metaphor

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

Metaphor accepts submissions in visual arts, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and performing arts 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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Acknowledgements

Being in the business of creation inevitably brings forth failures and struggles. In order to bring something to life it must be nurtured and cared for, constantly fed, and always changing. Winston Churchill said, “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.” *Metaphor* has been renewed by the enthusiasm of our staff, its artists, and everyone who has contributed to the creation of the journal. Together, despite the many ups and downs, we have brought *Metaphor* to life once more. For this, I thank you and I dedicate this journal to you:

Meagan Griffin, our Creative Director, for all her patience and willingness to communicate with me through the publication process, for her bold designs, and most certainly for her late nights and long weekends spent dedicated to the journal. Robin Scott, Kim Webb, and the Staff of the English Department for helping us advertise and directing students to our door. The professors of Weber State University for letting us come to their classrooms and encouraging their students to submit their work. I would especially like to thank those in the Creative Writing Department for being some of our strongest advocates, especially Dr. Ramirez, Dr. Griffiths, Dr. Howerton, Dr. Schwiebert, Dr. Joseph, and Professor Stott for always considering *Metaphor* as a first publication for their students. Sigma Tau Delta for helping us host events and for encouraging the written word. The undergraduate students of Weber State University for sharing your talents, experiences, and passion with us. Jan Hamer, our faculty advisor, for her support, positivity, and encouragement as we embarked on this journey. We could not have done it without her. Mark Biddle, our design advisor for his in-depth understanding of the design process and his creative opinion. Patrick Ramsay, my Assistant Editor and Poetry Section Editor, for his calm and constant support, communication, and enthusiasm. He would let me wring out my brain and fill it back up again, the entire time making sure I didn’t miss a thing. The Section Editors of *Metaphor*: Marette McDermott, Chelsea Maki, April Topham, and Peyton Brown for all their hard work and dedication. The spouses, family members, children, and significant others of the staff for their understanding and support. We could not do what we do without your patience and your constant love. To my loving husband, Dustin Olsen, who stood behind me always with words of encouragement. And finally, to my daughter, Penelope, who came to meetings, played Barbies by herself and never once complained. Thank you, my love.
My father once told me that the right decision isn’t always the easiest decision, and as usual he was right. As creators we must make endless compromises with ourselves. The artist must endure the constant struggle of self-doubt, of knowing whether or not to take the next step, of choosing that perfect color or perfect word. Sometimes the most fundamental choice is something like, Can I write about that? Questions like this can encircle the artist and torment him endlessly. As creators we must take the mundane, the normal, the overlooked, and magnify them until they becomes something new altogether. This decision-making has nothing to do with the possible outcome, but everything to do with the process of simply creating something palpable and true. Artists ask themselves whether or not they can do it, and when they make the inevitable plunge, they are faced with an even harder choice: to decide whether or not to share that piece of art with the world. To reveal that initial part of oneself, the part that saw something special in the ordinary or the forgotten, is one of the hardest decisions an artist can make. When artists feel the need to expose themselves, to write a poem or paint a picture, they are combing through the fibers of themselves and unraveling the very core of what makes them human. Once their white-hot center has been exposed, the connection is created between artist and audience, and for a brief moment the chaos surrounding us stops. The reader is immersed in the selections the artist has made without even realizing it. The process in creating this type of transcendence may be unseen to the audience, but to the artist who said yes, to the creator who wanted his stories read or her music heard, the decisions made in order to infuse the artwork into the world are paramount.

I would like to heartily thank all those who submitted their work to Metaphor. I salute your bravery and your talent. Never stop creating and sharing your compositions with us. And now, it is my immense pleasure, as Editor-in-Chief, to present this collection to you. Within these pages you have the privilege of experiencing the arduous decisions that went into creating this year’s journal. Go forth and become inspired, dear reader, for it is you who propels us forward.

—Megan Olsen
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Poetry

This year, the poetry section was flooded with a record-breaking number of submissions. However, it wasn’t the quantity that made this year’s poetry submissions such a feast to read, it was the quality of the work submitted. Every fresh poem was a pleasure, and for a different reason than the poem before it. It was an honor to see the sheer number of poets willing to submit their poems, not knowing how the world would receive them. We commend every poet who submitted work.

Poets are parents of children who no one else will fully understand. Each poem has its own direction, voice, and influence on the people who read it. A poem will lead its poet in a direction he didn’t initially expect. Like teenagers, a poem will sneak out in the middle of the night and leave you awake, searching frantically until dawn for the right words. When you find the words that have been waiting for your poem, you may hold them together and celebrate what you’ve created. When readers meet your poem, they will celebrate it too.

The dynamic essence of a poem is invigorating to both poets and readers. Oftentimes, readers will understand your poem in ways you never intended. Yet, the readers will still draw their own meaning and feel a unique tenderness toward their existence nonetheless.

To the poets whose children have found a home within our journal, thank you for sharing your tenderness through poetry. Welcome to the poetry section, and happy reading.

—Patrick Ramsay, Poetry Editor
“Body can’t contain the inside hurricane”
—Charles de Leusse

Whether
you live
on long beach
or long island you long
to turn on the evening news,
or feed through posts to see me
twirling my jarabe dress beneath satellite strobes and spacing myself sweetly between Puerta Vallarta and the sea: pacifically, then seductively, destructively spinning closer and closer, until the hat comes off and I flutter my falda through palm fronds and beaches.

I love to click my heels to the ground, cacophonous clacking, crashing in rhythm with torrential charisma, cracking rooftops beneath my calzado zamas, crushing casas con cada paso.

I love to drown the towns beneath my long skirt and flirt my way through las calles, waving como río, frío my teasing. It’s pleasing to hear the cracking applause of telephone poles and wind-shields.

Now let me bow for the watching world, let me trip across La Sierra Madre, let me slip into memory— un jarabe tapatio— but don’t let me take anyone with me.
Little Miss Moffitt’s tea set with a fresh
pot of Neverland brew
The once pop CD case of a forgotten
lip syncing child actor
Cinderella’s scuffed and sticky
‘glass’ slippers
press on stickers for the tiny
nails and little lobes
the first makeup kit with garish
neon colored powders
a leading lady’s wardrobe
scepters, fans, strands of ‘pearls’
the bins are overflowing
and the landfills are sick
from the great swag of plastic
behind the nursery door

outside, worn down heels click on the pavement
purses are stuffed with compacts, cards and keys
hair clips, wrappers, rusty charms
and ‘diamond’ rings all twinkle
under the harsh florescent lighting
and the glare off those hot, swag hungry, eyes
LEVIATHAN
By Marette McDermott

inert next to a dying beast,
salt peeled my flesh, a brining,
burnt in the festering sun, bleaching
bones to brittle pills, and leaving 206 placebos stranded,

while invertebrates dig graves
for shelter as the surf climbs, clinging,
grasping for leftovers, and leaching
calcium phosphate sediments
for decades,

my soul rots—cradled in the corner
of my bone’s cranium,
next to the shipwrecked
whale’s lumbering
stumbles for air,

until seven days later, someone stupid
stuck 20 nitroglycerin
and diatomaceous soaked cases
into its decaying flesh—

and lit a match.
it is late—stripping off our clothes and the pebbles
are pushing tiny globes between our heels
water ripples madly where we dip soft skin
the moon dangling like the abdomen of a firefly
your sweetness swallowed whole in the blue gloom
streaks of a camp fire gleaming out across the surface

and the galaxy bent like a wisp of smoke

I put the wet cigarette between my lips—shivering
embers blossom off your thighs and the arching small of your back
fearless, you look at us and into pricked pinholes
where muffled stars bleed along goosebumps on your breasts
where lush hills run the gentle slopes of your shape
and a whole circus of insects sings—fish splashing at the brim

trembling, aware of myself
on the somnolent shore
young only once
the fire whispers
I am who I am; I was who I was,
But I’m not quite sure who I’ll be.
The past is in place, but the future’s new space,
So the present can start on its way.
I won’t let tomorrow be stuck in the past.
I’ll start on a new path today.
And tomorrow I’ll find that I am who I am,
But not just who I was today.
UNPLANNED PARENTING

By April Topham

You look past the door at the rain
and see him through the glass
looking right at you, a few ounces
of misery on dripping paws,
just a handful of rags
greyed as leftover snow
in the spring. Eyes black and heavy
look up at you from where
they’ve been dropped into his face.
No, you think, don’t look at me.
I’m not your mother. No.

He doesn’t move, make a sound
or pleading, just sits shivering
on your step, staring up at you.
You want to tell him to go away
find another doorway to sit in
somebody else to trap
in those eyes, that pitiful face.
Somebody else. You take a step
as your mind wails. Please. No. I can’t.
I’m not your mother. I’m not,

but still you open the door
rain bursting in, cold slapping your face
as you bend, pick him up
just a handful—a sodden ball of fluff
light as a dandelion seed, running
up your arm, leaving a morse code
of blood on your skin, marking
his territory, clinging to your warmth.
No, you sigh. Please. I’m not your mother.

Pry ing his claws from your skin
you hold him close, knowing better.
Cradling him, you wipe his soaking fur
smoothing it with your fingers, surprised
by his purring. The crooning comes
unplanned and unbidden, Poor Baby
Sweet little ball of fur. You’ve done it
now. Yes, you are his mother now.
Wild women they called us—
when we wandered into the forest.
The dirt below us absorbing our secrets.

We sent the children to fetch eggs
in the hen houses
which usually had a cat
stalking around, lurking
under the space beneath the stairs, black

with two yellow eyes it watched
two little girls breaking an egg
and burying it in the earth,

the yolks dipping against the loam
and rock like the light of the moon
when it bends
down.

The children wake in the night wondering
where we go,
when we go—they wonder
why they’re being watched

by a giant face stacked like yolk
peering through the muddy night at them.
Under the moon

we wild women gather deep
in the forest, under cherry trees,
peeling the fruit from the pit.

Splashing carmine
in the dirt,
burying our eggs.

Under the moon, we slowly drip
down and plant ourselves in
the secrets of the world.
HEN PARTY

By Emma Steuart

Saturday forenoon
Men turn timbers
into barns

Hie-oh, hie!
they call hoisting
up beams

Boys on ladders
pound nails
alongside fathers

Women croon in the yard
piecing together
a candlewick quilt

I sit with chirping girls
under the shade elm
sewing scrap ends

rolling ragballs for rugs
I will later drape over
the line to beat clean

I watch and wish
for blisters from
hammers and nails

And when it’s time
to peel potatoes
and ready the tables

for the men I slip
down to the ditch
to cool my toes

Too soon I hear
the cackling of the hens
resuming their quilting

The staccato of hammers
hurries my feet up the hill
Lunch hour is over
Clear beads of liquid trickling down your nape
stoke flames of passion deep within my veins.
Your amber complexion leaves mouths agape.
Such golden beauty floods and clouds my brain.
For your bubbly demeanor brings much joy,
and your soft velvet kiss tickles the lips.
Your pleasure oft’ can regress man to boy,
And leaves one craving what lies ‘neath your slip.
My life and soul are prices I would pay,
As many far and wide have before I,
To be within arm’s reach of you each day.
I’ll keep you by my side until I die.
A smile grows as the barkeep grows near,
And brings to him, she, the icy cold beer.
Lying on pavement
Tiny stones—slivers of glass
My fingertips bleed
I laugh myself to sleep
With memories of Hannah
2AM beast, 3AM beast: a prowling rock
    in night’s flat pulse. It’s a metaphor titled,

“The Still Tide of Air.”

Taunted by irony’s gentle cackle
    humming outside my window: inattentive crickets
forbearing calamity, marshals the—end
of craniativity; a neuronic drowning.

Or let’s be obtuse
and call it “a debacle”

calmly set in motion, swiftly shoved
into the rain, a tumbling
    through the skier’s course,
a freestyle halfpipe, followed by the skeleton

and a 12 broken bone minimum.

I fooled myself at the starting line,
    believed words formed castles

but I only swelled
    with jumbled scree. Thinking picture words
like Hayes, but plummeting

with words that don’t
talk, doodle bugs curling
inside my rock brain,

I inadvertently crush those tiny word
creatures with each rattle,

they were escape artists anyway,

I’m crunched
    and atomized under bad judgment—it’s a freestyle to oblivion
There’s no time for mourning, I said
to the mirror. And I blinked away tears—
one for the roses, and one for the king-sized bed

with just one sleeping in it, one head
caught in thought and screeching fears.
There’s no time for mourning, I said
to the empty pillow next to me. I read
eulogies all morning—drenched in beers—
one for the roses, and one for the king-sized bed

half-unmade. I’ve laid here too long. I’m fed-up with silence. Empty halls creak, I hear:
there’s no time for mourning. I said
to the picture on the nightstand: if left instead
of right? If Cook Street or Ninth? Cheers to lonely years—
one for the roses and one for the king-sized bed

with bleach-white sheets. My eyes bled passion. I pillow-pressed my head to block my ears—
There’s no time. For mourning—I cried
for the casket roses—and for the king-sized bed.
Flutes played at my birth. Notes
Softly descending, trickling
To land in ears. Heart beats
Are heard as mallets strike.
Then starts my melody, counterpoint
Harmony. Cymbals crash in conflict.
Tension rises as trumpets reign fire. The symphony
Can be heard no more, all is consumed by the timpani.

Soft.
Start again.
Now courting the sound.
Play a dalliance here. A pitter,
A patter, then your world is turned right
Side down. My bass desires come true
As they march to the fore, seizing
Center-stage. The count of three
Is my bane. For when the wand
Slashes down, right, left.
I am gone.
A child’s art is sweet in her mouth and stained upon her untrained hand, and sometimes the scene can only be carried on her tongue. It must be carried through the night where the drawings of her dreams form outside the lines and the wax bleeds together. She needs a guardian for those dreams. A patchtrick creature as fearsome as her night terrors with a disconnected gaze separated from the hand and the artist’s eye so it can fight for her sleep. In infinite rooms full of soft pillows and every color, among blankets that smell of mother’s bed and peaches, it fights and sings for her until the drawing is complete.

—after Terrance Hayes, “How to Draw a Perfect Circle”
“You are so weird,”
is what I tell you when I’m somewhere
between laughing and wrapping my arms
around you. Feet cold on the kitchen tile
as you dance or laugh or make fun of the morning.
I pour myself a bowl of cereal and watch you
because this is how all of my favorite days begin.
THE COUNTRY STARS

By Jacob Guyon

The itch of grass on the back of my neck
Night smells of sunflowers and manure
Light-headed, loose-tongued, swimming in place
By the moonshine and starlight, pale and pure

The skyscape is a dancing kaleidoscope
Framed in brittle, forgotten silence
If disturbed, the creatures it hides
Can turn my peace to wretched violence

Each one is a picture, mercilessly vibrant
Of days, months, years this place took away
Every mile holds a few hundred ghosts
Who just refuse to fade into the grey

The clock reversed, the years long and blurred
My snow angel wings slowly spread
For just a moment, I can almost forget
That I barely escaped before I ended up dead

Even kids adopted by the city
Sometimes have to stray too far
To flee the neon and siren wails
She decided against taste for the wedding
When she set the ceremony in the barn,
Stringing paper lanterns from the loft
And wrapping lace around support beams
As though the wedding was more of a craft fair
Than a celebration of communion.

I linger near the cake table draped in burlap
Considering the relative quaintness of
A cake dressed in nothing, exposed
To the night air like the bride’s bony shoulders.
She glides among the guests like a moth
Seeking out the flame that is her husband,
Nursing a mason jar of wine.

She wants to cut the cake, and I move aside
For the camera so it can capture the
Crisp outer edges crumbling
Under the pressure of the knife in their first
unified task as man and wife.
The piece dissembles to dust
As he lifts it to her lips, crumbs migrating
to the dark cavern down the neck of her dress.

I wonder if she’ll leave them there
like a cheap, stale version
of the novelty lingerie and edible paint
her friends all squealingly gave her,
or if she’ll continue the evening
with the sharp elusive reminder under her left breast
that this was all worth it for the aesthetic
MY UGLY RELATIVES

By Marissa Hinrichs

the purple flag is snapping for attention
under the hot cause of cancer
bakes a castle of sandy cigarette butts

a corner of Playboy is glaring
from under some comic hero’s towel

away from the manicured talons
that rake and claw the cloth
caught between their curdled thighs
a hidden lens winks brightly
at the spawn of suburban harpies

against this black chunk of lava
the smack of the waves is persistent
sharks swivel their bodies beneath my perch

with pearl studded tresses salty stiff
with dried skin blister burned
with golden scales curled crisp
with a fish’s fascination
I watch my ugly relatives
The string slipped from the tiny girl’s fingers, then a tear slipped from her eye. She watched the balloon go higher, disappearing in the sky.

“All lost balloons find their way to lost children,” came the comfort from her mother. “Destination Neverland,” then chimed in her brother.

Years and years later, this little girl had children of her own. But she never would forget the day, away her balloon had flown.

“Mother, tell me again about Peter,” would chime the oldest from her bed. And she would always start at the beginning. “Now, Wendy, there’s so much to be said.”
NUTHEENG BUT A BOYAGE

By Marette McDermott

Nutheeng
but a boy, this man: me,
freshlee shavin
and still a boy,
on a voyage
with bones and
pen nees sayleeng
thru the watirline, glued to
the hul of a ship, my ship, my voyij,
my destind nait ion lost in an epik of time.
longeeng for an odd s e, I skower the shor, kolekteeng krumbs
from over 20,000 shaves I long for brokin planks, blood
brokin, and the boyege I never selld as
a boy. Markeeng years with unlit wax
kan-dulls still in their 50
sent pakits, I’ll lite all twelv
hundrid seventee five primarree colord stiks in onir
of the boy tryeeng to be a man, subtraktd—
by the kandulls of a man.
A CHILD’S REPLY TO THE MORNING DOVES

By Christian Curneal

Morning Doves, glide away down
I have a heavy stone for your feathered gown
Such ambition never ceasing to try
To cause your fall like a hammer from the sky

Not knowing the consequence
I take aim to this great offence
For all other times I’ve missed
But to this rugged stone, your leg kissed

Mourning Doves I have struck your brother
But I will never strike another
My wounded Dove, please sing to me...
NI DE AQUÍ NI DE ALLÁ

By Ana Reyes

Al país de los sueños llegó
atravesando un desierto
con una mochila que carga
un corazón muerto.

Dejó la tierra que me vio crecer,
mi padres lloran sin saber
que tal vez esta sea la última vez
que miraran a sus padres en su vejez.

Camino por la sombra
con mi espalda mojada.
Me juzgan por mi acento
sin conocerme primero.

Ni de aquí ni de allá soy,
atatradacuatro esquinas estoy,
como un águila en una jaula,
que aunque es de oro
no deja de ser prisión.

Quisiera volar por esas montañas
y no por el muro que separa mis dos patrias.
Soy perseguida por la ley
cuando no hay fronteras para el rey.

Mi casa no está allá pero tampoco aquí.
Atrapada en dos mundos no puedo huir.
Libertad es lo único que pido
para dejar la cárcel de este gran nido.
To the country of dreams I arrived
crossing the desert
with a backpack that
carries a heavy heart.

I leave the land that has watched me grow,
my parents cry without knowing
that maybe this is the last time
they will see their parents old.

I walk in the shadows
with my wet back.
They judge me by my accent
without knowing me first.

I am not from here or over there,
I am trapped in these four corners,
like an eagle in a cage,
that although it is made out of gold
it is still a cage.

I wish I could fly through these mountains
and not above the wall that separates my two countries.
I am persecuted by law
when there are no borders for the king.

My house is neither here or over there.
Trapped in two worlds, I cannot escape.
Freedom is all I ask
to leave the cage of this great nest.
ATLAS DREAMING

By Shawn Atkinson

I wandered far, across the land and sea,
and now I’m falling towards a maddening dream,
unrest in slumber; lacking end for rest.

I empty seas with melting spoons of ice,
unveiling creatures raging in the deep.
Their sightless eyes reflecting ages past,
then build an endless wall of bitter sand.
I carry dust from shore to mountaintop
with shoulders worn and cry. The shattered earth
will fall, descending from my tired eyes.
STAY TOGETHER FOR THE CATS

By Tasia McDonald

I’m sick of you. You drive me nuts.
You make me cringe. I hate your guts.
You’re foul. You suck. Your face annoys me.
You’re dumb and fat, naïve and noisy.
I wish you pain. I’d like you dead.
I curse the ground your feet will tread.
Your voice is needles in my ears.
You torture me. You bring me tears.
Your lone existence makes me vomit.
The earth would bloom, were you not on it.
I’d end it now, but for the fact
I cannot bear to leave the cat.
Some believe I am only the hunter of night,  
I only come out when the sky is black.  
They’re wrong.  
I come out when it pleases me.

I am silent, I say nothing on demand,  
Many try to get me to speak, yet I  
Remain as I am.  
I speak when it pleases me.

My movements, too, are silent,  
Like a cold, winter night. Undetected  
I stir in the stillness.  
I move when it pleases me.

Many take me as angry or cruel,  
Based only on my looks: hooked  
Talons on my feet.  
I am good when it pleases me.

Try to catch a glimpse of me, I move  
Among you, a master of being  
Invisible to all.  
I am seen only when it pleases me.

My yellow eyes glint in the light,  
I see my next target ahead.  
I spread my wings.  
I am the owl when it pleases me.
“Mom—Labradors for sale!” I shouted over the morning newspaper. I’d become King of the Classified Section looking for a pup. It was nearly my birthday and this year I didn’t want balloons, a party, or video games.

I called him Bandit, black fur and white teeth. Puppy breath howled through July nights, mourning, missing his mother, his distress settled by belly rubs and the task of a bone. Marrow on his calmed breath, we drifted like balloons.

He’d wait at the back door after school, ready and happy for the both of us with his Labrador smile. My grin would catch up to his as we played out back. If I was captain, he would have surely been first mate.

I came home one night to supper unmade. "Bandit!" I called. My mother answered, eyes red. Sadness dripped from her eyes to the ground. "He’s gone," she answered softly. "No," I replied with the only thought I could make. "No." Again, my voice weak like a leaking balloon.

My mother led me outside. Lifeless in the bed of the truck, fur painted red, was Bandit. The life in him smudged against the bumper of some car that didn’t stop. I held him, blood-wet and broken boned.

For months, I dreamt of dog-walks and his wet smile replying to his name. But near my bed, his collar sat unworn as if I might forget to mourn.

I still tie Milk-Bones to red balloons, and listen for barks til morning.
Near flawless and pure. I drape
on the slender nape of fair skin.
I sense strokes of heart in her wrist.
I hug wrinkle-free fingers
which only raise for tea. I taste
peppered poppy perfume while resting,
nesting in her bosom locket.

Toasting to candlelit dinners
or swimming in chandelier shimmers,
I’ve never taken the plunge
into elbow-high dirty dishwater
or scraped against dirt under nails.

Night tide returns me to the highboy,
reposing in red crushed velvet, wondering
what the flesh of an open wound
tastes like.
BLACK NYLONS WITH SNAGS AND RUNS
THE BEAN BAG CHAIR WITH THE HOLE
WET MATCHES, THE SEX TALK

BURNED OUT BULBS
EXPIRED MILK
THE SHATTERED DINNER PLATE
EMPTY, INK-DRY PENS

ALL THE LITTLE PROBLEMS WENT ON MOTHER’S TOP SHELF
WHEN SHE BECAME HEAVY WITH THE TWINS
SHE ASKED ME TO SIT UP THERE

IN MY OVERALLS AND TENNIS SHOES
I COULD LIE PERFECTLY STRAIGHT
AND FIT LIKE A SHOE IN ITS BOX
AFTER DARK, I WOULD CLIMB DOWN AND GO TO THE STAIRCASE
MY TWO YEAR OLD COOKIE-CUT SHAPE FIT INTO THE THIRD STEP

IF I WAS CONDEMNED
to lead a shelf life, then I would also, like the dinner plate,
get under her skin
THE VIEWING

By Megan Olsen

There he was,
His skin like peach rubber.
And through his limp pores
formaldehyde crept into the air.
It made me gag.

I searched for his familiar musk,
the one still clinging to
his pillow.
The warm scent I once found
in the notch of his neck
had dissolved.

There, his pungent putty husk
was swollen.
An unfamiliar shell,
hiding his spoiled heart.

I looked for a clue, anything to show me
this sour thing
used to be a man.
I searched for the expression
he gave to my daughter.
I searched for his warmth.

But his cold stiff hands were stacked
over a bulging sweater vest.
His nails were trimmed
and clean.
Black hair combed over
the plum temple.
Nothing looked the same.

I reached in, and placed
a folded note beside his
puffy head.
And I touched his chilled cheek,
just to see if it
was as soft as it used to be.

And with a sickness,
I knew
There was nothing human left.
MOTHER OF DEATH

By Meg Burton

Meet the Reaper
whose ebony skin glows
with the souls of those who passed.
Whose starlit eyes shine
with pity and love.
Whose silver hair
entangled with bones and feathers
curls down
her back as she leads you to your end.

You cannot help but follow
as she leads
to the depths of darkness.
You trust her
trailing behind like a child
whose innocence
gives no warning for
abandonment.
She leaves you
to stay in blackness
light fading with her every step.
You are hers now
and kindness is no longer needed.

You scream
but there is no answer.
You cry
but no comfort comes.
Your Mother has moved on
luring a new pet
for her company.

The Mother of Death is
cruel.
Inside there is a coldness
that allows no warmth to grow.
The Mother of Death will guide us
to eternal solitude.
An unfinished book decorated his tabletop, companion to an empty wine bottle—permanent fixtures begging to be drawn or left to collect layers of dust like rings on his life-tree. A cool glass stumbled between his fingers. Remnants of the wine pooled in the center, and its memory still addled his tongue.

His cat rubbed against his leg, back arched, tail snaking lazily back and forth, hungry, if for nothing else than affection. He was jealous of the cat and its fabled lives. He wished he could burrow between the thighs of his mistress and purr. Lifetime after lifetime he would lose himself in the warmth of Mnemosyne’s daughters, and each of his deaths would absolve him of his infidelities.

From dark heights, a pale, curved blade gazed down at him. The light was heavy with old regrets, and he tried to bury them under equal adoration. He imagined the nine names of his mistresses were etched on the bright sickle, and that it was forever seeking his heart. When it met him at the end, he would welcome it, collect his own blood in the wine glass, and offer it to Memory.
I NEVER LIKED THE COLORS THAT SHE CHOSE FOR YOU—

By Whitney Hurst

You were a sweater. I wanted to unravel and understand every fiber of your being, but I never saw beyond the façade that your mother crocheted and forced you to wear on Christmas morning. I watched her hook clasp its cold finger around you and pull you in again and again. She wanted a pattern after her own image, and as many times as you looked for the loopholes in her perfect stitches they still clung tightly to you like an overwhelming hug until you didn’t even notice that you were wearing them anymore.
Pluto.

You were massive. 
Worlds and worlds and worlds again, 
but now diminished into a binary dwarf planet system.

Would it have been so bad
to wander alone? To collect space dust, 
or fling it away? Until only you remained?

Could I have collected you then?
And kept you with my wandering stars?
CALCULUS DANCE INSTRUCTOR

By April Topham

I walk into the room tired
groggy from calculus dreams
winding through my nights
full of twisted derivatives
iterated upside down integrals
and polar vectorized mayhem.

He erases the board, an energetic
cleansing, one last swipe and scrub
and the board is pure, but I know
what follows and I brace myself
for the onslaught of equations
that I haven’t practiced enough.

In my dreams he is my brother
my uncle, the circus ringleader
whip and baton and marker
in hand, spewing numbers, symbols,
equations across the clean whiteness
a choreography of calculus.

He laughs, teasing my fears, giving
me hope. For just a second I grasp
the concepts, a joy of understanding
but it slips away again, is lost. Again.
My understanding is without
foundation, unstudied, unpracticed.

I desperately try to follow but I am
sluggish, with two left feet. I want
to dance calculus as he does, graceful
and elegant, confident and sure
as equations and sketches slide
in fluid beauty from his hands.

I walk away with calculus flying
in my thoughts, all smooth curves
and three dimensional spirals.
And I’m inspired to dance it one day
as he does, graceful and sure.
I stood before an endless tree
Arms sprawled in green triumph
Its roots grew with such grip
The earth dangled from its grasp

Men hacked its arms to teach it humility
Some respect
Two more for every limb lost
Gently it replied
Reminding the students their place

They were gone before the lesson was formed
Through groaning heartwood and sprouting leaves

I pressed my ear to bark thick walls
Of a classroom (listening for ancient lectures
And wise advice)

All I could hear was the banter of metal
On rock

The laughter of axes approaching
SEARCHING FOR DELIVERY ROOM

By Patrick Ramsay

September 18, 2015: Tourists Thwart Turtles from Nesting in Costa Rica

You are in labor and there is only one place where you can deliver your child safely. You travel hundreds of miles to reach this place and you arrive with the pains of childbirth howling through your body. You are ready to have your child. You cannot wait. Your child cannot wait. When you pull into the parking lot of this place, you are horrified by what you see. Giant, pale-pinkish, beakless and wingless, fleshy birds are standing in every parking stall and there is no room for you. These creatures are about four times the size of you, loud, aggressive and appear to be hungry for something—maybe you, maybe your child. Safety has been thwarted. Certainty for your child’s arrival has been smeared. You know no other safe place. There is no other safe place. The natural love for your unborn child inside you attempts to cradle it within you, while the pain of nature is howling at you to let your child go.

Will you search for another place, a damp back alley or maybe a half-empty parking garage in a bad part of town, where you can deliver your baby in peace? Or will you ask the monsters to move?
the battered tin sign swings above the gate. Decrepit cement slabs and rotting roses invite me in. Shadows haunt white squares where photos once hung in the lobby. Words hover over doors:

Memories of Father  Memories of Mother

Memories of Failure and Loss

Time of Strength  Time of Great Change

I have a coupon.
The caretaker records in his ledger then waves me through the threshold.

Pausing at the parlor, dust tinges of Grandma’s tea stains and Clementi’s Sonatinas. Stairs squeak as I grasp the chalky banister, traversing the path of precedence. My name crowns the room at the end of the hall.
The door still sticks. Light from the west window warms me, transforming the room to my own. Atop the highboy rests a pink box. I lift the lid. A cold gasp

of lilac escapes, flooding my lungs, ricocheting off my spine. The miniature ballerina pliés, turning innocent images of the past.

I pull open the drawer of sorrows, cringing at the sudoric scenes—memories that flutter about like fairy sprinkles:

my soft body coiled in bed, eyes bloated
for the baby I didn’t keep, the marriage
I couldn’t have, and the pending approvals
unnoticed. A corner of white parchment peeks
in—caught under the planted metal foot
of the old roll-top. Gibbs Secretarial. Valedictorian.

Class of ’32. I’m not anybody’s daughter
or friend or close confidant. I’m not a name
that rolls off the tongues of young suitors.

I’m just any girl Friday for hire as cheap
as they come. I open the face of the ancient
Waterbury and wind the clock back

precisely eighteen minutes before the time
of my birth, and lay upon the cloth-veiled bed,
crossing my heart at the wrists, closing my eyes,

holding my breath and waiting for the stroke
of midnight before exhaling again.
This time I want a new dress.
A god once said:
El Poeta es un pequeño Dios²
and I thanked the gods
for the opportunity to create worlds.

I’m just a white boy who learned the god-like lengua³ of Huidobro
in Mexico. For a time I was the one who looked
differently-- and spoke
hesitantly and bit the bitter flavor
of foreigner between
mis dientes⁴
and my American tongue.

And so I thank God for ojos
abiertos a los mundos
desconocidos⁵. And I use my powers
of creation to say:

hola
and mucho gusto
amigo⁶.
OLD FASHIONED GHAZAL

By Megan Olsen

An orange old fashioned bites so I pop the cherry into my mouth. The neon BAR sign is brighter than the cherry stem which separates from the fruit and slips over my tongue. He asks me to keep drinking, but I’m obsessed with crushing the cherry with my teeth while his bitters breath warms my thighs. I suck the liquor from the fruit and open up like a sweet maraschino cherry when its skin is penetrated by a tooth or tongue. All juice, all sugar—My lips are wet with whiskey and cherry juice; I’m overflowing with sweetness. I swallow hard but the air gets caught like it’s the invisible pit of a bright, wet cherry.
PLATE TECTONICS

By Murielle Parkinson Shallbetter

I like to watch you,
When you get up in the morning.
And when you get up at night.

It is so pleasant
to be pulled closer to you
by slow hot circles of molten rock.

Your slopes make
such a nice horizon
cutting ridges into the sky.
He cares about my eyes
and says he cares about me
when he holds me in dim light
and traces down my body.
But I’ve smudged the lenses
that frame his face
and wonder how he can see me
through the texture of my skin
As you thumb through the art in the following pages, I invite you to think of the edges of the piece as four walls. Bound by the edges of the page, I want you to think of each piece as a room, and as a room, I want you to live in that space for a while. Give yourself to it. Find a purpose for the artwork, for your viewing of it, and for yourself. Moments of reflection are ripe and ready in each of these pieces so long as you take the time to see them.

Thematically, these pieces ask the viewer a question. Whether that question concerns craft, medium, content, or subject, there are aspects of each piece that require viewer participation to fully construct the room. I implore you to leave your mark in these spaces because the answers to these questions are yours to discover.

There are carefully curated journeys to be had between each stroke of the pen or click of the camera’s lens. Consider this your formal invitation: come along, and occupy a creative space for a spell.

-Chelsea Maki, Art Editor
Redemption

Abby Van Ess
Lavender Crashes
Katie Strader
Porcelain Princess

Amber R. Truett
Agony

Brock Duncan
Grave Dancers
Amber R. Truett
Krystal

Brock Duncan
The Journey
Marta Constanza Alvear Bravo
Facebook Troll, from World Peace from Your Sofa
Josh Petersen
United
Tia Taylor
Glass
April Topham
Ornate Diamondback Terrapin, from Turtles of North America

Josh Petersen
Imbroglio
Jennifer Nichols
Cold Shoulder
Megan Hills
City Lines
Brock Duncan
Tea Party
Tia Taylor
Just Breathe

Paul Bundy
I used to wonder why it was called “nonfiction” instead of “truth,” until I started writing. Then I realized that, unlike fiction, where the story is made up, nonfiction begins as a truth that is then put through the filter of the author’s perspective. Whether the piece is a scientific or academic paper, a news report, a personal memoir, a philosophical essay, or a recounting of an experience, the author is included. In fact, there is no way to erase the author’s fingerprints from the work. Those fingerprints can reside in the form of imperfect memory, opinion, or even the choice of data used or not used.

That is what makes nonfiction compelling. Readers are given not just the subject, but the author as well, making it more personal than fiction, more real. Unlike fiction, which can be dismissed as “just made up,” nonfiction cannot; it happened in some way, and to a real person. Because of that, nonfiction can have an effect on the reader in subtle and often lasting ways, adding to his/her reality.

In this section, we are presented with the raw experience of addiction, the innocence of a first kiss, and a call to action in saving our planet from nurdles. As a staff, we enjoyed reading all of the pieces submitted, and appreciate the generosity of those who were willing to share themselves.

—April Topham, Nonfiction Editor
I whisper to Justin, “We’ve been here since Friday. I want to go home.”

“Soon, baby. Soon,” he says, turning his attention back to the bedroom door.

“You said that yesterday,” I say, falling back into the couch cushions.

“What now, fool? I’m busy,” Reina shouts into her phone as she opens the bedroom door. “Not right now, I gotta go.” She glares at Justin and asks, “You got those lines done yet?”

“They’ve been done, just waiting on you.”

Leaning against the cushion, I close my eyes wondering how much longer we’ll be in this bingeing hell.

I’ve been awake for almost three days, snorting line after line of cocaine, carelessly poisoning my body. It feels like I’m in shackles, and Reina’s apartment is the dungeon I hate but pine for. I want to blame Justin, but I can’t. I stay no matter how annoying his and Reina’s behavior gets because I want another fix.

After meeting Justin last year, the three of us became a trio trapped at the bottom of a cyclone of misery; we can’t see the light to pull ourselves out anymore. I look at Reina sitting next to me and think. *How did she get to this point? How did I get to this point?*

I’m not sure how long Reina’s been a dealer, but she had it all figured out and under control when we first met. She lived on Capitol Hill in a gorgeous old-fashioned 40’s apartment. It had the most incredible view of the Capitol Building. I loved it. The bathroom had the original spearmint green tub and sink. She decorated her bedroom in an African safari motif and the living room had black leather furniture, huge mirrors, and paintings on
the walls. She presented herself with such sophistication. Back then Reina didn’t make it a habit to dip into her own supply, and I cannot say when or what happened to change her behavior.

I met her in 2002 while working at Echo Studio Salon, shortly after moving to Salt Lake City. Since meeting, she’s been my main cocaine dealer. The first five years I knew her, Michael, my high school sweetheart, and I occasionally went to her apartment on Capitol Hill and partied like rock stars all night, but when our cocaine was gone, we went home. We didn’t stay for days, like Justin and I do now, and months passed before Michael and I partied again. Without Michael, I would’ve journeyed down this road long ago. *He kept my experimentation in moderation. He kept me safe.*

Gazing at Reina across the couch, I recollect how pretty she was years ago. In the two or three years she’s been using, she’s become haggard and incompetent.

She’s filled with paranoia. It seems like her hair turned grey overnight. She’s grown it long, but it’s thinned and lays limp around her face. She’s lost weight and her skin hangs from her cheeks. She struggles pronouncing her words and gets confused easily. Her false teeth don’t fit anymore, because of the weight loss; she complains they hurt her gums. She feels comfortable enough with me to remove them when we’re alone; I’m one of the lucky ones.

Reina breaks the silence in the room telling Justin she needs another drink.

He bounds to the kitchen and shouts, “You’re out of Smirnoff Ice. What do you want?”

“I want you to get me more,” Reina shouts. Justin shrugs into the living room to slip on his shoes. He grabs his winter jacket to brace himself against the blizzard outside, which is one excuse I’ve used to justify us staying this long. Staying quiet, I push the thought out of my mind: *Justin’s about to drive my car through the blizzard, blown-out, so Reina can have alcohol to drink.*

“Get cigarettes, too,” she says as he kisses my cheek. When Justin walks out the door, I feel my stomach knot up.
Reina’s mood immediately changes from rude to pleasant. She looks over and says, “Wanna do a line while he’s gone?” It’s Justin’s job to cut up the blow. I hate doing the work, but I’ll do it for another line.

While I chop white powder, I listen to Reina whine and complain. I have this urge to feel sorry for her. Stop. She makes money selling drugs, ignoring the fact she’s ruining people’s lives. She is a parasite to society.

She bitches about her disability money from the state, her computer not working, how she lives in West Valley now; the list goes on. I’m disgusted. It shows on my face as I stop what I’m doing and stare. We were good friends once. Now we just use and abuse each other for drugs.

Reina’s phone rings, and she goes to her bedroom, closes the door, and I’m left lining up the blow on the table. I can’t do my line without her. She gets upset. I leave the lines unfinished and sit stretched-out on the L-shaped, blood-red couch.

I try to stay busy on Reina’s laptop. It’s been a half-hour since we did our last line. Staring at the blow I feel the desire to snort it intensify. Uncomfortable and antsy, I re-adjust my body constantly, pushing my back up against the large cushions. I cover my feet with a blanket then remove it every five minutes; my feet are cold but sweaty.

It feels like Justin’s been gone forever. Looking at the clock, he’s only been gone fifteen minutes.

I cannot sit still, so I go into the bathroom. I haven’t showered in two days, and it feels as though my skin is crawling. Looking into the bathroom mirror, I see a stranger staring back at me. Who is this person I have become? My skin is blotchy and grey in color. My dark hair is oily. I pull it back in a ponytail and it enhances my facial features, which look distorted to me. My eyes look bugged-out and dark circles surround them. Staring at myself, my vision gets blurry and I can’t regain my focus. My whole body feels moist and filthy. I am strung-out.

I am ashamed of myself. I begin to cry, but my body is dehydrated and won’t produce tears. I sit on the black satin toilet
cushion and look around the clean, organized bathroom. This isn’t like the movies. Crack-head bathrooms aren’t supposed to look like this. Why am I am I still here? Stop thinking. Waiting for my body to relax, I examine the elegant satin and lace shower curtain, but after a minute it becomes blurry. I close my eyes and squeeze them tight. When I open them I’ve regained my focus. I retreat back to the living room. I hope Justin returns soon. I want to do another line. I want my brain numb. My life is unsatisfactory.

Standing to look out the window I see Justin pulling under the carport.

Two minutes later he rushes through the door letting out a loud “Whooowee it’s cold outside!”

In the same moment I’m glad to see him, I feel contempt for him.

He hands me a pack of cigarettes and a Gatorade. “Here babe, I got you a drink.”

I reach out my hand and snatch the cigarettes and say “Thanks.” Justin puts the other drinks in the refrigerator then sits on the couch next to me.

“How was it while I was gone?” he asks. Before I can answer, the bedroom door suddenly opens and our attention is drawn to the loud “bang” it makes hitting the wall.

“Too long enough,” Reina says. “Where the hell is my drink?”


Reina grabs herself a bottle and sits on the opposite end of the couch. I light a cigarette for her first, then one for myself.

“Finish cutting those lines,” Reina tells Justin. He looks down at the table noticing the half-made lines.

“What, you guys started, but couldn’t finish?”

“I want a big one this time,” I say to Justin.

“Hell, make them all fat,” Reina rudely says.

I like my lines big, but it really doesn’t matter anymore. We’re past the point of the drugs rushing through our blood stream, making our bodies feel like the first line did. We keep doing line after line now just to keep the awful come-down contained.
I hope I can feel this one, I think while watching Justin cut the lines. I yearn for the feeling I get from the first line. It all begins with the decision to come to Reina’s. My anticipation rises higher and higher every mile we get closer to her apartment. My body rushes with excitement pulling off the freeway to navigate our way through the West Valley streets. The second we pull into the complex, I realize what a bad idea this is. We shouldn’t be here, I say in my mind, but never out loud to Justin. Walking up the steps to her apartment, an overwhelming desire to run back to the car rushes through me, then my addiction takes over and any will power I have is gone. I’m happy to see her as she invites us in, but I know this feeling won’t last. I push these thoughts aside as I always do, thinking, Enjoy this moment. This is the last time I’ll ever come here. I smile, open my arms to hug her and walk inside.

Safe behind closed doors, Justin goes straight to work cutting down the rock of cocaine. Justin is Reina’s work dog. She never breaks the rock down before we arrive. She makes Justin do it for her. The rock is large, just smaller than a tennis ball. Justin cuts a small chunk from its edge using a razor blade, and with a BIC lighter he flattens the small rock under a dollar bill.

Waiting for my line, I begin to feel nauseous and sick to my stomach. I cut up a straw into three pieces and give Reina and Justin theirs. We keep our straws close, in our pockets, so we do not forget which one belongs to us. Justin does his line first then moves over, so I have space to do mine. The first line is always long and fat. It’s bright white with small orange and pink crystals throughout. As I bend my neck and tilt my head at an angle the light hits it so the crystals sparkle, and it resembles what snow looks like when the sunlight beams off of it. I’m ready to relieve my body of this anticipation.

When the line shoots up my nostril, I feel a sting in my forehead and it burns. My eyes and mouth water immediately. I have to focus on only one thing: not throwing up. I have to concentrate fully and keep swallowing the saliva building up in my mouth. It takes a full minute or two for this initial rush of toxins to pass through my body. Reina and Justin both constantly try to talk to
me at this moment, knowing I feel sick and need to focus. They laugh at me and make fun of my routine every time.

Then the liquefied cocaine drips through my nasal passage and my heart begins to race. My throat and my mouth become completely numb and my body is paralyzed. I lean back against the couch during this explosion of euphoria.

With every line after this one, the intensity becomes less and less. Each time I lean down now, I silently say, *I am wasting my time.* I sit and stare at both of them, wishing I had the will power to get up and leave. *Why do I keep doing this? I don’t even like it. I really do not even like them. I need to go home.*

We’re like zombies after three days of constant abuse, our minds and bodies numb. We are so blown-out we hardly move. My brain travels through thoughts rapidly, but when I try to speak it’s a struggle to make words. We haven’t had conversation in hours. The only words spoken have been by Reina telling Justin to cut up more lines.

Sunday’s sun begins peeking through the blinds and Reina realizes the supply has run low. Finally, it is time to leave.

“When you coming back?” Reina says hugging me goodbye.

“Soon. I’ll call you,” I say entertaining the notion to please her. *I hope I never return.*

The snow subsided, which will make the drive home less daunting. Sitting in the car I get impatient waiting for Justin to scrape the snow from the windows. I can’t stop thinking how dreadful the drive home is going to be. It’s always uncomfortable.

Pulling out of the complex, I think how long it’s been since the last line, trying to calculate the time in my head. *About an hour. God, I want another line.* My body starts to cringe. I feel cold. No matter how high I turn up the heater I can’t shake the cold from my bones. *Did Justin take any blow while Reina wasn’t looking?* It always takes the edge off before facing the family when we get to our homes.

“Do you have any?” I ask.

“No, we did it all.”

“Really? Why didn’t you take any?”
“I never had the opportunity. She watched me like a hawk this time.”

I am filled with paranoia and become skeptical of Justin. Angry and scared, my mind wanders. I wish we still lived together. Then I could watch him and make sure he didn’t take any to do alone, without me. Truthfully, I wish I still lived in my Salt Lake City apartment and had never allowed Justin to move in. We both live with our parents now, Justin 30 miles north of Reina’s, and I live another 20 miles north from Justin’s.

Pulling up to Justin’s gated community, I look over at him and he looks fine. He doesn’t seem concerned he’s been gone for three days or how he may have to speak to his parents when he walks through the door.

“Aren’t you scared?”

“I’m all right,” he says. “I’m just going to eat and go to bed.”

“I hate it! You can so easily eat and sleep after this; my come-down takes forever.”

“Well, try not to think about it; just watch some TV,” Justin says as he kisses my cheek and vacates the vehicle. I dread my lonely drive home every time and wonder why I keep putting myself through this; it isn’t worth it.

I am overcome with fear pulling into my parents’ drive-way. I want to reverse right back out, but there’s nowhere to go. My brain races, thinking I may have to talk to my parents in this condition. I rush through the front door, call for my dog Kilo, and bolt to the basement to avoid seeing them. Kilo runs down the stairs, follows me to my room leaping on the bed excited to see me. I close the door and feel a sense of solace. Relieved to rid my body of three-day-old clothes, I can cleanse the grotesque feeling that engulfs me. The water makes me uncomfortable; I shower quickly, eager to put on my pajamas and crawl into bed.

It’s cold in my room. I feel goose bumps encompassing my body. Snuggling close to Kilo he becomes alert. In turn, I become alert and stare at the door squinting my eyes, as if this enhances my hearing.

“Is someone at the door?” I ask.
He acts paranoid when I’m high. He looks at me concerned and senses how uncomfortable I feel, which makes him act uncomfortable too. He’s a dedicated friend who loves me unconditionally. I’m upset with myself for continually putting him through this.

I want to turn on a movie, but then I won’t be able to hear if someone comes down the stairs. Silently I lay in bed watching Kilo breathe, jealous he can fall asleep so easily. I want to sleep, but I can’t get my brain to turn off. My eyes keep fluttering and they won’t stay closed. I am so paranoid.

I hear the door move. Kilo looks up. “What’s that? You hear that?” I ask him, not realizing it’s just Jeda, our cat, scratching on the door.

I am in agony. I don’t even know why I’m so paranoid, but every little noise makes me cringe. “Calm down,” I say out loud, hoping my words take effect, but my body is restless and dysfunctional from the poison. I haven’t eaten since Friday morning, but I have no appetite. I should try to eat something, but I risk the chance of interacting with my parents if I go to the kitchen. I stare at the ceiling and repeat, don’t come downstairs and talk to me, over and over again. I wish I still lived in my own apartment where I could be alone. It’s easier going through the withdrawal in my own space.

I moved in with my parents in September, believing I’d stop using. It’s January and obviously I didn’t. I am disgusted with myself for disrespecting my parents like this. It’s difficult to grasp how they must feel as they also suffer through my addiction. I know they struggle to understand why I do this to myself. They make my life comfortable hoping I’ll choose to stay home and get well. My father has always struggled with his alcohol addiction, and I know what’s happening to me tears my mother apart.

She tells me, “Do whatever you want in your bedroom.” Begging me, “Please just stay. We don’t want you to leave for days.” They both do everything they can to help and it breaks their hearts to watch me slowly kill myself.

I beg my body to sleep. I want to wake to a new day, but I just
lie here thinking about my wasted weekend and try to comprehend how I got to this place. These are the moments when I miss Michael most. **Why did we break up? It doesn’t make sense anymore. I’ve just wasted my life since I left him. What was I looking for?** I analyze it over and over in my head. I can’t come up with any logical reasons. I think about my dreams and aspirations. I’m not interested in being a loser drug addict. What’s wrong with me?

Turning on my side, I see my reflection in the closet mirrors. I look emaciated and it frightens me. Turning my back to the mirror, I snuggle Kilo tight and begin crying. **I am wasting my life. If I don’t change, I am going to die!**

I awake Monday morning to an empty house. Stumbling upstairs, I feed Kilo, grab some leftovers and go back to my room. I fall asleep and the next thing I know my mother is waking me, telling me it’s time for dinner:

“I’m on my way, I’ll be upstairs in a sec,” I tell her.

Tuesday and Wednesday pass and I’m finally feeling better. I haven’t answered Justin or Reina’s calls, knowing if I do they’ll lure me from my safe haven. Anyway, I’ve been busy figuring out how to get away from them. In the last two days I found myself a place to live in California and a job working at a salon in Huntington Beach; I start in two weeks. Now I just have to pack and tell everyone I’m leaving. **I hope it goes well.**

Mom doesn’t work on Fridays. While cleaning the house together, I decide: it’s the perfect time to tell her.

“So, I’ve decided I’m going to move to California.”

With a condescending tone she replies, “Oh. When do you suppose you’ll be doing this?”

“I’m leaving in a week.”

She stops washing dishes, turns to look at me, raises her one eyebrow and says, “Really! And how do you expect to do that? And what do you expect to do?”

I gaze at her with an annoyed look, “I’ve got money for gas, and I’ve already found a job. I start in two weeks.”

“It’s too expensive. You’ll never make it,” she says with concern.
“I’ll make it. Jesus! Have some faith in me. I’ve always made it before.”

“You’re going to struggle. You just need to be strong and stay in Utah.”

But I know if I don’t leave the state and get away from this hell I’ve created, I’ll never stop. I’ll allow my addiction to kill me.

Looking around my room deciding what to pack and thinking about my adventure, my phone continues to vibrate. I am nervous to answer. I’ve played through my head, a million times, how I’ll tell Justin and Reina I’m leaving. Saying goodbye to them won’t come easy. It’s late Friday and Justin’s been calling and texting all day.

When I answer, Justin shouts, “What the hell? Why haven’t you answered my calls all week?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Reina called and she wants us to come over,” he says, expressing he wants to go.

“I’ll pick you up in an hour or so,” I tell him.

I figure I’ve got a week till I leave and there’s no better time than now to tell them. At least they’ll be together and I can get it over with. Driving to Justin’s I wonder why I allow my addiction to have this power over me. I can’t believe I’m going back into the dungeon that has trapped me for so long. Picking Justin up, I move to the passenger seat and gaze off into the clouds as he drives us the rest of the way.

Quietly I go into a daze. I will miss them. I’ve seen them both during their worst moments and they have been by my side to comfort me through mine. We trust each other with our deepest secrets. Reina and Justin are one of my deepest secrets. One I am going to bury.

Instead of anticipation, anxiety consumes me while I walk through the complex parking lot. I sluggishly walk up the stairs and when I see her door my imagination creates a picture of hell behind it. Reina opens the door with a huge smile on her face.

“What up, girl?” she says, opening her arms.

“Not’a’lotta, darlin,” I say sulking into her apartment.
“What’s wrong?” she asks.

Taking a deep breath I say, “Nothing’s wrong."

I feel like telling them immediately. If I just tell them I can get out of here and put this life in my rear-view mirror. Realizing I don’t want to leave this relationship angry or be mean to them, I think my usual thought as I do every time I enter Reina’s apartment. Enjoy this moment. This is the last time I’ll ever come here.

Except this time it’s true.
All I ever wanted since my first boyfriend was to be kissed. I watched that magical moment in “Dirty Dancing” enough times to know I desperately wanted to be kissed like Johnny kissed Baby. I envisioned standing close to him, our arms around each other, breaths heavy—yet shallow. I imagined his hands caressing up and down my back and across my shoulders; his soft lips leaving a trail of kisses from the base of my neck until reaching my mouth, gently nibbling. Then, parting my lips slightly, engaging each other passionately. And if “Hungry Eyes” should happen to be playing in the background, even better.

The problem was physical contact was a no-no at middle school. I guess the principal was worried hand-holding and hugging in the hallways would lead to sex behind the bleachers or something. Thanks to him I hadn’t even made it to first base, and I was already in my third relationship of the year, this time with Matt Hawthorne. Now that 7th grade was coming to an end, the window of opportunity was fast closing in on me.

One morning near the end of the school year I found an invitation taped to my locker. I tore it open only to reveal it was from Allen Warren. Great. Allen was one of those boys whose awkward phase started around the fourth grade and lasted well into high school. Instead of tall, dark and handsome, he was lanky, pale-faced with an overbite guaranteed to put his orthodontist’s kids through college. The only thing I really knew about Allen was he had horses. Allen still carried around his horse-themed Trapper Keeper from elementary school, ate from his Black Beauty lunch box, and often wore his favorite gray sweatshirt—the one with a herd of wild mustangs silkscreened across his chest.

“Did you get one?” I asked Celeste, waving the invitation as
she arrived at her locker.

“No,” she replied. “Who’s it from?” When I showed her, she started laughing. When Julie arrived at her locker on the other side of me she joined in the laughter too.

“You’re not going, are you?” Julie asked.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Maybe.” I shoved the invitation into my folder and headed toward homeroom. If Celeste and Julie weren’t invited I wondered about the other girls from my group. By lunchtime it was confirmed. Neither of the Amys or Angelas, nor the other two Julies were invited. Even worse—Matt hadn’t received an invitation either. It was starting to look like just me.

“Maybe he likes you,” Celeste laughed again.

“Be nice,” I sighed, looking over at Allen drinking from his Black Beauty thermos. “I don’t even think he’s noticed girls yet.”

Not that I was opposed to going to his party. I just didn’t want it to be weird—me with a bunch of kids I barely knew, swaying awkwardly to lame music. Then there was what the invitation said. “Barn party.” I had no idea what that even meant. Visions of cowboy boots, bolo ties and square dancing filled my head. Maybe I wouldn’t go after all.

During seventh period P.E. I overheard one of the girls in the locker room ask Maggie Fritz about Allen’s party—whether or not she received an invitation and if she planned to go. I held my breath, listening—waiting to hear her reply. Maggie Fritz was the most popular girl in school. “Look, I know he’s a bit odd. But he’s my neighbor and my mom said that his mom is letting him invite practically everyone because he needs friends.” Holding her chin high she announced, “I’m going and I think we all should.”

Smiling, I shut my gym locker and joined the rest of the girls for stretches. Now that Maggie had declared her attendance at the party, I knew that everyone who was anyone would be there. I called Allen that night to tell him I was coming.

Saturday night finally arrived. My mom dropped me off in Allen’s driveway and told me she would be back to pick me up promptly at ten o’clock, even though the party would go until eleven. She had to work her graveyard shift at the hospital and
I was not to make her wait on me. I nodded in agreement and jumped from the van with Allen’s gift tucked under my arm.

Making my way around the back, I could hear the strains of The Bangles singing “Walk Like an Egyptian” blaring from the barn. The evening was a little windy and I hoped my extra-hold Aussie Sprunch Spray would be strong enough to keep my sea-shell bangs intact.

The barn had been swept clean and blankets were strewn over bales of hay. Pizza and soda covered a plastic folding table against one wall and white Christmas lights framed the main area of the dance floor. I felt confident in my stone-washed jeans and oversized college sweatshirt. Several of the girls nodded for me to join them in a circle on the dance floor. Even though I played sports with most of them, it was different to be included at a party. And while I still didn’t understand why Allen had invited me, I was flattered he considered me one of the cool kids.

Then the deejay on the radio announced a slow song, and like many of the girls I retreated to a hay bale, doing my best to pull off apathy about slow dancing. That’s when Robbie Stayner approached. He had on his dark blue rugby shirt and his snug-fitting Levi’s, hugging all the right places. He smelled good.

“Wanna dance?” he asked.

“Um, well, you see I have a boyfriend,” I stammered.

“It’s just one dance,” Robbie said, melting me with his dark brown eyes and dimpled grin.

So I nodded and joined him in the middle of the dance floor, placing my arms around his neck, rocking from side to side to some love tune by Atlantic Starr. Besides, I rationalized, it wasn’t like Matt didn’t know where I was. Surely he knew there would be boys at the party and he probably assumed there would be dancing, and since when was one dance a commitment anyway?

But then one dance turned into two as another ballad filled the airwaves. I could feel Robbie’s warm breath against my cheek, soothing, yet slightly ticklish. His hands on the small of my back pulled me in a little closer. I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes, losing myself in the lyrics.
“Call Matt,” Robbie soon whispered into my ear.

“What?” I asked, looking up at him.

“There’s a phone over there,” Robbie motioned. “Call Matt.”

“Why should I call Matt?” I asked.

“Tell him you want to break up.”

As if under a trance, I followed Robbie’s directions and made my way over to the big black rotary-dial phone on the wall. I hadn’t given a second thought to the words I found myself blurt- ing out next.

“I think we should break up,” I told Matt when he answered. I don’t really recall his response other than he agreed and our conversation was over almost as soon as it started.

Robbie watched me from across the room, one leg propped up against the wall behind him. Feeling his eyes on me, the blood rush to my face. I don’t exactly remember how many more songs we danced to that night, but I remember drowning in his eyes.

It was getting close to ten and I knew if I was going to be kissed, it was now or never. Leading Robbie by the hand, we left the barn and slowly made our way across the farm, in the direction of the house. My feet were heavy, moving against my will. My ears took a few moments to acclimate to the still of night. Robbie’s breaths seemed to keep time with the cicadas.

As we neared the house, Robbie tugged on my arm a bit, pulling me behind a large rose bush. I turned to face him. We were standing so close to each other. I felt a tingling from the base of my fingers crawl up each arm. As Robbie placed both hands on my shoulders the tingling spread to the pit of my stomach and then swelled within my chest, bleeding upward into my cheeks. I looked into his eyes, then to his lips and back to his eyes again. Then leaning into me, Robbie cradled my face in his hands and slowly brought my lips to meet his.

And then—he stuck his tongue in my mouth.

I tried hard to resist the gagging reflex one often has when choking on something unexpected. Robbie’s tongue flailed from side to side before whirling around mine, meanwhile creating a suction around the outside of my lips. What is he doing? I won-
dered. This wasn’t how Johnny kissed Baby.

Finally Robbie pulled away. The gleam on his face and the light in his eyes bore pride over his performance. I, on the other hand, worried wiping the slobber on my shirt sleeve might be offensive. I at least waited until he turned away. We reached the driveway just as my mother’s van pulled in.

I lay in bed that night replaying the kiss over and over in my mind, wondering how something that was supposed to be so magical could so closely resemble the welcome I received from my dog each day after school.

True, I had finally made it to first base. But as far as I was concerned the French could keep their drooling kisses to themselves.
I often find myself thinking about the oceans—the beauty and mystery they contain, along with the stunning marine life within them. Imagine sparkling blue waters under a bright yellow and orange sunset, soft breezes swaying palm trees gently back and forth, dolphins jumping in the distance, and waves lapping on the rocks of the shore line. Now picture 5,800,000 square miles of garbage floating in the middle of that, twice the size of the United States, slowly releasing toxins into the water. This is known as the garbage patch, and it is causing an extreme number of problems for the marine life in the oceans.

The garbage patch is located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. As garbage is gradually collected from shores around the world by oceanic currents, it is slowly swept into the Pacific and caught in the swirling currents there, becoming trapped. It is estimated that 80% of this garbage actually comes from land-based sources. These pollutants range in size from large fishing nets to micro-pellets found in abrasive cleaners. Currents carry all sizes of debris from the west coast of North America, which can take up to six years to reach the patch. They also carry debris from the east coast of Asia but complete this trip in a year or less.

Out of all the garbage in the patch, most of it is plastic. Every year, more than 300 million tons of plastic is made, and more than half will only be used once and then thrown away. Plastic has serious environmental threats, such as the increasing presence of micro-plastics in the marine food chain and other highly toxic chemical pollutants that plastic attracts and concentrates. Nurdles are also a threat that plastic has on the environment. A nurdle is just a five-millimeter fragment of plastic that manufacturers use to transfer large amounts of plastic to other parts of
the world. The United States produces about 60 billion pounds of them annually.

Nurdles that are being shipped often end up in the garbage patch mainly due to shipping spills or falling from the exterior of objects. In 2007 on some Hawaiian beaches, 72% of sand particles found were actually nurdles. It was also found that every six pounds of nurdles collected from the ocean compared to only one pound of plankton. There are countless amounts of these plankton that are the same size and color as nurdles. This means that the nurdles in the ocean are competing against the actual food sources for many different marine wildlife. Not only do nurdles represent false plankton, but they also look quite like fish eggs as well. Due to the shaping, coloring, and different sizing, birds, as well as marine life, are impacted in various ways. These impacts will have profound effects on oceanic food chains. The ocean is becoming disrupted by plastic not only physically but chemically as well. The plastic nurdles are experts at absorbing toxic chemicals, and the pollutants are one million times more concentrated than in seawater. Like little balls of poison, nurdles become deadly to any marine life or sea bird that ingests them.

As people, we have increased our dependency on plastic and will continue to do so. Every single piece of plastic produced is still on this earth today. One single molecule of plastic is so heavy and rigid that nothing can break it down further. This is why recycling has such great importance. However, it does come with a price. The cost of recycling plastic is double what an entirely new product would be. This causes great controversy. If recycling is difficult, what else is there to do? There is only one other option—to change. A great way to change is to stop using the plastic bags provided while shopping. Another way is to stop buying plastic bottles that are intended for a single use. Although these are good ways to jumpstart the reduction of plastic, thinking above and beyond the simple ideas will help in a number of ways. Changing common household items that constantly are creating nurdles, such as exfoliators, can have an impact on the environment for marine life.
A powerful phrase noted by the leader of the Nature Conservatory, John Sawhill, reminds us that “A society is defined not by what it creates, but by what it refuses to destroy.” The United States needs to begin making a change in the use of plastic each year. The toxic nurdles produced are the beginning to the end of marine life and the beauty they possess. Many countries have taken a stand against plastic production because they have realized there is only one Earth. Don’t let plastic destroy the environment in which we live. I hope to one day see an ocean as beautiful and clean as they were always meant to be. Become a part of the movement in the United States, and help reduce plastic use.

Works Cited

Among the many things that compose, signify, and mean fiction, at its base, it is the unequivocal place between imagination and reality, existing in a permeable and malleable layer. Writers write and readers re-envision, both beyond the turning of the last pages; that is the beauty that all good fiction inherits.

It is another matter to create such exceptional fiction. Fiction writing is a weighted process of craft decisions amalgamated with experience, vision, and impetus that ultimately defines one’s style. There are many writer’s rules laid bare in the world but the main thing to remember is that a writer carefully crafts his or her story, from fleshing out, and knowing the characters to agonizing over nearly every word. Though it’s an undeniably grueling process, profound joy comes from creation. For fiction writers, creating demands that they live deeply in their story’s world, while often breaking and making their own rules, they compose a world that follows its own logic.

Aside from what makes fiction, fiction, it is merely a narrative. J.M. Barrie wrote, “Do you know,” Peter asked, “why swallows build in the eaves of houses? It is to listen to the stories.” No matter what type, big or small, everyone likes, wants, and maybe even needs, exceptionally good stories.

—Marette McDermott, Fiction Editor
Anaya sat at her blemished coffee table, smoking the very last of her Marlboro cigarettes. The empty red and white pack lay next to the overfull ceramic ashtray and several crinkled receipts. Anaya scooted the pack with her toe until it teetered on the edge of the table, then fell off with a soft thud on the wood floor. Daytime television was playing on the old, black, fish-eyed Sony, and Anaya laughed without humor at cracks Ellen DeGeneres made. She looked around the small, butter-yellow living room of her apartment through the curling cigarette smoke. She had lived here a little over a year, yet a large, full box was still being utilized as an end table, and the unused chameleon tank—her last item which she’d moved out of Carl’s apartment—sat empty near the front door. Anaya felt a small ache near the bottom of her stomach. She wished that there was artwork on the walls; that she’d taken the time to make her space cozier.

She felt an abrupt need to do something. Anaya never seemed to have a day off before, but now she had all the time in the world since she had been fired from IHOP last week. There was now too much time to think about her co-worker, Stacey, and the solemn expression on Stacey’s face after a rude regular had grabbed her ass when she was refilling his coffee. After Stacey had raced to the walk-in fridge to hide her tears, Anaya grabbed the regular’s lingonberry pancakes from underneath the heat lamp, and made her way to his table with the plate held high near her face. As she stood over him, her heart pounding, she’d let the plate slip from her hand, and watched it drop into his lap. She’d stared as the lingonberries splashed up onto his white shirtfront, and remembered now, with satisfaction, the look on his face when he’d tried to stand up and then fell when his knees hit the table. The rest of
that day had been a blur, and though Anaya had worked at IHOP for seven years, she was fired for the indiscretion.

She stood up from her sagging, threadbare couch, and grabbed her faux leather purse off the turquoise armchair. She thought about Carl: how sometime after he’d been gone from her life, she had stripped a flowery wreath that her mother had made bare, and re-glued the fake silken roses onto a headband. It was meant to be worn at a time when she felt ready to purchase a dress to match. She rifled through her wallet, and found inside it her driver’s license, credit card, and the last crumpled five dollar bill that she’d made as a tip. She decided that she was going to buy that dress today, because she wanted to feel pretty for once. Also, since she hadn’t really left her apartment since being fired, she was running out of cigarettes, groceries, sanity, and clean clothes.

Anaya checked herself in the bathroom mirror and thought, with dismay, that she looked harassed, tired even. The curly tendrils of her dark hair framed her peaked face. She had stopped putting in her contacts, so her mannish black frames amplified her shifty eyes. She was still wearing gym shorts and an INXS t-shirt that she’d worn to bed the night before, but when she sniffed her pits for foul odors, she found them tolerable. (If there was one thing she was determined not to be, it was stinky.) She walked back out into the living room, and sank down next to the chameleon tank on the floor to lace up her worn boots. Glancing through a slit in the blinds, Anaya could see grey clouds beginning to roll across the sky, so she grabbed a red umbrella off the naked coatrack and headed out.

As she ambled down the metal steps with a newfound excitement, Anaya dug into her purse for the Greatest Hits Billy Idol CD that she’d found at a pawnshop a few weeks back. She smiled and kissed the front cover, which displayed a young, simpering Billy, all in white and black. Rain began to fall, bouncing off the staircase with a sharp pink! pink! pink! Anaya stopped at the bottom of the stairs, and was about to open the umbrella, but resolved to walk the few feet to the carport in the rain. Her dented ’86 Mazda wouldn’t unlock from the driver’s side, so she had to crawl in
through the back, knocking a cigarette tin to the floor in the process as she tried to squeeze into the front seat. She started up her car, which she had named “Lola,” and pressed the CD into the lip of the stereo. “Cradle of Love” began playing, and Anaya bounced excitedly in her seat as she looked over her shoulder and backed out into the late summer afternoon.

When she stopped at a red light, Anaya watched an incongruous pair stroll by the crosswalk hand-in-hand. The woman was rather large, a white, coffee-stained t-shirt edging its way up her rounded belly. The man who held her hand looked like an atypical hoodlum from out of a movie Anaya had seen: his black beanie clung tight to his delicate skull, and his sagging black pants were held up by a belt that had a bottle opener on the buckle. In a bizarre way, the couple made Anaya think of her and Carl. She had met him nine years ago in college. It had taken time for her to build up enough confidence and money to go, so she began later than most of her peers, at the age of thirty. Carl was part of the maintenance crew there, and had started up a conversation with her as she was eating lunch underneath an apple tree. He was supposed to be working, but instead he leaned against a shovel and impressed upon her his apparent coolness. She looked up at him, her reflection flashing back at her from his shining gold aviators. Rather than study for her first algebra exam, she went for a beer with Carl instead. He was twice her age, with a soft middle and a penchant for fried foods.

The light turned green, and Anaya sat there in a daze before the person behind her laid on their horn. She jumped, gave the person a dirty look in the rearview mirror, and drove on. The odd couple looked over their shoulders and laughed as they continued on down the street. Anaya realized that she didn’t know where to go to buy a dress, so she went to the first place she thought of, Dress Barn. The rain had subsided, and the dark clouds loomed over the brick business buildings in town. As she stepped out of her Mazda, the moisture, melded with the remaining summer heat, made her feel like she had stepped into a dusty smelling pool house. Out of the corner of her eye, Anaya saw a tall, willowy
man coming towards her. As he got closer, she could see his dark matted hair, which blended into a narrow beard. He was wearing a grumpy lab coat, beige canvas pants, and 70s-style rainbow suspenders over his exposed flat, hairy chest. Before Anaya recognized him as a homeless person, she saw a vision of Jesus wearing rainbow suspenders. The dandruff even gave him a sort of white, flaky halo.

Anaya inhaled too much air, causing her to feel dizzy. She teetered a little and clutched the pleather purse to her, as if he would come up and rip it away before she could stop him. She stood frozen and petrified as he inched closer to her, sadness dulling his pale eyes. His hands were tucked into his pants pockets, and Anaya took a step back, feeling uneasy.

“Pardon me,” he said, also stepping away. “I’m sorry if I scared you. I was wondering if you might have some spare change. I’m stranded here, and all I need is about ten dollars to catch the Greyhound to Denver.” Anaya blinked at him, and shook her head.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m pretty broke myself,” she said, trembling. He half-smiled at her and nodded. She was close enough to him to see that he wasn’t very old. He was, perhaps, her age. She wondered what he had been through in his life to wind up in this Dress Barn parking lot, begging for change. Anaya felt guilty as he backed away, and resumed his place underneath a sparse tree in the far reaches of the parking lot. She relaxed a little bit once she was inside the store. The automatic doors opened and closed behind her with slow, creaking deliberation. Anaya had never been inside a Dress Barn before, and her first impression was that it was an impersonal place, with its bright, fluorescent lights and its mini warehouse feel. Some dresses caught her eye, and she strode over to the rack, hoping that a new dress would make her feel better.

“May I help you?” the sales woman asked, making Anaya jump.

Anaya felt angry. Did she look like she needed help? Maybe all she needed was to be left alone.
“No, thank you,” Anaya said.

“All right. Well just let me know if you need a dressing room,” the woman said, a feigned Martha-Stewart-grin stretching across her rounded face.

Anaya breathed in, feeling the air pass through her lungs. She nodded at the woman, and made her way over to a pretty, lavender colored dress. She pressed the soft cotton fabric of it between her fingers, and checked the price tag as she always did when shopping. The tan card read $56.99. She sighed, stepping away from the dress and admiring its 1930s charm. The lace collar, flower print, and petite leather belt that was sewn into the waist reminded her of something Billie Holiday might wear. But it was too expensive. She circled the other racks, looking up every once in a while at the sales woman, who seemed to be keeping an eye on her.

Anaya ducked into a tiny alcove with a large sign on the wall which read: BARGAIN! 50% OFF!, and flipped through the marked down dresses, but found none that she liked. She looked at the tag on a gaudy vermillion number and realized that the clearance price was handwritten on a sticker, and glanced back over at the employee, who was now busy pestering another customer. She couldn’t help but stare at the sales woman’s midriff, which was gouged into a thin line by the tight elastic band that held her skirt over her green knit shirt.

Anaya’s fingertip found the edge of the neon orange sticker, and she was able to peel it back and away from the original tag. With a confidence she had never felt before, Anaya marched over to the lavender dress, and grabbed it off the rack. The sales woman seemed pleased that Anaya had finally picked something, and nodded to her while still talking to another customer. Anaya smiled, feeling giddy. As she stood in line behind a balding woman, Anaya pasted the bargain sticker of $14.99 over the original tag. Her hands began to sweat once this new, lovelier price was in place. The only other time she had been this nervous in a checkout line was when she had purchased textbooks from the college bookstore. Once the bookseller had told her the total and grabbed
her credit card, she had known in that moment that there wasn’t enough money in her bank account to cover the hundreds of dollars it would take to get through a higher education. Back then, her fear had been a waste, since she had only attended for one semester before dropping out to move in with Carl and pursue a full-time job at IHOP.

Anaya took a step away from the woman in front of her once she sniffed the raw fragrance of cats, rose-scented perfume, and something else: a dusty, confusing smell. Like old books, but not the good kind. The kind that gets stacked underneath a hoarder’s collection of tin cans and Popsicle sticks. This woman was not to be trusted. Anaya glimpsed the saleswoman, who was now bent over a box, the uniform folds of flesh bursting between her knit top and crinkled skirt. Anaya looked down at the dress draped over her arm. She assured herself that a little skimming was far better than actual theft. She remembered the first time she had stolen something. A young girl then, she trailed behind her mother in a craft store, and came to a halt beside a lower shelf that had an array of windup, fuzzy mechanical chicks.

Anaya gawked at them in fascination, watching as some still shifted their orange plastic legs up and down after a stranger had set them going. She grabbed one, clutching it between her small hands as if the Easter toy were a living creature. She begged her mother for it, and went so far as to break out into hot, roiling tears in the middle of the hot glue gun section when her plea was ignored. That’s what her mother always did when Anaya threw a tantrum: she simply walked away and pretended like Anaya was invisible, someone else’s hot-tempered child. The new idea had come out of nowhere. Anaya realized that the chick was small, infinitesimal. Who would notice one out of dozens missing? No one. She crawled underneath some fake pine wreaths—that had smelled of imitation cinnamon, musk, and something metallic—and tucked the squirming toy into the chest pocket of her denim overalls. Her mother had raised her voice an octave when she saw Anaya crawling around on the dirty floor, but besides that, Anaya’s crime had gone unnoticed.
As Anaya now gazed at the bright sticker, her heart ached for that innocent version of herself. Once she and her mother had unloaded their groceries that day, she had broken down by dinnertime and admitted that she had stolen the chick. Anaya didn’t feel connected to that self anymore; when it was her turn to step up to the register, she laid the dress on the counter, and made steady eye contact with the clerk. The woman’s eyebrows raised when she saw the sticker, and her lips parted for a moment, opening and closing like a goldfish. She scanned the barcode, and leaned towards the screen, looking above her gilt-framed glasses before glancing at Anaya.

“This is strange, it’s ringing up at $57.69,” the woman said, confusion causing the wrinkles in her forehead to deepen.

“Really? That is strange,” Anaya said, leaning over the counter to look at the screen herself. “Perhaps it’s not on sale after all.”

The clerk looked over Anaya’s shoulder, aware that the line of women was beginning to pile up like an unfortunate highway collision. Anaya turned and shrugged at a stern, bleached blonde woman behind her, whose lipstick frown seemed forced, like a chocolate kiss pressed into round, warm dough.

“These things do happen sometimes,” the clerk said, resolving to punch the new price into the keyboard. “We’ve just begun our end-of-summer clearance sale, and it can get a bit hectic around here.”

“Oh, I completely understand,” Anaya said, her laugh disingenuous. The clerk looked skeptically at Anaya through her lenses. “I worked retail before waiting tables,” Anaya blurted, trying to keep her cool.

Her heart had stopped beating, but now it picked up a furious rhythm when the clerk smiled phonily at her and asked for $15.69. Too concerned about her fraudulence, Anaya hadn’t thought about what she would do if she actually got away with it. She almost dropped her enormous bag as she plunged into it for her wallet. The grumpy customer behind took a perceptible step backward, much like Anaya had done before. This set her mind to wander. Did she, in fact, smell bad? She should have at least
changed her t-shirt. Just because this was a Dress Barn didn’t mean she could just roll in here like a vagrant. Oh dear sweet Christ, that’s what she was, too! A vagrant. She was robbing this unwitting old sales clerk blind.

“Ma’am?”

Anaya quivered, grasping her wallet in one hand, her card in the other. “Yes, sorry. What now?”

The clerk frowned, becoming impatient. “Debit or credit, ma’am?”

“Oh, credit.” Anaya looked behind her. Half the line was filtering into a new one. The green knit sales clerk had come to the elderly woman’s rescue and was ringing up customers like a pro marathoner.

“You have a better day, now,” the clerk said, handing Anaya the receipt and the bagged dress.

“Thank you,” Anaya said, grabbing the sack and rushing towards the sliding glass doors before the sales woman would become suspicious and tackle her to the linoleum floor. Once outside, she dug Carl’s aviator’s out from the bottom of her purse, and fitted them over her bulky frames. The crime was done. There were no police officers surrounding her little Mazda, no overweight or aging sales associates running out into the barren parking lot screaming her name. She squeezed the bag, feeling the weight of the dress like a cradled kitten. Anaya half ran to her car, unlocked the door, and flung herself down into its dank confines. When she turned the key, Billy Idol sang “Rebel Yell” over the crackling speakers. She felt exhilarated by his lyrics, and danced her feet on the pedals as she backed out of the parking space.

She had set the plastic bag on the passenger seat, and looked over at it when she came to a stop sign. When she glanced up into her rearview mirror, she saw the homeless “Jesus,” still huddling underneath the scrawny tree. Light drops of rain began to fall again on her bug-splattered windshield. Without thinking, she turned the wiper blades on, and sat at the sign, listening to Billy’s voice and the scrunch! of the plastic wipers against the glass. Anaya looked down at her open ashtray, which she had started to
use for spare change as a means to quit smoking so much in the car. Marlboros had been Carl’s cigarette of choice, and it was his habit that she had adopted shortly after knowing him. Though she didn’t have any prospects—no place to go—she had been the one to end their relationship. Anaya had realized one day, while Carl was in Idaho painting the exterior of a house, that she didn’t know who she was. She had gone to college to improve her life, and instead had ended up living in a one bedroom apartment with a man far past middle age, who chain smoked and could care less that strangers were grabbing her co-worker’s ass.

Anaya kept an eye trained on the Jesus’s crouching silhouette as she reached into the tray and scooped out a handful of coins. She put the Mazda in reverse, and sped backward towards the man. He stood up from the muddy ground, wrapping his peculiar lab coat around him tighter. Anaya couldn’t help but smack her palm down on the manual lock before rolling down her window. Some drops of rain fell on the man’s face, making it appear like he’d been crying. She looked down at her cupped hand, and was about to hand the change out the window when she realized that the majority of coins were pennies. It felt like an insult, giving a Jesus in rainbow suspenders blackened pennies with old cigarette ash stuck to them. Anaya looked up at him, and sighed, dumping the coins back into the tray.

“I know what it means to need help sometimes,” she uttered, then stopped short, shocked by her honesty. He blinked slowly and nodded, his whole body rocking back and forth, like a meditation. He hugged his arms around his long torso, and to Anaya’s surprise, she saw the gold glimmer of a cross around his neck.

“Do you believe in God?” she asked, turning down the raucous music. The man smiled at her, and looked instinctively down at his chest.

“Honestly? I believe in people. Some really amazing people donated their time, food, and bedding to a shelter I stayed at. That’s where I got this necklace. One of them was a believer.” Anaya nodded, a few tears falling down her cheeks. She reached over and grabbed her purse off the stained, grey floor, and found
her wallet at the top of the pile. As she unzipped it, she thought about her last five dollar bill. She wasn’t in trouble, as far as money went. Not yet, anyway. She knew that there were other jobs out there, far better or worse than IHOP. She handed the ripped bill out the window, and the man took it, his grasp soft. His smile made thin lines appear at the corners of his blue eyes, and the delicate skin beneath them twitched.

“Bless you,” he said.
The Sun is not up yet, and I don’t know what the time is. You hold open the lid. Like a monkey, I’m over the side and into the dumpster with just a hop and a dive. Today is garbage day, but the compactor trucks haven’t made their rounds yet, so I land on a lumpy pile of slick plastic bags. I know what I’m looking for. Aluminum cans. No steel, no glass, no plastic. And they need to be empty. I hold the handle of the mini flashlight with my mouth. You keep an eye on the windows of the first row of trailers, making sure none of the lights come on.

Most people don’t sort their trash, they just pile their empty cans mixed in with all their other garbage in white bags and tie them shut with red drawstrings. I don’t waste time loosening the ties. You taught me not to waste time over and over until my goose-eggs had goose-eggs, until it sank in. I tear the bags open in the first place my hands get hold.

Rotting food spills out across my shoes. Damnit. These are my nice shoes; my school shoes; my only shoes. “Stop whining,” you tell me. I still can’t keep from gagging when blackened cabbage clings to my shin. You call me a sissy.

Ten beer cans from the first bag. I toss them out to you and you stuff them in a black Hefty bag. You could crush them now. There is plenty of time between cans, but you’ll just have me do it later. Three more cans from a second bag.

You toss the bag into the dumpster with me and drop the lid. That’s the signal. I switch off the flashlight and wiggle myself down into the garbage. Something wet and cold soaks into my shorts. I wish it were clean water. There is no way it could be.

“Mornin’,” you say as I hear your footsteps in the gravel fad-
ing away. Someone mumbles back. The lid opens and two more bags fall in, adding to the weight on top of me.

It takes minutes for you to return. I can feel things crawling on me. Maggots, probably. I think I can hear them eating. While you are gone, I daydream of catching some horrible, painful sickness, so that I can give it to you or you can watch me waste away and feel bad for all the times you smacked me. The black plague would be nice.

You pound on the dumpster when you return. My ears ring with the echo. When you open the lid and tell me to toss out the cans, I try to hit you with the bag. I miss and fall, my hand landing in an un-taped diaper. I retch and heave, but we haven’t had breakfast yet and I have nothing to throw up. I find a crusty paper towel to wipe my hand off. You remind me that I’m a sissy.

We fill the bag and then another. I am tossing out the first few cans to begin a third bag as you take the second to the car when a security guard chirps his siren. We are trespassing, and we know it; time for plan B. I jump up onto the lid of the dumpster and fling myself at the barbed wire fence to err. Trash spills from my back as the guard tries to grab hold of my leg, but I am wiry and he is fat. I teeter over the fence, the barbs cut into and run down my stomach, but I am free and my heart is pumping so I hardly notice. The rent-a-cop jumps and acts like he is going to chase me over the fence, but his feet almost don’t leave the ground. He and I look at each other a moment, and behind him I see you backing the car away. He shouts at me, but he’s on that side of the fence, and that’s all he can do. I know you’ll be in the parking lot at the mall a couple of miles from here.

I run all the way there.

You could give me a hint where you are parked, a honk, a wave, but you don’t. I ask the strangers I pass for change as I hunt for you. They pity me, I can see that, but they are also disgusted by me. The ones that don’t pretend I don’t exist all but throw their loose change at me, anxious to get rid of me so they can get their early morning power-walks done in peace. “Don’t touch me,” I read from them like a comic book. I feel like a villain.
I hide the coins in my socks so that they don’t jingle. I know that if I don’t you’ll just drink them.

I find you, sleeping in your Impala, between a red minivan and a silver BMW. I recognize it instantly because of the way the paint peels up and curls. You make me put Hefty bags under my legs and sit in the back seat. I have to roll the windows down. I can’t stand the smell of myself. I can’t stand touching my own skin. I can’t stand the Elvis playing on the small speakers in the front dash; I try to ride with my head out the window.

We do this again and again, trailer park after trailer park. Those are the best places to get cans you tell me. Except ours. There are never any cans in our own dumpster. That’s always the first place you look when the beer is gone.

Sometimes I find prizes in the dumpsters: toys, clothes, comics. I find a pair of shoes. Nice ones. The kind you never buy me. The left one has dog crap on it, but you let me keep them anyway. I find a G.I. Joe, but you don’t let me keep that. I’m too old to play with dolls. Now that it’s light, you tell me to look for other things. A VHS tape is in here. Some old John Wayne movie. You take that, and a nude mag with coffee grounds on the cover that make the woman there look like she has a hairy chest. You toss me a black T-shirt to cover the blood on my own. It’s too big.

Bag by bag we fill up the trunk of your rusty old car with aluminum cans. When we can’t close the hood and have to use a bungie to hold it closed, you drive us to the beach. We crush the cans in the parking lot, shooing away the seagulls. They’ll take the cans if they can get ahold of them, you tell me. You call them garbage birds. As I see all our work reduced to only four bags, I start to feel cheated. I worry we won’t get enough out of the cans for you to give me the ten dollars you promised, and I don’t ever expect you to pay me the hundred you owe me for other the days like this over the past year.

Once the last cans are crushed I run out into the ocean to wash myself. I can feel the sand being washed out from under my shoes, the tug of the sea trying to take me away with the rest of the trash. The cut in my stomach stings in a way that makes my
teeth tingle. Hundreds of smaller cuts I didn’t know I had burn all over my body. There is gum stuck in the stubble of my hair when I return to the car. You tell me its time to shave my head again. I hate when you shave my head. I let the sun dry my clothes into stiff card-stock while you smoke. You flick the butt into the sand at the edge of the parking lot and smile at me.

“Payday,” you say.

You push a cassette tape of The Coasters into the radio and we sing together about Charlie Brown along with the tinny sounding singers. This is the time I like being with you. The few minutes between having nothing and having something. The few minutes when you are too tired, too sore, or have just run out of reasons to yell. It’s the moment when we both dream of what we are going to do with our payday, before you drink it.
He sorts the warm laundry and folds your underwear for you. He does it incorrectly, and no matter how many times you tell him the way you like it, he crumples the panties and places them next to your unpaired socks anyway. You try to keep up. You fold each pair into careful thirds, but the pile on your side of the bed still grows. He discovers another pair and tosses them. They land on the carpet. You sigh.

“I’ll do it if you’re just going to do it wrong,” you say. You lift the pair from the ground and smack them onto the bed. It sounds like a soft slap.

A flinch. Some pain. He folds his jeans over his arms and pats out the wrinkles hard. You know that he will feign gentleness until one day you will be arguing and he will use your own words like jagged glass to cut your love. “It was always the laundry,” he will say. “You never let go of the laundry.”

Neither of you speak. It’s like your nag has materialized on the bed. It makes itself comfortable. It drips and hisses. What a mess.

“Baby, I’m sorry. It was a dumb thing to say.”

He won’t look at you. You start to over explain. You pull out your box of push pin excuses. Each one is a reason why you are the way you are: A pin for the first time your mother called you a bitch: age sixteen. A pin for the last time your mother called you a bitch: last Tuesday. A pin for each time you’ve wondered why anyone would call their daughter a bitch: dozens of pins, too many to count. A pin for your father’s liver that failed. A pin for your father because he failed your family. A pin for each time you loaned money to your three sisters. There are no pins for
the times that they paid you back. You are a constellation of tiny holes, you say, and you need him to sew you back together.

The box is empty. So are you. You wait.

“It’s all right,” he says.

You search the topography of his features. You do not believe him.

“I’m sorry,” you say. Then: “I love you."

The nag is still on the bed. It slithers around a pile of clean shirts. It oozes with a noise that reminds you of your mother’s laugh.

He holds his socks. He’s quiet. Forgiveness feels like a dumb thing to want. You imagine his fingers twirling the tips of your hair. You imagine your face pressed into his neck. You imagine a day when he won’t remember this.

You look down. There is a loose thread on the hem of a dress. You catch it between your fingers and pull. It resists briefly, but gives way to the tension. It unravels and you do nothing to save yourself from the knots.
I saw her today. I was out looking for calories and band aids, when I noticed a small group of them trapped in a Starbucks. There were a few of them pressed against the glass, smearing green foam with their mouths. At first I started to walk away, but then I stopped and did a double take; it was her.

She was sandwiched between two Starbucks employees; they were swaying and smudging the glass with foamy green slime. I sat there for a long time just looking at her. She was wearing the teal wool sweater I had bought her for her birthday.

“It’s over,” I said to her. “I need to move on.” Her head cocked from side to side in an unnerving twitching motion, and I could hear her guttural, wet moans through the glass.

“I’m sorry but nothing you can say will change my mind. We have grown apart since you died and started eating people.” At this, she started banging the glass methodically. I tried to ignore the desperate pounding, as I searched to find the right words.

“Yes, yes, I know, we had some good times, but I’m a different person now, and...shit.” The horde of decaying espresso junkies that were trapped inside had moved to the glass. There was now a mass of putrid greenish-grey flesh pushing and pounding on the window. The glass was cracking!

“I have to go,” I said, as I nervously eyed a crack in the window grow exponentially.

“Take care of yourself.”

I looked into her cloudy scratched eyes one last time. Then I quickly started to walk away; with the sound of shattering glass behind me, I started to run.
August woke to the soft, raspy voice of Billie Holiday drifting down the hallway from her mother’s bedroom. She gazed at the Pink Floyd poster hanging on the wall opposite her bed. It was the one that depicted six Floyd albums painted on the backs of six attractive naked women. August had seen this same poster in D’Artagnan’s room, and had admired it enough to purchase one herself, though hers clung to the wall with two pins she had scrounged from the kitchen’s junk drawer.

“Augustine!” her mother called from the kitchen.

August growled, her temper already rising with the new day. She kicked off the sparse blanket and tossed her two ghostly white legs over the side of the bed. Looking down, she noticed that her black toenail polish was starting to flake. On this cold autumn morning, August’s body ached like it never had before. She had only spent three hours of the night sleeping; the rest of the night she had been out with D’Artagnan, Riley, and the twins. The motley group of teenagers had adopted August into their group shortly after she and her mother, Jasmine, had moved to town. They had lived there long enough to feel comfortable in their new apartment, yet large boxes still loomed in corners like ominous creatures that didn’t want to be touched.

August looked across the room at her desk, which held her laptop and a tarnished frame. The picture within it was of her as a dimpled, smiling toddler, resting on the shoulders of Jasmine, who looked young and filled with a certain light that now seemed to be extinguished. August sighed, a pang of guilt filling her with nostalgia and loneliness. Looking at this picture of her once happy mother made August ashamed of an outburst that she’d had
during breakfast the other morning . . .

Noticing August’s unusual lack of appetite, her mother had wanted her to finish a bowl of soggy Cheerios, and scooted it in front of her. August felt a violent surge of energy, and without thinking, tossed the bowl of cereal clear across the kitchen, shouting that she didn’t want the damn Cheerios! When her shocked mother had simply stood up from the table and left without saying a word, August came to her senses. Rather than go to school that morning, she sat in the milk-splattered kitchen, listening to Billie Holiday sing about love lost from Jasmine’s bedroom. Sorrowful Billie was now a frequent addition in their lives.

Drawing herself back into reality, August stood up from her bed, and walked over to the desk. Gently, she placed the picture face-down. She sat in the desk’s ripped chair, and stared down at her feet. August blinked, and suddenly she was pulled into her memory of that first day at school . . .

Dark, slight and pale, August had kept to herself. Being a junior at Heights High School, August was able to have her own locker; it was against this thin, cold metal door that she chose to rest and eat her lunch. August started on an apple that she had prised from the neighbor’s overreaching tree when she felt the hair on her arms stand up. Glancing up, there stood a tall boy with long black hair, which was tied up into a messy bun on his head. Like August, he was rather pale, which made his amber eyes shine peculiarly. She stared back at him for a moment, but looked away when she felt her face warm.

“Hello there, little apple blossom,” the boy said, smiling at her with his hands tucked away deep into the pockets of his jacket.

“Hello.” August looked curiously up at this mysterious figure. Realizing that she felt very small sitting there on the dirty floor, she collected her bag and stood up, still clutching her half-eaten apple. The boy stepped closer to August, pulling an iPod from his pocket.

“Do you ever listen to The White Stripes? I think Jack White is fantastic,” he said, drawing even closer to her so that he could
show her an album on his iPod. August felt strangely comfortable with this boy’s confidence, and did not move away.

“De Stijl,” the boy murmured, his voice like honey, “my favorite album of theirs.” He looked at August, his eyes shining. “Would you like to listen to a song?” he asked, already pulling Skullcandys out of his other pocket. August was drawn from her reverie by the bell echoing down the hallway.

“I need to go to class, but it was very interesting to meet you, uh . . .” August held out her hand, and the boy took it as humor clouded his eyes.

“My name is D’Artagnan, and I’ll gladly walk with you to class, Augustine, but you must listen to this song, I implore you.”

August was pulled from her daydream by a sharp knock at the door. “August, I’ve made you breakfast. Get out here and eat it before you miss your bus,” Jasmine called through the old, thick bedroom door.

August looked about her room. Everything was in disarray. The few clothes she had were crumpled, pathetic-looking, on the floor, and a different poster on the back of the door on which her mother now knocked was beginning to peel off. The claw marks that ran down the middle of the door in angry lines were exposed once again. August scurried over to the door and pressed the poster of a laughing Janis Joplin back into position. She tried to keep her mother out of her room. August could only imagine what the disgruntled, forty-something woman would say if she saw what lay hidden behind the poster.

“I’m not hungry!” August barked, her white hand resting on Janis’s happy face. If it’s Cheerios again, I swear I’ll puke, she thought.

“August, I don’t have time to argue with you. Can you at least hurry? I can’t drive you to school if you miss the bus again,” Jasmine said, her voice muffled.

“Fine,” August conceded, backing away from the door in a trance.

She turned and looked around for things to wear. A grey sweater, which she had purchased from the secondhand store,
and had likely belonged to a man before her, was her selected item, along with grey pants and black lace-up boots. August sat down in the desk chair and relished the rhythm of each lace as she looped them around the silver clasps. She approached her mirror that hung above the desk and stared at herself. *I barely recognize me,* she thought. It was true. August had been changing drastically every day. She gasped, stepping closer to the mirror when she noticed something strange.

Though her hair was thick, dark, and curly, an incongruous little patch of fine hair grew on her neck. Squealing in pain, she tried to peel it from her skin, as if it were an epic zit that wouldn’t pop. Unable to do it, August had the livid impulse to destroy the thing which flashed her sulking face back at her. She began wrapping her fingers around the elegant curves of the mirror when there came a BANG! BANG! BANG! at the door.

“Damn it, August, what are you doing in there?” Jasmine shouted.

As the doorknob began to twist, August grabbed her backpack and threw herself out into the hallway, quickly closing the door behind her and glancing up into her mother’s angry, contorted face.

“I’m ready, mom, jeez. Don’t have a seizure,” August muttered, refusing to make further eye contact as she made her way down the saturated red hallway. The old wooden floorboards creaked under her boots as she sped towards the foyer that led into their small apartment. To August’s surprise, Jasmine said nothing more. Not a word about her strangeness. Nothing about the sudden fits of rage, or her new choice of friends, or her secrets which lurked like ghosts behind the bedroom door. Nothing.

Stepping out onto the musky landing, August bumped into Old Widow Gray, who lived in the apartment across from them. The old woman, wearing a rather precarious light purple wig, gold-rimmed glasses and a cardigan, gazed suspiciously up at the girl as they met outside each other’s doors.

“Well, look who it is,” the woman murmured, “our new troublemaker.”
August’s heart began to beat too fast.

“Hello Ol—” August began, gaping at the strange smoothness of the elderly woman’s face. “Ms. Gray,” she finished, hitching her bag up higher onto her back and rushing past the peculiar old woman.

August listened to the melody of her boots as she descended down two flights of stairs. The patter calmed her as she reached into her bag, diving deep for D’Artagnan’s old iPod.

“Crazy bat,” August grumbled, selecting a song from The White Stripes’ album, *Elephant*. She smirked and began her brief stroll to the bus stop as Jack White’s prophetic voice declared, “‘There’s no home for you here, girl, go away! There’s no home for you here.’”

As she approached the stop sign, the yellow bus began its journey without her.

“What?” she gaped, watching the bus speed away, as if on purpose.

She grabbed both slings of her bag and started at a trot, gaining speed as the bus chugged further away. August’s heart throbbed in time with the music as she began sprinting, her feet barely sweeping the earth. The girl chuckled at the bus driver’s challenge. Does he really think he can leave me behind?

Commuters driving at a steady rate goggled at the pale girl, who matched, then passed their moving vehicles. The bus finally had to stop at a light. August bounded up to the door, her mouth in a wide-set, doggish grin. The driver blinked as he pulled on the spindly handle that opened the bus’s accordion doors. August mounted the little steps, her pants calming to rhythmic breaths. She smiled at the driver as he swiveled away in his chair, a sour expression on his face. August took a front seat, sitting with her back to the window and her legs stretched across the cushioned plank.

“Let’s have a ball and a biscuit, sugar, and take our sweet little time about it,” Jack White cooed into her headphones. August breathed in and closed her eyes, trying not to think about the old widow’s remark.
The bus pulled into the loop in front of the towering brick high school. At the top of its archaic stairs stood the statue of a dark bronze wolf, howling up at the sky with one foot lifted, almost like a hunting dog. August stepped out into the damp morning, looking around for her friends. There D’Artagnan stood beside the statue, one hand in pocket and one shoulder resting against the wolf’s side. August felt a warmth spread throughout her chest. She could have sworn that it was her heart melting in its affection for this boy. She trotted up the stairs, coming to a halt a few steps down from him.

“Hello.”

“Hi there, Augustine. How are you feeling this fine morning?” he asked, taking a step away from the wolf, which the group had named, for no particular reason, “Mr. Simmons.”

“Well, when I woke up I felt a little hungover. And then that damned bus driver left me at the bus stop again, and I felt the most incredible rush of energy, and I,” August began, looking into D’Artagnan’s confident face, “I outran all these cars and caught up with the bus.”

D’Artagnan grinned, offering her his hand, which she took without hesitation.

“Tonight is the night, August.” He spoke softly against her head as they began to walk into Heights High. “There will be no stopping it once it begins.” August looked down at the paved entrance of the school as they made their way through the solid, metallic doors. The tall boy squeezed her hand, following it with a soft nudge. “Hey. Hey, you’re all right. It’s going to be great, you wait,” he said, flashing his pristine white teeth at her.

August gave him a simple nod. In truth, she didn’t know how she felt. She imagined that her emotions ran somewhere between sheer terror and elation. The first bell rang, making August jump. D’Artagnan, who had not yet relinquished her hand from his protective grasp, gave August another light squeeze.

“Will I see you at lunch?” he asked, stepping away as those around them began bustling to class. August looked into his
liquid-amber eyes as a thought crossed her mind: *I want to be in your life, always.* Her fear ebbed, and she found that she was smiling at him.

“No, I need to work on some things. But I will see you later tonight,” she said.

“I’ll be there,” he grinned, turning to walk away with his hands tucked inside his pockets.

As August stepped into the dark foyer of the apartment, the sounds of smooth jazz echoed from her mother’s room. She looked in on Jasmine, who was asleep with a book on her stomach and the reading lamp still glowing red. August started to shut the door, but was struck by the image of the departing sun as it sank below the grim horizon outside Jasmine’s window. A shudder ran up her spine as she made her way down the hall to her room. Once there, she locked the deadbolt into place. D’Artagnan had helped her with it while Jasmine was at work a few weeks ago, and the small cylindrical bolt was now snug and reassuring. *My mother can’t witness this,* she thought.

August dropped her things on the ground, and hesitantly took her clothes off as her bedroom grew darker. Naked, she perched on the bed, wrapping her arms tight around her legs as she gazed out the window. Time seemed to crawl by before the dazzling full moon began to appear behind opaque clouds.

August yelped as a sharp pain ran from the base of her spinal cord to the back of her skull. She would have screamed, but the pain erased her voice. August shut her eyes, and watched the solid round outline of the moon behind her eyelids. As her fingers pressed into her knees, she felt the prick of something sharp, as if the tip of a knife had prodded her. Her eyes flew open, and as she raised her hands before her face, she watched as long, sharp claws grew from her fingertips. This had happened before, but it had not been accompanied by pain like this. Tonight was the first full moon since D’Artagnan had given her a small bite on the meaty flesh of her right thigh, an inconspicuous location.

August’s eyes widened as fine hair began to sprout over her
knuckles, winding its way up her arms. It was as if hairy vines were overtaking her. She screamed out this time, the end of her cry becoming deep and guttural. She fell to the floor on hands and knees, her back making audible CRACKS! as the spinal cord snapped into a shorter, arched position. She stared up into the face of Janis Joplin, who seemed to come alive. All the colors began to spiral around her, and August heard laughter echo inside her brain. Furious knocks rumbled the image, and as August’s leg cracked and extended painfully beneath her, she watched the handle twist around.

“Augustine! What’s happening in there? Let me in. Why is this door locked?” Jasmine called in anguish, tears fogging her voice, which now seemed distant and unreal to August.

She writhed around on the floor in agony, her body curling in on itself. I have to escape this cage of a room, she thought, her body gentrified and pulsating.

“August, please, what’s wrong with you?” her mother sobbed against the door.

The creature stood shakily up on all fours, her hands now massive paws. Without another thought, she jumped through the window, out towards the welcoming moon. In the back of her mind, she heard the crash of glass and her mother’s cries as she plummeted down the side of the apartment building.

Once she was on the ground, August looked around, exhilaration making the thick coat of fur on her back stand up. She spun around in a flash when she heard a distinct rustle in the bushes. Her pounding heart, at first sending waves of panic throughout her body, began to ease when she noticed amber eyes glinting behind the neighboring apple tree.

“Hey there, little apple blossom.”
He came into the library at least twice a week, the man who smelled like cheese. At 6’3” he towered over me, pushing his glasses up his greasy nose while hovering, mouth gaping open, a crooked smile revealing only his lower teeth, never really understanding the concept of one’s personal space.

“Do you have anything about...” began his usual pursuit. Over the years I helped the man who smelled like cheese locate books on how to win friends and influence people, stop worrying and start living, how to be happy, how self-control works and why it matters, being fit not fat, emotional intelligence, and meaningful meditation.

The man who smelled like cheese was a do-it-yourselfer. He checked out books on starting a garden, crocheting an entire wardrobe, building a shed, pouring a stamped concrete driveway, raising chickens, keeping bees, making your own banjo, and traveling the world on a dime.

Every now and again he’d ask for a recommendation. I’d direct him to world religions, decorating with paper cranes, or cooking with five ingredients or less. I never once showed him a book on how not to smell like cheese and he never asked.

Then one day, as I was cleaning out the book repository, I came across the traveling the world on a dime book—which smelled like cheese. In it, a bookmark folded over the front flap with a note scrawled in tiny, narrow penmanship:

To the librarian who smells like tomato soup. Thank you for your years of service. I’m moving to France—they make the world’s best cheese.
It starts with broken crackers and carefully measured chocolate chips. 12 ounces. Oven preheated. 400 degrees. Then, the hard part: brown sugar and butter. Combine over medium-high heat in a sauce pan that’s too small and curse the damn pan for its size. Bring the mixture to a boil. Once boiling, stir the caramel for three minutes. Three, that’s the number. Any more minutes and that shit will burn. A bubble: plop...plop! A boil. Microwave says it’s 3:38. It’s on.

Stir, constantly. On the yellowed recipe, crinkled and stained, that text is bolded: stir constantly. Underlined. Important. All capital letters. STIR CONSTANTLY!

I make a game of it. Folding and unfolding on itself, the hot candy looks goopy and mean. It spits. Plop, plop. Push it around with a wooden spoon. The kitchen is hot and I feel sweat on my hairline. Stir, stir, stir.

Two more minutes. Recipe says ruin the caramel and ruin the whole batch. Each time is like the first time. The hot sugar smells like Christmas. Mom making candy for days. Relatives begging for the recipe, never getting it. A family secret, but I saw the recipe on Facebook under a different name. It had over eighteen thousand shares. There are no secrets anymore.

Mom would have made it this year, but the arthritis is nipping at her wrists and I was the first of the four daughters to volunteer. My turn to make the candy. My turn to serve the favorite. My turn.

"I know you can do it," my mom said when she handed me the recipe.

Numb knuckles ache. Elbow raw and counting seconds in my

This is my third batch. My arm forgot the fatigue from the last two batches of candy, but it remembers now. I should work out more. I should change the world. I should never make Christmas candy again. Stir, stir. Wooden spoon twists, the action mimics the heat coil beneath the pan. Stupid old stove. Is the caramel heating evenly? Mix, mix. Break the pattern. Clockwise, counterclockwise. Constantly.

One minute left. Teflon flakes into the warm brown of the candy. Oops. Too much stirring. Should have got the special pot. Should have listened to mom. The bubbles sound like laughs, trapped in pockets of heat and sugary sweet. Bubble, bubble, pop. Ha, ha.

I glance at the microwave. 3:40. It must be broken. Why else would it not roll over? Broken, I think, over and over. I stir. Broken.

3:41! Three minutes, and done.

Pour the thick syrupy warm over broken saltine crackers. Hot caramel, meet finger, a howl and a hiss but I have to keep going. Don’t ruin the batch. Chocolate chips over the boiling caramel. Wait for a few minutes, then spread. Thick, shiny, brown melted chocolate. Gooey candy in crinkled foil. Place carefully on trivets in the fridge. Drink wine and wait.

Christmas morning. I bring the candy to my parents’ house in a fancy dish with a festive red bow. I place it on the table next to all the other candies, my turn to make it, my turn. Open presents and laugh and drink mimosas. An ugly pair of pajama pants. An orange buried in the toe of my stocking. AA batteries and a new set of festive socks. Family’s all there: healthy and safe and bored of each other after a nice afternoon together. In the soft light of the evening, I pack up my Christmas spoils and ready myself to go.

“Don’t forget this,” my mom says, handing me a dish. Christmas candy. My candy. Lid never opened, bow crisp and bright and held firmly into place.
It was even colder than usual, at least ten below zero, the kind of cold that burned the skin and made every breath bite at the throat. The industrial district was all wool caps and upturned collars as the day shift trudged away and the swing shift filed in, a herd of neighborhood watch silhouettes. A cloud of tobacco smoke hung over the crowd like a noxious fog, occasionally spiced with the pungent musk of marijuana thanks to the few lucky enough to have prescriptions.

George Whitney puffed away at a bent cigarette with every breath, unwilling to expose his hands to the cold. He’d forgotten his gloves again. Thanks to that habit, the high collar of his coat was burned in several places, the cheap faux wool melted. The flesh around his left eye was swollen and discolored, a souvenir from a half-remembered bar brawl the night before. His knuckles were bleeding, the scabs ripped off by the zippers and rough fabric of his coat pockets. He was a very dangerous man, the middle-weight champ of the downtown pubs. The shiner was completely deliberate, carefully calculated. He enjoyed his reputation, but he needed to maintain the illusion that he was just a man.

The other ways in which he was a threat to all around him were very carefully concealed; it was a never-ending source of amusement that he blended in so easily and thoroughly. He enjoyed the freedom of anonymity. He did enjoy his little indulgences; he’d let small parts of the illusion slip to smugly toy with being discovered, especially in crowds. He let the hollows beneath his cheekbones sink behind his collar, and would allow his eyes to revert to their natural pitch black for a split second when he made contact with someone else’s, then return them to their false
dim hazel before the anticipated double-take. It’d taken years of practice, but he could actively disguise almost every aspect of his appearance, a skill that was partially responsible for his continued survival when others of his kind had been hunted and slaughtered as mercilessly as any pack of rabid predators. When he did go out to feed, he took great pains to plan every detail of his approach, attack, and escape; he’d come close to getting caught once or twice, but so far his luck had held out.

His self-assured games were quickly halted as he walked past a pair of Civic Patrol watchmen on a street corner. They were smart and observant, and though he could tear their arms off with very little effort, he’d have to deal with forty more in a matter of minutes. He tossed them a respectful upwards nod as he passed, doing his best to imitate an amicable grin. One of the watchmen turned slowly, wearing a disdainful scowl, obviously deciding whether to question George about his shinier. An icy shudder ran from his scalp down his spine to his waist. He was hungry, and that set him on edge to begin with. Making the energy from his kills last for days, even weeks, was another skill he’d acquired over the years, but he was pushing the limit this time. A sudden vision flashed through his mind, a split-second daydream of throwing aside his coat, revealing his sinewy, nightmarish true form, and charging the two watchmen, tearing and pummeling until they were lifeless piles of mush, then turning his rage on the bewildered crowd. He couldn’t help but smile, and that crooked grin was enough to convince the peering watchman he was harmless.

He’d walked another half block before he realized he was holding his breath and his cigarette had been reduced to a crumbling cylinder of ash. He spat out the still-smoking butt without looking at where it might land. It banked perfectly off the back of a short, burly worker’s head, leaving a tiny black spot on the back of the lime green stocking cap that proudly declared him to be a floor boss at the aluminum plant before disappearing under his collar.

The man yelped in pain and surprise, which was followed
quickly by rage as he stuffed his hand behind his thick neck, hopping and cursing until he found the butt and tossed it away. He turned on his heels so quickly the momentum of the shoving, slogging crowd almost knocked him to the sidewalk. Beady grey eyes scanned the crowd in halting jerks, looking for someone at whom he could direct two hundred pounds of dumb violence. George attempted to brush past him, but a powerful hand snagged his right arm just above the elbow. “Was that yours, asshole?”

George was tired and hungry, much more so than he’d thought, and being provoked by a puffed-up simpleton was far from what he needed. He should have just apologized and gone on his way, and though that might not have defused the situation, it would have worked better than what he actually said: “Nope. It was that guy with the black coat.” Three of every four men in the crowd were wearing black coats.

“Oh, so you’re some kinda smartass, huh?” His grip grew tighter, and George felt his control slip a little. The white and hazel in his eyes dissipated in small spots. He jerked his narrow arm from the Neanderthal’s grip with ease, and he saw a flash of uncertainty in the little man’s eyes, but it was quickly dwarfed by a fresh tide of idiotic anger. With both thick hands on George’s lapels, he tried to pin him against the wall. He was very strong, but still just a human. George took one step backwards, dropped his center of gravity, and simply stood. The puzzled floor boss was suddenly gaining as much ground as he would against a brick wall, and George had a split second to get his instincts back under control, to corral the suddenly ravenous predator just beneath his artificially smooth skin. In that moment, when the floor boss finally reacted in the only way he could think of and cocked back his right hand for a crushing haymaker, George’s mind was a sheet of paper-thin discipline holding back a flood of ferocity.

But he held on. His eyes regained their color and the other signs of his transformation were withdrawn one by one. He wasn’t going to kill the little idiot, but he wasn’t going to let him win the fight either. Swatting aside the clumsy swing, he stepped to the side and popped a quick, precise punch directly into his
assailant’s throat. He stumbled backwards, his wind and bravado gone. George had another decision to make: whether to press the attack. Opting to err on the side of restraint, his inner monster back on its leash, he turned indifferently away, lighting another cigarette and shouldering his way through the ring of onlookers that had gathered as quickly as the audience chanting, “Fight! Fight! Fight!” on an elementary school playground. Pride at having the strength to hold back from decorating the sidewalk with the little idiot’s entrails filled what might have passed for his heart as he disappeared into the crowd.

That night, it was his time to feast. The streets were empty of everything but ghosts; the curfews were rigidly enforced. He chose a neighborhood he’d skulked past more than once as the evening’s hunting ground, a dark, stinking labyrinth of convoluted alleyways between the jumbled downtown skyscrapers cramped with tiny apartments and crawling with fire escapes like rickety iron ivy. Most of the windows were tiny and frosted to opacity, and the others had very short sidelines. He had spotted paths along those walls where he could go completely unseen except for very brief moments of visibility, and he was so fast and nimble that anyone who did see him would shake their heads and look again to find the same blank wall as he scrambled out of sight.

Like all of his kind, he loved to hunt. After ducking silently off the street, he crouched behind a dumpster and stripped off his clothes. His illusion of humanity fell away, and he began to transform. His eyes were coal black, like two round windows into an echoing abyss. Deep hollows sank into his pallid cheeks. His lips split into a quartet of clicking spider-like mandibles. Everywhere his narrow limbs sprouted cruel spikes and poison-filled claws until he looked like Sasquatch had bred with a black widow. Atop hunching shoulders his head shuddered and twitched. The cold ceased to affect him.

With a skittering, clanging scramble, he ascended the nearest fire escape, leaping to the one across the alley. With an agility and strength of which humans can scarcely dream, he bounced along the metal railings, listening for the sounds of solitude and vulnerability.
Eighty yards or so down the alley on the sixth floor, he caught a scent that stopped him in his tracks. He hesitated. It wasn’t within the safe area he had scouted; he was visible from a half-dozen windows here, and he should have kept going, but he had to look. It was the kind of impulse that he had trained himself so hard to resist, the kind of reckless greed that had gotten so many of his kind killed. Clinging to the wall outside the window, he peeked cautiously inside.

No fucking way, he thought. If his real face had been able to smile it would have. He saw a small man tumbling drunkenly from his kitchen back to his living/bedroom. It was the floor boss who’d accosted him earlier, sitting at the edge of his bed with a freshly-microwaved pile of chicken wrapped in chemicals and preservatives on his lap. The seventh beer of the night sat by his feet while he gaped blankly at a small, blurry, tinny-sounding TV, the others tossed into a fetid pile in the corner of the room. The clicking and rattling of George’s barbed jaws were eclipsed by the grating wall of urban noise while his head turned almost completely backwards, his two black voids of eyes snapping from one spot to the next, checking every window in sight for witnesses, the pitiless, rapacious part of him filling rapidly with malicious joy with every vacant window he passed over. Once he’d confirmed to his own satisfaction that he was not being watched, he brought the claws on his left hand to a single point. His sense of caution and all his well-trained subtlety screamed at him to move on, but he was beyond the point of being able to stop.

With a flick of his wrist, the window shattered. His left hand clamped onto the frame and he swung inside, sending the TV flying as he landed on the table and scrambled across the filthy carpet. He leapt and landed on the slovenly little idiot’s chair, pinning him down with a claw through his shoulder. His victim began to scream, but the poison was spreading quickly, and all that came out was a pathetic squeak. Babbling silently, he stared with little grasp of what had actually happened as he approached the last thirty seconds of his pitiful existence. Staring straight into his terror-twisted face, George shifted his own countenance back
to the one he’d worn in the crowd during their first anticlimactic meeting, decorated by a grotesque, impossible grin lined with rows of jagged, irregular, blood-soaked teeth.

Just before his victim’s life had completely dissipated, George’s spider fangs closed around his throat. He inhaled deeply and slowly, drawing that energy into his own parody of a soul with a rattling hiss. The floor boss’s face froze into a final terrified grimace lined with blue-black, toxin-filled veins. George celebrated with a victorious snarl.

As he was climbing back out onto the fire escape, his eye flashed to a window across the alley and two floors up. The blinds had moved. He was across the alley and a few feet from the window with a single leap. Cruel elation illuminated every cell in his body. Only one kill was necessary for him to satisfy his controlled appetite, but a witness provided an excuse to be a glutton. Once that craving had been unleashed, it would dictate his every action until he was able to bleed off the rush, usually done in his tiny bathroom with a tub full of water that was only a few degrees south of boiling. That was the only time when he felt anything even vaguely similar to guilt as his victim’s life slowly melted into his own.

He drew back his hand again and drove it through the glass, grabbing a handful of the cheap plastic blinds and yanking them free before sending them spinning to the alley floor. As he crawled through, his gaze fixed on his witness, a thin, pale, wide-eyed boy with dark hair who couldn’t have been more than eleven years old. He froze under the child’s stare, those enormous orbs of cloudy hazel sending tears surging down his face, a sharp, attentive face that somehow wouldn’t break. He didn’t sob, he didn’t cower. He simply stood. He understood death, had seen it before, and he recognized the creature before him as its pure and unmistakable proxy.

George had killed men, women, and children by the dozens. His rotten, wretched life, the past hundred and fifty years, had been sustained by drinking suffering like fine wine. He had killed policemen, had eaten their sons. Purity had its own bittersweet
flavor, but there was something about that boy, old enough that
his innocence was horribly fragile but still so young that it was
more important than ever.

Hiding among the humans had made him soft. He advanced
on the boy, claws and fangs at the ready, trying to shake off his
inexplicable hesitation. Maybe he had actually come to resemble
a human by imitating them so skillfully, or even envy them. Maybe
he had developed what he understood was called a “conscience.”
Whatever it was, it froze his claw an inch from the boy’s chest. He
just couldn’t kill him.

He backed off, holding the boy’s gaze with his paralyzing
jet eyes and slipped back out the window. As he was clambering
down a seemingly endless series of iron rungs, a piercing scream
finally burst into the night. He could hear the boy relating what
he’d just seen to his terrified parents as he reached the alley floor.

In minutes, a Civic Patrol helicopter lurked the sky above
him, and heavily armed sweepers flooded the streets. He
had the option of trying to revert to his human disguise, but that
would make him slower and weaker even if he did manage to
retrieve his clothes. When they finally cornered him, he fought
hard, doing his brutal species proud. He managed to kill five
watchmen and severely wound three more before a hail of gunfire
sent him jerking and twitching to the blood-soaked concrete.

A jarring metallic sound left his shuddering maw as he died.
The older watchmen, veterans of the war against his kind, recog-
nized the sound: he was laughing.
Brian raced through a breakfast of cold cereal and even helped his mom do the dishes. He swept and vacuumed and made his bed. He’d finished all of his homework the night before. By ten he was sitting on the couch watching Bugs Bunny evading Elmer Fudd on a little black and white TV with an antenna made as much out of tin foil as steel, tapping his foot, waiting for the clock to catch up with him. Brian was excited to be able to see Amber again. It had been two long weeks of only being able to talk to her on the phone and that just wasn’t enough to fill in for the real thing.

He’d met Amber on a school field trip to the Central City Library. Her class was there the same day as his. He’d cracked a joke that made the librarian stutter over herself with indignity, and Amber had come up to him after the presentation. They traded numbers. Hers was a second line that her parents never answered. He could call anytime. He gave her the number to the payphone outside his apartment building and he told her to ask for him, Brian, and someone would come get him. It was probably best for her to call before nine.

Being excited only amplified his nervousness. She had heard stories about Penny Heights. They made the neighborhood sound so dangerous. Wasn’t it full of gangs and criminals? She had put off coming to see him, but Brian swore to her, Penny Heights wasn’t as bad as people made it sound. Sure they were poor, but Brian had heard stories about the rich people in Amber’s gated community. About bankers in robes sacrificing children to demons in their basements to maximize quarterly profits, or massive sex parties where everyone wore masks and didn’t know who they
were diddaling. He didn’t think they were true, and she should trust him that the ones she’d heard weren’t true about Penny Heights neither.

Amber said his being poor didn’t bother her. She was from a family on the north end that had at least two of everything: two living rooms; two cars (each); two car garages; two bathrooms; two houses; two mothers; two fathers; two Christmases. She said it would be nice to be around people who paid more attention to who you were and less attention to who you wore. She talked about money a lot, but she always added something about how much it sucked. Brian couldn’t see how someone with so much had so many things to complain about. But he liked talking with her, and she said she enjoyed talking with him too. She looked forward to spending a whole day with him.

Brian gave his mom a hug and left their apartment at eleven. He wanted to meet Amber at the bus stop and walk her to his building. She wasn’t supposed to arrive until noon, but he didn’t want her to have to wait on him. He didn’t want to give her any reason to change her mind about him. The streets were just starting to wake up and the air was still crisp.

There weren’t any parks close to their building, so at eleven on a spring Saturday, the kids played in the streets. Some rode old, hand-me-down bikes with wobbly tires and rusty chains that slipped off their gears through the mostly empty intersections. In front of Rolinda Estates his younger sister and her friends danced to Salt-N-Pepa buzzing from an old blown-out boom box on the steps. The girls catcalled and teased older men that walked by with caps pulled low to hide gray and thinning hair.

“Hey, Bri. Where you going?” one of the taller girls asked. Brian couldn’t remember her name. Jane? Jaimie? Jessy?

“He’s picking up his rich girlfriend,” his little sister said in a singsong voice.

“Ooooo!” all the girls teased.

Brian waved off the girls and picked up his pace away from them. He smiled. These mornings, the little girls playing in the street, little boys riding bikes, were the stories about Penny...
Heights the rich people didn’t tell. The part they didn’t know. It was perfect that Amber was coming on such a nice day. She would see that they were people in Penny Heights, just the same as the people up on the hill. Maybe more so. There weren’t gates keeping each other away. They all knew each other, and helped each other. Little girls played on the street, safe. She’d love coming to see him after that.

And how nice it would be to have someone around who could see him doing things, going places. Amber had said he was smart and should go to college. He’d never thought about it. Kids from Penny Heights went to jail, not college. It wasn’t that they were all criminals, people just looked for them to screw up, then nabbed them when they did. She said college changed that, made people look at you differently. If he went to college, he could get a job downtown in a high-rise, be someone else. Brian liked the idea of going somewhere different. She said she’d help him with the applications if he wanted when he got closer to graduating high school. His mom had told him not to get his hopes up.

Brian arrived at the bus stop plenty early. The winos were starting to wake up and seeing him at the bus stop, one by one they approached, almost like they lined up, asking for change. Anything helps. But Brian didn’t have any change he could spare, only some bus tokens and a couple of quarters that he’d need for the phone. He quickly fell into the same rhythmic speech, apologizing to each one as he turned them away. Sorry man, ain’t got nothin’, just waiting for a friend. By noon, they had shuffled off on their never-ending mission to collect enough change to buy a bottle.

When Brian could see the bus coming from down the street, he straightened his clothes one last time and ran his hand over his hair to make sure it was all in place. When the bus door opened, he held his breath. He watched the door, unblinking, for the first glimpse of her. She wasn’t there. And as the bus drove away, he searched each window for her face. He still held his breath. She wasn’t there.

Maybe she’d gotten off at the wrong stop. The next one was
about two miles away and he could probably make it before the next bus came. Sure, he could, and she’d be waiting for him, thinking he was the one that was late. She would tease him a little until she realized she had been the one that made the mistake, but he wouldn’t say it. Brian pulled on his old Walkman headphones and pressed play on his latest mixtape. He walked along the gravel shoulder of the road, his head bobbing with the music, his eyes on the horizon watching for her silhouette.

Amber wasn’t at the next stop though. Brian tried one more stop, but she wasn’t there either. He turned back home, thinking that maybe she got on a later bus. He should be at the stop waiting for her when the next bus came.

Passing the trailer park that marked the edge of Penny Heights, a prick of fear punctured his inflated mood. What if she had decided not to come after all? He tried to convince himself that she was just late, she was coming. But the more he thought about it, the more he knew she wasn’t. His shoulders slumped and his head hung, barely balancing atop his deflated body. He watched the gravel pass under his feet as he walked.

He sat at the bus stop, and first one then a second and third bus passed without her showing up. Two police officers in a cruiser had taken an interest in Brian, and drove past him slowly twice, their mirrored glasses hiding what were surely probing eyes. He began feeling guilty. Of what he didn’t know, and it probably wouldn’t matter. He decided that he had better go home before they made a third pass. Too many friends had stories that began the same way and ended with a criminal record that scared off job interviews.

His feet felt heavy, and Brian dragged them as he walked home. It was nearly three thirty when he stood again in front of the Rolinda Estates. His sister and her friends played double dutch on the sidewalk. Brian watched them, their skinny legs beating time with the rope. Jaimie—that was her name he remembered—was the oldest of his sister’s friends and she had had a crush on him for years. He watched her now, arm over arm, turning the ropes for his sister. She didn’t look so bad once he had
stopped to look at her. Actually her freckles were kind of cute.

Brian wondered if dating would be like this for them too. Daytime dates with outsiders too scared to come pick them up at night. Stood up, waiting at the bus stop for someone that wasn’t coming to begin with. If they don’t leave, they would only end up with someone else from Penny Heights. They probably won’t get married. It’s easier to take care of a baby with your mother than a guy who clocks hours at community service instead of a job. Their boyfriends would all be like Brian, trapped, going nowhere and living with their moms too.

Brian tried Amber’s phone number at the payphone, but the automated message said that the number he dialed was no longer in service. When Jaimie noticed him on the phone, she smiled and waved. This time Brian smiled and waved back. She blushed.
Chris stopped and reached for his wallet as he glanced down into the eyes of a homeless child, whose hand was extended out in a plea of hunger. “Stop, Chris,” Leroy whispered, hand cupped so Bradley would not hear. “You don’t have time, just keep walking.” Chris hesitated with his wallet in his hand, and then began to step past the child.

“Oh, Chris, don’t listen to him,” Bradley said. “You’ve got to help the poor child!” Leroy glared at Bradley as Chris stopped again and pulled out a few dollars from his wallet to give to the hungry child. Self-righteous twit, Leroy thought. Just because Bradley had scored higher marks on the exams, he thought his position as shoulder angel somehow made him better than Leroy. He despised that condescending tone of voice that Bradley used when he talked over him. He knew for a fact that he had studied harder than Bradley at the academy, but despite all of his hard work, he’d landed with the role of shoulder devil when Bradley and all the other stuck up snobs had bribed their way through testing. Bradley’s family was wealthy, and their money could buy a certain level of prestige that came from being honored as a shoulder angel. Too often, Leroy was paired with this insufferable, spoiled brat for duty.

“You’re losing your touch,” Bradley said to Leroy, fingering the golden harp in his hands as he lounged on Chris’s right shoulder. Leroy said nothing, turning his back to Bradley to sit stiffly at the very edge of Chris’s other shoulder, gripping his trident tightly in his hands as he watched the landscape go by. He was sick of it. If it had just been the arrogance, Leroy could have dealt with it, but it went deeper than that. He thought back to last night, while Chris had been sleeping and the angels and devils were all at the staff meeting.
This staff meeting had begun like any other; he’d been sitting towards the back of the room, chatting with a few of the other shoulder devils before the meeting began, when he heard his name being mentioned across the room. Looking up, he saw Bradley standing in a circle of angels, talking with them and laughing. Bradley winked at Leroy as they sat down, waiting for the meeting to begin.

After a moment, the lieutenant, who had been talking with Bradley moments before, stood up and walked to the podium. He shuffled some papers around, and with a brief nod at Bradley, cleared his throat until everyone stopped talking.

“Leroy Andrews, please come collect the routes for your division before we begin.”

Leroy frowned; they usually didn’t hand out the routes until the end of the meeting. He walked to the front of the room to receive the stack from the Lieutenant, and as he turned to go back to his seat, the door opened and an attractive young lady angel slipped in quietly and sat down next to a group of friends. She flashed him a quick smile, and Leroy smiled back awkwardly, looking away as he stepped forward with the bulky routes clutched in his arms.

Coming down the aisle, he tried to walk quickly as he glanced up at her again. She was whispering quietly with her friends, and as she brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, he noticed the way her long brown hair curled around and framed her perfect face. Without realizing it, he approached the row where Bradley was seated, and as he passed, Bradley stuck his foot out in front of him. Leroy tripped and crashed to the ground as his feet tangled, sending his armful of papers exploding across the room. There was a moment of silence as the routes fluttered gently to the ground, and Leroy looked up to see the lady angel hiding a smile behind a delicate hand. His face burned with embarrassment as the room erupted into laughter, and a few of the angels grinned and slapped Bradley on the shoulder.

Eyes stinging with humiliation and shame, Leroy scrambled up and left the room quickly, leaving the papers scattered on the
Making his way over to the nearest closet, he jerked the door open and pushed his way in amidst the mops and brooms, shutting the door behind him and plunging the little room into darkness. He felt around in the dark for a bucket and turned it upside down, sitting on it and holding his head in his hands. Bradley had done it again—this time in front of everybody, and more especially in front of her; the look on her face when he had looked up at her from the floor...

How dare he? What had Leroy ever done to make Bradley want to torment him all through their years at the academy, and humiliate him in front of everyone? As Leroy sat there on the bucket, an idea drifted to mind. He momentarily recoiled from it; he was a shoulder devil, but he wasn’t evil. The thought was downright cruel—a fate he would never wish on anyone. A shoulder angel or devil who fell off of his or her charge while on duty would lose guardian status and could not be restored to it; one small nudge and Bradley would be gone forever.

Sitting now on Chris’s shoulder, Leroy turned and looked at Bradley, thinking back to everything Bradley had done to him. All of the torture and humiliation, the hours of looking over his shoulder in fear of Bradley and his gang of angels, the sleepless nights haunted by fears of what the coming day would bring... Bradley was just sitting there on the opposite shoulder, strumming his harp and singing an out of tune melody, not paying the slightest bit of attention to what Chris was doing. The idea suddenly seemed more justified than cruel, especially as Leroy considered the added offense that Bradley had stolen his position; the calling of a shoulder angel was one of dignity, and it was a dignity that Leroy had earned. Bradley disgraced the holy title simply by touching that golden harp with his filthy hands. It was an angel’s place of honor to guide God’s children to do what was right; the only reason they needed shoulder devils was to give people an opportunity to choose between right and wrong, and every one of them wanted their charges to eventually be happy. The role of a shoulder angel was a serious responsibility, and this loser was too prideful to care about Chris or anyone else assigned to his route.
There really was no other option, and it would just feel so
satisfying to see the terror on that stupid, smug face as he fell
from his exalted position. Leroy rose quietly to his feet and crept
up behind Bradley. The fool was still flicking the strings with no
sense of coordination, creating a faint, discordant jangling as he
continued humming; he didn’t even know the basic harp training
all angels were required to know by their first few years.

Drawing close, Leroy paused briefly behind Bradley, lip
curling in a sneer of contempt as all of the anger boiled to the
surface. He raised his foot, planted it in the center of Bradley’s
back, and shoved him with it as hard as he possibly could. Brad-
ley toppled off the shoulder with a strangled yelp, twisting and
falling as he slid off of Chris’s shirt. In desperation, Bradley flung
his arm out and caught onto a seam in the shirt, jerking to a halt
as the harp went spinning to the ground below. His frenzied eyes
locked onto Leroy’s as he swung in the air, feet scrambling use-
lessly against the silk shirt.

“Leroy, please! You can’t do this.”

As Bradley hung there, helpless, Leroy crouched and set
his trident to the side, leaning in close to stare into Bradley’s
terror-stricken eyes. “This is a matter of loyalty, Bradley,” he said
softly. “There are too many honest, hardworking cadets out there
that deserve a fair shot at this. It’s despicable angels like you that
prevent them from getting what they deserve—what I deserve.”
Leroy straightened and slowly began to grind Bradley’s fingers
with his foot, stripping them one by one from the shirt.

“Have mercy!” Bradley cried in panic as he tried to twist his
last two fingers in the fabric to hang on.

Leroy stopped grinding and laughed. “Mercy? Where was the
mercy all those years at the academy, Bradley? I ask for justice!”
With a quick motion, Leroy stamped hard on Bradley’s hand. As
he fell, his anguished cry ascended up to Leroy’s ears, and he
watched with grim satisfaction while Bradley disappeared from
sight, all those years of pain dropping away with the fallen angel.

After the cry had faded into the distance, Leroy stood on
Chris’s right shoulder for a time, staring sightlessly down at the
world below. Finally, he stooped to pick up his trident, and paused for a moment to look up to the heavens.

“It’s a matter of loyalty,” he repeated softly, reassuring himself.
If you’re like I am, it’s sad that one of the few highlights of high school was when a teacher would leave the class with a substitute. Realizing I would be faced with the boredom of an entire period subjected to some movie about some war I didn’t especially care about, I planned ahead. My plan was to escape into music.

After a little while, a song started to play that I hadn’t heard before. Undoubtedly one from an album I had saved and since completely forgotten. As it played intrigue overwhelmed my apathetic stare out the window. I entered actively listening. The song’s intro started slowly and indistinctly, one or two instruments playing nothing in particular; a violin played and the song shaped into a melody as seamlessly and as effortlessly as a seasoned potter throws a shapeless hunk of clay into a piece of masterfully crafted pottery.

It was my most memorable The-Perks-of-Being-a-Wallflower moment. The song became the soundtrack to my experience, watching an empty playground out a rain-beaded window. I was not the first, nor the last, to have an experience like this. An experience in which a piece of music seeps into you and allows you to escape for even a short amount of time.

Albert Schweitzer said, “There are two means of refuge from the misery of life—music and cats.” Music has a place in Metaphor because it is an integral part not only of the college experience, but the human experience. That, and this journal doesn’t have a section about cats on campus.

Music can be an escape, and we just never know when a particular song will catch us off guard. Please lend your ears to our featured artists.

—Peyton Brown, Music Editor
To some, my methods and style of music would border on the obscure and hard to classify side of conventional...musical-ness. You see, I’m bored with the conventional views of music and form. I don’t believe that music should be bounded by strict rules and form; as such, my music tends to break all the rules. Naturally, of course, this deters many from paying any mind. I believe that music is capable of encompassing every sound. Any sound you can find can be an instrument so music can then be a condition of all possible sounds. I tend not to limit myself to a certain genre of music; instead, I’ll go and experiment with any given genre so as not to limit my bounds. I draw a lot of inspiration from the producing minds of Rick Moody, Baastian Van Goethem (Bestien), Human Tone, Brian Eno, and my own life. Every song I’ve made always has a piece of myself in it, whether figuratively or literally. I don’t just produce Ambient/Drones, but also House music, Hardstyle, Tekstyle, and Jungle Terror.

Enter “Dreamless System”: this Ambient song stemmed from me dinking around on my guitar, trying to make it produce sounds that the guitar, on its own, wouldn’t be able to make. Pushing the untuned guitar through a couple of guitar pedals, including 2 Boss DD7 Delay pedals, 1 Boss RV 5 Reverb Pedal, and a Xenyx Q02 mixer, I was able to make the guitar sound like a very spacey ocean. There are underlying grumblings throughout the track that consist of an old recording I did of the new Math building being constructed from two semesters ago. After loading the recordings up into my computer and adding some extra recordings from a great many places I’ve visited over the summer, we have the song you hear before you, “Dreamless System.”
Music has always been a huge part of my life. After taking piano lessons when I was ten, I decided I didn’t like other people telling me what to play. So I quit formal lessons and taught myself to play the songs I wanted to learn. I’ve been playing the piano for fifteen years now and absolutely love it! The past few years I’ve started to write my own music, thanks in large part to a songwriting class I took here at Weber State University.

I like to write songs that show characters going through difficult problems like depression, hard relationships, loneliness, etc. But by the end of the song they start to move forward with optimism. Usually this optimism isn’t due to an outside force changing their circumstances to be less difficult, but the character changing their mindset. As someone who suffers from depression and anxiety, writing these songs is how I reassure myself that everything will turn out okay in the end. I can take whatever bad experience I may be having at that moment, whether it be fighting with a loved one or fighting with the ugly voices in my head, and reframe it into something positive. My greatest hope is that my songs will uplift and give hope to others as they face their own trials and difficulties.
THE HIGHWAY THIEVES (ALBUM)

By Matt Johnson

The Highway Thieves are an Ogden-based musical collective of seven individuals with very different musical backgrounds, crafting melody-driven rock music that draws from Americana, funk and soul, hip hop, and the blues to create a dance floor mash up approach to songwriting. From The Band to The Avett Brothers, from classic jazz to modern hip-hop soul, The Highway Thieves are always exploring the borderless terrain of music regardless of genre or style. The songs on this EP reflect the embryonic years of the group, with lyrics and music penned primarily by lead singer Jon Turner. The group, now swollen past the initial band of singer/guitarist Turner, keyboardist Kyler Lewis, and co-singer Devin Turner, has with every additional member morphed and evolved into the exciting dynamic and genre-defying ensemble it is now. The Highway Thieves are poised to become one of the definitive live acts in Utah and are being watched with great interest as a potential force to reckon with on the national and international scenes.

Jon Turner, vocals, guitar, harps
Kyler Lewis, keyboards
Devin Turner, vocals
Morgan Thomas, guitar
Bill Bitner, saxophones, flute, windsynth, harps
Matt Johnson, drums
Jesse Hodshire, bass
We are an electronic sci-fi themed duo with a passion for songwriting. Our inspiration stems from various topics including: math, science, science-fiction, analog musical instruments, electronics, space, glitch art, and technology. We use obsolete computing equipment (c64, Apple II), old game systems (Gameboy, NES, Atari 2600), vintage synthesizers (Juno 6, Omnichord), and old sci-fi movie samples to make our music. *Metatransit* is a journey through the dark, dystopian, retrofuture of the Purge Worlds comic book; a story that follows the cybernetic assassin Brandon Lao from planet to planet as he seeks revenge for the death of his partner, Anna. Musically, *Metatransit* guides you through a world of well-worn VHS aesthetic and glitched-out soundscapes that wax and wane from dystopian ambiance to punchy dance floor pop, overlain with scratchy 1950s science fiction; satisfying our need for warm analog hum, pulsing club beats, and 8-bit nostalgia. Our goal was to create an alternate universe using the album and comic book as a means to feel and understand the story in different forms. Each of the eleven songs on the album is directly linked to a key moment in the comic book. We started the process in January 2013. Later we teamed up with Black Omen Comics, who provided illustrations, story development, and the comic book itself. The album and comic book debuted at the Salt Lake Comic Con in September 2015. The official release date for the album is October 16th, 2015.

Partner: Joshua Faulkner
My artistic process is pretty simple. I walk around like a raw blister, feeling a lot of things, sampling a lot of experiences, getting my heart stomped on and my head full of hot air. I come home and feel lonely and nostalgic. I put that down. I sing it, write it, draw it—whatever it takes. I have a little mic and a couple guitars. I have probably 20 journals filled with poetry. I think that it is essential to my existence to create and to express. I am certain that I would die if I ever stopped.