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Cardinal Sins

Cardinal Sins

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Editor’s Note

Finishing up my first year as being a part of *Cardinal Sins* as both a reader and an editor-in-chief has been quite the experience. I’m so thankful for the opportunities to learn and grow with this journal. It has more rewarding than I could have ever expected. To think that at the same time last year I was applying for the position, believing there was no way I could ever get it. And here I am, one year later, wrapping up my first year as an editor-in-chief. Despite the long hours pouring over my desk, fixing spacing and typos, fighting the gods of InDesign and drinking arnold palmers religiously, I now sit before an annual I am very proud of. And there are so many people I wouldn’t be here without.

The works in this issue are so special to me, as every submitter poured their heart and soul into their passions, creating work they should truly be proud of. This annual is filled with incredibly talented artists and writers who put so much work into making this annual the best it could be. I hope that everyone who reads this edition will see the love and care that went into making this journal. I hope you can connect with these pieces as much as we have. Because art is worth connecting to, always.

To those who have contributed to this issue, thank you. Thank you for all of your time, effort, and patience. Thank you for allowing us to publish all these amazing pieces. I hope that you’ve enjoyed working with us, even with the slow start to this year.

To the readers and editors I’ve had the pleasure of meeting and working with this year, thank you. It’s been so amazing getting to know everyone and seeing all the passion that comes from reading these wonderful pieces. I hope to see you again in the following year as we continue forward with our next issues.

Cheers to reading and to art!

Emily McGlynn, Editor-in-Chief

Table of Contents

Editor’s Note.....4

Fall 2025-

Poetry

“Impressions”, Claire Scott9

“Rêver”, Carella Keil.....10

“The Pallbearer”, Britta Adams.....11

“my tears water your thorns”, Carella Keil.....15

“A Chocolate Coffin”, Frederick Frankenberg.....16

“Everything Ends”, Frederick Frankenberg.....22

“Words and Breath”, Richard Dinges Jr.....29

“My Neighborhood”, Richard Dinges Jr.....43

“Purple Butterflies”, Plamen Vasilev.....46

“The Sinking Ship”, Holly Day.....54

“Swarm of Pigeons Feed”, Mercury Sunderland.....55

“Aphrodite”, Micaela Michalk.....64

“Kale Salad”, Thom Young.....65

“From Another World”, Dmitry Blizniuk.....78

“the Great everything gone wrong all at once”, henry 7. reneau jr.....83

Flash Fiction

Just Because, William Cass.....18

And This Too Shall Pass (But Maybe Never), Carella Keil.....44

Great Satan’s Symphony in Dubya Minor, henry 7. reneau jr.....57

After the Apocalypse, Day 105, Kelly Talbot.....80

Between a Rock and a Hard Place, James Gardner.....86

Fiction

A Bed Full of Sand, Carella Keil.....24

Through the Cracks, Jake La Botz.....30

Did You?, Evie Scoles.....48

Who Do You Like?, Alison Boulan.....66

Color Artwork

Mirage, Faith Schuyler.....63

Starfish, Edward Supranowicz.....42

Athena, Faith Schuyler.....47

Life, Faith Schuyler.....77

Neon Lights, Faith Schuyler.....79

Color Photography

Questioning Deer, Frederick Frankenberg.....82

Black and White Artwork

Sailing, Faith Schuyler.....14

One Thing Leads to Another, Edward Supranowicz.....21

The Prism and Prison of Memory, Edward Supranowicz.....28

Winter 2026-

Poetry

“Last Night I Dreamt of You”, Claire Scott90

“Obligations”, Wortley Clutterbuck.....91

“Checkpoint - Mackinac”, Sarah Kleinfeld.....93

“Oliver”, Danny Barbare.....98

“No Longer Yours”, Erika Joy.....101

“Ringing Bell”, Claire Scott.....104

“The Contemplative Flower of Violet”, Paweł Markiewicz.....126

“Autumn”, Joshua St. Claire.....139

“Winter”, Joshua St. Claire.....141

“Sunrise Over Necropolis”, Sarah Kleinfeld.....153

Flash Fiction

The Okay Samaritan, Brian Hawkins.....95

Drive-by Confessional, Lext Axiotes.....99

Saving a Life, Dick Daniels.....106

How to Tell a Joke in Three Easy Steps, Bobby Oerzen.....122

Just Physics, Dick Daniels.....143

Creative Nonfiction

Into the Vital, Ira Feinstein.....111

Rope Burn, Alexander Kolleth.....148

Fiction

The Summer Wind, Sam Mazzarol.....128

Color Artwork

Stained Glass, Edward Supranowicz.....103

Celestial Nap, Astrid Wick.....147

Acknowledgements.....154

Biographies.....155

Submission Guidelines.....161

Support Cardinal Sins.....163



Poetry

First Place Winner:

Impressions
by: Claire Scott

Impressions

Claire Scott

*...if I had no impression,
I would have to look at you each time anew.
-Krishnamurti, To Be Human*

Here he comes, hair sticking up like crabgrass
his body covered with yellow stickies

*tells unfunny jokes
forgets to feed the dog
confuses weeds with flowers*

I put them on one by one over the years
to tell me who he is

the Indian sage Krishnamurti says
truth is a pathless land

created each moment anew
not frozen in time

I peel off impressions
that have made me feel secure

until he is standing naked in the kitchen
where the smell of coffee

and the sizzle of turkey bacon
bring us into the present moment
where anything is possible

Rêver

Carella Keil

Wading in the ocean, drawing craters on the moon
The sky pulsing purple
A split in the seam of time.

If dreams
Can disguise themselves
As reality
Can reality

Ever disguise itself as a dream?

The Pallbearer

Britta Adams

It sounds cliché to say death
is not easy to carry, and yet my mind
returns to that thought. I have carried
more than my fair share as of late—a mother, father,
sister, and grandchild to boot. Each time I wrap
my fingers around the handle and lift, I notice the grief
is heavier than the casket, and it does not depart
when I gently lay the box down in the opened
earth. It lingers long after the *ashes*
to ashes, when last goodbyes are said
and the plot is interred. I had hoped grief would give
the old Irish goodbye, but now I bite my lip in dread
of bearing its constant companionship. My arms quiver and shake
under the weight of tears welling
in my eyes, and my shoulders strain
every time I take a moment
to openly weep behind the closed door
of my office. I used to turn to Keats and Coleridge *for many a time*
in times like this, *I have been half in love with easeful Death*
but the *Nightingale* and *Lime-tree Bower* *They are gone, and here must I remain*
—they only perpetuate the pain now,
and I need more. Before all this,
I had not sat on a therapist's couch, had not felt my body
sink into the soft, plaid cushions made to look like home.
I was not raised to talk about feelings, and so I feel
ashamed both to be in that room reaching for tissues and
that it took so much time to get there. But each time I park on that
tartan couch,
I realize, I have needed someone to teach me to carry
feelings without always contorting them into anger. My poor kids

surely could have used a dad who knew that. I suppose,
that's the hardest part about grief,
that it makes me angry, yes, but also
that it forces me to feel something bigger
than anger, bigger than me. And therapy teaches me to see
my feelings in constellations, the pinkish-purple
galaxy inside me that has a capacity, an ability
to explore so much more than steaming red
and—perhaps eventually—deep ocean blue.



Artwork

First Place Winner:

Sailing
by: Faith Schuyler

Sailing

Faith Schuyler



intaglio print on printmaking paper

my tears water your thorns

Carella Keil

I yoked tomorrow
to my memory of you -- drowning
in blue yesterdays

A Chocolate Coffin

Frederick Frankenberg

Call up the Candyman
That broken dream profiteer
Dressed in his fancy garb
Gold chain on his wrist
Felt shackles in his hand
Emerald keys to Xanadu
around his pale neck
An exchange and a farewell
thrown to the floor
on the bottom of a
smashed Maslow's pyramid

Pleasures so sweet
An empty painless life
Every day a rapture
So rip off a skull
and dip it into
a chemical
It may be that time to lie
and die in a chocolate coffin



Flash Fiction

First Place Winner:

Just Because
by: William Cass

Just Because

William Cass

A fall afternoon in the Midwest: heavy jacket weather, brightly colored leaves tossing on the breeze, flocks of birds migrating overhead.

~

Bob checked his pass again to be sure he was in the last boarding group for his flight from Cleveland, then settled back in his seat across from the gate counter and watched passengers in line file slowly by. He'd just retired from a long career as an elementary school teacher and was taking his first vacation in years to join a bus tour through the Badlands, a place he'd long dreamed of visiting. With audible contentment, he sighed.

~

Heading outside to her mailbox, Alice stumbled upon an unexpected package on her front step. She opened it quickly without looking at the addressee and found a roll of toilet paper inside, wrapped in clear plastic and tied with a jaunty ribbon. The message printed across the roll said: "Here's to Kicking the Shit Out of Cancer!" Alice's eyes traveled to a man's name and address on the box. It had been intended for 600 Sixth Street; she lived at 600 H Ave., a short block away—an understandable mistake. She considered returning it to Amazon until she read the accompanying gift tag that said, "You've got this!" followed by "Much love, RJ." Alice felt the box lower itself to her waist and looked up the block toward Sixth Street.

~

Leo had been out on disability since suffering a leg injury at the quarry where he worked, his first significant accident since beginning there thirty years earlier out of high

school. He leaned on his cane at his living room picture window, watching a pre-school-aged boy whose family had just moved in next door pedal his Big Wheel for the first time up onto his driveway. The boy began making an elaborate pattern of turns there while emitting a throttling noise. Leo shook his head at the sheer delight on the boy's face as he executed his swerves and maneuvers, then felt a small smile crease his own lips.

~

Bob regarded a young woman next to the gate counter, shifting from one foot to the other and staring hard at the gradually decreasing passenger boarding line. Her expression melded anxiety with desperation.

She turned to the ticket agent behind the counter and asked, "Anything yet?"

The agent studied a computer screen in front of him, then shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "Still a completely full flight. But you're the only one on the waiting list."

"Please," she implored. "My father is gravely ill in the hospital, and his doctor told me to come right away if I wanted to see him while he's still alive."

The agent raised his palms in a grim gesture of helplessness, then lifted a microphone from his console. He pressed a button on it and announced the final boarding group.

Blinking, Bob looked down at the pass in his hands while the young woman wept and the line progressed by them. When only the last few passengers were left, he stood up, extended the pass her way, met her troubled eyes with his own gentle ones, and said, "Here, take mine."

~

Alice resealed the box as best she could. She looked up the block again, where the house of the man to whom it was addressed stood silent and still. Its curtains were drawn with no lights visible inside.

Alice carried the box without haste up the sidewalk to its front porch. After she'd set it carefully on the entry mat, she tapped her heart with her fingertips and pointed them to the front door before retracing her steps.

~

Leo was surprised to find an old tub of sidewalk chalk in his grown son's bedroom closet. The room had remained untouched since his son had moved across the country for a new job and his wife had left shortly afterward.

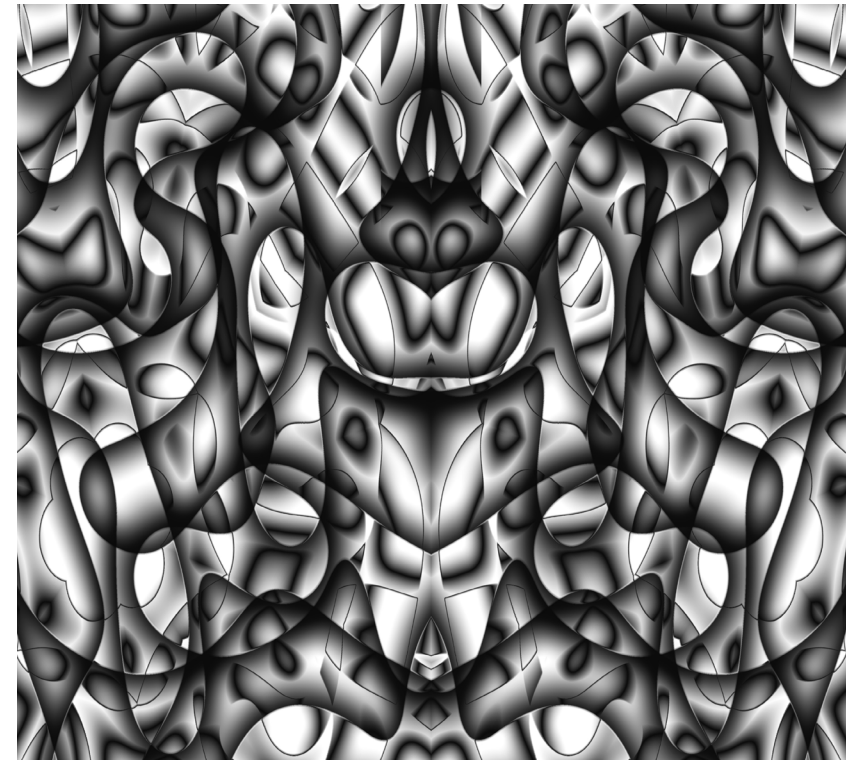
Leo hobbled out onto his driveway and drew a simple chalk raceway on it, two red lanes in a figure eight. Afterwards, he sat in an armchair beside his living room window and waited until he saw the neighbor boy appear again on his Big Wheel. The boy paused at the foot of the driveway, intently surveyed the drawing, then let out a joyful whoop and began weaving through the lanes. Leo expelled a soft chuckle.

~

Late-October's blue hour in the Midwest: the descending light held a languid, almost liquid quality; fireplace smoke in the air; fallow fields, rosy cheeks, leavened hearts.

One Thing Leads to Another

Edward Supranowicz



digital drawing done from "scratch" on GIMP

Everything Ends

Frederick Frankenberg

Everything floats to dust
Expires ethereal dies
Ends in rust
Evaporates to rise



Fiction

First Place Winner:

A Bed Full of Sand
by: Carella Keil

A Bed Full of Sand

Carella Keil

I awake in a bed full of sand.

It's snowing softly in the graveyard of my soul.

My apartment is situated at the back of a building, two picture windows facing a dark, dismal alleyway. The snow is scarred by black tire tracks. Telephone lines grow taller than the trees. It is dark at night, all the stars burned out long before I moved here.

One night I looked out my window and did not see my reflection. I walked around the apartment and shut off all the lamps. I got used to the dark. I sat until I was no longer afraid. I thought of paper hearts, the way we fold our emotions up like origami. Make them smaller, deceptive in their simplicity. "I love you." How rich. How delicate. But in the end, only words. I find those words more palatable when served on the end of a knife.

I find I've lost my appetite.

Time is relative when you have nothing to measure it by. Sand? Blood? Tears? Perhaps words strung together like pearls on an endless thread.

The next night (a thousand nights later), I looked out my window and saw a graveyard. Instead of my snow and slush, a beautiful green meadow sprawled before me. I tapped the glass with my fingernail. Blinked through reflected hazel eyes. The cerulean sky remained. Buoyant white clouds floated past like cherubs on the wind. Families walked among the stones. A soft and solemn day, innocent and unassuming, lingered just beyond my window frame.

I had fleeting thoughts of granite and tears. Grass sprouting over memories. The grave of my heart isn't deep; you won't remain buried long. I know you are already awake

in someone else's dream. I realize it is best to leave lovers in unmarked graves. I don't want to be tempted to place roses by your stone words.

How do you measure time? A pearl for every tear left unshed.

I watched for a while. Pressed my palms against the cold glass. I breathed in and out. Little crystal clouds condensed on the window. I trailed my fingertips across the pane, unspooling words and sentences, until through the fog I could see again.

I liked the comfort of words against my fingertips.

I sat down at my desk and wrote. I stayed up all night and wrote. I stayed up all eternity. And wrote. A little girl in a bleached yellow sundress flew a kite in the graveyard outside my window.

Spring abandons even the dead, shedding its petals on the grave. I remained awake through the seasons, writing. Winter in a graveyard is much nicer than winter in an alleyway. When high summer came the sun weighed down on me like a heavy yellow curtain, glazing my skin with its scalding sap. I noticed ladybugs crawling on my windowsill. When I unfurled stacks of writing, curled with age, empty cocoons fell from my words and hit the desk with a raspy sigh.

My words on the windowpane had vanished, along with the glass. I realized there was nothing left to keep me inside. Nothing but unwritten words. I thought of the phone that never rang, the bed I never slept in. I thought of my hair that had grown to the small of my back. How no one had ever run their fingers through it. I thought of my family, faded pictures taped to the walls; I thought of how much prettier I looked in memory than in the mirror. I thought of how I was only a faded picture myself, taped to someone else's wall or collecting dust in a seldom touched album. Or, perhaps more nebulous, a photo left floating in the darkroom sink of a forgetful lover. Was I still waiting for you to pick me back up? So I

dropped the smile and stepped over the sill.

How do you measure time? Necklaces with broken clasps and ropes fraying with the weight of heavy pearls.

On an Indian summer's day, I sat on a tombstone with a pen in my mouth, papers in hand, hair lashing from side to side in the breeze. My bare heels scraped against the stone. I traced the words with my toes, feeling between the grooves. I looked up and saw a little girl in a caramel-colored dress perched on the tombstone across from me.

She watched me write for a while, at first intrigued, then annoyed. Hopping off her stone, she marched over to me and peered over my shoulder.

"That's a lotta words" she said.

"Mm-hmm."

"What are you writing?"

"A story."

"Bout what?"

"Broken things."

"Broken things?"

"Yes. Like hearts and necklaces and grown-up girls" I replied absently.

"But who are you writing them for?" She looked vexed.

"Who will read your words?"

I paused, in this yard of empty souls, and was lost for an answer.

In an instant, she snatched the sheaf of writing from my hands and darted off, holding the pages aloft in the wind.

"What are you doing? Give them back to me!" I shrieked, hysterical.

Her eyes were huge and solemn. "What's the point of all your words if you aren't going to do anything with them?"

I was about to retort, when she viciously ripped the pages with her little fingers and threw the scraps in the air. Every paragraph, every sentence, every word pried from itself. The pieces hovered together on the wind for an instant, a sto-

ry untold. Then a breeze seized them, and white words fluttered all around. Like petals of snow, each flake distinct and icy, dissolving back into my skin.

"What the hell did you do that for?" I screamed.

"The birds are hungry," she replied inexplicably. I looked up and saw flocks of birds taking flight, filling the sky with their black wings. And I remembered winter and a bottle of sleeping pills and a faded picture draped in somber amber light. With a start I realized I was staring at myself on the other side of a pane of glass. I rapped on the glass. It remained solid. A reflection.

I write for all eternity. At the end of a hallway, in an apartment with two windows facing onto an alleyway I never walk down. I have almost enough, almost enough, to give one word to each soul buried outside my window.

But, as I've been taught, "They are only words."

The Prism and Prison of Memory

Edward Supranowicz



digital drawing done from “scratch” on GIMP

Words and Breath

Richard Dinges Jr

Careful in the release
of air from puckered
lips and tongue slipped
between sharp-edged
teeth, a brief instant
of tension that could
cut off the tip and
gush blood in place
of words, a final
gasp in wonder
at how powerful
some phrases can be
when built one syllable
at a time, sparing
hyperbole and blending
speech back into its
origins of utter wonder.

Through the Cracks

Jake La Botz

Mom mumbled that Uncle Larry didn't know how to take care of a kid, that it would be a long drive back to Detroit, and—at least five times—that he was “troubled.” I knew all that already, though what troubled him exactly was hard to say. At least no one said it when I was around. I was just glad she was letting me go with him. His car was full of crap he'd found on the road—bottles, car parts, clothes, magazines. Same reason Mom insisted on taking a cab all the way to LAX from the family reunion in Bakersfield. No way she was getting in that car.

A half hour after she left, me and Larry went to a 7-11 and bought two jars of peanut butter, three loaves of bread, a fistful of Slim Jims, gallons of water, and a tall green bottle of Squirt for me. There was no room in back of the Buick, so we dropped supplies between us on the big bench seat and hit the road.

There were a lot of things, normal things, Larry didn't like. Interstates, hotels, gas stations—unless we needed gas. Because of that, we peed on the side of two-lane highways and slept in the car. Sometimes when we stopped, he'd pull out a camp shovel and dig stuff up. Rocks and little things in the dirt, I suppose. He never talked about them. By day two, I stopped asking.

On the third morning, we were only about halfway through Utah. The sun was bright, but it was cold enough to see your breath. In the rearview, I saw Larry packing the shovel away along with his latest road treasures. I walked around back to take a look. The trunk of his '71 LeSabre, even though it was a huge trunk, was already overflowing. It didn't seem possible he could fit anything else.

“They're all here,” he said plainly.

It was just my uncle saying something weird. Nothing

new there. But the words sounded faraway, like they were coming from way down in the trunk. I stepped away, saying I had to take a leak. I didn't want to look anymore.

Once Larry got the trunk closed, he climbed in silently and drove us down the gravel road toward the highway. When we got up to cruising speed, he clicked on the AM. I guess the FM was broken. There was only one station coming through—a religious show with a preacher who sounded like he'd been recorded a hundred years ago. The corny sermon he gave was full of old English words like “thee,” “thy,” and “brethren.” Larry finally turned it off and said,

“Let's sing a *Jimbo*.”

Jimbo Bingham was Larry's favorite songwriter. He was mine too, though I didn't know much about songwriters at thirteen.

“*Gimme Back my Gator*, recorded in 1968 for Recondit-ty Records. Best album ever made. You know ol' Jimbo was from Harlan County, K-Y, like me and yer Mama,” Larry told me for about the millionth time.

Though I had never heard the actual record, I'd been listening to my Uncle play those songs on guitar since I was a baby. So many times, I knew exactly what the record sounded like.

“Can we get from here to there... without going *there*,” I sang along with Larry, as we drove down a desolate Utah highway.

“Here to There”—side A, track one.

I had to grab the wheel during the solo so Larry could play air guitar. Funny enough, a church bus passed in the opposite direction while he was rocking out. The look on their faces, scrunching and gawking like that, made us belly laugh for at least ten minutes straight. When we finally got our breath back, we sang the next four songs in a row—: “Smoky Came Around,” “Gimme Back My Gator,” “Back Door Frontman,” and “Last Bubble in My Beer.” At the end of side A, I made a hissing noise like the needle skipping in the runout groove and pretend-flipped the record over. We did all five

songs from side B after that.

By the time we finished singing “the Jimbos” we had crossed the Colorado border. I tried the radio again and found some Rock and Roll.

“How come they don’t play Jimbo on the radio?” I asked.

“Ol’ Jimbo fell through the cracks, son,” was all Larry said.

Four days later, when we got to Detroit, Larry moved into our basement. I was happy to have him there. I’m not sure how Mom felt, except that she was stern about him not bringing his junk in the house.

I started ninth grade that year, but my real education came from Larry. Every day after school, I went straight home to spend time in the basement with him and his guitar. I followed best I could while Larry ran through every chord, riff and run of the Jimbos. The way he was teaching, you’d have thought my life depended on learning those songs.

One afternoon, when I came home, Larry’s car was gone from the street. Somehow, even before walking in the house, I knew he wasn’t coming back. In the basement, I found his old, off-brand guitar next to a sixty-minute cassette of Larry playing the whole *Gimme Back My Gator* album. There was a message too: *They’re all in here, bud. Maybe someday you’ll write the liner notes.*

I was mad at Mom, figuring she had kicked him out.

A sheriff called a few months later. He said Larry’s LeSabre had been located off the side of a highway near Issaquena, Mississippi. When they dropped it at the tow yard, they found his body in the backseat, buried under a pile of garbage. Mom wasn’t surprised. I was devastated.

Must’ve been a month before I set foot in the basement again. It was hard at first, listening to Larry’s voice on that tape. But sitting down with his guitar, playing along, it was like he was still there, still teaching me.

There was one spot on the tape, though, where for about thirty seconds the music faded out in a weird way, where other noises came through, breaking up Larry’s voice and guitar. The thing is, every time I listened to that spot, it was totally different. Sometimes the sounds were kind of gloopy, like something getting pulled out of the mud. Or screechy, like the sound of a hurt animal. At other times, it would go totally silent. But not ordinary silent. It was like all the sound had gotten sucked out of the space and into that little tape recorder. I know it’s strange to say, but in those moments, I thought Larry was communicating from the other side. It got so that whenever I came to that spot, I’d fast-forward real quick, like a kid running past a haunted house.

In any case, with the help of Larry’s cassette, I got better at playing. But I didn’t want to rely on my uncle’s licks alone. I looked everywhere, from record stores to libraries, searching out Jimbo Bingham’s music. Not one person I met had ever heard of him. I figured *Gimme Back My Gator* must be a super rare record, which made me feel special to know about it. But then another thought crept in—*what if Larry made the whole thing up?* I finally asked Mom about it. She said she’d seen the record years before, or at least she thought she had.

I started listening to other music around that time, but it was the Jimbos that always got me going. *Gimme Back My Gator* really was the greatest album ever made, even if it was only my uncle playing on a homemade cassette.

Ignoring homework, chores, and everything else, I practiced along with Larry’s tape for five or more hours a day. Mom seesawed between anger and worry. She couldn’t believe it when I actually graduated high school.

By the time I turned eighteen, I thought I was a real hotshot on guitar. I played open-mics here and there and did some busking too. Everywhere I went, people said they loved my songs. I felt funny about it, but I never told anyone who the real author was—because in a way, they were my

songs. I'd spent years learning them. I knew them inside out. I knew them better than anyone. Anyone except Uncle Larry, of course.

As I became better known around the open-mic circuit, bar and cafe owners started offering me paying gigs. Mom couldn't believe I was "turning a buck with that busted old guitar." I hated the way she said that. As soon as I could afford to, I moved out of her basement.

Other musicians always wanted to jam with me, so it was no problem putting a solid band together. And because, in my head, I already knew exactly how the bass, drums, and lead guitar should sound on the Jimbos, I showed the guys which notes and rhythms to play. At first, they thought I was a control freak, but hearing the songs played live, fully fleshed out like that, was amazing for everyone. I recorded them onto cassette, made copies, and sent them around to local clubs. In no time, we were headlining the best spots in Detroit.

Our notoriety in the local scene grew so fast, it was no surprise to anyone when the record deal came. I knew exactly which songs to record and what order they'd be in before we set foot in the studio. It was easy enough to figure out the title too: *Gimme Back My Gator* by Jimbo Bingham.

I kept the five-thousand-dollar record advance for myself—they were my songs after all—and considered how best to spend it. Though it wasn't enough to buy a new car, it just so happened a mint-condition '71 LeSabre was sitting in a lot down the street from my apartment. It drove super smooth and the FM worked too. I bought it that day.

The label had good publicity and radio coverage for us ahead of a national tour. They put together everything: routing, van, hotels, tour manager. We were stoked to hit the road.

The first couple shows, warm-ups, were in college towns—Ann Arbor and DeKalb, Illinois. They had decent attendance and went off well enough, but by the third one, Chicago, the crowd was way bigger. There were a lot more

people backstage when we finished, too. Of course, I got most of the attention. When the guys acted annoyed about that, I reminded them we were billed as "Jimbo Bingham," not "such and such band" or "Jimbo and the blah-blahs." Nobody really cared who was on bass, drums, or lead guitar.

We had a day off between Chicago and Cleveland, so I asked the tour manager to drive us back to Detroit. He tried talking me out of it, saying we'd already paid for two nights' stay at our Chicago hotel. I said, *see you in the van*. He got the picture.

Six hours later, when we pulled up at my place, I let the group know I'd be driving myself the rest of the tour. Though no one dared say it, they were happy to be rid of me. I couldn't wait to slide behind the wheel of my LeSabre.

The next morning, on the way to Cleveland, I saw something shiny and beautiful by the side of the road. To the ordinary eye, it might've appeared as a simple hubcap, which it was, but to me it was so much more. It's hard to explain, but I *had* to have it. While the turnpike traffic zoomed by, I hopped out and popped the LeSabre's trunk. Driving away, I felt a sense of security knowing it was back there, traveling with me.

When I got to the Cleveland show, I was amazed to see a line around the block. The marquee said: *TONIGHT - JIMBO BINGHAM - SOLD OUT*.

I signed a couple autographs on the way in, shaking hands and posing for photos. That night, with the energy coming from the audience, we put on a strong show. Afterward, the band settled together in one corner of the room while I navigated the backstage crowd. I realized then it would be better if I had my own greenroom, separate from the other guys. I told the tour manager. He said he'd take care of it.

The next days went by in a blur. Autographs, sound-checks, front of stage crowds, backstage crowds, liquor, hotels. What I remember best are the drives between gigs. In the mornings, after checkout, I couldn't wait to get back in the

LeSabre. I'd click on the FM and flip around the dial, listening for my music as I drove. Though the label assured me we were getting plenty of airplay, I never did hear myself on the radio. Seemed the only thing I could pick up were corny religious shows or crackly static. The FM didn't work so hot after all.

The best part of the drives, the part I really looked forward to, was hunting for things by the roadside. Between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, on I-76, I found an old framing hammer. Pittsburgh to NYC, a kid's t-shirt, pink with a heart on it. NYC to Philly, a half-deflated basketball. Philly to Baltimore, a Spanish-English dictionary. And so, it went. In the beginning, I limited myself to one-item-a-day. But it got away from me pretty quick. It seemed each treasure I found needed to be in the car, needed to be with the others. By the time I hit the Tennessee border, the LeSabre's trunk was full.

In Knoxville, we played to another packed house. By that point, it was just like every other night. Same schedule, same songs, even the faces singing along looked the same. But there was one thing about that night I'll never forget. At the end of our last number, I glanced down at my setlist, trying to decide on an encore. That's when I noticed a piece of paper sitting at the edge of my mic stand. I picked it up, figuring it was a request. When I opened the note, there was a song title alright: "Closer to the Truth"—side B, track five. It was the only song from *Gimme Back My Gator* that didn't make it onto my album. The label said it was too much of a downer, that it didn't fit with the rest of the material. I disagreed, but didn't push it. The thing is, other than the band and the record label, nobody knew about that song. Afraid someone had pegged me as an impostor, I dropped the paper and peered out at the crowd. The eyes staring back just then seemed to narrow, like they were squeezing me into something small. I waved the guys offstage without an encore.

Our label rep, who'd been waiting in the wings, inter-

cepted me as I was hurrying away. He steered me toward the greenroom, prattling on about making a new album soon as the tour ended. Words flew out of his mouth so fast I could barely keep up—flights to L.A., a luxury pad near the beach, a hotshot producer. To top it all off, he said, they were going to cut me another check—for ten grand this time.

When I didn't reply, he reminded me that I had signed a three-record deal which had to be fulfilled within two years. I smiled best I could.

"You're gonna be *massive*, Jimbo!" He said, pumping my hand.

When he walked out, I stood staring at the graffiti covering the greenroom walls, still thinking about the weird note I'd found on stage. Best I could figure, it was the label guy's idea of a joke. What wasn't a joke was the two albums of original music I owed. I didn't have time to give it much thought, though. As per usual, people came piling through the door, handing me drinks, talking my ear off. After knocking back a few, I put it all out of my head.

The next night in Nashville was the biggest show of the tour. There must've been a thousand people out there. At the end of our set, they were chanting "*Jimbo, Jimbo.*" Strapping my guitar back on, I strolled up to the mic to start the encore when, strangely, I saw another scrap of paper at my feet. I bent down anxiously and opened it. There was only one word this time: *Closer*.

Panic-stricken, I ran off and locked myself in a backstage bathroom. There were no stories I could tell myself, nothing that made it better. I was trapped.

The tour manager was sitting in a chair waiting for me when I finally came out. I took the two valium and the beer he offered. The promoter was pissed. I could hear the band griping in their room, too. I told the tour manager it was stomach cramps, but he knew there was more to it.

I left the venue and started walking, looking for things in the street, things to put in the LeSabre. When I passed a payphone, I had the sudden thought to call Mom. It rang a while, but she finally picked up. I talked fast, telling her I was having a hard time. Mom stayed quiet. I figured she was mad because I hadn't been in touch since moving out. Finally, she said,

“Larry? Is that you?”

I said, “Mom, it's me... *Jimbo*.”

The line got real crackly then, but it sounded like she said,

“I'm sorry sir, you have the wrong number.”

With the connection being so bad, I decided to try again later.

When we got to Memphis the next day, I asked for more valium. The tour manager said he had some “pain medicine” too. I took the pills along with several stiff drinks. By showtime, I was more than loose. Seemed like the audience was as stoned as I was. They laughed at my dumb jokes and stage antics and didn't seem to care when I played songs in the wrong tempo or out of tune. Toward the end of our set, I dropped my guitar pick. The old wooden floorboards were so dark with grime I couldn't spot the pick anywhere. I was about to ask the lead guitarist for one of his when something strange caught my eye. At first, I thought it was an optical illusion, something to do with the stage lights. But when I bent down, I definitely saw an object, a sliver of paper, emerging from between the boards. I jumped away, bumping into the drums and cymbals. The band hit the beat real heavy, thinking I was doing another of my theatrics. When I glanced back, the paper wasn't moving anymore.

I didn't panic that time, probably because of the drugs. There was no point in reading the note either. Instead, I strummed the intro to “Closer to the Truth”. The band looked

confused at first, but jumped in after a few bars. About half-way through, I could hear people crying in the audience. Wailing, really. The venue was near-empty by the time we finished. I guess the record label was right, the song really was too much of a downer. Afterward, I grabbed all the backstage booze I could carry and drank in the LeSabre until I passed out. I couldn't've handled another night in a hotel anyway.

Our show the next day was in Jackson, Mississippi. Tired of driving interstates, I took the old highway, Route 61, all the way down. I kept the windows open, keeping my eyes peeled for road finds. Just after a town called Rolling Fork, I found a quart-sized, green bottle lying in the gravel. It was an antique, faded like old money or a sailor's tattoos. The kind of bottle meant to have a note in it, floating down a river. Sitting in the driver's seat, I held it to my ear. An amazing whoosh came from it, as if I were inside a running vacuum cleaner. There was no room left in the trunk or backseat. I set it beside me and drove off.

Arriving at the venue, I found the guys partying in the greenroom. My room was stocked with booze too, but I had something else on my mind. I walked straight to the stage, got down on hands and knees, and investigated the gaps between the big wooden planks. Everything looked normal. Just another dumpy venue with a disgruntled sound guy pulling cables and yelling at people.

After soundcheck, I hit the booze and pills hard. I was weaving pretty good by showtime. We played to a thinner crowd that night, but they were loud, yapping with each other instead of listening or singing along. It threw the band off for sure, but I didn't care anymore. I stared at the floor almost the entire show, avoiding eye contact with the audience, waiting and watching in case another note popped up.

At some point, I heard our tour manager shout my name from the wings. He waved me over, saying the promot

ers had accidentally double-booked the venue, that we had to get offstage right away. Behind him, I saw a group of young dudes decked out in rocker gear and overblown hairdos, waiting impatiently with their equipment. I staggered back to the mic and announced that we'd be playing our last song.

"About time!" Someone yelled from the audience.

As the crowd's laughter died down, the band met eyes for a moment. Amazingly, we started "Closer" in perfect unison. It was the only song we played well all night.

There were no applause at the end. No boos either. Nothing at all to indicate that we'd been standing onstage doing our best to entertain a group of ungrateful customers for nearly an hour. Completely humiliated, I faced away from the crowd and crouched down to pack my gear. I glanced around at the bass player, drummer, and lead guitarist, looking for empathy, support, a little camaraderie at least. But in that moment, as I searched their faces, I realized I didn't recognize them. I couldn't even think what their names were. It suddenly dawned on me that I'd never known them at all.

There was an eerie silence then, like the fadeout spot on Larry's cassette. After a minute, I heard,

"Hey *you*, hurry up!"

I packed my cables, pedals, and guitar quick as I could and then reached over to unplug my amp. As I yanked the cord from the socket, there was a sudden, strong pull like being sucked down a drain. Down and down until there was no stage, no band, no audience. No light either, other than a tiny shaft shining through a crack above my head.

And that's how it's been ever since.

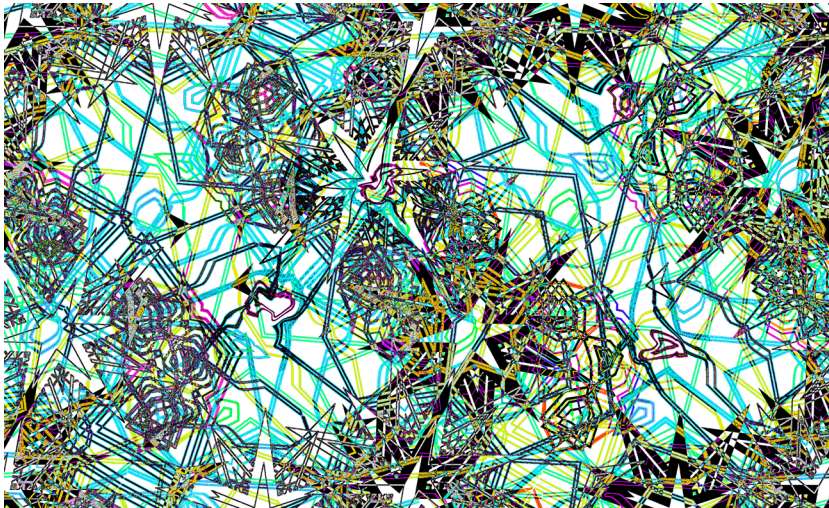
If you're up there reading this, if this note made it through, I have so much more to share with you. More than I can fit on a scrap of paper.

I know what you're thinking, and yeah, I made some

bad choices, collected the wrong things. But you don't have to go through all that. What I'm getting at, what I'm trying to explain to you, is about the songs. They're like nothing you've ever heard before. And the thing is, they can be yours. Every one of them. They're all here. All you have to do is look down. See the cracks? Yeah, that's it. Keep coming. You're almost there. Now just bring your ear a little closer...

Starfish

Edward Supranowicz



a blank digital “canvas” using GIMP

My Neighborhood

Richard Dinges Jr

Moon, stars, sun, a far
horizon that slices
the universe in half
and myopic eyes
shutter even neighbors
from recognition
mere pin pricks in
a darkened palette
that vanishes at sunrise
over a world flattened
by not only closed
eyes but closed minds
forever attached
to unhinged mouths
and reddened faces
that never look up.

And This Too Shall Pass (But Maybe Never)

Carella Keil



“And this too shall pass
But maybe never,”
he wrote in permanent marker
on the bedroom mirror.

On humid nights, death stands below my window, humming softly. He leans against the stone wall, smoking a cigarette and peeling the petals off a flower. The moon cuts his face in two.

He sleeps in my brother’s bed, the bed where black gauzy nightmares pry themselves from dreamcatchers. My brother will never return to make his bed.

Death doesn’t wander aimlessly. He smiles with infinite patience. With a steady gaze and glistening eyes, he looks right through me. I’ve seen those eyes before. Green eyes that are not to be forgotten.

Six years ago, he stroked my cheek, caught a perfect teardrop on the tip of his finger, and held it up like a star. Once when I was tired I laid my head in his lap. He began to braid my hair. I didn’t wake up for three days.

It hurts that he won’t look at me. Hurts to be ignored by the man who sleeps in the room next door, the man I once thought I knew so intimately. How foolish and naïve to crave the attention of a man who holds so many hearts in his hand. Childish to seek him out and then shun him, to taunt death to hold me close and then let me go. To believe he would ever release me, if it was I he truly wanted.

Death doesn’t want me. He flaunts his indiscretions all around me. Death is confident. He knows he is the ultimate destiny of every relationship. It is a terrible and easily forgotten secret.

Purple Butterflies

Plamen Vasilev

Upon a canvas, softly spread,
Where hues of dawn and twilight bled,
A symphony of colours bright,
A vision born in morning light.

Purple butterflies, with wings so fine,
Dancing on the gentle breeze, divine.
Their bodies shimmer, pearl-like sheen,
A whispered promise, softly keen.

Through fields of emerald, green and gold,
Their patterns intricate, a story told.
Of sun-kissed meadows, flowers so sweet,
Where nature's artistry we meet.

With velvet touch, they softly land,
On blossoms bathed in golden sand.
A fleeting glimpse, a whispered sigh,
As secrets softly drift on by.

Their wings, a tapestry of grace,
Reflecting skies in time and space.
A vibrant dance, a fleeting grace,
These purple wonders, in this place.

From bud to bloom, a silent flight,
A whispered song, in fading light.
Their beauty captured, in a single view,
Purple butterflies, forever true.

Athena

Faith Schuyler



oil on canvas board

Did You?

Evie Scoles

The room is oppressive, the walls too white, the temperature too hot, the lights too bright, and the metal chair too uncomfortable. That's the point though. You remember watching one of the many cop shows on TV that call this stage of the process a hot box. They try to "sweat" the truth from you. Those on the other side of the one-way glass don't seem to understand that you don't know, you don't understand. They put you in here hours ago, handcuffing you to the table, and now they've turned the heat up in an attempt to make you uncomfortable. You're stuck in the dirty sweatshirt they brought you into the station wearing. You tug at the sleeves, but it's no use trying to get out of the mud-covered material.

You look around, trying to find something to stare at that isn't your reflection, but the minimalist room is blank. There's a security camera with a flashing red light in the top corner of the room. Recording everything after they told you you're a suspect. The rights you once had, gone in the moment the phrase left the detective's mouth. Giving up on the walls, you stare at the table, but that means looking at your hands that are chained there. Looking at the dirt and blood caked under your fingernails. The wave of nausea hits you again as you stare at your hands, trying desperately not to puke.

Your mind spins back to your hike this morning, things were going so well, *swimmingly* as your friend would have said. You both walked the paths marked by the park rangers in the early morning fog. The well-trodden path tourists took when they came here looking for an adventure. That's not why you walked those paths, you're from here, and know the beauty of the forest. You're a drug runner, both of you were, to pay off the college debts hanging over your heads. You know the

trails and how often they're walked before you disappear from view to stuff the plastic-wrapped square into your packs in the cave system before making the walk back to civilization.

The door to the room opens and in walks the detective, he said his name at some point, but you can't remember now. He's wearing slacks and a shirt you could only hope a woman picked out for him to wear. The salmon-colored sleeves are rolled up his forearms, showing off the ropey muscles he used to grab you and stick the cuffs earlier this morning. His badge, golden and pristine, glints in the lights bearing down in the room. The leather of his shoes squeaks as he walks past the empty chair on the other side of the table, choosing to sit on the stainless steel near your dirty hands instead. You instinctually pull away.

Both of you are silent. You remember a show where the goal of the detective was to get the suspect to speak first. That's how they knew they had won the case and gotten the right person. Because the suspect spoke first. It doesn't make sense in the shows, it doesn't make sense now. However, you know better than to open your mouth and tell them something they can use against you because they misinterpret your words.

"Can I get you anything?" he finally asks. You meet his eye and he looks kind, a gentle smile on his lips, soft brown eyes that aren't staring at you like you're guilty. The way everyone else has been looking at you.

The sweat is starting to form on your upper lip, and you know that you'll feel better if you could cool off, drink some water, maybe even move around instead of being latched to the metal table. They already took your prints, meaning they wouldn't sneak those off whatever vessel your drink came in, but what would the point of that be anyway. "Could I have some water?"

He chuckles beside you, looking at the glass with a nod. "Anything else?" He's playing the nice guy, the good cop,

the friendly guy who just wants you to be at ease while he slowly takes you down, planning your demise behind those gentle eyes.

“I want to get out of my sweatshirt, but can’t,” you respond, jingling your cuffs against the table in explanation as if he doesn’t see the chain laced through the loop on the table.

There’s a soft knock on the door and he stands from the table, moving over with an athletic grace that you would have praised years ago. A hand sticks through the frame, but the detective is too broad to see around, and soon the door is shut, your freedom stuck in the room with you.

Your friend always answered the door like that, sticking their entire body in the path of the crack, not allowing any chance of you seeing past them to another of the string of men they invited back to your shared apartment. The parties hosted in your small space kept people running constantly in the living space. You hated it about them, the bubbly personality, the cheerleader that everyone loved; They always took up too much space. That never stopped you from loving them, your polar opposite that forced you out into public, made you talk to people, made you try new things when you went to college together, though the one party they dragged you to was enough.

The detective sits down, a bottle of water in hand, in the chair opposite you. *Focus on him so you don’t look at your reflection and see what they do when they look at you.* Trying to keep from seeing the dark circles under your eyes from sleepless nights since the storms started. Don’t look at the knots matted through your hair from the hike. The mud and dirt caked on your clothes from falling on the slick path during your hike right before you hit the rock.

You look at the bottle of water he set in front of you while he unlocks the cuffs, the small red line on both wrists while the metal table echoes as the cuffs land. You snatch the bottle, ripping the lid off, and chugging half the contents. Water drips down your chin as you eagerly suck down the liquid.

Taking off your sweatshirt, you use the clean inside to dry your face, to wipe away some of the mud.

“Now that you’ve had some water, gotten out of your sweatshirt, there’s something I need to know. You and Cameron Renner went on a hike this morning around five thirty, the park ranger confirms seeing you enter. He says that he often looks for the two of you on your Thursday morning hike. You went on the trails that you normally take and went down to the river, which is where we found you. Can you fill in the missing time for me?”

You spin the bottle nervously in your hands. “We got there at the normal time for our hike. The storms the past couple of days have made everything slick. I slipped about halfway through and slid down the hill to the river. Cam said I hit my head on a rock and we should turn around and head back.”

“What time was that?”

“Not sure. Sun was coming up, so I’d assume around six thirty.”

“What time do you normally finish your hikes?”

“We hike out until seven and head back so we’re back in time for work at nine.” You don’t know what your usual hikes have to do with this one. This disaster has landed you here instead of in the lab studying the microcultures you’ve been working on for the last four months.

The detective is writing things down in a small notebook, the top is flipped up so you can’t read whatever he’s written. He finishes scribbling before meeting your gaze.

“What happened while you were out there today?”

You suck down the other half of the water in the bottle, stalling for time while you form the words in your head that still feels fuzzy. You have to say the words out loud, you know you have to admit what you’ve been fighting yourself since the sun was peeking over the ridgeline and bouncing off the running water of the river. “Cam and I were sitting by the river, doing concussion protocol on me, like I was one of the high

school cheerleaders, making sure that I was good to continue our hike because I wasn't ready to come back."

"And you were concussed?" he asks, scribbling down in his little black book.

You shrug a response. Cam said they thought you were concussed, worried about you finishing out the walk to the cave to pick up the package, though you aren't quite sure you believe them. *Believed* them.

"What happened after that?"

"Cam went to our place, wanted to see if it was flooded and make sure that no one decided to camp there. Sometimes people hide in that cave when the storms come because they don't know it floods. They were gone too long, so I went to check, to make sure they were okay."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know, my head hurt, it still hurts." You're silently hoping that he'll stop questioning you. Hoping you can leave, go to the hospital, and have them admit you for a concussion and take a break for a few days, out of the oppressive lights. Get a story together about what happened. Remember what happened.

"When you went to the cave, was Cameron alive or was Cameron laying face down on the ground with a bullet in their back?" he snaps, forgoing the nice guy persona he had before. You don't answer so he continues. "We found a gun in your bag, a single bullet missing from the mag. When we run ballistics, is the gun in your bag going to match the bullet in Cameron?"

You look at your hands. The red, sticky liquid covered your palms as you grabbed at Cam's unmoving body. You didn't scream when you touched the corpse. You didn't remember how you got here, standing over Cameron's body with your open bag on the ground. You heard sirens screaming in the distance when you walked out of the cave and sat on a rock. You didn't move until the first set of people walked down the lane. Didn't move until they exited the cave guns in

hand, pointed at you. Didn't move until you were cuffed and marched up the hill.

"Did you kill Cameron?" the detective asks again.

You stare at the table, unsure what to say while the words ring in your head.

Did you?

Did you?

Did you?

The Sinking Ship

Holly Day

The spring thaw comes up through the basement carpet
and part of me wants to let nature take it all back;
let the mold brachiate and sprout all along the ruined carpet,
eventually
consume it and turn it to mud, make way for more, bigger
mushrooms
to bloom in spectacular globules and flared umbrellas,
push their way through the tiny cracks in the concrete,
only to disappear under the branching fronds of green ferns,
their seeds blown in from outside my office window.

And if I sat here long enough, here, at my desk
with the windows open and the forest creeping in,
would rabbits hop through the open window to nuzzle at my
rotting slippers,
chew their way through stacks of paperwork to make little
homes for their young?
would birds follow suit and build their nests in my book-
shelves,
sit on the edge of my desk and watch me work?

What if all I had to do to get the world to finally accept me
was ignore the spreading water stain in the rug,
put away the towels sucking up the water,
just let the damage take its course;
just welcome it all in?

Swarm of Pigeons Feed

Mercury Sunderland

swarm of pigeons feed
around thrown grains of rice
iridescent necks bend
to eat an easy meal

bench stands empty
where no one will sit

man drunk on sake
runs through the birds
wishing he could fly. the

pigeons all
flap their wings at once
leaving him on the street corner
cursing the feathers. he will never have

enough to fill
a simple desire. so

man wishes his life was simple
like trash birds in downtown
so he can't drown himself
in the remnant of their feed. he

drinks from the
paper bag

that once held rice. he's
gotten tired of feeding the birds &
just wants to be


loved & left alone

so he scares away the creatures
who are thankful for his presence. the

swarm of pigeons feed
on potatoes & grapes & bread

when he drinks from
a different source.

Great Satan's Symphony in Dubya Minor henry 7 reneau jr.



It's not as if we became a monstrous nation. But for the first time
in Americans' lives, the possibility is so.

— Norman Mailer

Please allow me to introduce myself / I'm a man of wealth and taste . . .

— "Sympathy For The Devil," by The Rolling Stones

She was one voice of love , hope , and compassion
, one human *be-ing*.

And , although Allyson had been reminded repeatedly
that she alone could not change the world , she still

would help whomever , whenever & however she could
; always at the back of her mind hoping , just maybe

, her one effort would , in the great scheme of life
, set things right in the world

*. & hope Amen-Hallelujahed ! naïve expectation
dismissing the reptilian gaze of habitual deception
behind which something deformed & slouching
constructed calamity
, a blood-stained monument
to unrequited humanity worn as armor*

. She had decided to postpone her last two semesters
and travel to the other side of the world , to help

orphaned , refugee children , who now dominated
the front pages of stateside newspapers

. Thoughts of imminent death never entered her mind
, too cluttered with the rubbish of greenhorn idealism

, a youthful sense of invulnerability
and trust fund security

. *& demons, howling "In Fraud We Trust"*
oiled relentless gears
& the machine ground & gorged flesh & bones
& hopes & dreams of screaming , bleeding , burning
, bombed & bartered children
who wept corrupted magic
from eyes cataract-ed by bottle-flies
seeding maggots into encrusted hope

. Over time
, Allyson's conscience seized her silver spoon

and whipped her blue-blood entitlement
into lathers of selfless compassion

that mommy and daddy could not dissuade
. Eventually , her father grudgingly sent the corporate jet

to take her to the safe point , 280 kilometers
inside the no-fly zone

. . . *where demons force-fed Operation Enduring Freedom*
& Shock & Awe , a burka-less propaganda
(I will come on thee as a thief , & thou shalt not know
what hour I will come upon thee) sending "enduring bases"
& hanging-judge military tribunals
, soccer balls & baseballs & an arrogance
that dismissed free will

. "One day we will come to our senses" , Allyson mused

for the umpteenth time

as she spoon-fed the orphaned child
, too weakened by the deprivations of war

to lift salvation to her trembling , emaciated lips
. But , deep in the innocent recesses of her mind

a whining whisper hovered under the horizon
of her awareness , a shrill distant whistle

, as if dire consequence were approaching
from spiteful happenstance

. It had not entered her mind , regrettably
, that here in the neutral-zone designated refugee camp

, far from the zealous determination of exploitation
and domination , she had painted a bull's-eye on her back

. *the woe of injustice , perpetuated by human greed*
in checkout lines , clamoring with the addictive icons
of Wal-Mart & Amazon , Micky Ds & the Nike swoosh
of 3rd world slavery , living an affinity for KKK-ism
(Kapitalism & Korruption & Killing)

. Allyson smirked back a smile thinking about the tales
she would tell her family and friends

. She pictured the jaw-drop , horrified awe on their faces
as she described the man-made suffering and deprivation

she had encountered . Her best friend , Tianna
, would shake her head

"Girlfriend , I know you want to change the world
, but you should know better than anybody

that money is God in this world
. People gonna' keep killing each other

as long as there's a dollar
floating free"

*. & demons flung stones piled 'round angry curses
as money changed hands , changing dreams , changing
destiny , hearts & minds & souls & bodies
, cheating culture to fallen station
nation to nation
, taught to judge every gift
by its unknown foreign wrap
stained & tattered & stamped , passed hand to hand
to hand*

. And , as she raised the spoon towards the child's lips
, Allyson's attention snapped round

to the high-pitched shrieks , and now
audibly panicked screams , erupting around her

. Her altruistic daydream screamed , then plunged
over the edge into an abyss of molten terror

, exploded to an alien sun suddenly gone nova
; a flashbulb detonation that obliterated shadow

, burning flesh and muscle and bone , hopes and dreams
, to ash , a millisecond after the child smiled up at her

*. & demons promoted Global-I-zation as a generic term
for peace , a mechanized metal & missile tread
of Manifest Destiny , a machine-driven insect frenzy
, 24/7 left-right-left regimentation*

. And the angels wept as sined , blood-stained dollars
floated down into a man-made crater of flame and

smoke and greed . ashes to ashes , dust to dust
. Allyson was recorded as number 4,258 on the list

of American dead , while the foreign dead
in the refugee camp

were euphemized as collateral damage—as the Great Satan
schemed to devise new ways to kill

*. . . human skins shrouding skeletal deception &
muscular lies corrupting potential to a brooding misery
they spawned & spread
with all their mighty metal & predator menace
a laughing mad that screwed tight a vise-like obsession
with accumulation*

. . . a freedom that resounding , just too good to be true .

Mirage
Faith Schuyler



Color Artwork

Cover:

Mirage
by: Faith Schuyler



oil on canvas board

Aphrodite


Micaela Michalk



When the mist carved through the air,
I had to blink my eyes against the sting.
I've heard stories of sirens, their deaths
consecrated on each wave, before
crashing back to sea. But when you
arose from the foam, you were no
mermaid but a massacring warrior,
arrowed green eyes aimed towards
my heart. They say love knows no
bounds but I knew no boundaries.
You consumed my every thought,
appeared in each reflection, answered
each dove call. You were all the allure
of a forbidden fruit. With three little
words, your arrow's aim proved true.
I felt the mist as if it were a wave
crashing around me. But this time
I kept my eyes open. I welcomed
the aching sting. You were coming
home.

Kale Salad

Thom Young



she loved punk rock
and putting
cigarettes
out
on her arm
when she
was
drunk or bored
which
usually was on
Tuesdays
in her flat
making
kale salad
for uninvited
guests.

Who Do You Like?

Alison Boulan

Megan leaps from bed and runs into the hallway. Dad's leaving the bathroom, and she squeezes in behind him, shocked by what's waiting inside--the tiny room smells like a petting zoo. Holding her nose while peeing, she then stumbles out and gasps for air.

"This isn't fair!" she yells into the now-empty space. "Dad's supposed to use the *other* bathroom and not *this* bathroom. He's in big trouble, because I'm telling Mom."

Megan then bunches her PJs between her legs to dry herself. Mom's been lecturing her on this habit and keeps saying, "One day it's going to give you a UTI. And UTIs rot your kidneys and make you die."

But Megan isn't afraid of rotting kidneys, and she isn't afraid of dying. "Everybody knows kidneys grow back," she says to defend herself. "And they know kids can live forever. These are facts. Look it up."

Back in her bedroom she hits PLAY on her boombox. Taylor Swift sings about hating the boy who broke her heart and wanting to burn his t-shirt, and Megan dances over to the dresser, stepping on sheets of old homework, dirty underwear and gummy balls of used Kleenex. Her collection of stuff lives on this dresser, and she takes a moment to admire her treasures: the nine plastic dinosaurs painted with red nail polish (holdovers from first grade); the black, purple and pink Sharpies "borrowed" from Grandma; the Tupperware bowl filled with mismatched barrettes; and the 12" plastic unicorn with rainbow-colored plastic hair. Everything Megan owns is plastic, because Davey Miller, a kid in her math class said, "Plastic is stronger than plutonium."

Then she spots her bracelet. Megan made this last year at summer camp using colorful glass beads and miniature

cubes that spelled "Megan." The *g* is smudgy and looks more like a *q*, but her friends don't mind, and that's all that matters. Slipping it over her wrist, she then opens a heart-shaped jewelry box, also plastic. Skittles are waiting inside, and she scoops two into her mouth. Then after covering her face with bubblegum-scented lotion, she fluffs her greasy, chestnut hair and spins like a ballerina.

Getting dressed for another Monday, Megan pulls on wrinkled skinny jeans and a stretchy, yellow shirt, and then digs her toes into pink socks covered with bumblebees. These socks are her favorite socks, and she only wears them on Mondays, but sometimes on Tuesdays, too. She then slips on her new, white Nikes, a birthday present from Mom and Dad. They gave her these shoes, because she talked about them for months; she even searched the internet for the lowest price, which she wrote on a baby-blue 3x5 card and left on the kitchen counter. Megan's been saving her Nikes for a special day, but today isn't a special day ... she's just decided to wear them.

Time to finish her morning routine. Megan faces a mirror covered with frog stickers and studies her green eyes, chapped lips and dimpled left cheek. Taylor Swift starts singing about being better than everybody else, and the song inflates the girl's self-esteem-balloon until it's big enough to fill the bedroom. And then the ruler of this messy world makes her declaration:

"You're awesome. You're cool. You can do anything."

After kicking an empty Amazon box, Megan skips down the stairs, goes into the kitchen and pours a bowl of Frosted Mini Wheats. She prefers Fruit Loops, but Mom won't buy them. Dad will buy them, but when he does, Mom yells, so he doesn't. While yoga-body Mom makes Megan's lunch, laid-off doughy Dad watches *Seinfeld* reruns on the sofa. The girl can see him from the table and can't believe he's holding Lucy, her stuffed giraffe.

"This is totally unfair," she says, even though no one is

listening. “I want Lucy back. Like today. Like now.”

Mom sneaks up and gathers Megan’s hair. She reminds her daughter that hair gets washed often, not just on holidays, and then she adds, “You’re getting that old dog smell, and girls shouldn’t smell like old dogs.”

Megan replies, “*Mom . . .*” because it’s what her friends say to their moms. “I might have that smell, but I should not be compared to an old dog.”

“I was only comparing smells,” the concerned parent says. “And since you’re my daughter, I care how you smell.”

“*Mom . . .*” is the reply, this time louder.

The debate continues, until Megan drops her spoon and whispers, “Shit.”

Her mother picks up the spoon and yells at Dad.

And Dad replies, “Don’t look at me—she must’ve heard that at school.”

Megan smiles at her parents then runs upstairs for more Skittles. Her supply is low—eight grape, nine lime, two orange (orange is her favorite, but sometimes lime)—and she schemes to get more. She’ll volunteer to go to Costco with Mom and also volunteer to clear the table after dinner. Because without Skittles, life is not worth living.

She checks her phone’s battery and finds it dead. Again. She tells herself she needs “a system” to keep it charged, something a scientist would use. This idea disappears in a nanosecond, and she grabs her fat, blue backpack and hurries to the front door. Mom follows her daughter outside, kisses her spirited only child then climbs into the family’s minivan. She’s going to her important job at the electric company, which Megan brags about to her friends. She also brags that her mother went to college and pays all the bills and buys pizza on Fridays. Mom waves goodbye, like a mother drowning in love, and Megan waves back, pretending she’s a beauty queen.

The happy fifth grader cuts through her neighbor’s hedge and begins the three-block walk to school. As soon as

she passes Mr. O’Connell’s driveway, she revisits her favorite fantasy—going to Chick-fil-A with Taylor Swift and her boyfriend, Travis. In the most recent version, everybody orders a strawberry milkshake, and everybody orders their own fries. Travis then tells stories about getting tackled by gigantic men in football, and Megan and Taylor laugh at the funny parts.

Her two best friends are waiting outside the elementary school. Sophie has a boy-girl face, red curls and turquoise glasses. She’s the shortest girl in fifth grade and likes Skittles more than anyone, including Megan. Jennifer’s a straight-A student with silky blond hair that sways when she walks. Her teeth are wrapped with wire to correct a dramatic overbite, and Megan stares at this tangle of stainless steel whenever she talks and sometimes initiates conversations just to see it. Jennifer’s already had her period and claims to be a woman because of it. And since Megan and Sophie haven’t experienced “Bloody Mary” yet, they’re just ordinary girls living ordinary lives.

Without speaking, the three friends head to Miss Henigan’s Math class and wander through a maze of screaming kids carrying backpacks and musical instruments packed in industrial-grade cases. Then, without warning, Jennifer swerves to the right and enters the bathroom. Megan follows her inside, and the morning’s Frosted Mini Wheats begin to churn in her belly. But it’s not because the bathroom has pukey green walls, rusting stall doors and toilets that flush every other time. It’s because she knows Jennifer is going to ask her questions.

As the three girls preen before a bank of mirrors, Jennifer studies Megan’s mouth.

“Where’s your lip gloss?” she asks, sounding like Mom. “We talked about this, remember?”

Mom won’t buy lip gloss. Whenever Megan asks, her mother says, “Four dollars isn’t in the family’s budget. Would you rather have lip gloss, or milk for your cereal?”

Jennifer’s benevolent today and hands over her

Glamour Girl Glitter Gloss. Sophie uses this brand, too, only because Jennifer makes her buy it. Megan begins painting her lips, as the other girls look on, and the stress of the moment turns her legs into rubber bands. Jennifer then coats her own lips with the finesse of a make-up artist, before turning to address her friends.

“Remember,” she says, sounding like Mom again, “you have to wear lip gloss all the time, wherever you go, because boys like our lips to look shiny.”

“But how do you know that?!” Sophie asks with wide, white eyes.

Jennifer sighs. “I just do.”

With glistening lips, they begin brushing their hair. Megan’s arm aches after just ten pulls, but Sophie and Jennifer brush on and on, as though brushing will land them roles in a Netflix movie. Sophie unexpectedly surrenders, but Megan keeps brushing, trying to keep up with Jennifer and her award-winning technique. Tragically, Megan develops a cramp in her elbow, and Jennifer wins ... again. Smiling into the mirror, she drops her brush into a red, leather purse and leads everyone outside.

The three students enter Miss Hennigan’s class, and Miss Hennigan is late because she’s always late. Dropping her backpack, Megan sits next to Jennifer, and Sophie sits behind them. This ranking is valuable, because Jennifer’s important: she went to France; her dad drives a Tesla; and her brother’s girlfriend has a gecko. Megan doesn’t love this arrangement and wants Sophie to sit next to her. But whenever she mentions it to Jennifer, the girl replies, “Maybe in the future.”

As kids fill the classroom with their chimp-like chatter, Jennifer leans over, places her mouth near Megan’s ear and whispers, “Who do you like?” Before the girl can answer, Jennifer moves closer and touches her friend’s hair with her sticky lip gloss-lips. “Most boys don’t even know you like them,” she continues, now breathing onto Megan’s neck. “And that’s okay, because they probably wouldn’t like you back.”

She stops to lick her braces and finishes with, “But they do like to be liked.”

Megan’s heart is pounding, and her stomach hurts. And she needs to pee. She’s also craving a Skittle and would sell her soul for one. Remembering her new Nikes, she looks down at their wondrous whiteness and wants to show them to Sophie. But when she turns towards the other girl’s desk, Jennifer’s warm head blocks her path.

“Megan,” Jennifer says, now talking behind her math book, “when you start to like someone, you have to write his name everywhere, especially on the back of your hand. And you have to practice kissing him—you can use your forearm or a stuffed animal ... I do it all the time.”

“Ewww,” Megan says, wrinkling her nose, “that’s gross.”

Jennifer nods. “I know—that’s why you do it in private.” She then spins to face Sophie, who’s leaning over her desk to hear the conversation. With slits for eyes, Jennifer hisses, “You’re being rude. I’ll tell you at lunchtime.”

Megan wants to write these liking rules in a spiral notebook. She has seven, in every color of the rainbow, and will probably use the green one, because it’s the only notebook without goofy self-portraits. She begins to review the facts—*always like someone; boys like to be liked but don’t like you back; write his name on the back of your hand*—and stops when the kid next to her farts into his hand.

“Okay,” Jennifer says, pointing at the ceiling, “these are the boys you can like.”

Now Megan can’t breathe, and she just wet her underwear. She stares at her friend’s mouth, which is now the center of the universe, and hopes to hear something that will alter the trajectory of her life.

“Tyler and Max are the only boys left,” Jennifer says, talking through three fingers. “That’s because Stacy likes Alejandro, and Tina likes Liam. Now listen, Megan, there are some other boys, but you can’t even *think* about liking them. Ready?”

Veto Hunter, and veto Christian. Hunter smells gross, like cat food, and his stepfather was in jail twenty-five years ago.”

What?! Megan asks herself. *Hunter’s stepfather was in jail?! Why didn’t I know about that?!*

Jennifer pulls back, sucks in a breath, then continues. “And Christian has *problems*. Stacy said he takes Ritalin and broke every window in his house with a hammer. Now pay attention. This part’s important. I need to tell you about Eric. Veto Eric, too, because I like Eric. I’m even starting to ‘like-like’ him and could be his permanent girlfriend next year. Eric has a moped and is starting a band, so stay away from him.”

Megan wants to run home. These elementary-school boy-girl dynamics are too much for her young brain, and she may not understand them until sixth grade. Maybe even college. She fingers her bracelet and suddenly remembers Oreo’s tumor. Sophie’s cat has an oozing tumor on his butt—Megan has nineteen pictures of the tumor in her phone—and since she loves Oreo as much as she loves Mom and Dad, she needs to visit him after school. She begins to organize her afternoon, just as her friend swoops in for more.

“So ...” Jennifer says, sounding like a demon, “who do *you* like?”

Megan swallows, glances at Sophie then replies, “I’m not sure—I’m making up my mind today.”

“Good,” Jennifer says, stroking her hair. “Let me know.”

Miss Hennigan bursts into the room, and the mood changes. She’s Megan’s favorite teacher, because her dirty-blond hair is always messy, and her disheveled appearance is both laidback and fashionable. Megan dreams of becoming a mini-Miss Hennigan in high school, and this motivates her to waste hours online looking at clothes and pictures of Taylor Swift. Today she admires her teacher even more, but this admiration mutates, like a lot her feelings, and her stringy body fills with sadness. Confused, she sniffs her hair, shocked to discover that Mom was right—her hair smells like Grandma’s chihuahua.

Sighing, Megan tries to untangle these strange, new liking laws. One thing’s for sure—she’s not happy with Jennifer’s list of liking candidates. Tyler? He barks like a dog and wears an earring; he also bites his nails until they bleed. And then she thinks, Not Max! She saw him shove Miranda into a locker last winter, and Miranda sprained her littler finger. He also has weird ears and a voice that’s too big for his body. She can understand not liking Hunter but wonders why Jennifer didn’t mention Ethan. He makes her laugh and answers lots of questions in Science class. And that cowlick; Megan can’t stop staring at his cowlick.

The day creeps forward, and she eventually finds herself in Health class. When everybody leaves, including Mrs. Macklemore, a teacher nobody likes, Megan stays at her desk to address her new “problem”—the itchy rash between her legs. She watches the clock’s jerky red arm while devising a plan, then lifts her backpack to leave.

Nurse Jacky, a bony seventy-six-year-old who normally checks for head lice, is extra cranky today and interrupts her nervous visitor to complain about her husband’s “noxious” body odor and how he won’t take a shower. Megan begins to cry, and the school’s only healthcare provider gives her a sticker, and three suckers, then demonstrates how to use a stethoscope.

Now even more worried about her rash, Megan goes to the lunchroom and finds Jennifer sitting alone. When she asks about Sophie, the other girl says, “We’re mad at her. She told Eric I was liking him, and Eric pretended to throw up. So, we can’t talk to her anymore. We can’t even say her name.”

“What if she calls me?” Megan asks, dropping into a chair. “What if she wants to have a sleepover?”

Jennifer stabs the table with her finger. “I said never. We can’t let her get away with this, because it’ll make her a bad person.”

From across the room, two girls wearing matching Old Navy sweaters point at Megan and laugh. They hate Megan;

and she hates them. But they like Jennifer, and Jennifer likes them, even though she's said they're "low achievers who will end up working at Target." Megan ignores these girls, hoping Jennifer will talk to her, even if it's about Tyler and Max, but her friend's scrolling through a new iPhone while eating a yogurt.

Megan wants to be five again, because life is suddenly too hard. She's surrounded by boys, Sophie is gone, and Jennifer has turned into Mean Jennifer, who's way worse than Regular Jennifer. She'd rather be watching cartoons with Dad, baking cookies with Mom and reading stories to her stuffed animals. Taking out her potato chips and a peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich, she begins to miss her bedroom, and her pillow, even her dinosaurs. She tells herself not to cry and carries her lunch over to a big, gray barrel filled with half-eaten apples, candy wrappers and a jumbled mound of carrot sticks.

Miss Tuttle's English class is next. The thirty-something is Megan's second-favorite teacher, because she grows her own food and reads comics; there's also a rumor she has a tattoo on her back. Miss Tuttle shows everyone how to write a haiku, and Megan's first haiku is about Ethan, then she considers writing a second haiku about Sophie, who's sitting next to her. Jennifer said to ignore the tiny, bespectacled girl. But Megan, still suffering from her own woes, sneaks a peek at her ex-friend and feels a swell of badness. She wants to ask Sophie what *she* thinks of boys, and if girls even *need* boys, and then slowly realizes Sophie's her favorite person in fifth grade, maybe the whole school. She pulls out a scrap of paper and writes "hi sophie" in teeny tiny letters, then slides it across her desk. Sophie smiles and gives *her* a scrap of paper that says "hi megan" in teeny tiny letters, and the two girls share a joyful smile. Sophie then reaches into her backpack. Megan watches her dig like a raccoon, until the girl pulls out a button. But it's not a button. It's a Skittle. And when Sophie drops it into Megan's hand and tickles her fingers, the grateful girl's

heart glows like a firefly.

When the day is over, Megan follows Jennifer through the double doors, leaving the locker-lined walls and junk-filled display cases behind. Her friend doesn't say, "Those are nice shoes." Or "See you tomorrow." Or "I hope you choose the right boy." And Megan wonders if she can live without the future prom queen. It's drizzling, too, and her oily hair is beginning to stick to her cheeks; she can even smell her hair and wishes it would fall out. But she still trudges on, because she always trudges on, through puddles, over cracks in the sidewalk and around a flattened cupcake. And after each sloppy step, her small body weakens, because it's dragging the day's drama behind it: the lip gloss ordeal in the bathroom; Jennifer's shocking liking lecture; the word "BOY!!!" that's taken over her brain; the mysterious rash that might be eating her legs; and the moment with Sophie that's still humming inside of her. It's a lot for a Monday, but there's something else, something much, much worse:

Her new Nikes are getting wet. And they might be ruined.

Now home, Megan sits at the kitchen table with a cherry popsicle. Dad's shooting baskets in the rain with a kid from her school, and she's extra mad at him. She wants him to read a book and change the lightbulb in the basement, and she *really* wants him shave off his new mustache. She'll talk to Mom about these concerns later and also discuss her scary rash; and if she's brave enough, she'll ask if it's okay to have a boyfriend. But then getting up for another popsicle, she decides she's not going to have this conversation, because Mom will only complain about Dad and global warming and won't hear a word she says.

The family eats taco salad for dinner, then Megan clears the table, studies math and lets Mom wash her hair. She's now the compliant child her parents have always wanted, and her mother promises to take her shopping, which will hopefully include buying more Skittles. And if Megan can

adequately demonstrate that she's "just a helpless girl," Mom might also buy lip gloss.

As sleep calls her name, Megan pulls on a pair of pixie-covered pajamas. They're her favorite pajamas, and she plans to wear them forever, or at least until she turns thirteen. With clean hair smelling like coconut, she sits cross-legged on the bed and covers her arms, hands and feet with lotion, this time tutti frutti. Then after yawning like a cat, she scratches between her legs, picks her nose and hugs her pillow, all while telling herself she needs to stay awake. There's too much to figure out on this school night, and the boys, Tyler and Max, are waiting.

The back of Megan's mind screams when it hears these names, and she struggles to find meaning in Jennifer's logic. "Why were *these* boys the only choices?" she asks Bruno Mars, her stuffed crocodile. "And why did *she* get to decide? And what about Ethan? Am I supposed to veto him, too?"

Unfortunately, Megan can't remember why, because she's already forgotten why, in the same unexplained way she forgets many things. Wanting desperately to like someone, she bolts off the bed, eats a grape Skittle and uncaps her purple Sharpie. Then she waits, with a thumping heart, because it's time. It's time to write her first boyfriend's name on the back of her hand.

Life

Faith Schuyler



gouache on watercolor paper

From another world

Dmitry Blizniuk

A branch gently taps against my window.
The steady clinking of knitting needles.
The sounds merge into the deafening magic of silence.
The silence emerges from the background of small noises,
Like a girl emerges from the sea.

She deftly, like a mermaid, shakes the water from her hair,
Squeezes it and puts it on her shoulder.
I take her hand. She's trustful and tender.
We walk through the park strewn with sounds.

A crown strewn with jewels:
A coin falls on the asphalt,
A strike of a match scratches the air,
A streetcar clicks its castanets far away,
A blind man on the bench smacks his lips.

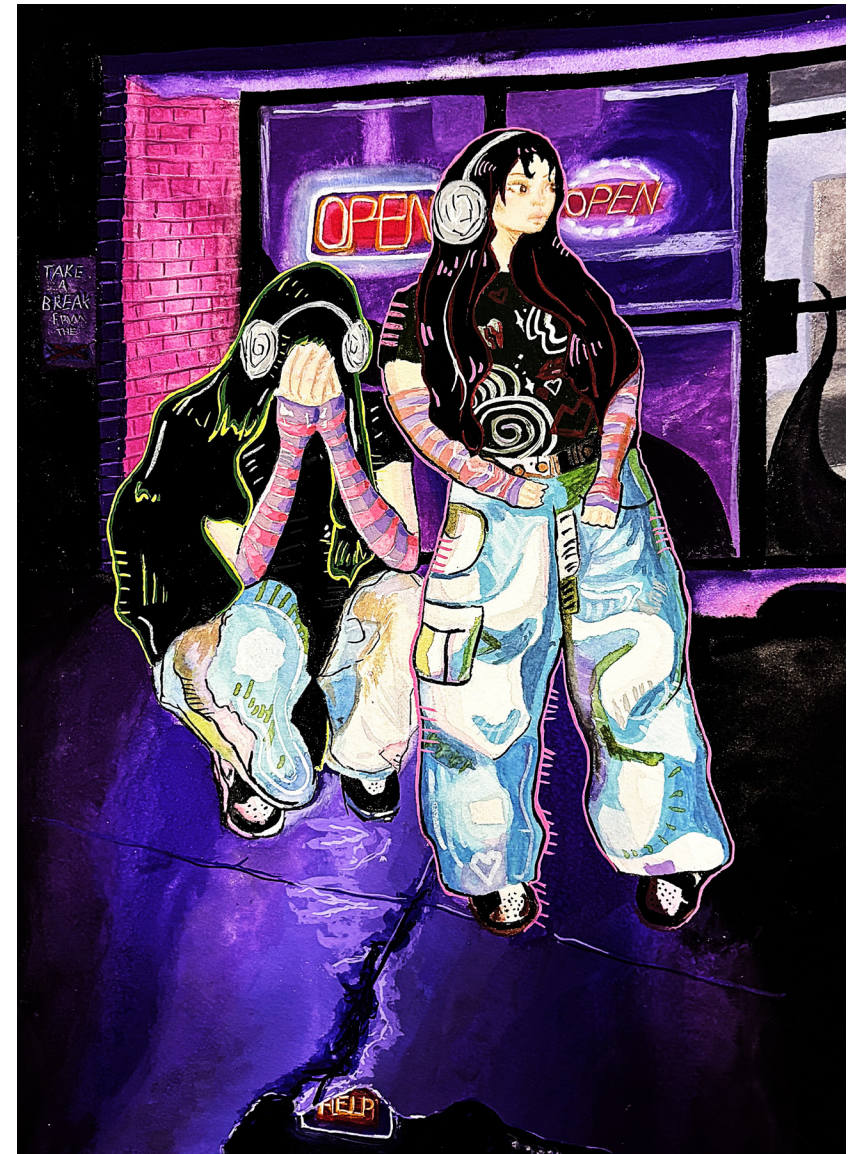
The snails of his eyes are drawn deep into their shells.
Beside him, patiently sits a woman, upright and flat,
Like the Virgin or on icon, and holds his hand.
The pines are as motionless in the sky as rocks.

It's so quiet that one can hear
The crunch of the tiny jaws of squirrels in the pines.

Silence is a way from another world,
A path of gods paved through the musical bedlam of humanity.
In silence, one can see the eternal mess
And the pageant of elephantine ideas, images, ghosts.
Draw aside the fringed curtain of November
And listen to the silence... It's all
That will be left of you.

Neon Lights

Faith Schuyler



gouache on watercolor paper

After the Apocalypse, Day 105

Kelly Talbot

Miguel stopped his silver Turbo Cabriolet Porsche at the entry of the half-mile gravel drive to the old two-story house. He'd travelled up and down the length of California, searching for every friend and acquaintance he could think of. There was no one. Finally, *inevitably*, he'd arrived here. He slowly cruised down the driveway and parked next to the old pickup truck by the wooden stairs.

He got out and walked to the door. He was wearing slacks and a shirt, no suit, no watch, no jewelry. He didn't want to appear too ostentatious. He lifted his perfectly manicured hand and knocked. After a brief pause, he knocked again, this time more loudly. No response. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his keys.

"Hey, old man! It's me, Miguel. I'm coming in. Don't shoot me or anything, okay?"

He stepped across the threshold. The living room was just as he remembered it. He walked over to the piano on the far wall and looked at the photos on top of it: his grandparents, his parents, his sister, and himself.

"Abue, you here? I'm home," he called out.

After his parents had died, his grandfather had raised Miguel and Ana. His grandmother was already gone by then. Abue had done a fine job, too. Ana was a prominent orthopedic surgeon in Houston, and Miguel was the third-highest ranked venture capitalist in California. The old man loved to tease him about that.

"*I'm proud of you, mijo, even if you are only number three,*" he would say with a twinkle in his eye. But he was proud of him, and Miguel knew it.

Miguel walked around the house. Abue wasn't there. Miguel exited through the back door and surveyed his grandfather's vast property. Hermen and Luis, who normally helped

with the orchard and the crops, were nowhere in sight. Miguel strolled among the fruit trees, studying them. He reminisced on the conversation he'd had with Abue in these trees after he'd graduated high school.

"Pay attention, Miguel. This is important. Fruit trees don't graft themselves."

"I'm paying attention, Abue. But I'm going off to college. This is great for you, but I'm going to be in finance."

"The market is a volatile thing. You never know how it's going to go. But if you know how to work the land, you'll always have something to fall back on. Humor an old man, will you?"

"Okay, Abue."

And Miguel had paid attention, not so much because he was concerned about having something to fall back on, but because he loved and respected his grandfather, and he wanted to see him happy. Abue's parents had been migrant workers, and in his childhood he had absorbed an incredible amount of agricultural knowledge. He was also a shrewd businessman. He'd acquired this property and built a thriving farm up from nothing, without ever selling out to the giant conglomerates.

And now Abue was gone. This land was his legacy. Miguel barely knew a fraction of what Abue had known, and there was no way he could ever run it as well as the old man had. But he knew enough to make a go of it. This wasn't much of a world for California's third-highest ranked venture capitalist, but it was custom-made for a farmer. Miguel looked down at his soft businessman's hands. His childhood calluses would return in no time.

Miguel could almost feel Abue's sturdy hand on his shoulder as inside his head he heard the old man warmly chuckle, "*Well, mijo, it looks like you're finally going to be number one at something.*"

Questioning Deer

Frederick Frankenberg



the Great everything all at once

henry 7 reneau jr

every ear closed to its own destruction . i am contemptuous of the collective apathy fabricated from *the way it's always been* . the Great bible , bullets , and Big Head \$\$\$s of the State , within which i am an ash tray pariah/hood . *a cobweb on the soul . a cuticle of dust* . i am contemptuous of the Great length and breadth of the abyss that divides with the ferocity of sordid intentions , the overheated gears hanging stripped of reciprocal empathy . i know that empathy takes the time to teach a child to fish , easing her hunger , along with the savvy that can end her hunger . and this act of ennobled humanity paid forward , can alleviate the hunger of others . is different than sympathy , or compassion , that gives a child a fish , then leaves her to possibly starve tomorrow . unlike empathy that selflessly walks in another's shoes . this is a prayer . let us join hands . the Great collective lamentation noun/songs of dire consequences forthcoming , the uber-euphemized revisions , threadbare clothed and ironbound to diaphanous reconstructions of the past . the present day talk-show drama , and the theory that every bullet is a metaphysical construct . i am contemptuous of the Great gray areas between the obfuscations of lies and the granite solidity of the truth . i am Greatly aware , informed beyond ignorance of the premeditated damage of sticks and stones that traumatize less effectively than the generational slur of stereotypes . i am contemptuous of *turn the other cheek* as a realistic method of converting an enemy to a friend . i am contemptuous of the Great mean between our ninety-nine shades of Black and the Great white rope legal lynching us today just as it's always been —a diaspora of kindred brethren and sistren—like phoenixes lulled inside icebergs . our beating hearts a Blue[s]-toned wail of retribution . we demand reparations !! following the blood-handed fist of centuries , following the false emancipation of scraps from Massa's table , and the present-day punishment of poverty for profit sanctioned by a malignant narcissist MAGA . i am contemptuous of the Great deceitfulness of *His* imagined uber-omnipotence and the vile

repulsiveness of *His* xenophobia to behold . i am enraged my worth is quantified as *less than* by the oppressor , a yellow star of inferiority like a Great subtraction arm-banded to my imminent *be/* coming . the Great bureaucratic obsession with protocol , the standard operating procedures , penciled in red with the knowledge that the system is a broken repetition . the Great *blind* ? Lady Justice , who performs so well for them can buy her—McTrump and Diddy : 1 , equal Justice for all : zip !! the Great amerikkkan Dream , aka *success* , is the ravenous , good-as-dead corporate personhoods who walk among us . an upward mobility that has a morally repugnant component . their every thrashing avarice , their feral animal ravaging , an ode to a purposeful unethical ineptitude and inefficiency like some cancer rot concealed beneath the skin . the Great canon of English thesaurus , of distorted words that obfuscate history behind multiple meanings : *enquiry* as witch-hunt ; the *Law* as legal lynching ; *post-racial* same as *the way it's always been* . our Great blind hope in spur-of-the-moment more equitable and mutually inclusive than human nature currently is . the Great toxic inhalation of shamelessness , a killing harvest just beneath the surface of corruption , and everybody enthralled and waiting for someone else to do the right thing . most formulations of tolerance assert that tolerance is a reciprocal act , and that the intolerant need not be tolerated . and like our eyes , both are not required to see , but both are needed for depth perception . this necessitates drawing a line between the tolerant and intolerant in every implementation of tolerance , which suggests that every act of tolerance requires an act of intolerance . but i digress , listening to Ice Cube gangsta rap while i scheme the many ways to burn the White House down . i mean to stray from the flock (i clicked Skip Ads) and stealthily bedevil all the fascist systems that *focus funding on projects that reflect the nation's rich artistic heritage and creativity* [sic erat scriptum] *as prioritized by the President* . the Great neglected prophecy in denial of woe : Mother Nature , her eyes now a toxic chemical blue , and on the run in the 21st century . every day , the statistical happenstances (i can hear a train a coming) , the hubris of our petro/technological modernity , as we live and breathe fossil fuel emissions and micro-plastic particulates

toward an ecological collapse , soon a dystopian proliferation of moss , and mushrooms , and roaches . the Great polluted deluge—an ocean atomized—unleashes a toxic flood of corrosive rain ; it has to go somewhere , the storm runoff that rinses over polluted fields to find a poisoned river . the Great personification of narcissist desires , a friction fire burning through our wanting more, burning beyond our arm's length ; the toxic destruction and poisonous waste , the mounting catastrophism of our living lust for dominance . the Great invasiveness of ocean warming , salt-curing the land of its verdant green demeanor . the Great monuments to the worst of them amongst us , a redaction of what is actually there that doesn't exist . a phantom limb presence of absence . is this a new constant pain ? or simply one of today's trending discomforts , in passing ? this is not just about miracles . this is not about the way things can be . this is about the way things *are*

the way things are in amerikkka .

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

James Gardner

It was on a Saturday afternoon down at Billy Ferguson's trailer. Walt Emory was out on the back deck talking with Billy and Ernest Witt. They were knocking off a thirty-count carton of Miller High Life and smoking Billy Ferguson's Winstons. "Don't ever pass it up," advised Walt Emory.

"Don't pass up what?" asked Ernest Witt.

"A piece of ass," he said. "Don't ever pass up a piece of ass. You'll kick yourself for it down the road. I promise you."

Billy Ferguson laughed. "I ain't never done that," he said. "Don't tell Tina that though." Billy's live-in girlfriend; Tina Woody was in the kitchen fixing fried bologna and cheese sandwiches. She was twenty-three and gorgeous with long blonde hair and a body that wouldn't quit. She was standing at the stove in a string bikini listening to the conversation out on the deck through the open kitchen window.

"I ain't sure Billy, but she might have just heard you," said Ernest Witt pointing at the open window and looking worried. Billy Ferguson just shrugged.

"When you get to be my age, all you can do is look back," said Walt Emory. "So, get it while you can. That's what I say."

"What about when you're in a serious relationship, Walt? What do you do then?"

"Cheat!" declared Walt Emory without hesitation. "It don't make no difference. You ain't falling in love. You're just having sex. They're two very different things all together. You can have a serious relationship with a dog," he laughed.

Just then, Tina Woody came out the door with a tray of sandwiches. "Here you go, Boys," she said as she sat the tray down on the picnic table. "Y'all help yourselves. There are two for each of you."

"Thanks Honey," said Billy Ferguson as he flicked his cigarette butt out into the grass. "Did you put mayonnaise and pickles on them like I told you?"

"Yes Billy, they're just like you like them, mayonnaise, mustard and pickles too."

"Good," said Billy Ferguson. He grabbed one off the plate and took a big bite. Then he washed it down with beer.

"So tell me," said Tina Woody looking at Walt Emory. "Is that advice about a piece of ass good for women too or just for men?"

"Honey, I ain't going to presume to give advice to a woman," he answered. "That's outside my field of expertise. Women have got their own code of conduct."

Tina Woody smiled and grabbed a beer from the cooler. "I think that a man ought to be faithful if he's in a serious relationship with a woman. I think that they both ought to be. There ain't no room for infidelity as far as I'm concerned. Ain't that right, Billy?"

"Oh hell yeah," agreed Billy Ferguson nodding his head emphatically. "The most important thing is trust. If you ain't got trust, you ain't got nothing." Billy Ferguson walked over and put his arm around his girlfriend's bare shoulder and sighed. "There ain't nothing good as love, Walt."

"I wholeheartedly agree," said Walt Emory. Like Billy Ferguson, he was good at speaking out of both sides of his mouth.

"But I thought you said...," began Ernest Witt.

"Forget about what I said. Listen to what I say."

"That's right," said Billy Ferguson leaning in to get a kiss of confirmation from Tina Woody. She pulled back and turned her head.

"You know something? Y'all are all three full of shit. I could have any of you any time I wanted to. I wouldn't even have to lift a finger."

"Awe now Tina, you know that ain't true," said Ernest Witt. "We would never betray Billy or you either for that mat

ter. We respect y'all too much. Heck, we're friends."

"Friends or not, I could get you two in bed in a heartbeat," said Tina Woody.

"Tina honey, why you talking this way?" asked Billy Ferguson seemingly hurt by her blunt remarks. "Let's change the subject before I get mad."

"Why would you get mad, Billy? I thought y'all were all for free love. Didn't Walt say don't never pass up a piece of ass?"

"Yeah, but I didn't mean it," said Walt Emory. "It was all just talk. Good friends don't screw each other's old ladies. It ain't right."

"Billy, run up to the store and get us another case of beer. This one's almost empty," said Tina Woody.

"Aw shit Tina, I'm too drunk to drive."

"I'll drive you," said Walt Emory pulling his keys from his pocket."

"Okay, come on!" Billy Ferguson and Walt Emory climbed into Walt's Suburban and drove off up the gravel driveway leaving Tina Woody standing there with Ernest Witt. She looked at him and he looked at her.

"Come on Ernest," she said as she took him by the hand. "We ain't got but about fifteen minutes until they get back. Let's do it!"

"Really?" he exclaimed. "God Tina, are you joking?"

"Yes, you idiot, I'm joking!"

"I thought so."

"You'd never make love to your best friend's girl anyway. Would you?"

"Certainly not," replied Ernest Witt. "But then again, Billy ain't my best friend."



Poetry

First Place Winner:

Last Night I Dreamt of You
by: Claire Scott

Last Night I Dreamt of You

Claire Scott

last night I dreamt of you, mother
you were no longer in bed
with a tray of untouched toast
no bourbon bottles in sight
no lip-sticked glasses
you were wearing a dress
a silver dress with shiny sequins
and your hair was combed
not plastered with bobby pins
your dangling earrings caught
and held the sun like a mirror
or a polished stone
you were beautiful, mother
I ran to hug you, but I couldn't
get any closer, no matter
how hard I tried, mother
sweat dripping, heart pounding
then you ghosted away
faded into the dream
like a Cheshire cat
or maybe Charon ferried you back
slightly loopy now, not realizing
trips are meant to be one-way
mother, please come again tonight
tell Charon I will put more
coins in your mouth
please hold this child

Obligations

Wortley Clutterbuck

I've lived a life as I have chose,
not all of it set down in prose;
the usual milestones I've met
with much of it I'd fain forget;
there's been the school experience,
occasioning varied laments,
then followed by taking a trade,
a course in life I would dissuade;
there's sev'ral things I loved to do
but not one was I supposed to.

The biggest vexation I find
owes, as you guessed, to humankind;
for all the moments I enjoyed
came consequences to avoid;
obliging papers to be filled
but shifting them I soon proved skilled;
that having brats and toiling hard
were not outcomes in which I starred;
the trick in life is to get some,
departing before debts to come.

So much of life drops from a tree
which doesn't mean apples are free;
ask Eve and Adam what they thought
about free love once they were caught;
there's always some landlord who sets
the world to pace for what he gets;
the game of breaking even I've
discovered employs speaking jive
and men who are as they would be

evade responsibility.

So much of life's amenable
but only when the belly's full;
the Piper, so it's said, gets paid
or ev'ry one ends up dismayed;
if all our fortunes are the same
then there's no call to sign one's name
but, as we know, a signature
casts lots upon prospects' future;
and states of mind which never last
determines how one's lot is cast.

How many men at Waterloo
gave battle, but didn't want to?
how many, if they had their say,
would just as well have run away?
the stories the newspapers gave
was all those men were very brave
but I know as a certainty,
deserting happened frequently;
if men don't choose their own parents
they sure don't choose their governments.

I've been known to make promises
ephemeral as my kisses
and gave a few apologies
that didn't come with warranties;
the reckoning requires some math
when you are down to your last laugh;
while debts of honor should prevail,
sometimes a man must skip on bail;
most good intentions tend to pave
the high road to a pauper's grave.

Checkpoint - Mackinac

Sarah Kleinfeld



Stacked stones are left upon the shore
of a glittering blue expanse,
a thousand histories built by a thousand hands.

The only sounds here are roving hooves of horses,
soft lapping of waves,
and distant laughter of children playing

beneath that narrow strip of Bifröst
connecting our two halves,
at the island where past and present meet.



Flash Fiction

First Place Winner:

The Okay Samaritan
by: Brian Hawkins

The Okay Samaritan

Brian Hawkins

That Tuesday I stayed home from work sick, almost certainly COVID though I wouldn't test myself for another month. I'd spent the better part of the weekend sleeping, then dragged myself in on Monday feeling no better at all. Slight fever. No cough. Just worn out, I thought. One more day of rest would be enough.

For the middle of September, it was hot, so I stepped out on the deck that afternoon taking a break from my sequence of naps to see if the sun might revive me, in spirit if not in body.

In the backyard sat a homemade contraption my wife had designed herself, mostly completed. Bird netting stretched over several lengths of PVC pipe to keep the leaves out of our small koi pond. With the trees still dressed in full green, we wouldn't put it in place for a few more weeks, so the job didn't need to be completed quite yet.

I stared at the three steps down to the yard wondering if I could navigate them. Then pushed my still-weary body forward to look over the covering as if I had the skills, or the inclination, to critique it. The truth is, I thought it would do the job just fine. We – she, to be more precise – still needed to secure the netting with a few dozen more zip ties and cut off the excess before we covered the pond to keep all the foliage and acorns out. She'd done well it seemed, and I wanted to make sure to tell her when she got home.

I circled it a couple of times before deciding I didn't have another trip in me. As I began to walk away, I saw some of the bunched-up netting wiggle. Not wind. More like something burrowing under it. Or trying to get free.

As I bent down to look closer against the browning in the late-summer grass, I saw an unexpected redness bright

against the dullness of a dying landscape.

A small snake, I realized, had tangled itself in the net. The glaring sun doing its best to bake the unfortunate prisoner.

Not one to find bravery in unexpected places, I grabbed a stick and tried to waggle the material enough the snake could free itself. This did not work.

After fetching a pair of scissors from the house, the extra trip up and down the stairs nearly doing me in, I tried cutting it loose without losing a chunk of my hand, though I'm sure the small serpent was not big enough to take even a tiny bit of skin. I managed to cut it away from the rest of the contraption, and by the time I'd finished I considered lying down right there for my next nap as it slithered away. So exhausted I don't think I would've cared if it'd crawled right over me.

Unfortunately, it had so tangled itself in the fiber any movement only wound the strands tighter and tighter.

Just from its appearance I knew it wasn't poisonous. We only have three around here: water moccasins (very rare and not found in small backyard ponds), rattlesnakes, and copperheads. No rattles warning me, and the coloring was wrong for the latter. Also, the head was not flat enough. If I'd come to my last moments on Earth, poison would not be the reason.

I had only one real choice: pick it up and cut.

When I first lifted it from the ground, it squirmed in my hand but made no effort to bite. Cutting around it was one thing, but the household scissors I had were too big to get between the snake's skin and the fibers without risking injury. Instead, I used the small scissors from my pocketknife to sever each strand.

With some effort, I snipped and clipped, slowly undoing the snare. This was not a quick task, however. The longer I cut the less animated the snake became. The agitation it showed initially slowed then stopped altogether. For my own part, I felt little better standing in the heat focused on such an

intricate task when all I wanted was to sleep.

By the time I'd cut the last bits away, I was sure I had killed it in trying to save it, and maybe myself.

I placed the small creature in a tuft of grass and waited for it to slither away.

And waited.

And waited.

Back inside the house, I filled an empty spray bottle with cool water. I spritzed its now-dry skin, then covered it with a few early fallen leaves. Tempted, I almost upended the remainder of the water over my own head.

All I could do was nap and check on it later. With a few unused fish tanks in the garage – remnants of a long-ago hobby – I thought about keeping it. Raising it as a pet perhaps.

After waking from my next *Matlock*-induced coma, I decided I would indeed adopt it if it was still in the yard and alive.

I returned to the scene of the rescue, and what I'd decided was a Northern Scarlet Snake (the internet told me they no longer lived in Indiana, yet that's all it could have been with its red, black, and white bands) was now gone.

Somehow it had recovered, revived by my little dose of tap water and some shade. I felt like crap, but knowing I saved the beautiful and rare little fellow improved my spirits some.

Only later at dinner when I told my wife about the ordeal did the thought occur to me any number of birds which called our yard, and the several hundred acres of woods bordering it, home, might have been at that very moment wondering why that tasty little morsel was just waiting there right out in the open. Red skin shimmering in the late-afternoon sun like a roadside billboard advertising a truck stop buffet.

Oliver

Danny Barbare

Who is Oliver, but a sweet Boston Terrier that sits
in our lap in the
love chair
with glazed eyes,
studious
for a piece of
Orville
Redenbacher's
Gourmet
popping corn
still crisp and warm
and sea salted too
to fall out of the bowl
hands
wide mouth,
chewing it sideways
it with a cough
and wanting another
right out of your mouth if he could

like a French kiss.

Drive-by Confessional

Lexi Axiotes

"Bless me, Father. For I have sinned."

Fuck Pap smears, and while I'm at it fuck you too. The last time I had a splinter, you had pushed me onto the wood chips. It is natural that I think of you now. I sometimes wonder if going to Catholic school would have made me better at forgiveness. On Sundays, knobby knees would knock on wooden benches. They call them 'pews' like the sound the guns make in *Star Wars*. I know you like *Star Wars* because it's still the banner on your Facebook account I don't follow.

"How long has it been since your last Confession?"

Fuck, I don't know.

"I'm not sure, Father."

There's something I am sure of though; I hope if you ever find yourself in a Porta Potty, there's no hand sanitizer. If you took me to a Nebraska City winery, I'd have to hold back the urge to hit you over the head with the bottle. It's starving and I'm lunchtime and there's a moth in my kitchen and how can you even think straight in times like this? There's a cow with your face loose in my dreams.

"That is okay. What sins do you have to confess?"

Why didn't I notice when my feet stopped growing?

"Father, I'm very angry. All the time. I can't explain it, but it feels like there's a fire burning at the back of my throat, crouched to pounce. Ready to be unleashed."

"What is this anger directed at? Yourself, others?"

I have the bones of a fully functioning adult, but not the meat. The winter has aged my hands and they look like my mother's. There's a monster under my bed that only answers to your name and a cow in my dreams with your face.

"Everyone. Everything. I'm afraid I'm turning into my father."

“Why do you believe that?”

In your absence, blossoms burst and trees whittle
down to sticks. I never know how to end things. Phone calls,
stories, conversations. This thing with you. It’s tar and you’re
lava and I’m scorching and it hurts.

“I don’t know, Father. Just give me my penance.”
Put me out of my misery.

No Longer Yours

Erika Joy



Lightning strikes daisies—
Your lips crackle against mine,
Rose petals fall to the overgrown garden,
Weeds a barrier from mud

The lonely wind howls,
You pull me closer,
Whispering empty promises into the gusts,
“I’m sorry—
I’m here.”

But I am not—
I am fleeting,
Shifting through your fingers like Zephyr

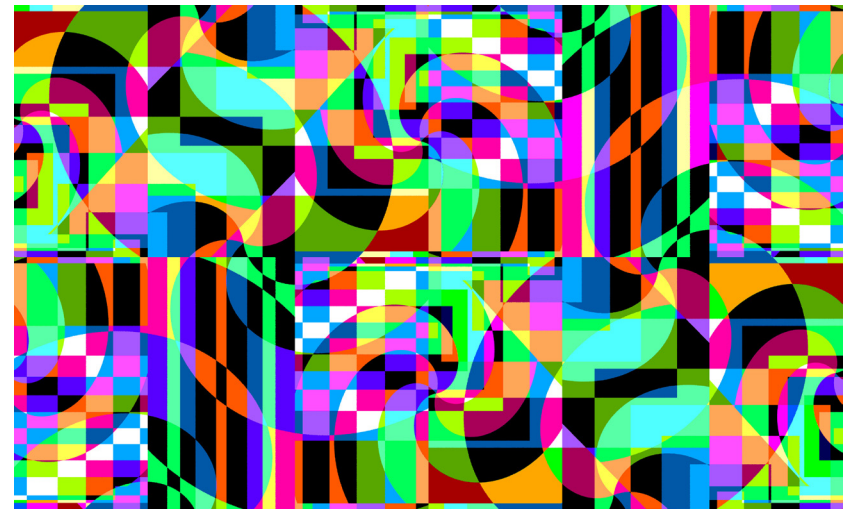
Stained Glass
Edward Supranowicz



Artwork

First Place Winner:

Stained Glass
by: Edward Supranowicz



blank digital "canvas" using adaption of traditional painting

Ringling Bell

Claire Scott



burnt or buried
who cares
turning to dust or being eaten by worms
ashes or slow decay
who cares
no need for coins placed over my eyes
under shivering stars
no need for a stamped passport to a heaven
I don't believe in

no doubt delighted to be out
of the shadow of the valley
of refractory computers
and skittering roof rats
but a few tender prayers
would be nice
while I am still here
messages to soften
the metal fist of my heart
too rusted to sound a bell

my face falling down
feeling tight and withdrawn
no point no point
as children sell fentanyl
on street corners
forests are destroyed
to grow soybeans for China
and fishermen murdered
under a cold carved moon

yet here a sunlit lunch
of garden tomatoes and arugula
a photo of my grandson
dressed as his father on Halloween
a *Trader Joe's* jacket with *Tyler* on the tag
a neighbor brings peonies
with sensuous pink leaves
let me learn to walk lightly
on this precious earth
and ring and ring and ring

Saving a Life

Dick Daniels

Larry's eyes were crystal blue, like still water on a mountain lake. They were the only things Shirley and Trent Chason left their son when the poor couple were buried in the Simpson Coal Mine of Aldrich, Alabama. Trent and six other miners died after a cave-in; Shirley was on the rescue team when a secondary tunnel collapsed.

The mine operator also owned the General Store in Aldrich and took in the twelve-year-old orphan. "Larry," Mr. Simpson said, "You'll always have a place in my home." The "place" was a crowded stockroom with a thin cot where the boy could collapse after toiling all day unloading wagons and stocking shelves.

Larry knew the Simpson daughter, Elizabeth. Thick auburn hair showered her shoulders with tight curls, and her complexion was "peaches and cream." She was regarded as "the prettiest girl in three counties" and conducted a daily ranking of prospective beaux in the schoolyard. She had told Larry more than once, "You have the most beautiful eyes. I would know them anywhere." Whenever she flirted with him in the store, Mr. Simpson would quickly find work for him outside; the doting father imagined a far more attractive match for his prized daughter.

Aldrich was booming as demand soared for coal to fuel the munitions factories sprouting at the Civil War's inception. Larry was maturing, and a growth spurt had him occasionally snaring the number one spot among Elizabeth's suitors. Soon, the observant Mr. Simpson was encouraging him to leave for the Confederate fight. On the night before Larry mustered out with a dozen other Aldrich lads, Elizabeth snuck into his room and showed him he was more than number one—he was *THE ONE!* When the fresh inductees assembled to march off the

next morning, she hugged his neck and whispered, "Come back for me."

Private Chason joined General Pickett's division just before it headed for Pennsylvania. Two days of bloody battle outside Gettysburg convinced Larry that the South was not the invincible force he had believed. When twelve thousand Confederates were ordered to attack across an open field, he hopelessly trudged out with the other disillusioned troops. Two hundred yards from the Union positions, a bullet creased his scalp, and he collapsed on the ground in a daze. As consciousness returned, he heard the soft plunks as bullets continued to land in Southern flesh.

He lay there, feigning death and suffering a soldier's greatest shame. Thousands of corpses from both armies awaited the inevitable rot or being torn to pieces by birds and hogs. Larry wasn't proud of what he had done, but he knew it would not have changed the outcome. As night settled, he found a dead Union soldier, stripped off the uniform and shoes, clothing himself as a Union enlisted man. He would pretend to be suffering from amnesia to avoid detection as an impostor. With nothing to identify him as Confederate, he walked to a lighted barn where field surgery was being performed amid an uproar of anguished cries.

After being patched up and adopting the name Larry Simpson for the required military report, he was escorted to a nearby unit of Pennsylvania infantry. For the remainder of the war, he never aimed his weapon at a soldier on the other side. When Lee surrendered, Larry saw no way he could go back to Aldrich. Elizabeth would have read his name on a casualty list in the Birmingham newspaper and grieved at her loss. He couldn't bear to see her reaction if he told her the truth. The only alternative was to stay in the Army and hunt Geronimo.

Desperate for some way to redeem his honor, Larry risked his life repeatedly in frontier skirmishes. An Apache arrow finally found him and dug a furrow beneath his hairline.

The cavalry troop hauled his unconscious body back to the fort on a flimsy travois. When he awoke on his bunk, the Post Adjutant handed him some papers, "Simpson, you've been discharged. If you want to get yourself killed, do it somewhere else."

Riding through the gates, he pointed his mount toward Alabama. There was nothing he could ever say to Elizabeth, but he needed to see her one last time. On the month-long journey, questions tormented him. Which one of the school-yard suitors made it back and was deemed acceptable by Mr. Simpson? Would she have accepted their proposal?

In Aldrich, he sat on a sidewalk bench across from the store that had been his home. An energetic boy skipped by, toting his lunchbox by a strap. Larry stopped him and asked, "Hey, who runs the General Store?"

"Missus Chason, sir." A stunned Larry asked, "What does her husband do?"

"Oh, her man was killed by them Yankees at Gettysburg." During the silence that followed, the boy hurried away with the tin container banging against his legs.

When Elizabeth unlocked the store, Larry waited until it filled with shoppers. Entering cautiously, he buried his face in the shelves and listened to her familiar voice as she waited on customers. A clerk was headed his way when Elizabeth called out, "May, could you handle the counter? I've got to run this new rifle over to the Sheriff's Office." As she stepped off the boardwalk, she called over her shoulder, "And make sure Laura doesn't get into the penny candy while I'm gone."

Elizabeth was halfway across the street when a chorus of shouts and gunfire echoed from the Farmers Bank. A teller yelled, "We've been robbed!" as the thief mounted up and spurred his horse into a full gallop. Elizabeth froze facing a pointed gun as he bore down on her. Larry sprinted into the street, shielding her body as he knocked her to the ground. There was just enough time for him to see her expression change from fear to recognition as she looked into his eyes.

Two fatal bullets slammed into his back before he could hear her say his name.



Creative Nonfiction

First Place Winner:

Into the Vital by: Ira Feinstein

Into the Vital Ira Feinstein

In the summer of 1989, I was eleven years old. Six weeks after my mother's death, my legal guardian, Connie, called me into her private office: the family van. Parked in the driveway, she closed the doors for privacy. The windows were opened in hopes of a breeze, but despite the setting sun, the air was still thick with the day's heat. We sat down in opposing chairs. The midnight blue bucket seat felt like peach fuzz against my thighs. I leaned my elbows into the armrest and held my head up with my hands. I started to perspire. Connie asked me how I was doing.

I glanced at her, mumbled fine, and looked away.

"Do you want to talk about your mother?"

I feigned ambivalence with a shrug. She pressed on. My silence was worrying, but I had to let someone in. Finally, I told her what I knew from reading the newspaper: scientists believed there was a genetic component to breast cancer. That must be the case with my family. My mom died from breast cancer, both of my grandmothers died from breast cancer. Surely, I was going to die from breast cancer. Nothing else, no theories of random order in the universe, made sense. If I was to escape a similar fate, I told Connie, I needed to have my breasts taken off. "No breasts, no breast cancer," I explained.

My solution wasn't something I'd read in the news. It wasn't something I'd heard anyone else speak about. It was the simple, deductive reasoning of an eleven-year-old.

"If that's what you choose, know that you won't have to go through it alone."

"It's my body," I responded. "I am alone."

"Maybe they'll find a cure," Connie countered.

I nodded politely, not believing a word of what she

said.

It took nine more years, but finally, I was able to schedule an appointment with a genetic counselor to get the nascent testing for the BRCA1 gene mutation. Connie came with me and spoke on my behalf.

“She needs this to be able to move on with her life. Whatever the outcome, she can handle it; she needs to know.”

At the end of the interview, consent was given, though not because they thought I carried a mutation, as they estimated only an eight to eleven percent risk based on my family history, but because they benevolently wanted to put my mind at ease.

The answer to my question was drawn from my veins — blood spilled into three vials that Kara labeled: Carla F. Feinstein. She placed the vials into a small, padded box, which was then shipped to Salt Lake City, Utah, to be tested in a lab by an unknown scientist hired for the sole purpose of extracting information from a bloody language I knew but couldn’t translate.

Six years later, I moved to Portland and began living a healthier lifestyle. I began to think that if I chose a mastectomy, it would be a decision made out of laziness, an inability to live what I considered to be a “pure” lifestyle. Every day was a battle with my desire to indulge in the things that brought me comfort and joy: coffee with cream and sugar, apple fruit leather, and the peanut butter protein bars I snacked on. At night, if I caved and consumed something with sugar, I’d chide myself with the list of what I shouldn’t have eaten or drank. I could never string together a perfect week, and with a seventy-eight percent chance of getting breast cancer, perfect was the only thing that counted.

But would it really count? Maybe no amount of QiGong or dietary changes would work for someone with a BRCA mutation. The books I was reading targeted women with an average risk— a mere one in five. They’d been written before

the mutation had even been identified, and none of it applied to someone in my situation.

Even if I was able to remove all of the plastic bottles from my house, it didn’t mean that the paint on my walls or the reglaze that was peeling off the bathtub wasn’t toxic. Then there was the heat I pumped through my car on cold days, heating the plastic vents as well as me. And even if I gave up my car and walked everywhere, what about when a bus or car passed me, and I inhaled the exhaust? There was no getting around just how toxic the world had become. I felt like a canary in the coal mine. I was willing to take extreme measures to save my life, but if the world around me wasn’t interested in taking similar steps, I was destined to become Sisyphus.

If I were to get my breasts removed, they would not just be martyrs for myself, but for our culture, as are all of the breasts removed because of breast cancer, a blanket of pink flags covering the caskets of women’s body parts that we have culturally agreed are expendable. And why not? They can be recreated. Skin pulled back and then pulled forward to cover a saline sack that may appear even better than what was there before, but would never carry a life force through it and would never cause the owner to exclaim: “I sing, the body electric!”

Would my breasts accept their role as martyrs in this preemptive strike, or would they haunt me like a phantom limb? It was so easy to think of breasts as an appendage: nice for filling out a swimsuit, but unnecessary if not used for feeding offspring and with formula, not even really necessary for that. Was the electric connection experienced through the caress of a nipple merely an enjoyable, but nonetheless meaningless by-product of sexual arousal?

I imagined the rituals I might perform around the loss of my breasts. I could bury them in a funeral service beneath my favorite Princess Tree, wrap them in a pink flag to acknowledge their sacrifice to the nation of my body, and com-

memorate them. I could ask my brother Rick to mount them on a wood board, taxidermy them like the deer heads and fish that he used to work on, and have him pierce the nipples with O-rings, like an ox on a farm. I could nail the plaque of them onto the front door of my apartment, pull the rings as I left my house for the day, and tug myself into a future full of good luck. But hospitals don't let you take home your disconnected parts; my breast carcasses would be burned in an incinerator.

I thought about how ironic it was that you could go into any store and see a pink ribbon on everything: coolers, cans of soup, blenders, mixers, spatulas, golf balls, sweat shirts, M&Ms, makeup, water bottles, dog leashes, coffee cups, stamps, crosses, scarves, socks, tennis balls, iPod covers, Christmas bulbs, checks. And yet, these were the very items that leaked toxins that mimicked our hormones and increased our risk of getting cancer. My writing was full of the rage that I couldn't express elsewhere.

Suddenly, a thought popped into my mind: maybe a study had been published which showed a reduced occurrence of breast cancer for mutation carriers who had prophylactic mastectomies. I don't know why the thought occurred then, or why it hadn't happened anytime over the past six years since I'd gotten my genetic testing. No doctor or genetic counselor had mentioned it to me, as we hadn't kept in touch. I sat down at my computer, navigated my way to PubMed, typed in BRCA1 mutation and prophylactic mastectomy. And there it was: the research I'd been waiting years for had been published three months earlier. A prophylactic mastectomy reduced the risk of breast cancer up to 90%.

Twenty years later, this statistic is common knowledge, reassuringly given to anyone who goes in to get genetic testing, but until that moment in 2004, I didn't know just how much of a reduction in risk a mastectomy would provide. I thought about what to do with the information.

I heard the keys jingling in the front door: my girlfriend

Angie was home. Skipping "hello," I went right into, "A study has been published showing that mastectomies reduce the risk for mutation carriers by ninety percent. I'm going to get a mastectomy."

She looked shocked, not by the news per se, but by my delivery. I blurted it out as soon as I saw her. But after five years of indecision, I couldn't find it in myself to wait for a more appropriate time.

It was mid-October by the time the oncologist, Dr. Nathalie Johnson, met with Angie and me. The appointment had been rescheduled two times in four weeks: the surgeon was too busy treating people with actual cancer to keep my appointments. When I mentioned to the receptionist that I was now on my third appointment without ever seeing the doctor, she promised not to reschedule me again.

I told her that I wanted to move forward with the surgery, and she consented to performing it. "Are you interested in reconstruction?" she asked.

I told her that I wasn't. She handed me a business card for a plastic surgeon she recommended. "Just in case you change your mind," she said.

I suddenly pictured myself having the masculine pecs I'd long dreamed of and took the card. I felt an uneasy relief as Angie and I walked down the hall to schedule a date. Even if it was the right decision, it was still a big one. I picked a date with the scheduler that coincided with the end of the fall quarter, giving me two months to think about it.

I played around with my image while preparing for my mastectomy. I wanted to avoid being shocked by the change. One afternoon, I locked myself in my bathroom and removed my tight, electric-blue long john shirt and tossed it on top of the toilet seat.

Turning my attention to the mirror, I grabbed one of the rolls of Ace bandages that Angie and I kept around and began the slow process of wrapping the cloth around my chest,

trying to figure out how to flatten my breasts without cutting off circulation. It was awkward, and I quickly lost patience trying to keep the bandage taut while rolling it around my body.

One breast spread out as if flattened in a mammography machine, but the other bulked up and threatened to spill out, like I'd cinched up my waist to make my bosom spill over the top of a corset. Nonetheless, it was as good as I could get it. I put my shirt back on with my eyes closed, pausing to pull the sleeves down before appraising my work. Eyes opened: I looked like a football player, puffed up in the chest, but slightly lopsided. My reflection was hardly flattering. I thought about the business card of the plastic surgeon I'd been referred to. *You could make an appointment and just talk about your options.* I told myself. But I knew I didn't want her to remake my DDs, nor did I want Cs, Bs, or As. If I could've kept my nipples, maybe I would've risked telling the plastic surgeon that what I really wanted was to have my breasts turned into pecs. But under the circumstances, no chest seemed like the best option. I could always get reconstruction later.

As the date of my mastectomy neared, I became increasingly fearful of what I would feel the moment I woke up from surgery and looked down. That, I thought, would be the ultimate moment of truth. Would I wake up and feel relief, or would I be hit with a tsunami of emotion: I'd removed parts of my body before I'd ever fully inhabited them. I'd rejected my breasts out of fear, and now it was too late to rectify the relationship. I should've given myself more time with them. I wanted to be 1000% sure that I was making the right decision before I had the surgery, but that was impossible. I'd only be able to know for sure when I got to the other side.

As the fall quarter of grad school drew to an end, "having my breasts removed" was an odd answer to the "What are you doing over Christmas break?" question, but I still told people who casually inquired. Finals were turned in. Angie and I drove up to Portland with our cats, Pele and Griffin, to

stay with our friends Lyndi and Spence so that we would be near my doctor, just in case anything went wrong post-mastectomy.

I woke before dawn--5:30 to my regular 11:00--to have my last meal before surgery at a coffee shop: a lemon poppy-seed scone and coffee so strong I needed three sugars and four creamers to get it down. I filled the day with acupuncture needles, chiropractic adjustments, and my first and only pedicure, which gave me a case of toenail fungus in my right pinky toe. The activities I'd scheduled to whittle away the long hours between waking and the surgery weren't enough to slow the refrain repeating in my mind, "Am I really doing this?" It was unfathomable: I was going to sign myself in, put on a hospital gown, get knocked out by some powerful drug, and allow a stranger to cut off my breasts? How could I really get rid of my breasts--parts that I never wanted--but a part of me nonetheless?

At the hospital, the receptionist handed me a beeper. Angie and I sat in the waiting room until it went off, signaling me to walk to the prep-room. We stood up. I paused. I'd been focusing on this moment for the last fourteen years of my life. I was sure it would be a pivotal event in my personal history, allowing me to move forward with my life in a way that I hadn't been able to do since my mother died. All I had to do was walk. My legs weakened and wobbled, but my body accepted its sentence and carried me down the carpeted hallway and through the doors that opened to the prep-room.

I stepped into the appointed room, changed into a hospital gown, and climbed into a bed. I noticed that despite having no liquids for over eight hours, I had to pee. It was a nervous tinkle, a pressure that would remain even as the liquid went out, but enough to bother me. Actually, I needed to cry, but feared that if the nurses saw tears, they'd cancel the surgery. In a chilly, antiseptic bathroom, safely alone, I sat on the toilet, hospital gown pulled up to my knees, head held in

my hands, and tried to breathe down the tears as urine dribbled into the bowl.

I wiped. I flushed. I stood up, washed my hands, and faced the mirror. In the dim light of my tunnel vision, I flashed myself--an inaudible goodbye. The gown went up, then came down. I pulled down on the door handle and shut off the light as I let myself out.

I was on the hospital bed, having to pee again. An IV now inserted, there was no time for more dribbling nonsense. I waited to be wheeled into the surgical room. Angie stared at me. I stared back and lost the ability to swallow my apprehension. The truth leaked out. A nurse noticed. He squeezed my hand, then offered relief through a drug dripped into my IV. Calm blew in--clouds on a blustery day.

Angie kissed me before the nurse rolled me away. Gliding down the long hall, hospital lights flicked above, a disco ball shimmered in the caustic hall.

A turn left, a turn right. Forward. Doors opened, bed situated. My surgeon bent over, smiled. A mask was placed around my mouth. I counted backwards: 10, 9, 8...

I woke up in my own hospital room, with a nurse asking me about pain. I couldn't feel anything, though I was aware of the morphine attached to my IV. "About a six," I said in response, trying to figure out how to get as much of the drug into my system as possible without making the nurse suspicious. A pleasant 'whoosh' flooded my system, and I fell back asleep.

When I woke up again, less groggy, I realized it was time to look down. I glanced at the thick white wrap around my chest. It was so thick that it was hard to tell I didn't have breasts. The mastectomy still didn't seem real. *I'll have to wait until I can remove the bandage*, I thought. The nurse informed me that I'd have to keep my chest wrapped for three days. After spending the night and the better part of the following day in the hospital, we went back to our friends' house, ate

homemade challah that a friend had brought over, and waited for the days to pass so that I could remove my bandages and see what my chest looked like. It was a long time to go without a shower, especially after a hive outbreak resulted in sweating, itching, and scratching. Compounding the feeling of discomfort was that, due to the constipating pain medicine, it had been four days since I had defecated.

My stagnant bowels left me feeling full and grumpy. I wanted to time my shit so that it happened when my friends were gone at work, lest I be too self-conscious to relax enough. I drank some "smooth move" tea, and then I drank some more.

Angie was still asleep, and I was happy for the privacy. And then, it happened, a cramp. I went to the bathroom, but by the time I got there, something was wrong. I was dizzy and perspiring. I sat on the toilet, doubled-over as another cramp took over, and I moaned with pain. I shat out a single, small, pure white turd. I didn't know that was possible. Nothing more came out. I knew that I was going to pass out and wanted to get back to the couch, but I couldn't do it without help.

"Angie," I called, "Angie, come here. Help."

She stumbled into the bathroom. I must have looked very pale because as soon as she saw me, she went from looking sleepy to scared. She helped me back to the living room, and I lay down on the couch and moaned. I stared up at the stucco ceiling and tried to ignore the cramps as they overtook my body. I'd never felt pain like this before.

Angie looked for a phone, but we didn't have one; we were proudly non-cell phone owners. Lyndi and Spence only had cell phones, and they took them to work. Angie wanted to go to the neighbors' to call the doctor's office, but I needed help getting back to the toilet. I wasn't able to walk the twenty steps between the couch and the bathroom. At one point, I collapsed mid-step and ended up on the hardwood floors of the kitchen for a few minutes before I could find the strength

to stand up and make it to the living room. We went back and forth for five rounds before I was finally stable enough for her to go to the neighbors', in hopes of finding a phone with which to call the doctor. While she was gone, I feared that I had my breasts removed to save my life, only to die because I was full of shit.

Angie came back. "They shouldn't have let you leave the hospital without a bowel movement. But you should be okay," she confirmed.

Eventually, I evacuated my bowels, and they returned to normal color and size. The pain abated. It was the price I paid for taking too much morphine.

"I didn't realize how much I loved you," Angie told me later, "until I saw you passed out on that floor and I didn't know if you were going to be okay."

I decided to make a quasi-grand unveiling of the wound. Surrounded by Angie and my friends, I started the process of unwrapping the tape and gauze. The layers were dense enough to make it look like I still had a B cup set of breasts, but at the bottom of the layers were two lines, sewn together with dissolving stitches and small pieces of tape, meant to protect the thread from getting wet. I moved my shoulder back as I glanced down and felt nauseated as I saw a muscle ripple beneath my chest wall. It took me a moment to realize that this movement had always looked like this, but flesh upon flesh had made it invisible to me.

After the chorus of "That doesn't look too bad," I excused myself to take a shallow bath and wash off the dead cells that had been accumulating over the last few days. When I immersed myself in the clawfoot tub, an unknown scent entered my nostrils, slightly humid from the warm air. I smelled different. Unable to clarify my earlier scent, I could notice only its absence and the presence of a metallic, maple syrup odor. I thought that the smell would go away as the painkillers left my system, but the change was permanent.

I tentatively brought my hands to my chest. The flatness felt so different. They're really gone, I thought. I searched myself for regret and felt none. I hadn't been 'tricking' myself into not feeling attached to my breasts; I'd made the right decision.

How to Tell a Joke in Three Easy Steps

Bobby Oerzen

The process server stood on Eliot's doorstep, clutching the manila envelope like a valentine he was nervous to give.

"Don't worry," Eliot assured him. "Not gonna make this difficult. You had nothing to do with it."

The server nodded, wary but relieved, offering a pen with the papers.

When Eliot went to sign, the pen scratched dry across the page. No ink. He tried again, pressing harder, leaving only an indentation. He looked up with a smile, desperate. *Timing's everything in comedy.* "So, this means it all goes away, right? And we live happily ever after?"

The process server just pulled out another pen.

Wrong pen, wrong timing, wrong audience. The setup was perfect; execution, not so much. As Eliot signed, he wondered if, perhaps, timing was secondary to delivery.

Later, at the kitchen table, Eliot read through the documents. "DISSOLUTION OF MARRIAGE." Dissolution: like sugar stirred into water until it disappeared. Such pessimistic diction for what had once felt solid, permanent.

STEP 1: Set the Stage! Start with a premise that draws your audience in...

He'd arrived twenty minutes early to their first date to savor the anticipation. All day he'd felt it building. Google searches during his lunch break ("first date conversation starters"), a stop at Banana Republic to buy a blazer he probably couldn't afford. None of it mattered. He was a live wire, stripped raw — crackling with possibility.

The bar was a typical Lower East Side joint. Dim in that calculated way. All Edison bulbs and exposed brick. Super

storm Sandy had just blown through the city, and everything still felt waterlogged, uncertain. The smell of soggy leaves had seeped into everything. The IPA he ordered was hoppy and complex — material he could riff on if needed, the difference between cascade and centennial hops.

He pulled out a book, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, bookmarked with an invitation to a friend's wedding two months out. Already he was imagining waltzing in with her. *This is Clara*, he'd say — her name rolling off his tongue like those Spanish R's.

He tried to distract himself by reading, his eyes flicking over typeface, but the words refused to cohere into meaning. Like trying to hold water in cupped hands.

Then, she walked in.

STEP 2: Build the Tension! Raise the stakes to keep them hooked...

From across the bar, he watched — admired — the way she moved through the crowd, her brown hair catching the amber light. She shed her oversized winter coat, revealing a simple sweater, jeans. A careless style that suggested beauty was beside the point. She'd done her makeup without obsessing — hint of eyeliner, lips their natural color.

"Eliot?"

"That's me," he blurted, hopping to his feet, bumping his bookmark. Clara offered a tight-lipped smile as he dove to retrieve the wedding invitation.

Part of him wished she'd have crouched down, too; their hands meeting on the cream cardstock. *What's this?* She'd ask, and he'd explain about the wedding, and she'd say wasn't it funny how they'd just met, and here was this invitation, like the universe winking.

But instead, she slid into the booth, plucking the cocktail menu from between salt and pepper shakers.

"Jesus," she squinted at the menu. "Twelve dollars for

well whiskey?”

He surfaced from under the table, invitation in hand; blazer twisted awkwardly. Her attention remained fixed on the laminated menu, like it was the most fascinating thing in the room.

STEP 3: Deliver the Punchline! Land it with confidence, even if — especially if — it's not what they expect...

It took three rounds of drinks before she noticed the book. “*Love in the Time of Cholera*,” she smirked, “What are you? Some sort of a romantic?”

She cocked her head, a Cheshire grin spreading across her face. The bar was playing music: Gotye, the verse from the woman’s perspective. It all built to a crescendo: he knew the next two hours, the next two months, the next two years balanced on his answer.

“Guilty,” he shrugged, unsure what facial expression to make.

After a long, tense beat her face creased in a smile that he found immaculate. “That’s either going to be a problem or it isn’t.”

Caught up in his own excitement, he rambled about the book, how Florentino Ariza waited fifty-one years for Fermina Daza, until —

“Know what I remember about that book?” It sounded like a dare. “How she smells his shit on their honeymoon and realizes she doesn’t love him. Márquez,” She snorted, sharp and bright. A gleeful heckler. “He knew what was up.” She tore a strip from her cocktail napkin as she said it, the bar’s name —*Slipper Room*— ripping clean in half.

He felt something tighten in his chest but pushed through it. This was just her humor he told himself, Dark and smart. He liked that about her already.

“You’re even funnier than your texts,” he said, hoping it came off as a compliment.

She studied him, then reached across the table, grabbing his collar and pulling him forward. He knocked over his beer, IPA spreading in a golden flood, soaking Márquez, the invitation, everything to come.

“Shit —” he started, but she was already kissing him, deep and urgent. He tasted the whiskey sour on her tongue, felt her teeth graze his bottom lip. Somehow both tender and violent.

When she pulled away, he sat there stunned. The taste of her twelve-dollar whiskey burned in his mouth and a thought swirling in his head: THIS IS THE GIRL I’M GOING TO MARRY!

At his kitchen table, Eliot put the papers down. The callback had finally arrived.

The Contemplative Flower of Violet

Paweł Markiewicz

The mellow flower of violet
is the fineness of the violet's blossom in the moonlight
however, the small eternity happens
in an enchanting woodland solitude
genus Viola is minor
but wonderful and subtle
so tranquil the last night was
when a sylvan dream was awakened
four butterflies landed
in the calyx of this violet
their elysian longing leaving
in the heart of the flower, a diamond was created
from heart-like dreameries of butterflies
and from eternal power of starry night
and the moon shines on everything
I stay yet not far from that
in the phantasy – the violet so unfolded
intoxicated by charm and by homeland
as well as by starlit night
full of the dreamy Erlking



Cardinal Sins

Fiction

First Place Winner:

The Summer Wind
by: Sam Mazzarol

The Summer Wind

Sam Mazzarol

Fifteen thousand times a day the Pacific Ocean heaves herself onto the rock platform at the base of the 250-meter-high sea-cliff that the townsfolk of Ellis Rocks call the Door Wedge.

I was 11 years old in 1987 and the first light of the new year was breaking over the small beachside town as I stood at the precipice of the long, thin headland. The town at the base of the Door Wedge was an unremarkable and sleepy holiday stop for lower-to-middle income families, boasting three caravan parks and five fish 'n chip shops. And for the past six Januaries my family had made it the Mecca for the uninspired and predictable summertime pilgrimage my vacations had become.

But in the crisp wind of the dawn of January, there was barely a soul to be seen on the beaches either side of the Door Wedge or on the esplanade.

The orange dawn over the Pacific was dappled by pink cumulus clouds and the crashing surf beneath me sounded like a barrage of a thousand aerial sorties. The wind blasting immediately from the east was so strong I imagined it blowing me back onto the grassy cliff top had I thrown myself over.

As I looked back toward the street, a human figure began climbing the goat track that led up to the ledge. The man wore a long black cloak and walked with long purposeful strides up the slope. As he drew nearer, I could see his face was mostly obscured by a long black beard and a pair of dark glasses. He was about the only person I could see with the full sweep of vision, and he was exactly the sort of man my parents had warned me to stay well clear of.

I was too young and sheltered to recognize the sickly-sweet waft of hemp that came from the joint dangling from

his mouth. He had no shoes and didn't even appear to be wearing any pants under his coat. I moved out of his way and stood back, hoping naively he hadn't noticed me. He walked up to the ledge, looked down and gazed up through his shades as if he were looking for Lucy in the Sky. The wind blew his long hair into the air like a lion's mane as he laughed openly, guarding his little reefer against the wind in his cupped right hand. There were always odd people drifting through Ellis Rocks: rednecks, vagrants and mystics. Most were harmless, though you'd be foolish to leave too much goodwill in their hands.

He turned toward me and took his shades off in what was for me a sharp moment of fear. His beard was almost a foot long but tightened into a long braid at the end.

"You're up early, kid," he said.

He took off his cloak to reveal only a tiny pair of shorts around his wiry, tattooed form and a long head of hair that went halfway down his back.

"Anyway fella, nothing personal but you'd better FOQ," he said as he bound his hair into a ponytail.

He then turned to me again and his gaze grew sterner. "I don't speak Swahili, kid: piss off."

I recoiled at the force of his language but, not wanting to entertain the alternatives, was mightily glad he'd dismissed me.

"Alright, stay - whatever, kid. Just don't do what I do, or if you do, don't tell anyone you saw me do it, ok?"

He placed his sunglasses back on his face and turned to face the cliff's edge. He took a few small paces forward and then vanished calmly and silently over the edge.

My heart and stomach became one for a moment and I felt the numbness of incomprehension that immediately follows trauma. I ran to the ledge and saw the vagrant hurtling quietly toward the rocks, his legs and arms flailing and his ponytail pointing up toward the sky. In three seconds, he

had fallen halfway and I could feel a ghoulish shot of adrenalin kick in, knowing something spectacularly unsettling was imminent.

Yet as he approached the bottom, his body straightened out and he was soon falling headfirst like a pencil, yet not plumb down but pitched out toward the sea. For a moment, it looked as though he might have been able to make a water landing. But the more he fell, the more he moved away from the cliff face. He was soon no longer moving toward the water but parallel to it. And then like a piece of rubbish swept up in a gust, his entire body flipped up and away from the water's surface. This vertical motion seemed to take his erect body up a few meters before he slipped back toward the waves. He hooked another leg higher, only this time turning back to face the cliff. The wind was supporting him mid-air. He did this a few times until he caught a fast ride almost to the height of the precipice. He didn't zoom up like a rocket - he was carried up and appeared to be tossed around as though he had no specific control over his direction.

His general movements looked more like that of a fly than a bird. Occasionally when it looked like he was losing altitude he would do a somersault or two and plunge about 10 or 20 meters before catching another thermal higher. As the sun rose up on the township, I watched this man ride the winds of Ellis Rocks.

Finally, he made a long series of spirals higher until he was just a speck in the sky, far above the precipice of the Door Wedge where I stood. For a moment, he was suspended in the sky. He then embarked on a series of slow, wide circles towards the water, only he was moving away from the proximity of the cliff toward the beach on the southern side of the headland. I could see him making a long, slow controlled descent toward the waves breaking on the beach. His landing was more a series of falls followed by shallow sweeps up. As he got closer to the water I could see he was trying to time

himself with the waves. Eventually, he merged with the white surf about 25 meters from the sand. He disappeared below the water, and it was about 10 seconds before I saw his head reappear amid the wash.

Without thinking I grabbed his black cloak and ran down the hill. Sweaty and breathless I arrived at the beach and saw him lumbering out of the water. He unfurled his hair and shook his sunglasses dry. Expressionless, he looked my way, walked up and grabbed the coat from me. He reached into the pockets to retrieve his rolled up joint and gruffly passed the cloak back to me.

"Keep it, champ," he said and walked off across the esplanade and down a laneway that led to the town's one backstreet.

It was then I noticed an elderly couple who were sitting on a nearby park bench with their Scottish terrier.

"Dope-smoking crook and lowlife scum - someone should let the police know he's back in town," the old gentleman growled as he turned his stiff neck, watching the vagrant saunter off.

"Oh, leave him be, Ken," his wife responded and then turned to me.

"Isn't he wonderful to watch? We haven't seen him here for some years now. A magnificent show but a very sad story," she explained.

"The only thing sad about it is he hasn't smashed himself against the rocks yet," Ken offered.

I asked politely what his name was.

"Oh, I can never remember and I don't know what town he came from. He wasn't much of a scholar, but he was a very talented musician as a schoolboy, I'm told. Never took a lesson in his life but knew like a fish knows water. I don't care much for his sort of music, I must say - much like the, what's that awful band called?"

"...the Sex Pistols..." Ken mouthed as though the very

words were bile on his palate.

“No, not them, dear... never mind... the story goes he became tone deaf after a terrible motorcycle accident when he was about 17. After that, slipped off a cliff top at Walker Heads or somewhere nearby and that’s when he learned to fly,” she told.

“He took some pills and tried to kill himself,” Ken added.

“Yes, now promise me you won’t do likewise,” she said sweetly.

It was still early morning when I returned to the cabin in the caravan park where my parents were sleeping off their New Year’s lagers. No one was any wiser about my early morning walkabout. I quietly resettled myself into my cabin bunk knowing that I’d be up and moving again in an hour or two.

In the harsh summer heat of the day, I began to wonder if what I’d seen was real at all. As a child, I’d told many lies: some malicious for my own personal protection or advancement, others pure embellishment to indulge my imagination. Yet I was confident that I’d be incapable of telling this story as anything other than an honest-to-God recollection of what I’d seen, something I knew my parents would have no time for.

So, I told no one.

The slow morning creaked into an even slower lunch hour and by late afternoon my family and I had moved to the beach to do nothing in particular. My father splashed around the modest surf with my younger sister while I sat on the sand reading Asterix and the Goths, the sound of regional AM broadcast coming from my parents’ transistor radio. The radio station had been playing their gold playlist and some croaky New Year’s message from Prime Minister Hawke.

“Why don’t you go play in the water?” my mother asked.

“I don’t want to.”

It seems cruel to be so sneering about such simple and

earnest family memories. But it wasn’t just boredom I was wrestling with that afternoon; it was the anguish of knowing what I’d seen. I was turning the pages of my comic but barely reading the words or looking at the pictures.

And then I felt it - a hot, sharp prick in my sensory memory as the smell of smoldering hemp passed down the beach. I paused intently and put Asterix on the sand. My mother lying on her towel, supporting her body with her elbows as she stared vacuously through a pair of glasses out at the surf, tapping her pinky to Skeeter Davis’ version of Gonna Get Along Without Ya Now.

I picked myself up and followed the scent up the sandy steps to the grassy hill near the beach car park.

There I saw him - sitting shirtless under a cypress in the park, smoking a joint and chatting to some guys with surfboards. He was making sweeping motions with his hands, and I could hear him talking about the wind. The surfers walked off and I dawdled over.

He looked over my way and slipped his joint discretely away.

Up closer, I could see the awkwardly spaced and random collection of tattoos on different parts of his torso, with no defining theme or motif: a Chinese dragon on one arm, pictures of mermaids on the other, the words “The Show Must Go On” scrawled across his chest and some other cryptic quotes and squiggles that meant little to me and presumably anyone else.

He looked up at me through his bleary eyes.

It was obvious he didn’t recognize me and I was all of a sudden beginning to second guess what I was so sure I’d seen that morning.

“How do you fly like that?” I asked with the only boldness I could muster.

He retrieved his joint and took a long meaningful toke. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said.

My posture collapsed as a landslide of self-doubt crashed down on me. I slowly turned away and began the long painful process of pondering my own sense of dorkdom.

“No, come back,” he called. “I remember you. You brought my reefer down for me.”

I nodded, shooting a glance back at him.

“You’re a good kid - but you need to know I don’t fly,” he said.

The man was in his early forties, but he was an agile bopper, squatting on the balls of his feet on a bald patch of dirt under the shade of the tree.

His feet were horribly calloused and his curled toenails filthy black. The fingernails of his gnarly hands were similarly dirty and overgrown. He smoothed the patch of loose dirt with the edge of his palm and began outlining a picture of the Door Wedge and the sea on the soil. This was no crude line in the sand but a detailed depiction of the beachscape behind him. He didn’t do this with a stick but rather used all five digits on his right hand simultaneously to create the picture.

“...and here’s the sea.” With both hands he etched a picture of the base of the cliff and the shoreline. With his hands, he created the pictures with the sort of speed and expression the hands of Chopin might have displayed over a set of piano keys.

“Now - when your schoolteacher tells you that if you fall off a cliff that’s yay high that you’ll fall at this speed and hit the bottom in this time, then you know she’s either a clueless bitch or worse...she’s lying.” To illustrate the point, he drew a hair-thin line with the edge of his nail from the top of the cliff to the base and then erased it with his index finger.

“I’ll tell you something, kid - nothing goes in a straight line - it’s the biggest lie ever. So, when you see some brain-fried hippy throw himself off a cliff, he knows he doesn’t have to land in the spot directly beneath him. If you jump off a cliff, you can maybe go a little to the left or a little to the right. So,

there’s no real reason why you can’t just keep pushing out a little more. It’s like anything inevitable in life - I’m not saying you’re not going to hit the bottom, but if you can put it off as long as you can then you can make a good ride of it. It helps if you’ve spent your whole life procrastinating but of course a good breeze -like what we got today -also helps.” He drew another line to illustrate his point: it went from the top of the cliff straight down and then gradually out to sea though never touched the surface.

“So, it’s not flying?” I asked.

“No, it’s drifting - been doing it all my life.”

“Do you think I could learn?”

The man didn’t answer my question but, retrieving his rolled weed, took another drag as he looked out to sea. The breeze blew in and his eyes widened.

“That your family out there? Frumpy redhead bird and pasty dad with double chin and mustache? They good folks?”

I nodded.

“Kid, I’ve never seen someone so young look so bored as you do right now. Let me tell you something about the wind - she’s the sexiest thing alive. Smooth, clean, firm and closer than a brother or sister - but like Sinatra says she’s a mighty fickle bitch and you need to know what mood she’s in before you decide to give yourself to her,” he said pointedly.

A wave of clarity washed over him and his bleary eyes sharpened.

He looked past my shoulder and I turned to see my parents emerging from the beach.

“So long, dude. If the wind picks up, I’ll be taking off later this afternoon.”

My puzzled looking mother swiftly trotted toward us, smiled politely at my new friend and whisked me away from the stranger back to the caravan park.

At about half past six, I stood atop the Door Wedge again and peered over the shabby chain link fence down to

the crashing waves. Apart from the scruffy overhang and a few tufts of weeds sticking out of the cliff face, it was almost a clean run down to the bottom. A strong wind came up the cliff, and I shielded my face as a spray of grit and salt hit my face. The surf repeated its looped performance of crawling like a slow hand over the rock platform below before retreating.

"If you drop down and find yourself heading straight for the rocks like an egg, I won't be coming after you," I heard a voice from behind say.

I turned to see the vagrant sitting on the bench, tapping his bare feet on the hard soil.

"But don't let that stop you," he said.

"Some folks say I've got some special deal with gravity, that falling doesn't come as hard for me as it does for others," he explained as I pulled myself away from the ledge, embarrassed.

"I don't know about that, but I remember the first time I ever threw myself off a cliff not too different to this one. Back then the plan was to go straight down and never come up again. "

The sun was setting over the land and the Pacific's horizon was turning purple as evening encroached. The man stretched his arms and gyrated his hips to limber up.

"Folks in this town don't like me much - seems to be a recurrent theme in most places I go. And that's alright by me as I don't much like them."

He stretched his hamstring muscles as he held a hair band between his teeth.

"The first time I threw myself down it hurt like hell when I hit water - even with all the juice and beans I'd taken - but what surprised me was the fact that I hadn't fallen in a straight line and what's more important, I wasn't dead.

"A few weeks later I tried it again just to see how slowly I could fall to the bottom. And that's when I started to learn the wind can help you along but only if you let it. It took a few

months before I fully got this. The wind's always there like a quiet little flirt, giving me little nudges higher and making my trip down that much gentler. And then one evening, much like this, we just hit it off and..." he pointed with his finger skyward and smiled.

"So where are you going now?" I asked as I felt the firm breeze come in from the southeast.

"I reckon this wind can take me about three towns along the coast. I can make a nice landing at the inlet at Wol-lumundi Lakes. It doesn't really matter where I go, just so long as I move along."

He pulled his hair back and bound it with the band.

"Remember, I'm not Superman and I sure as hell am no angel. If you find yourself falling from this cliff you won't see me coming after you.

"Take care, little buddy."

With that, he stepped over the ledge as if it were a step off his back porch. I didn't see him fall this time. The wind was so strong he was already moving vertically away from the cliff. He bounced along the breeze and then made a couple of spirals down before the wind took him a few waves higher. As he moved along the northern beach, I could see him rolling in the wind like a happy cat rolls in dust. He had given himself a decent altitude and eventually, he was completely invisible in the dusk sky.

All that was left atop the Door Wedge were my own thoughts and the unintelligible whisperings of the wind.

An inner pang of envy and a private lust gripped me as I imagined myself rising into the sky as he did. I sighed and sat on the pebbly ground. I crawled over to the ledge and looked down. There was still a strong wind blowing up the cliff.

I placed two legs over the ledge and propped my body up with the palms of my hands.

"If you can put it off as long as you can then you can make a good ride of it," I said, repeating the man.

My arms began to shake as I suspended myself over
the rocks and ocean for a few minutes.
I glanced back up into the sky to see if I could still see
my friend, but he was gone.
Shutting my eyes, I counted to three.

Autumn

Joshua St. Claire



hurricane remnants
a whirligig
breaks free

leaflitter moon
the universe
grinds to a halt

afraid to meet them
in the woods
goldenrod

cumulus clouds
shifting the sunrays
glister of crow

last light
red maple leaves
reach terminal velocity

last nectarines
new cold
warms the mountain

lub-dub
the red sun
through yellow trees

Wright's Ferry Bridge
two blue skimmers
joined at the hip

great egrets
leaving the Susquehanna
nameless wildflowers

stretch of stratus aster field

early November
burying myself
in the scent of fallen leaves

Winter

Joshua St. Claire



sunshine and shadow
on bare birches
stratocumulus sky

skeleton elm branches
creaking in the north wind
these five fingers

where the sun strikes an absence of bird

frozen river
the spruce roots
pull deeper

into the sound of moonlight

fox shadow

sun frost
an absence
of footsteps

bone white
in the cold moonlight
elm and I

alizarin crimson and ivory black that night

snow coming
the white
in the deepening grey

what lies beyond the meadow full of snow

Just Physics

Dick Daniels



Dissimilar forces brought the two men together: the American Civil War and baseball. Will Thomas of the Union Army had been an architecture student. He was the star player on his college team, the leading home run hitter although he possessed a wiry build and wore spectacles. History would never know what kind of soldier he might have been, as he was captured at the First Battle of Bull Run.

Initially, the men at Asheboro Prison Camp in North Carolina had been allowed considerable latitude in their activities, and Will introduced the new game of baseball, fashioning a bat from a discarded fence post. He still had the baseball he brought into that first battle, thinking his military mates could enjoy a game of catch after the expected victory.

Johnny Clark, a Confederate guard, was fifteen years old and assigned to the camp because he was a crack shot with a rifle. His parents were poor and made ends meet by producing moonshine in the hills. Johnny was taught to shoot for two reasons, to bring home meat for the family table and to scare away anyone snooping around their stills. Although some of his bulk was baby fat, he was the size of any full-grown man.

In those early days when the prison warden allowed games to boost the prisoners' morale, Johnny had been invited to play with the northerners and proved to be a natural slugger. Will helped him perfect his swing. "It's just physics," he would say. "You want to hit the ball in front of home plate, when your bat speed has reached maximum velocity. Hit it with the fattest part of the bat—close to the end; that will apply the greatest force. Lastly, swing the bat in a slightly upward arc to give lift to the ball so it can defy gravity over a longer period of time and distance." Johnny didn't understand

all the words, but he applied the principles.

As the war dragged on and rations shrank, the games were abandoned as the emaciated men had no energy for recreation. One day as they were recovering from a shortened game, Will took the opportunity to learn more about the issue that had caused the great conflict, so he asked the young man, “Why do you have slaves?”

“We don’t have none,” Johnny replied. “My pa couldn’t afford one. Besides, he says it ain’t right.”

“Why does he say that?”

“They’re really the same as us...You know most of them speak two different languages, right?”

“You mean, African and English?”

“No, both English. They talk dumb around white folks ‘cause it’s against the law for a slave to know how to read. They would get lashes—or worse. But when they’re alone, they talk just like you and me.”

“I had no idea,” said the dumbfounded college man.

As the war neared its end, prisoners were starving to death, literally. To avoid that inevitable fate, many tried to escape. Some succeeded, but many more died in the attempt. Johnny had to pull the trigger a few times. He never killed anyone, choosing instead to bring them down with a well-placed shot in the leg.

By the time General Sherman completed his “March to the Sea,” the prisoner population in Asheboro was less than one hundred men who were nothing more than skin and bones. In March of 1865, rumors spread that Union armies would be liberating the camps, and the prison personnel could be charged with war crimes. In response, Asheboro’s warden set about to close the camp by shooting the remainder of the captives.

When it was Will’s turn, Johnny volunteered to escort him to the execution. In the surrounding woods where a mass grave had been dug, he pulled Will aside, “Listen, I talked to

some of the slaves that lives near us. There’s a church, Mount Zion Baptist, five miles north that’ll help ya. I’ve got some biscuits for ya, and here’s a maple bat I carved for your protection. Look out for deserters; they’s probably more dangerous than any soldiers.”

Will thanked him with a hug and said, “I hope we meet again someday,” as Johnny fired in the air.

When General Lee surrendered, Johnny got as far away from Asheboro as he could. He made a living constructing simple farm buildings in North Carolina with a crew of hard-working blacks. On a Sunday afternoon twenty years later, his wife Debbie handed him the Raleigh newspaper, pointing out a story about a magnificent new building being dedicated in Washington, D.C. The architect was Will Thomas. “Isn’t this the fellow you knew at Asheboro? You should go. Take J.T. with you. It can be an early fifteenth-birthday present.” Johnny and his excited son boarded a train the next morning.

Will Thomas, during his remarks from the podium, locked eyes on young J.T. and saw the spitting image of the young man who had guarded him at Asheboro Prison. Despite the wear of two decades, he recognized the father, too. Finding each other after the crowd thinned, a beaming Will hugged his old friend and said, “I’ll be darned, Johnny Clark! Or should I say, ‘Mr. John Clark?’ The man who saved my life. Your name should also be on this building.” Turning to J.T., he asked, “And who is this fine young man?”

Johnny was also smiling broadly when he introduced his son, “This is J.T.—John Thomas Clark. He’s named after a man I met a long time ago.”

“John, come to my house for lunch. We’ve got some catching up to do.”

As the dishes were cleared, Will disappeared for a minute and came back with the weathered maple bat. “I still have it. But I’d like J.T. to take care of it for me.” Gripping the bat and adopting a crouched stance, he said, “Son, it’s just phys-

ics. You want to hit the ball with maximum bat speed....”

Celestial Nap

Astrid Wick



Watercolor, graphite, white ink, and colored pencil.

Rope Burn

Alexander Kolleth

7:13 P.M, eleven notifications, eight of them from Tino. The blue light emanating from my Samsung assaulted my sight.

Bzzzzzt, bzzzzzt, bzzzzzzzt.

I picked up my phone, hesitant to speak. “Hey, everything okay?” Unlikely, considering that Tino has a flair for the theatrics. I pressed my fingers against the ridge of my eyebrows. Everything he said sounded like standard gossip until a torpedo of information emerged from the surface. The bombshell hit me like an aluminum baseball bat. His family drama had escalated into more than a battle with rules—no, it had developed into an all-out assault. Of course. As if peace was ever an option with this man. “When di—Wait, this happened after I left? Stay right where you are, I’ll be there in a few.”

Dinner would have to wait until I could pick up my friend. Just thinking about this made the rope that held us together tighten intensely. Another notification, this time of the location. His cousin’s house—the epicenter of the crisis.

The drive there felt like sailing through dense fog in the hopes of finding the shipwrecked sailor at the lone light-house. Everything seemed fine the previous night. We spent the night celebrating the completion of the Silos in Old Town Saginaw. We danced along to the myriads of artists, whether it was gospel, punk, or jazz, singing on stage, with Tino taking the lead as I sheepishly tried to stay on beat. That night, his gaze lingered on me longer than usual, his smile warm like the sun. That night, my gaze averted away from him quicker than usual, my smile stiff.

Six months of dancing an off-tempo tango will do that to men with different definitions of no strings attached. Our once perfectly stable rope now contains several knots,

tangling us together. Severing the rope was tempting. Yet, the smell of his Versace Eros cologne kept me entranced, the warmth of his calloused hands soothing.

Our situation seemed to act like a Nicorette patch; perhaps it worked too well for him.

Once I turned into his cousin’s cracked-up, weed-ridden driveway, I hit the same shallow curb, like I always do. My car shook like a rattlesnake, making me worry that this instance would result in an expensive band-aid for my Kia Forte. Sitting on the beat-up steps of the porch was my dear friend, who was looking down, sullen with a stony expression etched onto his face.

Upon seeing my Kia Forte, he darted toward my car, carrying a small tie-dyed JanSport drawstring bag. His hair was unkempt, resembling a Barbie doll that had experienced too much playtime. The bags underneath his bloodshot eyes resembled a deep violet. He reeked of cannabis and black and mild cigars. I could still smell traces of his Versace Eros. He swung open the door, sitting down in the passenger seat as if it were a life raft. He planted a kiss on my cheek.

“I’m going to rehab tomorrow. I can’t live like this anymore.” The rope tightens itself further, wrapping around us to create yet another knot.

There was nothing I could do but nod along, drive, and listen. Everything started to make sense after he told me what happened. The frantic shouting from his cousin had kept him up all night.

“...Mind if I smoke?” His delivery indicated he already knew my answer.

I hesitated. “Just be sure to roll down the window.” He rolled down the window, and a low squeak could be heard. He took a puff of his cigarette. Some of the smoke trailed back into the Kia; my expression remained wooden.

“Alex, he hit me. He really hit me, Alex. He wasn’t in his right mind.” That bastard. I knew cocaine could make a

man belligerent, but I never would have guessed his cousin's senses would have evaporated along with the high. Now, Tino has lost his safety net. Each thread had been snipped one after another. He had called his friends. Nothing. His extended family? He wasn't even graced with a response. Only me. One cheery chickadee within a sea of vultures answered his cry for help. I could feel the abrasions forming.

We drove for several minutes until we pulled into the all-too-familiar Old Town parking lot. We were welcomed by neighboring flashes of ruby and sapphire lights. Cop cars decorated the streets as crowds of people swamped them. The stars in the sky had been drowned out by the smog in the air. I smelled nothing but Tino's perfume and the stench of cigarette smoke. Gio remained fixated on me.

Sitting in the driver's seat, I fiddled around with a titanium ring, casting my eyes away from Tino. I turned up the radio, letting my Best of Y2K playlist speak through my car speakers.

"I'm sorry. You know my folks won't let anyone crash at their place. Is there anyone willing to let you stay for the night?"

"My friend lives around the corner. If not, I'll manage. I'm checking in tomorrow anyway." He leaned in a bit closer, his hand now nestled over mine. "Besides, once I get out...I know I'll have you by my side."

And for a moment, that future prospect felt like a warm embrace. Yet I still felt the abrasions; the tugging wouldn't stop. It had to stop. It needed to stop. I can't fulfill this end of the deal anymore. It was time to cut the rope.

"...We can't be affectionate anymore. I...I'll be here to support you, just not in that way." Any warmth had left the car, leaving behind chills. He went silent, as if I'd just carved the rejection into his chest. The rope had finally been severed, leaving behind agonizing burns.

"I think this...this feels so much worse than a breakup."

And to make matters worse, "Please Don't Go" by Mike Posner started playing. He swiftly turns the volume down. Maybe I should have lodged the knife into myself.

"Why? Why now of all times?" His voice cracked.

"Because I'm being cruel to you," I spoke slowly. "I can't give you what you need, especially since I haven't healed myself."

"That's fair." He let out a soft remark, taking another hit of Marlboro Red. "Did you feel anything?"

I click my tongue, trying my best not to roll my eyes. "Of course. These feelings, though, are not love. Maybe intense passion. Certainly not love."

"Then what is love to you? Is it love?" He continues to press, seemingly eager to interrogate me. Ah, the million-dollar question. At this point, I'd rather he take off with my car.

"Love is...an equation I haven't solved. There are too many variables to take into consideration, and I can't ruin myself again. Not again." He looked at me with pity. Here he was with no safety net and viewing me like I was a beaten puppy. My gaze lingered downward at the rims of my car.

"Alex, love grows with the simple pleasures of life. Remember the fries we shared behind the Silos? Remember when we watched our favorite movies? Doesn't that spark love within you?" Perhaps it did. But I'm still reeling from the burns. The pressure was too much to bear. This felt like a plea, a desperate bargain for additional affection.

Still looking away with a steel-like look, my lips quivering, "I simply can't. I'm sorry." His face fell, with all warmth from him clamping itself shut. After shutting the driver's side of my car, I felt a gust of wind stab me with its chilling breeze. "You must understand. I'm recovering, too. Anything more than a friendship will ruin us."

Shades of red and blue flash rapidly like strobe lights, blinding us both. He hasn't responded to what I've said. One of the few threads that had initially strung us together had

devolved into a bloodied dagger, his wounds now open for the world to see while I keep mine hidden. Maybe rehab would be good for him. After all, it's not like he had anywhere else to go.

I open my arms, hoping to give him one last hug. He reluctantly reciprocates, but I can tell everything has been too overwhelming. Salt had been rubbed into his abrasions, and it burned. It scorched him severely with no antidote in sight.

We remain locked together for a good thirty seconds. He pats me on the back. "You're going to visit me, right?"

I give him a half-hearted smile. "Like I said, I'll be here for you on this journey of yours. Just not in the...well, you know."

"I do. It's okay. It's fine."

"Good luck tonight," I say, with a hint of concern. Hopefully, his friend around the corner lets him crash for the night. Tino walks off into the night. I enter my car and slowly drive away, periodically checking my rear-view mirror until he's no longer in sight.

The smell of his Versace Eros lingered on my leather jacket. All traces of the rope vanished. Yet the burns remain.

Sunrise Over Necropolis

Sarah Kleinfeld



Sunshine and a cool breeze
there's not a cloud in the sky
over the saddest place on Earth

The baby deer are too busy following mother to notice
But the crows in their winged mafias have long known
that this place is a necropolis

Benches of carved stone offer a moment of rest
The church on the main street softens the blow
But the scent of flowers doesn't quite hide the rot

in a city of the dead
as opulent, as destitute
as New Orleans

Where the rich lay their skulls to rest
Where the poor struggle to support the bones of ancestors
they never knew
Where the thrifty escape, becoming ash on the wind

Acknowledgments



So much goes into producing this journal. I'd like to express gratitude on behalf of *Cardinal Sins* to the following people, though this list is incomplete in scope and depth.

Thank you to J.J. Boehm and the PJPC team; Taylor Hart for designing our logo; everyone at the Graphics Center for printing our journal; SVSU's English, Art, and RPW departments for encouraging students to join us and submit; and all of the SVSU students who have shown interest in our publication over the past couple of years.

Thank you to Dr. Kim Lacey, our faculty advisor who is always supporting us throughout the *Cardinal Sins* process. I'm so happy that I can work with you on this publication, and I always appreciate everything you do for us.

Thank you to all of our wonderful contributors. I feel so honored to be able to help you along the path to publication, and I hope that all of your hard work was worth it when you hold a journal with your creations in it.

Thank you to my staff who keeps publishing fun and manageable. The team this year was a mix of returning students and new people, and I'm glad that you all decided to join us. Our meetings were so wonderful, and I know that you're going to do great things as we continue to work together on these journals.

Finally, thank you for reading the Annual Fall 2025-Winter 2026 issue of *Cardinal Sins*, including the Acknowledgements no less. I hope you enjoy, and I salute your support of the arts.

All the best,

Leah Richardson, Editor-in-Chief
Emily McGlynn, Editor-in-Chief

Biographies



Winners

Claire Scott is a recently retired psychotherapist who is enjoying having more time to write, take long walks and try to stay ahead of the weeds. She is excited to be spending more time with her five grandchildren who are scattered over the country. And OMG this Granny just turned eighty.

Faith Schuyler is a Visual Arts Education major at SVSU who spends most of her time covered in paint—on purpose. Originally from Arizona, she mainly creates realistic paintings but isn't afraid to try abstract styles. She also dabbles in photography when she's not busy making masterpieces.

William Cass has published over 380 short stories and won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal. He's been nominated once for Best of the Net, twice for Best Small Fictions, six times for the Pushcart Prize, and had three short story collections released by Wising Up Press.

Carella Keil's debut poetry collection *Undercover Butterfly* is available from Dark Thirty Poetry Publishing. She is the 2023 Door is a Jar Writing Award winner in nonfiction and the featured artist for the Fall 2024 issue of *Blue Earth Review*. Find her work on instagram @catalogue.of.dreams.

Brian Hawkins lives in southern Indiana with his wife, Lacy. Brian's work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *The Barcelona Review*, *Jelly Bucket*, *The Brussels Review*, *Cowboy Jamboree*, and *After Dinner Conversation*. He currently is taking a break from social media, dumpster fire that it is.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the Grandson of Irish and Lithianian/Ukrainian immigrants. He gre up on a small farm in Appalachia. His artwork and poems have appeared in journals in the US and other countries.

Ira Feinstein is a memoirist, storyteller, and court jester. His story is an excerpt from his as-yet-unpublished memoir, *Cut Off*. Ira earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Portland State University. He currently lives with his wife and her elderly demon cat in the MW. Read more at irafeinstein.com.

Sam Mazzarol is a financial news editor and failed alchemist. He enjoys long-distance running, home brewing, reading comics, photography, Oxford commas, and getting lost. He lives in Sydney, Australia with his wife and kids.

Contributors

Britta Adams is a (recently) recovering recluse, (not-so-recently) recovering theater kid, and (constantly) recovering oldest daughter. She loves taking long walks with excellent audiobooks and hates grading papers written by ChatGPT. Most importantly, she is a staunch Lost apologist and an unapologetic stan of Satoru Gojo.

Frederick Frankenberg (he/him) lives in the Hudson Valley. He is also published on an engineering professor's office wall, next to her children's drawings. He is actually mainly a writer but also plays guitar and preserves beauty with his phone camera. Twitter handle: @FredIsAWriter Website: www.frederickfrankenberg.com

Richard Dinges, Jr. works on his homestead beside a drying pond, surrounded by trees and grassland, with his wife, two dogs, one cat, and twelve chickens. Avalon Literary Review, Wilderness House, Blue Unicorn, Plainsongs, and Grey Sparrow most recently accepted his words for their publications.

Jake La Botz's fiction has appeared in Mojo Journal, The Razor, and NUNUM. His music and acting have been featured in film and television, including True Detective, Ghost World, Rambo (yes, Rambo). His debut collection of short fiction is forthcoming from the University of Wisconsin's Cornerstone Press.

Plamen V. is an award-winning freelance writer/poet with published works online and in a dozen US magazines. He has been writing since he was 10. He has won numerous writing contests and awards from different parts of the world. He is a creative person with big dreams and also loves to help people. He also has Certificates on Creative Writing from the UK writing centre, from the Open University in Scotland, Oxford Study Centre and from Harvard University.

Evie Scoles wandered from the light of fantasy to the dark side of thriller.

She's thinking she might stay.

Holly Day's writing has recently appeared in Analog SF, Talking River, and New Plains Review, and her published books include Music Theory for Dummies and Music Composition for Dummies. She currently teaches classes at The Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, Hugo House in Washington, and the Indiana Writers Center.

Mercury Sunderland (he/him) is an autistic gay trans man. He's been published by University of Amsterdam's Writer's Block, University of British Columbia's Decomp, UC Davis' Open Ceilings, UC Riverside's Santa Ana River Review, and UC Santa Barbara's Spectrum.

henry 7. reneau, jr. does not X-insinuate, Tik Tok, Facebook, Twitter-twaddle, or Instagram. It is not that he is scared of change, or stuck fast in the past; instead, he has learned from experience that the crack pipe kills. His work is published in Superstition Review; TriQuarterly; Notre Dame Review; The Ana and Oyster River Pages.

Micaela Michalk is a writer from Ohio. She studied psychology and creative writing at Malone University. Poems published include "Pas De Deux" in 30N, "The Hospital" in Polaris, etc. Stories published include "Ashes Ashes" by Weasel Press, "The Birth of the Banshee" by The Write Launch, and more.

Thom Young is a writer from Texas. His work has appeared in PBS Newshour, The Wall Street Journal, The Oxford Review, and over 100 literary journals. A 2008 Million Writers Award and 2016 Pushcart Prize nominee.

Alison Boulan is a writer and photographer living in Michigan. She spends her days walking in the city and talks to anyone who's willing to listen. Megan, her story's main character, is special, because Alison is Megan. You're Megan, too. This one exists for Miss Bell, a very cool muse.

Dmitry Blizniuk is a poet from Ukraine. His most recent poems have appeared in POETRY Magazine, Five Points, Rattle, Los Angeles Review, The Cincinnati Review, The Nation, Prairie Schooner, Plume, The London Magazine and many others. His poems have been awarded RHINO 2022 Translation Prize and his folio had been selected as a runner-up in the Gregory O'Donoghue Competition and the 2025 Gabo Prize finalist.

Kelly Talbot has been an editor for Wiley, Macmillan, Oxford, Pearson Education, and other major publishers. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies.

Author of, “DEEP AUGUST, BIG TIME” and “THE HEALING GROUND,” James William Gardner writes extensively about the contemporary American south. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Gardner is a graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University and lives in Roanoke, Virginia. His work has appeared in numerous publications including Deep South Magazine, Newfound Journal and The Virginia Literary Journal.

Wortley Clutterbuck has been in the ‘scribbling racket’ some 300 years, disdained consistently by the literary aristocracy, yet finding favor with plebian journals such as Perceptions, Sucarnochee Review and Clinch Mountain Review. Originally from London, he now resides in Virginia.

Sarah Kleinfeld is an SVSU alumni as of December 2025, known to friends and family for being unapologetically autistic, an enjoyer of the outdoors, and most certainly not three ravens in a trenchcoat pretending to be a human.

Oliver is a hurricane of a dog. He injured his leg and we had to take him to the vet. He is a Boston Terrier who likes to chew on everything. We just got some raw hide and he works on this till it is all gone.

Lexi Axiotes grew up in Nebraska, but finds she is most at peace near an expansive body of water, or with her nose buried in a book. Her writing centers around messy characters who feel like either your best friend or your mortal enemy.

Erika Joy (She/Her) is a “Poetry Seer,” and a young author who utilizes her AuDHD perspective to evoke introspective wonder. When Erika is not writing, she is baking, repairing headstones, and hiking. She lives in Rochester, New York and enjoys touring Mount Hope Cemetery and finding local coffee shops.

Dick Daniels once tried to make a living as a writer. After dozens of rejections, a military magazine accepted an article and paid \$150--fifteen months later when published. Now he writes as a hobby, with payments

in contributor copies distributed to friends whose names appear in his stories.

Bobby Oerzen holds an M.F.A. from CUNY Queens College and has been published in Word Riot, Thieves’ Jargon, The Chicago Tribune, and Robot Butt — a range that suggests either versatility or an inability to commit. He lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with his wife, daughter, and twelve very noisy birds.

Paweł Markiewicz was born 1983 in Siemiatycze in Poland. He is poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poems. Paweł has published his poetries in many magazines. He writes in English and German.

Joshua St. Claire is a mild-mannered accountant from Pennsylvania. He is known to juggle his three sons, two cats, and his wife. He recently purchased an espresso machine which allows him to sling haiku at twice his natural speed.

Astrid Wick is a student at University of Minnesota. This is her first magazine publication. You can see more of her work at <https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/astrid-wick>.

Alexander Kolleth, aspiring author and educator, is a History major and Black Studies minor at SVSU. When he isn’t reading or writing, he enjoys time baking, biking, and spending time with his loved ones.

Staff

Leah Richardson is graduating this May with a degree in Technical Writing, and is ready to go. Society says to get a job, but it seems like there will be a cat stop first because every good writer needs a cat to ponder with.

Olivia Distelrath loves tending to her orchids, and recommends you read Jorge Luis Borges. Amor omnia vincit.

Emily McGlynn is wondering what it’s like to have free time.

Kim Lacey is still wondering, like twenty years later, if she remembered to drop off the refill to table 62.

Makenna Stamos is an English literature student with minors in

marketing and professional and technical writing. A dedicated book lover and enthusiastic supporter of storytelling in all its forms, she hopes to use her developing skills in acquisitions and editing to pursue a career in the publishing industry—or really anywhere she can be surrounded by stacks of books—after graduation.

William Cottrell, Creative Writing major at SVSU, has fought to the death for a few of these selected pieces. Despite not always winning, he keeps getting back up. He attributes this phenomenon to his family's cats, Reba and Albus, and their dog, Ben.

Ethan Rondo is a Creative Writing major, who wants to become a teacher and author.

Malena Pennington-Carr will graduate in December with a degree in Creative Writing and Professional Technical Writing who dreams of being an editor at a publishing house and an author. When she's not editing, volunteering, working at the campus writing center, or doing homework she's probably reading, watching films, or doing arts and crafts.

Emily Brunk is a Creative Writing major with a minor in Professional and Technical Writing. She values the craft of writing and the dedication required for words to carry meaning.

Alex Fiting is a Sociology and Communications dual-major, but loves anything to do with reading. When she's not in class, she is working as a line cook at a local restaurant or is doing a craft.

Submission Guidelines



All general submissions must:

- be submitted through (<http://cardinalsins.submittable.com/submit>)
- include multiple submissions for a single category in one document
- not contain any contact information within the attached document

Text submissions should:

- be in 12-pt. Times New Roman font, single spaced, with 1" margins
- include the title at the top of the piece
- be attached in .rtf, .docx or .doc format
- Poetry should be no longer than 70 lines
- Flash fiction should be no longer than 1,000 words
- Fiction should be no longer than 3,750 words

Artwork/Photography submissions should:

- be 300 dpi or greater
- have high contrast and sharp definition
- be attached in email in .jpeg or .png format
- be saved as their title

Note: Photos that have been manipulated with a computer program should be submitted as artwork, not photography

Maximum number of entries:

- Submit up to 3 poems, 3 flash fiction pieces, 2 pieces of fiction, and 2 pieces of creative nonfiction
- Submit up to 5 artwork and photography pieces in each category
- You may submit to as many categories as you would like

Prizes and Judging

Prizes may be awarded to SVSU students, faculty or alumni in each of the 8 categories we publish: poetry, fiction, flash fiction, creative non-fiction, black & white photography, color photography, black & white artwork, and color artwork. Outside SVSU artists and writers are free to submit and are eligible for publication; however, they will not receive monetary compensation for a general submission category prize.

Staff reserves the right not to award a winner in a particular category if no submissions are judged worthy of the award.

The SVSU-affiliated winner in each category will receive \$100 and recognition within the publication. All submissions will be entered into their respective category's contest unless otherwise requested.

Judging is done through blind voting by the editorial staff. Members of the editorial staff are permitted to submit entries for publication but cannot receive prize money for winning a category.

By submitting to Cardinal Sins you affirm that the work attached is solely your own. You agree to abide by Cardinal Sins's requirements governing submissions. If your work is accepted for publication, Cardinal Sins has the right to publish and distribute your work, in print, on the Cardinal Sins website, and, on occasion, in an audio format.

You retain all subsequent rights to your work.

Thank you for submitting to Cardinal Sins.

These guidelines are subject to change; please visit our Submittable page for the most current guidelines and for deadline dates.

A Note on Content & Taste

Though Cardinal Sins has no set theme, note we do not tend to publish works that feature explicitly sexual content, overtly triggering content used for shock value, glorified abuse, and/or similar content. Those topics may have their places, but they likely won't work for our university-funded publication. Please be conscious of this as you submit.

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