting next to him on the sidewalk right now, I would say, “The sun burns like the feeling in my chest when I miss you.”

My mom almost died when I was five.

She got Guillan Barre syndrome, a disease in which the body’s own immune system attacks the peripheral nervous system. It leads to temporary, or sometimes permanent, paralysis.

I was scared but in an oblivious and vague sort of way. I was too young to be worried by the tubes in her mouth and the ticking of machines.

“She looks like a robot,” my brother said to me the first time we saw her.

She couldn’t speak to us, but she would cry. That was really the only thing that made us truly comprehend that things were bad.

“Mom?” I said. “Mom, do you hear me?”

“She can’t respond, honey,” my grandpa tried to explain. “Your mom is sick.”

My mom was his youngest daughter, and perhaps the one he loved the most although he’d never admit it. He had this way of looking at her like his whole world lied in her eyes. His breath depended on her breath.

In the hospital waiting rooms, my grandpa pulled out a notebook.

“What are you doing?” I asked him softly.

“I’m writing.”

I looked around for a while, scanning the whole room. I looked at each white chair and each worried face.

“About what, Grandpa? I don’t see anything beautiful here.”

“It’s more complicated than that, I guess, honey. Sometimes writing is a way of finding beauty. Sometimes we have to create our own beauty when there’s none in sight. Do you get that?”

I nodded, although I didn’t really. The only thing I would find any beauty in would come six months later, when my mom could walk and talk again. I found beauty in the fact that she was back to being herself and speaking at a million miles per hour and trying to perform too many tasks at once. That was all the beauty I could see.

“You’ll understand when you’re older, my love,” my grandpa promised me.

But, when I was seventeen and watching him die, I didn’t understand. I even went to the waiting room and pulled out the notebook from my backpack and stared at each white chair and each worried face. I felt many things, but none of them were beautiful.

We used to have this ongoing joke that my grandpa would never die. He smoked almost a pack of cigarettes a day, and he drank a scotch with his breakfast, yet he always seemed to perfectly pass all of his physical tests. Up until he died, he never got sick, not once. He was as healthy as a twenty-year-old.

“You should really quit that, you know,” I told him. “It’s a terrible habit.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “Do we really know how that would affect my writing? Aren’t all good writers supposed to be slightly masochistic and dark?”

“More importantly, those cigarettes may be responsible for your inhuman good looks. After all, they must make up 90% of your body composition at this point.”

His mouth always spread wide when he laughed, and he chuckled from deep within in soul. Every muscle in him convulsed and participated in that laugh.
“But seriously, Grandpa, don’t you think you should stop? What if that shortens the time I get with you?”

He looked at me, long and hard, like my eyes held his dreams. Then he handed me the pack.

“Okay,” he said. “Consider it done.”

Later that night, I found him trembling on the front porch. He looked so afraid of disappointing me, so vulnerable.

“I don’t like see you this,” I told him.

I handed him his cigarettes back.

Sometimes, I feel like I handed a suicidal man a gun. He died from a heart problem, something that’d been worsened by his drinking and smoking. Sometimes I look back at that moment and think that I may have been able to save him, that I may have been able to give him years and years more with us all. But that night on the porch, I was just a thirteen-year-old kid who saw a man who was afraid and weak, and I had something that could fix it. All I’ve ever wanted was to ease his suffering.

My grandpa was always a religious man, in a way that I sometimes envied. Every Sunday, I sat in a pew and walked the tight rope between belief and disbelief, but not him. He was such a sure man. The ability to believe in what you can’t see is a beautiful gift. Some days, I feel like it’s a gift I was given. Other days, I don’t.

We had this tradition where every Sunday morning he would make pancakes for me. They were always slightly burned; I’m not sure why he could never get it right. He would always drown the pancakes in syrup before I got there, as if trying to cover up his mistake. I never minded though.

One day, we got to church early. Really early. I mean, we beat the priest.

The sun crept in through the stain glass window and turned us into a piece of a rainbow.

“Can I ask you something, Grandpa?”

“You sure.”

I looked away from him because I wasn’t brave enough to see his eyes. “Are you afraid of dying?”

He stared up at the cross for a long time without saying anything. “Not really, no.”

I decided to look in his eyes, as if trying to be a lie detector. I needed to see his faith to believe it. “How do you have that much faith?”

I looked around at all the statues, trying to see whatever he saw in them.

“Stop looking around like that,” he gently requested. “You don’t have to stare at that cross like it’s a life vest. That’ll just give you the illusion that you’re drowning.”

He turned to me.

“Take away this Church for a moment. Make it disappear. Take away the bible and the pews. Take away the altar and the cross. What would be left?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. Nothing, I guess.”

“No, no. You and me. We’d still be here. I think that’s the point of this whole building. This whole place is here to make people sit together on a Sunday morning and just be with each other and teach love. If you overthink it, if you get too caught up on trying to believe, you’ll miss the beauty of faith.”

He had this way of speaking, this way that the words rolled out of his mouth so smoothly and eloquently.

“The people we love immortalize us. That’s what I believe. That’s what makes me unafraid to die.”

Something about the way that the light hit his face made him look like an angel. Sometimes I wonder if that whiteness that crept into his skin on that hospital bed was supposed to make him look like that angel again.

Two weeks after he died, I got a package in the mail.

It was from my grandma. It had a note that said, “I’ve been going through your grandpa’s things, and I thought you might want this.”

I opened up that box to find the journal that he kept from all those walks we’d taken together when I was young. Only, he wasn’t writing about the beautiful nature that we found. He was writing about me.
I would hold that journal for so many hours, treasuring each word, and imagining the stroke of his hand as he formed each letter. Sometimes, when I held that book, it was like he didn't die at all.

He documented everything. He found joy in all of it.

“Julia named an ant today,” he wrote. “An ant! She stuck out her hand and let it crawl over her. She decided to name him Freddy. I don’t know why. She looked up at me and said, “I think I’m going to write about Freddy today. I think he’s beautiful.” This little girl wants to write about everything she sees. I swear she creates beauty out of everything.”
Rain
DC Edwards

It is raining
Isn’t it crazy
Each fallen from above

It is raining
Isn’t it crazy
How alone, infinitesimal
But together, flood the earth

It is raining
Isn’t it crazy
Outside, for moments
But inside, innumerable

Externally, uniform
Internally, unique
Each droplet reigns terror
On the lover’s flame

Isn’t it crazy
“Love never dies”
Yet inside, it’s raining
Both water and tears

It is raining
Inside, forever
A continuous shower
Until my sorrows wash away

Geodoe
Caitlin Lawrence
Good, how are you?
Sarah Spence

After the funeral
after forced, unwanted hugs, I
hang my black dress
and let the dogs out to pee, I
grab a vase for the flowers
so they don’t die too, I
microwave leftovers and
finally have time to eat, I
speed through a yellow light
driving to school, I
sit in class silently
and chew on my pen, I…

sigh and close my eyes
as the bathroom door shuts, I
feel the pinch in my cheek
from smiling all day, I
practice “happy eyes”
in the mirror every morning
I wonder what my laugh
sounded like before

He Gets High On Wednesdays
Megan Reynolds

He gets high on Wednesdays.
Says it’s the toughest day,
the middle, the midlife crisis
of the week and the weed
just helps him relax.

I can still feel the burning
in my lungs from the one time
I tried it too.
I didn’t feel anything
and that surprised him.
Even though it hurt
I hold onto that
like a match, trying
to keep the flame alive
but opposite you.
I remember because there were
so few times I surprised anyone.

I’m starting to realize
that even though there’s a spark
in you, the past is kerosene
and we are both going to go down burning.
I’ve really got to stop
calling you when I’m feeling lonely.
Crush
Brianna Azua

you smiled as soon
  as you saw me
light up football fields
  hit your purple polo hat
to shout thrift shop theme
felt uninformed with
every
  single
  answer
“later homie”
I watch you
  observe
  ping pongs passing
shyness
  “later with a thrift’d smile
  I watch as you shop every single
light theme to point you away
you saw my lion shirt
regretfully
  and felt you
    Crush
    shyness
shout at fields
  passing up football
  answer me homie”

Giganotosaurus, King of Argentina
Carl Teegerstrom
These things are known to say lots about the studies. I’m Charlie. Keep reading, this is good stuff and stay tuned for more honors thesis coming to you live from this paper! Honors does not a thesis make, but Charlie an honors thesis does make, right here and now RIGHT HERE AND NOW. There are many valid salutations in this paper, many referees and preferences about honor in my society this isn’t the average society. You see I write with a purpose, and that purpose is not pontification but exfoliation! I do not write this paper for honor, but for you. It is meant to be read but please do not read it while eating. I will know because there will be many food stains. Coffee is okay. The best kind of drain cleaner is the flavored kind… the kind you can really sink into. Sometimes fluids come out of my holes while I sleep. If I’m dreaming I drink them and they taste like berries. Do not judge me by what I do but what I don’t do with my berry juice. I am man of strongly held convections. In the purpose of potatoes I have infiltrated this paper as one of you… a schoolie person hidden in the maze of books that I saw in the library by the bathroom. This is where I write naked crouched in the stacks and make poops on the walls. Hambone, doggie slice. Wibble dibble my nizzle for the greatness of shizzles. The hamburger saw me yesterday and I think he knew I was taking off my sweater in a no sweater fly zone but this was my thesis so he listened closely. Here this and lick it like a chicken while the lickin is kickin. I know the books, listen to me on this: I put my toes in the air like I really care. But the truth is what is a thesis? What is honor? These are the questions. They are also the words. They are also the sounds and have letters and sometimes spaces. They are visible. But is honor? Is it tangerine? Can you hold it in your hands? I want to. This is my mission.

Hypodermal statement: kanban I right a thesis? Can I wrong a thesis? I want to find out. Listen dawg. Wikipedia says that binge watching is dumb. Why not use Google? It doesn’t make sense but change makes the cake. I just like licking the icing on the ski lift (Winter, every year). Charlie writes this to impress the scholastics, I knew what you think about this. Damn, paper this is too much sexy. Makes all the genies get splishy splashy. I wrote the sexy parts of this thesis in my bang shack. I make it while the making is good. Full on coilage, plenty of interchange. But this begs for the questions, if I wrong this thesis then how does binge watching begun transferring people’s lives? Do they watch the good stuff? I want to know, do you? My conspire thesis is around this ideas. Believe it or none this is not flavorized, this is all original. I swear on Spiderman (Lee, 1962). Did you know I like comics? You can’t binge watch comics since it’s a book, pictures just stratify it so it’s not as changeling as the chapter books. I theologize that people watch compliance amounts of TV because they have not read my thesis. This is what Charlie research has shown. If they was like Charlie and read comics instead then things would be sweet… potatoes, like my sister makes on Kellogg’s Eve in her merry casserole. She told me if the bacon ain’t aching, then don’t stop the shaking. But if the bacon flakin, you must get to makin. A thesis.

Never the nonetheless, a laxative way of watching is at home. Is it the binge watching? Indubitably. That’s why the tyrannosaurus told me to use this word because it’s a cinnamon. But not like the spice because that makes me sneeze in the library. This is where I pander deep throats striking my chin and making the sound that a gong made when I woke up yesterday next to the lye berry. No, the lie Barry (Sanders, 2015). The gong says moo but only if I ride the bus to where the windmills populuate with little birds and Satan. There’s a spine that says to ride the speed Trumps slowly (Donald, 2015). But is that a thesis? The barbarians think so, which is why I read what they reconnected. If I concatenated correctly, this thesis will be about three pages long now. Damn, I’m good. Like the belly of my dog after she had to pixelate my prickly pear (Slavlov, the old times). I showed her well I did. And I’m very pride in her after the binge… I recon I’ve read the books. I hit them but they hit back harder. But who knows about a jelly role besides my belly after a long night at the beach? That’s why Charlie’s thesis is the bingeing of the movies. Because donuts have holes, but not real wholes. This is the hole point that I’m trying to make about binge watching. Don’t you see? (Ray Charles, Jazz Age). Do you comprehension? What are you, dents? Like where the air partitioning in my bang shack.
comes? Were you dropped on your head as an instance? That’s what my mom told me last year. If I had a dollar for every dumb that you were, I’d have enough doll hairs to brush my teeth. But at last this is not the cases. Wait hold on. This does not case us. We have problems. Trickle Houston. Alert. Ring the doorbell but not too loud because the bingeing is on the TV. But where does it go when the lights go out? Does TV dream? I like to burrito; I sub-scrabble to this perception. Especially if I get a “Q” and a “Z” on a double letter scorn. Not to mention all my Red Sox. Where do all the lost ones go? Other issues exclude of course, but what if you lose the remote? Then does the TV binge the Charlie? These are the queries I make at night after my TV’s dreaming and the library’s closed.

In conclusion, yes. You can binge the watch, but the Night’s Watch will binge you on the TV. Bitch. I rest my case in pieces. On Pisces? To be continued. Thank you and sweet dreams. I’ll be here until Thursday, Bon Jovie’s voyage! Farewell and welfare… never more (The Raven, 1845). Now that’s what I call Poe a tree. Nailed it.

Seriously,
Chilly Wagner
Eleanor came to visit. She hadn’t seen him in upwards of five months and she was starting to look bad. Guilt did not motivate her, pretension did. When she opened the door, the crack of light from the hallway flooded a small corner of the room like a spotlight. The apartment smelled like cleaning solution and lemon scented Pine Sol. The light, artificially yellow to mimic the sun, hit Peter’s face. He didn’t blink, he didn’t move, he just looked as though he’d expected her.

“God Peter, we, and by we I mean I, pay for electricity and you can’t even turn on a light?” She put her bag on the floor near the door frame. This would hopefully be a quick visit. “What do you even do in here all day, huh? Have you even been outside since I last saw you?”

“I open the window.” Peter remained still, staring straight ahead, a statue. Eleanor looked exasperated already. When she brushed the hair out of her face, Peter flicked his eyes over to her without moving his head. Dark circles enveloped her eyes but she’d tried hard to cover them up with makeup. She didn’t succeed. It looked like she hadn’t slept well in a while.

There was one empty chair nuzzled in the opposite corner designed for use on visits such as these. The high oak back and stiff seat made it uncomfortable for any period of time over five minutes, but it was the only easily movable piece of furniture in the entire apartment. Eleanor grabbed the back and dragged. Peter felt the scrapes on the floor like cat scratches on his own skin. An imperceptible shiver ran down his spine as he thought about how he’d recently waxed the laminate flooring. Eleanor sat and crossed her legs. They sat in silence. She uncrossed her legs and re-crossed them.

“Ok…well…I’ll just say it then.” She picked nervously at the hem of her sweater and Peter remembered how she used to chew at shirt collars when she was little. He preferred this little act of anxiety. “I’m not sure if you know this or not but Colin and I have been having some…issues.” She stopped and waited for a response, a nod, a murmur, anything, but Peter simply continued to stare blankly. One eye focused on her left ear and the other on the wall directly behind it causing his vision to blur everything into an indistinguishable mass. Both eyes were in other worlds. He hadn’t participated in this world in a long time.

“No? Nothing?” Eleanor mumbled to herself. “Ok…well, Peter, what I’m trying to tell you is that Colin and I need to focus on ourselves for a while, sort some things out you know?” Still no response. “Well?” She arched an eyebrow, demanding. “Aren’t you going to say something? Honestly I would take anything at this point.”

“Good for you.”

“Seriously? God Peter, you’re such an ass. How is this a good thing? My husband and I are failing. The one steady thing in my life has gone to shit and you have the fucking nerve to congratulate me? Unbelievable.”

Staring straight ahead, the words escaped his mouth like oil, slick and thick. “I’m your brother Eleanor, not your therapist.”

“Christ, I know that. I’m just trying to have a conversation with you, tell you about what’s going on in my life.”

“You don’t ask me what’s going on in my life.”

“Because I already know.” She got up from the chair, pushing it back too quickly so it reached the precipice of overturning, but it rocked forward to land safely on four legs just before it was about to fall. “You want to know why I don’t ask you anything? Huh?”

“I’d love to.” His voice remained irritatingly calm and monotone. He’s hollow, she thought, completely empty.

“It’s because you don’t have a life. Do you understand? Staying exiled up here all the time, sitting in the dark, that’s not a life Peter! That’s not what people are supposed to do.” She turned and went to the door. He heard her rummaging through her bag. A lighter snapped then he smelled cigarette smoke. She quit four months ago but it apparently didn’t stick. It didn’t the last two times either.

For the first time, Peter moved. Slowly, deliberately he rose and strode over to Eleanor. In one swift arc of
his arm, he snatched the cigarette and turned towards the solitary living room window. Cold air rushed in like a giant
gasp, sucking energy out of Eleanor and depositing it into Peter. He dropped the cigarette out the window then left a
small crack open for air to whistle through. He liked how the breeze felt sharp against his skin.

“What the hell?”
“You said you quit.”
“I’m trying to. I’m just stressed.”
“Everyone’s stressed.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Everyone’s stressed. That’s not a good excuse to smoke. If you’re going to make excuses you might as well
come up with a good one.” Eleanor stared viciously at Peter, the corners of her mouth pinching into a disgusted
pucker like she’s just eaten something sour.

“What do you even know about stress? You don’t do anything! You lock yourself in here 24-7. So you can’t
talk to me about stress.” He didn’t react. That’s what she wanted, to guilt him, to egg him on. She knew where his
breaking point was and she wanted to see him crumble. Instead, he stood stoically looking out the window. It was
almost seven. The sun would be going down soon.

The clouds filtered select rays of sun which streaked through. Crepuscular rays, he thought. The building
across the street was all glass, one of those modern office buildings designed to look impressive and important but
containing paper pushers just like every other office. It reflected his own brick apartment building and Peter thought
he could just see himself in the office’s windows. Raising his hand to see if the reflection would mimic him, he saw
the figure turn his back to the office. The stranger and Peter locked eyes, one escaping a hectic life, the other thinking
about why he’d escaped in the first place. Peter gave a slight wave. The stranger nodded quickly in acknowledgement
then turned back to the interior of the office.

“Who’re you waving at?”
“Nobody.” Peter responded. Eleanor rolled her eyes then closed them tight. She gathered her strength.

“Peter, there’s something else I have to tell you.” He remained entranced by the office building. “So, if you’d
turn around and re-engage that’d be great.”

Relenting, Peter swiveled. Eleanor was sitting with her legs crossed in the chair again. “I’m going to stay stand-
ing if that’s alright with you.” Peter couldn’t let her win everything.

“So what other uplifting news did you have to tell me?”
Eleanor grimaced but otherwise ignored the dig. “Well, since Colin and I aren’t going to be together for a little
while I’m not going to have much money to help you out anymore.”

Peter turned then, his lungs getting tighter with each shallow breath.

“Eleanor, what exactly do you mean?”
“I mean I can’t pay for you anymore. I know you’re my brother and family’s supposed to look after each other
and all, but I just can’t.”

“What am I supposed to do?” He face flushed slightly. His ears were getting hot.

“Oh, I don’t know, get a job like everybody else! You’re almost thirty, Peter! I shouldn’t have to pay for every-
thing for my older brother.”

“You know I can’t get a job. You remember what it was like for me.” Just thinking back to his last job Peter
felt the blood rushing in his veins. Fast. Much too fast. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears, the wild drumming of
savages. He couldn’t feel his feet anymore. He was floating, floating away with nothing to hold him to this earth. He
shut his eyes tight and clenched his fists. Peter tried to breathe, but he already knew. It was too late. It was coming.
The anxiety.

He retreated back to his room. Eleanor had pushed too hard and she knew that, but she’d been careful for so
long. She was bound to break one day. She went to the kitchen, wanting to do something with herself. Eleanor had
always hated sitting still. Moving, she had discovered, was a great distraction. Everything was immaculate, no stains,
no dirty dishes left out, every towel folded nicely into thirds lengthwise then once again in half the other direction.
She smelled the usual cleaning solution, but also something else mixed in, a burnt smell like burnt toast. She checked the trash and sure enough there were two pieces of blackened bread at the bottom. That's not typical of Peter, she thought. Grabbing the Febreze that he kept on the counter, Eleanor sprayed it into the trash. Lavender. Calming. She opened the left-most cabinet and took out a glass. The ice tray was full, not because Peter didn't use it, but because he refilled it every time he did. She had just finished filling up a glass of water from the Brita filter in the fridge when she heard the window slide open.

Peter had collected a pile next to him. Blankets. Pillows. Books. Anything he could carry. He hurled a lamp out the open window.

“Peter! God, what the hell are you doing?”

“I'm cutting expenses.” he said as he threw a dresser drawer, contents included, out after the lamp. Eleanor grabbed his hand but he wrenched it free. A second drawer followed out the window. Wood splintered.

“You could’ve hit someone! And what? How? How is this cutting expenses? That doesn't even make sense.”

“Well, I don't need this stuff and I don't need anything else you’ve paid for so I’m getting rid of it.” Two cushions flew out the window. Pushing past Eleanor, he snatched an end table. Water from her glass splashed down her arm. It felt cool, the breeze from the window made it feel frigid. She ran to close the window.

“Peter, God dammit, stop!” He didn’t even open the window, but instead just forced the end table through. Glass littered the floor, in the dimming light it sparkled like thousands of tiny mirrors. Eleanor tried to grab him again, but Peter’s rage forced him into a kind of a blackout. The edges of his vision blurred creating a hyper-focused tunnel through which he saw only two things: everything inside his apartment and the gaping window.

Eleanor tugged on the couch cushion he was attempting to discard next. Peter won and Eleanor went stumbling backwards hitting her head on the counter. Hard. She slumped, motionless, to the floor, her legs at awkward angles. Peter continued.

Peter sat in the corner. In his anxiety driven rage he'd cut his electricity lines. The sun had set, but faint light from the city still crept in. The broken pieces of glass shone like black obsidian. The room was empty except for a few odds and ends that had fallen out of drawers as he’d carried them to the window. Peter's heart raced and his hands twitched just looking at the mess. He got up and searched through Eleanor's bag. He lit one of her Kool brand cigarettes. Once he got past the initial coughing it actually did calm his nerves. She had been right.

Eleanor opened her eyes and saw the white ceiling of Peter's apartment. Her head ached and when she touched the back of her skull her hair was matted and stiff. She winced.

As she pushed herself up, a shock tore down her spine.

“What happened?”

Peter walked into the kitchen as he said, “I'll get you some ice.”

“No, Peter. You're going to sit down and tell me what the hell happened.” Her tone of voice resembled an angry parent. It gave no illusion of choice.

He came back into the living room but did not sit down. After all there wasn’t anywhere to sit anymore except for the floor. He cracked his knuckles. Each crack sounded like tiny bb’s hitting plaster. It sounded hollow.

“You fell.” His voice remained monotone. He gazed past her, the background blurring into a mash of colors and Eleanor just a silhouette.

She sighed. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Why can't you help me anymore?”

“Because I don't have the money to support you.” She turned to walk away, then added, “And because I shouldn't have to.”

“Colin left you didn't he?”

“Yeah. He did.”

“Did he find someone better?” He knew that would sting, but he said it anyway. Surprisingly she seemed unfazed, just resigned.

“You know he probably did, but it doesn’t really matter anymore.”

*Trinity Review* 42
“When did he leave?”
“About seven months ago.”
“Why didn’t you tell me?”
“I don’t know.” Eleanor clutched the counter. Her head felt impossibly heavy, like someone had poured cement in her ears and let it harden. Every movement sent pinpricks trickling up her back. The hair at the back of her head had dried into a bloody helmet. The pieces closest to her neck crunched like autumn leaves. “I didn’t want to admit that I was a failure.”
“I don’t care that you’re a failure.”
“But I do. I didn’t want to admit that we’d both failed. Mostly though, I think I didn’t realize that we’re more similar than I ever wanted us to be.”
“You should’ve told me. You owe that to me.”
“I don’t owe you anything. Goodbye Peter. I mean it.” She slid her hand on the wall as she walked to the door.

Peter saw greasy smears appearing on the wall and was surprised that he still cared about a thing like that at a time like this. But people are predictable and stuck in their ways.

“You have about a month left on the lease then you’ll have to get out.” She saw Peter looking at the smudges her hands left on the wall. She had known that her bloody, wet, greasy fingers would leave marks, but she wanted them to. She wanted to remind Peter that other people existed, that she existed, because she knew she wasn’t coming back. Not this time. Those stains would be all that was left of her for Peter. She wanted to remind herself that others exist too, that people act and react and all you can do is try not to fail. She had failed, and she knew it. But so had he. Eleanor closed the door quietly. The sound seemed sad and disproportionate to the events that had taken place inside the apartment. Maybe from the outside, no one would know. Maybe from the outside, everything seemed fine.

The light from under the door created a slim beam that gave Peter just enough light to make out silhouettes. He made his way over to the window. Quietly. Numbly. The glass littered the floor like shrapnel. The night had chilled considerably, but Peter relished the goose bumps. Dropping his cigarette butt out onto the sidewalk six stories below, he noticed how the buildings looked like silhouettes as well. He imagined them decaying, falling to the ground and realized that maybe we’re all silhouettes, that maybe some of us aren’t meant for this world, not completely. They’re too far gone already. Some of us move like outlines, only half real, but existing elsewhere too. He felt his internal iron support beams collapsing, floor by floor, his heart falling through his hollowing, rotting body. I’m dying, he thought. Every second. I’m dying.

Peter thrust his hand through the window. The night air was still, stagnant. He pushed the window open. Glass shards fell to the floor. He felt strong, so strong, for the first time since before the first anxiety attack years ago. That’s what they were, attacks, beating Peter down until he wasn’t himself anymore. His muscles jumped under his clothes, itching to get out of the building. He put his left foot on the ledge, then hoisted himself out and put his right foot down. His feet reached past the edge and if he weren’t wearing shoes he could’ve curled his toes around the red brick. He plucked one shoe off then the other and dropped them on the pile on the sidewalk below. The brick chilled his feet in a way that made everything seem alive. He could feel everything. Standing tall, he surveyed the city, his city, though he’d never realized until now. Eleanor won’t be down yet. He saw his pile of possessions, lying broken and fractured on the pavement. Lifting his left foot off the brick, he smelled smoke. Not cigarette smoke, but campfire smoke. He remembered how the ashes always seemed to follow him when his family had gone camping, always after one of his attacks. The ashes called to him now. He looked up and there stood the stranger in his office across the street. Frantically, the stranger reached for a phone and waved his arms excitedly. He reminded Peter of some cartoon character he’d seen as a child, but he couldn’t remember which one. The stranger dialed. Three numbers, that was it. Then he held eye contact. Peter waved.
A shrill scream echoed down the dark hall. He jerked violently and knocked his mug onto the floor. Dropping his digital pen on the desk, he got up unsteadily and jogged to the kitchen. His phone vibrated across the counter, the timer howling, its screen bathing the dark kitchen in an icy light. He swiped it to silence and groaned, scrubbing his eyes. Despite the latest batch of neuro-dampers, even a tinny phone alarm sent waves of adrenaline through him. He splashed his face with water from the sink and concentrated on the lack of electrical sounds, the crash of distant surf, and the purr of untrained minds sleeping in the apartments around him. The phone chirped a question. He acknowledged it and went back to the office to get ready.

The pen and pad glowed softly orange and accusing from the desk. He picked up the pen, but set it down again. He couldn’t remember the rest of the sentence he had been writing. Instead he sent another article to his phone and rummaged through the closet by touch. The article began to narrate itself from the implants behind his ears. “State lawmakers gathered in New Charleston today as part of the ongoing debate over anti-telepath regulations in multiple cities along the coast,” said the androgynous voice as he wrestled into rubber chest waders and waterproof, steel-soled boots. He stuffed the phone into a pocket of his massive backpack on the way out. Outside his apartment, motion-sensing hall lights nearly blinded him. He shielded his eyes and felt his way to the stairs with one hand on the leaf-covered wall, twice running into sprawling tomato plants. They had finally put in biomesh on the walls, which mostly housed
filter vines and Glo Non-GMO Certified vegetables. Once outside, he pulled on his infrareds. No sense tripping on busted sidewalk or felled trashcans or stray dogs or stray people. On his way, he picked up a few used KwikSkip syringes and stuck them in one of the new tamper-proof trash boxes. He could never remember which company made these bins, but it was probably the same one that generated most of the trash that got put in them. “Our goal is to revitalize our coastal communities, bringing in more jobs for our hardworking citizens,” said a representative of Sea Star Eco-Resorts, went the article.

That was what he had been writing about, before the alarm went off. Sea StarTM spent a lot of money displacing a lot of people to import sand, to make huge gated beach resorts so the tourists could feel good about themselves, being so eco-neutral, helping fund a trash-free beach. Never mind that nets caught fish while they caught plastic, they had aquariums for that. Very few people liked drug-addicts and refugees better than tiny animals. Unlike with people, you could look at fish and eels and sea urchins in nice neat rows from the sterilized side of the glass, and not have to do anything different when you went home again. (Experience the Pristine Sea-scapes! The Jewels of the Waterfront! Take some space to unwind! Avoid responsibility in Three Easy Steps! Treat yourself, you deserve it!)

The last alley contained MiniMac wrappers, empty AquaSani and Glaciers water bottles, and baby weeds poking up out of the sand. He walked past them into the open. He turned down the infrared and briefly admired the dunes in the dark. They had climbed slowly up the broken seawalls, drifting higher especially since the dam removal campaign finally got through. Sea oats rustled softly under the roar of the waves. He inhaled slowly, savoring the ocean salt and stench of decaying algae and Chlo-weed. It smelled awful but air filters had been declared optional, and it was worth it for the occasional gust of cool offshore breeze. Nothing but the grass and the water moved. It looked like a normal beach if you ignored the stable dunes, he thought, pulling on work gloves. Plastic and glass further up by the high tide mark, and stripes of smaller containers and bottle caps leading down into the breakers. To the north, he could make out a few refugees, camped illegally by the dunes, asleep by the feel of their minds. He never bothered them and there were so few they were easy to avoid, especially since so many restoration projects had tightened up security. This one wasn’t checked often, but most refugees were fisheries folk, grieving for the harbors and old beaches. He trusted them better than other beachgoers, who were merely bored and therefore more dangerous.

He pulled a sharps bag out of his backpack and started chucking in beer bottles. “…and there has been increasing concern about the high number of telepathic veterans who may be medication noncompliant, which makes them far more likely to be a danger to average citizens,” said the article narration. He walked closer to the surf, picking up twisted shards of what might have been car parts. One wave sent a row of jellyfish tumbling into the nearest trash drift, squelching. Something crunched under his heel and he had an awful second’s fear he might have stepped on something alive. He dug around in the sand with his gloved fingers and pulled out an unidentifiable metal thing, to his great relief. It might have been the remains of a chair. He put it in the bag. The article narrative kept going, now listing off common medications for PTSD-telepaths.

“New Spring, Lessfar, Hodgeper Balance, and NEERbye are among the more commonly prescribed medications,” said the voice, praising the success of many of these for helping “difficult” patients. Suddenly dizzy, he dropped his backpack and started searching the pockets to turn off his phone. “NEERbye and its sister product, NEthing4U, have had especially promising results in treating modified pilots, a group which has been difficult to treat and has the highest percentage of noncompliant patients.” He fumbled at the screen, dropped a glove in the sand, nearly dropped the phone. “We can’t be held responsible for people who won’t accept medical care. Don’t blame—”

The narration finally stopped. He sank to the ground and put his head between his knees, shuddering. He remembered NEERbye, and more than a few stories about the others. He remembered the epileptic feeling of hundreds of unsynchronized minds, followed by the slow-motion drowning of sedatives, since the sedated mind cannot find the real world and yet cannot sleep. And then the colorless world of old school mood stabilizers. Why bother to eat if food is tasteless, why bother to walk if there is nothing good to see? And finally permutations of his current meds, which created less of an underwater feel and a lot more anxiety attacks. He knew noncompliant vets. He might have been one of them if not for the beach.

He concentrated on breathing in time with the waves. In, out, in, out; don’t think names, don’t think faces; in, out, in, out. Breathe slowly, count the seconds. Another jellyfish floated past, upside down in the rising tide, looking
He sat and breathed until the shaking receded. The tide had advanced to his ankles by the time he went to stand, and a larger than average wave nearly knocked him back down. Salt water got under his goggles and he pulled them off, eyes and nose burning. He spat out brine and confetti fragments of plastic.

Without the infrared, the sky shone brilliantly with stars. He stared up and thanked whatever might be listening for making the deep-water sky a night sky, visible only in the most silent and deathly hour of the morning when every other person slept. Their quieter minds meant he could hear himself think, and remember a few important things still existed in the world. Getting people to take responsibility often felt like digging a grave with a spoon, but he had faith in the ocean. The ocean was still trying, building up dunes and tearing apart trash. As normal as the beach looked, it had dunes, and hidden in the dunes and even up in the trash, some other living things soldiered on. He had no faith in himself, but they couldn't deny the ocean any longer. It had long since passed time to choose sides. He picked the sharps bag back up and went back to gathering trash.

His phone whispered apologetically hours later that it would be best to go home soon. A haze of light would soon be appearing off to the east over the sea, and he could feel the beginnings of motion from the city, returning night shift workers and those first few to drag themselves out of bed to finish an extra task before work. With daylight it might be almost nostalgic. He did not remove his goggles to see it. A trash truck back in the streets dragged a bin to its mouth with an irreverent crash. He flinched and turned reluctantly away from the water. Walking in toward the city felt strangely like death. He walked, then ran, back along the way he had come, resisting a futile urge to clap hands over his ears or hold his breath, as though that would protect him from the ignorant hum of minds, a slowly rising noise that gathered in and around and above him, like the distant shadow of an approaching storm of locusts.

II. Words

The next day went badly. He hadn't gone to sleep quickly enough and the sleeping pills interfered with his neuro-dampers, so he spent seven to eight am curled up by the front door, half crying with every person that left for work or the soup kitchen or to take their kids to school. Their anxiety ran high in the mornings, and they kept dropping things or forgetting things or running late. Their vicarious caffeine made him jittery. He had to keep checking every few minutes whether he'd locked his front door, because they had just locked theirs and he could barely remember which door was his. He woke up on the doormat around 2 pm, completely exhausted. He managed to put his other boot where it belonged before collapsing mostly dressed into bed.

Rush hour woke him back up and he failed to fall asleep again until after most people’s dinners. The road rage of bike traffic surpassed that of electric cars downtown any day, but he got both, gave and received it, including being simultaneously several people in a multi-lane pile-up fiasco. He iced his gravel-shredded knees and hands, which became cold and completely uninjured while a million conversations gave him a pounding headache in his own, distant body. He broke up with a girlfriend and two boyfriends and wrote possibly on his own actual grocery list never to buy pistachio ice cream again because he detested it after tasting his neighbors one building over eat it for the last week.

He fell asleep again somewhere around eight o’clock during the middle of a convenience store robbery, about the time the neighborhood curfews kicked in. He woke properly around an hour before midnight, feeling dizzy and hung over, which was another association he could only make vicariously and as always knew was completely accurate. After walking to the bathroom to check if any of the showers he remembered had been his—the towel wasn't damp, so probably not—he say back down at the kitchen table where he’d woken up. He was in the process of sorting out whether he was actually personally hungry or not when a key scraped at the front door. He listened to the familiar fumble of turning the key the wrong way first and then getting it right. A few bleary moments in, he decided this was happening to his own front door and not someone else’s, though this complex’s locks all got stuck the same.

“You seem out of it today,” she said kindly, pulling the door shut behind her, a bag of groceries balanced on one hip. He couldn’t see her because she had to come around the corner for that, but she projected quite well for an untrained telepath. They had met on a grocery run at 2 am one summer and she enjoyed caring for stray pets, a category he was apparently jumpy enough to qualify for. He knew how to count change but became dreadfully distracted if anyone else was paying at the same time for five blocks in any direction. She agreed with his taste in corn chips and

Trinity Review 46
thought his house plants looked magical, so she helped him count his change and took over buying his groceries from that day forth. In the present, she set the bag down on the table, pushed her infrareds up on her forehead, and stared at him until he could sit up and meet her eyes. He smiled weakly at her and grimaced at the reflection of himself in her head. She had enough presence to be able to tell what he was doing, and laughed.

He looked at himself in her mind while they put away cheese and strawberries and lettuce. His black hair stuck out, wing-like, on the right side of his head. She had turned the lights on to the dimmest setting when she’d entered the kitchen, so his wide open pupils could have passed as a normal result of the light. “Do you have salt on your face?” she asked, seizing a washcloth off the edge of the sink. “I got splashed,” he said. He had a box of RAW (Real Authentic Wild) Foods Blackberries in his hand. “Myrtle Beach?” she asked, and his memory said yes with an impression of the jellyfish. “Did I get these to eat or put away?” he asked. “To eat,” she said firmly, wetting the washcloth and holding it out. “I bet you didn’t eat breakfast yet. I’ll wash those; you wash your face.”

He took the washcloth and she poured the blackberries into a bowl. He felt dizzy again: someone a few floors down got caught coming home late, someone else’s baby daughter had a cough… He sat down. “Wash your face,” she reminded him, now running the bowl under the faucet. She focused on the sound of the water hitting the sink basin, the honey sweet smell of his lily plants, and her amused image of salty stripes on his jawline. Her focusing helped him focus, clicking at least two version of reality into place. A half-formed joke occurred to her and of course he heard it, something about Papa Atlantic trying to make him Anglo, because the salt lines were white, get it? But then she didn’t actually say it out loud because that might be a little bit racist somehow, and neither of them was a first gen but people were touchy about that sometimes, and he could hear it in her head anyway, right? He chuckled, and she rolled her eyes, because “It wasn’t a very good joke,” but she was glad he felt a little better.

“Wash your face,” she said again, setting the bowl of blackberries in front of him. He wiped at the salt absent-ly, still working on centering himself in the correct apartment. The baby had started crying and her mama picked her up and walked circles around their tiny room in the dark. That family were first gens, from Nicaragua, like her parents, though maybe fairer skinned. None of them were as light as he, being the Texas majority poster child that he was. Non-Caucasian White, something like that for the oversimplified race categories on surveys. Texmex, she thought fondly. He remembered the same nickname from before, bittersweet like the first blackberry he ate. The second one was better. She set out a box of cheese and ate a piece of it with one of the berries.

“Were those ice packs because of the wreck on Randon-Asa?” she asked, indicating them. They had left condensation tracks on the tabletop. He thought, chewing. The microwave buzzed and she got a dish out of it. “There were four people, at the start of evening rush time, somewhere with gravel. It hurt.” “Ooh, ouch,” she groaned sympathetically. “I heard about it on the traffic warnings. Did somebody start a fight?”

“I think so,” he replied after a pause. “I—he—the one with two sisters—got angry that he would be late to pick up a package. The project is already behind schedule without those parts.” “Do you remember his name?” she asked. He thought. “…high achiever, and detail-oriented, and Chinese takeout.” She twisted her head. “Chinese take-out?” He nodded, “His dad’s favorite for their lunches on weekends. Is it a Friday?” She shook her head with a gentle smile and stood up. “It’s a Wednesday. I’ll take your trash out.” She knew the sharps bag needed to go in the trash, because he knew it.

People tended to think of telepaths as though they were evil masterminds from movies, flipping through others’ private lives with clinical amusement, looking for secrets and designing ways to make them hurt. People used to imagine spaceships being strict and sterile too, and the same with computers, before the popular media really got a handle on the idea that the best computers were like human brains. Being a telepath felt less like reading a diary and more like becoming another person. That was why an accident could go even worse for the telepaths. You didn’t just lose a friend or a companion, you lost a piece of yourself, a piece and everything. It was falling forever, burning blackness, infinity for a few mad, equally infinite seconds. Such activities as staring straight at the sun or feeling yourself live and die might impair a person for a little while after. Affects become more severe with increased exposure. Piloting careers should have side-affects labels.

“Do you remember my name?” she said, sitting back at the table, now serving hot lasagna out of a dish. It was a focusing check, not an accusation. He knew who she was. She was save the ugly animals and feed everyone, unfazed
and straightforward and cornrows and paper cutout snowflakes. “Your name is Maria,” he said, and she nodded, pushing him a fork and steaming plate. “Very good,” she said. “And do you remember yours?”

Spaceships are fragile. People are fragile. Mistakes will be made. It’s your job to protect them. Don’t think names, don’t think faces...She did not repeat the question.

They ran a half conversation for a while, she speaking mostly aloud, he gradually answering with words instead of only in their heads. He excavated himself from sleepers’ minds while she narrated slideshow memories of an illegal stray GMO labrador she had saved from the sweeper drones. One of the lucky in this place to be a full citizen, she liked to become righteously indignant over anything that might imaginably be misconstrued as a violation of her civil rights. He never understood how righteous indignation and willful misunderstanding of the law could be weaponized in a conversation with police AI, but it worked for her, and she saved lots of dogs that way. He gathered enough clarity to put his dishes in the dishwasher and initiate a new topic.

“What was the big news today?” he asked, continuing, “It seemed like something happened but I never quite heard.” She scraped together the last bites of her lasagna. “A big spaceship went rogue, they’re pretty sure,” she said around a mouthful of pasta. “A U.S. military galactic one. Dropped contact on the way out to Mars and is heading for the asteroid belt. Days ago, apparently.” He suddenly felt very alert, as though watching himself from a short distance away. “It’s not answering any signals. Why would you go through the asteroid belt? Isn’t that dangerous?” she went on, glancing at him expectantly. “Not really,” he answered. He waited for his heart to race and nausea to twist him sharply into his own body, but nothing. He went on.

“The asteroid belt is still mostly empty space. Any decent pilot could get through it without much trouble. It’s not exciting like in a video game.” He pictured a galaxy map to show her; if you wanted to look like you were going to Mars to change your mind, veering off into the asteroid belt at least sort of looked like a mistake at first. His heart was beating faster now. It did not have the memory-fear feeling of an old surprise but of a real thing, new and exciting even if for somebody else. “What kind of ship, did they say? Or the crew size?” he asked.

“Um,” she started, while she rinsed her dishes in the sink. “Not sure. U.S. only, not a U.N. joint mission. They said it was one of the ones that can handle deep space and they might have to go after it.” He felt almost lightheaded at the possibilities. An act of war or terrorism was unlikely, but there were a few other reasons you might get the crew to run away with its own ship. “It would be a Sirius or Procyon, then,” he said, caught up in possibilities. “Beautiful ships, completely self-sufficient. Every single one of them has an independent genetics team and a full seed bank. If they don’t want to be found, they can vanish and not need any help to do it.”

She whistled, impressed and picking up a little of his newfound energy. “You don’t seem offended that your fellow servicemen have betrayed their country, or however the news crews phrase it these days,” she commented, glancing up when a shrill beeping started. He stood to retrieve his phone from where he’d left it on the counter the previous morning. The sound, as ever, put a zing in his gut, but today for once he felt more alive. It felt like waking up, or like flying.

“Cocktail time,” she said with a wink. He laughed brightly, pulling a case of syringes out of a drawer. Even pills and tiny cold needles couldn’t keep his mind from leaping millions of miles into space. What might they want out there? What new dreams were they dreaming? He tossed back the prescribed off-brand antidepressant and got his vials of Quantum NEssie and NordiPharma Iteration Three out of the fridge. “I hope it’s the crew Martell is on,” he said, wiping off the vials and his upper arm with an alcohol swab. “Let me check the doses?” she murmured, hovering behind his chair. He drew up one from each and re-capped them where she could see.

“I hope their CO hub team has the spokes all on board. The engineer teams will make or break a ship takeover,” he said, warming the cold contents of the syringe in the palms of his hands. “And why are you leaping to conclusions about why this one ship went rogue? You haven’t actually read the reports,” she said. “I don’t need to,” he answered, arm outstretched. He uncapped the first syringe and slid the needle into his arm. “The news will never tell us what they wanted whether or not they get away. I hope they do,” he said. His eyes slid shut and he pushed down the plunger. I hope they do.

III. Deep-Water Sky

Trinity Review 48
He heard the hiss of a squirt bottle and recognized the sound about the same time that a gentle stream of pressurized air and water vapor hit his face. He scrunched up his nose and brushed water off his eyelashes before opening his eyes to glower jokingly at his attacker. “Hub duty in fifteen minutes, Lieutenant,” said his subordinate, perfectly straight-faced and simultaneously offering an elaborately rendered mental portrait of his superior as Sleeping Beauty. “Was that sprayer in your orders, ensign?” he asked, belying his stern tone with a mental grin and a physical stretch. “Yes sir,” said the ensign gravely, silently blaming another lieutenant. “Thank you, ensign,” he answered with equal gravity, stretching again while he could before he had to go on duty. The ensign saluted crisply and left the break lounge, pleased with himself and grateful to his CO for not snapping his head off for someone else’s prank.

Speaking of which, the one responsible for the squirt bottle was coming down the hallway, mind overflowing with colorful mental energy almost brighter than his flaming red hair. **Best Sleeping Beauty impression**, it’s true, the man told him in a less than private thought, setting most of the personnel in the spoke laughing appreciatively. It’s a talent of mine, he acknowledge, smiling in reality and reveling in the mindscape, the efficiency and connections of the subs and COs. He didn’t know if he would ever get over the heady feeling of a fully telepath crew, not just a few hundred running the navigation but in every level of command.

Nobody on hub crew ever completely went off duty except when they were asleep. Even then, they dreamed privately only because the on-duty teams kept their fellows cocooned, just barely possible and only while they slept. Otherwise the top capacity minds rolled through the others like water, feeling all two thousand four hundred and thirty-three enhanced and the unmodified softer half. The hub knew every member of every spoke even when offline, favorite colors and snack foods and childhood TV shows, weird habits and memories and past hairstyles, names and faces. The ship and its people were a sprawling fantastic orchestra, and as a team of conductors the hub pilots synchronized them, the brain of the nervous system, the failsafe, the heart.

His hub partner opened the door. “All hooked back in, Texmex?” he asked, mentally cackling like a hyena about the squirt bottle and sleeping beauty picture. In person, Martell, beamed with a fierceness fit for a demon. “I think sushi—I think so, I mean, yes,” he said, stuttering and standing up while the other laughed aloud delightedly. “Words are hard,” Martell beamed, slapping him on the back as they stepped into the hallway. They walked at a brisk page, and he trailed a hand through the plants reaching out from the walls.

This one was a functional hall, short stalks of wild wheat on either vertical side. He knew there were stumpy beans and squash as well, barely visible on the walls but easier to see underfoot through grilles on the floor. Only electronics maintenance and some labs had a limited microbiome and no plants. Everywhere else was always splashed with green growing out of built-in pots and flowerbeds and vertical biomesh. He would never have noticed all the hard work by the microbiome people, but they were telepaths too, so he did notice. Several of them made root beer floats once a month, and another few had gotten sunburned by the solar-spectrum hallway lights on their first day on a Sirius. He liked them, and their buddies in ag.

Ag had lined the command spaces with strictly functional air cleaners like ivy and elbow-space-hogging dra-caenas. They filled living quarters with herbs and climate-zone themed flowers, and had an unofficial rotating schedule for whose job it was to make up the weekly scatalogical joke to be telepathically pinned to the doors of the wastewater recycling gardens. He glanced down a few floors out of curiosity and heard the current scheduled joke-maker avoiding that responsibility by doing her actual work. Martell reminded him of one of the last year’s best jokes, earning a silent Gross and the equivalent of an elbow to the ribs.

“GMO jokes are bad taste, but it was pretty funny,” he admitted. They turned down a fork in the hall. The pair acknowledged the salutes of a trio of gardeners, who returned to inspecting shelves of still-growing pumpkins. “Ah, sky view is on,” Martell said as they entered the soundproof hub space. They both watched the ceiling as he lowered the lights. Overhead, an image of the night sky shone brilliantly with stars. Familiar constellations burned portentously through the barest watercolor of the Milky Way’s arm, swirls of crystalline dust, and behind it all, outer space in its glorious depths. This was only a high-res image, completely unnecessary feed relayed from cameras on the outside of the ship. Yet after seeing the real thing, knowing this image reflected the truth outside, the blackness on the screen seemed deeper. Nothing eclipsed the sheer sense of size one got from being outside Earth’s atmosphere. None of the words for darkness in any of the languages the crew spoke seemed adequate.
“I dreamed about the sky, that reminds me,” he said, brushing a tendril of ivy off the touch screens built into the wall. “Figures,” said Martell, starting the checks for the amplifiers and the control touchpads, and asked, “You were pretty well out of it for such a short nap. Care to share?”

“It was strange, from what I remember. I think I was picking up trash on a beach in the Carolinas, but it was the middle of the night and there were barely any refugees.”

“That’s it? I was expecting giant purple grasshoppers or flying sharks to qualify as weird,” said Martell, checking the time. “T minus six minutes. Do you want the sky off or on?” “On is fine,” he said, starting to shut them out from the rest of the ship for the pre-handoff cooldown. Four and a half thousand people softened and blurred slightly below comprehensible range. That left only the computer’s access points humming softly, inaudible without amplification to all but the most sensitive telepaths. The on-duty pair one room over would request check-in at T minus sixty seconds. He sat down and they watched the status bar climb towards synch-ready.

Martell twisted around in his chair. “Can I ask you something?” he said. “You just did, he answered, heard Smartass, and snickered, “Go for it.” “What do you think of all these runs we keep doing?” asked Martell. He hesitated for a fraction of a thought before replying. Off the record? I think someone high up is in bed with the Mars One Hundred, but “Whether or not I’d like to question it, that’s not my job,” he finished aloud. He could feel his friend looking at him sideways now. He got a reply mostly in their heads.

The whole idea of the Mars Top One Hundred Companies makes it easier for them to screw everyone left on Earth, Martell thought with deliberate clarity. I heard from some others that that’s why our Admiral got demoted. She said what you said, except it was her job to do something about it. It should have been her job, and they kicked her down for it. “I don’t like it,” Marcel finished aloud casually. He went still, feeling a kind of subdued shock. Their captain had been an admiral prior to becoming their captain, and nobody would openly think about why she was no longer an admiral. Popular opinion held that she didn’t deserve demotion, whatever it was for, and everyone said Admiral in their heads any time they had to say Captain Travis out loud. Actual corruption went far beyond what they would have speculated.

“Really?” he responded finally, forgetting the logic of their spoken conversation. Reliable source. I’d swear on it or more, promised his friend. “T minus four minutes. Synch is ready,” he answered, and What’s more?

A real challenge for a change. Engineering teams would love it, hypothetically. And you know how it is for us on-planet. We go from patriots to freak show. Martell looked pale, almost feverish with excitement, and started the synch. They both put their hands on the control touchpads. He stared up at the image of the eternal night sky above until the synch forced him to shut his eyes.

So, what, he asked, shaken, we’re complicit if we stay and miserable if we quit and go back. What are we supposed to do, dump their cargo and chart a one-way for extra-galactic?

Why not?
White Christmas
Sarah Spence

Mama tells the story every year –
how we peeped through the windows,
not making a sound,
pretending we were mice on Christmas night.

We turned off all the lights,
so we didn’t scare them,
the angels that crept quietly
toward our lawn.

The grass was lit up like the 4th of July,
with a cross glowing bright, just for us –
Mama shook with excitement,
but told me to keep still.

When the angels had finished,
they left without a word,
and Mama wouldn’t let me
say thank you.

I guess no one saw the cross,
cause it never got mentioned
in the paper with
all the Big News.

But every year she tells the story,
and someday when I’m older,
she says I will finally
understand.

View by the Trinity Fountain
Beth Keenan
A Thorn In My Side
Melanie Orellana

I was sitting in one of the desk chairs. The ones where my feet can’t touch the ground and people never hesitate to point out. What they didn’t really know was that I liked having my feet hanging, so what?

“Hey, how should I format this design? I can’t come up with a basic foundation to engineer this stupid bridge with a budget of only ten thousand.”

I looked over at Meghan. Her brows were scrunched up in frustration. She was breathing heavily.

“Give it here.”

There wasn’t much to it, if we’re talking about foundation. A triangle is the sturdiest shape over a center point.

I picked up a pen and started drawing.

“Hey! It’s supposed to be in my writing! I don’t draw like you do, and— “

She took the paper from me.

“Why would I do it like this? It’s a waste of money. If I had a bigger budget, I’d try this, but I don’t. Forget it. I’ll talk to my boss tomorrow.”

She throws the paper into a pile and stares at her computer. I just stare.

“What? Is this design wrong for this bridge?”

She points to her computer.

“No, nothing.”

I turn and stare at my screen. I don’t feel productive much after that. I just doodle. It’s almost time to leave anyway. I turn off the computer and pack up.

“Hey, are you okay? You aren’t as talkative as earlier.”

“Oh no, I’m fine. Just gonna’ head home. I’m done with everything here.”

“Okay, do you need help carrying some of that?”

I pick up my papers and books. The ones that don’t fit in my backpack.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks. Goodnight. See you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight.”

I get to my car and sigh. I throw everything in the passenger’s seat and sit in the back. I sigh again and bang my head against the headrest of the driver’s seat. I inhale. I hold my breath for as long as I manage and sigh roughly.

“Three sighs. That’s better.”

I get a message. I pull out my phone and my spine tingles.

Dad: You’d said you’d call.

“Fuck.”

I call. My dad answers.

“Why are you calling?”

“I thought it’d be okay to call now rather than not at all.”

“Your mom’s not here.”

“I can still call, can’t I”

“No point. You let her down. Like always.”

Ouch.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry, I got called into work to help some people out. Forgot to text you guys about it.”

“If they need your help so much, why aren’t you getting paid more?”

“It doesn’t work like that, dad.”

“Of course it doesn’t, you’re just an editor.”

Wow, okay.

“Dad— “

Trinity Review 52
‘And you’re always busy. You never call. Well, not like you care in the first place. At least call once a week for your mom. She gets upset, then I have to deal with that.’

Yeah, I just lose track of time with work and volunteering.”

“I don’t see why you do that. It doesn’t make you any money. You could be spending that time at another job or helping out here.”

“I don’t want to overwork myself. And I send money every week.”

“What you make isn’t enough.”

“It’s over a grand.”

“Is that all we’re worth?”

Are you fucking kidding me?

“What about my brother? Your son? Your only son? He’s not even working. He’s twenty-four. He lives with you guys!”

“He’s in college. He can’t work right now.”

“I worked when I was college! Internships, part time, work study. There are options that fit his workload and schedule. Besides, it’s his seventh year in college and he still doesn’t have a degree! He should just stick to one and get a good paying job.”

“You should’ve taken your own advice.”

As if I didn’t.

“I did stick to one degree and get a job right out of college. I make decent money and enjoy what I do. I pay my bills and yours! Mom doesn’t even know about that last bit, does she? What, does she still think you’re working? Cuz you and I both know you can’t anymore. You need to tell her.”

“That’s none of your business!”

“Why? Because you spend it all buying beer and hanging with your buddies? Because if you tell her she won’t think so highly of you? Because you actually like not having to be at home? Because you don’t want to spend time with your own wife while she runs around, on her own, doing whatever you want? Because you won’t have any luxury anymore? The luxury I pay for? It’s my money dad, so it’s my business. I don’t even ask why you need four grand a month when we lived fine off of two, but I send it anyway. You need to tell her. And you need to tell your son to start providing for the household HE lives in.”

“Why are so angry about how much money you give us? If you had a better degree you’d get more money and everyone would be fine. This is your fault. You disobeyed me by changing your major. I told you that you’d have to support us as we got older. I raised you, young lady. This is not how you repay the debt to your parents! And do not bring your mother into this. How selfish is it of you to even think about putting her under stress? She can’t handle that anymore. And your brother is working on going into computer engineering. He needs to focus on his classes. You’re so inconsiderate. I don’t understand why you can’t just do as you’re told. You cause more trouble than you’re worth! And that’s nothing! I expect a check of 1,500 every week from now on.”

A click. I place my phone down softly on the leather. I clench my stomach and focus on breathing. I force my eyes shut so I won’t have to admit it. I get another message.

Mom: Hey sweetie, I missed your call today. I know you’re busy though so it’s fine. I hope you’re healthy and safe! I hate to ask this of you, but could you lend me a few hundred dollars for groceries? Your dad isn’t making the best money right now. I’ll pay you back when I can.

I sigh. I get to work.

Me: I’m sorry mom! I should’ve texted you about being called into work. I lost track of myself. Consider the 800 I just sent you an apology. You don’t have to pay me back, ma. Anything to help! Luv you!

I get another message. A sob breaks from my lips.

Mom: Thank you so much duckling. I’m so proud of you. Keep doing great things! Luv you 2 J.

“God dammit!”

I try to focus on something before my eyes get too blurry. I grip the seat in front of me. My head hangs between my knees. It hurts when I inhale. It hurts.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck! I can’t do this! I can’t! Fuck!”

I whisper to myself. I remind myself.
“Be selfish be selfish be selfish be selfish be selfish be selfish be selfish! It’s okay to be selfish!”

The pain in my stomach only got more pronounced. My chest constricted. My head pounded.

You’re worthless! You’re inconsiderate! Irresponsible! You care about no one but yourself. You always mess up! You can’t do anything right! It’s your fault, your fault! Everything is and will always be your fault!

I groan in frustration.

“Oh God, please stop. Stop!”

It never stops. But I open my eyes anyway. I cry for another hour before I make it to the driver’s seat.
Birth of Adam
Carl Teegerstrom

Green Dusk
Dzung Vu
My Blue Jay
Megan Reynolds

I had a blue jay
that sang outside my window
every day at five
in the morning.

At first, its warble
rang out sweet,
soft like the skin
on your cheek.

At first, I didn’t mind
waking up
just a little bit earlier
than planned.

And then I hated that bird.
Days turned into weeks
which fell into months
which surrendered to years.

Its call grated on the window
panes. Scratched the glass
and pierced early morning
like the sudden jolt
of a falling dream.
Then one day I awoke
and my bird had flown away.
Then I realized just how sharply
silence can sound and how heavy
sheets can feel when you’re sleeping
alone.

Magic Shoes
Dzung Vu
Faith Poynor

If only words came as easy as dreaming.
I sit and wait for the words to come, but they won't. I could wait all night with nothing but a blank page to show for my efforts in the morning. What to write, what to say? How to make a person listen when every word I say could get twisted around another way?

My muse has forsaken me. Words no longer come easily to me. With the loss of confidence comes the loss of creative ability. I want so much to make everything right. Broken lives and broken hearts could be healed with the right words. But how do I find them? Every time I try, I fail. In the darkest moments of our lives, words have the power to kindle a flame of hope inside us. If only I could find the right words and arrange them the right way, I could do anything.

Words can deceive, harm, kill. Empty promises whispered in trusting ears, lies told in love, soul-crushing despair. All things I’ve faced before. Ugly emotions of contempt, jealousy, and anger twist words around in spite. What is true, what is false? I need to find a way.

It is all in my mind: a feeling of being worthless, untouchable, broken. An illusion created and destroyed by words alone. I will not stop until I have power over these words and can force them to do my will. I will not stop until this is finished. Strength and courage needed to succeed lie within me, waiting to be discovered and exposed to the world. Where do I go from here? I need to change. I must walk through the fire and be reborn from the ashes.

A few words on a nearly blank page call for help.

My friend is in need, but I don’t know how to help. Where to begin? All these questions must be answered. Time slips through my fingers, precious seconds are lost in the confusion of life. The harder you try to hold on, the more you lose your grip. I feel so lost, not knowing how to right the wrongs and heal the suffering soul. I will never let her light burn out, no matter what it takes. She will never be alone. Dreams shattered, we fall to the ground. The hardest thing is taking breath to live. We all fall down, but it takes courage to stand back up. Take a deep breath, pray for peace, and get back up.

Strength. At last.

With a new sense of purpose, I pick up my pen and begin putting words to paper. A loyal assurance of friendship, an earnest whisper of love, a spark of hope in the eyes of the hopeless. Have faith, and let the words flow. Words that will save my friend. Words can be so very powerful. Words can change lives, nations, worlds. But the problem is knowing how to phrase and shape those words to create, inspire, save. And I finally know.

Suddenly, the once blank page is filled with beautiful, terrible words.
Pocket Change
Julia Camp

Copper kills those who let it,
like a poison
that takes away the sight
of the little girl you love without limits,
the girl with gorgeous
plump copper eyes and pigtails.
It’s hard to let go
of the way her new orange dress
sprawls as she spins,
and swirls and smiles and says,
“Do you see me, sis?”
so you look at her brilliant,
star-lit, smile
while she laughs.
In the midst of her might,
the fright sets in
that so much can rely
on the taste of copper.

Beauty of the Death
Dzung Vu
Hamlet

Carl Teegerstrom

Arendal

Delia Zacarias

Trinity Review 59
Dust collects on the dingy yellow buttons of the console
As the windshield wipers creak
And the patch worked engine shutters to a stop.
The boy with the sandy blonde hair pounds at the steering wheel
For the fifth time that night
And the girl tries to suppress an uncomfortable laugh.
He wanted it to work,
Needed them to work.
But as the rain poured down the pair
Drifted further away from each other.

The rusty hood cracks open,
Riddled with dents and peeling paint chips,
And the girl is reminded of the sturdy, callused hands of her Grandfather,
Working tirelessly on her old dollhouse.
Rough, grainy sandpaper outlining the edges of the boxed structure
Fingers meticulously gluing and re-gluing
Nailing and re-nailing
Shingles patch worked together
And wallpaper steam pressed seamlessly.
Pale pink brushstrokes made by shaky hands and wrinkled palms
Speckles of paint dashed all along his arms.

Barbie and Ken lay on the wooden floor
Missing left shoe, hair disheveled
Hands almost touching
Almost
But not quite.

Now the boy finished taping and tightening and cursing
And the girl rubbed away the smudge of grease from beneath his eye
With her thumb.
To Our Readers,

First, we’d like to thank the Trinity community as a whole for not only supporting us, but for also contributing great work to our publication each year. Without your constant readership and contributions, the Trinity Review would cease to exist.

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Many thanks to the Student Government Association for funding our Open Mic nights, where the Trinity community has had a chance to show off their many artistic talents. We’ve had alumni with bands playing their latest albums, students show off their poems written for class, unique stand up comedy, and many other, exciting acts. Thank you for helping us host these memorable events.

Yours,

Co-Editors Megan Reynolds and Amy Rossini
2015-2016
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