

THE TALON

WINTER 2017

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THE RED KIMONO

Erika Salmon

As the American-born child of a Japanese mother, growing up in a predominantly American household, my mother's country and things from that land were curious and delightful, yet mysterious and therefore tantalizing. Japan was like Narnia—not everyone could go there all the time, but sometimes if you looked in the right wardrobe doors, you might get a peek at it. I remember the cardboard box on the shelf in my brother's closet. It was high out of my reach, so if I wanted to look at it or get it down, I had to fetch a stool from the kitchen. The box was rather deep and about as big around as a big wedding cake box. Like a cake box, it was white with some kind of pink and red design and a clear plastic window in the lid. It wasn't the box but the contents of the box that mesmerized me, for when you lifted the lid, inside was a beautiful red child's kimono. There were cardboard cubbies for small-sized kimono sandals, white tabi socks with split toes, a matching hair pin with a gold bauble for an accent, and a little drawstring purse. I think the purse had a suzu, or a bell on it, because I associate the sound of its ringing with the box. I had other dresses. I have two older sisters, so I had plenty of hand-me-downs, and once Mama bought me a gorgeous fluffy blue Cinderella dress with sparkles on it from the thrift store, and my uncle and aunt who lived in Las Vegas sent me a new dress every Christmas for me to wear at Papa's Optometry Banquet, but this kimono was set apart and special. It was my only dress that wasn't on a hanger and that I couldn't wear as a dress up dress or to go to church in, and that I couldn't put on without help—I had no idea how to put on an obi.

There are pictures of me wearing that red kimono in the living room of our house. I have a huge smile and a pair of hideous round glasses on my face that people told me were cute (I loved them because the frames were rainbow-colored). But I don't remember my mom dressing me or whether or not it was for my fifth birthday, as it should have been if we were following tradition.

There were other Japanese things in our house, like the furin, a glass wind chime that we hung from the dining room light over the table, and the paper crane mobile that we hung just below it. In those days, or the days following slightly after when I fell in love with a Japanese exchange student at my sister's

university and prayed every night for God to arrange for us to marry in the future, Japan was the land of my dreams. At 9 years old, when I heard Papa talking about the problem of Japan's declining population, I decided that when Yusuke and I got married we were going to repopulate Japan. The one thing I felt sorry about, was that even if my kids married pure Japanese, and their kids married pure Japanese, and their kids married pure Japanese, my one quarter of American blood would never quite disappear from my family bloodline.

I never would have guessed at that time that, although Yusuke would reenter my life once when I was 13 and then disappear from my life, I would one day be living and working in Japan after graduating from university (the same university as my sister and Yusuke, by the way, because it was in our home town).

Anyone who has lived abroad knows that at some point, the thrill and the mystery fade to commonplace, everyday life—you wake up, go to the bathroom, eat miso soup and yogurt and a slice of toast for breakfast, ride your bicycle to work and listen to students talk about their college days and their favorite hot springs and reasonably-priced restaurants, eat a rice ball, a dried persimmon, and a slice of cheese, and go on with your afternoon until the sun goes down and takes the warmth with it, you bundle up in a coat and two scarves and cycle home, have dinner with the lovely host family and try to lay low while your host mom good-naturedly scolds her husband about always buying too many vegetables from the discount-vegetable market man, laugh with them about how all three of us can't remember for the life of us where we just set our gloves or wallet, then washing dishes, taking a bath, making lesson plans, checking Facebook, and falling into bed past midnight and drifting to sleep in the middle of a prayer, to do it all again the next day. In the midst of that normality, an unusually spring-ish day in February, I pulled up to the crosswalk on my way to work, and I heard the sound of a furin chiming in the haru ichiban spring breeze—and suddenly, I remembered the delicious feeling of mystery that used to surround this place, and the longing to experience it more, and that beautiful red kimono.

AZALEAS ON THE CONCOURSE

Ryan Caron

On a quiet day, quiet in spite
of the light rain dancing on the roof
over the train station,

azaleas bloom in black soil
like canaries in a coal mine
preparing to sing like a chorus of swans, silenced

by indifferent eyes and intercom
announcements keeping time
for locomotive skeletons

held together by constant momentum
on rails conducting ever forward.
When the trains return at night,

they will be welcomed by the same
azaleas, only wilting slightly
toward the ground and gravity's inevitable call home.

RADIO

Ryan Caron

I think God, or life, or whatever you want to call it,
Speaks to us through the radio.

Variations of aggression soak a boy looking for manhood
as he makes iron weightless before reminding it of gravity, endlessly;

a gaggle of girls in a convertible sing along, off-key,
to the artificial tones of a mezzo-soprano with no discernible identity.

Elsewhere, the satin promise of paradise reads like subtext to the dulcet
moans of forgotten innocence in the backseat of a car whose wheels are going
nowhere

while somewhere a mother hums along to contemporary gospel as she stitches a
ripped cardigan
like she forgot the deformed, libidinous butterfly drifting torpidly on her lower back.

Androgynous howling and gratuitous guitars resonate from another room like a
memory as a man's fat that's not that of a baby sweats on the exposed engine of an
atrophied muscle car.

A country dirge about unfaithful lovers accompanies
An awkward silence as a man provides a woman her final ride home.

A jukebox conductor reads the mood of a dive-bar room with a lazy, rustic appeal
while cheap-whiskey women dig for gold in the broken hearts of empty, careless
men.

Eager, haphazard fingers shred mountainous callouses and double bass drums run
like a cardiac drag race as two pupils expand into singularities where no light is
found.

The self-aggrandizing nouveau riche spit attempts at dominance in collaborative ef-
forts to consistent rhythms while a circle of loners find solitude in hot fog.

Somewhere, between the incessant lines of the highway and the setting sun,
the cloistered captain of an eighteen-wheeler tires of the noisy static he can no longer
define.

DON'T TAKE THIS TOO

Ryan Caron

When I was seven,
I walked beside my mother
as she searched for values in the grocery store.

The refrigerated aisles conspired
with hums and buzzes
on either side.

I didn't notice her make-up
caked into the crevices
of her mid-twenties skin,

the faux-gold cross
nestled loose and mocking
in her cleavage,

the hand that weighed heavy
because it held nothing at all,
or the suspicious eyes that followed

us like a cat eyes a fish in a bowl.
She bought our meager wares and drove us
home in a car that sputtered like a sailor cusses.

She sat me down upon my bed
and told me to say the Lord's Prayer before I slept.
I looked at her and said

"Why, Mama? I don't think
there's no such thing
as God."

She whispered, "Don't you take
this from me too," and shook
her head like a child.

Before she left the room,
I watched tears flood
her face and mascara cascade

into rivers thicker than the Nile
red with blood when Moses said, "Let my people go,"
and Ramses replied, "No."

APOLLO IN HARMONIUM

Matthew Kirby

Caressing his lyre like one would hold and strum his lover,
Phoebus sings—he serenades dear Sylvia and her beasts.
He makes his bed on her bark, reclining, and—discovered
By droves of deer, goats, cats of manes and spots—his aural feast
Defies the chain that binds terrain to hosting heinous hunts.
Manual shorelines upon the lyre's strings bemuse no Sun.

THE SEED

Matthew Kirby

Entwined in the bosom of Terra, the first seed was laid.
More seeds were sown, and by the hands of Ceres, they'd all grown
to greet the primavera—all but one, as though forbade
until it ate its fill of discourse, of peace. It alone
consumed the follies of wise men cut down by history,
sanguine bronze. Thunder clapped, and from the seed arose a tree,
striking in its diadem of knots, leaves, and mystery.
Even so, the number of faces was two, a sibling to
titanic Prometheus and Epimetheus,
He is to be called Janus. In his taut boughs feath'ry friends
were born there above the adulterer dead in his noose;
Janus understood his role as beginning, as the end—
as he once was born of lightning, so by it he shall fall.
Mighty Jove on high, outrage, envy in his rolling eyes,
hurled his hasty bolts at the tree who he thought sought to call
all lives to him before the Fates could cut their locks and rise
to spin another breath. Her tears and his rain interweaved;
the lachrymose mother held her baby close to her breast,
dousing famished flames that danced, quivered with no reprieve.
Teardrops pooled in her cupped hands, and in one motion she wrest
her Janus from the maws of ire; a lake she bore around
the hillock. But strong-willed Jupiter flung his final beam,
piercing, splitting the body of the gatekeeper, unbound
now in his gaze. Life met eyes with death's wet reflection—seems
he'd burned to nothing but a single seed, entwined in her.

MADE YOUR BED

Rechielle Blackwood

Ruby stared into the clear creek water through which she could see the white stones and the small black fish swirling around. The coolness of the early morning made her wish she could just stay here today. She took another hit off of her pipe to gain her resolve and allowed her mind to distress. Her daughter, Jewel, played nearby in a small pool of water a couple of inches deep created by the rock piles at the creek. Ruby sat on the rocky edge of the creek water thinking. She hadn't slept in two or three days, she really wasn't sure if it was two or three. She had been looking to crash, but her Aunt Pitty had died out in Arkansas, and her sister, Opal, was expecting her home for the drive to the funeral. She needed to get back home soon or Opal would be a nightmare all the way past the state lines; a four-hour drive of self-righteousness. Cade, the love of her life and Jewel's daddy, had decided that this was the perfect opportunity to put The Plot into action, and, if it went off as Cade had planned, the journey would end much sooner.

Ruby and Cade had known each other all their lives, and had both always ran outside the lines drawn by family and church. Ruby had fallen in love with Cade when they were sixteen years old. He was the pastor's son, tall and lean with a thick mane of black hair and dark eyes. Ruby and Opal's mother had been a devout part of the congregation led by Cade's father, but had passed on when Ruby was five years old. Ruby found solace in Cade from her life with her sister; consequently, Cade and Ruby became inseparable, and both chafed against the church's increasing rigor under Pastor Jennings. Together, they had smoked, drank, snorted, and copulated all throughout their teens much to Opal's dismay and with Pastor and Sister Jennings' head fully in the sand regarding their boy. The rest of the church was divided on the matter, but most believed Ruby was the devil's tool to corrupt the preacher's youngest son.

Jewel was the product of their teenage merrymaking. There was talk of marriage; a ceremony had been planned, and crepe paper flowers had been strung on the pews of the Huckleberry Creek Holy Church on a Saturday afternoon in June by various members of the church and the families, but both families had been jilted when Ruby and Cade had decided to celebrate their nuptials by skip-

ping the ceremony and heading on down to Eureka Springs where his parents had rented them a honeymoon cabin for the weekend.

Now eighteen, they both lived at home, but often spent days camping at the creek together, carousing, only now they had Jewel in tow. They had decided that they needed a home. Since most of Cade's and Ruby's scant income went to feed their respective drug habits, Cade had no way of providing a home for Ruby and Jewel and had thus decided that the Saint Opal of Oklahoma would die and become the bread of their lives. Cade knew how to frame everything in a religious light in order to make it seem necessary. Even though Cade was a preacher's son, he sometimes scared Ruby, but she could never leave him. They were tied together tightly, and, even if that rope was strangling her, she felt she had no one else but Cade and Jewel.

The Plot, as Ruby thought of it, had been devised after one particularly long weekend of binging, in which she brought Jewel home from the creek with a sunburn. Opal was livid. She had taken Jewel and covered her with aloe vera and told Ruby she was going to go down to DHS and take Jewel away the next time she did something so stupid. She said she was going to raise her up in the church like she was supposed to be raised. The fear of losing her daughter, coupled with the thought of her being raised up in Opal's version of religion brought the years of chafing against Opal's scolds to a blistering head. She had gone to Cade and told him the story and through a cloud of marijuana smoke and a couple of lines, they had decided that Opal had to go. Cade would catch Opal outside her job as she got in her car and pretend to rob her. They had a date in mind: July 7th. Jewel's birthday. In Ruby's mind, she was sure she agreed with this plan, but lately, every time they talked about the plan, she began to feel sick. The closer they came to Jewel's birthday, the more she had begun to doubt. Now Cade had decided to move things up because the drive to Arkansas gave him a perfect opportunity to do it farther away from home.

Ruby, sitting on the creek bank, gathered her resolve. It was time to leave. She dragged Jewel out of the pool of water. Her daughter protested loudly, begging to stay in the clear water where she had been attempting to catch the tiny fish swirling around her in the small pool. Her whole body resisted as her bloated diaper dragged.

"It's time to go Jew Jew. Grab your baby doll and let's go."

"No. Wanna stay!" She began to wail and kick her feet, punishing Ruby by soaking her lower half.

“We’re going back to Opal’s and the boys’, and we’re goin’ to Arkansas today.” Ruby coaxed Jewel, and she almost believed it herself, as she held Jewel away from herself and stood her up on the rocks, her fat little feet curled as she gained her balance.

Jewel paused her protest. “Mopalzanddaboyz?”

“That’s right. Then we’re headed to Arkansas.” Ruby wrapped a slightly damp beach towel around Jewel’s body and headed to the car with her.

“Arkezaw?” Jewel replied.

“That’s right.” Ruby almost wished this were the simple truth of it. She really wished for the days before The Plot was hatched. She grabbed Jewel’s baby doll, an old plastic Cabbage Patch with blond bedraggled hair, simply named, “My Baby,” and then she shook off the blanket and picked up her possessions and loaded everything into the car. She got into the car herself, and began to head down the gravel path that led back to the main road and back to town.

“MopalAndTheBoyz.” Jewel repeated, as if reminding herself why she was content to be in the car when all that sparkling water was visible out her window.

Opal stood in the front room looking out the picture window, her mousy brown hair tied up in a tall, elaborate updo out of which her long, angular face seemed to descend, looking down on the world. Her feet appeared to move around the bottom of her skirt like the uvula of a bell, her voice like the clanging as she walked back and forth, pulling the phone cord as she went, rambling on about her sister’s faults to the pastor’s wife, who conspiratorially promised to pray for Opal, and Ruby of course. The conversation wound back down to the initial purpose; to explain her family’s absence from church this weekend and to let the pastor’s wife, and consequently the whole church, know that Opal’s aunt had passed away, and she would be driving to Arkansas this weekend with her shiftless sister Ruby. She would also need prayer that she can maintain her Christian loving attitude throughout the trip.

“Here comes Ruby, awl call ya when I get there--I swear her lifestyle is going to get her killed. Yes. Please pray for her. “

Looking out the front room window, Opal had just watched a beat-up Toyota Corolla pull into the driveway, and Ruby was walking up onto the front porch carrying her daughter on one hip a cigarette tilted out of her mouth as she opened the front door. The door opened, and Ruby--a wisp of a girl wearing low-cut jeans and a shirt that stopped just below her breast bone--walked in. Her mousy brown hair was dyed the color of a cherry snow cone and it was

greasy and stuck to the back of her head. Her delicate features also showed the remains of yesterday's makeup. Her daughter, Jewel, a two-year old with a halo of dishwater ringlets, wearing a sundress and a soggy diaper hanging down to her knees, hung nonchalantly off her hip. She hopped down from her mother as soon as they walked through the door.

“Put that cigarette out before you walk into this house, Ruby.”

Ruby rolled her eyes and flicked her cigarette out the front door out onto the porch before she closed the door.

Opal was a full seventeen years Ruby's elder, and had done her best to help out with Ruby and the household after their mother died not long after Ruby's fifth birthday, but she got married and moved to her own household started having her own babies. She still came by to pick up Ruby for church and had tried to make up for the loss of their mother's devoutness in the family; however, Opal's religion, unlike her mother's devout but softer ways, had rubbed Ruby raw. Their father, exhausted after losing his wife, was thankful for Opal's help and generally left her to run things.

When Opal's husband was killed by a drunk driver after only seven years of marriage, she and her boys had moved back in permanently to help run the household. Then after their daddy died, when Ruby was fifteen, Opal became Ruby's sole caretaker. The house was left to both of them, and Opal was the steward of both Ruby and the house until Ruby turned eighteen, which she had done last February. She now owned half of the house outright, but Opal was still the matriarch. Opal was fond of telling Ruby after any incident, “Now you made your bed, and you're just gonna have to lie in it,” and this became her mantra after Jewel was born; any time Jewel cried all night and Ruby was exhausted, and especially if Ruby wanted to leave Jewel at home with Opal while she went out. Now Ruby had decided she wanted to live her life with Jewel and Cade without St. Opal looking over her shoulder.

Jewel immediately ran through the living room to Opal. “Mopal I hungry.”

“Get in there and get you some breakfast, girl. There's bacon and toast still on the table.” The little girl headed into the dining room to grab some bacon. She could be seen in the background reaching for a slice from a plate sitting on the edge of the table, the back of her chubby thighs and calves stretching as she reached up. From the distance of the bedroom, the sound of boys arguing was heard.

Ruby was looking pointedly at her sister, “Who was on the phone?”

“That was Sister Jennings. I was just letting them know about Aunt Pitty so they can pray.”

“Well prayin’ ain’t going to do Aunt Pitty no good anymore.”

“Don’t be disrespectful Ruby. Now let’s get a fresh diaper and some fresh clothes on Jewel and you get yourself packed up and let’s get out of here.”

“Why do you have to make sure the whole church knows every move we make all the time?”

“It don’t matter. Let’s get these kids ready to go. We have a four-hour drive ahead of us, and I’d like to get out of here before noon. If you woulda come home last night, we’d be on our way already.”

Ruby opened her mouth to lash back, and had a moment where she remembered her anger against Opal, and that if all went well, Opal would never scold her again. She headed down the hall to pack up her and Jewel’s belongings for the trip to Arkansas. More arguing could be heard from the boys’ bedroom.

Opal walked to their door and opened up the door a snatch. “You boys stop that arguing.” Whining and tattling could be heard in response. “I don’t care. You can both play with it on the way down. Now pack up your clothes I laid out on the bed. No don’t take out the underwear and socks I packed you to load up more toys.”

After the trunk was loaded with all the clothes and toys for their trip, it was time to load the kids into the car. Ruby insisted that Jewel’s car seat be put into the side right behind herself.

“Don’t you want to be able to reach your child while we’re driving?”

“Jewel likes to see out the window. Besides, I just want her close to me.”

“Alright,” Opal conceded but clearly wondering, “Boys, one of you sit in the middle, and one of you sit behind me.”

After everyone was situated, and the children were contented with juice boxes and game boys, and Jewel was holding My Baby, which was naked and had no eyes, and someone had scribbled on her face with a black ink pen at some point, they aimed the car eastward and started driving. The drive towards Arkansas took off quietly enough. The boys’ noses were focused into their game boys, and Jewel became juice drunk and fell asleep after the first few miles.

Ruby was dead silent, staring straight ahead. Her demeanor reminded Opal of those statues on that Easter Island that she had seen in the copy of National Geographic at the doctor’s office. Opal was accustomed to Ruby’s moods, and attributed it to some fight between her and Cade.

Trying to keep the conversation going, Opal chattered on about the scandal of Sister So and So's unwillingness to help with the church nursery, and Brother Layabout's absence from church for the last two Sundays. She did a round about the girl in her office calling in sick for three days last week, and landed firmly on Aunt Pitty's daughters who were squabbling over certain items from her house before her body was even cold. Ruby tried her best to block out her warbling. Suddenly real, the plans her and Cade had made to get rid of Opal and get the house all to themselves weighed her down. When they originally came up with the strategy to get rid of her sister, she had been angry, and the thought that Opal would die had not been real to her; all she could think of was freedom from anyone telling them what to do. She had her fill of Opal's judgement of her, and the thought of having the house all to themselves seemed like her only option for happiness. But now, as they headed toward the fulfillment of that plan, a terrible foreboding overtook her mind.

Also, there were too many holes in it. She was supposed to insist that they stop at the Walmart in Siloam Springs to buy diapers. Cade was supposed to go ahead of them there, and he would don a stocking cap and pretend to rob them, killing Opal in the process. He would make his escape, and Ruby would call the police. She wanted Jewel on her side of the car because she was afraid to have her daughter on Opal's. Ruby had no intention of harming her nephews, but she wasn't sure what Cade might do. Her intention was to take the boys to Arkansas where they would live with some relatives. She had no doubt someone would take them in since Ruby's reputation had been spread and discussed freely due to Opal's diligence in informing of Ruby's misbehavior.

At first she had welcomed the plan, but now she felt sick. She wanted to feign illness and urge her sister to turn the car around, but she knew Opal would be appalled at the idea of missing something so important to the family as a funeral, and she would then have to endure a lengthy punishment and the designation as the one who made them miss the service. The thought of enduring more of her sister's blame and condemnation amped up her resentment. This, compounded with her lack of food and sleep, and the need for a bump overwhelmed her, but she couldn't communicate any of this to her sister, so they continued on. Opal's words swirled around her and piercing her pulsed head.

They continued on for another forty-five minutes or so, Opal filling the air with her gossip, and Ruby getting more nauseous by the minute. When they approached the Cherokee Casino in West Siloam, Ruby begged Opal to pull in

so she could smoke a cigarette and get some air. She was sick and scared and she just wanted to hit the pause on the whole thing. Opal looked at Ruby's green face, sighed, and pulled in. The parking lot was already full, but devoid of people.

"What is wrong with you, Ruby Mae?"

"Just let me out. I'm sick!"

Ruby exited the car and ran to the grassy area outside the parking area and vomited. Afterward, she opened the passenger door and slid back into the car.

"Opal, I'm sick. Can we just go back home?"

"How 'bout you eat somethin' and see if that don't settle your stomach. When was the last time you ate something?"

"I don't need to eat, I just need to go back home!" Ruby's voice was at its highest pitch.

"Well Ruby, I declare. What do you expect me to do?"

Jewel, at the sound of her momma getting upset, began to wail, "Momma go back home."

The boys, who would've rather spent the morning playing than riding in the car, now chimed in.

Samuel: "Let's go home, Momma."

Caleb: "Yeah. Let's go home, Momma."

Finally, Opal had had enough. "Now you kids be quiet. Jewel, you too. We are going to this funeral. Our daddy's sister has died. It is our responsibility to be there."

She put the car in reverse and started to move the car. Just then a man wearing a ski mask appeared on Opal's side of the car at her window. He had a rifle, and he tapped on the window, motioning for Opal to roll down her window.

"Put the car in Park."

Opal put the car back in park.

"Now you get out of the car," he motioned to Ruby.

"What is the meaning of this?" Opal.

"Give me your wallet."

"Cade! Is that you? What in the world do you think you're doing?" cried Opal.

Startled, Cade discharged the rifle with a loud crack, and the bullet entered Opal's skull. Brain matter and blood were splattered onto Ruby and into the back seat, covering Jewel in her aunt's brain matter. The boys were both screaming and crying.

“Momma Momma Momma.”

Jewel was especially quiet.

Cade aimed the gun into the back seat, “You two shut up.”

Samuel, closest to the window, was white as a sheet. His younger brother, partially covered in blood and tissue, was whimpering and his eyes were as big as silver dollars.

“Ruby, get Jewel and let’s get out of here.”

“Are you freaking crazy? If I leave with you now, they’ll know we were the ones who did it.”

“Don’t you think they’ll know anyway when they question these boys? We have to get rid of them.”

“No. Just let me call the police, and I’ll drive them to Arkansas later.”

“C’mon! Get Jewel and let’s go.”

Cade now pointed the rifle at Ruby. “C’mon. Let’s go!” He screamed, his voice an octave higher than usual and his tone terrified Ruby.

She hopped out of the car and opened the passenger side door to the back seat. She quickly unsnapped and yanked Jewel out of the car, the doll dropping into the floorboard. Her little body as limp as a rag doll, was covered in warm, wet, sticky blood. The boys clung on to each other and huddled into the corner of the back seat. Ruby looked at Jewel, her eyes were lifeless and the blood on her body was growing thicker. Ruby lifted up the sundress, and found a large wound in her abdomen.

The bullet had gone right through Opal’s skull and hit Jewel.

“NO!” screamed Ruby. “You killed her! You killed her!” Ruby was now hysterical, and Cade was panicking. Security would be coming any minute.

He screamed, “LET’S GO.”

But Ruby only dropped to the ground rocking and holding Jewel. Cade then leaned the gun into the car and discharged it two more times. Then he slung his rifle into the back-floor board of his pickup and was around the car in a second. He picked Ruby up and slung her and Jewel into the passenger side. He jumped into the driver’s side of his pickup and took off. He drove westward on the highway.

Ruby held on to Jewel and sobbed.

“Cade! Why? You killed Jewel,” Ruby half screamed, half sobbed. “You killed all of them.”

“No. You killed her. You were supposed to go to Walmart. Why did you put

Jewel in that spot?” His eyes were round and his jaws were clenched in desperation.

“You killed my whole family. You didn’t need to do that.”

“No. What did you do? I heard you screaming to go home. You were supposed to go to Walmart. I pulled in after ya when I saw Opal’s car turn into the casino, I knew that was your doin’. Opal wouldn’t pull into a casino to save her son’s life.” Cade’s face twisted into a smirk, his eyes glazed with the scary look that he got sometimes.

“You killed Jewel. She was ours, our Jewel.”

“Why did you put her there? Didn’t you realize? No. It’s your fault. I’m not taking responsibility for this. This is your fault.”

Ruby was still crying hysterically and screaming as Cade turned off into a camping area just outside of West Siloam. Cade stopped the truck and got out of his pickup. He pulled Ruby out of the truck, still holding on to Jewel. He took Jewel from her, and laid her gently on the ground. Then he pulled his rifle out and shot Ruby in the chest. She dropped to the ground. He got into his truck and drove away.

The next Sunday at church, Cade sat on the front row with his mother and father while the church offered up praise and worship to God. After the singing was over, Pastor Jennings took the pulpit.

“I know many of you have already heard the tragic news that Cade’s daughter, and her mother, and our dear Sister Opal were tragically killed this past weekend on their way to Arkansas. The police aren’t sure of the details yet, but we are praying that this person will be caught and put away for his crimes. Please pray for Cade and our whole grief-stricken family. We know Opal was a god-fearing woman, and Jewel was our beautiful granddaughter, covered by her father’s devotion to Christ. We pray that her mother, at some point, knew God, and we can only hope to see them all again.”

At that point, Cade stood up, tears streaming down his face, raised his hands to heaven, and said, “I’m sorry for my wandering ways. I want to come home again.”

The pastor smiled and lifted his hands in the air, “Praise God, our prodigal has come home.”

Several of the church members cried out, “Amen!”

MOTHERHOOD

Emily Woodward

Wheeled into the hubbub of the foyer
Empty handed, without my own bundle
She is there – waiting to take home my joy
Grandmother's in lavender and pale blue
Crooning over your delicate features
Her face with the glow that should be on mine
While I sit watching from afar, eyes blurred
Like an insignificant spectator
A stranger intruding on Her proud moment
My soul quakes deep within as You depart
A silent goodbye cemented in time
Wond'ring if this void will be eternal

Time passes, but I still think of You as
That sweet precious babe with porcelain skin
And downy tufts of brown hair – a cherub
Adorned with a fresh white stockinged halo
Whose tiny hands I held but for one day

Was fulfilling Her dream my destiny?
Or was mine to ensure your happiness?
Either way, now both have been realized
If one day I should see You again, then
The chasm in my heart will overflow

BE ALRIGHT

Tyler Maruca

“I did it.” I looked up from my phone and then reread it again to myself out loud. I did it.

I sat on the patio of our second floor apartment and finished my cigarette before looking down at my phone and replying, “Are you okay?”

The question was stupid, but I felt compelled to ask.

“I’m sore and nauseous, but I’ll be alright. I should be home in about an hour,” she replied.

I knew Catherine well enough to know the extent of her lie. She was far from okay.

I got up, slid open the frosted glass door, and made my way inside. It wasn’t often that we got to share a night off together. Unfortunately, tonight would not be one we would spend making up for lost time.

I decided to surprise her with dinner. I didn’t get to cook much anymore, but I figured it would be nice for her to not have to eat on the fly for once. Catherine was a bartender at the local dive bar down on 2nd Street. Serving booze and greasy food to drunks every night had taken an obvious hit to her pride. “This is all temporary,” I would say as I kissed her on the way out the door. We just had to work long enough to pay off our backed up bills so she could enroll in school. Until then, we were doing what we had to do to get by. I opened up the refrigerator and whispered again into the fluorescent cold, “This is all temporary.”

Our fridge was empty. I had forgotten we had skipped out on groceries this week, so I had to make a quick run to the store. I slipped on my coat and boots and made my way outside. We lived together in the northern part of Wenatchee. Everything we needed was all fairly close to our apartment, so we shared a less than reliable old sedan that had racked up enough miles to make *Around the World in 80 Days* look like a stroll through the park. Catherine got the car today.

As I walked, I found my mind slipping back to her. Part of me wanted to hold her and try to convince her that everything was going to be fine, and in a month from now, we would be right back to how things were before. That part of me was stupid as hell. She was flooded with a pain I will never be able to comprehend, and all I could do was to help her make sense of it all and try to

weather out the storm.

After making it to the store, I picked up some chicken breasts, a bag of white rice, and some fresh asparagus, cashed out, and made my way back home. I then went to the kitchen and began to prepare for dinner. I seasoned the chicken with salt, pepper, and a bottle of lime juice we had in the fridge, then I started the asparagus and rice and waited for Catherine to arrive.

She walked in the door and stood before me. Catherine was a sturdy, hard-wired girl who kept her burdens underneath her eyes. Her complexion was fair, and her face was slightly mousey and gentle. Her hair sat just below her upper back and flowed chestnut waves.

She glanced at me from the door. Her eyes were black from exhaustion and defeat, and she looked through me like glass. My heart broke. Catherine didn't move from her spot in the doorway, so I approached her, we met with a firm but cold embrace.

"I love you so much," I said into her shoulder.

"I love you too," she replied softly.

We let go and she looked at me like she was going to be sick.

"I made dinner. It isn't super fancy, but I thought we could change things up for once."

"I'm not hungry," she said as she began to walk toward our bedroom.

"Please eat something," I said calmly.

She ignored my request, so I followed her stopping at the door.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She sighed and replied flatly, "No, Jamie, I want to go to bed."

She pulled the covers back, took off her shoes, and stretched out on the bed fully dressed.

"I'm going to put the food in the fridge then I'll come lie down with you," I said.

She rolled over without response.

I put the food in tupperware containers without eating my own helping. My appetite had dissipated completely. It was only 6:30, and I was far from tired. I made my way to the sliding glass door of our small balcony that overlooked the street below. It was only big enough to fit two chairs and a small round table. The furniture's black paint had begun to chip exposing the rusted metal below. Catherine and I often sat out there smoking cigarettes and watching the cars pass. I lit one and sat for a while. The sun had begun to set over the the hills on

the horizon, and the Washington sky was stricken with shades of orange and red. I watched until nightfall then made my way to bed.

As I slept, I found myself in the middle of the orchard where I worked. It was morning, and the frost had not yet melted off the grass between endless apple trees. I looked forward, but the morning fog was too dense to see very far.

I started to work. I picked tree by tree, apple by apple filling my basket with fruit. The sun cut through the clouds and autumn's glow leapt from the apples with ambient life. With slow persistence, black clouds blocked out the sun, and the fog persisted. It began to grow cold, and the fog choked the life from the trees around me and the apples froze and fell. I started to run as fast as I could down the stretch of trees, but the cold overwhelmed my body. I stumbled on some roots below my feet, dropping my basket and fell face first into the ground. I looked up to see a small crib in the middle of the field before me filled with apples bitten and decayed by frost, and in an instant I awoke to the sound of an infant crying.

I rubbed my eyes and realized Catherine was no longer beside me. It was her cry that had woken me, and it came from the bathroom door. The sound of the shower had mixed in with her sobbing, but I could hear it all the same. I opened the door and saw her there on the floor in front of the toilet. She was naked, and her arms were wrapped around her knees. A small puddle of blood had started to form beneath her, but she sat unmourned by its presence. I slid down in the floor beside her and wrapped my arms around her body.

"It's gonna be alright, baby," I said.

She pulled away and looked up at me. Her brow turned hard and her face was angry. I immediately noticed my folly. The once common pet name had become a swear on my tongue, and my effort to console had struck her hard and fast.

Tears began to pour from my face, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Her anger waned, and her face turned soft. She rested her head back on my shoulder. We said nothing. There were no more words to say. We sat and we cried together, soaking up the blood and steam and sweat and loss. Maybe this was temporary. Maybe we would wake up tomorrow or a year from now and this would be nothing more than a bad dream or a bloody stain on the bathroom floor, but tonight, we were taking on a pain that neither of us could begin to comprehend, but we were in it together, and I knew that one day we would be alright.

WOMAN OF STRENGTH

Brittany Seay

Deep brown curls tucked
neatly behind pierced ears.
Blue eyes never shadowed
with gloom.
A woman of strength stood.

A glance into the kitchen and
a sight to be seen—
She spun
from counters to stove
humming to songs only she could hear.

Too soon her eyes
seemed dull.
Her smile not able
to reach as far.
A woman of strength still stood.

Like a boxer in a ring
she stood toe to toe.
Dodging and swinging
with the heavy weight champ
of the most dreadful diseases.

Round One: winner
goes to she.
Round Two: tie
too close to really see.
Next up: round three

Bruised, bloodied, and scarred she steps out of the ring.
She stumbles—she falls.
Her hands grow weak, but she pushes herself up.
Heavy steps lead her back.
Hushed voices and crossed fingers urge her on.

The rounds lasted longer this time
and the treatments didn't heal.
Her hair laid on the pillow, on the floor,

and in the trash.
Her movements grew slower as the clock counted down.

Time was up.
The whistle blew.
Her body fell—
all black and blue.

It was over.
The war was lost.
Her husband's hesitant touch
closed her eyes.
He didn't cry. He couldn't cry.

Each daughter dressed in black
holding hands as they all clung
to memories of story times and sing alongs,
of hugs, and kisses that they
were told would last forever.

Everyone sat still in rough wooden pews.
Kind words meant to heal were uttered
by a man who no one really knew.
One by one they had to move.

The casket adorned.
The tombstone now stands
in a grass-filled cemetery
waiting patiently
for all of us to join.

USDI AND UTON

Todd Crow

The morning dew still shined on the grass and collected on Usdi's bare feet as he struggled to keep up with his older brother. The Greens' field was about half a mile from the boys' home going by the roads, but considerably less if they went through the woods behind their house and the large field between. Usdi kept a close eye on his brother as they ran into the light of the rising sun, which sat just over Uton's shoulder and highlighted his bare arms. It made him look heroic, like some Cherokee boy in a painting.

When they got to the Greens' field, Uton slid between the barbed wires of the fence with ease, then pulled two of them apart with foot and hands to allow his little brother through. Once on the other side, Usdi looked out over a field full of cattle.

"How do we know which one to pick?" Usdi asked.

"They should all still be pretty drowsy," Uton said. "We just have to find one that looks sleepier than the rest. Try not to get too close to soon, or they might start walking away. We need one standing still."

They split up and walked around the herded cattle. Usdi eyed each cow as closely as possible, but he was unsure how to tell if any looked drowsier than the others. They all looked as though they could fall asleep where they stood, even the ones walking or eating. After a few minutes, Usdi heard a whistle, then saw where his brother was waving him over.

"That one right there," Uton said, pointing at a rather large cow, mostly black, with a white underbelly. She stood a few feet away from the other cows with her head hung low. "Okay, here's the trick to it." They knelt down in the grass, getting their hands and knees wet. "You have to surprise her. Run at her, fast, and just before you get to her you yell real loud, like the Indians in the movies. She'll be so surprised that when you run into her side she'll fall right over. You ready?"

Usdi wasn't at all ready. His foot was shaking from nervousness, or fear, and despite the cool morning air he was sweating. He looked at the cow and tried to study her. She hadn't moved a muscle since he'd first saw her, and the last thing he wanted to do was disappoint his brother. He nodded.

"Good," Uton said. "Remember to push up with your arms when you run into

her. To help push her over. Now get going before she wakes up.”

Usdi stood and walked a couple feet over to line himself up directly at the cow's side. She was about twenty yards away; plenty of room to gain some speed before hitting her. He breathed in and exhaled hard before picking his feet up. The grass was slick under his feet, but he pushed on, sprinting at the cow as fast as he could. When he was about five yards away he screamed, “AYE YEH YEH!” just like he'd heard on the movies. The cow simultaneously raised her head and took a step forward, aligning Usdi now with the muscle of her hind leg. He couldn't stop. The grass was too wet and he was moving too fast, had gathered too much momentum. Usdi slammed into the back leg of the cow, though he could've mistaken it for a brick wall in his daze, and fell backward onto the wet grass. He could hear his brother's laughter coming from somewhere behind him, but it was interrupted by an “Oh, shit!”

A few seconds later Uton was standing over his little brother and telling him to get up, that the cows, all of them, were starting to run around. Usdi felt the ground rumble beneath him and raised up to confirm what his brother told him. The cows were in a panic, though luckily they were running away from the two boys. Usdi was helped to his feet by his brother and looked again at the herd just in time to see a large steer emerge from the crowd of cows. The steer's horns were nearly twice as wide as its body; they curled forward and up to a point. Usdi watched it groggily until he felt a jerk at his arm, then realized the steer was trotting in their direction.

They boys ran as fast as they could toward the fence where they'd come in. Over his own heavy breathing, Usdi could hear the stomping of the steer's hooves getting louder. He repeated a silent mantra that went, “holy shit holy shit don't slip on the grass holy shit holy shit don't slip on the grass...” With the hoof-beats getting nearer, the boys came to the fence. Uton slipped through the wires first, but Usdi didn't wait for assistance this time. He practically dove between the wires, his back catching on some of the sharpened metal barbs along the way, though he barely felt it as they ripped and scratched at his bare back, his thoughts only on escaping the steer.

It wasn't until they were walking back home that Usdi began to feel the wounds, which were dripping blood down his back. Uton tried to clean him up before entering the house, but his parents still saw the scratches and demanded to know what had happened. Uton took the blame for it all, and was beaten near bloody himself when their Doda was through with him.

Raymond's plane landed at a small airport in northwest Arkansas. He paid for a rental car, consciously choosing a compact rather than the luxury sedan he could easily afford, and began the drive to his childhood home of Marble City, Oklahoma, for the first time in more than ten years.

The scenery of northwest Arkansas and northeast Oklahoma was drastically different than back in Santa Fe, but it was also exactly as he remembered it. Various shades of green covered the limbs of trees blanketing the rolling hills. They weren't the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, but they were beautiful in their own right. Below the hills were dense wooded areas that gave way to flat fields where livestock roamed.

About an hour into his drive, Raymond found himself on the familiar winding roads of Sequoyah County, named for the most famous Cherokee Indian of all time. Raymond had learned to drive these roads when he was thirteen, Donald in the passenger seat and Doda passed out in the back of their family sedan. Despite the years away, he handled the curves and hills masterfully, his fingers gliding over the leather of the steering wheel like the roads were still mapped out in his memory. Raymond could swear he heard his father's drunken snoring coming from the back seat and an anger that he hadn't felt in years welled up inside him. His fingers wrapped tight around the wheel, and the dial on the speedometer moved increasingly faster to the right, passing 45, 55, 65, and the tires screeched as Raymond barely kept the rental on the asphalt around a sharp curve.

The sound of the tires and the vibration of the car had Raymond's heart pounding inside his chest, and he gradually pressed in the brake pedal to bring the car to a near crawl, then pulled over on the side of the road. He stepped out of the car with it still running and breathed the fresh air in deep, concentrated inhaled and exhaled to slow his heart rate. Across the road was a large road marker made of stones and in the center of it a flat stone panel that said "Welcome to Marble City."

A few days earlier, Raymond had received a call from his sister-in-law, Savannah. It had been the first time he'd spoken to anyone in his family in a couple of years. When the call ended, what ran through his mind wasn't the image of the car accident that he'd just been told had taken his brother's life, but a moment from their childhood.

It was a humid summer day, and the two boys ran shirtless through the woods behind their house. Donald's tan skin was almost brown from all the exposure, while Raymond burned a bright red. Donald, three years older, had always joked about using up all the Indian their parents had to pass down to them, leaving Raymond a pale imitation of an Indian—the facial features, the hair, but no color. They tore through the briars and low-hanging limbs that scratched their bare arms and chests until they came to a creek that flowed on the back corner of their property. The creek was shallow, no deeper than Raymond's knees at its deepest, but swift. In places the water level sat well below small cliff faces, while in others it was even with the ground and rocky banks. At its widest, the water split in two, separated by a gravel island about four feet across and ten feet long. It was on this island the boys had begun building a makeshift fort out of rotting pieces of plywood, pallets and logs.

"We're almost done, Usdi," Donald said. "All we've gotta do is get the roof on and it'll be finished. Did you bring the tape for the corners?"

"I've got it," Raymond said, holding up his right arm to show the roll of gray duct tape around his skinny forearm. "Doda better not find out we took this."

"We didn't. You did. Now help me lift this last board."

The boys spent the next half hour putting the finishing touches on their fort. The day before, they'd brought a couple of cans of strawberry soda from their house and left them in the running water, in shallow holes dug into the gravel. Donald pulled them free and sat next to Raymond beneath the shade of their completed construction project. Raymond remembered looking over at his older brother, his Uton, with the kind of admiration one does when meeting their hero for the first time, only he got to spend time with his every day. They sat sipping their sodas in silence, the only sounds that of the running creek water lapping over rocks as it passed by them.

Raymond's first stop in town was his brother's house. Savannah had told him that she and the boys would be staying at her parents' until after the services, but that he was welcome to stay there by himself. The spare key was under a flowerless pot of soil where she said it would be. Inside, Raymond felt the impression that his brother's death had made on the place. It was cold, despite the heat of early June outside. Toys laid scattered across the living room floor. Plates with small amounts of dinner left on them and half-empty cups sat on the kitchen table. The TV gave off a soft black glow, still on despite the satellite having

turned itself off. He walked through the small house to the master bedroom in the back and dropped his bag on the floor beside the bed. On the wall opposite the bed was a family portrait. Raymond judged it was a couple of years old by his youngest nephew having not yet reached toddler status.

Raymond's brother and his family were dressed in what was likely their Sunday best—Donald wore a red polo shirt with white horizontal stripes; Savannah wore her hair up and a blue dress with purple flowers; the two older boys wore solid-color t-shirts, orange and gray; and the baby wore a striped onesie with colors opposite his father's shirt. They never had much, but each one smiled what looked to be genuine smiles, like they'd been laughing. Donald had always been good at making people laugh. Even the baby looked like he was smiling. Raymond wondered how his brother, after everything that had happened, was able to find happiness in a family of his own. A twinge of jealousy and shame crept in on Raymond, and he tore himself away from the smiling faces of his dead brother's family. He busied himself by cleaning up the house, telling himself that Savannah would appreciate it when she and the boys finally returned home, as though he were doing it for unselfish reasons.

When the house was clean, Raymond fell hard into the couch in front of the TV. He sat there for only a moment before a weariness came over him, a weariness from the flight, the drive, the cleaning, and the growing realization that the next time he saw his brother he would be looking down into a casket.

Raymond went on his first date when he was sixteen years old. Heather Gaines hadn't been the most beautiful girl in his class, but she was sweet and seemed genuinely interested in Raymond during one of the most awkward stages of his life—arms and legs growing too fast to know what to do with them, and acne and short black hairs competing for territory on the lower half of his face. Raymond's mother had allowed him to take the family car, and he had taken Heather to the nearby town of Sallisaw since Marble City had only one restaurant that closed after lunch time. The night had gone well; Raymond even managed to recover after nearly sharing the locker room talk about Heather giving a senior a hand job after a basketball game the year before. Yet when he pulled into the driveway of Heather's home, Raymond saw his father standing in front of the house throwing up his arms and obviously yelling. Raymond put the car in park, asked Heather to stay put, and stepped out to confront his father.

"Doda, what are you doing here?" Raymond asked.

His father turned around, but when he took a step toward Raymond he stumbled, swayed, and took a moment to recover his balance. “Usdi. Come here, son.”

“No,” Raymond said, wondering where this sudden courage was coming from. Maybe it was because he knew Heather was watching him from the car. Whatever the reason, the face his father made showed that he didn’t appreciate being told no. “You’re drunk again. Why are you here?”

“I needed your mother to come pick me up, but she said you had the car. That you were on a date with that Gaines slut.” His gaze moved from Raymond to the car and he smiled as though he’d just told a funny joke. “So I walked here.”

Raymond didn’t know how to respond. His father had no right to speak about Heather that way and he wanted to tell him so. But Raymond was also terrified of his father and the things he could do, would do, especially when he was drunk. He could defend Heather and get the shit beat out of him, or he could keep quiet and forfeit any chance of seeing her again, and probably dating in general for the rest of high school. Had he not been interrupted, Raymond could not rightly say what he would’ve done.

The front door of the house opened up and Heather’s father stepped out onto their porch holding a shotgun, the barrel pointed directly at Raymond’s father. Raymond knew from having shot guns before that his father was too far away from the gun to be killed, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be injured. Badly. From the stock-end of the shotgun, a muffled voice yelled, “Both of you, get the fuck out of here,” then Mr. Gaines slid the fore-end of the gun forward to load a shell into the barrel to drive home the point that he wasn’t joking. “Heather! Get out of the car, honey.” Raymond turned to see his date obeying her father. She made her way to the porch cautiously, but as she passed Raymond’s father, he took a step toward her. Mr. Gaines slid the fore-end back, officially cocking the shotgun with a simple, “Don’t.”

Raymond’s father turned to face Heather’s and spat. The loogy arched high and landed on the ground just in front of the first step of the porch. “You point that gun at me, you’d better be prepared to use it.” He took a wobbly step forward. Raymond could see the barrel of the gun shaking and he knew his father would see it, too. Drunk or not, his father could recognize any and every kind of weakness. He’d seen it too many times. His father seemed to gain his footing with each new step forward, meanwhile Heather and her father were backing up toward the front door of their house.

Mr. Gaines pushed her behind him and told her to go inside. In that moment, his head was turned and Raymond's father used the chance to drastically close the gap between them. Raymond had never been able to explain the way his father moved so quickly, but in a moment the drunken son-of-a-bitch was on top of Heather's father, choking him with one hand while pushing away Mr. Gaines' flailing arms with the other. The shotgun had fallen down the steps and lay on the ground.

Raymond knew the time for standing by was over. He had to act, but the fear of his father that had been growing his entire life made him hesitate. He felt helpless and worse, shameful for feeling so. Seeing no other choice, Raymond pushed the helplessness, the shame, the fear inside and stepped toward the porch. He grabbed the shotgun and fired the first shell into the ground.

"That's enough, dad," he said. "Get off him."

His father had raised up at the sound of the gunshot. Now he sat atop Mr. Gaines wide-eyed, staring at Raymond.

"Boy, I suggest you put that fuckin' gun back on the ground before I beat you bloody," Doda said.

"No," Raymond said, and slid the fore-end forward and back, loading the next shell. "You're not the one calling the shots here anymore." Raymond hoped the shakiness in his voice wasn't as apparent to his father as it was to him.

Raymond's father climbed off of Mr. Gaines and stood up, hands held up in the air. "You win, boy. Now what?"

"Get down from there," Raymond said. His father followed his instructions and stepped down from the porch. "Now get in the car." His father turned his back to Raymond for just a second before wheeling back and sending the back of his fist into Raymond's cheekbone.

The blow surprised Raymond, and he stumbled backward, tripping on his own feet to the cool ground. He could feel his father's legs mount over his waist just before the shotgun was wrenched from his hands and tossed across the yard. "I should've done this a long time ago," his father said with breath that reeked of whiskey. Raymond grabbed at his father's face, but his hands were simply swatted away, followed by the contact of his father's hardened knuckles on his cheeks, his brow, his nose. Whatever fight was in Raymond dissipated with each new blow.

His father had just connected with his fists a sixth time and held back the seventh when Raymond heard the rumble of a motorcycle engine roaring

somewhere in the near distance. His beating interrupted, Raymond turned to see Donald speeding down the driveway, sending small gray rocks flying behind his bike's back tire. Donald drove the bike straight onto the Gaines' lawn where he let it fall on its side just in front of the porch.

"Leave him alone, you bastard," Donald said, lunging at their father and pushing him off of Raymond.

"Looky here, my eldest returns," their father said. "My utoon." He spat blood on the grass beside him. "This isn't the best time for a reunion, boy."

"I'm not here for a fucking reunion," Donald said, helping Raymond to his feet. Donald had moved out of their parents' house a couple of months before his eighteenth birthday and was living with a friend over in Brushy. Raymond had seen his older brother only a handful of times in the year since. "I came to try to keep your drunk ass out of jail. I didn't know I would show up to this." Donald held Raymond up, kept him steady.

"I'm so fuckin' tired of you boys," their father said. He quickly reached to his right in an attempt to grab the shotgun.

Donald, being younger, faster, and sober, leapt on top of his father before he could reach the gun. Raymond watched as Donald sat on their father's chest and rained down fist after fist, covered in increasing amounts of red with each crack of bone and splatter of flesh until two cops showed up and dragged Donald away by the arms.

Raymond didn't attend the funeral service. He waited until the graveside service, where he did his best to watch unseen from a distance. After a few moments, however, Savannah approached him, leaving her three sons at their grandmother's side. His sister-in-law wore a comely black dress that hid any features she may have underneath, and a small white bow in the ponytail of her jet black hair.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," she said.

"So was I," Raymond replied. "I'm sorry I missed the funeral. I just..."

"It's fine. I understand. Donny would've understood, too."

Across the cemetery Raymond could hear the preacher and his wife begin the first verse of "Amazing Grace."

"I know it's cliché, but it really was his favorite hymn," Savannah said.

"I didn't realize my brother had found Jesus. Though to stick around here, maybe you have to. You're not going to give me some speech about forgiveness, I

hope.”

“There’s a lot of things you’ve missed out on. But no. No speech.” She started walking back toward the service and said, “He would love to see you, though.”

Raymond watched the remainder of the service until every guest was gone. He’d watched Savannah and his nephews leave first, followed by her mother and father. Aunts, uncles, cousins and old friends left the country graveyard in small groups until there were only three remaining—Raymond, who kept his distance, his mother, and his father. Just before they walked back to their car, they turned and gave one longing look in Raymond’s direction.

When a loved one dies, there’s always a sense of surrealism attached to it. Raymond couldn’t tell if he felt like his brother was really gone, or if he had invented the idea of his brother all along, and everyone else in his life was in on it. He stepped over grave markers and thought about the boxes that were buried a few feet beneath the grass, and wondered what each one of those people were like in life and how fucking pathetic it is that no matter what we’ve done, our fate was to be boxed up, buried, and forgotten. Then he found himself standing beside the gaping hole that his brother’s box had been lowered into.

Raymond leaned over and looked into the hole. The box was made of unfinished wood, with little-to-no decorative designs carved into it. When he’d received the call from Savannah, he’d offered to pay for all of the arrangements, but she declined. She’d said, “Donny talked a lot about life and death, and he always said that since life was so complicated, death should be simpler.” So he was buried in a simple, wooden box, where above it rested a flat gray stone with “Donald Sixkiller 1964-1996” engraved in black letters.

Raymond sat on the ground, letting his legs hang down into the hole and ignoring that he was getting his suit dirty. He wanted to tell Uton that the day their father was sent to prison for second degree aggravated assault was the first day that Raymond felt free. But knowing that his father would be out of prison in five years, Raymond decided to leave Marble City, leave Oklahoma and leave his family behind. He didn’t know that the man who would return from prison would be different than the one who went in. Raymond was a senior in college when his father was released from prison. His father came back sober and stayed that way. Donald had tried to get Raymond to speak to their father for years, spouting claims of repentance, remorse, and rehabilitation. Raymond never did.

Raymond felt as though he should apologize to Donald for leaving, but he knew that his brother supported him. So Raymond silently apologized for not

coming back instead. He apologized for missing Donald and Savannah's wedding. He apologized for missing the births of his nephews. Mostly he apologized for all of the days in between that they could've just spent being brothers.

When Raymond left the cemetery, he had every intention of going back to Donald and Savannah's to get his things and start heading home to Santa Fe. But as his thoughts wandered on the life with his brother that he never had, Raymond drove to his childhood home instead. When he pulled the rental car into the gravel driveway, he expected to see plenty of cars outside, mourners sticking around to comfort the grieving family, but there were only two. Out front of the house, which Raymond could've sworn looked in better shape than it did when he was a kid, his two older nephews ran around with sticks in their hands, yelling at each other which Ninja Turtle they wanted to be. Raymond wanted to say hi, but they didn't know him, so he walked right by them and through the screen door.

The inside of the house smelled like fresh fry bread and brown beans, so he knew his mother was going to be found in the kitchen. He peeked in and saw the backs of Savannah's black hair and that of an older, much smaller woman that was his mother. It was strange seeing his mother so close, but too strange after so long to call out to her. Raymond walked by the doorway and into the living room beyond. On a raggedy cloth recliner with blankets stacked on the back of it sat Raymond's father, rocking with his eyes closed. Raymond carefully sat on the couch nearby, but the springs beneath the seat gave away his presence.

"Usdi?" Raymond's father said.

"Hi, Doda."

Over the next couple of hours, Raymond filled his belly and shared with his father some sweet tea that Raymond was informed had made his mother a local treasure. He hugged his mother, who soaked his shoulder with her tears. He talked about his job finding up-and-coming Indian artists and helping them sell their work. He heard about his father making a living off of wood work that he did from home. He laughed when they told him the story of Donald having to leave the labor room during his first boy's birth, and he cried when they told him about Donald losing his job a few years ago and the struggles he'd gone through to find a new one. Raymond learned a lot about what had been going on with his family while he was gone, but he didn't learn it all.

Raymond left his parents' home for the first time in more than ten years and no longer felt as though it would be the last time he would visit. He hadn't

received the closure he needed from his father, nor had he apologized for not coming home for so long. Those things he believed would come in time, when they were all ready for it.

As he walked to his rental, his two older nephews followed hot on his heels.

“Uncle Raymond?” the oldest boy said. Raymond nodded. “Can we show you something out in the woods?”

Raymond checked his watch out of habit, but then thought about what it must be like for these two little boys to lose their father. Raymond knew he wouldn’t be able to fill the void in their lives Donald’s death had left, but he thought he might finally be ready to be an uncle to these boys. “Absolutely,” he said.

Raymond followed the boys through the briars and low-hanging limbs of his parents’ woods until they reached the creek on the back corner of the property. “This way,” his middle nephew said, and Raymond watched as the two boys moved gracefully through the trees as they walked alongside the running water. Raymond, much taller and thicker than when he was a boy, had much slower goings of the trip. When he finally caught up to his nephews, Raymond was in a clearing of the trees and saw a small gravel island splitting the water. In the middle of that island was a makeshift fort, though arguably one much more masterfully crafted than his and Donald’s had been.

“Doda told us that he built a fort like this with you when you were little,” the oldest nephew said. “He helped Usdi and I build it a couple weeks ago.”

“Usdi?” Raymond asked.

“Yeah, my little brother,” he said, patting his brother on the back hard. “I’m Uton, and this is Usdi, just like you and Doda used to be.”

Raymond spent the rest of the afternoon playing with his nephews to the sound of the running water of the creek lapping over the rocks.

RUN RIVER WILD

Daniel Sandoval

Run river wild, flow over me with your jade deluge.
Sweep me across your ancient stones, babbling secrets.
Let me join in the course of your life's blood
through the Earth's capillaries.
I am free here.
The icy Arkansas my father knew in Colorado,
you see mountain water is in my blood too.
You envelop me into your emerald caresses,
carry me away like a lover to your oldest oak's shade.
Your beauty reflects the Maker and
I am enraptured by the sight of you.
Run River Wild,
break my sorrows and weary burdens on your bluffs.
Where the north wind blows strong and your
white caps crash without a siren's song.
Who can tame you River Wild?
Who can know all your secrets?
You know a few of mine.
Of moonlight whiskey kisses,
and dreams shared with only you and a cold one.
She is like you River Wild, I can't tame her, and would never try.
Oh but to know her secrets and feel her warmth, reflects
just as when you are most still and mirroring the world
in your green glass.
Run River wild, you will be here long after I am gone,
but you won't be able to share my secrets
with any other lovers
as they sigh unto you their own.
You rush through me still
Calling me to stay with you, to let you carry me on
further from home, away from the real world.
You are my escape if only for an hour.
When the rain falls hard and you rise and rush,
will you have any memory of me?
Run River Wild, someday I will let you take me, and
we will be one.

MONKEY

Daniel Sandoval

The monkey on my back is Apathy.
He doesn't like bananas. He likes Pall Malls
from one long filtered smoldering to the next,
we sit wasting hours.

I say "let's go to the store, get some coffee."
He raises a furrowed brow and shakes his head.
When all the shows are reruns the days merge into
one
long
commercial.
Here everything is cereal boxes and
laundry detergent.
Is there enough in the world to remove my stains?
I need magical lye to scrub this ape away.
There are things that need fixing
cars, dryers, windows, the walls need painting.
I need a few minutes more and I will get to it...
Somewhere I am a hero, somewhere I am all the things I long to be,
but not in this universe,
here I am just sitting,
smoking with Apathy.

FOXHUNT

Matt Sauls

Today I sat opposite one Marcus Green. He was a slim black man of medium height and the business casual attire he wore sat well on him. A pair of black rimmed glasses complemented his neatly trimmed facial hair. Overall, he gave the impression of exactly what he was—a confident, well-to-do businessman. Marcus Green owned at least five very well off local businesses, not counting the various chain restaurants he had a hand in.

As for me? I'm Jacqueline Frost, private investigator.

"Thank you for meeting me today, Miss Frost." He had a deep, rich voice.

I nodded and offered a smile. "Of course, Mr. Green. I understand you have need of my services?" There were few other reasons I could think of behind the email I had received some days ago, unless he simply had an extremely odd idea of how to ask a girl out.

"Yes." He hesitated then, and I had to bite back a sigh when I saw the look on his face. I could quote what he was about to say word for word. "My apologies, it is something I am still coming to terms with. I have reason to believe my wife has—" he stopped short. "That is to say she has been seen..." he trailed off.

He seemed almost grateful when I held up a hand to forestall him continuing. "No need to go on, Mr. Green, I believe I understand. You believe she is stepping outside of your relationship, so to speak, and contacted me hoping I would be able to find proof that she is. Or, hopefully, to exonerate her?" I kept my tone calm and professional. People could react in the oddest ways if I expressed sympathy, or if I seemed too cold or too warm regarding such a delicate matter.

He nodded and let loose a resigned sigh. "Yes, exactly." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Your name came highly recommended, given this...situation."

That was news to me. "May I ask from who? While I've certainly taken on cases like this before," They accounted for a decent chunk of my rent money some months, depressingly enough, "I can't say it's something I've built a reputation on."

He gave me a smile that was, to his credit, only moderately strained. "Your name came up during a conversation with a potential business partner. She spoke

highly of your skills, and made it clear that you did very well regarding situations that were, shall we say, out of the ordinary.”

He pulled a photo from his breast pocket, regarding it for a moment with an impassive expression before setting it on the table in front of me.

The picture was of a young Asian woman smiling at the camera. Something seemed off about it, something almost like a heat-wave shimmer on the surface. I glanced up at Marcus with a raised eyebrow and he responded with a nod.

I wore a pendant of a simple stone with a water worn hole in the center, an irregular ring of rock, on a bit of braided leather. A charm to help pierce illusions. I held it, rubbing it slightly with my thumb, and the heat shimmer melted away.

“This is Chun-hwa, my wife.” He said quietly when he saw my eyes widen. A pair of red fox’s ears poking out from the woman’s hair, and her eyes were shaped in a subtly different manner. “She is a kitsune.”

I looked back up with a raised eyebrow. Well. This had just gotten a bit more interesting.

I think I surprised Marcus when I settled on a nod and held up the photo. “Can I keep this? It’ll be useful.” I tucked the picture away when he nodded his assent.

The rest of the meeting went about as usual for these kind of things, mystical fox spirit revelation notwithstanding. I asked about her hobbies and where she liked to let her hair down. Turns out she loved to dance. He promised to send me a list of possible contacts if he could think of any.

I prepared to leave as the meeting wrapped up, and he leaned forward, fingers laced together on the tabletop. “Miss Frost, I’ve known Chun-hwa for almost twenty years, and we have been together for fifteen of those. We have had our issues, but I thought we had worked past them already. Chun-hwa trusted me with her secret, with what she is, over a decade ago.” He said. “I do not break this trust easily. I would ask that you be subtle about your investigation. If this does turn out to be nothing, then I will have enough egg on my face.” He fixed me with a serious stare. “I’ve loved this woman for years, Miss Frost. Please, find the truth for me.”

There wasn’t a lot you could say to something like that. I nodded and gave him the same promise I give each of my clients.

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In my line of work, it pays to be on good terms with bouncers and door-men, and I had enough good will that more than a few would tip me off, if

given proper financial incentive. I'd spread a bit of cash and Chun-hwa's picture around, and lucked out bigtime.

A week later I was sitting at the bar of a rather popular nightclub downtown, taking pictures of Chun-hwa as she flirted. I'd caught more than a few entirely human cheaters there, both before and after half of my cases had started to include the weirder side of the world.

It had been a relief to get the tip-off so soon. These kinds of cases can get incredibly boring if they drag out long enough. Unfortunately, I didn't catch anything concrete on film that night. My little digital camera got several pics of her talking and laughing with various men, but beyond her hand lingering on an arm for a bit too long, nothing hard enough to bring to Mr. Green.

I'd spent the intervening week alternating research about kitsune with taking pictures of a man's business partner having lunch with his wife. Something had seemed vaguely off about Chun-hwa. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about seeing her in person had the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I chalked it up to having been almost eaten by a werewolf not too long before.

Tonight seemed to be shaping up better though. Same club, and this time she was going all out. I'd seen her dancing with one particular guy, in that style of dance that was a bare few bits of fabric away from being an all-out mating display, and he was not shy about where his hands roamed while the music was pounding.

It was a bit odd to watch her up close. Unlike the picture, I didn't need to use the seeing stone. I simply knew what she was. As she danced, stomped, or gyrated, I would see the flicker of an ear, or the swish of a bushy red tail, and every time she laughed or smiled, her teeth seemed entirely too sharp to be human.

It can be odd to see things others don't.

The less than modest behavior was showing no signs of stopping while they were taking a break and relaxing at a table. She was on his lap, and my camera began to click away as they started making out like a pair of teenagers. I even managed a shot of her leading him out the door by the hand. By the time I made it outside they had disappeared.

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He took it surprisingly well. I've had clients do everything from burst into tears to punch new holes in my office walls, but he looked over the pictures with a neutral expression. His only comment as he flipped through them the first time was a flat, "I see." When he had finished the third look through he set them

aside and pressed a fist against his mouth, breathing hard for a few moments. “Twelve years of marriage. She-” His voice hitched, and I busied myself with my computer to give him a few moments to compose himself.

Finally, he cleared his throat and curled his fingers together, leaning on my desk. “Thank you for your time, Miss Frost. I trust you have the bill ready?” Amazingly polite, considering what I’d just confirmed for him. I nodded and placed it in front of him.

“I’m going to include an extra sum in recognition of your promptness and professionalism in light of the uniqueness of the situation.” He said quietly as he scribbled out the numbers.

“Thank you sir, but that isn’t necessary. I’m used to dealing with strange things. All things considered, it didn’t affect the case at all.” I said.

He set the check in front of me. “Regardless, I value good service. Please accept it.” He studied me for a moment before he flipped the checkbook open again. “I would take it as a personal favor if you would be with me when I confronted her about this, as a witness to prevent any...accusations. I would hire an off duty police officer, but considering her special circumstances, I would prefer someone more used to that side of things.”

I fixed a polite smile to my face. This was not the first time I’d had this request, and it was something I turned down as a rule. Never a good idea. “I’m sorry, but that is something I’m simply not comfort-” He set the second check in front of me, and the number of zeros cut me off.

“Money is no object to me at this time, Miss Frost.” he said simply. I looked at the check, and greed warred with the memory of the one and only other time I’d ever agreed to this. Greed, and the knowledge that I wouldn’t be worrying about rent for some time.

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A week later I sat outside a greasy looking hotel, of the variety that has rates for either the night or the hour. I’d gotten the tip off from a bouncer and made my way there in time to see her leaving with a man’s hand planted firmly on her ass, and tailed them to this place before making a short phone call. A few minutes later, Marcus stepped out of a taxi to join me.

The kid manning the counter was easy enough. I slid Chun-hwa’s picture over to him. “You sell this woman a room?”

He didn’t even glance down just giving me a patently fake smile. “Can’t discuss any customer information without a—“

Marcus placed a trio of hundred-dollar bills on the counter, staring at the boy. "...Yeah, like, I dunno. Thirty minutes? Some guy with her. Uh. Oh, uh, 404." He said after a moment's thoughtful look at the money.

"Got a spare key?" I asked.

"I dunno, we're really not supposed to-" He shut up when Marcus laid another hundred and a fifty on top of the first. He looked up, eyes wide. I could practically see him deciding that this was way above his pay grade. He pocketed the money and tossed me a key. "Just...like, give it back when you're done. Please."

We made our way up in silence. Marcus kept fidgeting with the cuffs of his suit.

I knew what I was expecting behind the door, and I wasn't looking forward to it. The floor was mostly quiet, if you discounted squeaking bedsprings and the occasional indelicate noise that leaked through thin walls. The hallway in front of room 404 was quiet though. I unlocked the door without any noise, bracing myself for being on the sidelines of an unpleasant conflict.

Marcus let out a strangled noise when the door swung open, his eyes bugging out. I imagine my own eyes were much the same.

On a cheap bed, stripped down to the mattress, were a nude man and woman. I could see three tails sprouting from the base of the woman spine, fox ears twitching in the air. She wore a single ornament in her hair, shaped like a leaf. I almost thought I could see the outline of a fourth tail, a wavering translucent image. It was rather hard to concentrate on, considering the tableau before us.

Chun-Hwa was not engaged in the oldest traditions of man and maid.

She'd torn a ragged hole in his side and had her face shove into it. The previous silence was gone, filled with the sounds of slurping and chewing. As we watched, she pulled back, worrying her head from side to side like a dog with a bone, and ripped out a large organ. His liver. Her mouth, liberally stained with blood, opened impossibly wide and she gulped twice, swallowing it whole. I could see the lump in her throat for a short few seconds.

It was then that she saw us. Her eyes widened. "Marcus?" She squeaked. I saw a dozen emotions flicker across her face. "Oh no-no, no, this isn't-I can-" She sounded agitated, afraid. Honestly, she really did sound like she's just been caught cheating, and was afraid of losing him.

She moved, one arm raised towards Marcus. He stepped back, shaking his head slowly. She let out a defeated whimper, before her eyes fastened on me, and I saw the sorrow turn to rage. "You did this..." She growled. Her mouth opened,

too wide again, and she let out a disturbing hissing yip and leapt off the bed at me.

I carry a Glock 19. It cleared my hip and I put two rounds in her with strangely muted retorts before she landed. She reacted like I'd thrown darts at her. An annoyed wince, before she lashed out. I twisted to the side, and her fingers—tipped with inch long claws now—ripped through my coat as I stumbled back. She raced past me into the hallway and I tried to follow.

Outside Marcus was still up against the wall, wide eyed. “She was eating him,” he said, and his voice was curiously emotionless. Shock, maybe. Gods knew I was shocked as hell.

“We need to leave,” he said. I nodded, checking my gun and going through a tally of what I was carrying. The Glock. A snub-nosed S&W 327 on my ankle. At the moment, I wished I was carrying a shotgun.

You almost get killed by weird shit as much as I have, and you might get a bit paranoid about confronting one too. Don't judge me.

I glanced down the hall, struck again by the silence in this section, and the lack of reaction to two gunshots from anyone else. I stepped a few feet to the left, and I immediately heard bedsprings and moans. I made a face and shook my head. “C'mon.” Magic can be annoying sometimes, though at least whatever she'd done had kept people from panicking.

I slipped the clip out of my gun and slapped in a fresh one. Custom made hollow points, filled with either sea salt or iron shavings. I had no idea if they were something a kitsune was weak to, but there were enough things on the supernatural side of the spectrum that disliked one or the other that I thought they were a good investment.

We took the elevator down. It stopped on the second floor, a woman wearing a bathrobe and holding an ice bucket stopping short when she saw it was occupied. I was keeping my gun handy, but discrete—no need to make anyone panic.

“Oh, which way are you going? I needed some ice...” she trailed off as she noticed me staring at her. Her hair wasn't right. It didn't hang right. Her robe was twitching strangely. I touched the stone hanging from my neck and she was abruptly an inch shorter, and I saw the tip of an ear that was not human poke through her hair. She grinned, showing off sharp teeth as she narrowed her eyes at me. Marcus stepped back against the wall as she dropped the illusion entirely. Chun-hwa.

My gun was in her face an instant later. “Don't move.” I snapped.

She laughed. “Catch me, and I’ll let you live.” She turned and ran, throwing the robe off as she did. I crushed down the sick feeling when I saw the rust red stains on the inside of it, focusing on chasing after her.

I should have been more careful. She turned a corner and was gone by the time I got there. I looked around, trying to catch my breath as I made my way down it slowly. I don’t know how I didn’t see her—maybe she used another illusion to blend in, but she hit me hard from the side, throwing me against the wall. I felt a sharp pain, and glanced down at five clear puncture marks.

She laughed again, flexing her clawed fingers while she stood crouched before me, her red-stained mouth spread in a broad grin. “I’m going to make you suffer.” She said in a low growl.

I shot her twice. She smirked as I raised the gun, thinking it would no more affect her than my standard ammo had. To my immense satisfaction, and no little relief, the smirk disappeared when the mixture of salt and iron hit her between chest and shoulder, the sound as muffled as it had been upstairs. She staggered back, clutching her new wound, and hissed at me before turning and running again. She flung the leaf shaped hair ornament behind her as she ran, opening a door seemingly at random and disappearing into it. I staggered after her and yanked the door open, staring at the insides of a closet. There was nowhere for her to hide.

A scream brought me around and I raced back toward the elevator. I could see Marcus backing away from the fox.

“Please. Please, I love you. I had to, to feed, I had to. I know I promised, and I tried, tried to stop it, tried to ignore it, but you don’t know what it’s like. Marcus, please try to understand. You have to believe me. We’ve been together for years.” She sounded like she was crying. I can’t imagine the lashing tails or the blood stains were helping her case though.

I crept up as quietly as I could, but Marcus’ eyes went wide as he saw me and she turned with a hiss and tried to rush me.

I managed to get my gun up before she got close and fired again. She fell back with a scream as the salt and iron punched into her bare chest, and I was readying a second shot when she simply vanished.

The hair ornament she’d thrown at me before fell to the ground.

I stared at it for a long moment. Marcus picked it up, turning it over in his hands. I think it was the way he looked at it that made everything click. The sorrow. The disappointment. The lack of horror.

I swapped back to my regular ammo as we made our way to the little alcove that held the elevator.

“So. Was the ‘kitsune’ line yours or hers?” I asked, keeping my voice as calm and casual as I could, despite my growing anger. He opened his mouth, but my gun in his face stopped him cold. “Please don’t lie to me again, Mr. Green. I saw the way you reacted to that scene upstairs. I heard what she said to you. This was never about her cheating on you.”

He closed his mouth into a tight line. “Well. I suppose this is what I get for hiring a competent detective,” he said.

I gave him my own thin smile. “Let me be abundantly clear about something Mr. Green. You tried to fuck me over. Don’t contact me again. There will be consequences if you do, and I assure you, my friends are scarier than yours.” The elevator door opened, and I stepped back. “Goodbye, Mr. Green.”

I watched him get on the elevator, trying to stare me down the whole time, before I made my way to the stairs and left as fast as I could.

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A week later, and I was sitting in a nightclub owned by a vampire, reading the newspaper and drinking a rather nice whiskey. Night Life was one of the premier hot spots for the supernatural crowd, and I’d done enough favors for the owner that she’d given me an unlimited bar tab.

McKenzie had already shared the official story with me once the hospital had cleared him. A woman went nuts from the guilt of cheating, killed a guy, and attacked us when we discovered her, managing to escape in the confusion. I’d given my statement and handed over my guns—thank the gods McKenzie’s my friend, else I’d probably still be waiting on getting them back—and made my way home to sleep for as long as possible.

Kumiho. The word had come up while I’d been looking at various websites full of Japanese lore. The name should’ve been what tipped me off. Kumiho are like kitsune, but kitsune are Japanese. Chun-hwa is a Korean name, and the Korean’s have much different tales of their mystical fox creatures. Kitsune are mischievous bastards at times, but Kumiho...

Well. They eat people.

I didn’t look up from my paper as someone settled onto the stool next to mine. “Something troubling you, *detectiv meu minunat?*”

Vidalia owned Night Life. She was a friend, of sorts, with an annoying habit of teasing me in her native language.

I tossed the paper on the bar top and took another sip of my drink. “Nothing to speak of. You have another case for me?”

The headline was some new political scandal. Off to one side, half hidden under the fold, bold print declared, “Local Businessman Missing. Foul Play Suspected.”

Sometimes I hate my job. At least his checks cleared.

AT NIGHT

Matthew Kirby

I went to a friend's. It was already late. I went to a friend's to watch *Princess Mononoke* on DVD. She was tired. There was an hour left, but I stopped it. She was tired. I said good night and drove home. We have three cars between us, my family. I parked on the lawn, under the tree. I should have gotten out, but I was there for thirty minutes, thereabout. I went to a friend's; I drove home. I let her know that I made it, and we talked for a bit. Even when you're not with someone, it's still nice to have a conversation in a car. We talked about that, how it's nice to have a conversation in a car. I parked on the lawn, under the tree, and the rain would tap my car. The rain whispered static, and it would tap. It would tap my car. It would tap. I reclined my seat and looked through my sunroof window at the branches. It was nice. My legs were getting chilly. I wanted to fall asleep, but my legs were chilly. So I went inside.

THAT FUZZY FEELING

Matthew Kirby

The musk of litter boxes even while tucked away was the perfume of Mrs. Cuddles, Sir Kittington, Lady Fred, Felicity, and Haruna. Each took their tea in grace. To be paid to drink invisible tea—the best of its kind, mind you—was not even a chore to Felicity; however, she felt nervous that Haruna’s parents were two hours late to pick her up. She brought out her cloth sack full of beans, or sunflower seeds they might have been, to keep herself calm. One hand in beans or seeds, and another offering to Lady Fred a biscuit if she would like it, which received a woeful, “Save me” meow. Felicity excused herself to call and call and call the girl’s parents. Haruna had spied the bag, but didn’t ask what was in it. Curious as she was she peered in and dug her hand a tunnel to the bottom. Something furry, something mushy, something bony. Her eyes widened and she pulled her hand away in haste. She spilled the beans, and Felicity rushed back. To her horror, the cat was out of the bag.

SEVERED

Carla DeLaughter

One became two, two
We are exposed
Numbing casualty

The skin
Tender
The wound
Fresh
Throbs in anguish
For the missing flesh

Open
Bleeding
Torn apart
More is broken
Than my heart

ODE TO A WAFFLE HOUSE

Matthew Tesson

A man once asked me, "Have you ever been in love?"
I said yes, and thought of Waffle House.

Of the man standing over the stove,
cracking eggs and flipping hash browns.
How comfortable I felt.

I remembered the waitress coming over,
asking if she could do more for us.
We shook our heads. It did not rouse
me from the moment.

You sat across from me, at three in the morning.
Just about every week we could be found
here laughing, after we had snuck out.

The man continued, "How did you know?"
I thought about how you'd drown
your waffles in too much syrup.

I thought of how my vision would rove,
across you as your laughter resounded
around the room.

Of the way you would shove
big pieces of waffle in your mouth,
but cover it with your hand.

I replied, "It's the little things."

YOUR GHOST IN A COFFEE SHOP

Matthew Tesson

Whispers and coffee beans
soak the air. Sitting with empty
chairs at an empty table.

Bitter comfort coats my tongue,
as Arabian steam dances
through my sinuses.

Looking at the black pool
between my hands,
a new scent floats by.

A perfume, sweet and familiar.

I close my eyes and wait.

I breathe and wait.

I breathe and smell.

You.

Standing before me. Yelling,
at me for a stupid decision
I made.
Your face—furious.

Your eyes,
sad. Fighting the tears that
threaten my vision.

I implode, apologies fly from my mouth.

Your arms wrapped around me,
and I can no longer see.

I have not

 forgotten.

Opening my eyes,

Three girls sit talking.

Strangers

talking about classes.

Surrounded by empty chairs

I drink from the

cup that seems to have

no

bottom.

DON'T

Matthew Tesson

Your hair; cascading sunlight in the dark.
You laid asleep across my chest, at peace.
I pray I don't disturb the way things are.

If only I had spoken from the start.
I maybe would have had a better chance.
Your hair; cascading sunlight in the dark.

At night, we used to walk around the parks
in town, but I would always fail to speak.
I pray I don't disturb the way things are.

But then I did. I got a little drunk
and spoke to you of things I hid for weeks.
Your hair; cascading sunlight in the dark.

You always stare at me and tell me, "Don't."
You say that you are broke, and I should leave.
I wish I hadn't disturbed the way things were.

But now I look away each time we talk.
It's easier when I'm unable to see
Your hair; cascading sunlight in the dark.
I pray I don't disturb the way things are.

NOT WITH A BANG BUT A WHIMPER

Brennan Lombardi

When James pulled up to the three story, red brick building, with white pillars supporting the porch, and a variety of colored balloons tied to the mailbox, he felt ashamed and disgusted by the sight of it, and hoped he would never have to see the superfluous mansion or its owners ever again. Since he arrived a little earlier than expected, he prepared a plausible story for his daughter and the owner of the house but his real objective was to get out of town as soon as possible.

His stomach made an unsettling growl, and he felt a sharp pain as if he was about to pass a kidney stone. James fumbled in his jacket pocket for the Imodium bottle and took two big gulps before putting the lid back on. After he slipped the bottle back into his pocket, he unzipped his jacket halfway down and reached inside his interior pocket for his six-shooter revolver, afraid he might have lost it since leaving his house. James was tempted to pull it out and make sure it was fully loaded again but fought off the compulsion for fear of neighbors and passersby witnessing him with a deadly weapon.

After zipping up his jacket, he turned around and checked on his infant son, who was sound asleep. So quiet and peaceful, he thought. James would do anything to trade places with him at that moment. Whatever he's dreaming of at that moment probably doesn't consist of poverty, loneliness or the slow release of death. Through his eyes, the world was still a spacious and cozy crib, with enchanting animals and elaborate designs hovering over you to keep you entertained.

James closed the car door as quietly as he could and bolted to the front porch in order to escape the freezing wind. He knocked three times before hearing footsteps approach. When Kate opened the door, she tried to hide her astonishment.

"Hey Jim!" she said with a wide grin. James attempted to smile too but made an awkward smirk instead. "I was expecting Helen to come, but it's good to see you again. How have you been!?"

"I'm good. I'm hanging in there" he replied. "Helen isn't feeling well so I'm picking Jess up a little early. Hope that's okay."

“Oh no! Is she sick?”

“Her stomach’s upset. How was the party?”

Kate let out a major sigh. “Ugh. I am so glad it’s over. But everyone had a great time.” She noticed his hands were trembling. “Do you wanna come in for a minute? They’re having cake right now.”

“No, I can’t. I have run to the store and get back home.” Kate nodded with understanding, but James could see she was still slightly shaken by his demeanor.

“Okay,” she said, still smiling. “I’ll run and get her.” When she came back with Jess, his daughter seemed even more surprised than Kate to see him.

“Dad? I thought mom was supposed to pick me up.”

“She’s not feeling very well. We have to get back home to her.”

“But I’m not done eating cake...” she whined.

“I know but we have to get back.”

“Can I stay just a few minutes?”

“Hun, this is not the time. We have to get back.” He hoped he didn’t sound as agitated as he was.

“How about I get you a slice for the road,” intervened Kate. “Can we do that?”

“Okay...” Jess said, peevishly. When Kate came back a slice of cake on a plastic plate covered in saran wrap, Jess took it with both hands and started walking towards the door.

“What do you say, Jess?” said Jim.

She turned to face Kate and said, “Thanks for inviting me, Mrs. Holland.”

“You’re very welcome.” She turned her gaze to James. “And hang in there. I know something good will come along.”

“I appreciate that” he replied. “Have a good day.” He grabbed Jess’s hand to let her know it was time to go.

“You too,” Kate said. “And tell Helen I hope she feels better.”

“I will, thanks.” He and Jess turned and walked toward the car.

“Okay, goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” said James, without turning around. Despite having a decent excuse, he knew Kate had felt uncomfortable around him and seemed very suspicious, but by the time she discovered the real story, he’d be long gone anyway. Still, he was bothered by the fact that he

didn’t sound more persuasive. If I could legally scam people for a living, he thought, then I can sure as hell get someone like her to believe me.

As they approached the car, James told Jess to get in the back seat and not

make any noise because her baby brother was asleep.

“Why is Sam here?” she asked.

“Because we’re headed to grandma and grandpa’s.”

“Why?” Jess whined again. Looking at her through the rearview mirror, he knew her interrogation wouldn’t subside until he either gave her enough details to make his story sound plausible or she was able to catch him in a lie. Like father like daughter, he thought.

“I have to meet some people in the city today, so I’m leaving you and Sam with them until I get back.” Helen would often leave the kids with her parents while she went shopping or visited with old friends, so he knew--or hoped, at least--that Jess wouldn’t ask too many follow up questions. “I packed your toys and some clothes if you need them” he continued.

“How long will you be gone?”

“Just a few hours. I’ll be back in the evening. Can you behave while I’m gone?”

“Yes. Can I call mom?”

“Your mom’s not feeling well. I’ll let you call her later.”

James started the car and, while driving away from the town he made a life for himself in, he expected to reminisce about his old life but he only felt emptiness inside, as if a dark shadow kept hovering over him and the vortex was sucking all of his memories and feelings out of him one by one. Every moment with his wife and kids before today felt like hazy memories from his childhood, which he didn’t want to dwell on either.

“Dad, did you bring my coloring book?” asked Jess.

“Yes, it’s in your backpack.” Jess unzipped her backpack on the floor in front of her and pulled out a large coloring book and a container of crayons. Sam was still sound asleep. James hoped both of them would stay occupied while he listened to the final score of the Mets, or any team for that matter. Just hearing someone steal second base or make a home run might bring him solace.

When James didn’t find the Mets playing on the radio, he settled for the Chicago Cubs and listened to the announcer rave about their recent home run. He thought this would clear his mind for a little while, but his old life came creeping back in. Everything he had worked hard for, his job, his fortune, his family, was all gone now. Who thought my whole life would change in two weeks?

James wished he could blame losing his job and his million-dollar stocks on the Wall Street banks, greedy consumers or the government in general, but he knew that he and other bankers like him caused the recession too. By convincing

clients with bad credit or low income to borrow a ludicrous amount of money, or Sub-Prime loans, to buy houses and cars they would never be able to pay back, he persuaded them that the American dream was still possible, the same dream he was able to live as long as the borrowers signed their own death warrants and they were bundled up for investors. America, like the crewmembers on the Titanic, will always save the prominent people first before rescuing everyone else. America was founded on greed, so why should it stop now? And if you can't live the American dream, what's the point of living in America? Or living at all, for that matter?

Regardless, James still had a glimmer of hope that he would eventually find another job and get his fortune back, either by applying for another company or maybe starting his own. It all seemed possible, at least until he decided to sort through Helen's phone that day with a gnawing suspicion that she would look for someone else since he had nothing left. He might have been able to tolerate her ardent messages if they hadn't been sent to and from Jay, his longtime friend and neighbor; someone he loved more than his own brother.

In spite of her betrayal, the affair made sense to him the more he thought about it. If Jay was close to James, it was only natural he would become close to his wife and children as well. He was a widower and she was a lonely housewife with a workaholic husband. He should have known sooner. Especially when Jess bonded more closely with Jay than with her own father. Even though he didn't want to accept it, a part of him, like a father's approval, was glad she chose someone he held in high regard.

It was admirable that Helen didn't break the news to him at the lowest point of his life. But, on the other hand, if they were lovers for over a year and she had planned to move in with Jay like she said, he wondered why she didn't she ask him for a divorce long before he lost his job. Did she consider ending it at some point, he wondered, or did she simply not have it in her to confront him? He finally concluded that it was just another mystery to Helen's decision-making process he would never fully understand and pushed the nagging thought away as much as possible.

James spied Sam, who was still asleep, in the rearview mirror, and saw Jess working on her coloring book, being as careful as possible not to go outside the pictures. He knew she was in the "zone", which reminded him of his college days when he pitched. Once he reached a certain state of mind, his eyes never left the batter and no amount of commotion from the crowd could distract him.

Someone could have walked right up to him and clocked him on the side of the head and he wouldn't have seen it coming. From the moment the batter stepped up to the plate to the moment he left, James observed every subtle movement by him and calculated what kind of pitch to throw or whether or not to walk him. Finding the "zone" was like climbing a sheer cliff, but once he was there he felt invincible.

By discovering this ability at a young age, James was able to receive a full-ride athletic scholarship, get accepted into a top tier MBA program and then offered a lucrative job. The "zone" had taken given him more in life than he had ever imagined but it seems to have disappeared lately.

As James approached a tollbooth, he remembered he had his EZ pass with him, but decided to pay with cash. If an APB had been sent out, he could easily be tracked through a tollbooth or any credit cards he used, which is why he also took his remaining cash from his checking account before picking up Jess.

"Dad, can I call Mom now?" Jess asked. She had finished her drawings and not a single color had overflowed outside the lines.

"Your mom hasn't responded to my text messages. She's probably sleeping right now."

"You said that an hour ago."

"I know, but she's sick. Can you wait till we get to your grandparents?"

"But you said I could talk to her. Why can't you call her?"

"It's not a good time, Jess. You're going to have to wait."

"That's not fair. I wanna talk to Mom!"

"Honey, she's not feeling-

"I want to talk to Mom!" Jess screamed.

"Jess," he snapped "shut the fuck up!"

Sam instantly woke up with a cry. Tears formed in Jess' eyes too. James had trouble keeping his eyes on the road. He turned around and pointed toward Sam's bag.

"Get his bottle," he commanded.

"It's your fault. You get it!" Tears trickled down both sides off Jess' cheeks. She whimpered.

James inadvertently swerved halfway into the next lane and a car right behind him honked.

"Goddammit!" he howled. At that moment, he wanted to run the car off the highway, thinking it was the best way to end everything.

Jess jolted into action, opened Sam's bag and pulled out a bottle full of milk. When Sam refused the bottle, she pulled out his pacifier and he accepted it. Then she offered him his stuffed lion, which he accepted with open arms. Sam sucked and whimpered but soon the car became silent again, and James felt the prickly pain in his stomach return. He took out the Imodium and gulped the rest of the bottle.

"I'm sorry I yelled," he said a few minutes later. Jess didn't say anything; she kept staring out her window, pretending not to hear him while holding back more tears.

"You wanna listen to the radio?" James asked.

Jess didn't reply. James found a radio station playing the latest music, not for his taste, but he figured it would calm her down. When he looked in the rearview mirror again, his gaze became fixated on Sam, who was more interested in observing a cheap stuffed animal than wondering where he was going or what would happen to him. He once again envied his son's naiveté and wished he could take back what he had done Sam's mother and, almost, to Sam as well.

He interrogated Helen, their shouting match quickly turned physical, and he was surprised at her strength she had when she slapped him across the face and he stumbled three steps backwards. His first impulse was to hit her back but a more sinister thought overpowered him and he retreated into the bedroom to load his gun.

No second thoughts entered his head. Afterwards, James believed it didn't completely happen by his own volition. He felt like he had entered someone else's mind and was forced to watch everything through their eyes.

He marched into the kitchen, shot her twice in the stomach, and walked out. He could remember her screaming and pleading when he pointed the gun at her, but it had no impact on him. He then proceeded upstairs to Sam's room, where Sam was sleeping, pointed the gun at his son and pulled back the hammer. But this time he managed to take control of his own thoughts and lowered his trembling arm to his side; he stood there for an eternity and stared at Sam, as if he was under hypnosis. He was numb.

The numbness soon wore off and was replaced by that familiar pain in his stomach. He went into the kitchen for medicine when he saw Helen's body covered in blood, her back rested against the side of the counter, head cocked to one side, and the stomach pain instantly shot to the top of his throat; he bolted into the bathroom. After vomiting, the pain returned to his stomach so he walked

in and out of the kitchen as quickly as possible to get the medicine. His body trembled at the image of his wife soaked in blood and he wished he could cry, scream or show any kind of emotion but nothing manifested.

He waited until enough time had passed for him to pick up Jess without seeming too early. He packed the kids' bags, drove to the bank, and filled up his car before heading to Kate's house. James tried to forget what had happened the past few hours but found it difficult to focus on anything else except his deceptive, lovely, wife, who was now a grisly corpse lying in their kitchen. He yearned to see her smile again, the way she did when they first met, but he blocked the nostalgia.

James couldn't stand the uncomfortable silence anymore. He may have had to suffer through it with his coworkers and neighbors but not his own daughter, especially if he never saw her again. Jess continued to stare out the window, lost in thought as much as he had been the entire trip. He wondered what Jay would do in this situation and used the most simple ice breaker he could think of. "How was the party, Jess?"

Her gloomy expression suddenly turned to bewilderment. "Huh?"

"I asked how the party was. Did you have fun?"

"Yeah, it was okay."

"Did Taylor like the Barbie car you gave her?"

"She said she already had one."

"Well I'm sure she could use another one..."

Rather than responding, Jess tried to turn her attention back to the trees and mountains but James wouldn't allow it; not while he had another hour left with her.

"Can I be honest with you? I'm not meeting anyone in the city, and I'll actually be gone for a few days." He now had Jess's full attention.

"Why?"

"Your mother and I are having problems and we need to take some time to work things out. Can you stay with your grandparents for a few days? I'm sure they'll take you shopping."

"What kind of problems? Are you leaving her?"

"I don't know."

"Do you not love her anymore?"

"No, I love her a lot, and I always will."

"Does she not love you?"

“She did...but no matter what happens this has nothing to do with you, and we will never leave you guys. Do you understand?” He turned around for confirmation but she nodded at the floor, afraid that making eye contact might produce more tears. James knew that was the best

response he would get from her. “I know I haven’t been around very much, and I’m really sorry for that. But you should know... I wanted to give you guys the childhood I never had.” He used to tell Jess how he and her uncle grew up on a farm and were forced to work from dawn till dusk every summer. How the majority of their childhood was spent milking cows and cleaning up their manure afterwards. “You guys are everything to me. I...”

“It’s okay, Dad. I forgive you.” A stream of euphoria flowed through James’s body, like wine after a meal, and he felt more relieved than he had in a long time. Jess may or may not forgive him one day when she knew the entire truth, but at least she absolved him for now.

To avoid crying, Jess held the stuffed lion in front of Sam, which he had dropped earlier but now gleefully took back. She also held her hand in front of him and wiggled her fingers. Sam showed a keen interest in this new mobile toy and his own hands clamped onto her fingers as he studied them with intense curiosity.

As James pulled up to his in-laws’ house, another three story house in an upscale neighborhood, he remembered the first time Helen introduced him to them. He knew Helen grew up wealthy, but it made no impact on him until he saw the house she had been raised in and, at that moment, he would have to become more than a small town banker if he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Although his father in law, a polite yet pompous man, offered him a position at his prestigious company, he decided to turn it down and prove to himself and everyone else that he could make his own path. And look where that took me, he thought, right back to this goddam house.

Since both of his parents were dead and his brother lived a free spirited, gypsy lifestyle, he knew his in-laws would make the best guardians for Jess and Sam. Pressing his hand against his chest, James felt the gun inside his jacket but had no impulse to use it anymore. Whatever became of him, his kids would be taken care of and he wasn’t going to interfere with that.

He stepped out of the car and opened the back door to get Sam. “Did you get everything?” He asked Jess.

She nodded and he followed her to the front porch, carrying Sam in the car

seat with one hand and his bags with the other. When they reached the porch, everyone dropped their bags and James put Sam down in front of the door before turning to Jess. "I don't have time to stay. Say hi to your grandparents for me, okay?"

Jess couldn't control herself anymore and burst into tears. James knelt down and gave her a hug; she put her arms around him as tight as she could. "I don't want you and mom to get a divorce."

"Me neither, honey."

"I don't want you to leave."

"Me neither, but I have to."

"Please be back soon."

"I will" he said, feeling the sharp pain in his stomach again.

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, hun. I always will." He kissed Jess on the forehead and had to uncuff her arms to get loose from her. He knelt down to Sam and kissed him on the forehead too. "Promise

you'll take care of your brother." Jess nodded. Without delay, James knocked on the door twice, walked back to his car and drove away.

Rather than getting back on the highway, he took the winding backroads going down a cliff before pulling over to the shoulder of the road. Once he stopped, he let out a shriek and tore off the rearview mirror before bursting into tears. For a long time, James sat in his car and bawled uncontrollably.

After every last drop of agony and remorse poured down his face, he started the car again and continued driving, deciding whether he should end his life now or later. At one point, he considered turning himself in, but couldn't stand the thought of his own kids visiting him in prison. He knew he couldn't run forever. Death seemed like the best option.

Suddenly, James's face brightened and a moment of clarity washed over him. Since his children were the beneficiaries of his life insurance, the only thing he had left to offer, they would receive the benefits if his death was accidental rather than a suicide. This is the way it ends, his last thought as he jerked the steering wheel.

THE ABBREVIATED AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A NON-TRADITIONAL ARTS STUDENT IN SIX WORD MEMOIR

Amy Luznicky

Birth: Dad's drunk. Mom's crazy. Genetic-lottery jackpot!

Year 2: Bites self. Blames toothless sister. Repeatedly.

Year 5: Little Golden aspirations ignite literary flame.

Year 8: "Educator" humiliates. Gonna revenge-write so hard!

Year 11: Performance art debut. Glenpool community deeply unsettled.

Year 13: Parents divorce. Bad poetry floodgates open.

Year 16: Dad's brain bursts. Finds abusive replacement-male!

Year 17: Shaves head. Stares into the abyss.

Year 18: Chooses abusive suicidal boyfriend over college.

Year 19: Mature LA Savior promises romance, adventure.

Year 20: Mature LA Bastard delivers heartache, STD.

Year 21: Abuser > Bastard. Elvis performs ceremony.

Year 21 and 15 min: Vegas Fight Night! Marital bliss K.O'd.

Year 22: Goes Corporate. Soul-death. But the benefits!

Year 25: Synonym for "terror": procreation with madman – OR – Dad's crazy.
Mom's drunk. Sorry kiddo!

Year 28: "Survival" is spelled D-I-V-O-R-C-E, Stupid. Duh.

Year 30: Explores local arts scene. Belonging! Finally!

Year 31: Corporate American? No! Luchador! Performance Artist!

Year 34: Severance + School(Passion)> Security

Year 35: Sobriety: The kryptonite of true friendship.

Year 36: Three-ring juggling extravaganza! Single-Motherhood, Mortgage, School

Year 37: Overachievement is better with hot fudge.

Year 38: Living cliché redemption story. Thankful AF.

YOUNG PROFESSIONAL'S FORTUNE 500

SMOKE BREAK

Amy Luznicky

He shivers without his coat
in the graycast gloom-drizzle
cutting into him sideways
as he half-heartedly shelters himself
beneath a shallow overhang.
He says he likes it that way because, yeah,
he knows there's a warm room in the garage –
a warm room with benches and ashtrays –
but it's the smell he says. He doesn't like it.

The smell, it might give him away.

He doesn't want the others to know
because, well, they are others
with othering thoughts thinking
behind suspicious eyes an
crinkled noses that sometimes
crinkle at him for illogical inklings.
But if they suspected...
Or smelled!
Or suspected they might have smelled
the smells of the warm ashtrayed garage room with heating...

Well, there'd be no end to it.

Ironclad opinions, cold judgments,
ill-conceived assumptions peering
through those othering suspicious eyes
and the crinkled noses crinkling
with some smug knowledge
that would only be half-truth, or non-truth,
or maybe only truth in one tiny instant of one tiny day;
not the truth of his person, his self-concept, his habits and ways.
And he wouldn't be smoking anyway if he weren't on this miserable, miserly
project with the miniature steeltrap-mind girl anyway.
His boss forever comparing and judging, comparing, complaining, push pushing

and pushing for speedy perfection.

Not to mention the crushing pressure of the job that he's in, the department he's in, the respectable, well-moneyed life he wants in.

So he says he prefers it this way:
shivering coatless in the graycast gloom-drizzle,
sheltering himself beneath a shallow overhang,
bumming a smoke (although he doesn't smoke)
to break up his bumper day.

D.R.U.G.S

(DEMONS RULE ALL UNDER GOD'S SIGHT)

Tyler James

Cocaine & Remy
Somebody please pass the Henny
I been, stackin my pennies
I know that I got plenty
Enough to get my fixin
My skin is constantly itchin
My girl is constantly bitchin
She say that she gone be leavin
But yet,
She in the kitchen
cookin baking that chicken
that water constantly mixin
my dealer be water whippin
I call him my doctor fix it
Cause he give me my fixing
And God is constantly seein
But my Demons constantly Grinning....
My mom hates me
My sister hates me
They play keep away from with the baby
I never play with the baby
Maybe I need some changing
Maybe I need some saving
You have twenty in your savings?

THE PILOT

Jesse Craighead

The morning sun woke Philip as its rays slithered through the blinds like a snake through the weeds. He felt, for the first time in years, like he had a purpose. There was an unmistakable pep in his step while he readied for work. He smiled as he brushed his teeth, hummed a tune as he dressed, and laughed as he revisited a Dilbert comic in his head while putting on his shoes.

He left the bedroom and found his way to the kitchen, where breakfast was covered and waiting for him on the table. Patricia always made Sam and Ellie breakfast before taking them to school, and always left a plate for him on the table. Some mornings he ate it; others, he dumped it in the trash. This morning was bacon, scrambled eggs, and dry wheat toast. He smothered the eggs in Tabasco sauce and devoured them in four large bites.

The food being room temperature didn't matter. He weighed whether or not to heat the food in the microwave, but decided against it. The bacon, still crispy, crunched between his teeth. He closed his eyes and enjoyed every bite. Moving to the toast, he took only one bite and placed it back on the plate. It sat too long cooling and resulted in a limp, chewy piece of bread.

He grabbed a couple oranges from the bowl at the center of the table, pulled the juicer out of the cabinet, and squeezed a fresh glass. He drank it slowly, savoring every drop, and then used his finger to shovel the pulp into his mouth. He rinsed his glass, placed it on the top rack of the dishwasher, and, seeing it was full, loaded a detergent pod and pressed the start button.

He smiled, satisfied with his morning, and looked at his watch. He stared as the seconds ticked away, and realized his heartbeat lined up, but his breathing was out of sync. He got lost in this realization before noticing the time and moving on with his morning. Philip went back into the bedroom. He opened his sock drawer, dug around for a minute, and pulled an envelope from the back. He stared at the "To Patricia" he had written on the front and then checked to make sure the letter he wrote late last night was still there. Finding it undisturbed, he sealed the envelope with a lick of his tongue and placed it on the kitchen table. He hoped it would be enough for her.

Grabbing his uniform jacket and hat, he walked to the front door. As the morning sun placed a heavenly glow around him, he thought about how impor-

tant that house was to his family. It was the house he and Patricia bought when they first married. It was the house they would raise two responsible, beautiful daughters in. They were conceived in that house. They took their first steps and said their first words in that house. A wide smile stretched across his face as the memories flickered through his mind like a montage. He clung to the idea that today was a good day. Today, for the first time in a very long time, felt like a happy day. He needed to feel happy. Philip checked his watch again. It was nearing the top of the hour.

He opted for the scenic route to work. It took a bit of extra time, but it gave him time to say goodbye. He bid adieu to the hill he rode bikes on as a child and the pizza joint his father took him after little league games, then to the public court where he played basketball and the park where he lost his virginity. He rolled down the windows as he passed the park and took in the clean air one last time.

When Philip arrived at the airport his watch chimed to let him know it was 11:30. He passed the express TSA screening specifically for pilots, stopped for a couple cups of coffee, then walked to his gate. "Just one bag today?" asked the perky blonde girl at the check-in counter.

"Day trip," Philip said and tried to remember her name. He slid his shoulder bag to the floor and sat the cups of coffee on the counter.

"Max should be here any minute," the girl said.

"I was just about to ask," he said and smiled. "You have a marker I can borrow?"

She handed him a blue sharpie.

He marked the lid of one of the cups with a blue "M" then sat the marker back on the counter. Her name came to him as if it were whispered into his ear.

"You're a doll,

Candice."

"Thanks," she said. Her cheeks flushed and she pushed the button below the counter to release the boarding door. "Have a good flight."

"I always do," Philip said. He smiled, winked, and tipped his cap, then grabbed the coffee and his bag and boarded the plane.

He checked his watch and saw only forty-five minutes until departure. Knowing Max would be arriving any minute, he sat the cups of coffee in the cup holders between the seats and dropped his bag in the pilot's chair. He pulled a bottle of generic sleeping pills from his bag, unscrewed the top, and shook four gel caps

into his hand. Using his car key, he split the gel caps in half and dumped the contents into the marked cup. He put the remnants of the gel caps back in the bottle, then zipped it back in his bag. He gave the cup a swirl after securing the lid, and heard Max's booming voice greet a flight attendant.

Philip quickly stowed his bag in the pilot's closet and turned in time to catch Max entering the cockpit. "Long time no fly," he said and embraced Max.

"It has been quite a while," Philip replied. The two men released. Max stowed his bag next to Philip's in the pilot's closet before sitting in the copilot's chair and took a long draw of his coffee. Philip grimaced, imagining the pain caused by the hot coffee rolling down Max's throat.

"How do you drink it like that?" Philip asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's piping hot and you drink it like it's ice cold."

"I'm just used to it I guess."

"It doesn't hurt?" Philip asked.

"Not at all," Max replied.

Philip shrugged it off and left the cabin. Noticing a stewardess was no longer standing at the entrance door, he took the opportunity to swipe two tiny bottles of vodka from her cart. He recovered the stack of alcohol by bringing it all forward to make it appear as if it were all accounted for.

Hearing the toilet flush in the back of plane, he quickly closed the curtain on the cart and went back into the cockpit. He stood in the doorway and stared silently at the back of Max's head thinking two things simultaneously. First he wondered if Max was already asleep, and then tried to consider what he might do if it were so. His heart raced and his face flushed as he wondered if he had spoiled everything.

"Max," he said softly in an almost questioning tone.

"What's up, captain?" Max turned around and Philip saw he was awake and playing on his phone.

"Candy Crush?" Philip asked and tried to regain his composure.

"Yeah," Max said. "I've been stuck on the same damn level for three days."

Philip shut the cockpit door. He checked his watch and saw twenty-five minutes until takeoff and ten minutes until boarding began.

"For a second I thought you were asleep," Philip said.

"I did catch myself yawning a minute ago."

"Better get that coffee down, then."

Max took another pull from his cup. The near-hollow sound of Max dropping

it into the cup holder told Philip it was almost empty. He grinned, then turned on the plane and began his preflight system checks. The clink of metal echoed throughout the plane and into the cockpit. Philip paused his checks and glanced over his shoulder to analyze the sound.

"It's a wheelchair," Max said.

"Good ear."

Philip resumed his checks and Max began his. Once finished they recorded the plane's status and communicated the results to the control tower. The air traffic controller radioed the allclear and gave the pilots an updated departure time. Still on schedule, Philip checked his watch and saw fifteen minutes until departure.

More passengers funneled onto the plane and loudly made their presence known as they stowed their bags and conversed loudly amongst themselves.

"How many do we have today?" Philip asked.

"Let's see," Max said and retrieved the manifest. "Looks like a full flight; fifty-two including staff."

"Do we have an Air Marshall?"

"Not listed."

Philip nodded and moments later heard a new set of passengers begin boarding. Philip looked down at his coffee, realizing for the first time he had forgotten it. He took small sip and grimaced as it rolled down his throat.

"Cold isn't it?" Max asked and smiled.

The coffee was cold, but that didn't bother him. It was the taste of the vodka in the coffee that made him grimace.

Philip popped the lid and downed the coffee. "I'm gonna need it today," Philip said to Max when he finished. He burped loudly, tasting the vodka again when he did, then tossed the cup and lid in the trash. Max shook his head and turned away. Philip wasn't sure if he smelled the alcohol on his breath or was just disgusted by the cold coffee, but it didn't matter. If he wasn't going to say Philip wasn't going to ask.

The noise from the aircraft door closing and sealing sounded like an air compressor popping off a tire. One of the flight attendants knocked twice on the door to let the two men know the plane was loaded and secure. Philip grabbed the intercom microphone and took a deep breath. Max yawned bigger then tried to shake off the sleepiness he felt setting in.

"Good afternoon everyone and thank you for flying Eaglecrest Airlines. I'm Captain Philip Adams and my copilot today is Max Jenkins. The sun is shining

and the sky is clear, so there are no delays in your flight today. We're about ten minutes from takeoff, and if the skies remain clear we will be at JFK about 5:45 eastern time. Leading our flight crew today is May Valentine. Be sure to listen carefully and follow along as she goes through the pre-flight instructions. Thank you again for flying Eaglecrest Airlines."

Philip placed the microphone back on its hook and adjusted his seat. He heard May begin her pre-flight presentation and radioed the control tower for final checks. He received the allclear just as May finished the presentation.

With the assistance of Max, Philip backed the plane away from the terminal, straightened on the runway, and took off. He felt the landing gear lock in place as they lifted high into the air. Max called out the elevation every thousand feet until they reached ten thousand, then every five thousand feet until they reached a cruising altitude of fifty-five thousand feet. He initiated the autopilot and announced to passengers they were free to roam the cabin.

"You mind if I catch half an hour?" Max asked Philip. "The coffee didn't help."

"Not at all," Philip said and smiled. It isn't uncommon for either the pilot or copilot to nap during a flight. Autopilot kept the plane in the air with little work from either of them when the weather was clear, so Philip was able to monitor the controls on his own. "Take longer if you need it. I'll wake you if the weather changes."

Max unbuckled his harness and adjusted in his seat. With the sleeping pills flowing through him, it took only a few minutes for Max to begin snoring. Philip unbuckled his harness, grabbed his bag from the closet, and rifled through it. He pulled out a bag only slightly larger than a coin purse. He unzipped it and removed a small syringe filled with Ketamine he stole from the hospital when he last visited his wife at work. Philip popped the cap off and watched it shoot across the cabin. He approached Max from behind, stuck the needle in his neck, and pushed a lethal dose. Fast asleep, he didn't even flinch. Philip tossed the now empty syringe into the trash can and sat back in the pilot's chair. Max's heart stopped beating before Philip even finished securing his harness.

Philip grabbed the microphone and held it to his mouth. He closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath then spoke with absolute calm.

"This is your Captain again. I want to thank you all one more time for making Eaglecrest Airlines your choice for holiday travel. There will be a slight diversion in our trip today and we won't be making it to New York."

He paused briefly and heard the passengers begin talking in disgruntled

voices. Philip tried speaking again, but felt a catch in his throat. He closed his eyes, took a slow deep breath and regained his composure.

"This is the part where I'm supposed to tell you not to worry, but you should. You won't be seeing your families again."

The passengers erupted in loud, raucous panic. The flight crew unsuccessfully tried calming them and May banged on the door. "Captain!" she shouted.

Philip tuned out May and the chaos in the cabin, even as passengers rushed the cockpit and attempted to beat down the door. "We are currently cruising at fifty-five thousand feet and are somewhere above the Andes Forest. In a few moments I will turn off autopilot and angle the plane directly down. When this happens gravity will shift, and you will need to be secured to avoid any unnecessary injuries. I suggest everyone retake your seats and refasten your buckles."

Philip placed the microphone back on its hook and checked his harness for security. Guilt swept over him as he looked over at Max's lifeless body. He pushed the thoughts away and turned his attention to the control panel before him.

He stared at the switch that controlled autopilot, and in that moment began to second guess what he was about to do. He didn't think of himself. He didn't think of the passengers and crew on board. He thought about their families. How many of them had children they would never see again? How many of them had someone dependent on them for care?

Philip's eyes turned red and began to water. He closed them in an attempt to hold in the tears as if doing so would also hold in the guilt and shame he felt.

He turned the autopilot back on and removed the microphone once more. He held it to his mouth with eyes closed and tried to fight back tears. The noise of the entire passenger manifest hammering away at the cockpit door began to disrupt his thoughts, and he lowered the microphone and rested it in his lap.

Philip started thinking about what life would be like if the plane landed safely in New York. Surely he would lose his job, maybe even be jailed. It would be his last indiscretion before his wife left him, and his children wouldn't speak to him again. The passengers on board would go after his family.

Philip rapidly shifted back from guilt and shame to calm determination. The tears dried up and the drive he felt to turn the plane into a fiery ball of wreckage reemerged. It was no

longer something he simply desired, but something that had to be done. He learned the point of no return wasn't driving the controls up and forcing the plane back to earth at more than 600 miles per hour, but announcing his inten-

tions to do so.

To not die now would be a fate far worse. Philip jerked the microphone from its cord and threw it across the cockpit. He straightened himself and took a deep breath, then switched off the autopilot a final time. With complete control of the plane, he maneuvered it directly down. The plane plummeted nose first and gravity shifted tremendously. Philip released the wheel and watched his hands fly above his head, then saw Max float limply at the top of the cockpit. He listened for the screams of the passengers, but couldn't hear anything over the sound of wind blowing against the plane. Philip felt the plane shift and slowly begin to spin clockwise. He fought gravity to bring his hands back to the wheel, and then fought against it to prevent the plane from spinning. His efforts were wasted as the plane picked up rotational speed.

Max floated slowly around the cockpit, bumping into Philip and all around the cockpit. As the plane spun faster he hit Philip and the cockpit harder. He cracked his head open against the floor, pounded his face on every surface, and broke his neck when he shattered Philip's collar bone. Philip shrieked in pain and released the wheel. He was thrown around as much as his harness would allow.

He began to pass out from pain in his neck, back, and shoulder, then was startled awake when the intercom microphone flew around and smacked him in the face. Blood poured from his broken nose and showered his forehead and the ceiling. It came around again and again, rupturing his eardrum, shattering his jaw, and pelting his body repeatedly.

The assault stopped when the microphone flew into the windshield and left a golf ball-sized hole. The now thin air was sucked out of the cockpit leaving Philip gasping for breath.

The pain left him as his body went numb. He watched the green forest trees close in as he spun circles on the edge of consciousness and thought about how it reminded him of riding the Gravitron at the state fair as a boy.

Just before the plane made contact with the forest floor, he thought of his children. He was at peace.

THE DARK

Ibrahim Buoykes

We enter blind descending into the hour-glass sand.
The pressure palpable on our pupils as we peer into the pitch
Black; The darkness held our hand.
An unreliable guide and burdensome witch.

Had only we'd been owls, for sight we lack
Then we could see behind; hindsight is clear
And more appealing than what's ahead in the black.
Pace diminishes as dark weighs down here.

It's draining, you will want to rest.
The Abyss recalls many have succumbed for breath.
Feel them? Living ghosts, slide down your calf, hands on your breast?
Tread carefully, though you stumble, complacency is death.

OLD MAN'S POEM

Curtis Brashear

His old, ramshackle house was nestled in front of a gently rising slope of the western Ozarks in Adair County, where the thick growth of tree leaves in the summertime would shroud the house in shade and coolness and would all but hide it in secret on a little, country dirt road. He inherited the plot and the house that was constructed on it from his aging parents, whom he cared for, when he returned from the war in the Koreas. They had maintained it through the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the ordinarily hard times in the dirt-poor cranny of Oklahoma. Once home, he never married and never seemed to care to entertain the thought of it, only working in the ministry of his Lord until the abilities to do so had ungracefully left his aging body. His name was Johnny Presley. He was eclectic and intelligent and lonely. Even on Sundays he would shun the fellowship meal to commune with himself at home. He spent most of his time in the woods observing and documenting birds or at the cherry wood desk in his quaint living room writing poetry.

I grew up in his church, under his tutelage, and spent a great deal of time with him in his later years, because he had no family, and I would step in where I could. Most times I would take him doughnuts in the morning on Fridays. He loved doughnuts, which seemed to me the only vice he would indulge in, and we would talk about the Bible or about something he observed in his readings or about some new poem he was working on. His intelligence and wit were a great combination for a man of the cloth and for a conversationalist.

It was late summer one Friday morning that I pulled into his driveway and noticed he wasn't standing guard on his porch awaiting my arrival as was customary. I quickly ambled in through his always unlocked front door and breathed a sigh of relief as he was positioned in his rocking chair in the living room. An old sweat-stained white cotton tee and his outdoor khaki pants were his usual attire and this day was no different. As I neared him though, I could see the wrinkles in his face turned down in an unusual direction.

"Johnny, are you ok?" I placed my hand on his shoulder and the touch seemed to startle him out of a trance. He leaned in closer to me and cocked his head to get his left ear closer to my voice.

"I said, are you ok?"

“Oh yeah yeah. I just slept through my alarm today. Didn’t hear it I guess. You bring the goods?”

I opened the box of doughnuts and he quickly seized upon them, looking under his bifocal lenses to gain his depth perception as he reached in the box. He wrapped the doughnut in a napkin and placed it on his coffee table for later consumption. He never ate in front of me, or anyone for that matter. After I finished eating, he reached for the hearing-impaired headphones that he kept on a coffee table by his chair. I chuckled to myself every time he put those oversized things on his head. I would tell him that he looked like a hip-hop star. In his good nature, he’d reply that his rap album was forthcoming. Now that he could hear me, I chimed in.

“Johnny, you know your insurance will practically cover the full cost of hearing aids and what they won’t cover, Medicare will take care of the rest.” I brought this issue up with him often. In regular fashion, he waved my idea away with his hand as if to scoot it out his door.

“Just let me be, Jones,” he had always called me Jones, my last name. “You know I don’t want something clogging my ears up and besides, I am too old to worry about them now.”

“You’re the picture of health. I saw the church ladies admiring you last Sunday.”

“Right and I’m also Harrison Ford.” He slowly stood up and worked his way over to the desk that was stacked with piles of paper that were situated neatly in their place. Johnny was particular about his organization, and he blamed those particulars on his time in the military. He came back with a piece of paper with some hand-written scratch on it and handed it to me. “Read this. Tell me what you think.” It was another poem. The man was a machine. He wrote more than a college student laboring through a fiction writing class.

I read the poem aloud, which he liked to hear me do. He said it helped him to hear the meter and rhyme and rhythm.

“Lasting splendor, there forever
Gates of pearl, streets of gold
Praises rising, there forever
Where we’ll never grow old.
Life here is but a vapor
Deathly shroud, grave so cold
But we shall live in the sweet forever
Where we’ll never grow old”

“Sounds great Johnny. Did you mean to go nine syllables in that second to last line?”

He waved me off again. “Can’t ever satisfy you young folk. Always wanting more. Did you get my mail out of the box?”

“Of course I did.” I handed him the stack of envelopes that had piled up since the previous Friday. “I noticed you got something from the Department of Defense. Looked official. And a letter from the County. They must still want this place of yours.”

“Well I will tell them again that they can’t have her. I intend on holding on to this place throughout eternity. They don’t realize that a man and his land and his trees and animals share a bond.” He thumbed through the pile of letters, quickly putting most of magazine renewal requests and credit card signup hopefuls in a trashcan by his chair “file under destruction” he would say. Eyeballing the letter from the army he mused, “Wonder what the Army wants with me now? Lord knows an eighty-year-old man wouldn’t do them much good.”

“They need a new drill sergeant. My Lord does know you would fit the bill there.”

He chuckled at that remark as he opened the letter. As he read it he leaned back in his chair. I noticed that his slouch was more pronounced and he held the paper much closer to his face to read than he used to. A dimness took shape in his eyes. “They want to recognize me with a medal for a skirmish I was involved in.”

“In Korea, right?”

“Yes. We were stationed at Kunsan Base there in the southern part of South Korea and had worked our way north to where the DMZ is now.” He dropped the paper and looked out his front door and through the screen door and his gaze seemed to carry on to the road and then to the hills and beyond.

“I didn’t realize you were involved in any close fighting. You were a long-range gunner.”

I pulled him back to his house, “Right. I commanded a battery of the howitzer guns. I told you about those. They had a range of six miles. Probably why I need these hip-hop head phones today.” He pointed to the headphones and I waited for him to smile. He never did.

“What battle was this Johnny?”

He stared at me for a few moments then looked away again and I could sense his hesitation. He just sat in silence. A few minutes later, after he gathered himself, he opened the letter from the county.

“Imminent domain. I knew it. County’s wanted this land for years for the timber. They say it’s for a new spot for their waste water plant. They’ve been broke for so long they are looking for any way they can fill their coffers back up.” Johnny pulled himself to his feet, shaking his head.

“We can fight them. Let’s get a lawyer and take them to court.”

“I’m no expert, Jones, but I would assume that most cases such as these don’t fall out of the county’s favor.” Johnny’s mild manner irked me some. He was always willing to avoid a fight whether in the congregation or elsewhere. Turning the other cheek was a code he really lived by perhaps.

“Let me worry about that. I know some guys who might be able to help us out.” I got up to leave.

“Jones,” he grabbed my arm as I walked by, “would mean a great deal to an old man if you could help me keep this place. Would also be very gentlemanly of you to take this old man to the doctor next Wednesday.”

“Sure thing, Johnny.”

That next Wednesday as we sat in the waiting room, and passing the time reading magazines, Johnny leaned over to me, with his headphones on of course, and whispered rather loudly that he hadn’t slept well the night before.

“Had the most terrible dreams.”

“What were they about?” I said this as I continued to strum through my Sports Illustrated with half-attention given to Johnny and the other half on the playoff standings of the Oklahoma City Thunder.

“Korea,” he mentioned matter-of-factly.

My attention was immediately drawn to him. “What about it?”

“It wasn’t anything I was involved in, just something I witnessed. I guess I had forgot about it for a long time. That letter got my mind wonderin’.” He rolled up his National Geographic and gripped it tightly causing his normally pale knuckles to redden. “You make any headway on my land?”

“I may have found you a way out. My cousin is married to a friend of a lawyer who says he can take your case and at least get a stay on the land takeover for now.”

Johnny tapped my shoulder, “That’s good news, Jonesy boy. Good news. Even though our commissioner friends aren’t going to like that at all. Not. At. All.”

“They can stick it,” I was cut off mid-sentence.

“Let’s not let our tongue rule our lives, Jones.”

“Mr. Presley.” A nurse called from the patient room door, saving me from a stern scolding. After getting his blood pressure and pulse checked, the nurse left

us in the room to wait for the doctor. I sat in a chair adjacent to the exam table where Johnny was perched. He was a shorter man and his legs dangled above the floor a few inches, and he rested his weight on his elbows to support his back some. I glanced around the room at all the posters hanging about, in no particular order. The diagram of the nervous system and muscular system were opposite the wall with the poster of the different types of cancer and their names which was pinned adjacent to the large visual of the skeletal system that was positioned directly behind the little man on the table. I was caught off-guard when I viewed him from that angle, bent back, which revealed a man more gaunt and shabby looking than I remembered. The doctor entered the room at a brisk pace which startled me out of my fixation on the old preacher. He was a tall, silvered haired, no-nonsense veterans doctor. With a stylus, he rifled through an iPad screen that showed various charts and x-rays and diagrams, stopping on one that seemed to peak his curiosity.

“Mr. Presley, how have you been feeling since our last visit a couple weeks ago?” the doctor’s voice boomed off the walls.

“What visit a couple weeks ago?” I interjected quickly, without thought, shocked.

“I took a cab here several days back, Jones. Doc, just tell me what you have to tell me.”

“Mr. Presley, I’m very sorry, but the results of your esophageal motility test have come back very poorly.”

Johnny didn’t move or flinch or cry or show any emotion or say a word. I chimed in.

“What does that mean, doc?”

“It means that unless I refer Mr. Presley on for surgery, and time is of the essence, that the only other alternative is a hospice mediation.”

The pit of my stomach filled with lead and as I moved my eyes back to Johnny, who was still seated under the large poster of the skeleton, it all made sense to me. The weight loss. The waiting to eat while I was gone. The never eating with his congregation and maybe even the staring, absent spell the other day.

The doctor continued, “Mr. Presley, I know this eating disorder has been a constant struggle for you for entire life. Your willingness to deal with it and overcome it each and every day has been remarkable. It just seems that the smooth muscles in your esophagus have worn completely out. You just have no natural way to nourish your body.”

Johnny nodded his head and politely told the doctor that no hospice would

be required and we left the office.

The drive home, out into the country and away from town was a twenty-minute drive but this drive seemed like an eternity. Finally, about five minutes from his abode in the forest Johnny spoke, "Jones, don't be mad at me for not telling you. This has been coming upon me for some time now."

"I'm not mad, but you need to get help. This is not hearing aids. This is your life!"

"The best they can do for me is a feeding tube in my stomach. No way."

"You will starve to death."

"Yes."

"It's not right," tears welled up in my eyes. "It's inhumane."

"It's life, Jones. I'm eighty years old. I'm blind, deaf and have to choke a soft doughnut down like a baby bird would eat a worm." He chuckled at that comment which I knew he threw out there to calm me down. "Come see me next week. Pray for me in the meantime." I pulled into his driveway and he slowly slid out of my car and sauntered into his house.

I cried as I pulled away from him that day.

The next week he seemed to be in the same fashion as he was save for the darker circles under his eyes. He sat in his same chair with the same stained white t-shirt and khaki pants and sipped on a bottle of Ensure. I figured he just kept a closet full of the exact same outfit, which he probably had for years now. Clothing purchases were not at the top of his to-do list. He donned the same headphones and had a book in his lap that he handed to me as I crossed in front of him.

"What's this?" I took the book and inspected its leather-bound cover and older pages which had been meticulously hand-written on.

"Those are my notes from all my years of bird watching back on the mountain behind me. I want you to have it. Don't think it would be of value to anyone else."

I slowly grazed through the pages of notes Johnny had inscribed in the book. The detail of dates and times and seasons and bird type and the songs they sang were outstanding. "This is a lot of work. You should turn it into Audubon or something." He waved me off again like he always did.

"They have all of that and much more. This was just for me." Johnny leaned back in his chair and repositioned his headphones to make them more comfortable. "My family gave me one hundred and fifty acres that is the mountain behind me and the valley past that. All wooded. Overgrown mostly. Good mix of

maple and oak and birch. Great mix of birds and just animals in general. It's my little Eden back there."

"That's a lot of acreage to get lost in I suppose."

"Absolutely. I've loved those woods more than myself and almost as much as I love my God." Johnny smiled. He had always spoken fondly of his homestead but never with as much nostalgia as then. I guessed a dying man would think harder on those things. "Jones, this house and those woods are my solace. My golden pond, I guess. I can get lost under those trees and no one could find me. That's a good thing sometimes."

"Hey, the day is as cool as an early September day can be. How bout we go for a walk through one of your trails?"

"Only if you are prepared to carry double your bodyweight. I won't be able to go far."

"You can't weigh a hundred pounds soaking weight. And, by the way, Gaylynn was asking me about you the other day. You know she's single now. You might have a shot."

He waved me off with a laugh and we slowly made our way to the forest edge and meandered through the paths that Johnny had cut. The foliage was dense and the shade made the coolness palpable as a gentle breeze moseyed along with us as we walked. I knew the forest well for having walked it with him so many times, but I never let him know that.

"This trail leads to the hollowed-out creek bed. I would wager that thing has ten foot walls now. Funny what time and erosion can do to a thing. Deepen it. Widen it. I used to play in that creek all day. Catch fish. Catch turtles. Swim in some of the deeper spots." He held my arm as we went. His gait was slow but methodical. We took a right at a forked path and ended up at the top of a steep hill. "My friends and I would repel down this incline using an old steel cable that is buried at the top there. We used to pretend that robbers had some covert hideout in those rocks over there. Ah to be that age again."

"You want to play cops and robbers, Johnny?" He chuckled at my question and may have hit me if he had the strength.

"Best get me home, Jones. I'm getting weak."

He grabbed my arm again and we made our way back through the darkening forest. As we emerged a faint smell of smoke hit my nostrils. The more we inched toward his house the stronger the brimstone odor became.

"Johnny, you aren't burning your wood stove, are you?"

"Heavens no. I may be old but my blood is still pumping." We rounded the

last turn and a powerful heat hit us in the face. Johnny's cabin was up in flames. The red and orange and yellow blaze danced around the roof. Johnny was gut-punched at first then suddenly seemed to muster some super human strength and darted away from me towards the flame.

"My writings! My books!"

I darted after him, not realizing I had given him the lead that he had. I couldn't catch him before he ran through the door of the house. The heat was unbearable and walled me off. It was such a blistering fire and the wood was hissing and creaking and popping. Johnny had been in that furnace now for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, I mustered the courage, covered my mouth and nose with my t-shirt and ran in after him. The thick, billowing smoke in the living room dropped me to my hands and knees and I crawled around in the dark feeling my way.

"Johnny!" I yelled over and over, but the sound of the fire was just as loud as a lumbering freight train. The closer I crawled towards where I thought the desk would be, the more I could hear Johnny who was laying on the floor screaming. Piles of paperwork that he had drug off the desk were now in flames. I grabbed him by the legs and dragged him as fast as I could back toward the doorway. At the same time, I was trying to hold my breath to bring in as little smoke as I could into my lungs. Dumb luck or the grace of God got me to the doorway. I fell through to the porch while pulling his dead weight behind me.

Two weeks had went by since the fire and Johnny spent the first half of that time in a coma and the second half was working with the burn victims in the big city hospital. I spent most of my time after work and the weekends there. Johnny's state was extremely poor. His right hand was burned in the third degree and would never be of use to him again. The intense heat, according to the doctor, severely damaged his face, sinus cavity, and throat, robbing him of the faculties of taste and smell. "He's lucky to be alive," I remember the doctor saying. But what luck was that. I stood over his bed and viewed a man that was broken. A feeding tube was protruding from his stomach which was lined to an IV containing some nutrients. The respirator and intubation tubes gave him the classic Darth Vader look, which he would've found amusing if I could've told him. His chest would rise and fall in perfect harmony with the breathing machine he was hooked in to. It was hard to see a man who was so kind, so compassionate, so caring and selfless end up prostrate in an ICU bed being kept alive by machines.

Several days went by and his condition improved some. One evening as I

sat in a chair close to his bed, my mind lost in the numbing monotony of the endless nature of the hospital, Johnny woke up. His eyes darted to me. I quickly stood up and leaned to his side, "Johnny, it's me." I didn't know what else to say. What do you say to a man who has lost everything? He lifted his one good hand in the air and pinched his fingers together and made a writing motion. "Ok. Ok." I scrambled around the room until I found a note pad and a pen. I held the pad for him as he wrote left-handed and off-handed in a laborious fashion. When he was done he emphatically pointed his pen at the paper and then at me. I took it and read what he had written.

"House?" he has scratched onto the pad.

I shook my head no. He motioned for the notepad again.

"Forest ok?" he scratched out.

Again I shook my head no. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. The breathing machine was still working and the heart monitor was beeping faster. He motioned for the pad again.

"I deserve this." He wrote in big letters.

"What are you talking about Johnny? No one deserves this." I grabbed some tissue and dabbed his eyes. He waved me off and we were back to the notepad.

"Korea. Bad things. Unforgivable things." The handwriting was becoming sloppier now.

"That was war, Johnny. War is so terrible."

"Rape. Murder." Again, the tears flowed down his face.

That's when it all made more sense to me. The celibacy and the devotion to God. He motioned for the pad again.

"Do you remember my poem?" That was the last line he wrote.

"Most of it, I reckon."

I wrote the poem down for him and gave him the pad. He waved me off and out of the room. As I was leaving, I looked back at him and the notepad was held high with his good left hand. That was the last time I would see him alive.