META

APHOR

Undergraduate Interdisciplinary Journal
Metaphor is Weber State University’s undergraduate, interdisciplinary journal, in its thirty-eighth year of publication. The journal is staffed entirely by Weber State University students.

Metaphor accepts submissions in visual arts, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction from students of Weber State University.

Publications in Metaphor are chosen through a blind submission process. The author, or artist of each piece is unknown until the piece is selected for publication.

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Book and Cover Design by Hailey Romero
When I was younger I didn't question whether or not I could do something, I just tried to do it. I remember being asked to fetch a horse about a mile and a half away and bring her to the big stables, and I never paused and wondered, “Can I do this? What if the horse runs away, or spooks, or doesn't listen to me?” I never stopped and let myself worry. I just grabbed the halter, and went to get the horse.

Somewhere along the way, growing up, I started to question my ability. I'd stop myself from trying to do something because some part of me started saying, “Can you really do that? Oh, that's probably a bad idea.” For a while, I let these voices win.

When I realized this had happened, I started taking steps to change it. Once, the idea of being Editor-in-Chief of *Metaphor* might have had me thinking, “That sounds like a lot of work,” and it is! Or, “I don't think I could do that,” or, “I don't think I have time for that” or, “I wouldn't be any good at that.”

Yet when I first joined *Metaphor* I came to realize I'd found something I truly loved being a part of, and when the opportunity arose to be the next Editor-in-Chief, I jumped at it. I've tried to throw myself into the position and to work with the staff, and our amazing faculty adviser, Ryan Ridge, to rework various selection strategies and increase opportunities to get the word out about the journal, about working on the journal, and about submitting to the journal.

I never stopped to wonder if I could do these things. I was a little kid again, happy to be around what I loved and doing what I loved, no longer questioning my abilities, but just trying and doing.

Throughout my efforts to get students to submit to the journal, I often encountered: “Oh, my work isn't good enough,” and, “I don't think I could do that. I wouldn't be accepted, anyway.” I came across students who were stopping themselves before they even tried. So, to every writer at Weber State University, regardless of your major, I implore you: Submit your work, share your work, read and speak the words that you create and cultivate from your heart. Don't
stop yourself before you’ve even tried. Don’t stop yourself at all. Don’t let the negative voices, or the doubt, win. Then, encourage the same in your peers.

Doctor Siân Griffiths once told a creative writing class I was in, “Writing is a solitary act,” then went on to say that it doesn’t need to be lonely. Creators can come together to foster a rich literary community, and we can encourage each other and support each other with our work. Let’s not go it alone, everyone. Our university is full of amazing, creative people, and through our undergraduate literary journal, Metaphor, and clubs and organizations such as Sigma Tau Delta and Writer’s Ink, we can foster our own rich and supportive literary community.

To every staff member at Weber State University who helped support Metaphor and promote our journal to your students, either to join the staff, or to submit, I thank you.

To each and every student who submitted to Metaphor, thank you. Please submit again every year you are a student, and encourage your friends to submit too. We received an almost overwhelming number of submissions this year, and I personally could not have been happier.

Keep creating, everyone. Share the works you create with others, and encourage others to share theirs too.

—KELLY HART, Editor-in-Chief
A lot happens in the creation of *Metaphor*, and so many individuals are working behind the scenes to ensure the journal comes together. The process is not always a smooth one, and it is often filled with days of panic, but without the aid of these individuals the already difficult would be almost impossible.

Hailey Romero, our graphic designer for this year, came up with amazing work for both the interior of *Metaphor*, and the cover. She was always patient with our feedback, and always listened attentively to the staff’s ideas. Without her, this edition of *Metaphor* would not be as beautiful as it is. Thank you, Hailey.

Thank you Mark Biddle, for your continued support and help with the graphic design components of *Metaphor*. We wish you well in your retirement and whoever is following after you certainly has big shoes to fill.

Thank you to our faculty adviser, Ryan Ridge, for all of his guidance and hard work. I personally witnessed him on the phone several times trying to iron out things for the journal being printed, and know that he worked hard to ensure this issue of *Metaphor* was the best yet. His ideas and guidance were vital in helping the journal come together.

I would also like to thank the staff members of the English Department who helped promote *Metaphor* in their classes, and happily let staff members of the journal stand up to announce things like when the journal started accepting submissions, or had an event. To Doctors Christy Call, Rebekah Cumpsty, Siân Griffiths, Julie Panko; Professor Abraham Smith; Laura Stott, Sunni Wilkinson, and so many others in the English Department, thank you all so much for your help and your support.

Thanks must also go to Doctor John Schwiebert, who kept encouraging those who stopped by his office for a meeting to join, or submit to the journal, or simply told them about it. I was more than happy to give him a poster to hang outside his door, and I thank him for his hard work in helping us promote *Metaphor*. 
Thank you to Robin Stott and Kim Webb, for your continued support of Metaphor and assistance with all things, including: promoting the journal, assisting staff members with opening and reserving rooms, recruiting and promoting the journal.

Thank you to Claire Hughes, and the Writing Center, for supporting Metaphor. We greatly appreciate your willingness to hang our poster in the Writing Center, and your help promoting the journal to students.

Thank you to the Student Fee Recommendation Committee for all of their assistance.

Thank you to all of those on the Metaphor staff this year for your hard work in the selection process. We had an outstanding number of submissions, and I know it was difficult working through all of them and copy-editing, but you all did a phenomenal job. Thank you especially to the section editors who led their respective groups: Libby Leonard with Fiction, Madeline Marcum with Creative Nonfiction, Ben Favero with Poetry, and Ammon Holt with Art. You all did a wonderful job leading your groups in the decision-making processes.

Thank you to this year’s Assistant Editor, Nicholas Kelson-Packer, for handling the planning of this year’s High School English Conference.

Special thanks as well to staff member Sarah Taylor, whose expertise in various citation forms and copy-editing skills, as well as the leadership she displayed during these meetings, helped the entire copy-editing process go very smoothly.

Finally, tremendous thanks to all of the students who submitted to Metaphor this year. I know it can be frightening to put yourself and your creative work out there, and I am so pleased, proud, and thankful, to each and every student who submitted work for consideration into this year’s journal. Without you all there wouldn’t be a journal, so from all of us at Metaphor, thank you. Please continue to submit every year that you are a student, and encourage your peers to do so as well.

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The array of poems submitted to the journal this year was intimidating yet electrifying. We thank every poet that graced us with their writing, and we beseech you to continue on. Many a great poet study among us here at Weber State University.

Poems come from the heart, they come from the bones, the stomach, the fingertips, the soul, the eye. They burst from the ground and fall from clouds. Each poet is a seer. Each poem is both a fraction of the world and the world in its entirety. They are all alive with a voice of their own and something to say, something to show. Poetry plays our heart strings with the cleverness of a flutist and the bluntness of a jack hammer.

The poems in this year’s journal hold true to this standard. Each has its own unique ring to it. The great American poet, Donald Revell wrote, “The poet reads the world with writing.” As a staff, we enjoyed reading and experiencing these unique readings of the world, now the time has come to open the flood-gates and let them out to you. There are worlds that dwell along the lines for every attentive reader. We hope that you find those still hiding from us.

—BENJAMIN FAVERO, Poetry Editor
I heard once that the sky is clear.
   It looks blue to me.
Sometimes I lie in the green grass
and try to see past the blue.
   If I could:
       would I see you?
       would I feel you?

I heard once that dragonflies are messages from the dead.
   I thought they were insects.
I watch them dart through the air
and wonder what they are trying to say.
   If I could:
       would I hear them?
       would I understand?

I heard once that our ancestors watch over us.
   I didn’t know it would hurt so much.
Sometimes I sit
and think.
   If I could:
       would I go back?
       could I save you?

I heard once that time heals all.
   I thought time was relative.
Sometimes I think
   I’ll move on.
   If I could:
       where would you be?
       who would remember?

I used to hear “I love you.”
I thought love was felt with the heart.
Sometimes I think,
   too much.
    If I could:
     I would prove it.
     I would show you.

I heard once there is a God.
   I thought that was faith.
Sometimes faith isn’t enough—
   it should be.
    If I could:
     I would show you.
     I would touch His hand.

I once heard that God is dead.
   I still believe.
Sometimes you do too,
   I think.
    If I could:
     would we go on forever?
     would you want to?

I heard once that nothing lasts forever.
   I thought we could.
Sometimes I still do,
   do you?
    If I could:
     would I go back?
     what would I change?
     how can I make it right?
A dream inside these waking
Cobalt lips, spoke sweetly
Of you to me. I thought
It was thunder inside
A storm, but you taught
Me otherwise; now I hear
A heart beat deep in gray
And violent clouds where
Water drops like weapons
Down gutters and streets,
But you always were
A fighter.

There was a lonely
Song on the wind today.
It swayed the grass
And convinced its melody
To the trees. Hope is warm
And a smile is the thought
Of you across my face.
Inside these empty nights,
Bury your heads deep
In your lovers and breathe.
Don't stop until you know
It's not a dream.
it’s 1:01 a.m.
and I wish
I was drunk,
but Bukowski
keeps me company
with his small
rooms and rolled
cigarettes.

I smell smaoke
in the pages
and hear wine
soaked music
and I sit 26
and know how
many ways
the heart
can break.

always had a clear
vision of me,
whiskey in hand
and a cigarette
between my teeth,
foolish enough
to parcel life
onto the page,
and loving enough
to drown my head
in stars.
My body feels heavy

I am the empty meadow
And you are the blizzard

It’s loud when you whirl
But there is no silence

Like freshly laid snow

You suffocate my flowers
And my biggest fear is to stop

Breathing
Blinded by your bright pallor

I remember when
I first watched you fall

You felt so light
We sit as two— silent
She— devoured by her relationship’s impending demise
I— swallowed up by my life’s numbing monotony
Both— wanting to jump on the next train and start anew
wherever it takes us

The birds play in the sky above us
and the clouds let loose their droplets
that feel like pin pricks on our skin.
The slight breeze breathes air into my lungs.

Four feet dangle over the edge of the platform
with the train tracks below,
We take in the postcard perfect view;
the tall wavering grass
lending refuge to the deer,
the bright meadow that whispers in the wind
come to me,
the water in the distance glistening in my eye
like a twinkle in the air,
the clouds give way to hazy beams of sunlight,
creating an ethereal cast
on the jagged mountains above.

Nature, and the quiet presence
of my best friend since college,
is all it takes
to calm my soul
and I know the same forces
are working in her.

We hear the whistle of the train.
In unison, our heads turn toward the sound.
We scramble to get to our feet.
Dreams start to emerge and take shape—
a sphere that is always turning and seeing
new parts of the universe,
experiencing new environments,
new worlds.

A falcon perched on a post at the end of the platform
has been watching us since we slung our legs over the edge.
I imagine him there—
watching and waiting
to see if we will take flight.
When the train passes and we are still rooted,
he takes to the air
and flaps those migrating wings
as if to say
*It can be done!*
Time flows like rivers
Fast and slow where it can change
Enough to change you
Oh, the melodrama, the tragedy of it all—

how canny it must be, denied the crown, to
listen, the murder harmony will plant a curse, the strange secret
play —follow along, it's your turn now
The hourglass weeps lingering in a forest of fornication, of death
for the girl lost, awaiting the sprawl,
crushed under god's botched creations—we are
eyes falling slowly,
looking at her like she's wasted
a revelation— badly pronounced.
“I sometimes choose to think, no doubt perversely, that man is a
dream, thought an illusion, and only rock is real. Rock and sun.”
—Edward Abbey

i dreamt of snakes & coyotes
asleep under the juniper tree.
her name is Voodoo she told me
she is free under the sky—
its endless stars.
caught somewhere between sleep & waking
comatose
on a bed of snakes.
panicked & stumbling,
no way to break free
from the living wave—
it follows my feet
content to be crushed under them.

—

i live in a concrete box
no windows to let in the light
day in day out i live to serve
i eat food from a plastic bag
i drink coffee from a machine
compounding triglycerides
& complacency—eyes
glazed over
plump & soft & manicured
hands
i fear im losing—
but still the calling remains
  in the back of my skull

—

the valley is sick with a cancer
  the sprawling city a blight
  on the foothills
  neighborhoods of concrete & strip malls
  & fun for the whole family
  too loud
the calling drowned out   a whisper now

—

i see the future from today—
  a forgotten mansion
  carved into hillside
—i want it buried in snow.
  tufts gather on branches & the exposed frame
  weighing heavy on wood & steel alike.
  life comes with the melt
  branches bend
  under the weight of moving water.
  the sun seeps
  trickles into cracks
  & the freeze breaks
  brick & mortar,
  food for the topsoil below.
magpies perch & fly
shattering the stillness
of a waiting winter forest.
their wings leave soft kisses
on the powdery carpet,
& rabbits make winter burrows
of window sills & concrete.
the land is unlearning its civilization

there's something tugging at me
im caught on a wave i can't escape.
whispers haunt me
i hear them in the wind that shakes me as i sleep
—ripping sparks from the bed of coals
as it howls cold & violent in the night,
a millennia of beating on red cliffs
the calling is choking me
i see its shadow on high peaks
—the sun filters through clouds
high patches of fire & light—
i can almost make it out

in those quiet & lonely places...
I like the way you twirl your cigarette.

Baby,
that SoCal sound
champions the slow decline—
It’s inversely proportional
to the coffee in your cup.
I need a smoke so fucking bad—
I need a lobotomy so fucking bad—
It’s a jungle
& everything is foreplay.
A competition against death.
You knock me out
at the kneecaps,
oh Holiday,
no one understands me like you!
& no doubt
I’ve been working on my unimpressed face
& at least funeral sex
reminds you
you’re alive.
Here I stand
Staring and smelling
Oh, what delicious smells
Wafting from thy cooking foods
You have been preparing
All day
All day long you have prepared
Cleaning
Cooking
Decorating
Soon though the noise
It will arrive
With greetings
Laughter
Stories
Then at that table
You will all sit
You will feast on those wondrous smells
My mouth will salivate
With each of your bites
I will lick my lips
And Imagine
You will give thanks
To this wonderful meal
While I will merely be thankful
For the small scraps
That fall from your table
They say that blood looks black in the moonlight. But nearly everything is black and white in Luna’s galley. The forest is stripped of its once vibrant colors, save the snow, which is iridescent and glistening, and glowing like a soft, cool bulb behind a thin sheet of baking parchment, and the moon is the color of custard spilling over the edges of midnight’s ramekin. Light scatters unnaturally, refusing to seep into the snow, gleaming off its glazed crust. It is gentle and bright, but its shadows have been scraped away like so many charred bits of puff pastry, leaving the night lacking the crisp consistency of daylight in deference to the decadence of delicate soft surfaces. The body, bound and stripped and sunken into the snow, blends with its bed of shimmering sugar; a frosted berry, cold and pale and plump and blue, eyes wide and egg-washed as the moon, which does blacken blood to a thick, glassy reduction, like too much syrup drizzled over this guiltiest of pleasures; a sticky-sweet mess – the overindulgence of an amateur chef refining her palate and sharpening her skills.
We’d been away from home two years when I veered off the road. We’re lost, I said, displaced, or worse, dislodged completely from the why and what of this whole goddamn trip. The taste of salt and muddy coffee lingered on my lips and sweat hung heavy in the air. Ahead, two piles of weathered, sun-bleached bone had caught our jaded eyes. Oh God, cried Claire, oh God, Greg, swear to me that isn’t us. I promised her we hadn’t decomposed, and though that word caught in my throat like rust to iron, a fog of hopefulness arose.

We ditched the car and left all that we’d brought behind to find a spot to die and rot.
A story's told of a man
who locked himself away
in a prison that he built.
At least, that's what they say.

A cunning trap to contain
the worst of all mankind.
A jail to kill the hope
of the man that it confined.

Judge and Jury as he was
his sentence he declared:
sealed away forevermore
so that the world be spared.

Thoughts made up the prison walls
and thoughtlessness the bars.
The Jailer's name was Conscience
and Memory was the guards.

Visitors he did refuse
he wished that no one came
Ashamed that he might feel joy
and joyous in his shame
Freedom filled his restless dreams
but consciously, he cried.
He wept bitterly for glee
That he was still inside

In the prison's iron cells
doth irony abound,
for on the doors and cages
no locks could there be found.

Innocent he may have been
but guilty in his mind.
Redemption within his grasp;
to pain, instead, resigned.

Man, your crimes are not so great
why stay you locked away?
Part the bars, walk outside;
let Mercy have its day.
We have a common history
Things we can’t whisper in the dark
The before and after
The shape of the shadow
What a wonder:
the oppressive quiet in a tragedy.
You are not alone,
but you will feel like it
What exists is only what is spoken of
What is spoken of is all that exists
No victims nor monsters here
A secret: you know.
We are all quiet ghosts
in the hurricane home
The Survivor screams through a chinless mouth
Gaped maw never to close again
Kicks jagged sharp stumps
Nowhere near enough for replacements
Flails spurring biceps
A rain of thickness never coagulating
Easily he is lifted from the bisected HUMVEE

Up-armored, bullet-proof, standard conveyance.
I step from my own, newly acquired, still clean
Watch as he is transported to a waiting bird
For him the flight is short
Don't know if his screams stopped

Scouts scattered on the sand
Menagerie of horror,
With a pitiful background
In training, on ranges we arrange
Standing in lines to clean our mess
We do this now,
The mess less tedious
Uniforms match, boots similar
A morbid game of connect four, five,
I lose track, a bad metaphor for this
A haunted corresponding of skin tone

We pile the parts and men in a Bradley
Our platoon sergeant “The Alligator” oversees
He instructs our caution
The KIA similarly aged to his sons

Unknowingly ruins him

Distorted versions of children
And us, prospective twins to finality
The Alligator transports un-whole remnants
His last act before sleep,
Using unlabeled water bottles,
A crimson waterfall runs down the ramp
Carrying away his eye’s spark
I’ve seen you
Twirling your lover around
the electric, cobalt blue Christmas tree
Her laughter rang through walls
Bells of beloved
You sang from your heart
Love me forever
Forever with mistletoe
Her silence echoed

I’ve seen you before
Spring showers singing like hummingbirds
We both stood ankle deep in a puddle
I faced the mountains, you faced the wind
Perhaps your mouth twitched
But before a sound could escape
The bus rolled in

I’ve seen you
Counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds
Wondering whether our lives are worth anything
As your back melted underneath the rays
Of merciless July

I’ve seen
Life dwindle as leaves drip
Mandarin sunsets painting the rooftops
We wait for the same bus
Every day, same time as yesterday
Perhaps tomorrow
You tell me
You’ve seen me before too
Real fire-eaters are nothing like the ones who perform in circuses. Faces burnt. Lips blackened. Cracked. Bleeding. Their teeth seem to glow, melted together in one mouth-wide incisor-molar. Any hair they have is short and patchy, thinned by the very first sparks of need.

The sickly sweet perfume of perpetual human barbecue hangs on their every breath, but if you pass a crowd of them and feel the smoky embrace of a wildfire grip your clothes with hazy fingers, know they’ve been feasting.

Their hands so dry and rough, you can feel their gritty texture without ever touching them. Soot, soaked into the folds of their fingers and pressed into their palms by the habit their hunger desperately demands, coloring their clothes and staining every surface they brush by. A silent, bleeding shadow.

You’re lucky to ever hear them speak louder than the soft whisper of falling ash. If you happen to make one laugh, the mesmerizing crack-pop of a burning log rises in the air. They can yell – a terrifying explosion of sound that rolls downhill, melting everything in their path with a violent, volcanic rage – but rarely do. These outbursts of complete consumption come at a cost, and afterwards they drift withered and hollow until fuel fills them again.

The darkest part is always their eyes. Sometimes showering sparks as they flash from face to face, but mostly they’re still. Smoldering. Warm, but spent. Exhausted by the burn of Fate’s hot burden.
We built a robot
red
square
hollow
who blew bubbles
made out of
fire.

We built a robot
flat
happy
concave
who blew bubbles
made out of
sparkles.

We built a robot
conical
orange
stationary
who blew bubbles
made out of
lava.

We built a robot
massive
yellow
talkative
who blew bubbles
made out of
teddy bears.
We built a robot
lonely
narrow
soft
who blew bubbles
made out of
carpet.
We built a robot
winged
deaf
neon
who blew bubbles
made out of
rocket ships.

We built a robot
tall
alien
nervous
who blew bubbles
made out of
squares.
the rippling line of grout
cuts tile slabs into plateaus
and canyons
reminding my feet to be
careful where they step.
step.
into the room
where florescent lights encase
the polished sand.
they say if you want to
know someone look under
their bed,
i say look in their shower.
all the corners they didn't
clean because in the grand
scheme of things
you pull the curtain
and it vanishes
beyond the veil.
what empty bottles pollute
this solitary space
what abandoned hair and follicle
lay in calcium coffins
where acrylic and enamel
meet 90 degrees of plaster.
did their keen eye glaze over
the crevice where dirt stays hidden
or did they see it and decide
it felt more at home there
than they ever could.
Cold metal chains clink against the prisoner’s form.

One Drop.

Runs down his feeble spine. A hollowed eye opens, gazing at
the bleakness up above.

Two Drops.

Splatter on the prisoner’s papery skin.

Limbs claw, sprawling out erratically, fingernails desperately
raking at unforgiving walls.

One. Two. Three Drops.

A steady stream flows now . . . then soon a flood.

Countless drops.

Invade the prisoner’s lungs, denying him breath,
Silencing all screams for help.

Outside, the noses of two greedy kings
look on chuckling to themselves merrily.

“Oh what a fool!” They jeer.

The pair toast golden goblets taking a sweet sip when sud-
denly their knees buckle and collapse, fine goblets crash to the
lifeless ground.

The old prisoner would have smiled. For it only took . . .

One Drop.
Every time I leave the Long Island Sound
I visit her
my knees drop to kiss the sand
my hands slide through the water
fingers whisper I’ll miss you
she cries sea glass into my palms

As the sun leaves she glides down the mountain’s back
kissing her way down its spine
making the mountain blush
that’s why the sky turns pink
as she makes her gentle exit
You ask me where I go
when you look at me and are met with blankness
your curiosity fills the space between us
so I’ll try to tell you
I am fighting through the past
relaxing in the future
I’m there that day laying in the driveway
beside her as she needed to feel the sun
hold her one more time
I’m enjoying a day years from now
not doubting a compliment
I’m in the in between
needing silence
where calmness is stroking my back
I’m with you, laughing after years of
getting lost in the unimportance
I’m everywhere scattered like sea glass
I am not a sculpture
to be gawked at and admired
nor am I a painting
that will never change again.
I am a novel,
currently being written.
My mind fills
page upon page
with words to the wise and
all of my mistakes.
I am-
a never-ending story
that will one day cease to be.
Something less than human
something more than art.
Scribbled down
memories in languages
I do not know.
Life makes the novel grow into
lengthy soliloquies,
desperate monologues that hold
much more than
my simple figure.
Yes, I am
art...
But not the kind that
pleases people.
My book would be banned in
schools and steeples.
Fear the frenzied writing
that holds my thoughts so
dearly.
I am page upon page of
scornful jealousy,
adventurous memory,
deep-rooted self loathing,
and everything
in between.
You can read cover to cover
and never truly understand,
for literature is art
and art
is man.
They say home is where you make it,  
but I’ve never been good at choosing a foundation.  
Never been shown the proper way to make concrete into pavement,  
always used the fragile parts of me to try and create it.  
Home...  
has never lasted long wherever I have made it.  
I tried using people as support structures but have always been mistaken,  
see, people leave when it’s hard.  
They’re simply too impatient.  
And brick by brick my home crumbles into a makeshift shack.  
Never sturdy, never something to look at for inspiration.  
It wobbles in the wind and collects tears and condensation.  
Perhaps if my parents had stayed I’d have a better understanding of cooperation,  
but they went separate ways and left me in contemplation with no blueprints to build a better life,  
just a diagnosis and medication.  
Plus quite a few fucked up genes that leave my brain a combination of unhealthy behaviors, bad coping mechanisms, and overwhelming frustration.  
And I’ll probably never have a proper home because I can’t create one out of language.
we live our lives with broken cds in our heads
they repeat and stick on certain things
like (The soft feeling of her hair in my hand) dust (pollen from the flowers that adorned his grave) and other particles.
They stick to certain melodies, certain sousounds, certain phrases. Some of us stick to places that only do them harm

stop.

Abram Turner
Why do we start anew?

“Maybe it’ll fix itself”

but it won’t ever be completely fixed.

weshoudnt WORRY, howhowhowever.

perperperfection isn’t the gogogogoal

becaubecause in the proprocess of gnidniwer

we we we we OPEN ourselves up to nenene new sounds.

our cds make new music.

we find new places to get stuck.

and maymaymaymaybe

hopehopehopehope

(please and thank you god)

we won’t do

ourselves

harm.
In summer, we used to drive to demolition sites. I’d pick you up in my clunker of a car and we’d chat. You told me you loved to watch falling buildings. “Like the fall of a great leader’s statue,” you’d cheer triumphantly.

We’d reach the site, and you treated it like a drive-in theater. I was terrified. You nudged me and smirked. “One comes down, and another will come up!” I loved the way you found creation in ruins, but my anxieties always lingered.

What would you say to the ghosts without a home?

Buildings may be made of stone and wood, but they move and shift. Slowly, like the slow, meticulous beat of a heart. They pulse. They creak. They shift with their own weight. I never knew the wrecking ball would be so close to my own home.
I always hoped you were right about creation.
something new was built, but I never knew I’d be a spirit
wandering
without a home.

I hoped something would come from our
CRaCking Foundation
but that wasn’t the case.
I hear you visit sites with him as well.

I can’t look at empty lots, riddled with stones, without breaking down.
Art is subjective. It is a universally accepted truth that should go without saying, but sometimes we need the reminder. On first glance, a work of art can appear ordinary, but upon learning more about the artist or the craft involved in the making of the art, the piece becomes beautiful. The same is true for the opposite scenario; an artwork appears magnificent, but when learning more, it loses its luster. Nothing about the actual artwork has changed, but the context in which the artwork is being viewed from has changed. Our staff appreciates the craft of each artist who submitted his or her work. The art submitted is impressive. The more information gathered about each piece and its craft, the more the selected works of art found favor. We are proud to publish and share what we believe to be the best of the submitted work. We hope you will agree.

—AMMON HOLT, Art Section Editor
TAG...YOU’RE IT!

RUSSELL BINGHAM
ADrift

Hope Higley
CYCLICAL
HOPE HIGLEY

ART
MOOD SWINGS

NATHAN HALE
NIGHTHAWK

NATHAN HALE
THE DEEP EXPLORATION

AARON HOKANSON
ORDER VS CHAOS

AARON HOKANSON
DREAMING LAVENDER

HANNA IBRAHIM
BENEATH STILL WATERS

MELANIE POST
WHAT A CROC

MELANIE POST
JUST IMPOLITE

PAUL REYO
CONVERGENCE

EMILY ROYER
RE-ENTRY

EMILY ROYER
PIER

LLEWELLYN SHANJENGANGE
SOLEMN MOTIF

KATELYN SHAW
BRANCHES
KATELYN SHAW
Everyone is the hero of his or her own story.
Unlike most of the traditional fiction that we are familiar with (fantasy, science fiction, etc.) most real heroes today haven’t completed their journey. The individuals we encounter on our commutes, at school, in our communities, even in our families, are all people fighting to survive the day-to-day trammels—as we also try. Creative nonfiction stories are those intimate moments, the incidents and choices, along the path that make heroes who they are. Reading the narratives of others struggling to come out on top is inspiring and invigorating. The naked frankness of creative nonfiction is astounding, proving that heroes don’t have to fight dragons or climb impossible mountains alone.

In this section you will discover stories of finding consolation after the loss of a loved one, a portrait of a family member, traumatic vignettes in a young life, the discovery of truth, and honest loathing toward an inconspicuous inanimate object. Not all of these stories are triumphs; some depict less than best moments and may leave us questioning the ways we chose to cope with painful experiences. Each piece provides an occasion for laughter, tears, and the chance to look deeper into what it means to be a hero in the making.

Those in the Creative Nonfiction section of Metaphor are incredibly thankful for all of the amazing pieces we had the privilege of reading. We applaud those who submitted for the courage to share their stories with us. Every one of them is a hero; a heroes who has chosen to let the world join them for a few steps on his or her life’s odyssey.

—MADELINE MARCUM, Creative Nonfiction Section Editor
After Dad died, I started finding dimes. Never pennies or quarters. Always dimes. Not just in asphalt parking lots or on dirty grocery store floors. Random places: in the shade of the merry-go-round at the park, in the middle of the path at Lagoon, buried in the sand at Bear Lake, and on my kitchen floor—when I never have cash.

At first I thought it a coincidence, a strange coincidence, sure, but still just a coincidence, until my mom was with us the time my daughter dug up the dime on the beach. We were at Bear Lake for our annual trip. The place Dad had always gone and had taken us and taught us to love.

“I find them everywhere,” I said to my mom when my daughter handed me the dime for safekeeping.

“They’re from Dad.” She said it like it was something I should know. The dead leave dimes, like the sun is shining.

“What?”

She had, of course, heard about it on television. Mom used TV to fill the silence. Her television watching had slowly increased as one by one we’d moved out of her house. With Dad gone, it was probably on all the time. But she’d experienced it too, the dime finding.

She told me how she’d cleaned out Dad’s office after he died. She’d vacuumed and moved all the furniture. Mom moved furniture when she was stressed or whenever emotions were too large to contain. She explained how later in the day she’d walked by the office and saw something shining in the middle of the fresh vacuum lines. She’d gone in to find a dime impossibly placed in the center of the room.

I helped Mom clean things out. She moved, downsized. We continued to find things of Dad’s. His stuff still showed up a year later. One day, I threw out a foot high stack of printed papers, folders, and binders filled with explanations of cancer treatments, listed medications, and named doctors. I’d found them on a bookshelf in a closet. Mom had probably stashed them there, unable to deal with them. I carried them out and dropped the whole lot in the recycle bin.

Thump.

Cancer.

The word is too small, too simple for what it is, for what it does. It took my aunt. It took my cousin. It took my dad. But more than that. It took my cousins’ mother. It orphaned my second cousins. And we lost Dad. And to some extent Mom. And deeper still, a part of ourselves.

He was diagnosed near the end of October. Cancer. The disease where our miracle bodies get too carried away with regeneration and growth. His pan-
creas grew beyond itself, added a piece it didn't need. Then it spread. His liver
added growth. Not just one this time—dozens. That’s when the pain started.
At first, he thought he’d thrown out his back, sheet-rocking at sixty-five. But it
only got worse until it drove him to the doctor. And Dad didn’t go to the doctor.
So, the pain in his back—liver—must have been intense to get him to the
hospital—the man who passed kidney stones with a glass of water and a Tylenol.
We should’ve known it was bad.

Odds were against Dad. The survival rates of pancreatic cancer for all
stages is only 20% for one year and only 7% for five-year survival. We remained
hopeful, at first, Dad had already survived a terrible car accident when he was
young and two heart attacks when he was older, surely he could beat cancer.
But, as is common with pancreatic cancer, he was already in stage four by the
time we found out. The median survival rate for stage four pancreatic cancer is
between two and six months.

Dad didn’t want chemo. Didn’t want to spend so much time in a hospital.
He’d watched his grandfather grow sicker and smaller with the killing treat-
ment. But he also didn’t want to leave us, especially not over Christmas, Mom’s
favorite. We convinced him to try to beat it, to hang on to life. None of us could
stand the thought of him losing this fight.

He signed up for any and every experimental treatment that they’d let him
try. We watched him diminish from the broad-shouldered ex-high school foot-
ball player to a small, frail old man. He lost one hundred pounds. He got cold.
The man had always been like a furnace. He shriveled. He went swimming
with the kids, and the sight of his scrawny body brought tears to my eyes. Dad
had always been large, barrel-chested, strong. He had slalom water-skied that
August. By spring, he couldn’t climb the stairs to the second story in my par-
ents’ home. Oh, and it made him mad! He had to stand and watch while other
people moved furniture or lifted boxes upstairs. He’d fidget around, unable to
bear that he wasn’t right in the midst of the action.

I think every kid thinks of their father as a superhero. I happen to have a
lot of evidence to support it. My mother loves to tell the story about one of the
times they helped some friends move. My dad, most likely tired of waiting for
help, took hold of a freezer chest, threw it on his back and carried it up a flight
of stairs. Well, at some point, someone opened the freezer to discover it was
full of something like fifty pounds of deer meat. He shrugged it off. What was
fifty pounds on top of a freezer? He used to haul my mother’s great grandfa-
ther’s player piano around by himself like it weighed nothing. He didn’t think
anything of it. If something had to be done, furniture had to be moved, and
he’d do it. That was Dad.

None of the treatments worked. Everything failed. They only delayed the
inevitable. He died in May, in the hospital, the last place he’d ever choose to be.
He had tried to stay home. He’d even had me convince my mother just days
earlier that he didn’t have a fever so that she’d let him stay home. But the man who’d never taken a pain pill stronger than an aspirin got to the point where he couldn’t stand the pain. He had to go to the hospital to be given the drugs that would contain his suffering.

Even then he held on. We visited him in the hospital. I know he didn’t want to go. Someone finally told him it was okay if he needed to leave us if he couldn’t handle the hurt anymore. That he could let go. It was only then that he died as if he’d needed that permission all along.

Cleaning out the closet, I found part of his stamp collection. It included old envelopes, some still with letters. An old card in a yellowed envelope sent to my mother’s grandmother with a one cent stamp. My grandmother was a product of the depression, had kept everything. She had had an entire cupboard filled with Tupperware, and butter and sour cream tubs. And she’d kept old letters with ten-cent stamps.

Dimes again.

I started to keep the dimes, carried them with me. I thought of him when I felt them rattle around in my pocket. I claimed his old piggy bank in our cleaning process, put the dimes inside.

Curious, I did an internet search about finding dimes. There are others who have experienced the phenomenon. One woman has found them for years on the mail route where she works. Other websites talk about the significance of the number ten, that a ten speaks of coming full circle or that you are on the right path. That ten is a perfect number. Other sites talk about the tails side of the dime, the three torches representing the Trinity. Always the people have lost a loved one, usually recently. Of course, there were sites with skeptics and mentions on the informative sites about people who didn’t believe, no matter what was said. I have always had my faith, but I don’t read my horoscope, or have my future read, or believe in psychics or any of that. But I can’t see how the dimes can be only a coincidence. Maybe there aren’t coincidences.

We retook the trip to Bear Lake the second summer after his death. The year before my daughter had found a dime buried in the sand. That dime had started the conversation.

We sit on the beach, but it isn’t the same without Dad.

The wind picks up. Without thinking, I look up for Dad, to see if he’s bringing in the boat. No boat. No Dad.

My daughter and my niece are gathering seashells—or are they lake shells? “Hey!” my niece declares, “a dime.”

A glimmer of hope under the cloudy sky. A little miracle. A message that we are where we belong and Dad is there with us.
lie (n) - a false statement made with deliberate intent to deceive; an intentional untruth; a falsehood

In January of 1998, Bill Clinton famously said the words, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky.” Truth is, they found his DNA on her dress.

My first big lie was to my mother. I’m sure I’d told small ones before, it’s the way of children. But the one I remember had to do with shoelaces. The one seared in my mind. The one that made me blush then, though it makes me laugh now. You see, someone had gone into my dad’s dresser, (huge, HUGE, no-no), and taken a pair of leather shoelaces and cut them. My mom was incensed. What? Who? Why? Her words stumbled over one another in her fury. Laces were expensive, especially this pair, made for my dad’s work boots. Who would do such a thing? I don’t remember her asking my sisters. I do remember her asking me. Did I do this? No way. Not me. Uh-uh. (Truth is, my black Mary Jane’s were now tied haphazardly with pieces of brown leather laces.) I could feel the heat on my face. I tried so hard to keep eye contact, but couldn’t. “Julie, did you do this?” Again, I said no. She knew. She must have. She’d seen my shoes, would see them for the next few weeks until she replaced the laces. She chose to accept my lie. I still don’t know why.

My friend’s father died years ago. When he found out about it, of course, Mike was devastated. But as he told people about his dad, he proudly recalled his military service. How his father served in Vietnam. He told stories about his dad’s PTSD, how he would wake in the night screaming, hide in the bathroom, disappear for days. These memories gave Mike comfort. His father was a hero. Weeks later, Mike’s mother attempted to have his dad’s name added to a Vietnam memorial. She was informed that wouldn’t be possible. Truth is, her husband had never been in Vietnam, had never even served in the military.

I have a sister, Heidi, who is two years older than me. Ellen is two years younger. A group of three can be dangerous, always two against one or in our case one against two. When Ellen and I were about eight and six years old, Heidi told us that if we went to sleep with our hand open, palm up, the devil would play with it while we slept. Heidi was older, wiser—our sister. Did we believe her? The truth is, even though we’re in our fifties, Ellen and I still sleep with our hands closed.

On July 19, 2004, Mark Hacking called the police to report his wife was missing. She had gone for her usual run and never returned. Search parties were organized; flyers were posted. Mark spoke to the media, pleading for his wife’s return. The next day he was found wandering the streets. Naked. After being
placed in a psychiatric ward, Hacking confessed to his brothers. His wife had discovered his web of lies, including his claims to be enrolled at the University of Utah and being accepted to medical school. The truth is, he had shot Laurie in the head while she slept then discarded her body in a dumpster.

At the beginning of seventh grade, my best friend asked me to go school shopping with her. We walked through the store that was foreign to me. I'd never known the soft lights and music of a fancy department store. I'd never known the soft-spoken workers, ready to help. I'd never known the circular racks of soft fabrics and brand names. I followed my friend, trying to copy her ease. I nervously looked at blouses and pants hanging on those circular racks, knowing I would buy nothing. Kelly moved close to me, looking over her shoulder at her mom several racks away. She leaned in and whispered in my ear, “Shouldn’t you be looking in the chubby section?” This was the first time I’d been called fat. Truth is, I wasn’t fat. But a lie, told by someone you trust, sounds so much like the truth that you are prone to believe it. And I did. I believed it. And the lie became a truth that defined me. (Truth is, she wasn’t my best friend.)

In 1933, famous big game hunter, Marmaduke Wetherell, was hired to find the Loch Ness Monster. Wetherell had his step-son craft “Nessie” from a toy submarine. Another man took a photo, and it was published as proof. His son later repeated his father’s sentiment, “We’ll give them their monster.” Truth is, he didn’t find any monster. He made one.

Three years ago, my adult son finally had a job after months of jumping from one to another. He was happy. I was happy. He left for work each day, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Then, one day I went to the library and found him sitting in his car in the parking lot. Truth is, he’d been fired after a week and was pretending to go to work each day.

In 2015, Brian Williams was a successful and beloved television anchor. His stories about his adventures made him popular. One of his favorite tales was the time he was in Iraq, and the helicopter he was in was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. Truth is, he wasn’t in that helicopter but one that was traveling thirty miles behind. Other possible exaggerations have surfaced. Truth is, he went from being the 28th most trusted person in the country to the 835th.

The truth is, everybody lies. It isn’t just politicians or criminals. Children lie. Parents lie to their children. Spouses lie to each other—spoken or by omission. Lies are woven into our lives like DNA. If you say you don’t lie, you’re lying to yourself.

Truth is: lies are hard to hide. Truth is: the truth always comes out.

true (adj) 1- real; genuine; authentic  
2- sincere; not deceitful
In this interview, Sabrina Orah Mark gives us glimpses of her process while writing her new collection of short stories, Wild Milk. A prose poet by heart, her stories are a fantastical blend of fiction and poetry—revealing delightful humor and melancholic ennui. Mark exposes her “most raw nerve,” which can be a challenge for emerging writers. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and earned a BA from Barnard College, Columbia University, an MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Georgia. She is the author of the book-length poetry collections The Babies (2004), and Tsim Tsum (2009), as well as the chapbook Walter B.’s Extraordinary Cousin Arrives for a Visit & Other Tales from Woodland Editions. Mark’s awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and a fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Her fiction is forthcoming or recently appeared in American Short Fiction, Gulf Coast, The Journal, and in the anthologies, My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales (Penguin) and Poets on Teaching (Iowa University Press). Her poems have been included in Best American Poetry 2007 and the anthology Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century (2006). She has taught writing at Agnes Scott College, University of Georgia, Rutgers University, University of Iowa, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Goldwater Hospital and throughout the New York City and Iowa Public School Systems.

Anastasia Dotzauer: Hi, Sabrina. Let’s dive in. After two book-length poetry collections and a chapbook, Wild Milk is your first published collection of stories. Can you provide a little background on how Wild Milk came to be born? What made you decide to veer away from poetry?
Sabrina Orah Mark: The veer was more of a slip than a deliberate turn. After I had my sons, my prose poems started growing bigger and bigger; they began to tear at the edges, and eventually, the whole bottom dropped out. As a mother, it became necessary for me to let more of the world in. The box of the prose poem was (for me) a gorgeous, sealed thing I had to leave behind. I needed something with more light, more room, more talking, more stairs, more breath. If you look very closely, though, at the stories in Wild Milk, you can see little poems hiding inside.

AD: It sounds like motherhood has changed many things for you. Several of your pieces within Wild Milk feature the stories of mothers. By opening the box, were you able to put more of your own story and voice within your writing?

SOM: Poems and stories have these layers and layers of thin nerves. When I became a mother, I think, I became fluent in my most raw nerve. The one that is in closest proximity to the day. It is the one that scrapes up against trees. And other mothers. And socks. And bedsheets. It is that nerve that seems to be the loudest layer these days. It is loud and raw, but also it gives the stories ballast. Like a spine made entirely of nerves.

AD: It’s a wonderful and brave thing to share those raw nerves with your readers. What advice would you give to aspiring writers who may feel their nerves are too delicate to expose to the world?

SOM: Thank you for this excellent question. Bruno Schulz wrote how in childhood we arrive mysteriously at certain images “like filaments in a solution around which the sense of the world crystalizes… (and) establishes our soul’s fixed fund of capital.” I love this so much. He goes on to write that these “early images mark the boundaries of an artist’s creativity…” We are then left with a “single verse” that attaches itself to our souls by a knot that “grows tighter and tighter.” And we keep working at this knot like an ancient seamstress in an endless fairytale. Which is to say, be patient. Most visions take forever. It might also help to imagine the nerves that are “too delicate to touch” as a thread that can sew up the rips in your heart.

AD: On the subject of visions, so many collect and collaborate within Wild Milk. From batches of new presidents in the White House to Louis C.K. piling all his wife’s seahorses on their bed, the diversity of stories and characters is breathtaking. Many developing writers find themselves burdened (or blessed) with a plethora of visions and often need guidance on establishing them within their work. How did you decide which vision(s) fit into which story, and were there visions you left out of Wild Milk as a result?
There are some visions that arrive, and it’s usually when I’m hard at work on something else. They creep in, as the seahorses did in “Let’s Do This Once More, But This Time with Feeling.” And I’ll get the sense that if I don’t feed them with story, they’ll never go away. Other visions enter like little bursts around the bone of a story. They trouble the skeleton. And then I need to strengthen the bones of the story so that the vision doesn’t send the story toppling over.

**AD:** Who are some authors, poets, playwrights, or other artists who helped build your stories’ skeletons in Wild Milk?

**SOM:** Leonora Carrington, Donald Barthelme, Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein, Reginald McKnight, Mary Ruefle, Lydia Davis, the Brothers Grimm, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Walter Benjamin, the Old Testament.

**AD:** Thank you for sharing your muses with us. Are you working on anything now that you plan to share with the public eye?

**SOM:** Right now, I’m writing a column for The Paris Review called Happily, essays on fairy tales and raising boys. And I’m working on short stories.

**AD:** Again, thank you for your time, Sabrina. It has been a pleasure.
Dear Mr. Snooze,

You are without a doubt one of the most clever individuals that I have encountered during my mortal sojourn, and for that, I must commend you.

Despite your intelligence, however, my intent in writing you today is not one of praise or respect.

No.

I write to you to say goodbye.

Let me be clear, this has not been an easy decision for me to make, but as I have come to see you as you truly are, I have become increasingly obliged to accept the reality that I cannot entertain you any longer.

As a matter of fact, you cannot leave my life soon enough.

I honestly do not care to know how many of the world’s greatest minds you have in your control, but I assume that you do, in fact, have friends in high places.

This is concerning to me, not because I blindly follow those that exercise superior abilities, but because I recognize that if they—in their increased levels of discipline—are unable to rid their existence of you... I most assuredly have got my work cut out for me.

By simply being there, you have managed to convince us that the best way to start the day is with an act of procrastination you feed the idea that there is nothing better for us to wake up to than “just five more minutes” in the comfort of our personal groggy, pre-commitment purgatories.

The irony is that there is no direct gain in it for you. I can only assume that you love the amusement of watching as we succumb to our weaknesses... over and over again.


From your conception, you have always had favor in our eyes. You offered an escape, or, at least the illusion of an escape from all that we don’t want to deal with.

As such, you became one that we willingly invited into our homes and bedrooms. Thoughtlessly.
The part that disturbs me most about it all is that we have even come to view you as one of our closest friends. Because of the services you provide and our obvious desire for someone like you to be a part of our lives, most all of us have never taken the time even to question the way that you twist and distort our time to live life.

You don’t care much to think about it either.

While evil people give literally everything they have to develop, manufacture, and sell a lie in pursuit of some form of personal gain—you manage to bypass all of that unnecessary effort.

You ARE the lie that we all want to be true.

Every morning while we are weak, we choose to listen, but I refuse to do so any longer.

I hope that you and all the countless hours of our lives that you have wasted for mediocrity laugh forever in the darkest depths of the sea where only the fish can hear you.

Enjoy the seawater,

Aaron
As we sat in the small kitchen of the condo, my sisters and I could not help but giggle as my Dad, and Great Grandma argued with one another. As a young child, I had no idea what they were arguing about, but watching them get red in the face and act like children was very entertaining. Their argument finally came to a boil when my Dad forcefully yelled: “Grandma, you stink!” That was the last straw for my Great Grandma, and within a few seconds she had picked up her cane and proceeded to whack him over the head with it while simultaneously exclaiming that she bathed every day.

My Great Grandma, or Grandma Bill, was in her late eighties, and she was the epitome of a grumpy old lady. She always had a scowl on her old, wrinkly face, and I rarely ever saw her smile. Her silvery white, thinning hair was done in the same way every day because she religiously kept her roller set appointment at the salon. She also always wore her matching fleece sweat suits that varied in color. Although it never quite went with her sweat suits, she wore outlandish, colorful jewelry paired with the matching brooch. She hobbled along with her cane in hand, always seeming to be mad at the world, unafraid to speak her mind about anything on any occasion. My Mom always told me that Grandma Bill had lost her filter. I just nodded in agreement never really knowing what that meant.

On the days my Grandma Jack would watch me, I would gain some courage and venture upstairs to explore my Grandma Bill’s territory. The rules of the condo were to never rough house, keep quiet while she watched her Old Western movies, mostly because that was her designated nap time, and never use her bathroom because chances were we would get pee on her seat, all of which I broke on a regular basis. In her TV room, she would fall asleep to her old country movies that were blasted on the highest volume possible. I would sneak in and play with her glass cherubs that I was not supposed to touch. Anytime she would shift, my heart would stop, and I would drop to my knees ready to crawl away unnoticed, but most the time I would watch the silly outdated movies as she snored. My favorite days were when she would offer me a quarter to brush out the messy tassels on her rugs. I would get down on my
hands and knees to smooth and straighten each of the tassels to her satisfaction. She would dig around in her coin purse until she found me a quarter and would hold it out to me. I was always so excited and proud of the money I had earned even though it wasn't much.

Grandma Bill was an amazing painter. She painted wonderful mountain scenes and various other outdoor farm and nature scenes, but my favorite paintings and the most impressive were the paintings of flowers. She was able to capture every unique texture and detail in each of the petals, stems, and leaves. I always thought that her paintings were photographs because they were so lifelike. Her framed artwork hung throughout her condo, the common theme being pink peonies encased in gold frames. I always tried my best to imitate her artistic skills, but I could never quite hit the mark.

Most of Grandma Bill's time was spent pondering, sitting on her ugly, fuzzy pink chair by the fireplace. While she sat there, I would grab one of her lap trays, lots of paper, and a pencil. The only thing I knew how to draw were houses. I drew them the same way every time, a simple triangle connected to a rectangle and a wavy line that was meant to be the walkway. Once I was finished, I would hold up my drawing for Grandma Bill to look at. She stared at my drawing with wide eyes trying to come up with something nice to say about my pitiful attempt. “That looks nice Katy-Did” she finally came up with, her lie deceiving me as I smiled from ear to ear. For hours I would draw while she told me stories about her friends she used to paint with. Each time I would hold one of my drawings up she would compliment it and then say “Bring it here and let me show you something.” She attempted to fix something on my drawing but always ended up turning her nose up, disappointed that it did not look like what she had intended it to because her hands no longer worked the way they used to.

Grandma Bill's favorite restaurants were buffets, and they were always her first choice, mostly because she could always sneak a little something home. She always chose either Chuck-A-Rama or Super Salad. She would load her plate full of food and make several trips to take advantage of the system completely. She would always try to reach across the table to force feed me frog eye salad and chastise me for not eating everything on my plate.

After we had all finished eating, she would whisper “Come here Katy-Did” and beckon me with small movements of her pointer finger. She would carefully wrap a treat in her used napkin, and when I got close enough, she would slip her stolen treat, whether it was a brownie, cookie, or ginger snap, into my coat pocket. I always figured it was because as a child I was less likely to get into trouble. Then she would place her finger over her lips making sure I knew it was our little secret. Every time I would walk to the door, I would read the sign that said you were not allowed to take food home, take a peek back at her, and continue walking too afraid to say anything because I did not want to be
on her bad side. I always felt a little rush of adrenaline and guilt until I made it safely outside, and she had retrieved her treat from my pocket. 

Eventually, Grandma Bill had to be placed into a home because my Grandma Jack was in Alaska and no one else had the time or resources to take care of her. She had no freedoms left, and her body no longer allowed her to do the things she wanted. I remember visiting her after she had fallen in the home. She had purple and yellow bruises that covered almost her entire face. She seemed almost embarrassed that she had fallen and completely defeated. I saw the light and fiery spirit of my Great Grandma disappear while she was there. She passed away not too long after her fall. The last words I heard her say were, “I’m going home.” Grandma Bill missed her husband who she had lived without for almost fifteen years and her son she lost to an accidental shooting when he was eight years old. She was ready to be reunited with them, so she just let go.

Over the years of hanging around my Great Grandma, she taught me many things. She taught me always to speak my mind and that it was fine to be grumpy and even a little bit mischievous. But most importantly, she taught me that appearances are deceiving. Although her exterior was tough, she was one of the most loving people I ever knew. She let a little brat hang around and annoy her on a daily basis. She unknowingly sparked an artistic interest inside of me, and although I work in a different medium than she did, I attribute all of my talents to her and the countless hours she spent helping me and watching me draw.
1. Both Bri, my step-monster, and Dad ignored us all yesterday and today. This wasn’t the first time, and Jay and I acted normally. We got up, had breakfast, got ready for school, and rode there in silence. Then school, long division, jump rope, and bathroom breaks. Waited for Bri to pick us up, another drive on mute, homework. Dad came home. Door slammed. House shakes. Dinner was called. The first half of dinner was silent, like the past day in this house. Jay and I exchanged eye signals across the table, mastered after being together since conception, twin telepathy. Whose turn was it to ask what we did wrong? Mine.

“Um, what did we do?” I asked my plate and fork meekly. Bri dropped her silverware on the table. Dad picked up his clean plate and stood up in one, abrupt movement. “If you have to ask, it’s not worth telling,” Dad said.

That’s a hard lesson to learn when you’re eight.

2. “Where is Kacie?” Dad demanded from Mom. This was muffled because Jay and I sat in the Victorville police station parking lot, squished in the brown truck filthy from our dirt road that was transformed into chocolate milk river by last night’s rain. “Kacie wants to spend Christmas with me and the girls, her sisters, and mother, on Christmas,” Mom replied coolly. Dad’s face got red.

Uh-oh. Kacie was supposed to be with Dad for Christmas. She spent Christmas Eve with Mom. One day with Mom, one day with Dad. Those were the rules. Jay and I exchanged glances.

Mom was in Big Trouble.

“The twins aren’t going with you until you bring Kacie back,” Dad huffed. “Allen, please. Let the girls all spend Christmas together. This is what Kacie wants,” Mom reasoned. “The twins aren’t going with you until you bring Kacie here.” “Don’t do this, Allen.” Mom’s voice got hard and terse, like a gray-haired third-grade teacher who should have retired ten years ago. “I’ll get the cops out here, Carol.”

Mom got back in her Suburban and drove away.

3. “You can’t be here, Mom.” Even at ten, I knew the ins and outs of a custody order. Mom was not supposed to be at this award ceremony. Dad said so.
Once this morning and once three months ago, when I last saw Mom.

“No, sweetie,” Mom began, “My lawyer figured it all out.” She smiled and enveloped Jay and me in a hug that bears would be envious of. “You two are coming home with me today. We can even leave right now.” Jay and I squealed in the empty multi-purpose room.

Mom had given everything she had to get a top-notch lawyer and fight Dad. She couldn’t pay the heat bill for a week.

4. “You have to talk to the mediator this week,” Bri said over a dinner of chicken and rice. “Ok,” Jay and I said, deadpanned. Another mediation appointment, a cross between therapy and a game of Read Between the Lines. Tell the Truth, but Don’t Offend Mom or Dad. You Can Tell Me Anything, but Your Parents Will Hear All About It in Court.

At least we got to go out to dinner after.

5. Wednesday. Finally. Dinner with Mom tonight. Jay, Kacie, and I sat barely contained on the four-piece sectional that occupied the space in the living room that the entertainment center did not. We peeked out the window in rotating shifts every seven seconds.

Winter made it easy to detect when Mom arrived at the house. Headlights traveled in the dark. I stared out the window to make sure the lights stopped outside the gate. They did. “Let’s go,” I said as I scooped up my jacket and shouted a hardly acceptable “Bye!” to Bri and Dad. All three of us were out of the house in under a minute.

6. Kacie was in the bathroom throwing up. I only knew that because Bri headed in there to check on her. After a loud retch and a muffled exchange, Bri picked Kacie off the bathroom floor and forced her towards the couch. “Get ready to go. You’re going to spend some time at Amber’s and Chelsi’s,” were the only words out of Bri’s mouth that I remember.

Twenty minutes later, Jay and I hid in the kitchen like Amber, one of Bri’s friends, suggested as we waited for Chelsi, our friend, to get home from dance so we could surprise her. We never hung out on school nights. The sugar-smell of frosting was the air.

“Hey, why don’t you go look at the cake I made,” Amber said, a little too loudly to be inconspicuous. Chelsi shuffled to the counter. Jay and I popped out from behind the lower cabinets with synchronization and a giggle that only two people who have spent their whole lives together could possess.

Jay and I found out the next day that Kacie had swallowed eighty tablets of aspirin because she didn’t want to live anymore.

7. “We’re moving to Utah,” Dad said over the dinner table worn from ten years of kids. He had this expression of checked excitement with leading uncertainty. He knew Jay didn’t want to leave.

“I’m not going,” Jay stated as expected. At least she was upfront with it. She could have just told Mom under-the-table and left Dad’s household the same way Kacie did two years earlier: unexpectedly and vindictively.
But I was ecstatic. All I wanted was to get out of this God forsaken land of Joshua trees and wind.

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1. The yelling that I thought I was part of my dream isn’t. My parents are fighting over the plumbing. “What’s your fucking problem, Allen?” Bri screams. “What’s my fucking problem? You expect me to get all this work done but don’t offer to fucking help!” More words fly across the airspace like fighter jets dropping bombs. Exact words are hard to make out through my closed door, but lack of respect is mentioned.

   The front door slams. It’s silent; not even dog feet patter across the wood floors. Ten minutes pass. I weigh going to the bathroom. A door slams amidst my processing, and the noise level goes from snowy 3:00 a.m. to seventeen-car pile-up on the I-15. I keep to my bedroom and think about mitosis to distract me.

   The shouting has stopped for fifteen minutes. I need to pee. I creep out of my bedroom to the bathroom, then downstairs.

   I arrive in the living room to find that my parents are getting a divorce.
This is the place where we ask you, in no uncertain terms, to bare us your most tender and raw flesh—the place where we invite you to linger as an open vessel, unarmored, unburdened. This is that liminal space where you bring yourself to become not yourself. This is fiction, where you shed your own skin and step into the mind, motivation, and situation of characters whose perspectives have the ability to infect every part of your being.

Studies conducted in the field of cognitive science demonstrate increased emotional intelligence and empathy in long-time readers of fiction (Kidd and Castano). The complex and unique circumstances present in great works of fiction invite us to participate in understanding the world around us and the varied people who inhabit it. Fiction is one of our best tools in understanding one another, and it gives us—those who enjoy reading and writing it—the opportunity to exit ourselves and examine the collective experience of existence.

This year Metaphor received an incredible array of fiction pieces that demonstrated this quality. We truly had a difficult time narrowing down our selections to the pieces we bring you in this edition. We learned something new with each piece we read, and we are thankful to every writer who took the time to submit their work to us.

In this section, we explore everything from infertility, time travel, extraterrestrial soldiers, abstract art, coping with rape, and (quite literally) devouring books, among many other topics—but, most of all, we explore what it means to be human, and that, of course, is what satisfies us above all else. Enjoy, and empathize, a little, too.

—LIBBY LEONARD, Fiction Section Editor

Work Cited:
Not being possessed by a demon was the worst thing that had ever happened to Mary. The condition was rare, affecting less than one percent of the population, and wasn’t life-threatening, but that didn’t stop it from ruining her life. She found her diagnosis debilitating, and she felt inadequate, incomplete, and utterly hopeless.

She spent a lot of time on the phone in the hopes of filing a request to be moved up the donor list. The hold music was one Louis Armstrong song that played on a loop she had heard enough times now that she would wake up singing about cheesecake from a dead sleep. Whenever she was fortunate enough to “please hold” long enough to speak to an operator the conversation always went the same way.

“How in the Hell are there not enough demons to keep everyone possessed?” she asks.

“I’m sorry Ma’am, but overpopulation has the bureau stretch thin. We can’t keep up with human birth rates.”

There wasn’t a shortcoming in Mary’s life that she couldn’t attribute to her rare condition of not having a demon attached to her soul, after all, she could only be half as good as anyone else. Of course, they never told her that it was her shortcoming that led them to hire someone with less experience for the same job, but she knew why they didn’t call her back. Dates would end with the child he’d “It’s not you, it’s me” rhetoric, but she knew what that meant. Nobody could love half a woman, and she would never be whole until she too had a demon inside of her.

“I’ve been on the donor list for nearly a decade, and I know people that have received a transplant in less than a year!” She’s nearly screaming.

“I’m sorry Ma’am, but as I have already explained to you, the procedure is not covered by your current insurance policy, so others with proper coverage take priority.”

Now the tears start, “There has to be something you can do. I’m a good, person I pray to the Dark Lord every morning and night, and I haven’t skipped out on a sacrament in years. I’m a good person you have to help me.”

“I’m sorry Ma’am, but short of Satan himself signing an expedition order for your case my hands are tied.”
“Please,” Mary begs, “I’ll do whatever it takes, I’ll sacrifice a goat for Lucifer, I’ll give my first born son to Beelzebub, I’ll bathe in the blood of virgins.”

“Ma’am, you know that Hell doesn’t work that way, you have to file the proper paperwork and be patient. There is nothing anyone can do to speed your case along. Now is there anything else I can help you with today?”

She had already filled and filed more than her fair share of paperwork, the continually changing forms for the donor registry, the required six-hundred-and-sixty-six page application for disability, signed up for all relevant research studies, and sent thousands of emails pleading nonprofits for help.

Her days were filled with emptiness and depression waiting for the day she would no longer be alone in life, for her first chance to know what normal felt like. That’s all she wanted, to fit in, to be normal, to be happy.

All of her emotions explode, and she can’t hold back any longer, “You can find me a fucking demon, so I don’t have to die empty and alone!”

“If you are going to use aggressive language I am going to disconnect the call.”

“I’m already disconnected you bitch! Why do you think I’m calling you?”

There was a click then the dial tone. Mary tossed the phone aside and sobbed heavily with her face in her palms until she found herself wiping the tears dry as she sang about cheesecake.
Everything was going great until we hit mile marker 256 when she decided to put down her book and pick up a conversation. I knew she had something on her mind and had been happy she chose to ignore it for the first three-quarters of the trip home.

“So,” she started as she turned down my radio, “I’ve been thinking.”

I was a bit annoyed that she interrupted my music, but I think something else had been building up to make me snap. “Well thinking ain’t one of your strong points, so maybe you should give it up.”

She took a small gasp before she began screaming at me. “Fuck you, Billy! I should’ve known you got no respect for a woman from the day we met! You’re a mistake, and I’m done making it!”

We’d met at the bar a couple of months back and hit it off right away. Soon we were spending lunch breaks together two or three times a week. We had a few things in common, but the one we focused on was our physical attraction of one another. Then I made the mistake of taking her North with me for a weekend business trip and well, I guess we had less in common than we first thought.

She was still screaming at me when my phone started vibrating across the dash. The screen lit up, and I didn’t get a chance to read the name before she had it in her hands. I didn’t need to read it, and I knew exactly who it would be.

“Now hold on a second,” I pleaded, “I’m sorry I misspoke....” It was already too late, and I could already hear the voice on the other end of the phone.

I’ll never forget the way she looked at me with those eyes, like a wolf just before the kill. Then the words fell from her mouth, and my throat tightened like I was in that wolf’s jaws. “I’m the woman that’s been sleeping with your worthless husband.”
I hated that damned robot, maybe that’s why I put it in his casket. I never wanted to see that tin toy again, but my brother loved it. He loved it so much that when our sister found it and brought it to his hospital room, he held it and cried until I had to leave to catch my plane home. It was just a four-inch piece of metal, old and dented, but it ruined my last memory of my brother. Now all I can think of is the sobbing shriveled husk of a man I had known since birth but at the same time a man I didn’t get to know at all. That robot was a constant wedge in our relationship like when Ma’ passed and it was nowhere to be found as we sifted through our inheritance. It was all he wanted, the robot that held all his happiest memories of childhood in its hollow body, but of course, we couldn’t find it. He yelled and screamed accusing me of taking it until he finally left slamming the door so hard one of Ma’s tacky paintings fell off the wall. None of us heard from him again until his wife called nearly a decade later to tell us about the cancer. It was the same toy that left a scar under my chin from a tussle we had when I was fifteen, and he was twelve. It’s what he used to smash all of my G.I. Joes when I was ten and G.I. Joe was my favorite thing in the world. It was that hunk of tin, and it’s missing stickers that was supposed to be mine when I was eight until my five-year-old brother cried and threw a fit so loud grandparents made me give it to him instead. I don’t think I ever forgave him for it and I despised that robot ever since. I don’t want to see it ever again, but I can’t stop the tears rolling down my cheeks while I think about the piece of tin lying in his casket as they lower it into the ground.
There is a miniature giraffe curled up in my sink. Its long neck and its orange-yellow pelt are different than that of a cat. I don’t even own a cat anyways. I don’t know how this safari creature has made its way in here, to a bathroom sink of all places. It must’ve sprouted from a seed. I thought that plant my sister gave me had died ages ago. Still, I scoop up the giraffe from the sink and it flops, not unlike a cat, and I go to look for its origin.

My plant is not quite dead anymore. It’s healthier than ever, for it has branches now, instead of stems. Not even branches, perhaps more like limbs. It stretches up, in a half-human kind of way. It cannot yet speak, it only coos and gahs and sighs, and is growing sharp and tiny little teeth. I dare not raid its space to search for the seed from which the giraffe may have come.

With nothing more to do, I open up my roof. Surely, the residents of the top four floors above my small apartment don’t mind that their floors will open as well, to let the outside reach my bottom floor. They easily flatten themselves against the walls, like framed paintings, as floors open wide. Rain from above begins pouring in. The top floor residents drip down the walls, and they hadn’t entirely dried yet from pressing themselves into paintings. Water pools at my feet and the giraffe gets on the coffee table, and my toddler-plant reaches itself up to drink. The rain is mixing with the running paint from the top floor residents. I splash and dance and twirl in the colors swirling in my living room.
Dawn flushes my curtains with morning light, staining the bedroom with a peach glow. I wake from my silent dreams into a noiseless world. It is Saturday. I push the bedsheets and blankets off me, feeling the way they crumple in my hands like tissue paper. I stretch over to the cat and press my face and palms into her soft, cloudy fur, feeling the way it tickles my skin. I thank the stars I can feel. Feel the sheets move, my muscles stretch, and the cat’s sweet fur. I pull her limp, sleeping body off the bed and into the kitchen with me.

Minutes pass, coffee brewed and poured, bread toasted. The cat wanders the countertop for forgotten crumbs. I raise the steamy mug to my lips and welcome the bittersweet taste of coffee bean and warm milk. Breakfast is finished, mug placed in the sink, and feet find their way to the cold white tiles of the bathroom. I wet the bristles of my toothbrush and adorn it with glistening blue paste. I scrub away the remnants of coffee, toast, and morning breath, replacing them with the stinging sensation of spearmint. I spit and rinse way the foamy mixture. Then the rush begins. Face is washed, hair is combed, clothes pulled on, bag slung over shoulder. I slide lip balm across my mouth and taste a hint of coconut in its arrival. I thank the stars I can taste, taste strong coffee, spearmint, and subtle coconut. I kiss the cat and slip out the door.

I pass from home to hallway and squint into the dim light. Cracks litter the off-white walls like strands of crooked hair. I grasp the handle of the big metal door to my left and heave it open. I pass from hallway to city sidewalk. A sudden breeze sweeps across my face, and my eyes shoot up to look at the sky. Moody, gray clouds seep into the spaces between skyscrapers. I join a world in motion. Faces blur past as I enter a vibrant world of billboards and screens. I navigate the busy sidewalks and climb the steps of the public library. My eyes surf the crowd until they meet hers. Familiarity in a sea of strangeness. She waves to me, and I walk over to sit beside her. “How did you sleep?” I read on her lips and in her moving hands. “The cat and I slept well,” I sign back. We continue to chat unconventionally. I thank the stars I can see. See ugly cracks in the apartment walls, murky clouds, my sister’s smiling face. “Eat?” she asks. I nod, and we stand, gathering our belongings before reentering the flow of human traffic.
We settle on a nearby churro cart, unable to elude the heavenly scent it sends in the wind. We watch in mouth-watering anticipation as the burly man with a caramel complexion drizzles chocolate over the sugar-coated morsels before leaning out the window to pass them to us. We stroll down 5th, treats in hand, looking for an interesting doorway to duck into. I point to a few, but she is picky today, as always. Long after our churros have disappeared, she finally selects a glass door nestled beneath the words, “Shulman Gallery.” We open the door and step inside to be welcomed by a chilly old woman with a pointy face in a pale green pantsuit. She smiles and speaks, lips moving stiffly. She smells like the old perfume that stores don’t sell anymore. And antiseptic. She gestures towards the gallery and Sister takes my arm. We drift among painting and sculpture. I lean close to a large painting of a chicken and breathe in the smell of dry acrylic paint. I linger there for a moment, and my sister nudes me. The gallery woman doesn’t like me being so close to the art. We continue to drift like curious ghosts, then we leave. The woman methodically pumps hand sanitizer into her palm as we pass. I thank the stars I can smell. Smell delicious street churros, germophobic gallerists, and paint. Sister pulls a flyer out of her bag for a concert in the park. We’ll stand by the speakers so that I can feel the vibrations. I smile as she signs excitedly. Her favorite band will be playing there. I don’t notice the car coming down the street until my sister yanks me out of the way. The driver rolls down the window, and I see his mouth move in angry synchronization with his fist. My sister scowls and raises a middle finger as he motors past. I thank the stars I have no idea what he just said.
Under the right conditions, Martin could keep running for hours. He had been something of a late bloomer. Having no athletic experience in high school, he had to work that much harder at twenty-seven to acquire a level of fitness that appeared to come naturally to others in his age division. For that, he never took his abilities for granted. When he struck the rear end of a ninety-nine Cutlass going eighty-eight at thirty-three, he stopped to reflect.

Upon impact, his thoughts drifted to his first 5K. He had been running for two months, and he was woefully unprepared. A cotton t-shirt? Rookie move. The shock of each step pierced the soles of his bargain-bin sneakers and traversed muscle and marrow to his hips, his shoulders, his jaw, finally arriving at the base of his skull, spending its remaining energy gently rattling his brain. He came in dead last within his division, hulking across the finish line – lungs burning, tongue swollen. He dry-heaved over a hedge in the bank parking lot twenty yards from the finish. It would be two years before he decided to race again.

As his knees struck the underside of the dash panel, he found himself eight miles into his first half marathon. Down the canyon. Into the rain. Into the wind. Hands white, numb. Feet macerated. His knees were beginning to feel the wear of the miles – the repetition of impact and motion – thumping, swinging, thumping, swinging, thumping, grinding, compressing, swaying. He couldn’t tell if they were swelling from overuse or contracting from the cold. The conditions were miserable by any objective measure, but Martin’s grin was immovable. He was flying.

He felt each meandering fracture in his pelvis, spreading, splitting, diverging from one another, creating a mosaic of agony he had not expected to experience and could not escape. The surge of pain carried him to the last mile of his first marathon. His fingers interlocked around the back of his head, palms cooled by his short, damp, bristly hair – buzzed a week prior in preparation for twenty-six miles under the early morning Arizona sun. He was walking now, only for a moment, trying to loosen his joints for the final sprint. His hips began to spasm, sending twisting shots of pain serpentine through his back, up to the tops of his shoulders. The next one would be easier. Faster. There would be a next one and another after that. He wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t. He gritted
his teeth, hammered his fist against his left thigh, pressed his foot into the asphalt and pushed off into a defiant trot, barely faster than his walking pace.

The airbag hadn't deployed. Momentum drew the weight of his chest and arms forward as the impact with the steering wheel forced his head back, sending him to the morning of his wedding. He stood at the start line of the mountain pass trail race, cracking the kinks out of his neck and shoulders. He wore a tuxedo t-shirt. His bride wore a white running skirt. He thought he would be a ball of nerves. He had feared a late start on account of nervous bowels. But he was fine. He felt clear, loose, relaxed. She asked if he was ready for this. He told her he'd been training for it for years. She said she wasn't talking about the race. He told her he knew what she meant. The crack of the starting pistol resolved to rapid intermittent flashes of white light and muffled voices slowly coming into focus as he drifted in and out of consciousness.

“Martin. Can you hear me, Martin?”

Clouds of fine red sand burst from the trail with each step, enveloping his feet, dyeing his socks, caking his ankles.

“He's opening his eyes.”

His race bib flapped in the breeze, short one safety pin.

“Martin if you can hear me I just need you to hang in there.”

Two short breaths in, one long breath out, visible, scattered, wisped away by the crisp autumn air.
None of the clocks in his house kept good time. The analog clock above the bar ran slow, and the digital clocks on the stove and microwave were too fast. He used to joke that he would have to take an average if he hoped to get anywhere on time. He was, however, never late, nor was he early. He was known within his circle of acquaintances for being extremely punctual as his distaste for tardiness was matched only by the displeasure he took in waiting.

He rarely complained about the trivial matters of human existence – traffic, bad weather, and short weekends didn’t seem to bother him in the slightest. He had the wit and charm of a well-traveled gentleman, he was endlessly kind, and he always knew exactly what to say at the perfect moment.

He would claim with great pride that he was an open book, but he seemed to revel in unchallenged secrecy. His money, for instance, was a matter of great interest to his friends, though none lacked enough tact to ask him about it. His appearance was puzzling as well. It wasn’t uncommon to spot him around town multiple times a day, always wearing a different outfit. He kept his hair short, and often wore hats, but his beard seemed to have a will of its own, frequently growing at a supernatural rate. Once, I noticed a small tattoo on his right wrist: a sparrow. The next day it was gone, but the following week I swear it was a wren.

Occasionally his memory would get fuzzy – he would blank on a conversation he’d just had, or reminisce over something that no one else could remember. It frustrated him when others would forget, but endlessly more so when his own memory failed.

Despite his peculiarities, or maybe because of them, he has been a wonderful friend – faithful and reliable. Cameron has been away for three years now. He left without a word to any of his closest friends.

I’ve been thinking about the day we met, recently; I can’t seem to get it off my mind. Fifteen years ago, I struck Cameron with my car, pulling out of Tully’s. It was dark, I was tired, and my wiper blades weren’t doing their job. Of course, that’s all bullshit. Even in the best conditions, I had no right to be behind the wheel of that car. I just wanted to be at home, in bed. Cameron was
pretty banged up, but he walked away. I spent that night in jail. Of course, it
could have gone much worse.

I began to put money away for his medical expenses. I fretted over a call
from the insurance company that never came. After six weeks, my anxiety
started to melt away until all that remained was guilt, intensified by Cameron's
apparent lack of interest in even so much as an apology. I had no recourse
for atonement.

It took nearly a year, but I tracked him down. He said that he had no
memory of the accident whatsoever. He thought I was crazy, but he invited
me in, nonetheless, to hear about this thing that never happened. At the time,
I thought he was just being kind. I thought maybe it was his peculiar way of
forgiving me; to tell me to forget about it. He offered me a beer. I saw an olive
branch, and I let him know that I was done with all that. During the subse-
quent years as our friendship blossomed, I realized that he wasn't being clever.
My guilt swelled with intensity each time his memory lapsed. His frustration
became my cross to bear.

It was beautiful out last night – the first clear night this spring. I left the
windows open to let the house fill with the cool air drafting off the river. I lit a
cigar, put on Dark Side of the Moon at full blast, leaned back into my recliner,
and let the sum of the day wash through me. I almost didn't hear the knock at
the door over the clanging, clattering intro of the third track. Cameron stood
there, soaked, looking down, clutching his left shoulder. As he raised his head,
blood dripped from his brow, cutting two paths down his cheek, pooling into
the dimple alongside his smirking grin.
A moment of silence passes over the boat—a hush that washes over us like the calm before the storm. My fear is palpable, releasing with my breath and tearing away in the strong, easterly winds.

The men in my company are ghostlike in the spraying gales, holding to their carbines as though these are their last moments and these weapons hold the secret to salvation. They will carry them along the gray mists of the world beyond and to paradise.

It is a safe assumption.

The boat shifts with the raging swells and each man braces against the man next to him. We are sitting like sardines packed into a tin can, knees knocking with each roll of the boat, shoulders squeezed tight, leaving no room for arm movement. Conditions all made worse by the wind and the raging sea.

The boy next to me reaches for his pocket, pulls out a single, broken cigarette. He stares at it, perplexed, perhaps thinking the same thing I am thinking, how the devil is he going to light it?

He turns to me, noticing my gaze. He gives me a small half-grin. “I was hoping to have a last one,” he says.

I turn my head away, unable to face the truth of his words. There is no ‘last one.’

“It’s now or never,” they had said. “We’ve waited too long already.”

I could have waited longer. I could have waited forever. I was so brave in the beginning, so eager to push forward and take action. Now, what am I? I am a cowardly boy, regretting every moment of my heroism.

“I’m so proud of you,” my mother had said. Her smile flashed before my eyes as the boat lurched. I knew then that she was a hero as well, putting on a smile and a brave face for my sake. But inside, she was breaking. I could see her heart shattering as I waved goodbye, see the gleam of tears as she wiped them away.

Will I let her down today?

These thoughts are whirling in my head as we come to realize we are off point. The winds had blown us too far to the west, and the bombers were forced to stop. That is the silence from the air—whisperings of the planes as they fly overhead, clinging to their loads for the sake of those below.

Aren’t we all going to die anyway? I have already come to grips with the reality of the situation; my mortality snuck up on me as I sit huddled in the
Higgins boat. It traps me inside with these other mortal men, about to become familiar with the origins of life. It is a bond we now share but don’t dare talk about.

The shore comes into view. It is dark and appears desolate enough, but I know better. There are men there, stalking in the shadows, waiting for us. Omaha is a vicious predator, waiting for its willing prey to throw itself into its gaping jaw.

Another spray of water pushes against us; carbines tilting, swaying with the winds, desperate hands clinging to the only chance of life we have left. And then the boat stops, forcing us forward, and we would have fallen to our knees had there been enough room. A sudden stop at nine knots is more force than I expected. I press my hand against an unknown shoulder and look up.

The shoreline was still some distance away, and I know we have run aground—some hidden sandbar, impossible to avoid. Fifty meters to run before taking eighty kilometers of enemy infested beach seems impossible.

The bow ramp releases and the pressure of bodies floods the cold ocean like a broken vein.

“It’s now or never,” they had said.

My time has come. I race ahead with the rest, my carbine carrying me along into the grey mists.
There she stood, out on the edge. Tonia watched as cars, buses, and taxis sped past.

She could see the spot where she was going to land. It was all picked out. She hadn’t moved her eyes off of the spot for the last three hours, and not a single motor vehicle has passed over it. She made an “L” shape with both of her thumb and forefingers and placed them together in a rectangle so that she could focus on the spot better. She shut her right eye and peered through the rectangle as the tip of her tongue poked out of the right corner of her mouth.

“The time has come!” she announced. She lifted her pointer finger to the sky and continued, “Now, witness my beauty!”

Tonia took one last look back at the safety of the roof of the Manhattan World Trade Center. The roof was filthy and had not been cleaned in years, ignored just like her, but this would change all of that. “People will think twice after today,” she thought to herself.

She rubbed the back of her neck as she looked away from the roof and out into the city. Her neck was hot and grimaced when she touched it. “Maybe I should have put on some sunblock before I came up here,” she chuckled to herself. “Oh well, it will all be over soon.”

Holding up her bright pink watch to her face she took note of the time, “5:29.” One minute until show-time. She watched the second hand slowly tick around the circle.

Tick, it hit the mark that meant five seconds after minute 29. She grew restless from the wait.

Tick, the hand struck the 15-second mark. “Oh, why can’t it just go faster already” she moaned.

Tick, the hand smacked the 30-second mark. “Am I making the right decision here?”

Tick, the hand struck the 35-second mark. She began to contemplate whether this was going to big the biggest mistake of her life.

Tick, the hand whacked the 40-second mark. “This is the worst mistake of my life!” she screamed inside of her head.

Tick, the hand struck the 45-second mark. “I have to back out!” she told herself.

Tick, the hand struck the 50-second mark. Her right foot inched backward away from the edge.
Tick, the hand struck the 51-second mark. She could no longer see her landing spot.

Tick, the hand struck the 52-second mark. Something deep down inside told her to stay.

Tick, the hand struck the 53-second mark. Her foot repositioned itself along-side her left foot.

Tick, the hand struck the 54-second mark. She remade the rectangle with her hands and closed her right eye.

Tick, the hand struck the 55-second mark. She let her tongue poke out of the corner of her mouth.

Tick, the hand struck the 56-second mark. She found the spot where destiny had chosen for her arrival.

Tick, the hand struck the 57-second mark. She inhaled deeply

Tick, the hand struck the 58-second mark. She exhaled and said, “Show-time!”

Tick, the hand struck the 59-second mark. She closed her eyes and pasted a smile across her face.

Tick, the clock landed on the 12. Tonia opened her eyes, held out her arms like a great eagle, and jumped.

Some say, at a moment like this, their life flashes before their eyes. This did not happen for Tonia. Her mind was clear. Her eyes stayed locked on her destiny. She didn’t want to close her eyes, but the wind made it hard to keep them open. It would all be over soon anyway.

A splash and it was all over. She had done it. The water was cool and felt good on her sunburnt skin. She didn’t want to leave the water, but she hadn’t taken a breath of air since she jumped three seconds ago which means she has just enough time to swim back up to the top before she might start needing air.

As her face appeared out of the water, flashes appeared in all directions, each one competing for the best shot of the girl who survived a 1,000-foot drop.
I was born in a world of sand. Life only had two colors as I was growing up. One was the sky, and the other was that of the sand. My mother gave me a scarf so my face would not burn, it belonged to my father. I didn’t know who I was for a long time, for I had no way of discovering it in my world of sand. Then, HE came. He fell from the sky into the sand where I was there to meet him. He was older than I but not as old as my mother. He was louder and wilder than either of us. He wanted to leave as soon as He arrived. As he prepared to depart, I gave him my scarf. He promised to come back and take me to a different world. I waited.

When he came for me, I was already a man. The first time I saw grass, I cried. Trees, cats, squirrels frightened me, even haunting my dreams for a time. Fruits felt strange as they squished around in my mouth. Everyone asked why I still wore my old scarf (yes, He returned it to me) since I no longer needed it. I never knew what to say. The scarf was plain and boring when compared to what they had in this world, but I just couldn’t let it go. It smelt like the sand used to, even after all these years. My wife finally convinced me to get rid of the scarf, but by then, I was old and frail and had nearly forgotten what the color of sand looked like.
Tree #5 was determined to be the best tree in the production. It didn’t matter that trees didn’t get any speaking parts and didn’t move, and it didn’t matter that the seven other trees in the production were inanimate props. If anything, that made the competition stiffer.

Tree #5 had committed his stage directions to heart.

“Be seen not heard. But not too seen, trees don’t move or emote.” The duties of a tree aren’t as easy as you might think. A constant standing position through the entirety of act one, a ten-minute break to sit and have some juice, and then a second act full of standing again.

Tree #5 had gotten very good at the nuances of playing a tree. For example, not locking your knees or knowing how to gradually shift your weight to relieve the ongoing leg cramps, but not shifting so much that you moved more than the average tree should. It was, truly, a delicate balance.

Of course, there was so much tree characterization to get into. What kind of tree was this? Based on the arts and craft skill of the prop department, one woman named Linda who was maybe someone’s aunt, Tree #5 felt it safe to assume this tree was a Spruce. Initially, Tree #5 was sure his tree was an Oak, or an Aspen, or maybe even committing to the acting choice of a Willow; those were the only tree names he knew.

Being the dutiful performer he was, he turned to the Internet and for the sake of his part Google image searched, “types of trees.” Yes, this paper-mache tree costume was a Blue Spruce.

Tree #5 had concluded it was in his best interest to not argue with the director that such a tree wouldn’t exist in the region the production was supposed to be taking place in. On the down low, he was very bothered by the lack of forethought the production team had put into the creation of the eight trees.

The stage manager assured Tree #5 that he didn’t have to attend every rehearsal for the scenes he was in, but Tree #5 insisted he needed to rehearse all his scenes as much as the others did so he could practice being a very good tree.

Tree #5 asked that maybe it be considered that trees be allowed to hum, just a little since it was already a given fact they couldn’t sing. The concept wasn’t addressed, and Tree #5 left it because he knew that’s what you’re supposed to do.

When any member of the production team produced a canned, “I’m so proud of you all, and what you bring to this production” speech, the
cast and crew cried as if this wasn’t a half-hearted statement that they repeated word for word any time they did a production. Tree #5 would nod along, and imagine someone was proud of his background plant abilities.

When the stage manager waved them off to places and told everyone, “Have a great show,” he would imagine that the role of Tree #5 was an integral part of the production that warranted such a statement.

When the curtain opened, Tree #5 didn’t even consider that no one in the cast, crew, or audience knew him by any name other than Tree #5. Tree #5 did not think about his family not feeling the need to attend the show because their child was playing the role of Background Tree #5. He didn’t think about the crushing weight of hoping someone noticed how great of a tree that Tree #5 was or that someone somewhere was proud of Tree #5.

He didn’t think about any of that because he was a tree and trees don’t emote. And Tree #5 was going to be the best tree in the production.
It would have been Anne’s twelfth birthday today. I should have been making her a big plate of hash browns and overcooked bacon while Raz got her ready for the morning. Then we’d sit around our little table and I’d shake my head as she squirted way too much ketchup all over her plate. We’d eat and talk and laugh at silly things. She’d ask where her presents were and Raz would tell her not to talk with food in her mouth. Then I’d wipe a glob of ketchup off her chin and she’d give that big, toothy grin that was so contagious.

Instead, Raz and I shared an expired packet of oatmeal and sat in silence. The sun hadn’t quite risen yet, and a lone candle on the table was our only light. I stared at the empty space where our daughter should have been sitting as shadows flickered back and forth with the candle’s flame. I played through a thousand what-ifs in my mind. What if I’d been paying more attention? What if I hadn’t let her wander off? What if I’d been faster? What if I’d found her before that plague-ridden freak had gotten his hands on her? The scenarios worm their way through my mind and leave trails of rot in their wake.

Most mornings weren’t like this. Normally, I could hide behind the walls of numbness and apathy I’d built up. Not today. Today was the first in a long line of birthdays she’d never get to celebrate because I’d screwed up. I tried to push the self-hate away with thoughts of our upcoming patrol, but it wasn’t working. The scene in my head started playing again.

She screams and I round the corner with my gun raised. A man has her clamped tight with one hand on her left shoulder and the other pulling her hair. I yell and he looks in my direction. His right eye is completely covered in a fuzzy, red mold. From there, it spreads like a spider web across the contours of his face. Some of the lines extend down his neck and below his shirt collar. The largest line disappears into his ear canal. Only the right side of his head is affected, the same as all the plague-ridden.

In his teeth, I see a bit of my daughter’s cheek hanging loosely. The fire of rage that kindles in my heart burns hotter than the flames that leap forth from my revolver’s barrel. Two rounds slam into his chest and he lets go of her as he staggers backwards. Two more shots and he drops lifelessly to the
ground. Anne is screaming and holding a hand to her cheek as blood gushes down her face. She turns to me with tears in her eyes and cries the most heart-wrenching “Daddy!” I’ve ever heard. I respond with another pull of the trigger. Her head rocks back and she crumples to the ground.

I don’t remember how long I actually stood there with my mouth half open and my gun pointed at the spot she’d been occupying. In this playthrough, though, I put the revolver straight to my head and pull the hammer back. The barrel is still warm and it tingles against my temple. The whole world is silent as I stand there and stare at the scene of gore before me.

How many times have I watched this all play out? How many times have I had to kill her to save her from the nightmare she would have become? Hundreds? Probably more. Every single time, except for the real one, I squeeze the trigger. This go through is no different. The hammer falls and the revolver barks its report. My head snaps to the side and I crumple, just like she did.

“Bastion?”

The world snaps back into focus and I see Raz staring at me. The candle’s flame still flickers but the room feels much darker. I see worry and fear in her eyes. She is the only reason I didn’t really pull that trigger. I couldn’t bring myself to make her suffer the loss of us both on the same day. Maybe she would have been better off though. For all these months, I have been nothing more than an anchor slowly dragging her down. She feels it too; I know she does. Her lips move again as she repeats my name. “Bastion?”

“What?”

Raz makes as if to speak but hesitates. We stare into each other’s eyes and I see hers begin to moisten. She blinks rapidly and stops the tears before they can fully form. Raz stands up and gives me an empty smile before asking, “Are you ready to go?”

Until recently, she used to ask me if I was okay. If she could do anything to help me. If I wanted to talk about it. I think she got tired of hearing the word no. I stand and nod. She turns for the door without another word, and I blow out the candle. For a brief moment, we are encapsulated in complete darkness. I take in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Is this all she sees now?

I used to believe in a god and a blissful afterlife. Bad things happened to good people because it was all part of the plan. Trials and adversity were meant to help us grow and become better. In the end, everything would be made right. My faith survived the initial outbreak, the collapse of civilization, the deaths of some of my closest friends and family. I had faith right up until the moment I had to put my own daughter down.

The door opens and the sun’s early morning rays flood into the tiny room. The light banishes the darkness, but it brings no relief with it. No respite from the pain and despair. A shadow passes over me as Raz steps into the doorway. She looks back with another pained expression. She wants to ask if I’m okay.
I want to tell her the truth. I want to explain to her that I can’t stop blaming myself. That I hate myself for what happened, and all I want to do is blow my brains out, so I can stop feeling this way.

I want to tell Raz how sorry I am for the pain I’ve caused her. She lost her daughter too that day, and yet, because of me, she can’t even grieve properly. She’s so worried about me and what I might do to myself that she doesn’t have energy left for anything else. Raz can’t lean her head on my shoulder and pour out the ocean of tears she’s been holding back for all this time, for fear of pushing me over the edge. I want to make it right. She deserves so much more from me than this.

I can’t open up to her though. As hard as I try, as much as I want to, I can’t explain the way I feel. She’s coming to realize that more and more and it’s killing her slowly. Her kind, ever-forgiving, endlessly loving heart is turning as cold and dead as my own.

She doesn’t ask me if I’m okay. Raz looks down in defeat, turns back towards the door, and steps out of our little trailer. Another pang of regret cuts its way deep into my chest before I follow her out.

There are people milling about throughout the compound. Some of them move with a sense of purpose while others seem to still be waking up. I recognize most of them. We’ve been with this group for a little over two years now. We were some of its first members.

We make our way towards the armory, and people give the occasional wave and good morning to us. Raz responds in kind, and I ignore them like I usually do. A woman steps out from behind a stall and waves Raz over. They start talking about how nice the weather has been lately, and I stare at the dust on my shoes. Are these the same shoes I was wearing that day? I only have two pairs and these ones fit the best. So, it was probably these shoes.

The two of them continue talking, and the scene starts to play again. The weather had been perfect that day. That’s why she was with me in the first place. Anne had been sick for the last week and cooped up in our trailer the whole time. She finally felt better, and the sun was shining bright in the sky. I just couldn’t resist her pleas to come with me on my patrol. Raz was out hunting, so my options were either to bring her along or leave her with someone else in the camp. Two choices and I chose the life-ruining one.

My patrol area that day hadn’t seen any real activity in weeks. The last significant report was of a wild boar that had been spotted rifling through buildings over a month earlier. It should have been a completely safe and routine patrol. There shouldn’t have been any plague-ridden in at least a five-mile radius.

There shouldn’t have been any plague-ridden in the first place. None of this should have ever happened. Right at this very moment, I should be helping set up decorations for her birthday party in our home. Our home that shouldn’t have burned to the ground as we fled for our lives. Should have, shouldn’t
have, would have, could have, if this, if that. Stupid, pointless words and concepts that do nothing but drag me down more and more with every iteration of them.

“Bastion?”

Reality crashes back in, and I look around in confusion. Raz is standing at least twenty feet away from where she had been and is looking at me with more concern. The woman she was speaking to is nowhere to be seen. I shake my head to clear the fog and continue following Raz towards the armory.

She walks differently than I remember. Raz’s steps used to have more life to them. Not quite a bounce, but close. There is a heaviness to her stride now.

I could take that heaviness away. One pull of the trigger and I’d be gone, and she’d be free. I wish it were that easy. If it were, I would have done it a long time ago. I know better. If I killed myself, she would have no one left. I’d be gone, and she’d be more trapped than ever. So, what can I do?

No one else stops us along our path, and we reach the armory in less than a minute. The worker greets us with a nod of recognition and goes to get our weapons. We stand next to each other, but we are miles apart. Raz stares off into the distance and suddenly looks much older. The spots under her eyes are far darker than I remember. The roots of her hair are starting to gray. How much time do I have left before she is lost to me?

The worker returns carrying a compound bow in one hand and a quiver of arrows in the other. He hands the quiver to Raz, and she slings it over her shoulder before grabbing the bow from him. The man turns around and heads back into the armory. Raz tests the draw on her bow a few times and then stares off into nothingness again.

Time is running out. I know Raz can only take so much more of this before it’s too late. Before she has to completely shut herself off so that the pain doesn’t consume her. I have to do something. I have to help her.

The man comes back with my revolver and a speed loader. The gun slides into the holster on my hip, and I pocket the loader. Eleven rounds more than I’d need. Raz thanks the worker for his help, and we both sign the checkout log before heading towards the vehicle depot.

The revolver pokes me in the side, and I adjust the holster. My hand brushes against the gun’s handle, and the scene starts playing again. I try to banish it with happier memories of Anne, but it doesn’t work. In the span of a few steps, I’ve already killed her again.

My heart starts beating faster and my breaths become labored. I stop walking and the world closes in around me. The edges of my vision grow fuzzy and I suddenly feel much warmer. No more, I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep fighting. My hand instinctively goes to my revolver.

Before I can pull the gun out, Raz puts one hand over mine and touches my cheek with the other. She looks into my eyes and shakes her head slowly.
A surge of raw emotion claws its way up my chest. My bottom lip quivers, my jaw aches, and my ears ring. I can’t hold it back any longer and a wailing sound bursts forth from my mouth. It’s not a word or a yell or even a scream. It is a sound of pure anguish and I can’t control it.

I collapse to my knees and Raz wraps her arms around me. The sound keeps coming out until my lungs are empty and my throat burns. I choke down air and my entire body shakes. She squeezes me tighter and says something that I can’t make out. Raz pulls my head against her shoulder and we soak each other in tears. Tears of pain, of anger, of grief, of love.

We cry together until there are no tears left and our bodies shake from exhaustion. The people who were close enough to hear us have gathered into a group and they talk amongst themselves. We ignore them and just keep holding each other. The scene starts to play again, but this time I save her.
I had to call my mom today. It needed to be done before eight. It was five, and I wasn’t busy, I had no excuse not to call my mom. But, I remembered, I needed to do the laundry. I stripped the sheets off my bed and tossed them into the washer. I measured out detergent and added it to the load. I slammed the lid shut and turned the dial to a regular cycle before hitting start.

I could call now, except the dishes needed to be done. I filled the sink with soapy water. I worked on crusted lasagna on glass pans and scrapped off eggs from a skillet while humming along with the radio. When the sink was empty and the dishwasher full I sat at the table. I placed my hand on the tablecloth, inches away from the phone. I drummed my fingers on the cloth, listening to their dull sound as I scolded myself. I had no reason not to call.

Except, my dog needed walking. I called my golden retriever, and she came bounding over. We took a brisk walk in the autumn air. My dog yipped at other dogs and distracted me from the looming call by tangling herself around various trees. The walk ended abruptly when it started to rain. We ducked back inside the house, and I let her loose, not unhappy with the mess she made.

I mopped up the mess. After that, I transferred the sheets to the dryer and unloaded the dishwasher. I was confronted with my phone again, still on the table. I frowned. I completed a puzzle, waiting for the dryer to end. When it did, I made the bed. I sat down at the table again and picked up my phone. It was 6:40. It was always better to call her earlier. It was easier to talk to her then. I dialed and let it ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi mom, it’s me.”

“Melanie! I was just about to call you.”

“Really?” I slouched in the chair, exhausted.

“I wanted to ask what we should plant in the garden.” I glanced up to my father’s memorial flag folded neatly in its triangle case, displayed over my fireplace. “You should plant green beans,” I said.
“They grew very well last year, and we had too many!” My mother’s voice changed, it was subtle and only noticeable because I’ve had this conversation with her a dozen times. But my eyes widened, and I sat up straight. She continued rattling off what she was going to plant with my father, who had died the previous year. I paid more attention to her listing vegetables than I had the last time we talked; I was listening for anything that would support my suspicion that this was a different conversation. “Do you suppose adding pumpkins would be too much? You used to love growing pumpkins when you were little. Remember?” My mother hadn’t mentioned planting pumpkins for years, certainly not in the last year. I was in shock; I hadn’t had a conversation with my mother where I didn’t already know what I was supposed to say.

“Remember?” I echoed, the word familiar to me but unfamiliar to my mother. “Yes, I do. I love Halloween.”

“I think it might be too much.” She decided, oblivious to my awe at this conversation. “I’ll have to ask your father when he gets back from the store.”

“He went to the store?” I asked.

“Just for groceries, eggs, milk. You know the drill.” She chuckled over the phone. “Why don’t you come for dinner tomorrow?”

I sighed at the thought of dinner with my parents. A meal without nurses and pills of various colors, or a meal with a conversation that didn’t have to do with gardening; it would be too good to be true.

“Melanie?” my mom prompted, “how does that sound?”

“It sounds lovely.” I smiled.

“I’ll make a casserole.”

“I like the one with the chicken and broccoli.” I said, “That’s my favorite.”

“Good suggestion. I’ll have to call your father and ask him to pick up some things.”

“Now?” I asked, panicked at the thought of her hanging up.

“I’ll call you back. I want to catch him before he leaves the store.”

“Oh,” I couldn’t argue with her without saying that I was afraid if she hung up that this would be the last original conversation we would ever have even if it were as mundane as pumpkins and casseroles.

“Are you alright? Have you been working too hard?” I could hear her concern.

“No, I haven’t. It’s been dull.”

“You can tell me about it after I call your father. I don’t want to make him rush back to the store.”

“Oh.” I swallowed.

“I’ll call you back. Love you.”

“I love you too,” I said. She hung up. I kept the phone to my ear. I was awakened from my trance when my dog bumped her head against my knee, wanting me to pet her.

I brought my hand to her head and complied. I set the phone down on the table. I didn’t want to move out of my little bubble, where I could pretend that my mom was going to call me back so she could listen to me describe a medi-
ore day at work. There was a chance that she would call me back. But more likely she would call my father’s phone and listen to it ring until she forgot what she was doing.

The chances of her calling me back were almost nonexistent. But still, I waited, ready to pick up my phone. I stayed in my little bubble longer than I should’ve, far longer than my mom would’ve wanted me to if she knew what was happening to her. I only moved away from when I was reminded of this. She would want me to move forward, instead of staying in pockets of the past with her.
It made sense that it would happen to him. It had started before he was even born. His mother had read to him, and his underdeveloped ears had embraced the sounds of words. He could read by the time he was three, going through picture book after picture book, eventually making it to the chapter books until he had read everything in the children’s section at the library. By the time he was fifteen, he had gone through half of his small-town library, and he needed more. By graduation, after having read everything in the library and every book he could find from the people around town, he moved to the big city, knowing they’d have more books at the city university. His whole life was books. His walls were lined with bookshelves with his favorites, but he continually swapped them out as he read more. There weren’t enough books in the world to satisfy his hunger. He spent more time in the bookstore than anywhere else, devouring the books page by page, line by line, word by word. The letters were nourishing that nothing else could, quenching a primal thirst deep within him. He was considered eclectic, strange; but he didn’t care. He only cared about how many books he could read, how many words he could comprehend.

It continued like this for all fifty-four years of his life, the constant berating of the bookstore staff to buy more things, bulk online orders for more from other countries, even trying a few different languages. But one day, reading wasn’t enough anymore. His eyes couldn’t move fast enough. He needed more. He sat in his favorite plushy chair in the bookstore on 12th street with a coffee shop, it was quieter in this chair, the puffiness muffling the sound. He needed more, more words, more letters, more. He pulled the book closer to his face, willing his eyes to move faster and faster. The sweet smell of binding glue and old paper filled his nose.

The aroma filled his lungs as he took deep, determined breaths. He brought the book closer still, wanting more, needing more. The pages were on his lips, then on his tongue.

He bit down.

He bit and he chewed, the corner of the pages scratching at the inside of his cheek, rough against his tongue. But, oh! The taste! The pages were wonderful, salty and sweet, and sour, and wonderful all at once. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever tasted. Why hadn’t he tasted before? He took another
bite, then another, the ink was ambrosia on his tongue, taking him to another world. He closed his eyes as he chewed, lost in his own world of page and ink. When he opened his eyes, the book that was in his hands was gone, filling his stomach with the love only words could, and filling his soul for the first time since he first heard words in the womb. But it wasn’t enough. He needed more. He ate through the entire bookshop, people watching him, aghast, and eventually, the bookshop was empty. The owner screamed at him and demanded he pay, but he didn’t care. He was high on his own elation. Full of ecstasy from paper.

There weren’t enough books in the entire city to satiate him. So he left. He was determined to find more. He found all the different tastes that books could have, hardcovers were different than soft, and scrolls were the most delicious, holding their knowledge for thousands of years and aging like wine, more delicious than the new prints. The books that smelled like glue or the books that were of cardboard. The picture books were more like candy, and the dictionaries tasted like tobacco a stuffy professor would enjoy. But they were all beautiful, every book of every variety in the whole world, he ate them all, and there was no satisfying his hunger.
Tim trudged through the blizzard straining to see. Snow fell in thick sheets like raw cotton. Halfway through his eight-hour patrol shift on the far perimeter that extended into the Forsaken Wastes, he was equipped with the standard, self-warming gear, complete with tall rubber boots, loose-fitting trousers, and a long white trench coat. His goggles, which displayed GPS coordinates and directions, told him that he was coming up on the checkpoint, but he couldn’t quite see it.

Thwack!

His head snapped back from the impact, and he toppled backward into the deep snow.

“Way to be aware of your surroundings, dickhead,” said a cackling voice.

Tim wiped the remnants of the snowball from his goggles and got to his feet.

“Jensen,” shouted Tim. “You asshole!” He set to work brushing off the snow before it could soak into his gear but realized it was too late.

“Didn’t they teach you anything?” Jensen said. “I didn’t know boot camp had gotten so soft.”

“Fuck you,” Tim said. “See anything interesting out there?”

“A metric shit-ton of snow,” Jensen said. “Should be an exciting four hours for you.”

“Yeah. Exciting,” Tim said, rolling his eyes. The two laughed together.

“Whelp, I’m off to get some chow and a hot shower,” Jensen said, as he turned triumphantly and set off toward the compound. “Keep an eye out for those abominable snowmen. They get grumpy when you wake them up from their naps.”

With a chuckle, Tim slogged down the snowy hill and into the open valley below. They had been here for eight months and were looking forward to going home after another month. Nearly every soldier was sleep deprived due to the rigorous schedule. The most frustrating thing about their situation was that no one knew why they were here. This was a government facility, but why did they need an infantry unit to play guard duty? Tim shook his head at the thought. This was a far cry from what the recruiters had promised when he joined. He reached the valley floor and continued into the icy plain.

The storm was starting to lift, but the sky was still obscured by a thick layer of low hanging grey clouds. What little hope he had of living the exciting life of a soldier had faded entirely in the past few weeks. What he wanted more than anything was to go back home, finish out his contract, and set out to forge a...
new life. He knew it wasn't much longer till they left, but the days seemed to grow longer as each hour passed.

He had just started to walk when he heard something. He stopped and listened. There was a faint crunching sound, and he saw an indistinct outline forming ahead of him. Did Jensen come all the way out here to mess with him? Tim bent down and grabbed a handful of snow. “Not again, asshole,” Tim said under his breath.

Thwack!

A deep, searing pain radiated over his chest and through his torso. His vision blurred. He gasped, trying to draw in a breath, but his lungs were burning as if he were drowning. His head began to swim, and he felt himself falling backward and landed with a thud. He coughed, expelling a mist of dark red blood into the air. He looked down. Something was protruding from his chest. It looked like ice, but it was matte black. Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth as he struggled to breathe. He reached up to feel the object. An ax? Had someone thrown it?

His head dropped back. The fog was light enough to see the sky. There it is, he thought. Home. He could see the outline of the Earth above him, lights like veins stretched over the land. It would be about midnight on the North American east coast about now. It looked close enough to touch but felt very distant. He longed to see his hometown, his parents’ little red brick house in the suburbs. Tears streaked his cheeks as his mind fought off the pain.


He heard something approaching. Struggling to lift his head, he was struck with sudden fear. A towering figure emerged from the fog. The thing was staring at him with huge, blue glowing eyes. Each step it took sending a tremor through the ground as it drew closer. It looked as if it were covered in short, thick grey fur and had rams’ horns curling around either side of its head. Tim saw smaller outlines making their way past him still obscured by the fog. The giant thing stood at Tim’s feet staring down at him. Tim’s vision was fading, but the eyes blazed clearly. Visible puffs of breath issued from the figure. It stretched out a massive hand, clasped the handle of the ax, and yanked it from Tim’s chest. Tim’s vision doubled with a sharp spike of pain. The figure stared down at him a moment longer. Then, with two massive strides, it passed out of Tim’s view.

Tim’s vision began to close in around the edges, a single point of light hovering in his vision. The light began to speed toward him, opening to reveal a familiar scene. Tim was standing in front of his childhood home. Brown leaves were drifting lazily to the ground in the crisp autumn air. His parents were standing at the front door beckoning him into the house with warm smiles. Comforting warmth spread over him as he smiled and made his way to them. I’m home, he thought, as he took his last rasping breath, surrendering himself to the bliss.
You stare into the open, blue sky, and as the light of the world reflects from your eyes, your expression glows in awestruck wonder as your ever-changing mind begins to mold into a paradigm that the world is beautiful. You hardly understand the capacity of love contained in the hearts of every person on the first encounter, and that the light of the world is only second from the one you so gloriously emanate. Everything you are and will become is the greatest miracle that has graced the Earth. While that statement is rich in a blissful bias, it rings true to the ones that brought you into the world. Your mother spends a lot of time thinking about how a single moment of splendorous passion could produce something as perfect, soft, and sweet as you. Just a single glimpse of your smile fuels her desire to keep breathing, and all the gravity of the world melts away in the warmth of your dozing body dreaming against her chest. She will always be there for you, not hesitating to jump to your side with every cry flowing on your breath and will console every ailment until your mere worries recede. Every laugh escaping the cavity of your core brings music to ears that tire of hearing only melancholy. The weight of your small frame and your curious, delightful scent is something only people could wish to behold. But that is all you are, a wish of a whimsical thinker, nothing more than a desperate want from your mother staring at a negative pregnancy test. Except, she is not your mother, because you are naught.
I just deleted my grandmother. I never thought I’d say that. To lose those memories? The reps said I would always retain the basic memory of having a grandmother, even if I couldn’t tell you a single thing about her.

If you’ve never erased all the memories of your maternal grandmother before, let me be the first to say it’s not a decision to take lightly. But when the reps showed me the storage space I’d get back, I wasn’t exactly on the fence anymore. I feel sick about it, honest, but you’re only 25 once. I need that storage space.

I try Becky’s number; I haven’t talked to her since she got back from her family’s cabin at Lake Tahoe. It was her stepmom’s turn to plan the reunion so — surprise, surprise — I didn’t get an invite.

“Hi, you’ve reached Becky! I’m probably at work or asleep; leave me a message and if you’re lucky I’ll get back to you.”

She must be asleep — she works the late shift on Wednesdays. She’d want to know about my grandmother. Specifically, so she could berate me for being an awful person. And I think she’s hot when she nags, so we’re a perfect couple.

“Hey, pal! How much storage do you have in your MindBank right now?”

I nearly jump off the curb. Of all the amazing tech, instant hologram ads are not in the top tier. Ads that only the individual can see, geo-targeted to your area. I swipe at the greasy digital salesman trying to get me to buy more storage, but he doesn’t go away with just a swipe. It’s one of the newer, much more invasive type.

“For just $14.99 a month, you could unleash the power of an extra terabyte of MindBank storage!” the salesman practically screams at me. I walk right through him, trying to keep up with the foot traffic toward the park. Of course, this new ad walks with me. It’s only for a few more feet; even MindBank doesn’t have holograms that can chase you forever. Yet.

He yells in my ear, “Imagine the complex relationships you could have with another terabyte of MindBank. Or,” he pauses and looks me up and down, “the number of digital movies and games you could store and play every time you close your eyes.”

I give him my nastiest stare. “Do I look like the kind of guy who couldn’t have a real relationship?”

A woman passing by smirks at me, and I hope that she’s aware I’m speaking to an ad and I’m not an insane person desperate for love. The salesman doesn’t care about what I look like though. “Nothing wrong with games and movies!”

I reach the main walkway through the park, which is where the digital
The salesman begins to blur. “Even if I could afford an extra terabyte of MindBank,” I say confidently, “I wouldn’t buy it from you.” Before he can say anything, he disappears, having reached his threshold.

The park distracts me for a time, but then I wonder if my grandmother and I ever came here together. Not being able to remember, and knowing because of my decision to delete her makes me feel guilty. I need a bigger distraction.

Once I get to the gym, I call Becky’s number again. “Hi, you’ve reached Becky! I’m probably at work or —”

What kind of a person deletes his grandmother? I wish there were a way to delete the memory of deleting her. There probably is, but I’d have to pay extra for that too. I set my distance goal on the treadmill and switch to my MindBank, sorting through my movies. When I close my eyes, the latest “Star Wars” movie starts but gets interrupted by yet another MindBank ad.

“If you pay just $4.99 more a month, you can upgrade to MindBank with no ads! Think of that: a service that hosts everything you need at the blink of an eye. More movies, more games, more relationships. And when you’re done knowing someone, simply visit a MindBank center and have them deleted. Right now you’re using the bronze package, but with silver, you’ll get fewer —”

I don’t hear the rest of the ad I’ve already memorized because my foot slips off the treadmill track and I collapse, of course drawing the attention of the entire gym. I wonder what’s worse: my blushing or the skid marks on my face.

“Are you OK?”

Someone has rushed to my side to help me up. I smile at her. She smiles at me even bigger.

“I’m Carol,” she says. Grandmother is no longer a concern.

Two hours later, after an impromptu smoothie date with Carol, I head for Becky’s apartment with an extra spring in my step. We’ve dated for three and a half years. She’s asked for marriage or at least more commitment, but now I don’t know what to think. Having this extra storage is amazing, but I can already tell that Carol would take up a lot of that. I need to come clean with Becky, to have a heart-to-heart with her.

She shares an apartment with her sister, and I pray it’s not her that answers. I knock and wait. I close my eyes and flip quickly through the photos of Carol I already took from our date. If she can look that good in gym clothes, just imagine.

Becky opens the door. I’m momentarily distracted by Carol’s pictures; I quickly archive them. It’s time for the honest discussion. “Beck, I tried calling you a couple of times. Listen, I …”

She holds up her hand, a puzzled look on her face. “Do I know you?”
He began life as an average cell, dividing over and over as his body grew and developed, first appearing to his average parents as a blurry image on an ultrasound machine. At the regular forty-week mark, he escaped his confinement as an average collection of cells, measuring seven pounds eight ounces and twenty inches. To his average parent’s delight, he continued his average cell development, hitting the average fourteen pounds and twenty-four inches at the average benchmark of three months. By six months he averaged seventeen pounds and twenty-six inches. And still, he grew, more average and average as the years went on. By five, he weighed the average forty-one pounds and had grown to the average height of forty-three inches. By eight, fifty-eight pounds and fifty-one inches. He went to an average elementary school, got average grades, and made average friends. As his collection of cells known as his body hit the average age of twelve, he began experiencing the average signs of puberty, though, it didn’t feel very average, which was something his parents didn’t seem to understand as he tried to explain it to them with his cracking voice.

“I have hair there now. And, there are other things...” He’d blushed.

“Of course, dear.” His mother left to let his father explain. He wished his father hadn’t.

In his teens, he continued to be average, tormenting his parents with his moods and sudden cell phone addiction.

“It’s my life.” He’d tried to explain, holding the offending cell up for them to see.

“Of course, dear.”

He graduated school in the average twelve years and went on to get an average degree from an average college. He graduated with the average $30,000 in student loan debt and with an average marriage to a woman he would swear was not average. He got a very average cubicle job, worked an average of 34.4 hours a week and made an average $50,000 a year. He bought a new smartphone every twenty-two months, as is average and, with his not-average wife, he had a higher than the average number of four children. The twins had been a surprise. He and his spouse had the average number of fights, and at the average age of thirty, almost ended their relationship in divorce, but continued it after the average twelve sessions of marriage counseling.

As time grew old, so did his cells, with his memory beginning to slip slightly
at the average age of forty-five, and his body’s average five-foot-nine-inch frame began to follow suit. He retired at the average age of sixty-five to go on and watch his not-so-average number of ten grandchildren grow into their assortment of average and non-average lives.

His not-so-average wife died at the average age of eighty-one, leaving him to do the average thing and be confined to a home where he could live out the rest of his not-so-average life span.

“It's my life,” he whispered to his attendant.

“Of course, dear,” she replied as she wheeled him from small room to smaller room, only to eventually leave him trapped inside a collection of average cells that were no longer his own.
“Rebelled too late in life.” It was the first words I’d heard her say. She wasn’t talking to me, but to that red flower peeking out among the bluebells. Or maybe it was to the dirt. It was hard to tell precisely – her eyes hadn’t focused for a long time. It’s one of the reasons they’d put her here. Kept tripping over her cat or something because she couldn’t see.

“Waited too long, acted too good.” Her head drooped some more, like her voice.

“Went to school, graduated. Married and had kids. Just like I was supposed to.” The attendant was watching so I reached over and lifted her head some, so as not to let her airway cut off or something. Acting ‘attentive.’

“Never really had fun, though I thought about it. Thought about cutting my hair, wearing pants to school. Getting one of those piercings kids are cray-z for now. Had to rip one out of my daughter’s nose when she was a teen. Couldn’t let the neighbors see her like that.”

My nose ached suddenly, and I rubbed at it, feeling the raised lump of my most recent piercing.

“Most rebel in their teens, just like my girl. She’s a doctor now. Turned out good. Has to hide that tattoo though – folks don’t like to see it when she’s tending to their kids.”

Did she know?

“Not me though, waited too long.”

I started when she slumped over in her wheelchair.

“Waited too long and now they don’t see. Have to pick my battles, rebel while I still can.”

The attendant had seen the slump.

“Don’t like my dinner? I spill on myself to get another bath.”

I tried to push her back. Gently. She didn’t move.

“Hate the program they have planned? Move just wrong when they’re dressing me, make them take forever, so we miss most of it.”

Her shoulder is warm and bony. Her hand comes up to cup mine.

“In general, don’t like how they’re treating me? I wet myself. Make them clean up my crap.”

The attendant arrived and forced her upright.

“I thought I’d rebelled too late in life. The Good Lord knows that age doesn’t matter so much anymore. The world the way it is, we all end up in the same place anyway.”

She finally looked in my direction and winked, as the attendant wheeled her away for a nap.
The sun slipped through a crack in the curtain, got its foot caught in a lead string, and fell in an awkward sprawl onto the carpet. From its prone position, it crawled across the floor and pulled itself upright on the foot of the bed. It leaned over the comforter. Toward her.

She looked so peaceful there, her chest rising beneath thick blankets pulled tight to her chin. A strand of hair twirling across her pale face and tickling the corner of her open mouth.

Her eyelids were closed tight. Tight enough that the sun could see her eyeballs twitching back and forth.

She was so beautiful, so innocent.

So weak.

Slowly, the sun reached out, and stabbed its knife into her eyes.
To my dearest, Monica

This is the love letter you requested. It will be serving as your gift for our twenty-fifth anniversary. The following lines will proceed with exclamations of love, as I assume that is what your request entails.

You are truly beautiful. I can say this with the utmost sincerity because that is the main reason I married you. Mother advised me before she died, that beautiful wives make for a good reputation, and indeed they do. All of my colleagues approved of you at the wedding before ever having talked to you. They were absolutely unaware of your personality but approved of you nonetheless because of your beauty. This was a great comfort to me at the time because I was worried that you would scare them away if you opened your mouth.

I can also say with relative absolution that you are a good cook. Though not particularly inspired, the meals you prepared for my esteemed colleagues and I were comforting and familiar and got us through the day, and for that I am grateful. Mother also said that a wife who can cook makes for a good mother. However, I’m sorry to say; this advice has proven to be less true. But, since this is a love letter, I will leave that part out of it.

I admire how you used to enjoy singing. And, though your voice now sends a shrill, hateful fire through my lungs, I used to find it quite calming. I am thankful now, though, that you’ve stopped. I suppose I like your physique. You’ve managed to pay close attention to your figure over the years. Even more attention than to your own children. I wonder if you remembered to take your diet pills the same day you forgot that you had left Edward in the pool. I’m sure you looked completely ravishing drinking champagne in your floor-length see-through robe, you insisted I buy for you at that tacky hotel, while you dreamily stared at his bobbing body out the window.

He was six years old, Monica. He had just learned the vocabulary word “malignant.” I find you malignant, Monica. But, of course, you already knew
that which is why you probably asked me to write this letter. As affirmation
that you can still be redeemed. That you can still be loved, but, I don’t think
anyone could ever possibly love you. Not even that pool boy you spent your
lonely nights with in the summer, who you cried for to help you fish him out.
They found him pruned and limp, his eyes wide open bloodshot and puffy, like
mine when I finally saw him at the morgue. But I digress, it is our anniversary
after all.

So here is the love letter you requested. Believe me. I spent many labori-
ous hours poring over its contents. Maybe even a single tear dripped onto the
page if that’s what you would like to imagine. I have also sprayed it with my
cologne. Happy twenty-five years.

Regretfully yours,

Harry
I don’t remember much of anything about that day, not even the season, the weather, what I’d done... it was all the same at that point, I guess. I do remember my dog barking a lot that night.

Then there were droning voices on television, soon transmuting into dingy dreams, and then a dark, hidden hand. It was your hand. I could not see it, but I could feel it. Someone had turned the television off as I slept heavily under a haze of Jameson and unwarranted trust. You didn’t even have the humility to drug me first.

Streetlight slumped through flimsy blinds, giving the room the pit- tance of light needed to cast shadows and see the unforgiving glint in your eye. It must be another dream because you aren’t the kind that does that sort of thing, the shifty trickster who slithers in the dark, always ensnaring themselves in their deceptions. You can never possess that which you steal. I thought you’d know that. Then again, I thought I knew you.

“Thank God it’s over.” But no. There is an underbelly of the world that can’t be unseen. I’ve gone to my room, and you’re under my bed, waiting, waiting, waiting, shaking the bed frame. Sometimes your shadow crawls into my mouth and rests in the pit of my stomach. I can’t get the taste out as much as I spit, spit, SPIT.

Everyone you know says we asked you to come to our doors, whiskey on your breath, gun in your hand because everyone knows a woman in a short skirt is more powerful than any firearm. You must be every bad girl’s dream, and there are no angels anymore, right? We must all have it coming, short skirt, one piece, hijab, or hair in bows.

You’ve always feared it, haven’t you? You created new weapons, fought wars, conquered kingdoms, and built new ones to suppress it. You erected cathe- drals, written scripture, disembodied philosophies, and boundless ritual to deny it. You formulated volumes of laws and codes to stifle it. You said all was for our protection, then bound and burned our bodies to silence it. Nothing is more powerful than the ability to bring forth life; nothing more powerful than the mother of men. So you deny and shame us; you turn this wheel of suffering, a wheel that has been turning since the scorning of Lilith. And now, here I
stand before you, the reincarnation of Lilith. Here I stand before you as Venus, Oshun, Pavarti, Ishtar and Shakti; as Isis, Tara, Freia, Gaia, and Judith. You have tried every tactic to subvert me, yet I am reborn again and again, the nourishment that fills your bottomless cup. I await the day you grow a backbone and finally look me in the eyes.

This is me warning you: there is no more hiding beneath night’s shadow, for I am the sun that rises to wake you from your graceless slumber. If you have lived in love, we will stand side by side. If you have wronged me, know that the hands of justice

  tick,
  tick,
  away.

  It is only a matter of time.
The National Undergraduate Literature Conference (NULC) is held at Weber State University annually. Students from Weber State University, Utah, and all across the country submit their work for a chance to present at the conference. *Metaphor* is pleased to be a part of this enriching tradition and to have the opportunity to read the creative pieces from our fellow undergraduates throughout the country. It is our honor to be able to highlight some of them in *Metaphor*. 
There is a monster in this corn maze and she doesn’t know it. I haven’t told her yet. I want this to last just a little longer.

I don’t know how long we’ve been in the corn maze. The sun is starting to go down, but the orange light still rests on her face. It’s not that I’m in love with her, but maybe it’s sort of like that. It’s hard to explain to someone whose heart doesn’t beat like mine.

Any connoisseur of corn mazes can tell you that the point really isn’t to find the end of the maze. Well, maybe some would say that. I wouldn’t, though. I’ve been going to corn mazes since I was a kid. My parents pushed me around fields like this when I was in a stroller, which is harder to do than it sounds. I’ve been in a lot of corn mazes. The one we’re in now is the largest in the state, which is really saying something.

She is beautiful. Is that cliché? Alright, she’s a puzzle and I’m the middle piece. Is that dumb? Probably. But there’s a really special feeling involved with looking at someone and dreaming that they’re your future. Even if your heart is my heart.

We hold hands sometimes. Mostly, we tease each other. The corn crunches under our feet. Well, not the corn. The stalks. That’s what they do to make these mazes, they break down a bunch of stalks until there’s a path, sort of like making a homemade crop circle. It can be tricky business to step on. It can be itchy when you get it on your skin.

But anyway, I still haven’t told her about the monster in the maze. It’s a minotaur of some sort. I mean, it could be anything, it doesn’t have to be a minotaur. It could be a giant snake, or an invisible man, or something abstract. But since it’s in a maze, does that make it a minotaur anyway?

I know about the monster because they told me when we walked in. She didn’t hear. I held her hand tighter and followed her in anyway. I don’t think it’ll hurt her, not physically. I guess I don’t know, but I think we’ll be fine.

There are a million things that are keeping us from the future. One of those things is the monster at the end of this maze. Who knows what will happen? Another thing is that she’s not like me. Or so she says. Hints that I pick up on tell me different but until she changes her mind, or opens her mind, me and my strange heart are just stuck. I don’t know what my future looks like, even
though I daydream that it looks like the warm autumn sun on her round pink cheeks. I'm not in love with her. But I do love her.

I follow her around the corners. I look for signs of monsters. We haven't run into a single person, which is unusual judging by my corn maze connoisseur sensibilities. I'm letting this last as long as I can, though.

The corn is tall. It's taller than the both of us and the sun is starting to sink so low that it can't see over the tops of the corn either. There are snakes in corn, and mice, and all sorts of bugs. Corn is actually not a particularly safe place to be in, not when you think about it.

She leads me around a few more corners. I'm as lost as I've ever been in my life. I imagine that I can hear the monster roaring in the distance.

Another thing that connoisseurs of corn mazes will tell you is that they all end. Maybe that's not something that you need an expert to tell you.

I imagine that I hear the monster again and instead of letting her lead me, I stop her and I grab her and I pull her close to me and hold her there. I close my eyes. Her perfume is so familiar to me.

I imagine that I hear crunching of footsteps behind me, like something large is pressing down on the corn stalks on the ground. I feel hot breath on the back of my neck. I squeeze her harder and I try to memorize her sweet details.
it was a Chinese restaurant where mom took me to talk about birds and bees. By the time the egg drop soup came she was in waist deep. I shushed often and sharp to make sure the table next to us would not hear her prickly words. Our conversation was brassy next to the glittering lanterns, and harsh as it cut through the veil of steam coming from the rice. The cold air from the vent under the table bit at my bare legs. The ride home was delicate—the radio down, the heater high. We pulled into the driveway. A tender hand pinched my thigh to remind me it was my week to fold the laundry.
a scab. It pumps poison to your veins and when it surfaces gives only puss and lipstick colored blood.

It festers like weeds on a lawn, or like mold that spoils a loaf of banana nut bread.

Peeling like a hangnail—too soon, too often, nibbling on your fingertips. It always asks for a late check-out.
You are a light show in their sky. You feign resemblance to the stars as you swing across the light blue, dark blue, and deepest black expanse. You suck the light out of the Sun to show the inhabitants of your blue-green planet friend the craters carved into your visage. The Earth holds you close and you tug back—making waves in the endless oceans limited to its surface. Looking for the blue in yourself, you never find it, nor the green. Nothing moves around you like the wispy white blotches you see on the world in front of or below or above you. Maybe there was blue on you once. You doubt it though. The most fun you have is casting a shadow on the Earth when you squeeze between it and the Sun. You can never seem to win, it always gets you back. Whether by envy or admiration you always face the Earth. It turns and it turns, giving you the best views, while you show only one side. For the Earth, you and the wispy whites are not enough, it sends chunks of metal up and up and up and up. Some reach you and a few of those inhabitants bound across your white grey rocky plains. They are a mix of that blue and green to you somehow. Their feet and metal tickle you at first. Then it grows cold, it grows old, like everything else. Their planet’s blue browns and its green greys, its conglomerate whites are smudged with muck, but you always stay the same. You are a light show in their sky. Songs are sung in your name, while poems aim to draw you nigh. You refuse to show your other side, but they still go behind you anyway. They cheat you out of your own choice. And they wonder why you drift away.
let’s waltz on the moon
but it’s raining you say
the rain up here falls
in oh so slow motion

each drop drops into
calm orbit around us
like the asteroids
surrounding the sun

steps and turns in three
propel us into a spin
perpetuated until we
find ground again
Is this sun shiftless like mine?

Long afternoons and mornings dewed in gold.
I wish for geese, for anything
slight in these stagnant skies.

Garden thyme dropping to the ground,
heavy in its waiting, it’s dying.

I watch a deer in the woods, her small frame
frozen over the river. She drinks,

and does not second guess my presence.
Each bone in the body whispering desire.
Eyes holding the sky, wanting the moon —
tired and waning into nearly nothing.
Fall is light
the way marrow
of bird bones
is
weightless
as leaves
falling
leaving breadths
of air
through the sky.
WRITE ABOUT YOUR FIRST TASTE OF WINE:

You remember, sir, don’t you? You were there. Well, maybe not you, exactly, but one of your kind; a member of your genus, a fellow elbow in tweed. Back then your name was something like Samuel or Roberto or Jesús, I wasn’t ever sure how I should address you.

It went something like this:

You spoke in parables and I wrote in riddles, and in this way we taught each other something. The time it took doesn’t matter—all that blurs into a strange shade of mauve in my mind, a saccharine mash-up of lewd and lust. All I can remember now is that slowly it got warmer and we locked eyes more often until one muddy spring Monday I sat down in your office to chat.

So we talked.

You left the door open, a pious act, and you delivered a sermon about the time you were arrested in New Jersey for domestic violence and how schools should stop using Zero Tolerance drug policies. You also convinced me that Christ probably wasn’t a virgin, what with being surrounded by twelve men, and I remember you saying something like, “After all, women are the only enslaved group that sleeps with their oppressors,” and you advised me to go into education myself. We drank with relish those sixty minutes and I stayed, rapt, soaking in the edification. It was enriching and helpful and I remember feeling sort of, well, shall I put it delicately? Itchy.

The rash spread. Not just all over me but apparently all over you, too, and finally the fever broke: “I’d love to discuss this with you,” you sent, “over dinner.” It doesn’t much matter now what this was, does it?

So we met.

I was naïve—I knew that you meant a date, but I didn’t know you meant a date. I dressed accordingly: ambiguously inviting. It worked, and your intentions were solidified when you kissed me on the cheek as a form of greeting.

Maybe I’ll write this next part like a comedy:

We sat down and I deployed my first strategy: the lash-bat-over-the-menu.
You had a strategy too, though, you sly little shit: “Shall I get us a bottle of wine for the table?”

Well fuck me. I’d never had wine before. I didn’t want you to know; I was only just twenty-one. I wanted to embody this sort of Neoteny-infused sense-of-sophistication, an infantilized Mother Mary genius, if you will.

“Sure.”

You had another card in store. “Red or white?”

There were colors? I’d seen red wine everywhere—served during Mass, in kitschy décor, in romantic comedies about exactly the type of girl I was trying to be. I decided that red wine must be the better wine.

You almost moaned with pleasure. “I knew there was something special about you! Most women prefer white. What’s it they say?”

I had no clue what anyone said. Ever.

“Something about the lighter the wine, the more refined the taste?”

I nodded, malingering, in-the-know. I was clear. Until—

“Pick a bottle from the menu,” you said, handing me a gangly sheet. “Anything you want.”

Prosecco, Moscato, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Chardonnay, Malbec, White Zinfandel—a blur, seemingly unorganized, filled with words I’d never know how to pronounce.

Fuck.

You’d picked a table on the patio, tall and wobbly. I thought I might just take a nosedive over the wrought-iron railing and dart out into the street, body bobbing yellow as I ran out of view. Instead, I relied on the wit you’d dubbed as delicious:

“Dealer’s choice.”

A pause, a side note: The funny thing about porn is that it always shows relationships like ours in only one way. “Hey,” I say, leaning deep over your desk, “I’m really struggling. Isn’t there anything I can do?” I pout. It’s not like that, though, is it—instead, I say things like, “I’m not struggling at all. In fact, I understand you completely. And you’ve noticed. And I’ve noticed that you’ve noticed.” Maybe that’s why I’m writing this, this Brechtian moment. Maybe that’s all I needed to have said.

The waitress came, star tattoos on her neck and all, and took our orders. You asked for the wine and she asked for our ID’s. I’d never yet used my license for alcohol. I know that’s a bizarre virginity to have held on to, but I had this moment of deep thought before I handed it to her. Weird as fuck. The whole thing, top to bottom. My first clue should have been her face—her little spermi-cidal brows rose up in surprise when she looked at my age, and then yours.

Well fuck me again—wait, scratch that. Please don’t, actually.

She returned, made fanfare out of the bottle opening, and poured some—maybe two swallows worth—into a glass.
“For the lady,” you said.

Was I supposed to down it like a shot? I know now that I wasn’t—I was meant to swirl it pretentiously while inhaling the aroma and touching the taste with my tongue but you know what I did? I’m sure you can guess, if you don’t remember. That’s right. I opened myself up and drank it all, hard, gulping it like a double shot. Don’t get me wrong, I’d never purchased alcohol myself, but I’d definitely had my share of tequila, poured for me by dewy blue-eyed boys with sticky basement floors.

You laughed. The waitress laughed. “Must be good,” she said, and poured us each a full glass.

I made some bold remark, something akin to your intoxicating way with words, something challenging like, “So, what, you already have all the power and you intend to drive the drunk girl home after dinner?”

“Oh,” you said, your face growing dark with the night, “If that’s the case, don’t you, my dear, hold all the power?”

That kind of power. So we’d finally come to a topic I knew about. Looking back, we perhaps had nothing to teach one another after all.

I don’t remember much else; of what we spoke I have only fleeting ideas, of what I ate, I can remember something just reminiscent of pasta. I do remember hearing my voice grow louder as the Thursday evening, doused in cloudy chiffon, turned into that mauve-pink I assign to our whole romance. And because you’re a man and because I know you don’t know, I’ll clarify: mauve is not exactly rose.

I also know you’re thinking that, for symmetry purposes, I’ll end this remembrance like a tragedy:

Well, you’re wrong. You and your species—always confident, always two steps ahead of the game. You expected a twist, did you not?

I don’t think it can be a tragedy—I always write a little better when I’m wine-drunk.
Definitions of Pain

a burning sensation involved with an empty hand and cold heart
“being stabbed”
Synonyms: toast, wilted, gored

when someone’s elbow connects with another’s face or essentially any object passing by
“basketball extraordinaire”
Synonyms: ouch, bloody nose, funny bone

wanting to throw up but unable to do so, and when you do, at the least point of convenience
“take today off”
Synonyms: gross, green

laughing at the white thing sticking out of your leg, usually involved with trees and/or dares
“ambulance ride” “dashing through the snow on a pair of broken skis”
Synonyms: red, blue, white

struggling for composure because your sixteen-year old dog died today, and you don’t remember what it was like without her
“breathing hard” “must not cry”
Synonyms: gone, earth mound

when you glance down and something is biting your leg, causing blood to seep through your socks
“what is that thing?” “I discovered a snipe!”
Synonyms: struggle, kick

trying to touch your toes and not only missing, but crashing into the fetal position, generally accompanied with moaning
“stretching sucks” “life gets better”
Synonyms: new legs

generally, when a cow lifts its foot directly onto yours, resulting in a squishy sound
“be a man” “hope no one saw that”
Synonyms: broken, wheezing

when one can’t breathe and realization hits that the head is underwater
“gurgle” “gasp”
Synonyms: strengthened lungs, not so strengthened lungs

gazing up at the stars and wondering, “why?”
“pondering existence” “where do I belong?”
Synonyms: lost, stuck, unsure
No one knows what this is, he says.
Of course everyone knows what it is, she says.
Why can't I just be the tin man?
You are the tin man
with goggles and a pressurized heart.
Your purpose is simple.
I don't get it, that isn't me.
I am not silvery stiff.
There is more within.
Of course, you live and move.
This is you, trying to fit in,
hiding behind the glossy metal and top hat,
flourishing an ax that only you can see.
I do not hide.
I feel and breathe.
You don't have a heart,
there's only steam shooting through your veins,
allowing your limbs movement.
You didn't think you were something else?
Steam and tin—
wouldn't that make me rusty?
The rusty pickup rattles along the faintest idea of a path, its gears gripping out-of-sync before rolling over the hill’s crest. Grasshoppers spring from tufts of brown weeds and prickly shrubs. Their speckled wings sometimes catch the odd ray of the late citrus-hued light.

Hours of driving have taken their toll. After pushing the truck into park, the driver opens his door and hops off the running board, scattering another thick cloud of insects.

Lighting a fresh Marlboro, the man surveys what once was his, what is still his if the realtor is right. It isn’t much, but it will be enough for the time being. The acres of hollow grass, scooped low into the mountain and ringed with mature trees, is the perfect place to start again.

The man takes a long drag of his cigarette. When he exhales, the smoke is caught by the wind and pushed into his grizzled hair and shorn beard. He thinks about smiling, but the muscles in his face have forgotten how to move just right. He thinks about smiling because of the irony. Time is anything but fair. The landscape around him has not changed, but the years have beaten him into the creature he is that day.

“I have got to take you to Kamiah one of these days,” I say to my husband as we cuddle on the couch.

These words are out of the blue, random. I don’t know what makes me think to say them again. It surely isn’t the flaking layers of white paint on the wall of our small apartment living room or the wet humming of the sixty-year-old swamp cooler. It surely isn’t being curled up on our plaid couch with my head propped up against my husband’s lap.

“Maybe over your spring break,” he says absently, his fingers rotely brushing back and forth over the top of my head.

This isn’t the first time we’ve had this conversation, but this is always as far as it goes. Someday I will take him. Eventually we will drive along the winding asphalt shores of the Snake River. We will travel north through gorged cityscapes and lean farmland until the flat is torn apart by trees—green, lush things that guard the last truly wild places of the world.
Camouflaged behind these ancient sentinels are even older mountains. In the rocky fortress of these mountains are nestled small frontiers of civilization, only called ‘towns’ out of politeness. One of these small towns I claimed as home for a few of my formative years. I remember standing on the precipice we called our front yard looking into Washington State. Only a couple of hours in the car would take us over the invisible border and deeper into the untamed, unpredictable territory—Canada.

There is no good reason why I shouldn’t take my husband to this place of natural majesty. There is no good reason he shouldn’t see the stately pines peeking out of golden morning mist, no good reason why we shouldn’t lay side by side gazing up into a night sky so pricked with stars that it’s almost impossible to see the black beyond. There is no good reason why he shouldn’t experience a spring so green that he’ll wonder how he isn’t green too, or winter so laden with white and ice that he’ll forget all about spring and the immortal green.

Yet I hesitate.

***

Fifteen years is a long time. The man feels the weight of that time down to his aching bones, aching from the time spent in a space hardly as big as his green Chevy. An intimately familiar heat ignites in the man’s chest. There is nothing righteous about this burning.

Fifteen years. One year for each bomb they found. One year for each tick on the map of the coast.

He knocks the ashes from his cigarette, pretending that he doesn’t see the name tattooed on his wrist. The name of the wife who did not wait. Instead, the man stares at the fresh ink job by his elbow, a coiled snake waving its rattle and brandishing its fangs. Words of warning crown the serpent’s head. A warning that the man believes—always believed—has been ignored for too long.

Free from his fifteen years of penance, the man has sounded the rallying cry that started it all before. Few friends have answered, many of them still in hiding or irreversibly protected by death. But thanks to those who he did reach, the man has recruited fresh blood. Blood that has not gone stale caged in a backwater penitentiary.

The man knows that they aren’t far behind him. It won’t be long until their work begins.

***


Making time to plan the trip is not a problem. I already spend hours on my rickety laptop writing papers and sending countless emails. A few extra finger strokes and it will be out of my hands; we will have to go.

Instead of guiding my spastic cursor, I let my attention be lulled by the sickly sputter of our air conditioning unit. The formless water stains on the
decrepit wall flicker to life, animated by the single yellow bulb in the room. A sorry replacement for the sun.

I sigh.

“Still can’t decide?” My husband looks up from his lunch, the Bachelor’s Delight. A plate of microwaved chips and cheese drowned in salsa.

I can tell that he wants to go. But I’m not sure that I do.

I don’t hesitate because of Nez Perce traditions as old as the trees, the mountains; the bearers of a glorious heritage dancing in swirling feather cloaks of vibrant color, spinning so fast it seemed as if the tribal dancers would take flight. Impossible to forget are those moments I heard the chiefs and shaman sing giving voice to the songs that call the beast, the land, and the rain. I don’t hesitate because of the bushes along ever road bulging with succulent berries begging to be picked, or the spring gushing from the mountainside so clear, so clean that you can drink it right from Mother Earth’s breast.

No, I tell myself. I don’t hesitate because of those things. Perhaps I hesitate because I once lived on one of these heaven-reaching mountains, in these timeless woods, with monsters.

Not the monsters I strained my ear by my bedroom window to hear howling and prowling at night, leaving behind furrows and craters in the dirt with their paws. Not the monsters that bit or stung my skin until it stretched and swelled, feverishly bright over my bones. Not the monsters that screeched in blood-curdling triumph as their claws sank into the flesh of livestock and pets.

No, it was the monsters who dressed in human bodies and smiled with human mouths but cried for blood all the same.

Blood had flowed from the head of a man found in a ditch, not an inch of his scalp or a single lock of his hair to be found.

These monsters didn’t live huddled in caves. They lived in homes, just like me. These monsters didn’t pull away muscles and tendons or suck the marrow from bones. They ate with forks and spoons, just like me. These monsters lived complex lives and loved their families, just like me.

Unlike me, some of these monsters, sick with a multitude of blistering three-letter acronyms freely spread disease. No one was safe, not even youths barely thirteen.

A scenic drive up our mountain, a turn onto an unassuming dusty road framed by leaf-weary boughs, and you’ll believe that you have landed yourself right into the middle of some epic fantasy. A picturesque country with an endless forest dotted with meadows seasoned with exotically colorful flowers that look too beautiful to belong in this world. Any moment a dragon, an elf, a werewolf, even a knight could come dashing out of the trees, and it wouldn’t look a bit out of place.

Like mushrooms, sweat-built homes speckled the hills seemingly at random, but connected under the decaying surface were devouring roots of whispered words such as “off-grid, rights, government, and secrets.”
The flesh had burned, weapons had waved, wives had cried. All of these things done under a crimson banner stained with a black pinwheel shape that once meant peace.

As a child, these problems had been too big, too evil, for me to feel afraid. My small child-brain only understood that I wanted to act out innocent stories of adventure and quests across wild terrain with my sisters and eat berries with my brother that were so juicy they stained our lips sweet purple. It wasn’t until a few moves and many years later that my mother revealed these stories to me, that I realized how close I’d been to monsters—and then I felt fear; retrospective fear, but fear all the same.

***

Burned to the filter, the Marlboro has lived out its purpose. The man drops the orange butt and grinds it into the dirt with his boot. Night is rising, the bravest stars peeking down at the deeds of men and monsters.

After glancing in the truck bed at the bags bulging with poisonous pellets that make plants grow, the man releases the pickup from park and steers the belching vehicle farther down into the clearing.

Behind his seat, containers of diesel fuel slosh sharply. A white grocery sack sits demurely in the passenger seat, hiding the boxes of hardware bits inside. The man knows that it isn’t much, but he is too content to care. They may have to start small. He will be patient. He will succeed where their leader before failed. The man will not resort to escape with the aid of a bullet. Soon they will have men and women searching under their beds, and in their closets, for the gifts he will leave them. Powerful puppets will crumble as the masters die holding the strings.

It has only cost fifteen years.

Fifteen years for conditions to be just right; just right for the seeds of insurgency and misprision to take root. If everything goes as planned, the man’s band will grow, repopulating the woods with the predator humans fear most of all: themselves.

***

“Look.”

I’m smiling as I set the open laptop down in front of my husband. Our swamp cooler has taken a moment to rest. He squints his always-some-shade-of-blue eyes at the screen. After a moment, he is smiling too.

“A motel reservation. To the same one you’ve told me about, right? The one that serves homemade biscuits and gravy for breakfast?”

I nod. The memory of those warm, buttery mounds and spicy sausage set my mouth watering like there is a fire inside.

“When do we leave?” he asks.

Plans are set. There is no turning back now.

Time, the great anesthetic for all wounds, has passed. Tears have been for-
gotten, and the battle cries of men have dissipated into the air with the black
smoke of an anticipated Armageddon.

The monsters have mostly disbanded, dying or moving away after their
leader, alone along a gravel road, ate an ounce of lead.

As far as I’m concerned, there is nothing left in those mystical mountains
to hunt the ignorant and the innocent. Fifteen years is ancient history to me;
over half a lifetime ago, almost a dream. I can’t imagine that the monsters
from my mother's stories could every surface after years of dormancy, crawling
back to their sanctuary—my destination. I can’t imagine the horror of meeting
a monster face to face and recognizing that face. All I can imagine is the beaut-
ty of that wilderness framed by nostalgia’s artful hand. Now I realize that I do
want to see that green spring again, drink that pure mountain water, and stare
up into that glittering night sky.

And that is enough to convince me. I no longer hesitate.

Today I will go back to the woods where I once lived with monsters.
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