

PORTALS 2025



TORA BY KYLE MOORE

Editors

FACULTY EDITOR: BRENDA NICHOLAS



Brenda Nicholas earned her M.F.A from UNC-Wilmington with an emphasis in poetry. She has taught college English and writing at Siena College, The College of Saint Rose, Temple College, and Cape Fear Community College. She has published 1 chapbook and 2 books of poetry, and her work appears in numerous literary journals.

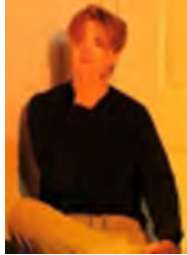
FACULTY EDITOR: LAURA TEAKELL



Laura Teakell has taught English at Cape Fear Community College for about a year now. She loves reading, writing, and coffee! Laura discovered her adoration for teaching during her time as a Circus Performer where she performed on the flying trapeze, aerial hoop, and aerial silks. When she wasn't performing, Laura was teaching aerial skills to others. She loved witnessing their progress and excitement! Her favorite time as a performer was the year she lived in Mexico and performed at several resorts. She met so many people from around the world during her circus days and that will always stay in her heart.

Editors

STUDENT EDITOR: LANDON BURGAMY



Landon Burgamy is an undergraduate at Cape Fear. He hopes to finish his associates degree sometime in 2027 and hopefully get into a four-year university. He enjoys reading, writing and gaming and his goal is to be a creative director of a major games studio.

STUDENT EDITOR: ELENA BRAGAN



Elena Bragan has been a Wilmington wanderer and writer for two years. As a sophomore, she is working toward receiving her English degree with a long-term goal of pursuing law. In her free time, she can be found smelling poetic roses, engrossed in classical literature, singing to the birds, or elbows deep in her ceramic sculptures.

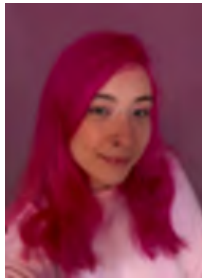
Editors

STUDENT EDITOR: SHELBY SHAFFER



Shelby Shaffer loves to read fantasy and romance novels, leave Halloween decorations up all year, and her 3 cats. She enjoys writing fiction and would like to explore writing horror.

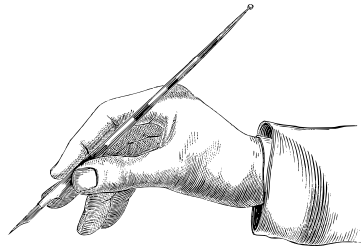
STUDENT EDITOR: KRISTEN PEACOCK



Kristen Peacock is in her third and final semester at CFCC, and applying to transfer to a North Carolina university in the fall of 2026. She wants to obtain an MFA in hopes of becoming a professor in conjunction with her goal of pursuing writing and publishing her own work. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her two cats, reading at the beach, and roller skating.

EDITOR'S NOTE

*Submit to be featured for the
next Portals Magazine
publication!*



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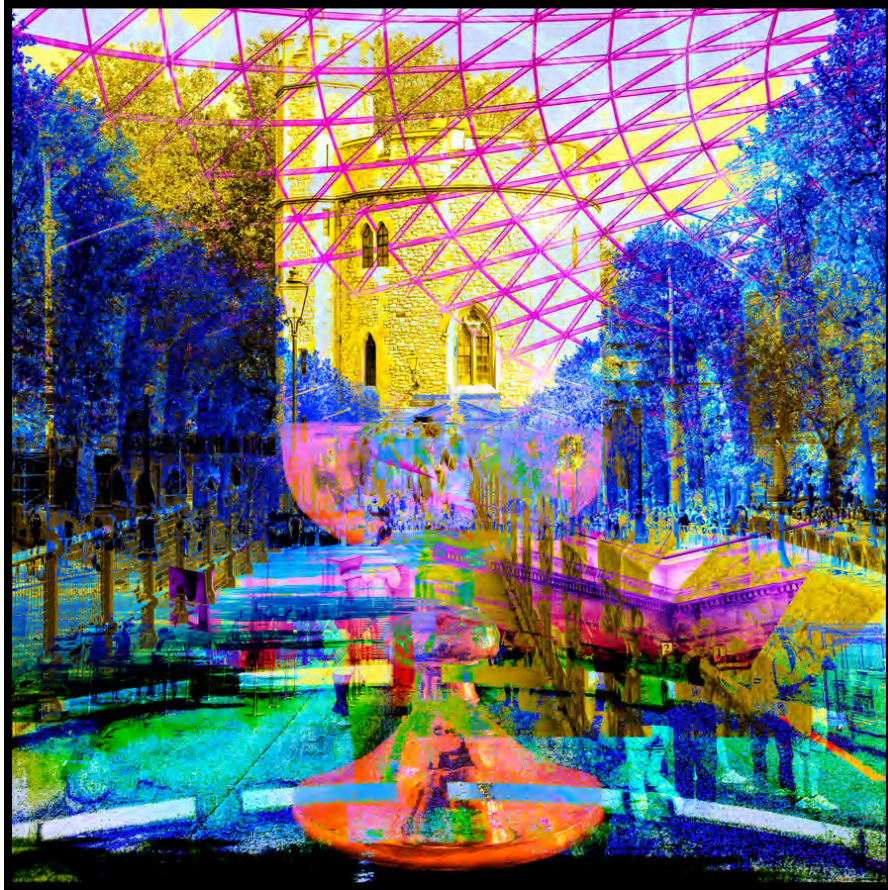
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Art

TITLE Wanderings England

AUTHOR Suzanne Voigt



Poetry

Not a Breakup Poem

By Marian Cramer

Those are reserved for country songs and Taylor Swift!
They are silly backtracks for ice cream gallons and photo bonfires,
for the men who've failed me—for you to read and say,
“you're being too nice, God damnit.”
We were never supposed to need one for us.
Because breakups don't take months or years.
They are the snap of a dried twig, explosive, splinters left in fingers,
damns breaking and floods and tsunamis and hurricanes.
Breakups are your arms in a dark parking lot,
wiped tears and mild threats of violence.
They aren't a pond going dry, a gentle draining of liquid,
fish dying first, and ducks flying away next.
They aren't deer returning in the spring, finding only caked mud and algae.
My breakups are songs about smashing things and heavy drums,
not slow piano and minor keys.
So this is not a breakup poem. And I don't lie awake at night wondering—
Does your mom hate me? Does your dad roll his eyes at my name?
Do you talk shit about me like all the men before you?
Do you still think I'm too nice?
No, this can't a breakup poem.
I don't feel a part of me missing, like taking a bracelet off after years.
And I don't have to ignore the strip of exposed skin, the tan line leftover.
I don't try to convince myself the bracelet frayed and itched.
I don't return to our dry pond,
don't remember how our spots faded
and our legs grew long and slender,
didn't think we'd return together.
I say we are not broken,
but the fish are floating,
and the ducks are flying,
and the record is spinning.

Poetry

Omelas

- *Inspired by the music of Sadder Days*

By Ethan Jones

Your **nocturnal skin** beckons me through the haze
The most beautiful **mirage** my brain could imagine
My touch meets yours, soft and inviting like **velour**

All that exists here is **you and my desire**

I call out through my skull won't you *write back*?
But **whispers in the garth** never make a difference
In this moment of perfection, I **dread** any outcome

Poetry

Liner Notes on a Real Frank Turner Playlist

For Thomas

After Terrance Hayes

By Pat Mestrez

1. “The Ballad of Me and My Friends”

Sleep is for the Week. 2007.

2006, two high school dudes become best friends.

Starting with The Road, we began to tally our tributes to Frank’s songs.

We knew nothing of The Nambucca, where he played those live
dive shows. But we worked to learn about that scene fast.

We found songs to take us an ocean away.

We found not just a musician but an entertainer. Something more.

2. “Love Ire and Song”

From the album of the same name. 2008

Songs of The South weren’t enough. We longed for more.

This one gave the words to unite us with a tribe of friends.

We felt united across borders in a battle cry that paved the way.

We waved new banners, read new bibles, sang songs
of revolution. Knowing nothing about 1905 or 1917, we learned fast.

We found a new way to listen to life.

Poetry

3. “Poetry of the Deed” - Live performance

From the album of the same name. 2009

We sweated and soaked in the luminosity of the stage.
The live shows bringing together brothers and sisters made
weary by simple slogans. And the bass boomed out fast.
Frank’s guitar churned our spirits, and red blood thickly ran free
In our veins and heated our souls. Philosophy morphed into song
and actions. The Band of The Sleeping Souls lead the way.

4. “The Way I Tend to Be”

Tape Deck Heart. 2013.

Why this track? Remember hearing the soft sound coming over the radio waves?
A change had occurred. A movement thick with black-red blood life
was being washed and grayed with the shitty culture pop sound.
Maybe he was just growing up and learning that hammers didn’t heal anymore?
Maybe we were growing up too, and cut loose, unmoored? Just old friends lost?
Our compass course no longer marked? No new directions to hold fast?

5. “There She Is”

Be More Kind. 2018.

Eight years had passed since High School. Fast
years burning by. Moments had fled into the air and flickered away
like the shadows of sights seen and graying friendships
felt slipping away. But some moments do stay, do linger, do make you come alive
And remain embedded like only the best songs do. They are much more
Because they show this life is worth living. I missed you there. My wedding song.

Poetry

6. "Haven't Been Doing So Well"

FTHC. 2022.

Fifteen years of new songs.

Fifteen years of trying, fighting, failing. So quickly

we've forgotten what we fought to learn. How much

Time we've wasted getting wasted. Friends and lovers fading

Away as a pandemic hammers on our fight to feel alive.

Away we scurry into our shells when we most need our friends.

Play it on repeat my friend. Savor each song.

Listen to the live cuts. Play it slow and play it fast.

Let the list carry you away. Try again to believe in something more. -P

Poetry

A Nuclear Accident

By Elizabeth Koenig

What a wonderful mother you'll become—
Maybe I'll meet a chemist. There will be a spark,
A burst of energy and we'll procure a home.
Atoms will split, glowing from my core, and
God Bless! a slobbering and spittering little baby.
Cradled in it's leaden bassinet,
Acute coos and goos like a geiger counter and
I'm trying not to react to it's complete
And utter meltdown.
Pacifier like cooling rods, I'm insufficient.
I once had a flourishing city; I was privy
But now it's been razed for me to raise
This blank canvas, yet all I can think of
Is the contamination;
The millions of ways it can detonate.
In sixty seconds, total decimation.

**Herstory contest winner*

Poetry

Op. 37 No. 1

Based on Chopin's Nocturnes, Op. 37 No. 1

By Kelly Tierney

Your shoulders have turned cold
Your eyes devoid of light
The heart knows what it wants to know, but the mind knows what is right
But when I reminisce on all the times that we've had, you're still better than all the rest
You're no longer the same man, still, I love you nonetheless
I hold onto the memories and the words that bring relief
I'll dance around discernment just to spare myself the grief
And I'll strike this torturous nocturne until I'm ragged and out of breath
You take my devotion for a game, still, I love you nonetheless
Now I sit across a softened man, a man for which I prayed
A man who admits that he was wrong, a man who knows he's changed
And a vow to be reborn leads me to forgive the test
The worst is through, and despite all that I knew, I'll still love you nonetheless
But in the end, I suppose it's true, the mind knows what is right
But the heart will drag you through despair, through many a sleepless night
The man that I knew is gone; into the night he fled
But he forgot his burnished vow, the only thing I have left
Like a fool, I loved him in spite of it all, and like a fool, I've no regrets
A life that's new is a life without you, still your name gets caught in my chest
I should be through, but it still rings true, I love you nonetheless

**ee-moh contest winner*

Poetry

But in the end, I suppose it's true, the mind knows what is right
But the heart will drag you through despair, through many a sleepless night
The man that I knew is gone; into the night he fled
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I should be through, but it still rings true, I love you nonetheless

Poetry

Game in the Oak

By Emma Riggs

The dismantled deer rests against the boulder
Its eyes, pale and lame, display a scene;
A future unknown, disturbingly spoken.
The chilled air infiltrates my nostrils
And tastes of an earthly metal.
Minutes ago, the animal was alive,
Unaware that its life was in the hands
Of five starving, unfortunate girls.
The frost clawed at our skin.
Hours passed like rattled breaths,
With the desire of not returning
To camp empty-handed.
Not disappointing the others,
In fear we may become the game.

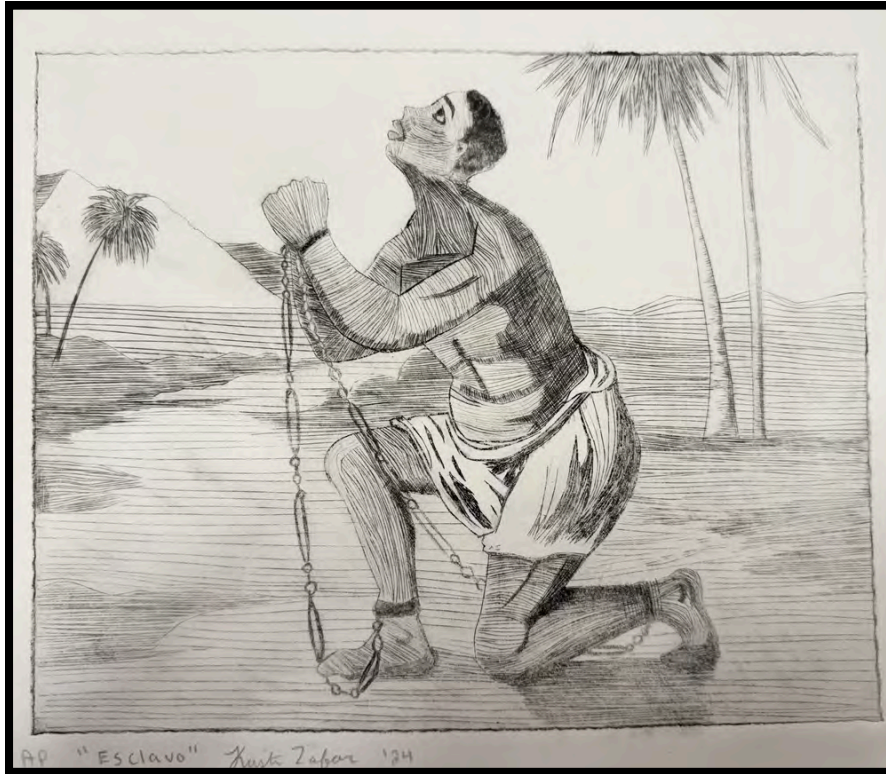
Poetry

The buck staggered from behind the oak.
The first arrow grazed its antler
And Shiloh tensed as I drew back
The final vessel of our aspiration.
Straight into the neck,
The buck collapsed abruptly

Like a woodpecker's drill.
As did the bubbling foam,
Frothing from its deranged mouth
Like the unforgiving northbound rapids.
Disbelieving stares and lurching stomachs
Were the only results
The two of us could muster,
As the snow flurried like needles,
And our hunger would never be released
By something more rabid than us.

Art

TITLE Esclavo
AUTHOR Kristin Zafar



Poetry

Acoustics

By Emma Riggs

The cracked sidewalk glides under our feet,
while streets gleam
from the headlights
of an endless stream of cars.
You and I climb the brick steps
as the sun peeks over the bar roof,
music muffled and waltzing.
Behind the windows,
silhouettes of people sway
to the strums of a guitar.
Laughter and clinking glasses
erupt when the door creaks open,
as a girl playing cards draws four
and we gravitate towards
the table farthest from the crowd.
It's warm being this close to one another;
the lighting is dim
and the atmosphere entrances us.
Like hypnotization, we sync with our peers
who carry mixed drinks
and kiss their partners,
and you and I do the same
because there is no passion greater
than that between two lovers
and soft acoustics.

Poetry

Field of View

By Kayla Brethauer

The camera highlights
the crinkles by your eyes, you cover
the exposed flesh with concealer.
We used to be younger, unaware
of our youth, unconcerned
for the future or any consequences
that may follow us from the past.
The camera distorts
the neon green liquid in your cup,
a libation that leads only to a blackout.
We used to be children,
licking frosting off of a cookie in the
food court mall, ignoring the Lorde music
video playing on the screen behind your head.
The camera displays
rows of towels laid out on the sand,
bodies burning for an even tan.
We used to be fun,
jumping into every mass of water
we stumbled across. Our play
didn't dictate any time for vanity.
We'd bob under the water
to avoid the flash of a camera.

Poetry

The Quiet After

By Mo Mahon

As you leave,
I sit in silence.
My eyelids either shut
or caught, staring, stuck.
I wonder when it became too much—
When was my fight not strong enough?

Compiling your things,
I feel no empathy,
just sorrows and self-pity.
I realize that without you,
without your things,
My mind and home are clean.

The ego thing,
it's left along with your ring.
Now you're nothing,
just a voice continuing to fade,
while my bed stays perfectly made.

Poetry

Your moldy feeling, no longer there to linger,
no more lint, no late nights on your computer.
I won't keep waiting, or pretending, or shaming.
It's like, once I came to realize who you were,
my entire understanding of life shifted—
my faith and stability
completely shattered.

You were much too young,
as I am too,
but unlike me, you were lying,
and nothing was true.

It's been hard to forgive the thoughts of you,
trumped by betrayal and hate.
I should be thanking you—
for it's so hard to believe that love was what I used to make.

I'm only saddened when it gets really late,
when my thoughts drift away from my head
and seek refuge within my heart instead.
As words pour out of me onto the page,
my voice can't comprehend how they were even made.

Poetry

Eagerness in the Heart of Empathy

By Veronika Bouchard

In the light of the morning,
I followed a paper trail that led to you,
From nameless faces of adolescence,
To faceless names we'd rather forget,
And I began to count every promise,
Every pinky swear that I could recall,
Every oath that was sworn in secrecy,
Every crumpled napkin written in pact,
Every tired and tattered note,
Folded ever so gently,
In the home of a shoe box,
Stowed away from the curious eye,
And I could hear the past whispering,
The gentle words of relief,
Of release,
And with ease,
A timid girl sweetly assured me,
That the here and now,
Is exactly as it should be,
So I smiled to myself,
As I caught fire with enthusiasm,
A fire so wild and bright,
That the rest of the world would travel,
Tens of,
Hundreds of,
Thousands of miles,
Just to watch me burn.

Poetry

Nature Channel

By Anna Orvin

All she ever wanted was space.
I wondered if she shut herself out
because she was disappointed in
The world. Or maybe she shut the
world out because she was
ashamed of herself.

No one heard the war that
culminated inside her mind. She
made it impossible to understand the
complexities of her turbulent
emotions. She would pinch her skin
In the mirror and fight the tears.
Then force a smile and suppress her
Fears. Dissociation was her survival
tactic that forced her to detach
herself from the world. And her
emotional detachment was what
Made her so apathetic.

Art

TITLE The Magic of Learning
AUTHOR Bronwyn Smith



Fiction

Felinemenomenon

by Anna Orvin

March 1975

The neon lights pulsed like a heartbeat as Julia meandered home after a late-night rehearsal. She lived nearly four blocks from the heart of the Las Vegas strip and was quite fond of her surroundings, having walked home countless times. The city's fading light casted a prismatic hue over her blond hair as she turned onto an eerily quiet street, where the vibrant music of Sin City soon faded into an ominous hum. Grasping her purse tightly, she anchored herself against the chill creeping up her spine when she was startled by a glossy black cat. Its piercing eyes glimmered like lanterns, peering into her very soul shortly before slinking away. Compelled by the strange encounter, Julia quietly trailed behind. After following for a few minutes, the cat came to an abrupt halt. Its dark silhouette casting an eerie shadow on the damp cobblestones before glancing back one last time and darting down a mysterious alleyway.

"Wait!" Julia called out, her voice echoing in panic as she sprinted toward it before stopping at the mouth of the ally's abyss. Her eyebrows furrowed, and a knot of uncertainty tightened in her stomach. Did the cat know she was following? But just as doubt began to creep in, the creature transformed; its sleek black fur melted into the skin of a glamorous young woman, and then like smoke, she vanished. Julia stood frozen, her breath catching in her throat as her heart raced. But the darkness beckoned her with a seductive warmth rising from the shadows that contrasted the bitter wind howling around her. Fighting every instinct to turn back, she felt captivated by the path's magnetic allure. The atmosphere thickened and in the unsettling quiet, she began to hear whispers. Julia carefully took a step forward, pausing for one last look at her original path before stepping into the shadows of another realm.

The air continued to whisper to her and the shadows twisted, beckoning her closer until she stumbled upon an old nightclub, with a facade that dripped with a haunting appeal. The lights flickered like dying stars, and a ring of thick fog coiled around its tattered exterior. In the distance, echoes of laughter and music seemed to emanate from its very walls. Julia's heart continued to race as her surroundings blurred into an ethereal haze. The alleyway had suddenly

Fiction

vanished, replaced by a surreal landscape and the air smelled of damp earth and something sweetly decayed.

As Julia stepped through the creaking doorway, she was greeted with a wave of warmth from the burning candlelight and a haze of cigar smoke that lingered in the air. Across the bar, perched on a velvet stool, sat a slender woman bathed in the soft glow of a single spotlight. Her hair cascaded like dark water over her ears, and her eyes shimmered with an uncanny invitation.

“Welcome, mademoiselle” the woman purred, as the smoke from her cigarette curled around her like a serpent.

“Where am I?” Julia trembled,

“Unfamiliar,?” the woman's lips curled into a sinister smile, one that hinted at the darker intentions that hid beneath her playful mirth,

“Welcome to *Chat Noir*. ”

“This is a nightclub?” Julia muttered, her voice trembling as the showgirls' feathery silhouettes glided across the walls.

“It's not just a nightclub, ma cherie,” the woman replied, with a languid seduction as she twisted the olive in her dirty martini,

“Have you traveled too far?”

“I--I didn't mean to come here” Julia stuttered, “Sometimes our paths choose us,” with a predatory glare she reached out her cold and bony hand,

“Daphné Baudelaire” She purred.

“I really should get going,” Julia said, instinctively stepping away. Yet, Daphné pulled her back.

“And miss the performance?”

“Well, it is getting late,” Julia answered doubtfully, “and I have rehearsal tomorrow,” Daphné beamed at her response.

“You... perform?” Julia felt Daphné's energy wrap around her like a silken shawl, comforting yet suffocating.

“Yes, ma'am” Julia hesitated,

“But the night has just begun, mademoiselle,” Daphné entwined her fingers through Julia's

Fiction

hair as she pulled her aside to walk, “Surely you don’t want to miss the main act.” Her eyes bulged as she nervously clung to Daphne. The audience was completely degenerate. Some had missing limbs and the neon lights illuminated their decaying skin and open wounds.

Julia's stomach twisted as Daphne guided her behind the curtains. The air was heavy with the scent of expensive perfume and something primal. Murmurs from the other showgirls drifted around them. Hushed tones that spoke of a “special performance” that awaited them.

“What performance?” Julia reluctantly asked.

“My darling, you should already know,” Daphne laughed; “You’re starring in it!” Then, without warning Daphne shoved her through the velvet drapes.

“What!?” Julia cried out, yet her protest was swallowed by the cacophony of the crowd's laughter and raucous cheers.

As she stumbled forward, she became lightheaded and the stage around her felt disoriented. Frozen, she gazed at herself in a nearby mirror. Instead of her baggy rehearsal clothes, a glamorous show dress clung to her figure like a glove. The garment was adorned with blinding rhinestones and atop her head sat the most magnificent headdress. The music finally began and Julia found herself entranced. From afar she could see Daphne with a wretched smile and her eyes sparkled with an intensity that promised danger. Julia started noticing subtle changes to her appearance-- her skin looked smoother, her posture more poised, and she radiated more feline grace. The other showgirls seemed to radiate an almost unnatural beauty of their own as they slowly joined her on stage. Their movements were fluid and mesmerizing, and their bodies shimmered underneath the soft light. As the performance reached its climax, Julia felt a surge of energy coursing through her. The dancers’ movements became more feral, more intoxicating, and Julia found herself more and more bewitched and teetering on the edge of surrender.

“You’re one of us now, Julia!” Daphne wickedly cackled, “Welcome to eternity!”

At that moment, a chilling realization washed over her: this wasn’t just a “performance”. This was a ritual, and Julia was in terrible danger. Her instincts finally fought against Daphne's spell as she pulled away from the thrall of the performance.

Fiction

The club soon erupted in mass chaos as the dazzling showgirls transformed into their monstrous catlike forms. Screeching a piercing hiss that was as loud as a banshee. Fueled by adrenaline, with her eyes closed and her ears plugged, Julia propelled herself towards the double doors. And with one final surge of desperation, she burst from the nightclub, leaving the echoes fading behind with one last screech. Fighting her way through the thick smoke she felt the weight of the other realm collapsing on her. “Help!” she shrieked in desperation, “Please!” but her voice was swallowed, as she fell through the realm's invisible gateway. As she spun around, frantic, her heart sank at the sight of Daphné standing at the end of the alleyway with a wretched smile.

“You can’t escape, Julia,” she laughed, the sound dripping with malice, “for you are mine for all eternity!” Her voice slithered through the air, thick with threat, “Your spotlight is waiting” and in a cloud of smog, she dissipated, leaving the cold empty path that Julia regretfully followed. Before she could escape, she saw herself in a grimy puddle's reflection. However, what stared back was no longer a woman; for she had transformed into a sleek black cat. Panic twisted in her chest as she realized the truth: her soul was ensnared, forever bound to that wicked place, while her body roamed the earth as a mere shadow. A horrified shriek escaped her lungs, but, instead of a scream, a low guttural hiss erupted. The remnants of her humanity slipped away, leaving only the primal instincts of a creature of the night.

Though Julia swore she would never return to that wretched place, her spirit remained tethered to its furry prison. While, some say she still prowls the quiet streets of Nevada, guarding the path from unwitting travelers. Others heed a warning: If you ever come across a sleek black cat, never look directly into its eyes. For Daphne still prowls, ready to claim yet another young woman who decides to wander too close to the darkness.

**Scary Stories We Tell in the Dark contest winner*

Fiction

I Go Back to Covil Estates

By Kristen Peacock

An Ode to I Go Back to Berryman's by Vincent Scarpa

On all of the perfectly manicured lawns with their identical dark green mailboxes, in homes of varying neutral colors, if you peer through the front lace curtains long enough, I can see Mrs. Dotty cooking for one with her Bible opened and ready at the table, her leathery skin and matching blue sweatsuit bringing with it the sweet scent of freshly baked sticky buns, the Bradford family with eyes unfocused, lukewarm microwave meatloaf on trays, TV laughter echoing off the walls filled with painful picture frame reminders of dead mother and wife, the palpable escape of father and daughter yet again in a living room that is anything but, and in still another house is Bob, a thin and grey bearded man, with eyes like the brown bottles of yeast he continues to empty, sunken into a recliner and ready to watch the TV screen until he passes out; while in our unassuming house, an ornate centerpiece is left abandoned and collecting dust at the dining room table, silver untouched yet tarnishing, the dead hydrangeas the only evidence that warmth once flourished here, my dazed mother left to make dinner, eyes constantly shifting to the door, my father coming home from a long shift full of sweat, the smell of perfume, and the faint aroma of leftover relations stuck to his coveralls, a subsequent cacophony of ice rattling in a glass and a child proof pill bottle popping open, the wandering eyes of my brother left alone to play with me, so I run to the pool, despite the awareness of eyes watching me jump, grateful for the escape to the bottom where there is no eyes and no sounds, only the catching and releasing of self-launched torpedoes straight to the bottom of the bliss, emerging into the eventuality of tomorrow's Sunday, all of us in tow for our once weekly family time to attend a sermon where a preacher yells of The Absolute Evil of Adulterers! and every week as he stands in the pulpit, he buzzes on about the same themes of respect and obedience and Godliness, but a luncheon of sham smiles and handshakes later our family goes home with thoughts of shame and sex and silent obedience swirling in the stifling car, my body turned to the window to avoid the ever eager eyes of my brother planning and watching, the shopping malls and elementary school I attend rolling past, a brief intermission of escape before we are

Fiction

back to the wrought iron gates, the same manicured lawns and homes in approved tones, except in the yard next to our family driveway now there is Bob stumbling around his yard, his red-faced grinning in sharp contrast to his pale body exposed and half clothed in a t-shirt, a drink in one hand and himself in the other, as Sheila watches from across the street in her prized garden, eyes wide and jaw hinged open amongst her wrinkled chins, hands in gloves covered with earth being ripped off shakily to find her jitterbug to speak louder than was quite necessary at the first responders to come now, her paisley kneepad left abandoned in a bed of spring flowers, the white gazebo and perfectly cultivated rainbow of color making the scene in front of her look out of place, but this scene is slowly shielded by the garage door closing, the side door of the house opening, the kicking off of shoes and being told to go upstairs and find something to do QUIETLY; my father will seek out his cabinet of hard stuff again before reaching the couch he will sleep on, my mother will be left to shuffle off alone to the bedroom and sink into her opiate armored slumber, all while he holds me down to play uninterrupted until he's done, leaving me to brush my teeth until my gums bleed, tears falling in my mouth and creating a salty iron assault as I scrub myself raw in the shower and run out of hot water, before I tuck myself into bed, repeating to myself as I drift off, only 10 more years to go.

Fiction

How To Live with the Worm

By Julia Starling

The first step is to swallow that worm. It's wriggling, and will dart out of your hands if you loosen your grip even a second. So keep hold of it tight. Hold it in your fist throughout the day. Don't let it go. Sit with the worm in class, while laughing with your friends, while doing your homework. Don't let it go. When the worm goes limp, when you're sure of your decision, that is when you can open your sweaty, red fist. Then you can swallow. It won't struggle as it goes down—it's been with you long enough, it trusts you. Or maybe you've just exhausted it. Either way, it will go down. It will rest, cold and still, in your stomach. Now the easy part is over.

The second step is to get smart. Break out your calculator, memorize those calories, come up with a thousand different lies. And a thousand more, for when they no longer work. Numbers don't lie, but you sure will. Tell them you've just eaten, you're allergic, you don't like that brand, you're still full from lunch. But most of all, prepare for when they don't ask. For when they don't notice. Don't let it go. The worm loves that certain flavor of sorrow.

The third step is keep going. When the fog marches in, when the black spots swarm and dance, those signs of weakness will give you strength. What would be losses for anyone else will be victories for you. There's no other way to live. You can't let it go. When your period halts, when your hair falls out, when the warmth leaves you, you are not losing yourself, you are winning your death. Words and wit abandon you. Strips of your hair, shiny and dry like the shells of dead cockroaches, line your

Fiction

pillow. A long black snake coils itself in the lower part of your intestines, burrowing deeper and deeper by the day.

You're losing everything, but you've gained some friends. In the rice, you see the maggots. In the grease, the paths of slugs and snails. In the salt, the next generation is cradled in their white sacs. Olives grow eight legs, noodles writhe and squirm, and chips take flight on paper-thin wings. In your slow decay, it all becomes more alive, and you will cradle the worm closer. You could never let them go.

By now you've probably started looking up the statistics for fun, or perhaps followed the temptation to look at recovery stories. Both of which will let loose a sardonic dark laugh from deep within you that shakes the worm deep in your stomach. You will memorize the menus of every restaurant in town, and run your things longingly over their words. Lists and lists are things to try, one day, come to you at night, and you whisper them into your blankets like a prayer. Yet still, you wake, and you do it all again. But you can't let it go.

Because it's working. Your wrists are thinner, your collarbones sharper, your stomach flatter. One day, you think giddily, perhaps you'll get so small you'll be able to see the worm's outline like a fly in a frog's throat. You can't let go.

Because the worm is growing fat on misery and apathy. It demands more and more from you, its gracious host. Because that is all it is. You are only living with the worm. No one said you had to become it.

Fiction

Injustice in the Rainy City

By Landon Burgamy

Rain poured from the darkened sky above, leaving the streets with a river of water. It's always raining in Seattle, that's nothing new. What was new however, was the police tape covering one of the narrow streets on 10th ave. When detective Savannah pulled up to the scene,

detective Langdon and the police chief Wallace were both waiting for her. She already knew they were in need of her help but when she got there, they both looked like sad little puppies.

“Savannah, glad you finally decided to show up. You said you would be here an hour ago.” Wallace said, barely meeting her gaze.

“Well, you said it was my day off...but yet here we both are. Working.” Savannah responded back with a slight attitude.

Wallace did not respond and Langdon continued to stand there silently. Savannah who waited for their response began to look around the scene. She noticed the usual things, a body outline, evidence markers. She had an internal guess of a homicide based on the way things were laid out. However, there really wasn't much here. She assumed that some of the minor details had been washed out by the rain. Then whatever was left, quickly collected and taken as per protocol.

After a moment of looking around and seeing nothing, she wished she had gotten there sooner.

“Alright chief, what am I looking at?” Savannah asked, speaking directly to the police chief. “Looks to me you guys already got everything.”

The police chief hesitated for a moment.

“The scene you're looking at is the death of 23 year old Vivian Brant.” Wallace says, not even looking at Savannah – more so looking down at her shoes.

Savannah did a double take. Looking at the scene then back to Wallace. Wallace still could not find it in himself to look at her nor Langdon. “What?” Savannah began to have the same sad puppy dog look. She turned her attention to the other detective. “Langdon are you alright?”

Fiction

Langdon stands there trying his best not to look away from her as she speaks. Failing this challenge, he softly turns his head and quietly says, “Wallace is taking me off the case.”

No matter how much Vivian wanted to celebrate this occasion, especially since he was off the clock, he couldn't. This was his first time sitting at a bar and ordering barely anything. The beer he ordered was so low alcohol it would have made his college-self disgusted. He was on his second beer and that was only to not make him look suspicious. It tasted like piss and he hated it. Vivian wasn't focused on his drink. He was more so focused on the man who sat a few stools down from him at the bar. It was pretty evident that this fellow was already a few drinks in, and when he told the bartender, “Another one”, Vivian saw his opportunity. The whole bar was mostly empty except for the two of them, the bartender, and the three girls that sat chattering in the corner. Vivian strolled up to the man after almost finishing his second beer. Then to his surprise the man turned toward him and said, “hey there mate, come sit and let me buy you a drink.” The smile on Vivian's face couldn't have gotten any wider.

At the Seattle police headquarters, sitting at her desk. Savannah was trying not to pull out her hair. Two days had passed since the case had started and she had been running all around trying to find something, anything. There was nothing. The autopsy for the body came back, and didn't lead to anything. Vivian was shot in the back of the head, and the bullet in his brain, untraceable. She had nothing. Usually when a case goes cold she just bids her time and waits for a lead, but this was different. There was extra pressure because it was Vivian. She wanted to solve this case quickly for Langdon and the rest of the department. She sat and stared at her computer screen for a while. Wallace soon walks over to Savannah and puts a hand on her shoulder.

“There's going to be a service for him tomorrow, I want you to be there.” He says calmly and is now able to look her in the eyes.

This time it was her not matching his gaze. “I'm not sure if I can. Not until I find out what happened.”

Wallace nodded his head. “Langdon said he's ready to talk. But be gentle with him, yeah?” Wallace says. “Yeah okay.” She responds. Wallace nods his head again, gives her a light tap

Fiction

on the shoulder and walks back to his office. She hated thinking of the idea of Langdon being a lead but it's what she had. She took a few minutes to just sit there. Then she got up and walked out of the building.

Langdon had been doing detective work for a long time, about 20 years. So when they got a new detective on payroll it was only right that he would take them under his wing. "The kid and I were working last time I saw him. We had driven back up to the headquarters where I dropped him off at his car. I believe it was his white Honda that day." Langdon said, sitting in a chair across from Savannah. They decided to meet up at a local coffee bar, so they both felt a little more comfortable and relaxed talking about what happened.

"Alright, and did he happen to tell you what he was going to do after you dropped him off?" Savannah asked, summarizing both her questions and his answers in her notebook.

"I would've thought he just went home but he didn't say." He paused for a moment. "Listen Savannah, I really don't know much of anything. I was more so hoping you could tell me what you've found so far."

Savannah herself paused for an even longer moment. She picked up her coffee from the table next to her. Took a sip, then sat it back down. "Langdon, you and I both know how this works, I need anything and everything you can give me." She says. Langdon sits there thinking. About a minute goes by, a very long minute. "I just don't think he said anything about what he was going to be doing." Langdon says, fully meeting her in the eyes.

"Ok how bout this." Fully challenging his stare. "We'll just talk about how your last day together went and what you guys were last working on. Maybe that will jog something in your memories."

Savannah was known around the city to be its best detective, she never gave up and she never lets things go. Every little detail amounts to something and Langdon's details were off. He tried his best to downplay the last case they were working on, like it didn't matter. Savannah, however, distinctly remembers how excited Vivian was when she last saw him. "We finally got a breakthrough in the Varre case." He had said with a big smile. A smile so big he showed all his teeth. It would be hard to forget that smile, and now it would be hard to forget that case. It would be a long shot but there might be something there. Pulling up to the headquarters this late

Fiction

was not unusual for the detectives some nights. It wasn't encouraged but everyone knew what case he was working. So when she strolled into the place at 1:00 am, no one batted an eye. She couldn't sleep and Vivian was all that she could think about. He was just a kid, barely made it to the end of his first year. She was there to look more into this Varre case. She wanted to know why Langdon was so dismissive about it. Sitting down at her desk and looking through the case files in her computer, she noticed it wasn't popping up. Usually every case pops up in their system, new, old, finished, not finished. This one was not in the system at all. She tried typing it again a few more times in a few different ways but to no avail. There was definitely something to this case. She sat there for a while thinking of her next steps.

"WHAT!" Vivian screamed. "We can't just drop the case now! I finally found a lead." sitting at a diner booth was Vivian, his senior partner Langdon and police chief Wallace. Wallace had called the two in for what he called a casual lunch. Langdon already knows the deal with these lunches so they both decided to let Vivian eat before starting their discussion. Wallace takes a deep breath and says, "Listen, I'm gonna let that slide because I know you've been working hard on this case... but this isn't a suggestion by me. This is a demand from the higher ups. Do you understand?" Before Vivian could get in a rebuttal, Langdon jumps in, "Yes sir we understand." Langdon and Wallace both gave Vivian a look. Then Wallace nods his head, stands up and heads over to the counter to pay the bill. Vivian doesn't wait and walks out immediately, with Langdon slowly following behind him. Vivian walks straight to the car without looking back. You're not driving." Langdon calls out. Vivian stops "and looks up to the sky.

"No... No, I don't understand." Saying loudly with a deep hope Wallace was behind him to hear that.

"Just get in the car, we'll talk about it." Langdon says as he makes his way past Vivian and into the driver's seat. Vivian reluctantly gets in the passenger seat. "Listen, Wallace is letting us go home early today. I'm gonna go ahead and drop you off. If there's anything you wanna talk about, now's a great time," Langdon says. They sat together in silence until finally Langdon started up the car and drove off. About five minutes into the drive Vivian finally broke,

Fiction

“I don’t understand, we’ve been working nonstop to get a lead and go after this guy. Now that we finally have one, Wallace just calls it off?”

Langdon doesn’t take his eyes off the road, instead he just says “Remember it wasn’t Wallace that gave the orders.”

“You know what the worst part is?” Vivian responds. “That you fucking knew... and you’re just fucking okay with it.” Langdon sits in silence, eyes still on the road. Neither of them spoke a word for the rest of the trip. Finally when they pulled up to Vivian’s car, Langdon finally looks at him. “Just go home kid. Get some rest and we’ll talk about it tomorrow.” Vivian was already out of the car and slamming the door by the time Langdon finished his sentence.

Luckily a few years ago, Langdon made the mistake of sharing his computer password with Savannah while they were working with each other. She saved his password after that just in case and like the old conger he is, she knew he wouldn’t change it. Savannah thought maybe there might be details left behind on his computer. She booted it up, and put in the password.

She opened up any tap she thought might have something to do with that case. She found the last file he was working on. Inside everything had been redacted and taken off. He had deleted everything but why? She kept digging through his files but found nothing. It wasn’t until she went through his recently deleted emails where she found an exchange between him and Wallace. She couldn’t believe what she was reading. She had taken plenty of photos of this exchange and just couldn’t get past one of the messages Wallace had sent. “Failing to effectively delete and forget this case could cost us everything. We both need to make sure Vivian understands this.” She sat for a moment trying to take it in. She couldn’t get past that idea of Wallace and Langdon, two people she had worked with, looked up to, and even trusted, could be working to cover up something. What were they trying to cover up? Savannah didn’t have much time to think when Wallace came walking in.

“I thought I told you to take it easy on Langdon. Now I see you going through his computer,” Wallace says with a disappointed look on his face.

Caught by surprise, Savannah spins around in her chair and looks at Wallace. It took everything she had in that moment to not sit there awestruck; instead, she questions Wallace. “I know you and Langdon are covering up his last case! Why?”

Fiction

Wallace stayed calm when he spoke. “That case needs to stay hidden. You need to drop all of this.” Savannah couldn’t drop it, not now. “Vivian's death has led me to this point. Suppose you

want me to drop that too, because I can't.”

Wallace stands there. Any amount of friendliness he had was gone. Wallace has never intimidated Savannah before, but now he stood there towering above her.

Vivian broke his promise to himself about not drinking tonight. He ended up three drinks in with the man at the bar. By his third, the both of them sat together slamming their drinks on the counter and saying, “Bartender, give me another.” As much fun as these two had that night,

Vivian kept in mind what he had to do. All of his hard work on the case led him to this moment

with this man. He wasn't going to throw it away just for Wallace’s sake. Vivian was far from a lightweight, so when his suspect had gotten up to go home, Vivian knew to follow him from a distance. Vivian had followed his man as he stumbly walked three blocks away and turned down a narrow street. Assuming this is where his suspect lived, Vivian took pictures and jotted down the address. He couldn’t go in now or he’d get in so much legal trouble. As it was right now, he figured he would just get by with a slap on the wrist for following up on this case. He didn't care; surely Wallace and Langdon would forgive him if he ended up bringing down this whole operation. Shit, maybe he’d have Langdon stop calling him kid. Just then he hears a gun click to the back of his head.

“We told you to drop this whole thing kid. You should’ve listened.”

**April’s Whimsical contest winner*

Fiction

Death In The Mangrove Forest

By Tyler Pessink

His heart began to pace and his stomach shook when he found a small pattern of blood splattered on the leaves of a mangrove bush. Cal visualized the path made by the game running for safety and followed cautiously, the placement of his feet precise so as to not make more noise than necessary. His ears popped when he swallowed saliva. The dark towering trees covered the sun from peaking through. A plantation nearly wiped of life and colour. Birds did not whistle, sticks did not crack. The only sound made in the forest was the wind blowing against the limbs of the trees. The branches shaking and bobbing, like an oceanless wave.

He found the six-point deer lying on its side, still breathing rapidly, kicking its hind leg. Its eyes darted back and forth, from its front view to Cal. The arrow protruding from its left side had leaked blood out, slowly dripping down into the wet dirt. Its piebald fur was matted and tough. Cal kneels down to place his hand on the deer, comforting it. The deer bleats in shock as he sinks his knife into its long neck. In seconds, it gives out its final exhausted breath and lies still. A pain in Cal's chest comes over for a moment, before washing away.

He begins to skin the hide using a sawing motion, the slick and wet flesh tearing open. As he distracted himself, a bush stirred to his right just outside of his peripheral view. He immediately turns his head and draws his bow towards the sound. The bow creaked from its overuse. What emerged was another man with his hands in the air, slowly standing up. Cal withdrew his bow but kept it up. The young man was tired, his face smudged with dirt and grime, his ginger hair oily and unkept. He wore a brown coat, fingerless gloves, dark pants and leather boots. He eyes the game for a moment, only then focusing back onto Cal.

He says, "You wouldn't happen to know where I can find the nearest town, would you?"

Cal shook his head; he was a lone ranger after all. Towns were just temporary shelter to him.

The last place he visited was a week ago, a small village with peasants and wheat millers. He had to leave after getting into a fight with a drunk. Now he is here wandering again, as he always has. The boy pleaded, "I'm real hungry, mister. If I help you set up camp, could we split the deer?" Cal paused and thought it over.

Fiction

A stranger happened to be in the same location as him in a forest so large you could get lost in it forever. His friends could be waiting a few yards away to ambush him and take everything he has. Why should anyone be trusted in a situation like this? “I also have some seasonings. The food I did have is gone.”

Okay, maybe he is trustworthy.

A chill wind blows over as the sun lowers, with crickets beginning to chirp. Cal has a large pot simmering over the fire. He opens the container of seasonings the boy promised and gives it a whiff. It smells peppery, a little spicy. He sucks his finger and dips it in to get a taste. Since Cal wasn't already dead from suspected poison, he gives the container a generous shake over the pot and stirs it with a large wooden spoon. The ginger boy is kneeled down across from Cal, his hands near the fire. Cal looks up and says, “Do you have a name?”

“Philip.” The boy's mouth salivates from the smell of the venison stew. He wipes it off with his sleeve and rubs his arms, his stomach gurgling. He replies “You?”

“Just a ranger who keeps moving. You should do the same, away from me of course, I attract trouble and you don't look the most fit for bandits right now.” Cal never wanted to get others hurt on his behalf; he did miss having company though. He pulls out two bowls and spoons from his pack, handing the other set to Philip, and begins his supper.

Philip gulps it down, ignoring the burning in his mouth, using his fingers to scoop every drop of broth. Cal looks at him with an awkward stare. “Which way are you going after this?” He asks.

Philip takes a moment to chew and swallow, holding his finger up to let Cal wait. He gulps and exhales in euphoria. “Best damn stew I've had in a while.” Cal doesn't want to show it but he likes being complimented for his cooking. “North, I think.” Philip looks up and around to check the sun's position. “I figured if I keep going in one direction, I'll eventually get out of these woods.” He doesn't sound too confident in the idea, but what else can he do?

As the coals in the pit settle and crackle, Cal sets up his cot. He looks at Philip and realizes he doesn't have a pack with him. “Sorry, I only have one.”

Fiction

Philip waves his hand and shakes his head. “It’s alright, it makes sense for you to only have one.” He lies down against a boulder. “I lost most of my stuff when I ran away from a few wolves a couple days ago. I tracked it back and the bastards ate everything. I carried what I could in my pockets.” Cal winces in silence from the guilt. Nothing is more tortuous than the cold wind and a rocky bed. An owl hoots in the distance. Philip attempts to get comfortable with the boulder, shuffling his back and shoulders, it doesn’t work. “It’s funny.” Philip says “The wolves were easier to run from than people. Or hunger.” The fire dims out and the two begin to close their eyes.

Rustling can be heard right next to Cal. His eyes twitch as he wakes up, taking a deep breath and looking over to his left. The moon barely illuminates the ground. Philip is looking through his pack. Cal mumbles, half asleep “What... are you doing?”

Philip turns around, a knife in his hand pointing directly at Cal. His breathing is raspy and shaky. He says “I can’t let them find me again. I’m getting out of here and I won’t let starvation take me first.” He grabs Cal’s pack with one arm, slinging it over his shoulder before stepping back. “Please understand.”

Cal begins to feel a vibration rush through his stomach and his eyes blur. Is this how he is repaid for helping someone? A stab in the back? No, not this time. Cal charges forward to tackle Philip before he swings the knife into his left thigh. A sharp sting runs through his leg as he yelps “Gaah-ha!” Cal gets up, almost stumbling, and grabs Philip by his shoulders, pushing him into the dead firepit, ashes flying in the air, knocking the pot down. “You thieving bastard!” Cal shouts, his voice sounding dry and rough. It echoed in the cold night, bouncing off the bodies of the mangrove trees. Philip tries to push himself away before getting up. They both stop and get into a stance. Cal grabs the knife in his leg and pulls it out, letting out a small whimper before tossing it towards the ground.

Cal steps forward, trying to get Philip to miss. Philip throws a jab as Cal dodges to the side and grabs his arm, throwing each other around. Cal throws a punch at Philip. He ducks and punches back at him. Cal pushes Philip, causing him to stagger and fall on his back. He gets on top of him and slams his fist into his face. Blood begins to run down Philip’s nose. He tries to

Fiction

raise his arms up to block, but he's too weak to effectively stop Cal's overbearing strength. He goes in to choke him, pressing his thumbs against his throat, his eyes filled with rage. Philip tries to push him off, his teeth clenched, pressing his hands against Cal's face. His arms slowly drop and his eyes go up. Blood rushes to his head, his heart beginning to beat faster and faster. He sees his girlfriend sitting on a stool painting a canvas of the Everwood prairie, where they went on their first date. He sees his friends laughing with him, drinking bitter ale at the tavern as they tell a tale about a horse kicking the rude stable worker into a pile of manure. He sees his mother lying on her bed, holding his hand, as she closes her eyes for the final time. He sees his village burnt down, the intense blaze overwhelming him as he is chased away by soldiers of King Andreas wearing white and blue colors. He sees a dark-haired man wielding a bow, next to a dead deer, looking directly back at him. The first person he has seen in days. What a way to end such a life he had.

Cal waits ten seconds after Philip's body stops moving. He lets go of his throat slowly, fearing he might wake up. The adrenaline begins to wash away, his hands shaking. He grabs ahold of his arms to stop them. As he carefully gets up, he searches Philip's pockets for anything he took. He grabs his pack, searching for a bandage for his leg, and his knife, the only thing he had left of his father – iron worn by time, by blood, by love. Before he starts walking north, he looks back at Philip one last time, his corpse lying prone with his arms spread outward. It reminded him of the deer, struck by his arrow. An unbearable weight fills his chest. He feels a sting in his eyes; His breathing starts to pace. He squints and mumbles to himself as he begins moving. "All I do is attract trouble."

Art

TITLE	Feathers
AUTHOR	Andrew Loehrs



Fiction

Between

By Ashlyn Parnell

There are things happening in this hotel that make me need to touch the grass real bad.

Outfit laid out for tomorrow, haven't done that since middle school, just because of the anticipation to wear my new shoes that I bought today at goodwill.

Why do all people not chase their dreams?

Put a cutesy little whiteboard on my door and write things like "Be the energy you want to attract" just for the guys to draw penises and tits and things like "Fuck Bitches Get Money."

A group of people told me that I look like I would be vegan, so I have been spending the week wondering what that means.

She said she loves my skirt.

Head out the window, I wish I was the wind.

Would today be different if I had told him?

Movie marathon of all 3 Magic Mike movies (with three men) felt like a fever dream.

Gonna take out every single piercing and remove every tattoo one day just to feel something.

Fiction

Today she said that as a teacher she learns new things from her students every day and that she's not an expert, but the designer of an experience. She is so inspiring.

I want someone to remember me when they're old.

She told a story about a man that threw a sheet cake on someone's windshield. She also told us about how she comes from a family that has a long line of OCD.

Wearing a dress today, she told me she loves it.

If Taco Bell gets rid of nacho fries one more time, I'm gonna lose my shit.

I'm trying to soak up the energy while we're still here. I have a problem with always looking ahead and imagining this time being gone forever.

No feeling will ever compare to staying up too late at the sleepover, using your iPod like it's an adult phone, texting people you know that you shouldn't be.

I want to dress like Jesse Pinkman.

Screaming. Very loudly. At nothing. Because of everything.

Being cat woman for Halloween, slutty without being too obvious.

Fiction

Continue to let them cross the boundaries I set, when will the world be mine?

Does anyone else spend their lives constantly wishing their name was anything but the one that they were given?

Picture this: Me frantically wiping down every surface (with the harshest rubbing alcohol you can find in the store) as soon as anyone leaves my room. Vacuuming over the floor at least 3 times. Convincing myself that this is normal with noise cancelling headphones on, playing “chill” music.

Used an umbrella for the first time in the actual rain last week and it was revolutionary not getting my bookbag wet or anything.

Poems about vivid detail today; she mentioned the hissing of the bus when it stops.

We speak equally, unlike conversations with a man.

I never realized how controlled I need my environment to be until I have no control

.
She told me I looked lovely today.

There’s no way I’ll actually make it as a writer. People laugh at my major.

Can we all agree to stop buying cake for birthdays and eat pie year-round?

Fiction

I want to listen to every song ever made and rank them all by the probability of me listening to them again.

Crying every time I realize that I will never be a daughter.

In a perfect world, ASMR is the only thing I need to survive.

I'm running out of the back door once again, through the grass to my house. I wait until the weekend to be able to use her front door.

My favorite activity in the whole world is hearing music through my Sony XM4 headphones and

jumping around my room like there's no tomorrow.

“We are all living vicariously through you.”

The only parts that shine are the things that people can take advantage of like our compassion,

empathy, love, nurturing personalities.

Oh, to be a restaurant regular that never changes their order.

She really seems to see me.

Fiction

Outside

Touched grass, things got worse.

Wearing my new outfit, with the new shoes from goodwill, feeling like a

fairy and my younger,

more girly self.

Why are you not chasing your dreams?

Embraced the tits on the whiteboard and drew a title that says “things that

make me happy”,

added Drew Starkey on there.

Being vegan can't be a bad thing I mean it's not an insult, right? Someone

tell me in vivid detail

what about me makes me look like I would be a vegan.

She makes me feel pretty.

Feeling the first cold wind of the year is like resurrecting my soul.

Fiction

Things would never change, he's still a man.

Magic Mike Halloween costumes coming soon, everyone.

I am losing my mind; I haven't gotten a new tattoo in over two months.

Tomorrow she'll speak like she always does, being herself, and it will still leave me stunned that people like this really exist and that I could be one of them someday.

I barely have a memory; why am I expecting others to?

She told us about the time that someone wrote a detailed poem about their sex life and then they proceeded to bring the partner into class to meet everyone.

Reminder to wear dresses more often.

Taco Bell got rid of nacho fries, losing my shit.

Started soaking up too much energy, I had to isolate myself and decide that that was the only answer.

As we all giggle and run away quietly, I begin to realize that we are all still little girls making decisions that we know we shouldn't be.

Dressing like Jesse Pinkman isn't enough, I need a new attitude.

Fiction

Crying. Quietly. At lots of things. Because of myself.

Being Betty Boop for Halloween, the idea of a tiny red dress is more appealing.

The universe is in you, working for you, not against you.

I wish my name was something cool and rarely seen on a woman like Alex, Carter, Ryan, or

Blake.

Picture this: Me sweating, watching the hands, arms, legs and feet of their bodies touching all

of the furniture in my room. Mentally making a game plan of how soon everything can be

clean

again, when they can be gone, how to get them out. All of this while smiling and laughing at

whatever they say.

Started using the bus system as my regular transportation and always think to myself, why

doesn't this exist in every town?

Poems about a historical event today, writing about Syd Barrett makes me cry every time.

My appreciation for women goes up significantly when I speak to a man for just 5 minutes.

I have to know every step and every moment of my day before hand, or it feels like it was

Fiction

stolen.

She is constantly on my mind at this point. Fuck the people that try to make me feel bad for following my passion.

I will never buy another cake for my birthday, and I am eating pie year-round, especially pecan.

Hyper fixating on that one song in that one album, chasing the feeling that it gave me when I first

really heard it.

Jumping for joy every time that I realize I never have to be a mother.

In a perfect world, singing is the only thing I need to survive.

Sneaking through the side door, key card entry, always waiting until the weekend when the building feels more alive.

There is no other feeling that compares to knowing every word to a song and being able to scream it at full volume.

“Ashlyn, you are the light of my life.”

Fiction

like unconditional love, no judgement, and constant support.

The things that keep us strong and make us so special are the things that they could never fathom

like unconditional love, no judgement, and constant support.

Oh, to be able to claim a favorite and stop falling into trends of what I am supposed to be like.

She said she has a “partner.”

Fiction

Saved by the Bell

By Holly Hickman

If you were to ask Michael how long ago the funeral had started, he would have been unable to answer.

He knew it started at 11:00am on Saturday. He knew it took place at First Hope Methodist Church. He knew the service was supposed to be an hour long. He knew that after the service was done, the mourners were supposed to follow the hearse to the cemetery. And most of all, he knew that he would be one of the pallbearers carrying Howard Graham to his final resting place.

It's a great honor, too many people in Howard's family had told him over the past week. It was a request from Howard himself, courtesy of a change in his will less than a month before the heart attack took him. The family's voices echoed and reverberated in his mind until they became a cacophony of static: it's a great honor, it's a great honor. It was a great honor, and all Michael could think about was sprinting out of the church like a sinner on fire.

The priest's words rang hollowly in Michael's ears, a dull, persistent ache that made his head throb. Mourners sat on either side of him, but their shapes were blurry and out of focus. All of his attention was stolen by the casket at the front of the aisle, its deep oakwood color, half opened to reveal Howard's meticulously arranged corpse. Its white curls tamed a brushed over, black suit and tie perfectly pressed and straightened, hands pleasantly folded over the stomach, and eyes closed as if only moments away from opening again. It looked like Howard as Michael had known him in life.

No, that was wrong. Because the Howard Michael knew in life was always smiling, the crow's feet at his temples always pulling and deepening, his eyes bright and warm and intelligent. What was in that coffin looked alive, but it did not look like Howard Graham.

Why do they always have to make them look alive? Micheal wondered hysterically. Why why why—?

Fiction

The priest raised his hands. Michael found himself drawn by the movement, following the direction of the priest's fingers up and up and up until they reached the apex of the church, where a large, bronze bell hung.

Tell me, do you know where the phrase saved by the bell comes from?

It was a question Howard had asked him once. That day felt so far away now, but the moment was burned into his memory. They had spent the morning tending to Howard's garden, as they often did during the summer. Then they went inside for lunch, and Michael had made a sandwich in Howard's kitchen he could still taste on his tongue: chicken salad with tomatoes and raisins.

He remembered crossing the boundary of the tilted kitchen to the thick carpet of the living room with that sandwich, watching as Howard lounged comfortably on the couch with a glass of wine in one hand and the remote in the other. He was flipping through the channels with the intensity of someone conducting research, which, as Michael had learned over the years, was typical for Howard, who had spent most of his life in academia.

"Find anything to watch?" Michael asked as he sat down next to his friend.

"I think so," Howard replied, selecting a channel that made the screen come alive with scenes and people that felt vaguely familiar. It was a sitcom with a family and a group of kids going to school, though that hardly narrowed it down.

"What's this?"

"Saved By the Bell," Howard told him with a chuckle, sighing as he leaned back, tired but satisfied. Tending the garden was a labor intensive task even for someone who wasn't well into their eighties, but Howard never let that stop him from doing exactly what he wanted. They were a strange duo, especially considering Michael was nearly a third of Howard's age, but Michael liked to think they weren't all that different. After all, they were both divorced men with a love for gardening and teaching history to bright, young minds. As far as either of them were concerned, it was enough.

"Did you ever watch this as a kid?" Howard questioned, but there was that lilt in his voice that told Michael he already knew the answer and just wanted Michael to confirm his hypothesis. Old habits die hard, and all that.

Fiction

“Nah.” Michael shrugged, taking another bite of his sandwich. “I don’t think my parents would’ve approved of this. Not enough Jesus.” It was Michael’s usual answer when it came to these things. Movies and TV shows people his age typically knew were mostly lost on him, and they had been slowly going through everything Michael’s missed.

“I guess we’ll have to rectify that.”

The two watched in silence for a time. Michael slowly ate his sandwich, Howard finished one glass of wine and poured another. It was comfortable. Easy. If you’d told Michael five years ago that this would be his life, he’s not sure he would believe it. Fresh off a divorce, cutting off most contact with his family and former friends, moving to a state he had never been to before, trying to find a job as a history teacher at a local school, starting over and trying to figure out how to live after 26 years of the fear of God and his parents controlling his every thought, waking or otherwise.

And then Howard Graham, his new neighbor in the little cottage next store, had shown up on the day Michael moved into his new life with a tray of cookies, a smile on his face, and a story about his days as a college professor, teaching students the importance of the Glorious Revolution. The rest, as they say, was history.

It was only when the episode was nearing the end that Howard spoke again. “Michael,” he drawled, his voice warm and eager in a way that meant a history lesson was just around the corner. “Tell me, do you know where the phrase saved by the bell comes from?”

“Where does it come from?” Michael mused, ever willing to indulge his friend. “I assume not from the show.”

“Of course not. It was around long before then.” Howard pushed himself forward, elbows resting on his knees. Michael saw colors and shapes reflected in the lenses of Howard’s glasses, a distortion of the scenes playing on on screen. “In the 18th century, being buried alive was a genuine concern for many people. We have several records of loved ones falling into comas, doctors believing they were dead, only to later find out that they were actually alive. They would dig the bodies up to find the inside of the casket covered in scratch marks and their fingers bloodied from trying to claw their way out.”

Fiction

Sometime during Howard's explanation, Michael's breathing had come to a neat stop. In his mind's eye, he saw a memory he had never discussed with anyone, not even Howard: his grandmother's wake and funeral.

He remembered dressing for the wake, the too-big suit and tie his parents had borrowed from church friends, the sleeves of the jacket hanging past his fingertips. He remembered holding his mother's hand as they entered the room. He remembered the countless family members walking around in their black mourning clothes, pocket Bibles in hand, talking to one another with hushed prayers and thick sobs. He remembered the dozens of wreaths of flowers outlining the rectangular room like a meadow during spring, the air cloying with their thick perfume.

What he remembered most of all, however, was his grandmother's corpse. The hands resting lightly on its stomach, the barely closed eyes, the bright red lipstick on its lips, the same lipstick his grandmother had carefully painted on every day. It didn't look dead. It couldn't be dead.

And then he was right in front of the coffin, close enough to touch the too-alive corpse, and Michael couldn't stop staring at his grandmother's face. She looked alive, so alive, but everyone was crying and praying like she was dead, couldn't they see that she was still alive, just asleep and ready to wake up? And then Michael's eyes had begun burning with tears, trembling as something his brain screamed wrong wrong wrong but it wasn't grief or sadness or anything else he had been taught to feel but fear and if he stayed in the room any longer he would scream—

And then he ran. He escaped his mother's grip and darted from the room as fast as he could, tears streaming hotly down his face, panting and wheezing and unable to stop imagining his grandmother's face, alive and dead, taken from her body but still lingering on earth like a ghost his parents day can't be real because God forbade it.

Michael had refused to go back in the room for the rest of the wake. And then the next day at the funeral, he had hid in the very back row of the church as the priest preached about

Fiction

panic. “death even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me, head buried in his mother’s lap, squeezing his eyes shut and desperately trying to imagine anything that wasn’t the darkness of his own eyelids staring back.

It was a memory that had followed Michael for so long, and sitting there, listening to Howard speak, made it feel quite suddenly like he was the one being buried alive, the walls closing in around him, a pressure in his chest growing denser and denser as the seconds ticked by. He wanted, for the first time in their friendship, to make Howard Graham shut up. He wanted to shove the remaining bits of his sandwich down the professor’s throat until he choked.

“So they came up with a system,” Howard continued, oblivious to Michael’s growing anger. They would tie strings around the hands of the body, threading it through the ground so that it was attached to a bell on the surface. If the person was actually alive and came to, the movement of their hands would ring the bell and alert the groundskeeper, saving them from an unfortunate demise.” He chuckled, the movement throwing shadows across his face. “And there you have it: saved by the bell. Funny that such a morbid saying would turn into something so lighthearted, isn’t it?”

No, Michael had wanted to scream. But he couldn’t speak. In his mind, it was no longer his grandmother in the coffin, but Michael, limbs thick with concrete and wrapped in string, his eyes staring and unblinking as the lid descended upon him. Light and color was sucked from the air until only darkness remained, his lungs gulping for the rapidly diminishing air, hands and nails clawing at the horrible cage surrounding him. He felt it shudder and rattle, and how it refused to give, and he tugged and tugged and tugged on the string with all his might begging for someone to hear him because I’m alive, I’m alive, please God save me I’m alive.

“Did it ever work?” Michael asked, barely reaching above a whisper. Howard finally turned to face him, confusion pulling his eyebrows together.

Fiction

“Did what ever work? The bell?” He turned back to the TV to select the next episode.

“As far as we know there are no recorded instances of it saving anyone. All that work for nothing, I suppose.”

Michael hadn't responded. He couldn't. All he could think about were the strings around his wrist and the diminishing hope as he realized their salvation was a lie. Something touched his shoulder. Michael flinched; he looked over to see a fuzzy mass next to him growing taller and taller. Hanna, Howard's daughter, he realized a moment later.

Everyone was standing except for him. The pallbearers were assembling. The priest closed the casket, trapping Howard inside and damning him to an eternity of darkness. And now Michael would be carrying him to a grave to be buried under feet of dirt where he would suffocate and scream, but he couldn't scream because he's dead, but he couldn't leave and he's alive and he'll claw at the box around him until his nails crack and bleed black and his lungs are full of dust and oh God please—

Everyone was in position now. Hanna counted them off, Michael thought, and as one the pallbearers hoisted the casket onto their shoulders. Step by step they walked down the aisle, the teary eyes of the other mourners staring at them, uncaring that they were dooming Howard Graham forever.

Michael still couldn't hear their voices. He was sure someone was speaking, but he couldn't make it out. The bell rang above them, each pulse reverberating through Michael's body, his teeth trembling inside his skull.

It wasn't until they were nearly at the hearse that Michael realized the voice was coming from inside the casket—along with the unmistakable drag of nails against wood.

Fiction

Last Dance

By Lindsay Scully

The wedding wasn't large, close friends and family only, and supposedly dry, but when he approached her, his eyes were bright and his cheeks were flushed, the two shots he did before his best man speech made him a flirt with eyes only for her. She had eyes only for him, dead sober, and intoxicated by his attention she had ears only for him as well, ignoring her friend's whispered warning when he asks:

"Do you want to dance?" and what can she say? When his eyes are shining like water as it drips off an oar, catching the summer sun as it falls back into the sea. What can she say but: "yes, of course."

So he leads her on, or out onto the dance floor weaving through happy wedding guests. He's an excellent dancer, she's more clumsy, it's not that she's graceless it's just that she's: "trained to fight not to dance," she explained when she took a turn with protest. He swung her around with ease.

"I thought fighting was a dance," he said without much interest,

"Almost," she responded as she spun."

"I'm not used to being moved is the problem."

She always spoke more than him; right now she was trying not to get close, he was tipsy and tired and leading her through the dance, and she was trying not to let him pull her in too far for his comfort, for hers. She was trying to keep her hands on his arms, and he wouldn't meet her eyes. As they swung and spun, he started to guide her hands to his waist, to his hips, she could feel a flush working its way up her cheek, her heart clawed at her chest like something was desperate to climb out. The song ended as he spun her into a dip. Leaning back into his arms, she looked up and he finally met her eyes, summer sky greeting warm tilled earth. He drew her back up and close, his lips grazing her ear,

Fiction

“Good job” he whispered. She blinked and he was gone. The crowd on the floor parting to swallow him up. Her best friend stood in the wake he left glaring: “I’m going to kill him.”
“Don’t,” she responded “the dance is over.”

Fiction

The Men

By James Maxwell

Pulling up to his parents' house, his home once before and, whether he liked it or not, his home now once again, he noticed many of the items heaped in little sloping piles upon the driveway that morning seems vaguely familiar to him.

The man in the driver's seat dug a filthy thumb into his chin and the sound of nail scratching against beard made a rough sort of sandpaper sound.

"Your folks having a garage sale or something?" he asked. "Been searching for a few things for my girl. Turning seven next week. Hard to believe."

The man whose parents the house belonged to traced a path up the winding artery of stuff, noting a t-shirt he had just worn that weekend, a "No Nukes" belt buckle, and a beat-up old Samsonite briefcase he had once hauled around but only because someone had taken the time to engrave his and consequently his eldest son's initials upon the steel clasp: JJM. And there at the head of it all sat his father smoking a cigar in a lawn chair, the source from which all estuaries flowed like some dark river.

"I'll root around and see if I can't dig something up. Thanks again for the ride," he said. He yanked the ratty schoolboy's backpack up from between his legs, aware that its contents might now encompass most if not all of what he could consider his own outright moving forward.

"Appreciate that, Johnny boy. See you tomorrow." The slam of the car door sounded out like a shotgun blast in the cool early morning air and shook some sparrows from an overhead telephone line. He observed the birds shift to a nearby tree with broad leafy limbs that stretched out over the lawn, and soon after the truck had rumbled off far enough down the road, he watched them loop back around in a swoop to their perch on the black wire that, from a distance, resembled threads strung across the blue-eyed sky—blue when the weatherman had predicted showers only that morning. That was some sort of strange luck, he thought. For his father anyway. He shuffled his way up the narrow avenue afforded between mounds of stuff, stopping when he arrived at the briefcase. He stooped down and lifted it up by the handle, running his opposite thumb over the grooved engraving scratched into the metal before then

Fiction

allowed the briefcase to settle down at his side. First, he stiffened his grip and clutched the briefcase as if his arm was an unbendable appendage. Then he allowed himself to slacken so that the briefcase dangled loosely at his side, imagining himself exhaustedly descending the steps down into the subway station of some city a million miles away, men in ties brushing past him on either side. He imagined then the train ride out of the city and into suburbs. Who awaited him at the other end? His three children, of course, who were more or less the same except now they ran out to him through the front door at the sight of his return. And who accompanied them? Donna? No, it would not be that old business again but instead an honest to goodness nanny. The familiar heat of the cigar smoke brought his spiraling back to the present.

“You considering buying that?” his father asked. He sat a stout, unfriendly looking man with almost bronze hair: a mix between the strawberry blonde of his youth and the silver of impending age. His eyes sat deep in his face and glowed like coals and his lips wrapped around the end of the cigar in a sort of snarl like a dog that might pounce at any moment. His arms, short but powerful, ran a faded green with patches of ragged flags and tucked up just under his sleeve, no smaller than a pack of cigarettes, the time blotted bottom half insignia of the United States Marine Corps shown. Smoke trailed unendingly into the air surrounding the two, the wisps forming little phantom estuaries that might wrap silently around one’s fingers if he dared reach up into him, heaving his body suddenly into oblivion.

He gently lowered the briefcase to the pavement and then, thinking better of it, knocked the tip of his boot into the side so that it landed flat with a thud.

“No sense paying for something I already own,” he said.

His father plucked the cigar from his mouth and laughed. “Is that so, Johnathan?”

His question was the sort that anticipated no response because even the man’s questions were like commands—orders daring you to deft them if you were either bold or stupid enough. Of course, he had done so many times, either for one reason or the other, depending on what the situation required. The old man had a knack for weeding out the unwilling, that was for certain. Yet, here he stood. He would leave if he only could.

Before he could answer, a minivan pulled up alongside the curb and a boy and girl stepped out. They were young, in their mid-20’s maybe. The boy wore a bright blue bandana around his

Fiction

neck like a scarf and the girl wore a pair of cutoff jeans and a white tee-shirt. Both had on sunglasses; although it was difficult to understand why with it being so early in the day still.

The two men looked on in silence from the top of the driveway, watching as the approaching couple stopped, whispered something into one another's ear, and continued on, laughing along the way. There wasn't much any one could say about a pair like that.

"Morning," the boy announced as if the thought had just occurred to him that very moment. The girl flashed a smile in greeting but it was impossible to tell where she was looking.

John raised an open palmed hand in greeting and let it drop when his father failed to respond. He tightened the straps on his backpack and attempted to relax. Above them, a peel of sunshine cleared over the roofline and notched a gash of warming glow across the street. Soon it would claw its fingers down towards them, paring shadow away like old wallpaper all down the darkened driveway until everything swam in daylight. The two poked around for a while, the boy lowering to his haunches whenever something piqued his interest. He lingered before the pile of books, selecting one after another and quickly thumbing through the pages as if scanning the merit of each without fully digesting a single one.

"Got anything else besides sci-fi and Stephen King," he asked from the ground.

"We got what we got," John's father said.

The boy begrudgingly thumbed through a few more books he may have already assessed.

"These'll do, he said, choosing three from the pile.

The girl wandered absently across the asphalt, the back of her sandals snapping at her heels with every step. John noticed a tattoo of a lady bug upon her big toe which looked like for whatever reason something somebody might constantly scratch.

She stooped over, bending at the waist unlike the boy when she noticed something. "How much for this buckle," she asked.

"A dollar," John's father said.

"Would you take fifty cents," she asked.

"I'll do fifty cents," he said.

"Sold!" the girl exclaimed, chuckling.

Fiction

Her laugh reminded John of some sort of bird call or the sound a dog toy might make when squeezed. It was certainly duck-like. John's father looked on blankly. A wedge of grey ash fell from the cigar to the cement floor before tumbling out into the world in diminishing fragments and then blown away on the breeze to mingle with the specter headed dandelion plants sprouting from the uncut lawn in pale spritzes. The girl pulled a leather satchel from her side to her stomach and rooted around until she found two quarters. She dropped them in John's father's hand. At that point he knew he'd have to forego that belt buckle, liking it or not. What's sold was sold. John gnawed the inside of his cheek and looked down onto the balding crown of his father, a thin wisp of hair brushed neatly across the scalp in a single silver wave.

One day, he too would be that old. The boy with the scarf made his way up the driveway towards the girl and the men, stopping to scoop up the briefcase from the ground. He jostled it in his hand as if to gauge the weight first and then knelt down, opening it with two clicks. Placing the three books he held inside, he closed the lid and locked it again.

"Seems a little beat up," he said, peering over the rims of his glasses. "Also looks like someone's initials here on the metal. I'll give you five dollars for it."

"Not for sale," John said. He pulled his pack straps forward using his thumbs and then let them back again.

"I can do eight if you need a little more for it," he said.

"It's not for sale I told you," he said.

The boy stood up again. He had little pebbles embedded in the skin of his knees, and the pavement had left behind a pattern of ridges, giving them the appearance of uncooked tripe. He opened his mouth to say something and then stopped. He looked fed up over one thing or another, but it was difficult to tell about what.

"Alright, Brandy," he said. "Let's leave these two guys alone."

"Well, thank you both," she said. "I'll find some sort of use for this."

"It's a belt buckle," John said. "It goes on your belt."

The girl laughed that same strange laugh as if there were something humorous about what he said, but really it seemed as if she didn't understand one way or the other and she had just

Fiction

been laughing her entire life without reason. The boy hooked the girl around the elbow with his arm once she came close and then pulled the scarf up over his nose.

“You know, those things’ll kill ya,” he said, so that there was little doubt as to what was doing the killing and to whom.

John’s father made a lewd gesture that sent them scattering into the daylight snickering and whispering as the men lingered in the shadows.

As soon as they left, John picked up the briefcase and removed the books from inside. He walked around the mounds of items and selected a few articles of clothing to fold, and then when those fit, he picked a few more things he might need. By the end, he had filled the container easily. The briefcase after all had not been meant for anything other than ballpoint pens and a few bundles of important papers. He had to hold the whole thing pinned between his chest and forearm. He passed his father and placed a balled up 20-dollar bill upon the arm of the lawn chair.

“You’ll have the rest of the rent by end of week,” he said.

His father removed a straight razor from his shirt pocket and ran it through the bottom most half of the cigar, allowing one stinking chip to fall away clean. Everything went back into his breast pocket: the razor, the cigar, and the balled-up bill. He rose up and patted his son on the back as he passed.

“Thatta boy, Johnny,” he said, and walked through the garage and into the house, closing the door behind him.

Just across the street, two cars pulled up and parked in the sunshine but this time the birds on the wire would not startle.

A door opened and he hugged it closely to his chest now, clutching his bundle with both hands like a man with the last remaining bills of a million dollars might do.

Fiction

Nothing

By Tucker McIntyre

CEO. Three simple letters that, when combined, exude almost limitless power. Not even the government can tell a CEO what to do. Not really. Allicia Bareghatski knows that well. She's the face of the luxury clothing company FERU, after all. You know the one that's worth billions? The one where they don't let you in if you're wearing a t-shirt and jeans. The type of store that's in luxury malls, where the rich go to shop, and the poor play pretend. Allicia is the picture of beauty, intelligence, and hard work. To the American cult of capitalism, she's the dream they worship, and just like her features, everything about her personality and her career seems to align perfectly with the interests of the masses. She could go on TV and lobby for puppy murder, and dogs would be extinct within twenty-four hours. However, I'm not writing this because I believe Allicia hates puppies. My name is Richard Everett. I'm the former housekeeper of the Bareghatski family, and just like you, I was once fooled by the legend of The Allicia Bareghatski. I now know she is the devil.

I had been working for Allicia and her family for about six months when it happened. Their home was an astonishing, massive work of art, built by a French architect and lifelong friend of Allicia's. Despite the perceived menialness of housekeeping, my father insisted it would impress her to know the history of the estate.

The house officially started being built in 2013. Mrs. Bareghatski insisted on being a part of every step of the process: the design, the furnishing, and the decorating. Her influence can be seen in the subtle, yet powerful details woven into the intricacy of every room. Finally, the house made for a perfect wedding gift, finishing construction in 2015, the same year that Mrs. Bareghatski and her husband Duke Fring were married." Father made me repeat that until it was ingrained in my mind. Still, I never really thought of any of that when I was there. I could care less about the facts. I was more interested in the superstitious side of things I had heard about from my friends. They told me all about it when they heard about my new gig. According to them, the past Bareghatski housekeepers had quit because of ghosts. 'Bullshit,' I thought, until my father told me the same thing.

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Despite the size of the place, the job was manageable. Easy even. Allicia had a habit of keeping her space clean, and her daughters embodied this trait perhaps more than her. You probably wouldn't know anyone lived there if it weren't for the labels on the bedroom doors. The girls' rooms weren't barren. They were well decorated with items of their choice, but the extreme tidiness made the rooms feel like a showroom. Only once did I catch something out of place. A vape tucked under one of their cabinets. Even though they were the children of the great and powerful Mrs. Bareghatski, they were children all the same. I told their mother it was mine. My father was so livid he almost fired me.

Only once did I catch something out of place. A vape tucked under one of their cabinets. Even though they were the children of the great and powerful Mrs. Bareghatski, they were children all the same. I told their mother it was mine. My father was so livid he almost fired me.

The floors were somehow the cleanest parts of the house. The white marble looked downright antiseptic. I can only remember the floor actually needing to be mopped once. The runny yolk of the cracked egg Chef Rachel dropped was completely gone with a swift left and right motion. The thin layer of soapy water that was left behind could have doubled as a mirror. I stared at my reflection on the spotless marble and felt empty, like I had been done away with the yolk. I stared at the empty reflection and questioned which side of the marble I was on. Nothingness. Still, my routine wasn't all bad. I was paid well, and the job always stayed the same. Then it happened. The most hardworking person in the world decided to go on a family vacation.

Allicia asked me to do three things while they were gone: dust the house, check the mail, and let them know if any packages came. I assured her, "Anything you or your family needs, I'll do it, Mrs. Bareghatski, anything at all." This is one of those moments a person replays in their head a thousand times, despite the fact they couldn't possibly have known better. No amount of reason can make a person forgive themselves for not being clairvoyant. Believe me, I know a thing or two about regret.

After two days in, I thought I must have the most pointless job in the world. I was practically useless when compared to the militia of cleaning machines the Bareghatski

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household harbored. There was a robot to clean the floor, the pool, hell, they even had one for the gutters. The most egregious machine of all was their automated pet feeder. It went off at the same times every day, forcing me to scoop the excess back into the top of the machine because “Puffy,” the Pomeranian, was being boarded at a luxury pet hotel while the Bareghatskis were away. I realized that I served no actual purpose. I know I was merely a custom.

After finishing with the downstairs rooms, I made my way upstairs to continue dusting. Alicia’s room was the worst of it. It was huge, just like the house, and took a long time to dust. The entire time I felt like I was being watched by their painting. They had a lovely centerpiece, an unnerving portrait of Alicia and her husband that just made my skin crawl. At the time, I had worked there six months, and I could count on my fingers the amount of times I had seen her husband.

I wonder if that had anything to do with him being portrayed as a malnourished lapdog in the portrait. I guess even with the endless possibility of a paintbrush, it was impossible not to look like an ant beside the domineering Mrs. Alicia Beraghatski. I wondered if he was as much of a formality to her image as me, the pointless housekeeper.

I had finished dusting the room and started to leave when I heard something. It sounded like a knock. As far as I was aware, I was the only person in the house. I turned to the direction of the noise and saw that their closet door was ajar. Now the Bareghastkis had always assured me that the only cameras they had were on the outside of the house, but I never really believed them. If they saw me entering their bedroom closet without their permission, I’d be done for. Things fall over in closets all the time, and if there was something going on, the outside cameras would’ve spotted it.

I gathered my cleaning supplies and opened the door to the hallway. The hinges on the door squeaked. I closed the door, and another squeak followed. I had closed it slowly, hoping that maybe the dreaded noise could be avoided, but it only prolonged and deepened the sound. I was at the top of the stairs when I heard the knock again. This time it was louder, and I felt even less confident that it could simply be heels tipping over in the closet. I was halfway down the stairs when the third knock came. This sound was much worse than the squeak of the door. It was like an animal hitting its head against concrete. At first I heard the flesh make impact. Then the force

Fiction

reverberated through the bone. It sounded like knocking your knuckles hard on a ceramic bowl.

‘Fuck,’ I thought. ‘Are there really ghosts in this house?’

I stood there a moment, deciding what I should do next. ‘Had I left the door unlocked? No. That would be impossible. The doors automatically lock themselves.’ As I contemplated, my eyes darted around me, and I looked in the direction of the noise. Above me a string hung attached to the door of a scuttle hole. Whatever it was, alive or dead, it was in the attic.

I came up the stairs and pulled down the attic ladder. Behind the door that held the ladder was another door. This door wasn’t pristine. It didn’t camouflage with the paint on the walls. It was metal and had a latch with a lock that swung down. ‘Just walk away before you lose your job again,’ I said to myself. Then came the worst noise of all. A soft, muffled cry like a starving baby. A baby who doesn’t have the strength to open its own mouth. My hands started to shake as goosebumps ran down my whole body. This was no ghost.

I stole a wrench from Mr. Bareghatski’s tool bag. By the looks of it, it had never been used before. I banged with all my might against the lock, and with each bang, the crying intensified. This thing, whatever it was, sounded afraid. I could barely see the lock when it broke off. My eyes were wet with tears, and my heart was racing, but I had come this far. again,’ I said to myself. Then came the worst noise of all. A soft, muffled cry like a starving baby. A baby who doesn’t have the strength to open its own mouth. My hands started to shake as goosebumps ran down my whole body. This was no ghost.

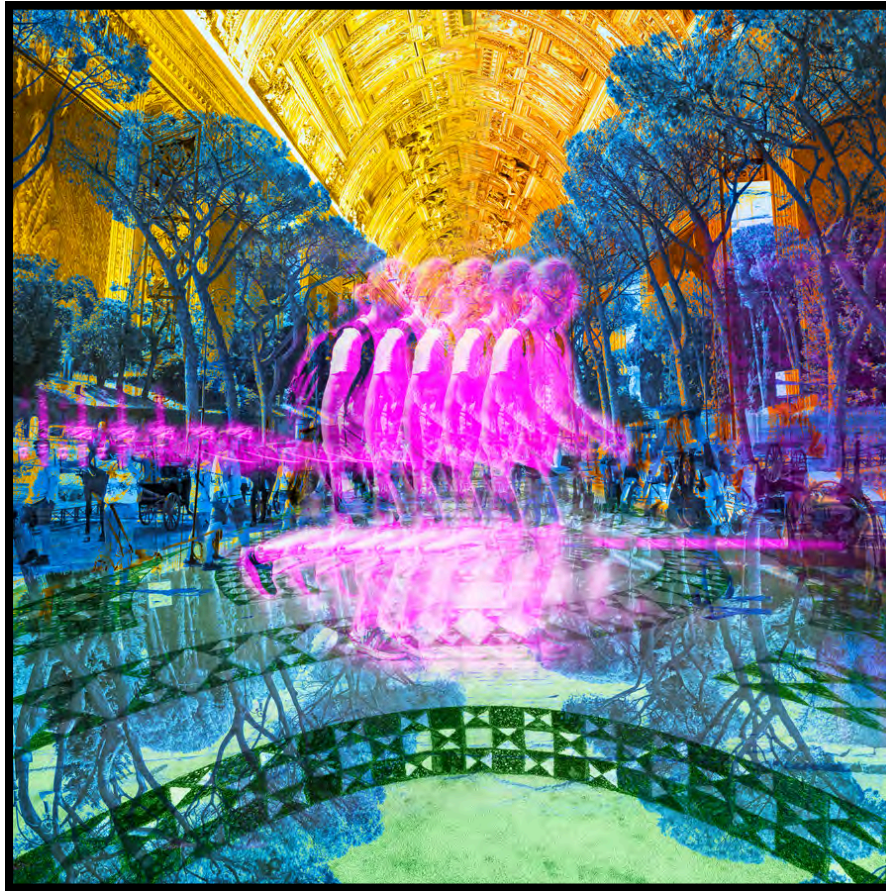
When I entered the attic, I saw a boy. He was naked, and his head bled out against the planked floor. Slowly, I approached him and spoke to him, but he didn’t even pick his head up to look at me. He just laid there, drowning in a puddle of his own blood and tears. He was weak and thin and his skin had never seen the sun. I asked him his name, but he said nothing, and as I lifted him out of his despair, I saw in his hand an old Polaroid photo. The photo featured a young woman. She was happy. Her eyes squinted from laughter, and the sides of her mouth wrinkled from an overwhelming smile. She had shiny white teeth that popped out from under her lips with

Fiction

he freshness of the first blooming daisy in spring. She was wearing a rock and roll t-shirt and a short skirt, and a man was holding her wrists and kissing her left hand. His hair was unkempt. It stretched out everywhere like a mop, and his eyes could barely be seen through his cheap mall kiosk sunglasses. His face was of no recognition to me. He wasn't the sole heir to the Hampton hotels, he wasn't the grandson of an oil baron, he didn't invent the iPhone, he didn't even wash the mustard stains out of his tacky Hawaiian shirt. The only thing remarkable about him was that he was in love, and as I stared at that photo, I saw Allicia for the first time.

Art

TITLE Wanderings Italy
AUTHOR Suzanne Voigt



Nonfiction

A Letter to My Best Friend

By Isabel Witchek

Don't be alarmed, but I must start this by admitting that I am on drugs. Today, the grass I rest in is my solace, swallowing me whole: the warm sun bathing my skin with gentle hands, the bubbling creek wrapping through the yard, the whispers of the breeze through the synthetic green trees. In my most delicate and tender, my words itch for a resting place, trapped birds in the cage of my skull.

This is a place stuck in time—my uncle's cabin, the one with the vertigo hallway and the drunk, yellow kitchen, hidden deep in the quiet Virginia mountains. Last night, we saw a sea of fireflies twinkling in the yard, and it was almost like looking at the night sky. Against the wall is the big breakfasts on the long table, and when I stand outside on the screened porch, I can hear the booming voices of the yelling adults and the barking dogs tearing through the grass. There is the swing I cried on, sitting lonely in the yard. In the very back of the house is the big room I was never allowed in. In the very front, the floor beds my cousins and I were banished to. I haven't been here in years, since I was a child, since I promised myself I would never go back. My return is with friends this time, not family.

I think of my Marie, my best friend. We met in preschool, almost eighteen years ago now—big, glossy, brown eyed and pink, chipmunk cheeked; a crown of untamable, curly flyways adorning us both. We were high-pitched squeals and never enough playdates, feathers in our hair and fashion shows in our mother's too big high heels, barbie barbie barbie...more barbie, and my twelfth birthday party, when she had gifted me a barbie even though it wasn't cool to play with barbies anymore; when just the day before, I had come to terms with my deep, dark secret—that I missed playing with barbies.

Funny how this meeting was always meant to be. Our mothers began working together at the hair salon downtown, both new and bug-eyed like us. They shared stories of their little girls, the new school adjustments, the she has a new friend I hear so much about. It was us they were speaking of, and they didn't even know it.

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These birds know where to fly, but their wings are clipped. Laughter threatens to escape the prison of my teeth, a bubbly, childish giggle that mimics the running creek in front of me. A regression to childhood, girlhood, wide eyed and mouth full of youth. My words are but unripe fruit hanging from the branches of my tongue. It is Marie I miss. Marie the birds fly to. Only Marie my mirth and boneless language could be shared with.

A birthday card is buried in my nightstand, with no date, no telling of age beside the sloppy handwriting and horrible grammar. It reads: issy you are my very Best friend and I Love you and I miss you more every Day and you are allso the funnyest person I know and I Love when we stay up till the Latest Point in the nigh Laughing over the Dumbest things Because we thout it was funny and thats why your my Best Friend.

Do you remember? My thirteenth birthday party, the sky-high fancy hotel room, sparkling chandeliers and thick, patterned rugs. Do you remember my absent mother and the bottled wall downstairs, the room we couldn't get into, like standing on the distant street and seeing a colorful Christmas tree through a window. Do you remember the cold tile biting into our knees as you helped me pick white rice off of the floor, grain by grain pinched between our fingertips, because it was too sticky to sweep into our hands, because my mother had thrown our dinner across the bathroom. But we laughed so much that night. A labor of love: rice under our fingernails and empty bellies.

We are messy bedroom floors and two reflections in the mirror, my first cigarette and your first breakup, juvenile intoxication and comfortable silence and heavy bass in our ribcages and gemstones glued above our eyebrows and whispers in the night. Laughing through our shared sickness and worn best friend bracelets and shared blankets and the crazy and the secrets and the inside jokes and the bliss and the unbliss.

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Nonfiction

Cold Turkey and Indecision

By Payton Morton

“I don’t stop eating cheesecake because it tastes bad, or it’s no longer appealing, I quit eating it because it hurts my stomach.” This was exactly how I tried to explain to my situationship of three months that I needed space. Of course, food would be on my mind at a time

like this—it was ridiculous, but maybe also fitting, as my emotions seemed as hard to digest as the cheesecake itself. This was not the first-time love, or what I thought was love, pointed directly at symbols, making me question my reasoning for affection. Looking back now, I can see that superstitions aren’t always true.

When I first met Mr. Situation, we were both wearing the same pair of fake low-rise Doc Martens, a bit scuffed at the toes from the faux leather. Ironically, I had just returned from a date with his German friend, and I boomed into the room filled with our mutuals, all of them drinking wine and belting out Hamilton lyrics at full volume. In the corner of the room sat Mr. Situation, lounging on what my friends called the “cuck chair”—a shabby, blue sofa, abandoned by all other furniture. He looked up, grinned, and said, “Hi, I’m Mr. Situation.” If he’d told me he’d upend my sense of self-worth while making me question everything I thought I valued, I wouldn’t have believed him. But looking back, it feels like that’s what happened. There was something in the way he spoke, some magnetic pull, that invited me in. Instead, I abandoned karaoke night with his friend a few minutes later to “watch a scary movie”—though I left thrilled by the fact that his friend had other plans entirely.

Thinking nothing of that night, except a tinge of disappointment for trading amusing karaoke for sleazy pick-up lines, I went home. Only a few days later, did I run into Mr. Situation again. Our second encounter comprised a bowl of chicken and rice at Shore Dining Hall. Noticing his entrance, my friend Peyton with an e, and I waved him over to our table. Realizing she was late for her class; she apologetically left the two of us alone at a high-top table meant for two. At first I was nervous- this cute guy with curly brown hair centered in front of me, but the conversation flowed as if we were old friends. Ironically, our chat was

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about identity and the significance of labels, such as the name we're given at birth.

Dare-I- recount, the conversation was about symbols. We continued meeting for lunch every Monday, then added Wednesdays to the schedule as well. In little time, we were eating a meal together daily. As I learned more about him, I realized how different we truly were. However, I was drawn to the excitement of something new.

After consistent lunch dates and the following hours that ate up the afternoon, we were inseparable. I exchanged most of my hobbies such as working out, spending time with my roommates, and even writing, for a glimpse of those deep inviting eyes 24/7. His humor stripped away our differences, fueling my appreciation for emotional intelligence and comedy. Our friend group merged together as our individual friendship naturally strengthened. When we made it to our first kiss, we were greeted by a green Luna moth, its wings stamped by crescent moons. After immediate research, I read that luna moths were a symbol of beginnings and believed whole-heartedly that it was a sign.

Subsequently, I began noticing signs everywhere—like the similarities in our family backgrounds, the shared connection through niche music, and, most importantly, the mutual appreciation we had for each other. I was searching for marks of relation between us, beautifully overlooking all distinctions. Then, one day he popped the question. It seemed timely given the amount of salad days we'd been sharing, yet concurrently sudden. “Do you want to meet my parents?” Seven words that struck me like a sword. I was taken aback. Are we like that already? Have I deemed myself worthy that quickly? His lack of religion and surplus of curse words were something I had both admired and differed, but were they qualifying to meet my mother? Could I meet his? I panicked, mumbling something about the speed of it all.

I came to the realization that I was no longer a simple lunch indulgence, nor a funny friend due to the consequences of my own actions. I had become the love interest without fully realizing it. When I traveled home for fall break, my friends and family started questioning me.

“Do you see yourself with him? Are you sure you want to be in a relationship right now? Does he believe in God?” Everything I had previously seen as a sign wrapped itself into one giant question mark as I felt the gravity of his emotions surface next to mine.

Nonfiction

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“Do you see yourself with him? Are you sure you want to be in a relationship right now? Does he believe in God?” Everything I had previously seen as a sign wrapped itself into one giant question mark as I felt the gravity of his emotions surface next to mine. This is going to hurt.

As I wrote down a list of pros and cons, I realized his personality had nothing to do with my feelings. He was a great guy, but not one I could see a future with. Partially because I wasn't sure what my own future should look like. I had drawn him into my space, not knowing that it was reserved. After talking with loved ones, shedding tears, taking a break from school, and indulging some turkey, I realized what I needed to do.

We sat in his car as I poured out my clear decision of uncertainty over Thanksgiving break. I explained how wrong it felt to be unsure of his potential “boyfriendment” in my life and the misfortune of losing him as a friend. I was stuffed. I even apologized for the crossing of boundaries into the physical realm, disguised as perfection by a Luna moth. When all was said and done, we agreed upon space and time for ourselves, my necessity for it much stronger than his, and parted ways. When I think about it now, still fresh, I gratefully accept the “signs” throughout our relationship as a friendly gesture from the universe, perhaps not as direct as I assumed, but meaningful nonetheless. In the end, stepping away from Mr. Situation wasn't about rejecting the connection we shared but recognizing that some bonds, like rich cheesecake, are best enjoyed in moderation.

Nonfiction

Two Different Countries and Me

By Bikram Grigas

I was about three years old, and I lived in a small village in Nepal. Everyone had jobs, kids and adults alike, because everyone needed the food and the water and the fuel. My job was to keep the monkeys from getting the bananas out of the trees. We needed the food because we didn't know when our next meal would come, so I threw rocks at them to scare them away. I would sit on the hill in the heat waiting for the monkeys. Other times I would go work in rice terraces where we would plant and cultivate the rice. One time, I ran up a hill and almost stepped on a black snake, and I turned around and ran down the hill. When I looked back, the snake was chasing me. This probably caused my ophidiophobia. To this day, I am still terrified of snakes.

One day two men came to our hut in the village and took me with them. I was nervous; we couldn't really communicate with each other. I was told by the people in the hut I stayed with to follow them. We walked about two days before we came to our destination of a bus stop. The bus took me to a place with tall buildings and there were so many of them. I had never seen so many tall buildings and lights that would illuminate the pitch dark.

My journey from my village to where I would be staying was frightening because I could not communicate with the people around me; also, I was very nervous. Once we got to the city of Kathmandu, I was brought to the orphanage which was named Bal Mandir (The Children's Temple). The two years I spent in the orphanage was almost life changing. They had running water and electricity, so we didn't need fire to see in the dark like in the village. I had to learn another dialect because their dialect was completely different from what I was speaking at the village where I came from. We ate breakfast every morning and dinner every night, and the younger kids didn't have to help, only the older ones did. Most of the older ones were female, and we would call them "didi" (sister).

Although the orphanage didn't have much money, we kids would find ways to have fun.

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We used to play with marbles and collect them from each other when we would draw a circle and put one of our marbles in the middle and we would try to hit it with our marble and if we managed to hit it that marble would be ours. To this day I still have two of those marbles. We couldn't afford clothes or shoes, so some of us would have over sized clothes or shoes that didn't fit. One day, I was playing with another child, and he had a rubber hose and put it around my neck and pulled me down the stairs, and I cracked my top left corner of my head. I still have the scar.

One random day I was called to the head of the orphanage's office, and I was so terrified because usually when you get called in there, you were in trouble. But when I entered the office, it was a little dark. There were no windows or carpets. There was a desk with a small lamp with a wired telephone, and there was a little bench with two people sitting on it. One of them had blue jeans and striped colors going down with different shades of blue. He was the biggest person I had ever seen; he was over six feet tall. The other person was a woman wearing a dark skirt and a white t-shirt. She had a pink orchid on her left side of her shirt just like the man next to her. She was the tallest women I had ever seen. They could not understand me, and I could not understand them. I didn't know what was going on, I was nervous and afraid. The two adults were trying to communicate with me. In my fear, I took the man's sunglasses and put them on my face, and everybody started laughing, which eased the tension. The tall women took me outside, and she started blowing bubbles, and I started popping them, which led me to being less afraid. I didn't know this at the time, but they were going to be my new parents.

Before I left the orphanage, we had a huge celebration with all the kids and adults who took care of the children with food. They cut up multiple goats and chicken for our feast with potatoes, lentils, and rice. They used a lot of turmeric, curry powder, paprika, cinnamon seed, salt and pepper for ingredients. When we finally got on the airplane and we lifted in the sky, I looked out the window and waved and said "Bye, bye" to Nepal.

I was about seven or eight by the time I reached America. Living in America was a total culture shock. It was hard the first year because of the language barrier. Whenever I was thirsty, I would take my thumb and tilt my head back and motion drinking, or when I was hungry, I would rub my stomach. At nighttime I heard scratching near the window, and I would yell

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“bagha” (tiger), but my parents would comfort me and would say there are no tigers here.

When coming to America, my name was changed to Jaime. My mother wanted to give me an American name so people would stop asking “How do you pronounce that?”; “Where is that from?”; “How long has he been here?”; “Where is he from?”. Maybe around fourth grade I decided that I wanted my name changed back to Bikram. I can’t really tell you why because my mother was always asking what about Jaime, and I would always say I want Bikram. My mother’s theory was because it was what I was known in Nepal. America was totally different from my experience in Nepal. Hot water for bathing was something not readily available in Nepal. My parents were able to afford clothes and shoes for me that fit me just right. Sometimes my mom would cook authentic Nepali food for my birthday, but I didn’t have a lot of traditional or cultural experiences growing up in America. One time we were eating food, and I ate some meat, and I said it was good and asked, “What is this?” My parents told me it was steak, and I looked terrified because we didn’t eat steak or cow in Nepal. Eating cow in Nepal is forbidden. Cows are considered sacred animals and are seen as symbols of purity and sustenance. But now, I love to eat steak.

My first four years in New Hampshire were difficult. The weather was a lot different. In New Hampshire the fall and winter season was something I had to adjust to. In Nepal it was always hot, especially at the village and the orphanage. New Hampshire had mountains and hills, but they were nothing like Nepal. My mom told me the fastest way I learned English was watching Sesame Street, Teletubbies, and Barney and Friends. One of my first friends I made was our neighbor, Ben, who was probably two years younger than me. We used to play outside all the time. We would swim in our swimming pool and jump around on a trampoline. Our favorite outdoor activities were riding mountain bikes throughout the neighborhood and trails in the forest. Winter was something I never experienced in Nepal; I used to see mountains in the distance that were white but had no idea why they were white. During wintertime, Ben and I and his brother Alex who was two years older than me would play inside a lot. We would play Nintendo 64 games like Super Smash Brothers, Legend of Zelda, and we even had a connector to play Game Boy games on the TV. We also played Sonic the Hedgehog on our Sega Dreamcast.

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As time went on, I started kindergarten and that was an adjustment for me because I wasn't used to school. I had people my age to play and draw with which was fun. Now that food was not scarce, I was growing up faster than kids in my class. During first grade I skipped second grade and moved up to third grade but during the middle of third grade, I was moved up to the middle of fourth grade. Physically I was taller and much stronger than the kids in my class, so I kept skipping grades. The contribution to my hindered growth was the lack of food I was getting in Nepal. Food was available but not enough. We would get one plate or a bowl of food. As we went to the doctors more, they concluded malnourishment. After all the doctor's visits and everything was on track, I completed my fifth-grade year. After the language barrier was no longer a factor, my life in New Hampshire was great. I had many friends to play with, winter times were fun, and all my new family lived around us except my sister who lived in North Carolina. Although we are not biologically related, she has always been my sister. We didn't go to church or didn't follow any religious heritage; it was like becoming someone new with another identity. In Nepal I didn't get to go to school, have goals for the future, or make different friends.

When I turned twelve my family told me we were going to move to Wilmington, North Carolina. Moving was something I did not want; I was going to lose all my friends and family. But we moved, and a month later I started sixth grade in 2003. Luckily my new neighbor was my age, and he introduced me to different kids. Wilmington was the final stop in the journey of my new life in America.

Of course, I would love to visit Nepal again, but I can't afford it right now. Growing up in Nepal and America has made me realize how fortunate I am compared to hundreds of kids in the orphanage I lived with and millions of kids around the world. "Why me" I always ask myself, I am still searching and wondering. I don't feel fully American because of my Nepalese past, that was a good seven years of my early childhood. Those memories will always be with me, whether they were good or bad. I have always wondered if my birth parents are alive or not; I might never find out. I always wondered how they looked or how old they were.

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My goal is to finish my associate in Information Technology and get a bachelor's degree in Information Technology, so I can support my family. I love learning, reading, and using new technologies. I have an eight-year-old son named Cameron now and he is a mini me in almost every way. I am sure he will get asked a lot of questions when he gets to middle school and above, but I want him to know I will be there for him. Most of the experience he will have will be experiences I have felt growing up.

Art

TITLE Morena
AUTHOR Kristin Zafar



Nonfiction

Everything Leaves Eventually

By Emma Riggs

My new neighbors are tending to the gorgeously blooming bustles of plants that they recently placed by their front porch. They catch my attention from my own porch swing across the recently repaved street as my dogs cue their barking at the neighbors' every movement. They have just recently moved in, and the cozy brick house is almost unrecognizable from their improvements and adjustments to the previously dull yard.

The family that lived there before them were great friends of ours long ago, when my childhood dogs were still around and my sister lived in the same house. I hung out with the kids almost everyday in the old tree house in their sullen backyard, with their zealous dog that always got loose, and on our bikes in the front yard. My bond with all of them was unbreakable, it seemed, as they were a few of my first friends. The family usually kept to themselves, however, and the kids were homeschooled, so I did not see them very much as we all grew older. I often think about how I never got to witness their departure, or to fare them well in whichever city they were moving to. They were the second or third family to have left the neighborhood where I've spent my whole life.

As I reminisce, the newly arrived elder couple revives the house, covering every spot in colorful flowers and placing interestingly vivid furniture on the porch, where there used to sit worn out chairs and a few potted plants here and there. I look around at my own house and realized that it has changed noticeably as well, not because someone new was there to alter it, but because my father's goal was most likely to fix it up and sell it once I moved out. Who else would fill the empty rooms with personality when it's just him and the pets remaining, anyway? I decide to escape the sudden unfamiliarity of my surroundings and finish the last page of my book, taking in every word as if it's my first time doing so. Afterwards, I quickly rush back inside to enter my backyard, the one place where the picnic table was still unused and rotting, the vast field behind my house looked as impossible as always, and there weren't strangers moving in where someone significant once lived. There will always be remnants of the past sticking to your skin like sandburs and waiting to be forgotten—but they never will.

Nonfiction

Sa-waat-dii krap to Thailand

By Pat Mestrez

There was no real sense of finality. No notions of needing closure or of shutting doors. Just a whisper to the air hinting that the dry and cool season might finally be approaching. That subtle change was noticeable after months of the balmy stickiness that Thailand bathes in throughout most of the year. Otherwise there was nothing to mark this Friday morning in September from any other school day. Other than that it was the last day that Jordan and I would be teaching at Nan Christian School. That next morning we would be departing Nan City with plans to take a week's vacation in the southern islands. A reward of one last adventure before heading back to the U.S. Sa-wat-dee krap is a standard way for a male to say hello in Thailand. For women it is the same but Ka is substituted for krap. The same phrase is also used to say good-bye. Together, after a year of living, working, and finding our way in a country halfway around the world, Jordan and I would be saying good-bye to Nan, our students, and our expat way of life.

It's not that our last day had come as a sudden surprise. Jordan and I had made the decision a month earlier. We were coming up on the completion of our second semester as *Pratom* (elementary school) English teachers at Nan Christian School. We had discussed the alternative choices of extending our contracts with Nan Christian or maybe moving down to the southern beaches and selling our trade there. We had consulted with both family and friends. We spent several hot humid nights drinking cheap Beer Singha together as we tried to plan our future life.

We still loved lunches of Pad Krapow gai kai dow, a traditional Thai dish of spicy minced chicken and fresh chillies served with rice and topped with a fried egg. Usually it costs 50 Baht, or about \$1.50 in USD. We still loved that only an hour-long flight could get us to a weekend in Chiang Mai or Bangkok. In either city a room in a hostel could be had for a few bucks a night. Usually that price meant no air-conditioning, but that is a small sacrifice if you know that you can drink enough beer to sleep through the humid nights. We loved our small friend group of other young recent college grad English teachers from the States. We loved the students in our classes.

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But we missed our families. We had begun to feel too far removed from the relationships we had built back in Charlotte, while attending and falling in love with each other at Belmont Abbey College. Much of our friend group had stayed in the Belmont-Charlotte area after graduating. We had begun to feel every one of the 8,000 flight miles between us and them. We also missed the conveniences of food menus in English, toilet paper in public bathrooms, and good pickles. I think above all Jordan missed her family. For me, it was the pickles. For reasons I never determined, it was impossible to find a good pickle in Thailand.

And so after due deliberation we made the decision. We would return stateside. We knew our last day would be the last Friday of the semester. We had broken the news to our Thai employers, booked our flight from Bangkok to Laganardia, and finalized our travel arrangements to get down to a beach bungalow on the Andaman Sea for our last week in the country. We had spent that last month continuing to try to teach a language from the other side of the world to the students of Nan Christian School. We knew most of them would live their whole lives in Nan. A few may go to University in Bangkok, but like so many towns in the U.S., Nan isn't the type of place too many people move away from. For most of our students, their exposure to Americans would exclusively be through transients like Jordan and I. Young Americans with a "sense of adventure" that would appear in their town for six months to a year, get their sense of adventure satiated, and then return to the comforts of fast-food chains, air-conditioning, and driving on the right side of the road.

Jordan and I had planned all week to meet our friends for beers and burgers at Mojo Burger to celebrate our last night in Nan. Mojo was an "American Style burger joint". This small, dark, and comfy sanctuary was owned by a guy nicknamed Guitar. Guitar was one of the few Thai-Americans in Nan. He had left Bangkok at 18 not having been able to speak any English. He had hopes of finding his mom in New York City. He had stayed in America for 15 years before moving back and opening a restaurant in Nan selling real American burgers. He never mentioned if he found his mom. He preferred to ask about us. His burgers were the best we had that year; though, at that time, he had not yet acquired a means of getting good pickles.) Guitar's restaurant was located right at the entrance to Gaad Nan, a condensed but dizzying labyrinth of bars, night clubs, and restaurants where we could drink in close dark

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quarters with Thai people our age, though this proximity never evolved to real intimacy. Cultural gaps are hard to bridge, even with alcohol.

We were meeting up with Bianca from Puerto Rico and Taylor from Boulder, Colorado, neither of whom had quite warmed up to the local food scene. They still preferred trying to make mac n' cheese in their apartments to going out for Pad Pak Boon, Tom Yum Goong, or Nua Nam Tok. Meeting for burgers was the best option we had to convince our fellow English teachers and friends to meet us for our farewell dinner.

To celebrate our last night in Nan in true American fashion, we spent that evening getting wild-west drunk. We ordered multiple rounds of Beer Leo from Guitar that we drank over ice. Then there's the hazy memory of moving on to another bar and of ordering their signature house Rainbow shots. These were prepared by lining up multiple glasses of beer with a shot of a different color of the rainbow balanced between each beer. ROY G BIV in all his glory. Our server, a young person delicate and fluid in their mannerisms then would tap the shot on the end into the first beer in a way that caused a domino effect across the line of beers, knocking each successive shot glass into the next beer. The chugging began from there. Chong gao - cheers. We used this phrase several times that night and on into the half-light hours of the next Thai morning. We felt unfettered and free. Drunk on life.

* * * * *

The next day of travel was rough. Stomachs roiling with acid, cotton-mouthed, and heads banging and hands shaking. After the short flight from the Nan airport to Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, I suggested to Jordan that instead of catching the 8 hour train and bus trip that we had already booked the tickets for, that we book a few flights down South to Koh Tao. We had learned from experience that a scheduled 8 hours by train and bus in Thailand usually meant more like 10-12 hours. I didn't think we were in great shape to survive that kind of trip. Jordan agreed. That decision to shift travel plans saved us from having to fight off the urge to vomit in our camping packs during what would have been an air-conditioning-less ride through the winds and turns of central Thailand's geography. It wasn't cheap, but what's a few hundred bucks when you're young and hungover? These are the types of decisions you can make when you're not quite twenty-five.

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Our flight lasted an hour and a half. She and I bought two Beer Tiger and drank them with ice at the first open-market cafe we saw after landing in Koh Tao. We had survived our hangovers and arrived at the quiet bungalow with enough time to ask the local management to send out for a case of Beer Chang and a couple bottles of Thai whiskey that could get us through our week in paradise.

I wish I could say that I remember Jordan and I both taking time that last night in Nan to appreciate where we were and what we were experiencing. Instead, I only remember having fun. I think we were just young and comfortable knowing that we would have fun wherever we were the next day, whether that was in Thailand or the United States.

Now after a few years, I worry that I will never feel like I took the appropriate time to reflect on what our time in Thailand did mean to us then as we were leaving. Or on what it could have meant for us by having stayed. With age and distance, these questions have come up often. They often interrupt periods of a more enjoyable nostalgia. I'm not sure I'll ever even know how Jordan looks back on that year and the choice we made to leave. The truth is I think that we were just young and that youth doesn't know doors can close permanently. It doesn't know moving across the world isn't always so doable, that some friendships should be left behind, and that hangovers won't always be so easy to grit through.

It's been almost ten years since we left Nan. I find myself sometimes thinking of the hundreds of students we got to know at Nan Christian School and hoping a few have grown up and traveled around. Maybe a few of them have become teachers or have made it to New York City and Chicago.

Since we came back to the U.S., Jordan and I have gotten married and settled in Wilmington, NC. We live almost exactly three hours from Moncks Corner, the small southern town in South Carolina I grew up in. That three hours is a proximity that would have made me sick at eighteen when I first left for college, where Jordan and I met and fell in love. Now I'm 33, she's a year younger, and we both find ourselves sometimes struggling to come to terms with where we are and with what we are doing here. It's almost impossible to get good Thai food in the southern United States. But there are plenty of places to buy high quality pickles.

Nonfiction

We might still one day make some big and new travel plans for our future. It's a pretty easy time to be uncomfortable in America. But right now we have no plans to get back to Thailand. Sometimes we find ourselves resentful of the doors that we might have shut. At other times we are pretty comfortable where we're at. Maybe both these things are just part of living closer to 35 than 25. Maybe I'm still hoping we are fortunate enough to get to learn how to say hello in a few other languages. Even if it means having to learn to say good-bye in them.



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