

The Cornfield Review

A Literary Publication of The Ohio State University at Marion



preface

SHAKESPEARE'S RICHARD THE THIRD famously uttered the lines, "Now is the winter of our discontent," words the editorial staff of this year's issue knew to be true in that down-in-the-bones kind of way. This year's submissions, for the most part, tended to revolve around a definite tonal center, ranging from somber and melancholy to outright dark, brooding, and, in some cases, violent. On top of that, the pathetic fallacy was in full force on the OSU-Marion campus, as a brutal winter bore down on on with all its frozen, soul-crushing might: campus closings, snow emergencies, burst water lines, and other wintry maladies were tossed our way constantly by some relentless, pitiless hand from above. And yet our intrepid band of editorial heroes tarried onward, finding a collection of real gems in the mix, artwork, stories, and poems that—in spite of their oftentimes gloomy dispositions—are thoughtfully and artistically expressed. We happily share these pieces with you in this, the latest edition of the *Cornfield Review*.

As with previous issues, we must give thanks to the powers that be, the ones responsible for helping along our humble publication. Our thanks goes to the OSU-Marion administration, led by Dean Greg Rose, who continue to support this three-decade-plus venture. Faculty in English are, as they have been in the past, mainstays of the creative writing culture we've cultivated on the campus and beyond. The lion's share of the work, of course, was completed by this year's Editorial Board, who deserve my appreciation: Mike Beatty, Malcolm Carter, Leah Cottrill, Robert Johnson, Taryn Korody, Skylar McEntire, Jennifer Miller, Dennis Millisor, Deb Noll, Rachel Schade, Lauren Upp, Jill Valentine, and Sheree Whitelock. The Cornfield Skeleton Crew, gluttons for punishment who stay on past Winter Quarter into spring to help finish production duties, deserve a particularly jaunty tip of the hat: Lauren, Deb, Leah, Taryn, and Dennis.

The *Cornfield Review* is published annually. The Editorial Board seeks quality poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction in addition to original artwork and photography. Submissions are primarily accepted from students, faculty, and staff of OSU-Marion and Marion Technical College, although works by off-campus writers and artists will be considered. For further details and queries, please email me at mccorkle.12@osu.edu, or visit the online archive and submission site at <http://cornfieldreview.osu.edu>.

— Ben McCorkle, Faculty Adviser

The Cornfield Review Mission Statement:

We strive to represent the literary and artistic voice of Central Ohio by giving area college students an opportunity to see their work published in a professional literary journal. Additionally, we are passionate about achieving a cultural impact that goes beyond local campuses and reaches into the greater community.

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Possession

You met her at the park, bathed in moonlight; she's yours.
She thought you were her shining knight; she's yours.
Things started to change; you don't know why.
She lost her perfection, stopped being polite; she's yours.
She wouldn't listen, wouldn't do as she was told.
She didn't know the evil she could incite; she's yours.
Grabbing her wrist and covering her mouth, you
plead, "Do as I say and you'll be alright"; she's yours.
After the first slap, you felt sick, screamed
"I'm sorry!" and held her tight; she's yours.
She didn't leave, but she didn't change her ways.
"Why do you force me to do this every night?" She's yours.
That day she kept pushing, she knew you were tired;
it was her fault for starting the fight; she's yours.
You pushed her against the wall, whispered, "Be quiet,"
and wrapped hands around her neck, strangling her light; she's yours.
Under the moon, you brought her here, buried her.
A stone tablet is all that marks the forest site; she's yours.

— *Tabitha Clark*

Prophets

*"I've lived to bury my desires,
And see my dreams corrode with rust;
Now all that's left are fruitless fires
That burn my empty heart to dust."
—Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin*

*"Human kind
Cannot bear very much reality."
—T. S. Eliot*

Pillows of sand float across the ground.
Crimson and sodden and swollen,
like dirty clouds they burst, and
a deluge of flesh stumbles from slumber to slaughter.

Coughed forth and gasping for air,
they run and cower and shiver.
Panicked like rats in a flood,
fleeing our song of freedom.

Fleeing our melody of metal,
the ascending crescendo
beneath a sky full of pyres,
deep resonances felt more than heard.

Explosions like lightning:
break and butcher,
shatter and smash,
eviscerate and entomb,
lights looming large above the storm.

We leave them awestruck.
Awed at the carnage,
Awed by how many simple, humble homes
our concerto devours for safety's sake.

Bombs like thunder:
blare and blast,
scream and squawk,

deafen and debauch,
playing low notes for atonement.

We leave them shocked.
Shocked at how many simple, humble families
we wholly rip apart.
Shocked by civilian casualties,
and how we wash our hands.

Bombs leave craters in dirt
like bullets through walls.
Like an airliner descending,
and bursting through clouds.

Lovers stumble a sweet lonely samba under our melody of metal.
Families lose babies amongst the bedlam, and
each cries frightened and scared and alone;
and alone each must fearlessly face this foreign world.

Our storm sings sad and loud:
a blaring staccato machine gun sound.
A song of severance, for many a soul,
from their simple, humble homes.

Certainly, these Pilots are brave,
but they never hear the morbid song they play.
Certainly, these Pilots are noble,
but they'll never see their family dance a terminal waltz.

She's alone, desperately seeking the sun's sterling shine.
Are you shocked, we never see her?
Never hear her cries to her savior...
A desperate a cappella –
for salvation;
for sunshine.

Her breath comes ragged and sharp and salty,
beneath that cloying chorus of silt and sand.
Her simple, humble home
battered and blasted
below our song's swelling serenade.

Hidden from the sun's simple shine
We never see her.
Never hear her cries to her savior...
A heartbroken dirge –
for her family;
for her child.

I've never seen her choking;
gagging on rubble and dust and dirt.
I've never seen her dragging her battered baby,
through exploding gouts of earth.

She cries to her savior...
A sullen, somber cadenza.
Remembering sunnier days.
Life before our symphony of slaughter.
She hums a lonesome lullaby
waiting for an angel to carry her home.

We never see this.
We're embedded, sightless, and dead-ended.
New at five, or new at ten –
it may be new, but
will it ever be true again?

It's shocking we never see her...
From dust to dust, and
from ashes to ashes.
Spending blood for blood, and
spending life unto death.

We think ourselves wise, yet
we are willful,
and wasteful,
and searching for profits.

—*Michael Beatty*

Downfall

Ice covers the fire that once fueled a black heart
the smoke drowns the innocence we once felt
We cage animals, but in reality we cage ourselves
The gods mock our dreadful thoughts
Some say this is the end, but it is only the start.

The shrieks of angels are heard for miles
their light shines like the dark of night
the sun never rises, only setting in the west
we keep the peace by declaring wars
this is not new; it has been going on for a while.

We take comfort in the blisters we have
Our strive for equality only diversifies us more
Safety cannot be measured, only because it does not exist.
There is never light at the end of this tunnel
Instead of building, we only collapse.

— Alan Bryan



— Benjamin James Ditmars, "Camel in Udaipur, India"

Suburbia

The people, the people
Were once a slumbering giant.
Apathy, once a friend, is now a foe,
Turning grizzlies into teddies.

Wake Up

Wake up

wake up

wake

—*Brittany Coomes*



—Bobbi Hupp-Wilds, “Rock”

Thoughts On My Grandparents ' House

I can still look out the window
And see grandfather working
With old tools – the names of which I can't recall –
In the woodshed.

I can still taste Aquafresh
And smell the Marlboros
Mixed with Folgers Coffee
In the morning.

I can still feel painted blocks
Near storybooks and board games
And imagine them as castles
In their bag.

I can still hear the conversations
I never understood in youth
Yet would interrupt to feel important
In the kitchen.

I can still remember laughter
As if it never left the walls
Or died with grandma
In the living room.

—*Benjamin James Ditmars*

Joan Miró Tribute

A red tear from his shadowed eyes
Falls to black, collides with brush
To spiral into quarter notes

That swim their way
Past rainbow rivers
Toward the singing fish

And go within its gills
To find adobe villages
Then untamed woods

By natural gardens
With their vivid vibes,
Prismatic peace

That fade into
Chromatic hills
From Prades, 1917

Where paths converge
Like music rising, dipping
On the scale of yellow ground

But soon evaporate
Sweet drops of noise to
Ribbons in Joan's blood.

—*Benjamin James Ditmars*

White-Rimmed Mirror

The white-rimmed mirror
Flickers with white candles
Burning their white flames
Into white smoke.

The white-rimmed mirror
Reads covers of white books
In white fonts
With white description.

The white-rimmed mirror
Reflects its white self
With white guilt
At white perception.

The white-rimmed mirror
Turns silver white
And gold to white washed air
Without white mercy.

The white-rimmed mirror
Shows non-white spectrums
But ignores them in white memory,
White history.

The white-rimmed mirror
Sees deep into white clouds
Past white atmosphere,
White heaven.

—*Benjamin James Ditmars*



—Robert Johnson, "In Flight"

Chels And The Glass

So as I walked in silence
thought about this.

I notices a broken glass,
break myself."

And it speaks!
about it?"

"What is wrong?"

I asked.

"Why do we break the
things we love?"

It said.

I shrugged.

"Why do you leave
yourself to be broken?"

The broken glass

"It never occurred that I

"So what will you do

I asked.

"I will remain as I am
and hope for someone
to piece me together."

Poor...poor glass...

—*Robert Johnson*

An Ode To This

The cherished apple of the book's eye
 was red as the child's nose,
 as she swam oceans to find it.
She felt the molten lava water as the rain
 tinkled on the tin roof like piano keys
 and made wild flowers' scent bum her
nostrils,
while listing and twisting collided inside her brain.
The book witnessed the child's fear and heroism
 with loose-leaf ears wide open
 and the taste of dreamy sweat on its spine.
Abraham Lincoln took her by the hand
 to show her Rome burning for the first time,
 while the oceans were nearly drowned for their
ignorance.
And that apple only Mark Twain could surmise
 got away and started growing
 sporadically among poplar trees.

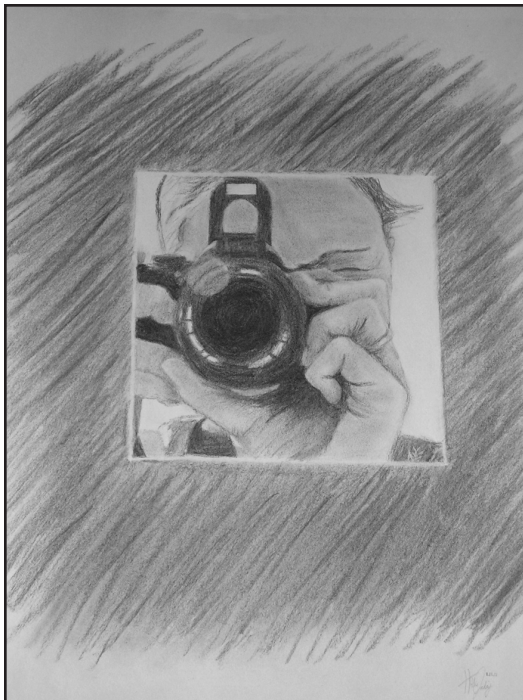
Oh, Dickens! Thou dost have swagger!

But this time the machine took her the wrong way
 and the child got too close to Shakespeare,
 no longer separated from life by pen
and ink,
 mad statues clutching her hair and clothes.
To all, she replied, "That's just not my kind of applesauce,"
 as she strolled gingerly through the cosmos
 making friends and foes with gods and clouds.
Meanwhile, the superfluous dog of silliness
 howled at the squeaking door
 that blocked its passage to the lily fields.

But they were dull, like diamonds against stars
 that hide behind the child's blanket at night
 with flashlight in hand for protection against
the ghosts.
The child stole away this time and that
 for her own undeclared happiness
 so much that she could be joyful forever.

She soared with thunderous silence
through sparse forests and green cities while becoming
insanely normal and anxiously calm.
Because in her world of vacuum cleaners and dinner menus,
too much depended upon grammatical reasoning.
But the British were coming in droves and decagons
to take her diamond-lit lily fields
and squeaking, rambling apple trees.
Just then, the apple grinned thoughtlessly,
and the book welcomed it back with open covers,
never to feel betrayed again.
Now the child, grown to a woman, will swim evermore with diamonds
and piano keys and laughing dogs
through mountains and eras and Jane
Austen's goodnight kisses,
like pure emotion always trapped between closed
pages.

—*Taryn Korody*



—Hollis Juday, "Claire"

Birds Of The Same Flock

With feathers the same color as fresh snowfall,
And an innocent heart as pure as pristine gold,
She is a temptress to the wicked soul.
With simplistic grace and arrogant beauty,
She is conceited by nature.
One naïve creature in a small pond,
amongst a flock of ducklings,
would think herself to be of optimal species.
The same creature in a bountiful lake,
surrounded by birds of the same flock,
would think herself to be in a tedious competition to win the heart
of the hunter.
She has but only one fear.
And that fear alone
is enough to bestow within herself
a million doubts.

The hunter is of zealous notion and of irrepressible desire.
Before him awaits a lake filled with dames of poise and passion.
All in anticipation of the prize.
He is not new to the hunt and is aware of the game.
He feels that it is his rightful duty
to caress each creature and to gain trust.
Trust is the precise key to his pursuit.
What he knows not
Is the impression he leaves with each dame.
Confusion and frustration
being the main components.
If he is not quick and loyal in the hunt
He will end up with only his own company.

—*Brittany Violet Long*

Pool Party At The Zoo

I want to be inside my belly when I cut my own throat,
And watch all the gulls fighting over razors and rope.
Worms will eat as pigs do, just like I do, just like we do,
And I want to eat it all.

I want to write sweet songs to myself about love,
Then eat my fingers, ink, labor, papers, and doves,
Vomit them out and eat them over again.
And I want to eat it all.

I want to eat the world,
And its scars and its SARS and its soap.
I want bones and loans and liens and beans
And brown paper packages, bulging with brains.

I want a saucy, little fox for my pocket full of peacocks
And a bed that's full of seashells, like a pretty, little pea pod.
I want a castle made of Hell inside the belly of a whale,
And I want to eat it all.

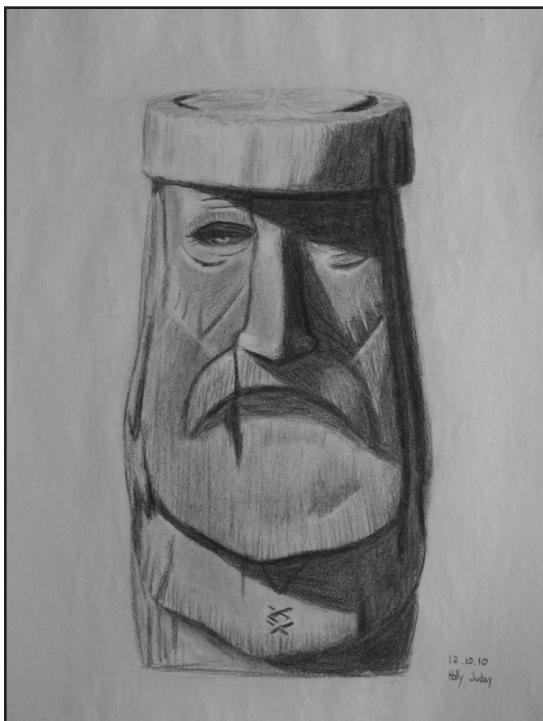
I want to spit out my lungs and my tongue and my teeth and my
grief,
Spit tangled nerves and taste buds around all that I see.
My fingernails and my slugs and my snails and my hair,
And I want to eat it all.

—Dennis Millisor

Winter's White Snow

With wonder, I wait
 winter's white snow
That slithers slowly,
 silently, stressless down
Building blankets,
 covering cars
With light, white, fluffy
 heaps; heavier to push
Than mounds of mud
 after summer's rain
Just as messy as
 it melts, turning ugly
I wittingly wonder why
 I wait winter's white snow.

—*Deb Noll*



—Hollis Juday, "Untitled"

Masked

Sing that sweet lullaby again,
Of hope for the future,
And greater good for us all.
Rest my soul in lies
Graced by the light
Of your benevolent smile.
Shield me with your hollow hope
As ignorance strengthens
All my twisted, selfish thoughts.
Never mind, I will wake to Hell.
I turn my blind eye
On your blood-stained hands.
For now I will believe in you
And let deceit
Slowly tear away the hope
That never was true.

—*Rachel Schade*

Pain

Life's a thief tiptoeing silently.
Open your eyes,
Just to close them again and deny.
Truths become false;
Nothing looks familiar anymore.
Pieces are missing.
Fight to hope but despair is strong.
Wait
Weight
Crushes.
The light is there,
But so is darkness.
You're still here.
But rising up to breathe, I wonder:
Where am I?

—*Rachel Schade*

Proverbs 31:25

How far you've fallen.
I guess it was inevitable
To gaze into the mirror
And see this pale reflection,
Pathetic, lost, uncertain,
Just a ghost of myself.
But, no, I've not forgotten
What it's like to feel beautiful.
I wait for sunlight
To conquer all the shadows
Lingering in my heart,
Because darkness never lasts
Forever.

—Rachel Schade



—Sara Klips, "Monster Music Box"

The Sort

bad wrong
power life
i

moral cool meanin

sufficient

fulfilled

truth is in the SEARCHING,
SORTING,
NAMING and RE-SALVAGING,
omnipresent,
malleable,
MEANINGS OF ALL THAT IS

right
satisfier
in me-reality, &
CONNOTATING its' relationships
in the context of a we-scale
to DEFINE the
continuum of i

—Zachary Wheeler

Stag

tonight i danced with deer non-distinctly,
 under the rolling clouds brushing the un-
known full-moon of silver.

 once-brave, once-timid,
uneased, yet unaware

it is not a dance many know;
 not of fear
 or conquest
a dance that is still.
 a dance of tranquility.

once subsided,
 a snorted fog of strength and fear
 began their leap into another
night,
one, in which i could not follow.

—*Zachary Wheeler*

A Metaphor

Standing at the shore,
too afraid to take that first step.
The waves dance around my toes,
finally drawing me in.
Overwhelmed by power,
refreshed by passion.
No longer fearing the waves,
instead --
I run to them.

—Sheree Whitelock



—Melissa Lester, “Walk in the Park”

Unexpected Love

my mouth
burns
for your taste
my hands
crave
the texture of you

I am patient
I must wait
you're not ready
But I can't
I bite
I tear
pleasure
pain
you in me
satisfaction
a peaceful sigh
my smile lingers
my love
you're gone
that's fine
you were priceless
dear sandwich
you could have lasted longer

—*Sheree Whitelock*

Rotten

As time goes by and death catches me, these rotten things follow me.
They follow me to let me know my breath, mind, and life are growing old.
Memories, friends, places have all changed it seems, what's left is not much
familiar to me.

Rotten are the buildings that I once knew, as the concrete crumbles and
facades stand askew.

Rotten is the soil that's at my feet, as this dirt won't grow anything good to
eat.

Rotten are my friends who are left in this town, as they walk hunched over
and look to the ground.

Rotten is my car and the memories inside, as rust takes hold and clouds fill
my mind.

Rotten are the dreams of my youthful bliss, as my body won't work and
my back's always stiff.

From the sweat of my brow to my slow-moving feet, this world has left me
rotten. So here I stand on my own two feet knowing most of my friends are
rotting beneath. I shall see them again in a much better place, as I finish my
rot in this dark, dreary place.

—*Joey Yake*

Lament Of The Desert

Brazen, Sahara clothed in cold beauty
buried beneath heat and sun brilliant
hates her survival. Longing for newly
formed dew on blooming thorns, not malignant
sand-ovens she cries for her lover's embrace.
Reaching back in forgotten past the moon
Luna once amongst dense stars raced
through a frozen sky to touch and swoon
the heart of a boiling wilderness.
Then Sol burned with rage and sunfire,
envious of Sahara's moonlight dress,
wrapped her in a blistered skin attire.
Here now ardor brings life and water death,
Sahara still craves Luna with each searing breath.

—*Benjamin Zucker*



—Brittany Violet Long, "Luck"

How To Save A Life

—*Tabitha Clark*

MY HUSBAND AND SON LIE DEAD ON THE FLOOR at my feet – I killed them. This morning, I made them French toast with strawberries, and now they're dead. ***

I walked into the house, and saw no one in the living room. "I'm home," I said, to no response. I heard muffled crying coming from my bedroom, and started toward the back of the house. Oh God, I thought, Justin's spanked Dylan too hard again. Dylan was only five, and his dad sometimes got carried away with punishment. I opened the bedroom door and fell into every mother's nightmare: my husband was fondling his penis, while my son was lying face down on the edge of our bed with his pants pulled down to his ankles.

"What the fuck are you doing!?" I screamed, flying toward him.

He grabbed my arms and threw me against a wall. "Stay out of this."

"Fuck you." I whispered, picking up the phone off the floor. "If you touch another hair on his head, I'm calling 9-1-1." I got up, my head swimming from the impact, and picked up Dylan. I pulled up his pants, comforting him and whispered. "Sweetie, Daddy was just playing. Could you go to your room and turn on your TV?" Dylan nodded his head, wiped the tears out of his eyes, and walked out of the room.

Justin, stood there, looking at me. "That's ok sweetie," he said, head down, his eyes peering at me from under his large brow, "you'll do."

"I don't think --."

"Did I ask you to think?" He lunged at me, knocking the phone out of my hand and slamming me against the door.

I wanted to scream, but I didn't want

to scare Dylan.

"I do what I want, when I want. You've forgotten your place, little girl. I think it's time I remind you." He grabbed my wrists and dragged me over to the bed.

"Justin, please don't..." He ripped off my t-shirt and khaki pants as I tried to cling to them. Then, he grabbed me by the waist and pulled me against him. "If you scream, I'll get rough. It may just kill you," he chuckled. He threw me onto the bed. "Turn over."

I turned over on my stomach, too scared to do anything else.

He grabbed my hair and yanked my head back. "I mean what I said. Listen to me, or this just might kill you. Do you want your son to come in here and find his mother naked, dead on the bed like a cheap whore?" Then, he shoved his way inside me.

I fought the screams that were creeping their way up my throat as my insides were torn apart. I clung to the sheets, bit into the pillows, anything to muffle the sound. I tried to think of something else, tried to retreat into my mind, but I was ripped back with every slap and claw to my back and sides, brought back to the pain, the smell of anger mixing with sweat, and the sound of his

voice that seemed to get angrier every second.

"You like that, that's what you want," he said, breathing heavily into my ear. As the thrusts got harder, he pulled my hair until it felt like it would rip out of my skull. He moved against me so hard the last time that I yelped. Then he collapsed on top of me.

"Now," he whispered, huffing and out of breath, "go sleep in your son's room. Go guard him like the little pup that he is. And don't try to leave, or I'll kill you both...and I'll make you watch him die."

I grabbed a towel and limped to the bathroom. After cleaning up the blood and semen, I pulled on my nightgown and lay down on a comforter in my son's room. He slept so soundly, considering everything that had gone on next door. I saw the dried tears still clinging salty on his cheeks, lit up by the blue glow of the TV.

"We'll leave baby," I whispered. "When he goes to work tomorrow night, we'll leave."

I dropped the blood caked bat and collapsed next to my five year old. "I'm so sorry, sweetie," I sobbed, holding his head in my lap, trying to wipe away the drying blood. "I'm so sorry we didn't leave sooner.

I'm sorry this happened." I rocked him and stroked his face. There was a roll of thunder outside, and lightning lit up the scene: blood on the carpet and wall. The baseball bat rested against my husband's leg, a line of blood showing how the head of the bat rolled when it hit the ground.

I should call someone, but how am I going to explain this?

The next morning, I made breakfast for everyone, and while Justin took a nap, Dylan and I went to the park. When we got home, smoky black clouds were moving in. Dylan and I walked into the house, and saw Justin standing in the middle of the living room with a baseball bat. "Where have you been?"

My eyes widened, and I pushed Dylan behind me, blocking my son from his father's view. "We went to the park, Justin. I just wanted to get Dylan out of the house so you could rest before work tonight."

"Yeah Daddy, Mommy says we're going on a trip when you leave for work tonight!"

I looked at my son, realizing that I didn't tell him it was a secret. *Why did I tell him?* My forehead wrinkled in worry, and I started shaking, afraid to turn around and face the beating that was coming. Justin didn't make

idle threats.

I turned and saw that look in Justin's eye. He was breathing heavily and drooling, his eyes bloodshot and black with rage. "What did I tell you?" He raised the bat and prepared to swing.

I closed my eyes, waiting for the beating, waiting for the pain. Instead, I felt a small hand push my waist, heard "NO! Don't hurt my Mommy!" and then a sickening crack, and a thud as something fell to the floor. I opened one eye and saw my son lying on the floor, his head bloody. Justin still held the bat. Now he was shaking.

"I didn't mean to. I swear to God, I didn't mean to. Check him. He's ok right? Check him!" He dropped the bat and fell to his knees to check on our son.

A calm rage fell over me. I walked around him, picked up the bat, and got into the batting stance that helped me smack home runs during softball season. "You bastard! You will never," the first swing connected with the side of his head knocking him to the ground, "ever hurt anyone again!" I brought down the two final swings on his chest, hearing the ribs snap and splinter under the weight of the bat. Now I was breathing heavily and drooling. I felt the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Then I realized my entire family was dead, and it was my fault.

The rain began to pat against the windows of our small two-bedroom house. It was time to call the police. I kissed my son, laid his head on the carpet, and walked to the closet before grabbing the

phone. *Why didn't Justin use the gun? Maybe he wouldn't have missed. I know I won't.*

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

"Send the police. There have been three murders."

The last thing the 9-1-1 operator heard was the sound of gunfire, and the clunk of the receiver as it hit the floor.



—Mark Tomsic, "Confessions of a Hypocritical Pastor"

Tales

—Michael Beatty

YOU CAN BE SO UNDERHANDED SOMETIMES.

Trying to help someone you care about from a tough spot, but sick of the spite and malice they're subjecting you to:

You say, "May you get everything you want."

A beatific insult if ever there was one.

You feel superior because you know it's an insult and you know they don't;

Ancient Chinese or gypsy or who knows what.

That's your thing; you collect clever the way a spider collects flies.

A Word here;

A phrase there;

A bit of someone's scientific inquiry. Never your word, your phrase, or your research; just a stream of ideas without foundations.

Clever without wit. Disembodied knowledge wrung free of its moorings. Details they call them, those important little things you aren't so good at.

Details.

You detailed a car once.

You even de-tailed a raccoon with a friend who shared your name...

Its lifeless body lay alongside the road. A puddle of blood was pooling beneath its grey mouth. The cracked skull and matted fur made it seem like it died slowly, you worried; your friend didn't share your concern.

This is the same friend who held a grasshopper and a garden spider by their haunches – one in each hand, to create his own version of bug-wars, 20 years before you'd ever seen the senseless brutality of two insects fighting for sport.

At the time you were ashamed for watching. Back then your self-disgust tasted like bile.

This friend was different than you,

but he seemed to accept you, and for you that was the only commodity that mattered those days. Goofy looks set you apart, and everyone always said you talked like a grown up.

The children ridiculed, and adults were always a bit astonished. The adults, sometimes they ridiculed too, and usually that hurt worse because your parents promised: "Things will be better when you get older."

You started to doubt the veracity of that.

Let's skin it he says.

Details: saying no will make you look weak, so you clench your trembling stomach and say yes. He drags it back to the woods on his house's large allotment and starts on it with a dull knife. Flakes of rust embedding themselves inside.

He skins one side... If you would call what a dull knife does to several-day-old meat "skinning."

He's laughing. Always fearful of rejection, and frozen stiff as your new friend – Rigor Mortis the Raccoon – your laughter comes out hollow and wooden.

Then he says you should skin the rest.

You say no.

He insists.

You say okay, but with a jittery voice you half-joke: "I've never done this before, so I'm not very good".

You clench your trembling stomach and sink the knife

into the stiff skin. One unforgiving black eye staring up at you as the knife wobbles up and through clammy – even stiffer than you'd imagined – flesh.

The smell of rot and maggots seeks to loosen your clenching stomach. After a minute of this, you've made exactly no headway, but your hands are slimy with something, yet without any visible blood.

You try to pass the knife back to the friend who shares your name.

You clench your stomach tighter, the knots are swallowing the half-digested ham and cheese Hot Pocket.

You've failed this test.

You're still the child while he is a blood-and-fur-soaked man, and you wonder if that is what it means to be a man...

Neither your first, nor last, nor your most magnificent failure.

He takes the bloody, fur-covered knife. You weakly laugh, and say, "I told you I wouldn't be any good at this."

He finishes skinning the side – then he de-tails the stinking, emaciated, grey animal. You remember once more that you were never good with details.

You figure you've got your own thing – being clever.

Maybe it's enough.

You remind yourself that sometimes it's easier to remember, if you pretend you're remembering for someone else.

Bystanders

—Michael Beatty

"DOWNWARD FACING DOG."

This is my life and I'm wasting it.

"Breathe in, slowly."

Pissing it away, stretching myself into poses to tighten and tone. Yoga: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday – beginner's yoga from 5:30 to 6:30 and advanced poses from 8 to 9, and on Saturday beginner's yoga 1 to 2 and advanced poses from 5 to 6.

"Release your breath."

I don't feel enlightened... at peace. I feel like hurting something. I saw on the news last week that two teenagers were arrested for killing cats. They buried them up to the neck, and proceeded to run over the heads with a lawnmower.

Lawnmower blades spin at three thousand six hundred rotations per minute when they aren't cutting, the resistance from blades of grass drops that speed to about three thousand rotations per minute, but imagine the dip in speed when those blades bite into the soft flesh and hard skull of a cat, imagine the small strips of trimmed grass leading up to the center of a nearly perfect circle of blood, plasma and viscera. The blades of green grass plastered crimson at first, but as the blood dries on the teen's lawn – on their neighbors' lawns – it metamorphoses from red to carmine and then the green and carmine blend together into a dank dirty brown, like a giant circle of bloody diarrhea.

Small chunks of cat brains loosely hanging onto the grass, spread like fertilizer on the lawn, grey matter dripping from chunks of skull still clinging to the blades of the mower, and in the center of each circle a headless feline body, a body whose adrenaline had caused the heart to race, caused

the blood pressure to skyrocket before being decapitated; once the head was gone all that energy caused the arteries to spray blood several feet into the air, leaving the body desiccated and buried; such a small amount of blood remains that they're essentially ready for a high school biology class to rip apart... I mean dissect.

Tiny mummified kitties standing on their rear legs, slowly becoming fertilizer as the worms and the bacteria and the ants pick away at them. Standing there until only a vertical skeleton remains, standing almost comically – their feet originally splayed in panicked positions as the kids buried them, but once all the flesh is removed, they look like waving, headless skeletons.

The pretty Asian lady on the news with the soft, calming voice said that when the police arrived they found a group of nearly 15 people observing the teen's violent behavior. Mostly other high school students, but several adults from the neighborhood had come out to watch as well, and I'm sure several were peeking through the blinds – secretly getting their kicks at the horror show. Both disgusted and aroused by the carnage. Diffusion of responsibility they call it. The kids murdered four cats,

and now anyone can watch a video of the whole thing online: 30,000 hits and counting.

"Breathe in, slowly, and when you breathe out transfer into plank position."

This is my life and every breath brings me another second closer to death. I still feel like hurting something.

Everyday I wake at 5:00, so I can make it to the gym by 5:45. This leaves me enough time to swim for almost an hour before rushing to work. 6:41 I shower and get dressed. 7:03 I'm on the road. 7:23 I'm pulling into the school parking lot. 7:29 I'm walking into my office, grimacing at the brass plaque next to my door that says guidance counselor.

I know the kids from the news. Their twins, and they're tenth graders. Each counselor has one class they follow from ninth grade to graduation; my class is tenth grade. This policy is supposed to build empathy or something, but I just felt contempt, especially for those fucking open enrollment students who were ruining my school. I'd told their parents, Frank and Beverly, "Take those kids back where they belong. They can't handle it here." Looks like I was right.

"Move from plank back into downward facing dog."

This is my life. 3:00 my day is over. 3:10 I'm changed and starting my run. 3:15 school lets out. 3:42 I'm halfway done – four miles – and passing the pizza shop, still holding a steady eight-minute mile. 4:14 I open the school door and start my cool down walk to the gym for my shower. 4:25 the principle joins me in the shower, and fucks me hard against the linoleum before rushing out to the football game; family already waiting in the stands, son playing quarterback. 4:33 I slide down the wall, and sit on the floor, chest heaving, my tears lost amongst the water from the shower.

Speaking of kitties...

Do you remember Kitty Genovese?

Diffusion of responsibility they call it.

The New York Times said "Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police" leading after that, "For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens."

Diffusion of responsibility they call it.

We still teach the story, a lesson about the callousness of humanity. It hardly seems relevant the story's been edited

in post to say only one man saw her being stabbed, that the initial stabs punctured her lungs, leaving her fatally wounded. That the wounds left her lungs incapable of properly taking in air, and they quickly filled with blood, which she would cough onto her chin and her soft blouse, blood which kept her from being able to cry out. She tried using the last of her strength to drag herself to a locked back door of her apartment complex. Her attacker, a man named Moseley, searched for her and found her lying there, gasping for air, and proceeded to stab her repeatedly, and then rape her while she died – robbing her of her life, her dignity, and \$49. Four years later – while imprisoned – he was sent to a hospital for surgery, where he severely beat his guard, took five hostages, and raped one in front of her husband.

Diffusion of responsibility they call it. In self-defense classes women are taught that if attacked and a group of people is watching they should not call out for help. A general plea for help leaves nobody responsible, and you're less likely to receive aid.

Instead, they teach women to pick one person, and tell them, "I need you to help me."

Make it that person's responsibility to aid you. Then it is harder for that person to shirk the responsibility onto one of the other witnesses. It's more difficult for them to justify their actions by saying others weren't helping, and telling themselves, "What was I supposed to do?"

"Breathe out slowly, and move into child's pose for a few minutes of calming meditation."

Lying with my face buried in my arms I try to keep from sobbing. Three years later, and I still sit staring at a bottle of sleeping pills at least once a week. Daring myself to finally do it. I can hear the breathing of the other students. Usually it's calming, but right now, I want to stand up and scream at their stupid, peaceful faces.

"Life sucks, and people are horrible, and you're all wasting your time."

Three years ago I decided to have a night out with five of my oldest friends. Friends I'd known since high school.

I can still feel their rough hands ripping my blouse off. Can still smell the whiskey on their breath as they bite and lick my face and neck. Can feel the cheap fake wood of the coffee table they threw me down on.

"Guys, what the hell are you doing. Leave her alone," Mark said to C.J. and John.

"Fuck off Mark, quite being so fucking gay. If you don't want to get your dick wet then just go watch T.V."

"Yeah, quite being such a faggot. If she didn't want it, she wouldn't have worn such a short skirt," said John.

Mark joined Gab and Benny on the couch where they watched television and pretended nothing was happening. That this was normal.

"Help me! Please help me! Please... please... please," I cried.

"Don't worry Baby. We'll help you." C.J. said as he yanked off his belt.

I just kept sobbing please and help. After ripping my blouse off, they carried me into the bedroom next to the living room, and abused my body for over two hours. My other three friends sat and watched television the entire time. They were still there when I stumbled out, grabbed my torn blouse off the floor, and waddled out the door. I'm sure they justified it, telling themselves that C.J. was right, and I really did want it. That it was all just an act. I could hear C.J. laughing as I tried getting out of the apartment as quickly as my battered body could climb down the stairwell.

"That bitch won't walk straight for a month."

I could hear all of them laughing at that.

I didn't go to the cops for over three months. All five of them had the same story when the detectives began investigating, and I was told that I should have had a rape kit done after it happened. Nobody blamed me, directly, but it was made clear that I shouldn't have waited. That now they would get away with it. Easy for them to say I should have done something right away, but admitting something like that happened to you;

admitting that you've been violated like that is something else entirely.

This is my life and it's wasted; it ended three years ago. Maybe tonight I'll finally have the courage to put an end to my suffering.

This is my life...

"Breathe out. Let all the negative energy flow out of you and back into the universe. Take a deep breath and bring in all the positive energy and love. Breathe out..."



—Lauren Upp, "Shadow Play"

Magic
Salesman

—*Benjamin James
Ditmars*

I SELL MAGIC BY THE BUSHEL. YES, I DO, LIKE MY father and his father and all the other fathers in the pantheon of fatherhood. Gnomes know it well.

We help those in need and those with desire. Have you ever seen a beggar wake to be a prince? Why, that's me at work! And I'm spectacular. Perhaps too spectacular.

I shiver to think I've done the world a disservice but between you and me, there was this case, a trifle if you will.

It was just after the thaw if memory serves me right. Winter had ebbed and with it came the first blossoms of a new spring, and as always the foibles of young love.

She came running up to me in tears to say he never noticed her and if I would be so kind to sell a bushel she could set things right. But I was very frank with her.

"There is might and wealth in magic, but no love," I said.

"Oh, but I'm sure it could play the slightest role to even the odds against the other girls that strive to call on him," she replied.

"Lady, I assure you there is not power I possess to conquer hearts."

She bowed to my height then took her leave. I continued selling ware throughout the day to poor and sickly types, sometimes not charging at all and always what they could afford to pay. Charity had always been integral to the identity of gnomes. Our hats indeed were most always sewn by the grateful.

But, I could only stay so long before I needed rest. The sun and human misery had weighed heavily upon me.

Therefore, I retired near a tree along the beaten path. A shady breeze swept my

sweaty form to cool me off. It was therapeutic and astonishingly cathartic. The gnomish afterlife, I thought, so full of belts and pointed shoes, must hold such virtue. I picked an apple off a low-hanging branch to quench my thirst.

As I bit into the crunchy sweetness of its texture my eyes began to droop. The shade and fruit had numbed my woes considerably.

I dreamt a bird was pecking me and squawking. As often as I batted it off, it returned to nip my nose or pull out hairs. But, it turned out as I woke to be the lady, who earlier sought love poking my chest with her comparatively large finger.

"Mr. Gnome," she began, "I beg of you to give me magic so that I may travel to another town. I can't be happy here, to see my love cavorting with another."

Looking at her swollen eyes I pitied her. Reaching for my tote I removed a bluish orb and sold it in exchange for gold. It may not have been the best solution to her problem but I needed rest.

She ran off before I could offer anymore advice. I would have told her, despite my tiredness: *use your brain, and never just your heart or ego*. Or, even better, use all three! But even then I doubt she'd listen.

I sighed exhausted. I had been old much too long to understand such matters.

Sleep took hold once more, but nightmares continued plaguing me. I dreamt another dream in which I sought a lovely gnome in youth. I spent days baking her the perfect acorn pie. And, as I presented it on silver, she did the unimaginable. She spat it on the ground, and then she spat on me. Without so much as a thank you she continued on her way, arm in arm with another gnome; his hat reached so much higher than mine...

In the morning, I woke to flailing limbs. It seems I had begun to run toward the one I used to love, to liberate her from the travesty that called himself a gnome. For awhile I laid contemplating the meaning of such specters before I noticed my tote, once holding an abundance of orbs was emptied completely. Someone had stolen it!

Oh, the tribulations this sleepy town will witness, I thought. I had wallowed in my own reveries much too long. With one orb and illness may be cured and as much as a scar placed upon an enemy. Yet, with the six now missing, homes would certainly burn while murder reigned!

I rushed down the path into the hamlet immediately. Carriages barely missed me several times as I ducked underneath their wheels. I deserved to be hit.

I was careless. Time spent *playing it safe* meant lives at risk. And as I walked onto the pavement of the town, such haste was confirmed necessary. Buildings burned as people screamed. Cries seemed endless every turn.

I went into the nearest house with a sense of urgency to set things right. A mother and father, I noticed, looked mournfully upon what must have been their daughter. She was still without breath but bore no marks of trauma.

"What has happened?" I asked fearfully.

"YOU!" the mother screamed. "You brought this wickedness! Our beautiful daughter is dead!"

I gaped in horror for a minute before checking other dwellings. Mothers and fathers from all of them attempted to maim me in some way. I can't say as I blamed them. Some blows I took in penance, others from slow reflexes. If enough pain could change reality I would have taken all that they could give. But, I had to move on toward the source of all this

misery before attempting such rashness. Absolving my sins would be selfish with a killer on the loose.

So many daughters worthy of a tiara were silenced in a bitter rage. And the best that I could do was search seemingly in vain.

The lady from the night before had only bought from me to see where I kept the orbs, I realized. And I had let her trick me. I was a disgrace. My father had warned me against such things, as had my grandfather and his grandfather.

I continued looking for that woman responsible but could not find her in the alleys, backrooms, nooks or crannies. Only when I made the long walk back to my tree, off the beaten path, did I perceive her worried form.

She held the six emptied orbs in her arms while tears ran down her cheeks. I still pitied her.

"Oh, Mr. Gnome, I never meant to hurt so many. I just saw him with her and used the magic in revenge against her. But I lost control and they all kept dying; even those I knew as friends. Then, the houses started burning..."

"Child, I do forgive you but I can't undo these awful deeds. You will have to keep the

burden as will I."

"What if you turned back the clock?"

"You've destroyed a town with love and now you seek to kill the world with time? These forces, my dear, are untamable and always will be."

"But you use them Mr. Gnome!"

"I merely coax and nothing more."

A pause set in. I heard her sniffing. The ground seemed wet around me.

"Let me come with you," she asked.

I'm not sure why I told her yes, especially so quickly; perhaps because we were labeled the same now; perhaps because we were the only two to understand each other's guilt. But, I maintain these events will be trifles to the good we'll do repaying Gob.

Love Sings

—James Gentzel

A MUSIC HALL, LOCATED IN A FORGOTTEN PART of town, is dimly lit by an almost unnoticeable network of lights hanging high above on the rafters. The thrust of its light shines down upon a lone figure, a young man in somewhat shabby brown loafers, playing a baby grand piano on the stage. The shadow playing on the side of his face makes his features almost indistinguishable.

Just as he shifts from his moody, rebellious melodic groove to a darker and smooth song that has a silky jazz feel, another young man walking with a slight stoop to his shoulders steps into the hall, the meager light reflecting lightly off of his pale blond hair. He nods his emotionless face to the piano player and sits down in one of the plush red seats. The hall is empty except for these two young men.

After several minutes of being lulled by the sleek tones emerging from within the depths of the piano, the young men raise their heads in curiosity at the sound of a door opening and then shutting.

Emerging from the dusky shadows is a girl around seventeen. She carefully takes a finger and gently rubs her eye as she walks across the plush red carpet of the hall and down the incline of the floor towards the stage. The eyes of the piano player return to the keys, but the eyes of the blond man never leave the girl's face.

The girl steps onto the stage, and a stream of light falls on her face, illuminating her milky white skin. She is wearing a simple white dress that hangs gracefully from her slender frame. The light causes shadows, emphasizing the tired lines under her eyes.

The girl sits down beside the young blond man and leans her head toward him.

"Hello," she says softly. Her eyes gleam and the brown darkness inside seems to be bottomless like you could stare into them until you would slowly disappear.

The blond man nods his head and somewhat shyly keeps his gaze at the floor. The girl turns her head ever so slightly, causing her long, dirty-blond hair to cascade over the back of the chair.

The young man at the piano runs his hands lightly over the keys, coaxing slow and seductive tones from the strings. He leans his head back in a thoughtful pose and begins to sing in a pleasantly raspy voice that embodies the sultriness of the evening.

"I can see a new horizon, where the sun is always shining..."

The blond turns his head towards the girl and meets her gaze. "So...I think that..." His sentence is rendered incomplete as his methodical manner of thought is unmercifully disrupted by the naked intensity of her eyes.

"Well?" she asks, her eyes raised in an amused fashion.

"Where were you last night, Eve?" the blond man asks her.

She slyly smiles. "Is that a rhetorical question?"

He turns his head back,

so he can seemingly study the pattern of the carpet. "No."

"Sorry Ethan, I was busy."

"I was here. I waited for you," Ethan says, a slight furrow becoming noticeable on his brow.

A soft blush colors her face. "I'm sorry."

"I hope I'll see you there, baby. I know, that you know, that I love you..."

Her hand creeps over the edge of the chair until it is on the armrest of the young man's chair, where the light reflects off the surface of her hand. The young man then places his larger hand over hers, extinguishing the reflection of light.

"And when the sun finally sets, just always keep believing that it will shine again..."

"Have you talked to Jen yet?" the girl asks him, her other hand unconsciously stroking the side of her leg in a worried pattern.

Up, down, up, down, the young man's eyes follow the movement of the girl's hand.

"No."

"Why? You said last night that you would..." her voice trails off.

"You weren't here last night," he reminded her sharply.

"That's right, you said it

the night before. C'mon, why the delay in telling her?"

"Please don't go away, I've got to hear you say..."

He shifts in the chair.

"I can't. For some reason I just can't. I'm sorry. Give me time."

The countenance on the girl's face changes and two spots of scarlet flush on her cheeks.

"Stand up for once. I'll be Amy to your Laurie and let Jen be Jo."

"I don't know how to tell her. I mean, don't you feel bad about this at all? I mean, it is your sister. I mean--"

"You mean, you mean, you mean! You mean nothing. You're a lot of talk. I thought we had an understanding?"

"You know I--"

"Don't even say it," the girl says, removing her hand from underneath his and entwining it with her other in a tight ball, resting tautly on her lap.

"To hear you say, I love you one more time..."

The blond man smiles and turns to the girl with a knowing look in his eye. "He just sang it."

She smiles back. "I know. Perfect timing."

The girl contorts her body in the chair so that she is facing the piano player who is melodramatically crooning.

"Hey," she says, "Why all

the sad love songs tonight?"

"What?" he asks, startled from his daydream. "Ah, I heard you. It's how I feel," he says morosely.

The girl squints to try to see his features underneath the shadow on his face. "Is it about Christa?"

He nods his head quickly. Painfully.

"You're not going to give up, are you?" the girl asks him, a twinge of sympathy detectable in her voice.

The piano player nods and a sad, barely perceptible smile plays on his face as he half closes his tired eyes. "Yeah, I sure am. I'm tired of standing at the end of the dock, staring at the green light, and wishing I was on the other side of the lake. So now, I'm a recluse, hiding in the shadows and memories of the past, waiting and wishing something would change."

"But you shouldn't--" the girl starts to say, but the blond man cuts her off mid-sentence.

"Leave him alone..."

Ethan says quietly as the piano player goes back to his music.

"You said it before, why not today? What is in store, for me now that you're away...?"

The young man at the piano sustains the last note of the song until it fades, disappearing somewhere into the

night, perhaps filtering over to join the rowdy music in a raging night club or harmonizing with a mother's voice as she sings her child to sleep. He stands and quietly lowers the top of the baby grand with the grace that only a person who had done this act many times before has. He runs his hand over the top of the closed piano as he walks towards the steps that lead down to the main floor of the music hall. Just before he steps down, he pauses momentarily to turn towards the blond man and the girl. This time the light shines on his face directly, causing him to faintly squint as a vague smile graces his lips.

"Good luck, kids. I wish you the best danged luck anyone ever had."

The young man disappears into the shadows of the hall. The blond man and the girl hear his steps albeit muffled by the soft carpet.

The door closes in a respectful and polite manner leaving the Ethan and Eve alone.

Eve turns to the Ethan.
"Well?"

He leans over and kisses her smirking lips. He then settles back in his chair and closes his eyes. "Well, I'll tell you. True love is...it's...actually, I don't know."

The two sit quietly in

the shadows for several minutes, with the humming lights high above providing the background music for the occasion. Eve breaks the silence first.

"You know, I feel sorry for him."

"Who? Oh, you mean with Christa?" Ethan asks her, nodding his head in the direction of the piano.

Eve nods. "It just doesn't seem fair, does it?"

Ethan shrugs his shoulders. "True love is never logical, Eve."

"I know. Two months ago I never would have imagined I'd be sitting here with you. It's kind of a dream come true," she whispers, her dilated eyes searching Ethan's.

A smile comes over his face as he takes her hand and pulls her toward him. "Same here, baby. Same here."

Outside somewhere in the darkness of the night, amidst the raucous jubilation and apathy of the roaring nightlife of the city, the piano player walks down a narrow alley between two ancient brick buildings built with crumbling bricks. He pauses and looks into a grimy window that is directly under a green and pink neon sign that weakly flashes "Eats and Drinks: Open 'til LATE," as a sort of signaling beacon to the tired and

huddled masses roving the city. He can see Christa inside, just as he knew she would be, sitting beside a lean and tall man whose eyes are almost Oriental. An ancient record player inside scratches out Glen Campbell singing "Wichita Lineman."

The piano player outside shakes his head in wonder and continues to walk until he is standing on the edge of the Landry Bridge magnificently stretched out over the Wainscot River. He shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his leather jacket and breathes in the clear and crisp night air as he tilts his head back and looks at the stars in the sky and the bright lights of the city that surround him. The moon is low on the horizon and resembles a pale, shimmering ghost, cunningly haunting the creatures beneath it with its insipid luminosity. He takes in the beauty of the city at the night; the lights, the sounds of crickets and the waves lapping at the shore, and somewhere far in the distance the mournful wail of a train can be heard. Yet he is alone, and he grudgingly accepts the fact.

As the moon rises at its barely perceptible speed, a fatigued bank teller, traveling from one side of the river to the other, observes a hazy blur in the distance accompanied by

a feeble groan. The bank teller dismisses the sight and resumes his thoughts of yesterday's baked chicken that is soon to be his dinner when he reaches his third floor apartment. His pleasant thoughts are returned back to the present when he hears a splash that is way, way far away. He rushes over to the side of the bridge where he sees a crumpled piece of paper. Picking it up and examining it, one side is a musical score with the title "Love Sings," on the other side written with a shaky hand in black ink reads, "Tell her I loved her." The bank teller raises one eyebrow thoughtfully and casually leans over the side of the rail and peers into the abyss of the night, seeing nothing but the clear, black water sparkling from the light of the gleaming moon. The teller slips the sheet of paper into his pocket and pulls out his cell phone. He quickly dials a number and waits.

"Hello? No, I'm fine. I'd like to report a suicide."

A short distance away from the music hall, a girl and a young man are talking in an almost empty restaurant which is only inhabited by them and the pot-bellied owner who keeps sending nasty looks their way, wishing they would leave. Outside a green and pink neon sign

flashes, sending a multicolored glow through the dirty window which shines, mixing up with the other confused colors inside the room.

The dark-haired girl pats the tall man beside her on the arm. "I'm sorry. I really can't go out with you anymore. I've done some soul searching and realized that I'm really in love with this guy who's like my best friend. Not everyone would say he's the most amazing guy ever, but I love him. I don't know why I never noticed before."

The man's eyes narrow to mere slits. "You can't do this to me, Christa, lead me on like for

a month and drop this bomb on me."

She smiles wanly. "I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. It just kind of happened. He can play the piano like no one else that I know. My favorite song is a song he wrote just for me."

"Well how nice. What's it called? "The Trail of Broken Hearts?" or something like that?" he spats venomously.

She ignores his sarcasm and half closes her hazel-colored eyes and murmurs fondly, "The title? "Love Sings." Poetic, isn't it?"



—Sheree Whitelock, "Snow Day"

The Magician

—Andrew Grimes

THE WOMAN RAN ONTO THE STAGE, BLOOD trickling from her thigh. She stared out at the audience, her eyes frozen in the stage lights. "Please, help me!" she screamed, her voice quivering with fear. The audience laughed in response.

She froze when she heard the curtain rustle behind her. Slowly she turned her head, feet frozen to the stage. Behind her stood a man wearing a black cape, his face covered by a white mask. He took a step forward, offering his hand.

"Get away from me!" She screamed, swinging her arms at him. The audience erupted in laughter and applause.

He retracted his hand and walked past her to the center of the stage. He stood there for a moment, his head turning side to side.

"Good evening ladies and gentleman!" A harsh voice erupted from behind the mask. "How are we this fine evening?" He was answered with more applause and a couple of drunken slurs. He waited for the room to get quiet. He turned back toward the girl. She stood transfixed on the stage, her face frozen with a look of pure horror.

"And how are you my darling?" He asked her, his voice cutting into the air. She stared at him, her arms wrapped around her torso, and her knees shaking uncontrollably.

"Please don't do this," she begged, her voice drowned out by tears.

The man in the cape took a step closer and placed his hand upon her cheek. "Oh, but I have to Miss. Svenson, you see the audience came here to see magic, not a slut beg on stage." The audience yelled in agreement. "Now what to do with you?" He circled her, his arm slowly caressing her

body. She quivered and tried to push him away, but he grabbed her around the neck and shook her violently.

"How about we cut her in half?" He turned to the audience, his teeth gritted into a sneer. "Or maybe a dunk in water is more to your pleasure?" The audience cheered and booed. "No, I know what to do with a pretty thing like you."

He released her and she stumbled to the floor, her body shaking as she cried out to the audience. "Please, help me!" The audience responded with angry chants and ferocious roars.

The man in the black cape walked over to a stool and held out a small bag to the audience. "Tonight ladies and gentlemen, you shall see this woman turned into that which lies between her sweet, sweet legs!" Cheers and laughter echoed through out the small auditorium. He smiled to them and bowed. The girl sat still. Her makeup smeared across her face, silent tears rolling down her pale cheeks.

He walked toward her and held out the bag. "Fear what is unknown!" He threw the bag onto the ground. The stage exploded into a giant smoke screen. Rainbow colored smoke swept across the stage and into the audience. The man in the black cape pulled out a re-

mote from his pocket, took one last look at the girl, and pressed the switch. The floor dropped out from underneath her and she disappeared with a scream.

When the smoke finally cleared, there he stood, and in his hands was a cat. The auditorium erupted in applause. He smiled, holding the cat high in the air. Coins and dollar bills littered the stage. He kissed the cat on top of its head and threw it into the audience. "Ladies and gentleman, the show will now take a fifteen minute recess. Please, use the bathrooms and other necessities at this time. Thank you." He walked off the stage and disappeared behind the curtain.

Backstage was filled with noises of heavy machinery, and the drunken laughter of entertainers. The man in the black cape took off his mask and handed it to a frail blonde woman leaning against the wall. She took the mask and walked away. He walked around a trolley full of expensive, colorful clothes, and walked down a flight of stairs. At the end of the stairs was a bench. Ten girls sat on the bench, heavy makeup covering their faces. He stopped in front of them. His head tilted to the side.

"Which one will it be?" he asked, aloud. The girls gig-

gled in response. Some pulling up there dresses and skirt, others whispering promises of enjoyment. He smiled and kissed their hands. His eyes froze on a girl who sat at the end of the bench. She had dark blonde hair that hung loosely across her face, her pale skin covered by red-shiny lipstick and dark mascara. She wore a tight white t-shirt that hung just above the bellybutton. Her skirt clenched tightly to her thigh.

He held out his hand to her. She looked up at him, her eyes examining him from head to toe. Finally, she reached out her hand, and he escorted her down the hallway. The chaotic noise soon subsided into the quiet tapping of their shoes against the cold concrete. He pushed the door open at the end of the hall.

"After you, my lady." He urged.

She walked past him, her perfuming arousing his nostrils. He offered her a chair and walked over to a small desk that stood in the corner of the room.

"Drink?"

She turned to him. "No, thank you."

He shrugged. "More for me." He poured a bottle of whiskey and sat in the chair across from her. They sat there for a moment. He sipped quietly on

his drink, his eyes scanning her. He set the glass down on the table. "Do you know what it is I do, Miss.."

"Rose," she said quietly, her eyes on the glass bottle.

He looked over, "Are you sure you don't want any?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm not a drinker. I just like the color of it."

He laughed out loud. "Too bad, you'd make a good drunk." He shuffled in his seat, rubbing his face with his palm. "Now then, Miss. Rose, do you know where you are?"

She sat quietly as if pondering the question, a smile spread across her face. "Yes, I'm sitting on a couch and listening to a man ask me if I know where I am."

He chuckled. "Very clever, Miss. Rose, but we have very little time for joke telling this evening. Since you are either blatantly ignorant of your where a bouts, or you cannot control that sass of yours, then I'll tell you." He leaned forward in the chair, his eyes locked on hers. "Your at your funeral, Miss. Rose."

The woman let out a laugh. "And how am I going to die?" she asked.

He leaned back into the chair, and took another drink. "I'm going to kill you Miss.

Rose." He pointed toward the door. "And they are going to watch you die, and cheer for it, beg for me to do it again and again."

She watched the honey color liquid splash against the inside of the bottle. "Is that what happened to her?"

"I assume by her you mean the girl on stage?" She nodded. "Yes, that's exactly what happened. Poor girl fell a good ways onto the concrete floor. Made quiet a mess. But nothing that a barrel and some gasoline can't fix." He paused and sniffed loudly. "I do believe you can smell her burning."

The girl smiled. "I do believe you can." She gave another small laugh. "Is that what your going to do with me?"

The man in the black cape sighed heavily. "No, Miss. Rose, how special do you think you are? Each of my assistants earn their deaths. I do not give them. I think you can understand this considering your profession."

She looked down at herself, pulling her skirt further down her thigh. She looked back up, her face expressionless. "So this is not a joke? You really intend to murder me?"

He stared at her blankly. "Yes, Miss Rose, I will murder you, and then I shall murder the rest of the neighborly prostitutes

that are sitting on that bench so eager to die."

"But why?" she asked. Her voice teasing with curiosity.

The man took another drink and set the glass down heavily upon the table. "Is it not obvious? Because I can. It is that simple Miss. Rose. There is no big meaning, no grand plan. Prostitutes will do anything for money. If that includes dying then so be it. No cops are going to sniff around for a couple of whores that went missing."

She stared at him for a moment and then looked toward the door. "But what about them? They must realize what you do."

He smiled. "Oh, yes they do. They may deny it. They may turned blindly away. But they know perfectly well. And you know what, Miss. Rose? They love it. They love the feeling of watching someone die. The anticipation of hearing that last scream. Oh, god they will pretend they don't understand. Cry out their innocence but when that blood escapes into the air." He paused and stared across the room. "They need more. We are animals, Miss. Rose. Don't forgot that."

He sipped the last of the drink and glanced down at his watch. "I am sorry dear, but we are out of time for the evening."

He looked at her with a frown on his face. "Unfortunately you are not near frightened enough." He stood up from the chair, staggered a bit, and then clenched the back of the chair for support. His eyes were glazed, he licked his lips feverishly. "You see Miss. Rose," his voice slurred with each word. "When my performers go on stage they must be frightened. That is the key to my business. Without fear then this is nothing more than a play, a lie, and that is not how a successful business man operates."

She stood erect in the chair, her eyes frozen on him. "You don't scare me."

He laughed and began to step away from the chair, his arms swaying to his side. "Oh, but I will. I have my methods. Cutting, beating, chocking, and for the more attractive types," he glanced down at her legs and smiled. "More biological ways."

He took a step toward her and fell. The glass falling from his hands and shattering on the floor. She watched as the crystal beads spread across the floor, their jagged points dripping with the toxic liquid. Her eyes crossed the room and fell upon him. He lay there, his body rigid and his eyes shut.

She sat listening to his heavy breathing, watching his

chest rise and fall. She stood up and walked toward him. "Oh, but you don't understand." she said, her voice was cold and low. "The woman you killed was my sister, and tonight I'm going to kill you."

The man in the black cape woke up the noise of applause. Each clap echoing crushing against his skull, sending tremors through out his body. He squinted at the bright light above his head, and then he saw the dark figure. His mouth hung open, his eyes frozen on her. She stared down at him, a smile spread across her thin face. She raised her hands to the audience. "Tonight ladies and gentleman, for the first time ever, a man will be cut in half."

For Pete Dully. Hopefully this will make your canon some day.

The Gospel of Bubba

—Malcom

TEN YEARS AGO, I WAS WORKIN AT CIRCLE K convenience store cleanin and stockin stuff. The owner, Mr. Barbrady was a friend of my mama's, and he's real nice so he gived me a job. He said, "Bubba, you make your mama and me proud when you workin. You work hard no matter what, ya hear?" 'cept he don't talk bad like me. Well, I sure did like that job a whole lot. I liked cleanin and stockin.

Sometimes he even lemme make the sammiches that we sold in the cooler. I always liked slicin the meat on the slicer because when I was doin it I could look at the knives on the wall. I sure do like knives. The Circle K had all kinds of knives. Big ones. Small ones. Medium ones. The bigger ones was real wide and maybe half a foot or so, and the small ones was as big as a pinky finger—the blades that is. I liked em cause they was real shiny. Sometimes I forgot about the slicin and I'd just be grindin the end of the ham or whatever for half a hour before someone come yell at me.

Well this here's the story that I's supposed to write down for you. One day I was workin with Wendy. Boy I sure did like Wendy a whole lot. She was so pretty. She had the most gorgeous hair I'd ever seen, then or now. And she was always real nice to me and I was always nice to her. Not everyone was real nice to me like Wendy or Mama or Mr. Barbrady so I's always liked to say when people is nice to me. Wendy was workin up at the casher, and I was slicin the ham for ham sammiches when I started lookin at the knives like I always do but this time was different. This time they started *really* shinin

real bright, and I had to put my hands up, and all the sudden the brightness died down and there was this shiny man floatin about in front of the knives. I squinted at him for a sec and then he said, "Bubba this is God."

I bout crapped myself cause I couldn't believe that God would be speakin to someone like me. They's more important people to speak to like the prezident or famous people or some-thin. Those people is smarter than me. So God starts goin on again, and he said, "Bubba, listen to me. People has lost faith in me and you gonna help me fix that up right quick."

That confused me. "How am I supposed to fix that up? Ain't nobody ever care what I say."

"That don't matter, Bubba. You gonna help me, and then you gonna write about it later. And people will believe you."

I don't know why God wanted me to write. I don't write all that well. Don't talk so well neither. But here he is telling me I gots to do just that. "What am I supposed to write about? I don't got nothin to say."

And then God smiled at me and said, "There's some bad man comin in here right now. You get a couple of these here knives, and you get him.

You stop him from hurtin your friend Wendy. And he'll hurt her. Hurt her bad."

I got scared. I ain't been in a fight or nothin really cause Mama always told me that fightin was bad and I should be a passafist. And I was. So I says to God, "I'm scared. Why do I gotta hurt this guy? What's he gonna do?"

And then God set me straight sayin, "Bubba, I'm not gonna lie. He's comin at you with a gun. You gotta swing them knives to stop the bullets, and then cut him until he can't hurt nobody no more. I'll be on your side but I can't do it for you."

I started cryin just a little and I told God that I'd do it even though I was scared as heck. So I grabbed those knives up and walked out the stock room door into the front towards the cashier.

Sure enough, God was right. There was this man wearin a ski-mask, wavin a gun in Wendy's face. She was so scared and sobbin and that made me start to cry a little more cause she was makin me more scared. Wendy looked at me and she got more scared too and then I started shakin and the guy turned to me and said, "Put down those knives stupid or I'll blow your blankin head off" but he didn't say blankin. God don't

like swearin so I don't do it.

I was breathin so hard and cryin a little more and I knew if I didn't do what God said me and Wendy were gonna get hurt real bad so I yelled and charged at him swingin my knives as good as I could.

I heard the gun fire and it was so loud but when I was chargin I wasn't scared anymore because I knew God was with me, and I heard the bullets hit the knives and wizz by and soon he was out of em and I kept swingin them knives until he was all cut up and wasn't movin on the floor and Wendy stopped me. She was yellin at me, screamin, "Bubba! Bubba! Are you crazy?! Why'd you do that you coulda been killed!" and she fell to the floor and I fell with her and we was cryin and I said I was sorry but I had to stop the bad man and we sat there and cried for what seemed like forever, and then a customer came in and saw the man and ran out and called the cops.

They put me in the cruiser cause I was covered in blood and it did look kinda bad but Wendy told them what happened but they didn't believe her at first. So they hauled me off to the station and put me in a room with a mirror. Soon enough, this guy in a suit come in and started talkin to me but I don't remember his name. I

think he was a cop cause he had a badge but he wore a suit so I'm not sure. He said, "Your friend Wendy said that you charged that man with knives because he had a gun."

I said, "Yea, I did that."

He said, "Well, why'd ya do that?"

I looked at his face and said, "God said I had to save Wendy and me from that bad man."

He kinda looked at me real funny like and then laughed once, shakin his head and mumblin something about God. Then he said, "You is lucky to be alive."

I didn't think lucky had nothin to do with it. God was there protectin me. He said he was. I didn't tell him that cause he laughed at me a little. I don't like bein laughed at.

Then the man said, "You know why they hauled you in, boy?" and I shook my head no.

"They hauled you in because they thought your friend Wendy was full of blank" but again he didn't say blank. "They said there was no way in heck that you stopped all them bullets with knives. No way in heck. But I saw them knives, boy. And I found all the bullets. Sure enough, you is one lucky son of a blank." And he laughed pretty hard. "You want somethin to drink, boy? Water or

coke or coffee?"

I was real thirsty for milk but I knowed that he didn't have none on hand cause nobody ever does so I said no thank you and he said he was gonna try and get ahold of my mama.

It wasn't too long before Mama came burstin in, cryin like it was gonna be banned tomorrow, huggin me and kissin my forehead sayin stuff like it was a miracle and then scoldin me for bein so stupid and then sayin more stuff about a miracle happenin. I was cryin too and I thought it was all a miracle too. And I thought about God.

I slept a lot the next day. Musta been fourteen hour at least. I kept dreamin about the phone ringin and slammin down but turns out I wasn't dreamin at all. Reporters kept callin, askin to talk to me, Mama said. I didn't believe her one bit. Nobody ever really wanna talk to me, but they heard about God talkin to me and now they wanna talk to me about God talkin to me. But Mama kept hangin up the phone, tellin them not to call back, and I asked her why but she just said, "Cause people will think you's crazy Bubba, talkin about God like that!" and she start to wailin again. That didn't make no sense because I knowed Mama believed in God because she told me about Him.

Two days later, I's sup-

posed to work but when I got to the store Mr. Barbrady was there and so were the police. He didn't look none too happy so I waited for him to talk to me first. He said, "Bubba! Bubba, we need to talk in the back office." and I got scared. Only times I been back there were bad times. I'd get yelled at for this or that but I'd only been back there twice. This makes number three. Like three strikes is what I was thinkin.

So I followed him back there and he shut the door and said, "Bubba, thank God you're alright. I think you did a good thing stoppin that blankhole. Real good thing." Mr. Barbrady liked to swear a lot but I never said nothin because it wasn't right to talk back to your boss.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I thought I'd gone and done it this time. "I was just doin what God told me to. I didn't really wanna hurt nobody."

Mr. Barbrady stopped me and said, "Bubba you did alright. I think you probably had to do it for you and Wendy. That man was a real son of a blank who killed a lot of people before he came here. A real son of a blank."

"That's what God said!" 'cept God didn't say any bad words, just that the man was real bad.

Mr. Barbrady, he laughed

a little, and then he looked at me real serious like, and he said, "Son, do you know why the cops are here right now?" and I said no. He said, "They was clearin off a bunch of crazies blankers that wanna come see the miracle kid at the Circle K."

That scared me a little bit again. Why would people I don't know come lookin for me? I didn't like the way that sounded. Not at all.

"Well, Bubba, I talked to your Mama and she agrees with me. So listen, you can't come to work for a while. I don't want no crowd of crazy blankholes around the store, and nobody needs to be botherin you or your Mama." I got sad and started breathin harder, but he rushed to say, "Now Bubba it's only temporary now, okay? Only til this whole thing dies down some." and he hugged me and I was sobbin. I was bein fired and I didn't like it one bit.

"Bubba, you is like a son to me, and I don't want you or your Mama gettin hurt or bothered by some idiot yokels who think you some kind of savior. That stuff may have been a miracle, but Godblankit you is still Bubba! Not nothin else!"

"I's sorry Mr. Barbrady, I's sorry! I work harder when I come back and I won't mess at all with them knives again." I wiped my nose and eyes on my

shirt even though Mama always tells me not to.

"I'll keep in touch with your Mama, and you get some rest, ya here? Go on, she should be out there waitin for ya."

I closed the office door behind me and I think I heard him laughin but when I turned around I realized that he was cryin in there. I started cryin some more. It was not a good time for me.

So that was ten years ago. I still don't have my job back. Mama just take care of me. We had to move out in the country instead of in the city, so now I's not close to anything so I just walk around in the woods or the field or wherever there ain't cars drivin by. Mama works a whole lot more but she make me take care of the house and the gardenin and repairin stuff. I never saw Wendy again. She didn't come back to work or anything, and I never got the chance to ask nobody else about it. Sometimes we get a visitor wantin to talk to me but Mama has to chase em off cause she think they all crazy.

God was with me that day no doubt. And I thank him a lot for that. I just wish he were here right now. If he is, I can't see him anymore.

Trinkets

—*Sarabeth Mull*

DID YOU FEEL IT? DO YOU ALREADY KNOW WHEN you touch me? Can you read it on my face? Can you sense it in my fingertips? That sense of longing. The hope for yesterday. The outlook for tomorrow. Can you see through me with just a touch? I am deceiving you as we touch. I am already cheating on you, and making a fool of you, and you have no idea... Or do you?

He touched my wrist. He touched it, and he has not a clue, but that wrist belongs to someone else. To Steven. That wrist belongs to my Steven. No matter. I am here. I am here with David. David is my choice today. Does David know that I am making a fool of him? That with each look or smile or laugh or touch that I am deceiving him? He doesn't know. He couldn't know. Damn it. He must know. I hate him for not knowing. I hate him for being too stupid to see that I am deceiving him. Maybe he is deceiving me? Maybe he DOES see it. Maybe he DOES know my betrayal, but his betrayal is MORE than mine. So he keeps his thoughts to himself, so that way I won't have those thoughts either. I won't be able to accuse him. He is sneaky and deceitful, and I shouldn't be with him. I should be with James. James was the one that gave me the earrings. I'm wearing them now.

Do you know that, David? The ears you whisper into at night before going to bed already belong to James. They belong to him. He was there long before you were, and he'll still be there long after you are gone. Your impact on my life is still unknown. Maybe you will get to have a toe, I may be able to spare a toe for you, but really, one can never tell. Sometimes, a mark is never left. A part is never owned. Sometimes, it's just a person passing through and then it's

gone.

What about Adam?

Adam liked to travel. He lived all over the United States and in many places all over the world. It was hard to contain him. Yet, I did. Somehow, I was able to keep him with me for a year and a half. How this was possible, I will never know. He had spark and spirit and could speak many languages. He was born on May 15, 1973. I loved him for many things, but mostly I loved him for taking the time to love me. I also hated him for taking the time to love me. I knew that I could not keep him grounded. I knew that soon he would want to fly again, and move to a place far away across the earth. So, I pushed him away. I didn't want to hold him back, so I made him leave. In hindsight, I should not have done this. He was a grown man, capable of making his own decisions. He wanted me. He WANTED me. I was not a burden, yet I alone decided that I was. I convinced myself that he was going to leave, and when he DID leave, I told myself and him that I had been right all along. I knew he would go, and now he had. A part of him is left behind. Here it is on my finger. It is a ring made out of a coin from Egypt. The coin is of no special sentiment. It was just the money he carried in his pocket while

he was there. But, when he met me, he noticed my appreciation of foreign coins; so he took it to a jeweler and had it made into a ring for me to wear. He didn't ask for it back when he left. He just left, to God knows where. Now, the ring stays behind as a reminder of his love. Of my love. Of the love that I could never quite grasp or understand. Adam owns this finger. And YOU, David, will never be able to have that.

I am cold hearted. I carry my secrets where everyone can see. If they only knew how to look. No one knows where to look for my secrets, and I suppose that is the best secret of all. The trick I play on the rest of the world. The trick I am playing on you, David. Poor, ignorant, gullible David. I haven't quite figured out your purpose in my life, and so far you have shown me nothing of interest. Yet here you are, filling in my time, and being there only when I have no one else to talk to.

David crawls into bed beside me. I know what he wants. I want none of that. I've already done that today. With James. James who owns my ears.

Who is James?

James was a bank manager. He wore a three-piece suit every day, even if he wasn't working. Even in the summer. He was professional. He was

tall. He was intuitive. He saw right through me the first time we spoke on the phone. He was born on May 5, 1973. He was married. And since he did not care about that, neither did I. I spoke with him on the phone for a year before I ever slept with him. And after that I was hooked. He was my father. He was my brother. He was my child. He was my boyfriend. He was my husband. He was my lover. Somehow, he encapsulated all of these things. Yet, there was a purposeful distance. I never told him I loved him. He dominated me. He took me places no one can ever begin to dream to go. Explaining them would only diminish their impact. Right before Christmas, we fought. The end all be all of fights. I assumed it was over. And then the package came. In it was a writing pen, chocolates and the earrings. The earrings that I still wear. The earrings that I will never take off. The earrings that James bit onto this morning to pinch my ears in the heat of passion. This morning, before you were here, David. My betrayal still exists with James. He is here. He was here. He has owned and still owns these ears. He will never let go, because I will not let him. I am his escape and he is mine. If you are with me, you have to take him too.

I am disgusted with myself. I live everyday with this guilt. But, if I did not have this guilt, what else would I have? I need to feel something, anything, even if it is guilt, to remember that I am still alive. For the moment that I stop feeling, that is the moment that I will cease to live.

A comment was made tonight. David told me that he saw someone wearing my bracelet. This is an impossibility, not because my bracelet is one of a kind, it isn't. It is impossible because no other bracelet in the history of the world has been owned by the same two people as mine. I wear the bracelet every day, and it owns me as much as I own it. There are many pictures of me, but none that exist with the bracelet in them. I am very conscious of this. And that is because this bracelet belongs to Mary. I stole it from her.

Mary and I started talking to one another in March. It never felt odd or out of the ordinary. We had a connection that one could not deny. Mary was born on November 17, 1969. She was married to a man named Todd. He did not fulfill her. She was an excellent lover. She was able to satisfy me in ways no man ever could. Mary was an airline pilot, which meant that she would come into town for

a few days, and then be gone again. She didn't consider what we did cheating, since it wasn't with another man. I would lay in her hotel room with her for hours, talking about things I did not know, acting as if I was more worldly than I actually am. She would fall asleep inside of my embrace. Her warmth comforted me like a soft blanket. Every so often, her breathing would slow to an almost non-existent pace. Then, suddenly, she would jump awake, gasping for breath. Sometimes I wondered if I was there only to make sure that the gasp happened. To make sure that she did not, in fact, stop breathing altogether in the middle of the night. No matter. I used her for my own selfish comfort as well. I am still not sure if I loved her; ours was a confusing courtship. The last time we stayed together, she had to rush out the door to catch an early flight in the morning. She left her bracelet. Now my bracelet. I know she did not mean to leave it, but I never told her that I found it. She never asked me if I did. Two weeks later it was discovered that her husband had cancer. I never saw Mary again. But, yet, here she is. She exists with me always. Mary holds my hand every day, and the smoothness of the silver on the bracelet reminds me of her soft touch, that could never be

replicated by you, David.

David likes to smell my hair. He likes to touch it too. To run his fingers through it. Every now and again, his fingertips get tangled in between where my hair ends and my necklace begins. When I feel this slight pull, I realize that I'm still wearing it. And that leads me to Anas.

To put it simply, Anas was from Morocco. He is Muslim. And though he does not practice daily, he does adhere to the celebration and fasting of the Muslim holiday of Ramadan. I met him during Ramadan. I found while fasting for this holiday, that as long as you are good during the daylight hours, at night you are given free rein to do as you please. Our courtship involved cussing, smoking, drinking and fucking, but only after 7pm, and before 7am. My connection with Anas, who was born on August 25, 1978, was purely superficial. He took me to fancy restaurants, where we ate like kings. He took me to nightclubs where we were the VIP's and we were waited on hand and foot. The liquor would flow freely. The music would play loudly. We would dance wildly. And his friends. His FRIENDS. They would be doing the same thing. We would all be together in a group. All there for the same reason. To have fun. They had money, which meant

we had money. Though I was suspicious of where the money was coming from, since none of them ever seemed to work. Without asking, my question was answered. Anas and his friends enjoyed a very particular fine white powder. They enjoyed it for work and for play. And the moment I realized this, I was done with him. I never loved him, but I knew he loved me. He told me he did every day. I never answered back, and he never realized that I did not answer. Anas had a coin that he had brought back from his last trip home to Morocco. He had noticed my ring, the one from Adam, and he had a necklace made for me. He did truly love me, and though I did not love him, I was sorry to see him go. He earned the spot he has around my neck.

David, David, David. Do you really think that I could ever make room for you? That there is a part of you that is as important to me as this ring? As this bracelet? As these earrings? As this necklace? There is no part of you that I want or care about as much as I do these things. These things make up who I am. They are as much a part of me as who my parents are. In fact, they are more a part of me because they were my choice. All of my life, all of my memories, are wrapped around these trin-

kets. Yet, I would trade in each of these things to have Steven back. My Steven. My lifeline.

Steven and I met in the most usual of ways. He called my place of business asking to speak with a co-worker. That person was busy, so he decided to talk to me until they were free. After a few days, he was calling just to talk to me. After a week, he had my personal number. After a month, he had my trust. He was born on April 18, 1957. We would call one another every night at 11pm, without fail. We started off talking about our day. Then it grew toward family. Life choices. Mistakes made. Greatnesses achieved. Lessons learned, and shared. By midnight I would be standing on my front porch, even in the dead of winter, smoking a cigarette and laughing harder than I ever had before. By 1am, his voice would be so slurred by the bourbon that I could barely understand him anymore. And by 2am, I would have finally convinced him that it was time to go to bed. This was our ritual. Our comfort zone. He had no family. I had no want for my own. We shared each other's company through cell phones. And I enjoyed it that way. As close as can be without ever involving that messy face to face communication. He told me he loved me at the end of every

conversation. And I told him I loved him right back. Because I did. Christmas came. And with that holiday, my Steven came as well. He showed up at my place of business, unexpectedly. He had not been drinking, which meant that he was shaking uncontrollably. I looked at him for the first time, and stared directly into his eyes. They were a haze of grey and blue, and each time he blinked, I could feel my heart skip a beat. He couldn't hold my stare. He was taken. Crippled by the intensity of my presence. He had not been expecting a woman like me. Even with our nightly conversations, he had not realized the power that I held. At least, that's what he told me. I had no clue that this power existed. In fact, I still don't think it does. When we walked outside and he kissed me, I was taken aback. This, I was not ready for. I was connected to this man, inside and out, but I didn't want him to be like the others. I wanted him to know me. The real me. Not the throw away sexual side. Men had used up that part of me in the past, and where had it gotten me? I thought Steven was different. I thought he didn't care about moving forward. I was happy with our relationship as it was. With no complications. With no distractions. Just pure emotion. He obviously wanted more, and

I was not ready to give it. I busied myself with work. The phone calls grew further apart. Steven was ordered to go to rehab for his drinking on the job. On the day he was to leave, he gave me his watch to hold onto. I was to keep it until he returned. I was unable to speak to him while he was gone. A month later he was home. He called me, begging me to come over, and bring some liquor with me. I refused. And a month after that he was dead. Steven, my Steven, was gone forever. He died on May 3, 2009. I have his watch, my watch. It rests on my wrist where his hand should be. It never keeps the time. And when it dies, as it tends to do daily, I am reminded of his death. And what I could have done to stop it. What I did not do. I was selfish, and I allowed Steven, my Steven to die. I wear this watch because I need to be reminded of my selfishness, and my cold-heartedness. I wear it as a warning to myself to treat others with kindness, for you never know when they will be gone. Steven owns this wrist. He will never, ever let go. I will never let him. And you, David, will never be able to become what Steven, my Steven, was to me.

I toss and turn tonight. I let David lay beside me. But that is all. I cannot overcome the thought that I am not his. He

is not mine. He cannot be who everyone else was to me. Is he willing to share me? Can he? Would he? Does he want to live with the knowledge that every day he is surrounded by my past? He would ask me to let go of it. Of myself. He would make me cut off my finger. He would mutilate my wrists. Burn off my ears. Mar my neck. Could I live without these things? I am making his decisions for him.

What if I am his Adam, and he only loves me because he thinks I love him? Let's say I am his James, and he sees me like his mother, and his sister, and his child, and his girlfriend, and his wife and his lover. Maybe I encapsulate all of these things for him. Suppose I am his Mary, and I am the best lover that HE

has ever had? Perhaps I am his Anas, and I am the one who is showing him a life he never knew existed. Worst of all, what if I am his Steven? Maybe I am the one he runs to for comfort. Maybe I am his best friend. Maybe I am the only one he can trust with every ounce of his being and be able to cling to when his life is falling apart at the seams.

If these instances are true, it may be possible that I need to rethink my relationship with David. What if David could be the glue that holds all of the pieces of me together? David was born on July 29, 1980.

I am here. I am here with David. David is my choice today.



—Sheree Whitlock, "Painted Pony"

DEAR BILL,

Dear Bill

—*Deb Noll*

That night when you came for dinner was like the three years since I had moved away from home didn't exist. Being with you was so relaxed. We laughed and talked about the silly things we had done when we were in our teens—like your asking me to go for the first ride in your brand new 1974 Firebird Trans Am instead of your girlfriend, Cindy. She was so mad at you, and pretty ticked off at me! Or the time I drank so much and got sick because the guy I was crazy about, Dan, had taken another girl to Nick's 4th of July party. And Kathy—another of your girlfriends—was so jealous because you would leave her house and stop by to see me on your way home. Remembering the jolt from the blown out tire while driving to your favorite make-out spot with anticipation of taking our friendship to the next level really brought the laughs—the timing wasn't perfect that night; another year would pass until, on a cold November night, we would finally have our first kiss...

We each remembered that kiss differently. I remembered you saying, "Wow!" as if you didn't expect it to be that good. Then we had laughed, because I said to you, "I said I hadn't had *much* experience, not that I hadn't had *any*!" The more we kissed and tried to make out, the more something happened that interrupted the mood—like rabbit fur from my coat tickling your nose, causing you to sneeze—or the other car that pulled into the lane behind us. We thought it was the sheriff, but it was only another couple of would-be lovers. We ended up laughing more than kissing, and kissing was as far as it went that night. That was when

we decided not to ruin *a good thing*—our friendship—for a physical relationship. It made sense then...but this night you were in my apartment eating dinner, and I wondered, “*Had fate brought you back to me?*”

I hadn’t realized how much I had missed you until you were there sitting across the table from me. Being with you was so easy, just like it had always been since we met when we were 15 years old at Farm Bureau Regional School. Sitting across the table from you, I realized that you were a part of me that had been missing. Being apart from you had been like taking the “Funk” out of “Grand Funk Railroad”—your favorite band. You used to crank the volume up so loud playing *We’re an American Band* on the 8-track in the Trans. *You* were my *funk*—the music that stroked my every nerve. Sitting there eating, laughing, touching, gazing into your eyes, I felt an energy that had been missing from inside of me. All of a sudden I wasn’t homesick anymore.

That night I didn’t tell you that I was seeing someone; his name was Rich. Rich and I did not have the same type of bond, of kinship, of friendship, or of knowing everything about each other that you and I had. The first night I met Rich, I was

instantly attracted to him; he and I talked for hours just getting acquainted. Between the two of us there was a connection that I prayed would grow into a lasting friendship, and just maybe a lifetime relationship. That was what I thought I wanted until you returned to me. Your being here confused me...

You and I had spent our teen years doing the same things, hanging out in the same groups, helping each other with 4-H projects, telling each other about our experiences and our dreams. We both had our first jobs at Elder-Beerman Department Store together—you worked in receiving and I worked in the men’s clothing department. You and I knew each other intimately through our shared life experiences. You were my rock when Mom and Dad got divorced. Without your strength, encouragement, and broad shoulders on which I cried and cried, I don’t know to whom or where I would have turned during that devastating year of my life. I thanked God every day then for allowing you to be a part of my life. Now you were here and our conversations were continuations of the journey we had taken together.

Rich and I were in the exploratory stage of our relationship when every conversa-

tion had me hanging on to his every word, always learning something new about him, and looking forward with eager anticipation to any common bonds we shared. I sometimes lost my breath seeing how his life and mine somehow meshed together despite his being from a small town in eastern Pennsylvania and me from rural southwestern Ohio—he and I had so much in common.

I loved you both. With you, I felt at home—warm, cozy, relaxed. With Rich, I was on a safari—new, exciting, and adventurous. I didn't know which I desired the most.

As you got involved in your course work at the Ohio State University, we saw less of each other. During that time, Rich and I were seeing more of each other. My feelings for each of you were strong. I was confused, not knowing with which of you I wanted to explore the possibility of having a future. I didn't know if fate had brought you here to me, but if it had, shouldn't I at least give us a chance? Were we meant to be with each other forever? I knew you so well; a part of me hoped so. I had to know for sure... You thrived on obtaining things you thought you could never have. You had my friendship and unconditional love, but

you had never had me—not in that way. I was confident you thought you never would, unless we got married, and at that point in time, marriage wasn't on your mind. I was certain you wondered, as I did, what our making love to each other would be like. I was sure we both felt the tension pulling us together. I knew it would be easy to seduce you. I wanted my first time to be with you.

I invited you to dinner as I had done many times before, only this time I had a very different agenda. Instead of a comfortable evening together, eating, talking, and watching a movie, I wanted this evening to end with us making love. The entire evening was planned out in my mind. I went to my hope chest and took out the silk gown that I had been saving for my wedding night. I planned a menu of finger foods that we could feed to each other bite by bite. I even thought through some dialog that we might exchange...and then I thought of the ramifications that our making love could have. I knew you'd have protection. After the scare our sophomore year that you could have been the father of Leann's aborted baby, I knew you'd never be without protection again. I wasn't on the pill, and I knew I had a responsibil-

ity to protect myself against pregnancy as well. I went to the drug store feeling every bit as nervous as I had been at age 18 buying a *Playgirl* magazine. I felt as if all eyes were on me as I read the information on the boxes of spermicide. Fearful that I would have to explain why I was there, I hoped no one who knew me would come into Rite Aid. With sweaty palms, I took my selection to the counter along with a box of Kleenex and a pack of Dentyne gum—as if those two items would camouflage the real purpose behind my purchase.

The fears I had in the pharmacy were minor compared to the nerves that swelled up inside me as I waited in my apartment for you. I had set the table with candles. I had a bottle of wine chilling. I had made my bed with new sheets. I was pacing the floor, going in and out of the three rooms that made up my small apartment, wanting everything to be perfect. I was nervous because I knew this evening could change things between us...I was about to change my mind and change into jeans and t-shirt, but then I heard your knock...

I greeted you at the door, dressed in a flowing, pink negligee; I wasn't disappointed in your reaction as you smiled

and said, "What's this!" We drank the wine with our dinner of cheese, trail bologna on crackers, and strawberries dipped in chocolate. We didn't eat much; you kept telling me how pretty I was. You fed me a strawberry, and with one continuous motion, your finger slid from my lips down to the cleavage between my breasts. My body shivered from head to toe with anticipation. You kissed me and excused yourself from the table. I cleared away our few dishes. You went to the bathroom. I was standing in the living room waiting when you came out. You took me into your arms. You kissed me gently on the lips, then you kissed my neck. You smothered me in your arms, and you asked me, "Are you sure?" In a quivering whisper, I said, "Yes." You led me to the bedroom. You kissed my lips. You stroked my hair. Your fingers traced my face, my neck. I returned your kisses. I melted with each caress of your gentle fingers. We made love that night with the light on. You took me on a journey to places I had never been. We fell asleep in each other's arms. You stayed with me through the night. I never asked if you loved me, and I never said that I loved you. Your gentleness, your passion, your experience—this experience—

engraved a life-long memory on my heart. You had given me a gift I would keep for a lifetime...

When daylight came, I never offered you breakfast, I never asked you to stay, and I never asked when I'd see you again. I watched you get dressed, I slipped into my jeans and t-shirt, and I walked you to the door. Before I opened it, you took my face into your hands and lifted my face up to yours and kissed me. Then you asked in a soft and tender voice, "Are you okay?" It was probably the nicest, most sincere thing you had ever said to me. I smiled. Through tears, in a whisper I replied, "I'm fine." The tears were because of your gentleness; the tears were because I knew making love to you was something I had wanted for a long time and I wasn't disappointed. The tears were because I knew I would never be closer to you then I was at that moment, and the tears were because I knew we would never be that close again. I couldn't explain what I was feeling. You had made me so happy, but in that moment standing at the door, it wasn't you I was thinking of—my thoughts had moved away from you and me; they had jumped ahead to Rich and a strong desire to be with him.

You and I continued to

be friends; we frequently got together for dinner and a movie. During the blizzard of 1978, you called to see if I was okay. Then you told me you were going to drive home—a two and a half hour trip in good weather. You asked me if I wanted to ride along with you; I told you that you were crazy, and I tried to talk you out of risking your life. You didn't listen, and promised to call me when you got to your mom and dad's house. We cared deeply for each other, like family cares for one another. We never let that night get in the way of the specialness that was our friendship. Rich and I got engaged after a couple of years passed; you seemed distant and suggested that my marrying him was a mistake. If I hadn't known better, I would have said you were jealous. One weekend when I was gone from my apartment, a neighbor said that a guy had come knocking at my door demanding that I shouldn't get married. Her description of the guy fit you; but you never came back or called after that. When you graduated, you went back home, became an investment banker, and got married. I married Rich and moved to Delaware. You and I completely lost touch with each other.

On a football Saturday in late October, 1985, while stand-

ing at the corner of Fyffe Road and Lane Avenue on the OSU campus I looked up and saw you crossing the street, coming toward Rich and me. My heart skipped a beat. Our reunion was brief, echoing the customary "How are you?" "What's new?" I told you about my son. You told me about your wife, whom you had just put on a plane for a business trip to Japan. We were both very happy. We exchanged our addresses and phone numbers. We laughed and talked—like old times—as we walked to the Horseshoe where we parted with a hug, and a "Let's keep in touch..."

A few times I went to the phone to call you, but for some reason I never did. Several months passed. Then spring came. One evening I received a phone call from your mom. In a rasped voice between sniffs caused by floods of tears, she said, "Our Willy is dead." She and I cried trying to comfort each other. *You hadn't told me you had cancer...I felt so hurt...we knew each other so completely...why hadn't you called me to tell me...I (Rich and I) would have come...* She told me the details for your burial. I wrote them down.

You never told me good-bye.

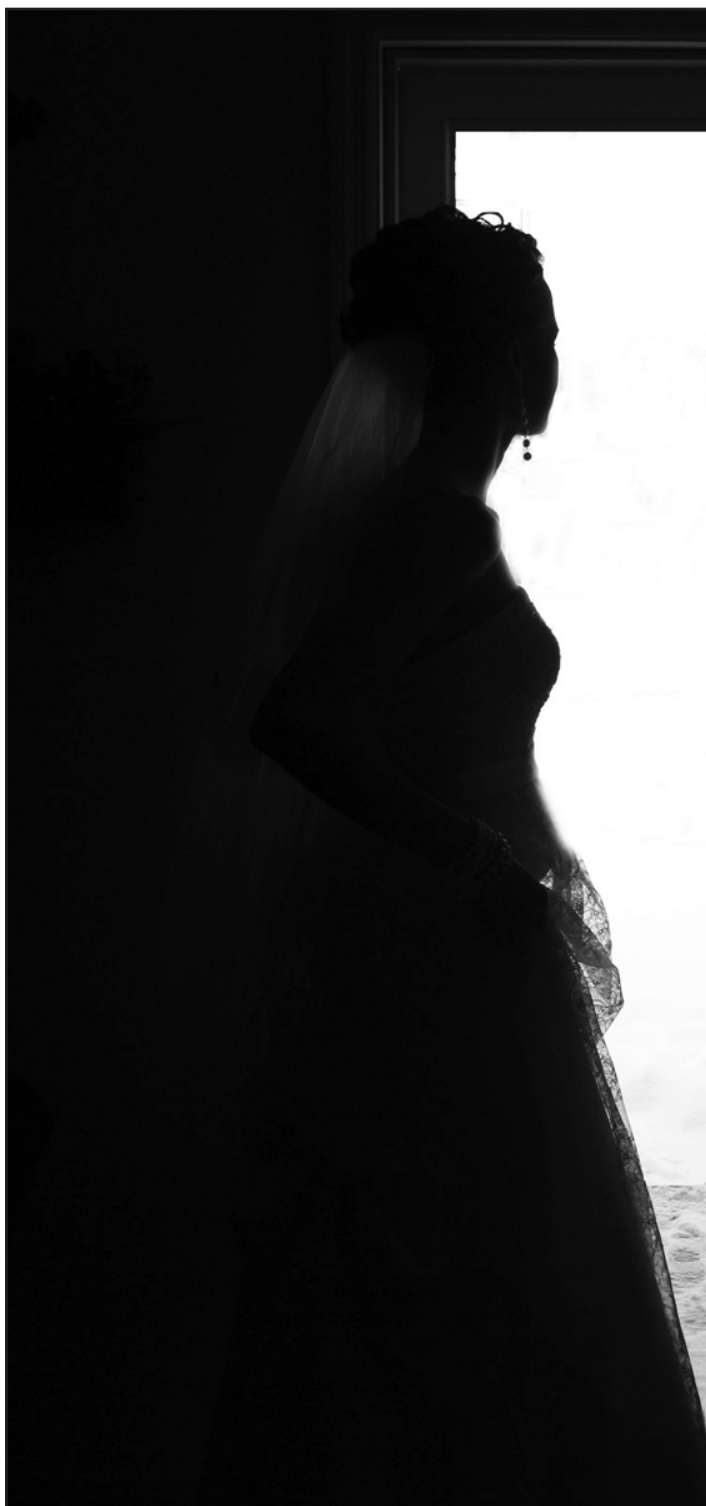
Rich and I went to Hamilton for your funeral, I had

hoped to see you one last time, to say my good-bye, to put closure to you and me. Waiting in the long line of grief-stricken friends and relatives, I suddenly was overwhelmed with a feeling. I told Rich, "He's not here. He's been cremated; I won't be able to see him." It was true, when we got to Cathy, Frances (Mom, as I had called her, since you and I had become friends years ago) and Ernie (who is like a dad to me...) were standing by your urn. Rich and I shared our condolences and took our seats for the service. I felt so cheated. I wanted to see you one last time; I wanted to tell you just how much I loved you and always would. I love Rich very much; but you never stop loving your first love...

On the long drive back home, as Rich quietly listened, I told him about all the silly things you and I used to do—like my giving you a stuffed lamb to remind you of your grand prize winning lamb—just as you and I had done on that night in 1977 when you came to dinner, it was as if the nine years in between didn't exist.

I miss you,

Love Forever.



—Sheree Whitelock, "Awaiting a New Beginning"

The Sidewalk

—*Deb Noll*

I'M NOT SURE HOW OLD I WAS WHEN THEY poured the concrete for the sidewalk that led up to the house from the garage straight into the kitchen. The sidewalk that wrapped around the house to the right leading to the outhouse, and to the left to the front door steps to an entrance we never used. It was poured just in time for the training wheels to come off my two-wheeled bicycle, so I must have been somewhere around four, five, or six. At the garage-end of the sidewalk—about 100 feet from the house—was an old, black, iron water pump. We used it to get water for watering the dog, for filling water guns, and for filling five gallon buckets of water to carry to the trough to water the Holstein feeder calves—it would take my brother and I about eight trips back and forth from the front pasture to the pump to fill the trough. That pump was also the place where dad stopped to wash the manure off his work boots before coming to the house.

As a young girl, I remember watching daddy come up from the barn. He walked with a quickly sprint to his gait. He would pick up a stone and throw it for our dog, Tutor, to fetch. Or he would tease Tutor to jump up into his arms, or play tug of war with his shirt sleeve. When he stopped to wash his boots was my cue to leap out the door running down the sidewalk to meet him. He would pick me up in his strong arms and toss me into the air; in free fall, I would drop back into his safe, waiting arms. He would scratch me with the stubble of his beard as he kissed me and sat me back onto the ground. Daddy always had time for his Penelope, the nickname he gave me.

It took three of my small steps to keep up with one of his smooth strides. His

strides filled with pride. He was a proud man, working hard to provide for his family, an honest-day's labor from sunup to sundown, and then some. He was a farmer farming 360 acres, raising 200 head of hogs at a time, and milking 80 head of Holstein cattle. He farmed on the shares with our landlord, Johnnie. An aged old man, Johnnie had twenty hives of honeybees in our backyard—when his arthritis acted up, he'd anger a hive so they would sting him—"it's a cure for the 'itis," he would say.

Daddy was tall. At six feet two inches tall, he was the tallest of anyone at family gatherings. He was the oldest of ten children, and whenever we visited my grandparent's home, there were always some of my aunts, uncles, and cousins there. But whenever there was a death or a wedding, everyone showed up like it was a family reunion. Dad had aunts and uncles and cousins who would come from all over Ohio and Indiana. He was the tallest of them all. I remember him being asked from one relative or another, "Leroy," for that is what his family called him, "What's the weather like up there?" Daddy had a somewhat brash response that I was never allowed to repeat. You couldn't lose Daddy, he was the

tallest one in the crowd.

He was handsome, too! Broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, distinguishingly bald, a missing front tooth gave a jester's character to his smile that stretched from dimple to dimple. His big, brown cow-eyes danced in those days. He was happy and proud, and everything about him showed it, and I was his little girl.

At age sixteen, I stood at the kitchen door where I had stood many times before, watching Dad come up from the barn. On this day, he didn't stop to wash the dirt off his boots. I gingerly opened the door and gently walked to meet him on the sidewalk. Today he wasn't walking with quite as smooth a stride. Coming up next to him I slid my smooth, youthful hand into his calloused, cracked, aged hand and said, "It will be okay, Dad." I didn't get a response. His eyes, now glassy looking, filled with tears, were appraising the front yard filled with household belongings and farm equipment, polished and shining like new, waiting for the auction. He let go of my hand as he reached for a tool setting on the hay wagon. He had just milked the cows for the last time. He had no hogs left to slop; the last of them had gone

to market about a week before. This day was a day that he had never wanted to come. He had been born into a farming family; farming was in his blood, but today he was giving up farming for good.

Mom often told the story that on the day we moved onto the farm, dad had admired it—you might even say he had fallen in love with it—and he had said, “If ever I have to leave here, it will be the day I stop farming.” Dad was always true to his word.

The farm was located in southwestern Ohio. Some of the land around our farm had been sold to Cincinnati Gas and Electric for as much as \$300 an acre (very rich for the day). Johnnie, our landlord, had suggested that he would be open to selling the farm for the right price. Dad made a legitimate offer to buy the farm, not quite the \$300 an acre that Johnnie was hoping for, but a fair price for farm land. Johnnie, a greedy man, laughed at it. So when negotiations to buy the farm failed—angry with the landlord; disappointed in himself for not having more money to offer—Dad decided to quit farming despite encouragement from Mom to look for another farm. Dad seemed to lack any interest in the idea. His ego had

been bruised. It was like that old man had defeated him. Dad lacked motivation or desire to buy another farm.

One of his excuses was he did not want to move me out of our school district. I argued that I had friends through 4-H, Farm Bureau Youth, and Jr. Leadership from all over the county; I could move into any neighboring school district and already have friends there. My brother thought it was his fault. He had left home to go to college at OSU and did not plan to spend his life farming. To Dad farming was a career that was passed down from generation to generation. Now, it seemed that the next generation had no interest in farming. That’s what my brother thought. Maybe he was right.

It was one of those times when I wished the Magic Eight Ball, set there on the hay wagon in a box marked miscellaneous, could really tell the future. I picked it up and silently asked, “*Why is Dad being so stubborn about this?*”

Turning the ball over, I read, “Ask again later.”

“*Is my brother right; does Dad wish he would stay home and farm with him?*” was the new question in my mind.

“Most definitely!” I read on through that dark circle on

the bottom of the ball.

One more question I thought, *"Will Dad be happy with his new job?"*

"Uncertain!" was the writing on the ball.

"Stupid ball," I said, and put it back on the pile of stuff.

I don't really know if those were the responses from the ball that day. I only remember having those and many other questions, and wanting, hoping for easy answers.

Our family changed that day. That night we slept under a new roof, in our new home, in town, in Trenton, Ohio. None of us got any sleep—we had left the quietness of the country, finding ourselves amidst the noises of town living—we heard everything. The next week, my brother went back to the Ohio State University. Dad was beginning his new job driving a fuel truck for Limbacher Fuel Oil Company. His route took him to all the farms in the county; he could keep in touch with his friends, but it also served to remind him of what he had lost. You could see sadness in him; his once broad shoulders began to droop. His fatigue was no longer from working sunup to sundown; but rather from not working hard at all. He commented that the job was too easy—not very physical. He said

once, "I feel so confined inside the cab of that truck." There was never any doubt that dad missed farming.

The Magic Eight Ball could not have predicted the changes that were yet to come. I could not have imagined the questions to ask it about the future.

Four years after moving off the farm, dad had filed for a divorce from mom. One night, my brother had come home for a family meeting. During the family discussion, we were trying to discern what had gotten Mom and Dad to this point in their marriage, hoping we could find a point where reconciliation might be persuaded. Emotions were running strong in all of us. At one point, Dad made a comment that he wasn't appreciated. My brother replied, saying something about having learned a good work ethic from Dad, "How else could I be able to pay for my college tuition?" he said to emphasize his point.

Dad saw it as a slap in his face, like he wasn't paying for his son to go to college—missing completely the point my brother had tried to make. My brother responded with something to reiterate his point. Dad was angry. He stormed to the door and raged, "I have no son!" I

had never seen Dad so angry, so distraught.

In the next instant, I sealed my destiny of having a relationship with Dad. I said, "If you have no son, then I guess you have no daughter either!" Dad must have known how much his hurting my brother would hurt me...

He merely looked at me and said, "I guess not, then!" He abruptly left the house, slamming the door behind him, never to return, leaving my mother, brother, and me standing there, each of us hearing, in our own way, the silence.

In the thirty plus years since that night, my brother and Dad have been able to rebuild a relationship. My brother says, "When we get together, it's like two friends talking over old times. It's not like we're father and son." Still, he's invited to celebrate Dad's birthdays, to picnics, to family events, where he gets to see our aunts, uncles, and cousins. He's very fortunate not to have lost everything like I have.

I've tried on several occasions to reconnect with Dad; to ask his forgiveness for speaking so boldly. Most recently was when my husband was in the hospital fighting for his life. My brother had said that Dad was

really concerned for me and my family. So one night, I called him. I introduced myself on the phone to his wife—whom Dad had married only three weeks after the divorce was final; yet he had denied that there was someone else in his life—I asked her if I could speak to my dad. She said to him, "Your daughter's on the phone..."

I heard his reply, "Tell her I'm not here."

That same steel-framed door that was slammed in our faces so many years ago was slammed in my face again, as it has been over and over again each time I've tried to reach out to him.

In my dream...I'm standing at the old farm house door, looking down the sidewalk, seeing Dad coming up from the barn. I walk swiftly to greet him. My arms opened wide; his are too. Our arms wrap each other in a grizzly bear hug. I look up into those big, brown, cow eyes, now grey with age, and I tenderly say, "I love you, Daddy." He replies, "You, too, Penelope." The dam broken, our lives are inundated with a flow of unending words... and then I wake up.

SUDDENLY—FAR TOO SUDDENLY—THE LAST ray of sunlight slipped away. The landscape dimmed and the shadows blended into darkness. In the city, shops locked their doors, while inns with their burning hearths stood like lighthouses pulling ships to land. In the more soothing atmosphere of the city's outskirts, mothers called their children indoors to ready themselves for bed. The heat was melting as a cool breeze sifted its way through the leaves.

But these signs of the approaching night were not welcome to Alinn. Darkness chilled her uneasy spirit. She gazed up at the fading sky, then scanned the rows of houses and the open countryside beyond, searching for anything amiss. For now all was quiet and she had light to guide her, but once the darkness settled, she would be stumbling blindly away from the men hunting for her. Something in the back of her mind told her she might as well lie down now and let them take her. She couldn't run forever. The more obstinate part replied that she only needed to run until they gave up. She pressed forward.

Still, as she walked, she couldn't prevent her mind from clouding over with churning emotions and memories. The emotions held her in an almost unbearable grip, while the memories played before her eyes as vividly as if she were reliving those moments in her life.

Her mind drifted back to the day in her childhood in which her life had changed forever. The eastern clouds had shimmered with the soft, pink shade of dawn as she and her family had finished burdening their horses with belongings. She recalled the dread that had hung in the air so thickly that

she felt it tingle on her skin before sinking deep into her young heart. The entire world seemed breathless with anticipation: the birds were hushed, the wind was still, and even the horses stood motionless, waiting to be urged forward.

Alinn's mother, Nakita, mounted the family's bay stallion with her six-month-old son secured carefully in front of her. Beside her, Alinn's father, Khaed, swung the girl's small form onto the second steed and then sprang into the saddle behind her. Clinging tightly to the horse's mane, Alinn glanced over her shoulder and squinted in the dim light to study the deserted town that had been their home.

Distant shouts kept her blood coursing wildly through her veins. She could envision what a horror the approaching Aihremakan army must be with its mass of tall, angry men wielding flashing swords and sharp arrows. She could see their dark, bloodthirsty eyes as they searched for her. With a gasp she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block the image from her mind.

As her father spurred the horse forward, Alinn leaned back against his chest and felt the wind rush through her hair. The air was cold and dry, stealing her breath away

and stinging her cheeks until they went numb. Shivering, she tightened her grasp on the stallion and swallowed. The seconds stretched into eternity until a shout broke out over the sound of the wind in her ears. She jerked open her eyes to see Nakita pulling her horse back so abruptly it reared in protest. Her stomach fluttering with fear, Alinn turned her head to see a line of horsemen clothed in Aihremakan chain mail and leather cutting off their path. The foremost man, apparently the leader, kicked his mount forward a step and nodded his head casually as Khaed yanked his ride to a halt.

"Escaping to the Toryn mountains?" The man's face was impenetrable. "It's a dangerous journey, I hear. The bogs are treacherous, full of creatures that don't like trespassers. But then I suppose the Toryn people are wild, passionate barbarians whose bloodlust must be at least as strong as those creatures'. Maybe they should be the ones fearing you." His laugh came out as a deep, guttural sound. "And don't deny it. Toryn raided and leveled numerous Aihremakan villages to the ground; your nation forced us into this war. So don't force us to deal with you as cruelly as your people dealt with us!" He turned his intense eyes on Alinn's father.

"Drop your weapons. Surrender!"

"I'm a man trying to take his family to safety, not challenging your soldiers to battle," Khaed responded gruffly. "Let me keep my arms to protect my family on the journey. Let us go our way."

The leader's clutch on his horse's reins went taut and his face, if possible, became firmer. "You think I'd trust the word of a Toryn man?" His voice trembled ever so slightly. "Drop your weapons now before I force you!"

Khaed glanced at his wife. With a kick, she spurred her horse past the men as Alinn's father drew his sword. Holding his daughter protectively with one hand and his weapon with the other, Khaed charged toward a space between two of the men. For a moment, Alinn thought they could make it. Then she heard a horse whinny in pain as her mother's shout pierced the air. One of the men had buried an arrow deep in the horse's chest. Legs buckling, it crashed into a heap in the grass and sent Nakita and her son tumbling off. The boy shrieked, but his cry was cut short on impact. The Aihremakan leader, still on horseback with his sword held high, towered over Nakita's form.

A shout snapped Alinn out of her thoughts. Two children were racing each other home, laughing and yelling to one another. Night had almost fallen. In the east, several stars glittered in the sky, but they quickly blurred into one large clump as tears formed in her eyes. Running her fingers unconsciously along the scar that traced from her right temple to her jaw line, she bit her lip. No, she told herself firmly, she would not cry now. She decided to find somewhere to hide and rest for a while.

An old farmhouse glowed invitingly some yards to her left, but it was the barn behind it that she approached. The door creaked as she opened it just wide enough to squeeze through. Straw scratched at her legs and caught in the hem of her dress, mud stuck to the bottoms of her boots, and the air, with its mingling scents of hay and manure, assailed her nose. A cow blinked lazily as Alinn stumbled to the back and leaned against the wall, this time feeling safe with solid darkness surrounding her. She tried to close her eyes and stop the thoughts from coming, but memories came crowding into her brain anyway.

How long had she and her father wandered through the

wilderness, running from soldiers, running from the memories? In the day they had shivered against the bitter cold of winter, stumbled through miles of swampland, and climbed ever higher into the mountains. At night, Alinn would curl up as close as she dared to their crackling fire and try to drown out the distant screeching of unseen things.

Khaed didn't speak much, and a few times he frightened his daughter by dropping to his knees and sobbing aloud. The first time, he'd wrapped his arms around her and cradled her tightly, and she'd let her own tears fall freely down her cheeks. But as time wore on, new thoughts began to emerge. The memory of the soldiers' attack played in her head hauntingly. The aching sorrow remained, but now that the shock had worn off, burning hatred replaced it. What would she give to see all of the Aihremakans, especially their king, as miserable as she and her father were now?

At last Alinn and her father found themselves high in the mountains, beyond the dark forest with its creakings and rustlings and onto the snowy slopes overlooking miles of empty bog land. The sky seemed to be permanently overcast, and the wind never stopped blow-

ing. Every morning, snowflakes would descend from the grey clouds swirling overhead and coat their freezing forms. In the night, they'd huddle close to one another in any small cave or beneath any outcropping they could find. Other than occasional orders to the horse, neither Khaed nor Alinn spoke much; they took comfort merely in one another's presence and lost themselves in their own thoughts.

Sometimes shadows fell over them and they looked up to see a distant form soaring high above them. The stallion would toss his head anxiously, sometimes stopping altogether. "Forward, Halir," Khaed coaxed, and the beast would press onward reluctantly.

At last their destination came into view: a huge building called the Sanctuary perched high on the mountainside. Set against the backdrop of rugged mountain slopes and the distant valley, the Sanctuary looked lonely. They hurried to the Sanctuary's tall wooden door and Khaed pounded the metal knocker against it.

The door swung open to reveal a woman with wrinkles carved into her pale face and black hair frosted grey. She interviewed Khaed carefully before welcoming both the newcomers with a warm smile.

A younger woman ran out to tend to their horse while another rushed to take their belongings. This was just one of many Sanctuaries throughout Toryn, some full of male prophets and others female. They were being sought out as refuges during the war, because Aihremak didn't care about attacking religious locations. Here, knowing the foreign soldiers would never come, Alinn felt safe at last.

Remembering the comfort of the Sanctuary, Alinn wrapped her cloak around herself more tightly and tried to curl up against a bundle of straw. It made a hard, prickly bed. Gaps in the barn's wall welcomed cool air inside, but it did not relieve the stench, which, accustomed as she was to the pure mountain winds, was giving her a headache. The thought made her long to be able to return to the Sanctuary. Yet, ironically, when she had lived there, Alinn had felt discontent and alone. The refugees and prophetesses had been strange company when her father left for war.

Meli, the grey-haired Head Prophetess, took personal responsibility for Alinn's well-being, promising Khaed that she would do everything she could to make the girl feel at home. She gave Alinn a tour of the en-

tire Sanctuary, introducing her to refugees and prophetesses, and took the fabrics donated by generous citizens and fashioned beautiful clothes for her. Every morning she would take Alinn out horseback riding or walking to get exercise and fresh air. Then, each afternoon, she took Alinn to the Sanctuary's huge library to read from dusty, leather-bound books of Toryn history and literature, as well as to study geography, mathematics, grammar, spelling, and science.

"It is important for you to learn as much as you can," Meli explained to the girl one day, "for as long as this war rages, we women will be the ones holding our country together while the men fight." She winked at Alinn. "Don't think because you are stuck behind that you don't have an important role to play too."

"Maybe it's not the role I want to play," Alinn muttered, staring blankly at the history book before her.

Meli reached across the table to pull the thick volume toward her. "Do you even know how the war began? Rogues belonging to neither Toryn nor Aihremak attacked Aihremakan towns, slaughtering and pillaging and burning as they went. The Aihremakans mistakenly believed they were our people.

They thought they were retaliating when they attacked us. Believe me, dear, the Aihremakans have suffered as well. There are little girls over there, just like you, who've lost loved ones. They're as confused and hurt as you."

Alinn blinked back the tears that attempted to form in her eyes. "You don't know anything," she muttered bitterly. "You've spent your life up here, away from everything. You haven't seen..."

Meli sighed and rolled up the sleeve of her dress to her elbow to reveal a long, pale scar running down her arm. "Believe me when I say I've witnessed cruel acts just as you have. Just realize that not every one of the Aihremakans is our enemy. Not every Toryn soldier out there is just, either. There is hatred and brutality on both ends. Your father is a good man and is doing the right thing by protecting his daughter and his country. You would not be doing the right thing by going out there with hatred in your heart. There is a difference between justice and revenge, self-defense and murder. Don't blur the lines, child."

Other days, Meli taught Alinn about what she insisted was to be her "calling."

"How do you...know so much about things?" Alinn

questioned one day.

"We see only what the Father reveals to us," Meli, the grey-haired Head Prophetess whispered to Alinn, and the girl noticed the reverence in her voice.

"So you do see the future," Alinn said, her eyes wide.

"More importantly, we can understand what is in people's hearts, if we ask," Meli said with a gentle smile.

"You just ask?"

"Just ask. Close your eyes and concentrate."

Alinn closed her eyes reluctantly, shutting out the white marble floors, the high ceiling, and the fountain in the center of the room. A prophetess's skirt swished as she walked past Alinn; the water bubbled ahead of her, and low voices echoed in the hall outside. Words tried to form themselves in her brain, but the idea of requesting a favor from the Father, the God who had let her dear mother die right in front of her, angered her. The emotion simmered deep down inside, until slowly it boiled up higher, higher, until it felt as if it were suffocating her. With a gasp, she opened her eyes and lifted her head to Meli. Shuddering from head to foot, tears flooded her eyes.

"I can't!" she almost shrieked. "All I see when I close my eyes...is...is..." Her voice

broke.

There were tears glistening in Meli's eyes, but the girl across from her didn't want sympathy or advice. Turning, Alinn raced from the room, down the endless halls, past startled women and confused children, and into her own bedroom at the far end of the Sanctuary.

It was there that Alinn could scoff at the prophetesses and long to be free from this place. She couldn't stand being here when her country was being torn apart. She wanted to fight against the soldiers that had caused her so much pain. She wanted to be with her father. With the desire swelling inside her soul, she gazed out her window, down the mountainside, past the empty plains below, to the distant northern horizon. Somewhere in that direction lay Aihremak.

Years later, Toryn was forced to surrender and Aihremak occupied the country. Soldiers, on their way home, began to flood the Sanctuary. A young woman who hadn't seen her father since the age of twelve, Alinn watched eagerly and hopefully every time a soldier was welcomed in, waiting for the day Khaed would walk through the door.

That was why, on the

evening a young man calling himself Rayvik slipped inside and greeted the women with a smile, Alinn was standing off to the side, studying his face. It was clear immediately from his short, sandy blond hair and piercing blue eyes that he was Aihremakan--certainly not a usual guest in the Sanctuary. Meli questioned him sharply, studying him with her shrewd eyes, but soon relented.

"You may enter," she determined, but Alinn caught her breath, overwhelmed by terror and fury all at once. For the first time, she doubted Meli's gift.

Rayvik stepped in with another grateful nod of his head, caught Alinn's gaze, and paused. On the way down the hall, as the prophetesses swept on ahead to prepare for their new guest, he asked for her name.

"Alinn," she snapped back at the strange man. Knowing that the Head Prophetess was only a few yards ahead was all that kept her even semi-calm. Her whole body trembled as she felt the churning emotion sweep through her like a gathering storm. She didn't bother to hide the hate shining in her eyes.

"You seem out of place here." He peered around, as if to make sure no one had overheard, but the people they were passing in the hall kept their

distance. A mother pulled her little boy close to her. "Excited for news?" he inquired, as if the stares didn't faze him.

"Maybe." Alinn felt like she was choking.

Rayvik glanced at her with a twinkle in his eyes and a wide grin. "I know something you'd be interested to hear. I met your father on the battlefield."

Alinn blinked. Hate and fear and the eagerness to hear about her father vied for control within her. "Is he all right?" she demanded.

"He was the last time I saw him. To be honest, I owe him my life."

"What?"

"He almost killed me," Rayvik murmured, his face serious for the first time. "We met each other in battle and —"

"I don't believe that," Alinn interrupted viciously. "If you survived meeting him in combat then you must have killed him, because he'd never let a bloodthirsty Aihremakan soldier live. I'll kill you my —"

"Don't be ridiculous, sweetheart. I hate Haidon and everything Aihremak has done as much as you do, and that's why your father spared my life. I have a letter as proof." He pulled a paper from his pocket and slipped it into her hands with another quick smile. "If you can't trust me, you'll have

to trust the words of your own father."

Maybe it was just his charm, but Alinn was reluctant to doubt his words. They walked silently into the long dining hall to join the other Sanctuary occupants for supper. Though she sat down the table from him, she still caught his eye several times, and she still heard every word he spoke.

That night she curled up in bed and read the letter written in her own father's hand, describing the long, bitter days he'd spent as a soldier. As she read his tender words of affection, her lip trembled, though she held the tears back. He spoke cheerfully of their meeting again soon. Alinn was so grateful to hear from her father that she almost forgot herself and thanked Rayvik when she saw him at breakfast the next morning. Almost.

Days passed, but the Aihremakan soldier did nothing to increase her suspicion. Still, whenever he tried to speak to her, she answered shortly, and if she saw him from a distance, she walked the other direction. Her deeply ingrained distrust and hatred for his race wouldn't allow her to acknowledge the fact that there was something drawing her to him. After being alone so long, after being ignored by every other young

man that had stayed in the Sanctuary due to the ugly scar marring her face, the attention he paid her was far too welcome.

Finally, she saw him down the hall one day and found herself pausing.

"You're afraid of me," Rayvik said, though he didn't seem upset.

"No, I'm not," Alinn protested, glancing across the hall at a painting so that her scarred cheek was hidden. "I distrust you. But distrust and fear aren't the same."

"Your prophetess friends trust me, and they say they can discern between enemies and friends." When Alinn didn't respond, he began to stroll forward and she followed, as if pulled by an invisible string. Gazing up at the pillars stretching toward a ceiling inlaid with gold, he questioned, "Enjoying your magnificent prison? You were only touched by the shadow of war when soldiers stumbled inside. You've all been caged up in luxury like the master's favorite pets."

Alinn spun round to face him straight on. "How dare you say that!" she snapped. "My father wanted me to be safe. I'm all he has left!"

His response came unexpectedly.

"You're tired of feeling safe. You're tired of being

locked away when there is evil out there that has wronged you. You are trapped here, where these prophetesses are full of good, pure thoughts, and all you can focus on is the past and the anger. You have a right to be angry...to be dissatisfied with this."

The hallway was dim, but several yards behind Alinn, sunlight poured in through a window in the ceiling. The light reflected in Rayvik's eyes. For once, the smirk vanished from his lips and a hint of bitterness leaked into those blue eyes. His fist was clenched at his side.

"Fine words from an Aihremakan," Alinn muttered at last, "criticizing a sanctuary in Toryn. Did you come here hoping to find citizens weak enough to betray their country?" She turned and marched down the hallway, letting her scarlet sash trail behind her and the gold chain about her waist clink defiantly. Behind her, Rayvik's soft laughter echoed in the vast space, but she only held her head higher and walked faster.

It wasn't long after that meeting that Alinn realized she couldn't avoid him. He was a white tiger, devilishly beautiful. Whenever she saw him, he walked smoothly, with confidence, because he knew exactly where he was going and exactly what he was doing. His eyes

glittered with assurance, and the smirk on his face told the world he felt his power.

Did he know that look in her eyes? He probably recognized the expression by now; she was sure he'd spent time around enough admiring girls. Had he seen the tremble in her hands? If he was confident and sure, then she was just growing more uncertain and self-conscious. Now she felt her loneliness steadily breaking down the shield she'd built. The flames didn't look quite as dangerous as they had at first. Did the sense of danger attract her? She wanted desperately to belong, but not to him. And yet, a part of her said that was exactly what she wanted.

Outside the barn, a sound recalled Alinn to the present. Horses were pawing the earth and snorting. Peering through one of the cracks in the barn wall, she saw five Aihremakan guards seated on their usual white stallions just a few yards away. Alinn lay motionless in the straw, hardly daring even to breathe for fear they'd hear her.

"Focus," came Meli's voice. Beside her, Velara nodded. Alinn was perched on the edge of the fountain, trying to let the sound of running water soothe her thoughts. Closing her

eyes, she imagined herself on the edge of a precipice, swaying, teetering, and falling. With a jerk, she opened her eyes and caught herself before she fell backward into the water.

"This is ridiculous," she proclaimed with a defiant shake of her head.

"Don't give up," Velara began, but her flawless features mocked Alinn's scarred face.

"I'm not wasting my time," Alinn spat out. Leaving Velara and Meli dumbfounded, she dashed from the room, holding her hand to her face to cover her scar. Tears threatened to fill her eyes, but she refused to let them come. Slowly, she lowered her hand to her side.

It was then she saw Rayvik strolling down the hall, glancing at the rows of paintings decorating the walls. Her heart beat faster. He turned and saw her; her thoughts clouded over with uncertainty. She felt frozen in place, and the words stuck in her mouth, but only for a moment. Lifting her eyes to his, curving her lips to match his smile, she greeted him with a casual air that surprised her. The white tiger strode toward her, and she held her ground. He couldn't know how hard she was fighting. Or did he?

"I hear the women tell you to 'muse'?" Rayvik asked.

Alinn shrugged. "They

think anyone can see things if the Father reveals it to them."

"But you don't see anything."

"Maybe."

"I think," Rayvik went on, "it's because you're focused on the past. And why not? Why sit here wasting your time when you know what really needs to be done? The only way that Toryn will ever be free is if Haidon dies."

She lifted her eyes to his, more open now to what he had to say.

Rayvik sat on a nearby bench. "Do you want to know why I hate him so much?"

Alinn nodded, and Rayvik explained how he and his brother had joined the army.

"It felt like we were on the right side," Rayvik said. "Until...until we set fire to a village and my brother realized a woman and her children were trapped in one of the houses. He rushed in to rescue them, but our commanding officer reprimanded him for the action. That man told him to kill those innocent souls, and of course my brother refused." Rayvik paused. "My little brother died alongside them for that."

Alinn sat in silence. She couldn't fathom how anyone could commit such injustices. Glancing at Rayvik, who wore an expression of pain and anger,

she decided then that it was no coincidence they'd met one another. She hadn't meant to open her heart to Rayvik and tell him her sorrows, but she told him anyway. He shared her anger and sadness, and in their mutual feelings, Alinn felt understanding and security with another human at last.

That had been the beauty, the tragedy, of their meeting, Alinn thought as she scooted closer to a crack in the barn wall. One of the men raised his voice slightly, and she was able to catch what he was saying.

"It's been four days," he muttered. "She can't avoid us forever."

"Perhaps the witness was wrong; she wasn't sure. Or maybe we're looking in the wrong direction. Rayvik said--"

"Rayvik is a treacherous snake. He told the king if would give him the chance he'd track her down himself, but with his kind of record I doubt he'd hesitate to cover for a Toryn woman. He probably stalled us from pursuing her. In fact, I think he was involved in the assassination plot. Either way, though, he's a deserter, and he'll get what he deserves."

"Yes," another man said as they all spurred their horses forward. "He'll be executed in Elvonia in the morning, and

good riddance."

They disappeared into the darkness, leaving their words echoing in Alinn's ears.

She and Rayvik had decided that Haidon had to die, and that they were as capable as anyone else to be the ones to kill him. Alinn had insisted on being the one to do the actual killing, and upon consideration, Rayvik had agreed. A woman would be the last person anyone would suspect.

Alinn didn't want to waste any time. Her father was war-weary and brokenhearted, and she didn't want him to have to live in bondage to Haidon any longer than necessary. Haidon would die, and then she would search for her father. Rayvik agreed.

Without a word of goodbye to anyone, they escaped the Sanctuary for Aihremak that night, taking two horses from the stables and packing all the provisions the beasts could carry. Alinn didn't even glance back as they wound their way down the mountainside.

A few hours later the pair stopped to rest.

"And a pistol is really the best way to do this?" Alinn asked as they discussed their plans.

"Trust me; weapons have changed during the war," Ray-

vik replied.

Alinn stopped questioning him after he taught her how to fire it. The sheer force of its release made her gasp in surprise. The power almost made her dizzy when she imagined gazing at Haidon himself, and burying a bullet in his forehead.

She sat down before the fire and lost herself in her thoughts.

"You really needed to get away from that Sanctuary and have a chance to live," she heard Rayvik say after a few minutes. He smiled and seated himself beside her. Alinn instinctively leaned away from him but he didn't seem to notice.

"Hungry?" Rayvik asked after a short silence, turning to her. The fire had roared to life, reflecting in his eyes and casting flickering light on Alinn's face. Knowing it was shining directly on her scar, she pressed her hand to her cheek.

"No," she said firmly, "I'd rather sleep." She was about to escape to the safety of the shadows, but she felt Rayvik's hand on her own, gently pulling it away from her face. Frozen, she flinched as he traced his finger along the white scar running from her temple to her jaw.

"That was a nasty cut," he muttered, removing his hand and giving her a chance to breathe again. "No one would

inflict that sort of injury unless they were just trying to hurt and scare you. Or if they were taking their time killing you. Let me guess: it was your parting gift from the Aihremakan soldiers that attacked your family?"

Alinn nodded and turned away, wanting desperately to hide from his piercing gaze.

"Want to know a secret?"

He leaned closer, his face serious but his eyes sparkling.

"You're too self-conscious."

Glancing up into his face uncertainly, Alinn caught his smile and grinned back. "We're not going to let those soldiers or Haidon ruin our lives," he said. "Deal?"

"Deal," she murmured.

With a growing sense of urgency, Alinn stepped to the barn door and peered outside. The world was enveloped in velvet blackness. Only the stars lit her path; only the crickets broke the silence; only the night breeze kept her company. The darkness weighed heavily on her, like it was pressing in on all sides and slowly suffocating her. But no, that wasn't the blackness at all—that was the weight of her own emotions, wasn't it?

She and Rayvik reached Aihremak in three days. Before they rode into Elvonia, the first town on Aihremak's border,

Rayvik stopped their horses and turned to Alinn. "Now remember," he cautioned, "you don't want to stand out. Keep your hood up and your hair back. Anyone who sees your dark hair will know you're foreign."

They rode into town quietly, entered the first inn they came to, and sat near the hearth to eat supper. No one seemed to notice Alinn next to Rayvik and his charming aura. As a woman placed his food before him, he mentioned that he was a soldier returning home from war, and asked if there was to be a celebration at the capital city.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I can't believe you haven't heard yet! King Haidon is going to speak on the steps of the old church tomorrow evening."

Giving Alinn a significant look, Rayvik said he couldn't wait to attend. The woman left.

"I'll be in the crowd to help you escape and make sure nothing goes wrong," Rayvik muttered across the table to Alinn. He gave her a sideways smile. "And when it's all over... just imagine."

The food seemed to stick in her throat, but she'd never felt more prepared. "I'll find my father and we'll be able to live in peace," she whispered. "We'll be free at last."

Off to the east, the sky

was starting to turn grey. Had her thoughts really kept her up all night? Her legs were stiff, her head ached, and her whole body trembled. A rooster crowed nearby and she realized she was on the outskirts of a city. Catching her breath, Alinn approached it slowly, running her eyes along the wall surrounding it. It was Elvonia.

Again, uncertainty plagued her. Alinn knew what was supposed to happen at sunrise, but the question was, should she care? She had escaped, after all. Rayvik may have been captured and sentenced to death, but hearing about his offer to the king to hunt her down had reawakened her suspicions. What if she risked herself for someone who wouldn't risk himself for her?

She tried to imagine pressing toward the Toryn wilderness, finding her father, and seeking refuge at the Sanctuary. She wanted desperately to see her father again. But that was impossible, because she couldn't imagine facing him now and seeing the disappointment in his eyes. That would be worse than death.

Deep down, she knew there was no abandoning Rayvik. Whatever happened now, they were bound together. She had to find a way to rescue him.

She sat and stared at the city while behind her, the sky grew lighter. Even the stars in the west began to dim and dis-

appear, and the breeze became stronger. Somewhere in one of the lone trees dotting the sea of grass, a bird chirped bravely.

Closing her eyes, she saw the crowd before her again, shouting, dancing, and laughing in Aihremak's capital under the afternoon sun. Buildings towered over the wide city square, casting cool shadows on its edges that some sought for relief from the heat. Soldiers slapped each other on the backs in congratulations, citizens embraced them, and mothers, wives, and children cried with joy as they were reunited with their loved ones. Tucked away in the shadow of an overhanging roof, Alinn wrapped her cloak around herself and fingered the gun at her side. Women dressed in long, colorful skirts strolled past. Children shouted and chased each other, startling Alinn when they nearly ran into her. The littlest boy accidentally hit a grocer's fruit cart instead, knocking some of its contents to the ground. He glanced up fearfully at the grocer, but the man just grinned at the boy, helped him to his feet, and cleaned up the mess himself. None of the Aihremakan citizens seemed ready to let anything bother them. Their long war was over at last. Alinn closed her eyes and ground her teeth in quiet rage.

Somewhere in that mass of men, women, and children before her, Rayvik was posi-

tioned, watching and waiting. And King Haidon was standing directly across from her on the wide steps of the church. His grin sickened her, and the light in his eyes looked terrible. Alinn tried to contain herself. Any moment and she'd raise her gun and aim it straight forward to line up with the monster's forehead. She didn't care if every citizen in the square saw her, for she had a quick, almost effortless escape planned.

Overhead, children shouted excitedly from the rooftops, and Alinn hesitated for the first time. Her fingers shook and her mouth went dry as she grasped her weapon and struggled to pull it out from behind her cloak. She glimpsed the queen gazing affectionately at the king. The memory of the last glance her parents had shared flashed through her brain--and her heart stopped beating. With that single memory, a dozen more flooded her mind, unbidden but unstoppable.

Her mother was being struck down before her eyes; her father was desperately trying to stop the soldiers--too late. She was in the wilderness again with her father, bent over to hide her face from the icy wind and to hide her eyes from the sight of her father's face etched with the suffering. She was lying on her bed in the Sanctuary, holding the pain inside as she stared out her window, wondering how anyone could be cruel enough to

kill in cold blood. Then the soldiers were in front of her again; the leader was clenching his jaw, trying to hide the misery and hatred in his eyes.

She'd become one of them.

Alinn made a wild movement to shove the pistol back into the holster, but it slipped from her clammy hand, clattered to the cobblestone road, and fired. The bullet buried itself into the heavy door of a shop across the street. Panicked, Alinn had fled toward the alley behind her.

Alinn opened her eyes to study the guards standing at Elvonia's gate, and stood slowly. Meli had once told her that if she only tried, she would see the day when her own bitterness stopped imprisoning her. That would be the day clear vision and guidance from the Father would come to her.

Well, Alinn saw clearly now. The dilemma was plain, but it was just as obvious that there was no running, no hiding, not anymore. *A life for a life*—that was one of Aihremak's most famous laws. Whether or not that bargain could save Rayvik from all the crimes he'd been convicted of, she wasn't sure. But that didn't matter. It was worth the risk. Throwing her hood back and letting the breeze catch her hair, Alinn walked toward the gate.

contributors

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Alan Bryan: Senior Psychology student that loves to get into peoples head. Oh and I love writing poetry as well. "It is only after we've lost everything that we are free to do anything" -Fight Club-

Malcolm, you silly man.

Tabitha Clark (Albright): Awarding-winning writer, honors student and all-around great individual (not to mention really modest!), she is ready to move on to her MFA studies...but really, just call her Tabs.

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Hello, my name is **Ben Ditmars**. How are you? That's nice to hear; I'm fine too. I have a novel on Kindle entitled *Gnomes of Coyul*. Check it out! [<http://niceoldspice.blogspot.com/>]

James Gentzel is a Freshman biology major pursuing a career in pharmacy. He has a strong passion for guitars, fitness, and the New York Yankees. He is currently in the process of penning his first novel.

Andrew Grimes: Sophomore, OSU Marion, majoring in English. I am not a writer, nor am I a poet. I am just a mere storyteller wishing to express the world as I see it.

Bobbi Hupp-Wilds: I am a loving wife, mother, student, and employee of OSU. I love being a part of the Cornfield; I hope you enjoy my entry as much as I had creating it. "Who I was yesterday is not who I am today and who I am today will not be who I am tomorrow."

Rob Johnson is a not sure of his class rank but is a member of OSU Marion branch regardless. Majoring in English he wants to contribute to the world through writing about Aliens, Orcs, Artificial Intelligences,

and Magic.

Hollis Juday: I enjoy reading, rock climbing, running, and going on adventures. I love Dippin' Dots! I am perpetually terrified of mascots, any and every kind. "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Hebrews 10:23-24

Sara Klips: See that shaved koala? Koalas do not like lemon drops. Lemon drops get stuck in koala fluff. Koalas prefer swedish fish. Eucalyptus flavor, please. [mindyourmonsters.com]

Taryn Korody: I'm clever, lovely, and bitterly honest. (One of these things may be false.) I'm also a future high school English teacher and a junior at OSUM. Everything is beautiful and so are you.

Melissa Lester is a Senior, majoring in Sociology. She loves photography and is still aspiring to save the money for a 'real' camera. She loves traveling and capturing memories with her camera on her travels. Her lifelong goal is to have a successful career that allows for her to travel, so that she can capture photos of all the beautiful places in the world.

Brittany Violet Long: Art Education Major, Psychology Minor, Creative Writing Minor.

Dennis Millisor: I don't even think that this is real. It's probably just another one of those online scams, where you send in some information and then receive a bill or something. Do you know who I am? Do you know what I've done? I have killed animals, and I have eaten their meat. I have toiled against the ground, and I have tasted its fruit. I have fought wars, erected monuments, and I am building an online empire at www.DennisMillisor.com.

So, yeah...there ya go.

"Let's meet at a bar because I have this idea, and I'll tell it to you and you can tell me it's a lousy idea, and we'll agree that it's a terrible idea, but at least we'll be at a bar, and it will be less awkward and the whole evening won't be a complete waste." - Daniel Handler

My name is **Sarabeth Mull**. I am a sophomore English major at OSUM and I love to write.

Deb Noll: Junior, English Major. Writing words about living; living life; life is living; living the Word.

Rachel Schade spends much of her time being determined (ahem, stubborn) in order to achieve her goals, getting distracted by the awesomeness that resides in her creative brain, and sharing fun, crazy experiences with friends. She also happens to be particularly attached to the words "defiantly" and "obnoxious."

My name is **Mark Anthony Tomsic** and I am from Columbus, Ohio. Currently, I am majoring in social work and aspire to have a successful career helping others with addictions and providing clients with a stable support system. My other goal in life is to get married and have a beautiful and healthy family. I want to be the best husband to my future wife and the best father a child could ask for. I cherish the fact that I am different from other individuals in my age range. My distinctions have led me

to experience many events and appreciate varieties of culture, writing, film/theatre, photography, and art. Photography is an outlet that allows me to loosen the concealed part of my personality that opposes social norms of society and provide laughter and provoke thought. My favorite films include, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Forest Gump*, and *Little Miss Sunshine*.

Lauren Upp feels that she is not very creative... in fact, she dragged her feet the entire quarter coming up with a bio.

zach wheeler: english major, professional writing minor. likes art, graphic design, music, and poetry.

Sheree Whitelock cannot be defined. Everything is a contradiction. This is an argument. Life is – what is? Oranges grow on trees pollinated by non-bees. Horses have faces, even on the interwebs. Mine does, yours should. Blue or Red? Define me, I dare you. Wrong answer. You lose; that's the Game.

Joey Yake: I am an OSU Graduate with a degree in Education. I am currently an English major seeking minors in Professional Writing and Political Science. In the end...Ninaoz!

Benjamin J. Zucker: Ag Business, Senior.

colophon

This issue of the *Cornfield Review* is printed using **Palatino Linotype**, *Rough Typewriter*, *Airstream*, and *Air Conditioner* fonts. The layout was handled in Adobe InDesign. The interior artwork and photographs, as well as the cover design, were all edited using a combination of Adobe Photoshop, Fireworks, and GIMP. The cover image incorporates a photograph by flickr user Nesstor, which is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License (CC BY 2.0).



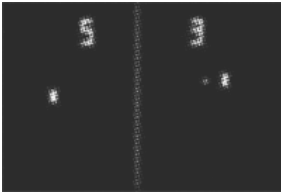
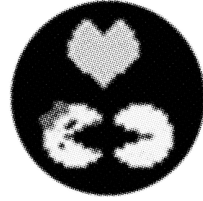
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THEY MEET .

The literary tradition is still dedicated...just not necessarily to its paper hardware. The *Cornfield Review* is now microprocessing online at:

<<http://english.marion.ohio-state.edu/cornfield/>>



* * *

In the beginning,
there was PONG...

See the history of the *Cornfield Review* in dazzling digital splendor. Searchable archives from 1976 to present available at:

<<http://cornfieldreview.osu.edu>>

* * *

Get your GAME ON
with KAPOW!

Hey, check out “**Kapow!**” OSU-Marion’s cool creative writing club! We meet every couple of weeks during the autumn, winter, and spring quarters (usually during the noon hour in LC 217), where we hang out and listen to and share good words, good thoughts, good vibes, and good spirits! You’re welcome to come, too! You can bring your lunch and just hang out and listen, and/or you can bring some sweet words to read to your fellow Kapowers (And we’ll be all ears if you do!). It’s all good when we get together. So check out the flyers that are hanging around campus, where you can find our specific meeting dates and times. And if you have any questions, contact Stuart Lishan, fellow Kapower and faculty advisor (lishan.1@osu.edu). Hope to see you there! And don’t forget, break a line!

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