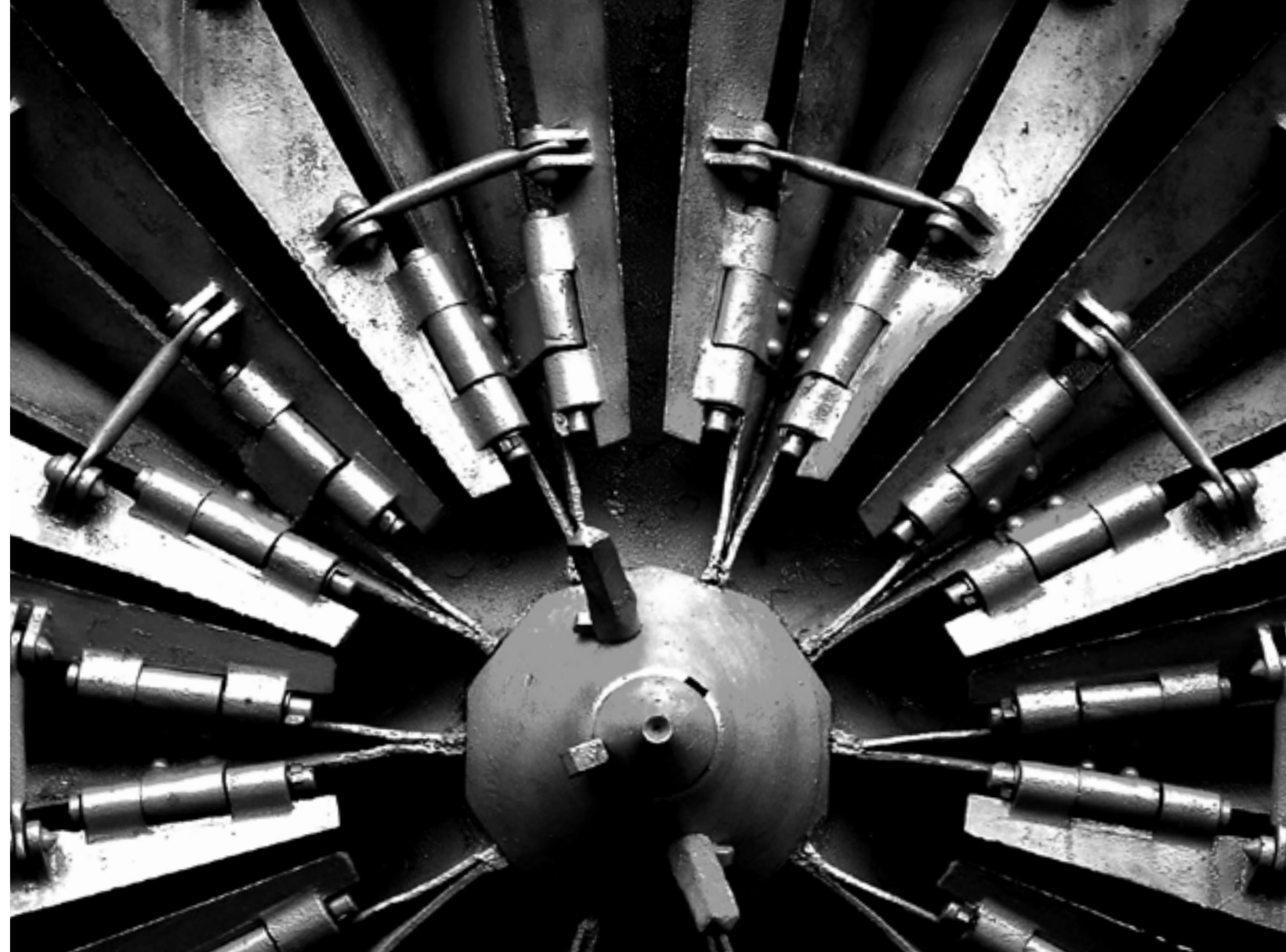




CREATIVE NONFICTION



JOURNAL 2020 is a collection of the finest undergraduate artwork and creative nonfiction writing at CU Boulder—the work of young writers with enough strength of voice, vision, and courage to tell their true stories and the true stories of others.

JOURNAL TWENTYTWO
PROGRAM FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC • UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

JOURNAL TWENTYTWO



FALL 2013
VOLUME ONE • ISSUE TWO

FALL 2013 • VOLUME 1 • ISSUE 2



CREATIVE NONFICTION
VOLUME ONE • ISSUE TWO

JOURNAL TWENTYTWO

PROGRAM FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC • UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

FALL 2013
VOLUME ONE • ISSUE TWO

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JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY publishes print issues each fall and spring, and provides an online community for all genres of creative nonfiction at the University of Colorado Boulder. We acquire First North American Serial Rights. CU Boulder Undergraduate artists and writers of creative nonfiction interested in publishing in JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY may refer to our back page for submission guidelines.

Queries: JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY, Program for Writing and Rhetoric, UCB 317, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado 80309-0359; or journal2020@colorado.edu. We are a green journal and prefer electronic submissions and correspondence. Printed on recycled stock and fully recyclable (including the cover). Single copy costs are \$12.00 per issue in the U.S. and Canada, and \$14.00 outside North America.

Cover Art: MARIAH HERMSMEYER


ON JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY



Editing this second issue of **JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY** has posed rewarding new challenges. Last spring, our first issue proved that the creative nonfiction from just one writing class could showcase an extraordinary collection of young voices. This fall, we fulfilled our plan to expand our vision. Issue 2 grew from our roots in one classroom to encompass undergraduate writing and art from across the University of Colorado Boulder campus. Our call for submissions was answered by ninety-five writers and dozens of artists. We received so many submissions from talented undergraduates that we have begun work on our online complement to showcase a wider breadth of student creative nonfiction work in writing, film, art, podcasts, and more.

Yet the heart of **JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY** remains in print. The pieces in this issue represent the finest in creative nonfiction writing at CU Boulder. Once again, I feel extraordinarily lucky to have had the opportunity to work with writers with such strength of voice and vision. I want to thank the authors for allowing us one lens to view an intimate interior, or another that deepens our focus out in the world. Those views are sometimes personal, tragic, or funny, but always true.

Our second issue opens as Lexi Evans recognizes ignorance and intolerance both in others and herself. Moving to the U.S. proves bittersweet for Stela Knezevic. Benjamin Ross struggles with questions left by his service in Iraq, while Megan Sakas finds her grandfather's war wounds still unhealed. Samuel Carrothers's memories of his East Texan childhood are simpler than his present life. More childhoods are turned over in Lexi Evans's and Sayoni Nyakoon's portraits of lost loved ones. After the loss of his mother, Brendan Craine hardens his body and mind only to find himself still vulnerable. More vulnerability is explored in Amy MacNair's brave memoir. Michael Harris tries to equate faith and young love, and Kimberly Preston embraces her culture and traditions. Traditional social expectations are challenged by Sayoni Nyakoon, while Kathleen Childs's new journalism confronts homelessness in LGBT youth to reveal tragedy both personal and national. We switch gears and get lighter with Kathleen's recipe for behaving maturely around an ex, and Ben Song laments the trials of a cursed dating life. First Dates are awkward for Andrew Hecoeks. Finally, Erin Greenhalgh paints us an epitaph to close.

New journalism, portrait, memoir, humor, and more—I am very excited to have helped share these powerful stories with you. Enjoy. 

HANNAH BECKLER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I chose to take on heading Art Direction in Issue 2, after helping start the journal last year. My main task was cementing our image for the journal and spreading awareness through posters, handouts, and our new website. It's been exciting for me, as an Architecture and Studio Arts student, to put my visual computer skills to good use, creating fun graphics that kept our iconic red bar while also trying to educate others about who we are and what we're here to do. My other main task was finding the color to bring life to our pages. I am a strong believer in giving artists as many opportunities as possible to share their work, so it was important to me for student artwork to be highlighted within our journal, not only to complement the writing around it for nice transitions between pieces, but to also stand alone as an exhibit of the great artistic work of our student body. I'm thrilled with the artwork we have this issue and had a lot of fun creating new ways to display each piece on the page.

I'm excited to see how the journal progresses and look forward to seeing what the future staff creates and what new stories come our way. ✎

MARIAH HERMSMEYER, ART DIRECTOR



✎ ✎

JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY's second issue might merely have hoped to reach the quality of writing that occasioned its creation, a high enough goal. An astonishing collection of writing from just one course (WRTG 2020 in fall, 2012) led several students to create Issue 1 last spring. Even with growth in staff for Issue 2, everyone had enough to do simply establishing a journal with ongoing support, representing talent from across the University of Colorado Boulder, and reaching an audience beyond campus. Impressed readers of Issue 1 might naturally ask: *can something this good be sustainable?* The strong support of Director JOHN-MICHAEL RIVERA and THE PROGRAM FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC, as well as a generous UROP GRANT from MAY PENUELA AND JOAN GABRIELE, helped us answer that question.

We fulfilled our promise to continue publishing one issue a semester satisfying our founding criteria:

- Creative nonfiction only—in all its sub-genres.
- All content created by undergraduates.
- All editorial, layout, and production work by undergraduates.
- All in the beautiful print you hold in your hands.

Volume I, Issue 2, however, already raises the bar for us.

Issue 2 publishes impressive writing from students across campus, and our nearly one hundred submissions underwent a blind review process worthy of any scholarly journal. The writing here exemplifies sensibilities, depth of feeling, and curiosity that some older readers (if not so lucky as I am to work with these young people year after year) might easily think impossible in undergraduates. This journal continues not only as a home for creative nonfiction's possibilities, but as a testament to the quality of work that for some reason we thought possible from late teens and twenty-somethings in the 1920s, but not now. Not so. To read these young writers is to realize young talent flourishes in any age; one must simply look to see it.

Undergraduate energy that created JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY has proven contagious, inspiring not only me, but more importantly, students new to the journal. Hannah Beckler, this issue's Editor-in-Chief, managed our staff through the acquisitions, developmental editing, copy editing, and publishing processes resulting in this issue. Somehow, she also taught fundraising and marketing strategies to other students, and led our new business staff through successful application for that UROP grant. She then began our growth online, creating our first website (journal2020.wordpress.com) with last issue's EIC, Mariah Hermsmeyer.

After helping to found the journal, Mariah turned to Art Direction, acquiring the stunning artwork you see in these pages. Her work with design advisor DAVE UNDERWOOD last spring accomplished the look you see here, with a bold layout that avoids what Dave calls "non-nutritious text." We continue to honor the strong writing we publish by presenting each piece with a fresh turn of the page to en face art that does more than mimic the coming story. Mariah's innovative introduction of four-edged bleeds in this issue stretches art across a page spread, lifting the first words of a piece over colors subtle or stark, or contrasting black, raising the aesthetic bar for future issues. And as many new submissions as we received, we simply could not find the ideal cover for this issue until we went to "the Hermsmeyer folder" again.

JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY grows precisely because these and the other students working so hard on this issue taught each other along the way. Next issue, look for multi-modal and media-rich complementary material online while we keep our print journal to put in the hands of parents and the rest of us who want it all in terms of how we read and react to creative nonfiction. If you are reading this beyond our campus walls, drop us a line, stay in touch. If you're an undergraduate here, join our staff, send us your artwork—*tell us your stories.* ✎

JAY ELLIS, FACULTY ADVISOR

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MAKESHIFT PATRIOT

By Lexi Evans

It was going to be impossible. There were three buildings in Research Complex I, and two of the buildings had twelve floors each. The third building had nine floors. This amounted to thirty-three floors, which meant there were roughly 660 stairs for me to scale to find the missing person, who, I might add, had just arrived in the United States for the first time. From Saudi Arabia. This was a dangerous proposition in itself: an unaccompanied Saudi who spoke broken-to-severed English lost in the biggest academic research complex west of Chicago on his first day of studies in the U.S. (Homeland Security would not like the sound of this). So with the conviction of an army of TSA personnel responding to an airport security breach, I began my pursuit, dashing through heavily carpeted hallways and racing up dark stairwells. Our boss had told us that we would need to accommodate Hasan's¹ prayer needs; I was worried we hadn't accommodated fast enough. So I had to ask myself: if I were an Arab in an American research complex, where would I go to pray to Mecca? The answer was obvious: the floor with the bioterrorism chemicals.

1. Names were changed for this piece after fact checkers verified the story.

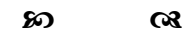


This was my job. I worked in a Proteomics lab in the Endocrinology, Diabetes, Metabolism Department at Anschutz Medical Campus at the University of Colorado at Denver as a professional research assistant. Before I started, I had to Wikipedia “endocrinology” to make sure it was the study of glands and not the visual examination of organs by means of an endoscope. I couldn’t pronounce the word “proteomics” (and still can’t), but I was sure fooling someone, because they were paying me \$12 an hour while I bolstered my resume for med school. I had previous experience as a laboratory assistant, but tragically, Friday mornings rendered me too hung-over to function, so I quit before they could fire me. I lasted three months. But if writing lab reports were a qualification, then I was hundreds of pages deep in experience.

I had gotten the job because two divorces and an eHarmony account later, my mom had met a professor. Jim worked at CU and was collaborating with a researcher who needed an assistant. Surprisingly, the eHarmony romance ended shortly thereafter because (a) Jim wanted to have a “plant-potting party” (my mother struggled to keep cacti alive), and (b) he showed up at our front door a few months after they met, got down on one knee, and told my mom he wanted to wake up next to her every morning for the rest of his life. They had never even held hands. At least I got a job out of the ordeal. According to our boss, Mike, we were working on an “important project” for King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. They paid for a number of their students to earn their PhDs at our university while working in Mike’s lab (among them was Hasan, whom we lost on the first day). I didn’t know what we were doing half the time, I just knew it was “important.”

Among the Saudis chosen to “assist with research” was Aabid. What I knew about him before I knew anything else was that the day before his first day of work, he asked Mike to ask my supervisor Linda and me to “cover up,” and not wear anything revealing; which, by his definition, meant anything that exposed skin not on our hands or face. He didn’t want to get distracted, he said. He wasn’t used to it. The next day, I silently crept into the lab and slid in between a row of lab benches so I could get a glimpse of Aabid before he could get a glimpse of me. From a small opening I could make out a massive curtain of black, thick, wiry hair. His beard

turned, and an olive-colored neck appeared. My flip-flops slapped against my heels as I moved toward him. I emerged from between the lab benches, and his eyes followed the sound of my flip-flops up to the bare skin shooting out of my shorts, up to the place where my necklace dove down beneath my tank top. I stuck out my hand. Aabid blinked at it, then began waving his hands wildly in front of his chest. “No, no, no! I do not, I cannot!” The curtain shook violently. I retracted my hand. “I’m Lexi, nice to meet you.” He was still waving fiercely. Rage flooded my body. My flip-flops began slapping my heels harder and faster all the way out of the lab. My eyes burned with anger. I was nothing to him because I wasn’t a “him.” I was a thing not worth shaking hands with because I didn’t have the anatomy to match the image of worth. The feeling was familiar, but the first time I had felt it was eight years earlier, before I even had the chance to understand what it meant to be female—



His name was Eddie. But of course that wasn’t his real name. His real name was Ahmed Orabi, and “Eddie” represented his attempt to seamlessly assimilate into American culture. Easily pronounceable and generic names were a trend amongst Eddie and his clan. His friend Khalid became “Ted.” His brother, Omar, went by just “O.” I never knew Andy’s real name, I just knew it wasn’t “Andy.” To enhance the theme of changing the most important part of one’s identity, Eddie also carried around with him an excessive amount of accessories proudly donning the American flag, I guess as a peace offering of sorts. In all actuality, Eddie hated the United States. He hated it almost as much as he hated Jews.

My mom met Eddie at T.J. Maxx. She was buying pillows. My mom went through this phase (and in all likelihood is still in it), where anytime she needed consolation, she would buy pillows. On a bi-weekly basis, I would come home to find my living room entirely re-decorated with a new set of pillows. She would keep them for a trial period, then exchange them for a new set. Sometimes she wouldn’t exchange them, but would continue hoarding them until we had a closet in each room stuffed with pillows, which would later become an endless supply of chew toys for my dog, who, like my mother, developed a strange affinity for the damn things. My mother’s ex-boyfriend had just been murdered, so she was buying pillows.

*My mother’s
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pillows.*

My mom was vulnerable, and Eddie was in the pillow aisle, so a year and a half later, Eddie began living in our house and my mother started wearing a ring. Apparently, they had gotten married, but my mother didn't think it was incredibly important to tell me, so she didn't. I was thirteen years old.

Living with Eddie was like living with someone who had emigrated illegally from Jordan to the U.S. in 1987 and had yet to realize that two continents and fifteen years had passed him by. Under Eddie's reign, I was never smart enough, never fast enough, not tough enough, reserved enough, or domestic enough. He may as well have told me that because I wasn't born with a penis, I would never be enough. He complained to my mother about what I wore, he threw a fit when I began wearing eyeliner and mascara at age sixteen, and he went berserk when a boy tried to take me out on a date at age seventeen. Once, when he was mad at my mom, he barked, "In my countrrrry, we keep women on short leash!" (Thank God we have retractable leashes here in the United States.) He thought it beneficial to tell me on a weekly basis what I would never be able to do, or else he wouldn't talk to me at all. He would see a female celebrity on TV and, regardless of who she was, would point at the screen with a thick, greasy finger, and howl, "Dis woman whorrre!" To Eddie, women were either sexual objects or domestic slaves, and to Eddie, I was just a naïve girl who still believed in the innocence of the world. Our futile debates about race, religion, and sexual orientation only affirmed this. He condemned everything about me from each thread of clothing down to every pulsating thought I breathed into existence. I was nothing.



After that turbulent first day, Aabid gradually came around: he would nod politely at me when I walked into the lab, and would occasionally ask me about experimental procedures. One summer day a few months after he arrived, I walked into the lab in an uncharacteristically upbeat mood, only to lose it entirely several feet before reaching my desk. Aabid's eyes were glued to a soccer ball flying across my computer screen. He didn't break contact with the monitor, even as his hands struggled to find their way into one of the three bags of "Flamin' Hot" Cheetos, Lays, and Funyuns that were strewn across my desk. I pulled Linda out in the hall.

"What the hell is going on here?"

*Aabid's eyes were
glued to a soccer
ball flying across
my computer
screen.*

Linda just shrugged her shoulders. "The speakers on his computer don't work, and he wants to watch the soccer games."

I slapped my palm to my forehead. "Jesus. But that's my desk. I've been here for over a year. He just got here!"

She shrugged her shoulders again. "I know. I know. I'm sorry."

I never got my desk back.



Eddie loved garage sales. He loved them so much that every Sunday, at precisely 11 a.m., Eddie would pick up his daughter from his ex-wife's house, and would eagerly begin his Tour de Sale through the greater Denver metro area. Eddie had an irresistible attraction for things that were already broken, or would break very soon. This ritual continued when he moved in with us, and within months of his arrival, our garage began to resemble a "Hoarders" freak show on TLC. It overflowed with dismembered hard drives, crippled bicycles, defective TVs, horrid shoes that would never belong to a pair of feet, trinkets disguised as patriotism, and my personal favorite: a mangled, sputtering Otis Spunkmeyer cookie oven. One summer, Eddie decided it was time to pawn off his wretched junk to some other poor soul. So we had a garage sale—my first ever. Eddie had a natural talent for hustling, and I marveled at his ability to get rid of years of worthless treasures within hours. I briefly went inside our house to use the bathroom, and when I returned, a stranger was walking away with my bike—the same bike I had bought with money my deceased grandpa had given me for my birthday. I skidded over to Eddie.

"Eddie! That's my bike! What are you doing? You can't sell it!"

"Honey, it's okkkayyy."

I ran over to my mom. She shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry, Lex, but he already sold it. We can't just take it back."

So I watched my childhood roll away with a stranger's hands gripping the handlebars.



For the first few months Aabid worked in the lab, he refused to eat lunch with Linda and me because we were women. Eventu-

ally we persuaded him to have lunch with us on East Colfax, but only because other men would be there. On the way back, stunned by the number of liquor stores lining the street, he asked us what one could find in a liquor store. I had forgotten they forbid ethanol ingestion in Saudi Arabia. He was 30 years old and had never indulged in even a sip of alcohol.

“Ya know, beer, wine, hard liquor.”

“What is de difference?”

“Well, hard liquor has the highest percentage of alcohol; then wine usually, which is made out of grapes. Then beer, which is made out of yeast.”

“So you are more likely to become alcoholic if you drink hard liquor?”

“No. Not really. Alcohol doesn’t discriminate.”

“So children should not drink beer?” He asked in a Borat-esque voice.

“No, Aabid, they shouldn’t.” He was innocent.



I remember Eddie telling us that Islam did not allow him to drink—it was a sin. He would say this while swigging from a bottle of Tuaca and laughing viciously. He condemned my mother’s sporadic consumption of wine because drinking was especially sinful if you were a woman. Eddie sat on his pedestal—a beer in one hand and the Qur’an in the other. The Qur’an was his reason for not ingesting drugs or pork, but it was also his reason for discriminating against homosexuals, Jews, Christians, women, and countless others. He ripped what he wanted from Islam and abandoned the rest with self-righteousness and indignation.

Because of Eddie, my soul grew bitter. I hated him in a way that I’ve never despised anyone before or since. I hated him for being so prejudiced, for believing the world was an ugly, disgusting place. I hated him for everything he stood for. And I especially hated him after 9/11. He began to represent the oppression of all women, and in a single man, he embodied the entire Middle East for me. Being a patriot began to mean hating another race. I could see few differences between him and the men who killed some 3,000 people, some burning as they leapt to their deaths from the frame of a crumbling building. Eddie chose to live in his world, and I, in mine.

*Because of
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After failing a biochemistry exam four weeks into the fall semester, I was feeling particularly defeated about my chosen career path and life in general, and thought double-checking the average GPA of prospective medical school students would be a good idea. It wasn’t. Salt water stung my eyes as a knot began tightening around my throat. I could hear Aabid’s timid footsteps approaching, and I knew he was going to ask me a question about an experimental procedure I wouldn’t be able to answer, which would only magnify my feeling of inadequacy. I hid my face in my hands to indicate to him to go back to his soccer games and potato chips.

“Um—Lexi?”

“Hmm?” I peered at him from behind my fingers.

“Um—Are you—okay?”

I shook my head.

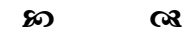
“What is wrong?”

“I-I did terrible on my biochemistry exam. There’s no way I’ll be able to get into med school.”

He shook his head. “No, no. Medicine is difficult, but if you want to become a doctor, you will. You are smart. And if you want, I can help you with this biochemistry.”

I pulled my hands away from my face and looked up at him. “Thank you, Aabid.” He held up an index finger to signal me to wait just a moment, and disappeared behind the lab bench. I could hear him rummaging in his desk drawer for something, and he returned seconds later with a shiny, red-orange bag. He nodded at the bag, then stretched his arm toward me. I stuck my hand into the “Flamin’ Hot” Cheetos and smiled gratefully.

Aabid pulled up a chair beside me. He tapped the cover of my textbook with his finger. “So, what are you having trouble with?”



Some months after the biochemistry catastrophe, Aabid asked Linda and me to accompany him to the lounge. A miniature white tablecloth covered one of the tables. On the tablecloth rested a ceramic teapot engraved with elegant Arabic script, surrounded by three tiny teacups. Candied dates and baklava were arranged

beautifully on saucers. He poured the tea into our cups with such care and precision, and eagerly watched our faces as we brought the steaming liquid to our lips. He smiled with his eyes. It was the end of Ramadan, and Aabid wanted to share the celebration with us. Aabid explained that Ramadan was the Islamic month of fasting, where Muslims refrain from drinking, eating, sex, and smoking during daylight. He told us that this practice was important because it was about resisting temptation, finding humility, exercising patience, and being submissive to God. He told us that by cleansing his soul, he found freedom. So Aabid sat and shared his tea with two American women on the holiest of Muslim holidays.



I remember when Eddie would celebrate Ramadan; in the early fall dawn, he would grab a freshly prepared pumpkin pie from the fridge (a product of my mother's insomnia), snatch a fork from the silverware drawer, slam it down on the table with the pie, and proceed to savagely shove forkfuls of pie into his mouth until whole turned to half. I never saw him pray, and I never even heard him explain what Ramadan was, so when it rolled around every year, all it meant to me was half-eaten pumpkin pies punctured with metal prongs and deserted on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator.

During the month of Ramadan one year, Eddie had a peculiar guest over for dinner. He was a man of few words, saying little to nothing during the three-course meal, save for a few phrases exchanged in harsh Arabic with Eddie. He sat with his arms crossed over his chest, his downturned lips displaying his obvious dissatisfaction with the world—or my mother's pumpkin pie, I couldn't decide which. He would let a chunk of beef or lamb roll over his tongue and then begin working his jaw against the meat, viciously tearing it into little pieces as he let out small grunts. He chewed and grunted, chewed and grunted. He had black, piercing eyes, and a grim silence that clouded his entire face. A few times when the chatter was buzzing and the forks were scraping desperately against plates, this man's piercing eyes found their way to mine, his eyes turning even blacker and his face falling into deep shadows.

This man was an ex-Al Qaeda member. Of course, I didn't find that out until a year later—my mom made sure of that. When I learned the truth, my sixteen-year-old self extracted two disgusting facts, plain and simple: I had eaten dinner with the enemy. I had

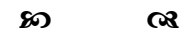
*He told us that
by cleansing his soul,
he found freedom.*

betrayed my country. All I could think about were those menacing eyes, the way they burned through me with a hatred that spread to Ground Zero and back. When I thought about the way he stared at me that night, at my own dinner table, I was resolutely sure that he had desired one of three things: (a) to blow me up, (b) to stone me to death, or (c) to turn me into a sex slave. There were no other options.



After sharing his post-Ramadan feast, Aabid inexplicably sent me an email with pictures of war in the Middle East. There was no text in the body of the email, no captions, just the truth of a plain picture. I couldn't respond; I didn't know how. I never heard Aabid speak badly of another race or faith. Aabid's Qur'an was sacred, and Islam was part of an intrinsic force that stitched together the fabric of his existence. It helped him make sense of the world when everything else seemed lost. Eddie poured Islam on his smoldering contempt like gasoline. The Qur'an was his scapegoat for hatred—the same hatred that had burned thousands of Americans to the ground. He used something holy to condone his prejudices, and for that, I could never forgive him.

Eddie was a nationalist, blind with pride and rage founded in revenge. And so was I. But Eddie would live and die in his hatred. He had murdered his own soul; and I thought he had permanently tainted mine. But mine had been salvaged because I could still find humanity in a race that I blamed for the destruction of my nation. It was the humanity in the mutual understanding of war, the humanity in Aabid's kind, innocent eyes that rescued me.



We ended up finding Hasan the day we lost him. After searching for an hour, I was called back to the lab. Hasan had never even left. We couldn't see him because he was a few lab benches away, kneeling on an delicate rug, his bottom resting on his heels with his arms locked out in front of him, his head slung low between his shoulders. His palms were pressed into the tiles and his lips were barely brushing the rug. He was facing east. Praying. ☞

*It was the
humanity in
the mutual
understanding
of war . . . in
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rescued me.*



EXTRACTION

By Benjamin Ross

Moving steadily through the early darkness, after the sun had slipped far beneath the horizon, my Marines and I eased along the bank of the Euphrates River. We approached the rally point and waited for the order to proceed. The rancid, humid air engulfed my nostrils. I crouched, felt my right knee sink into the wet muck of the earth, the wretched stench absorbing into my fatigues. The squad was concealed by high grass and foliage, but each movement we made was slow and deliberate. Poised and disciplined, each man scanned his designated sector with minimal rotation of his head—eyes wide open, darting from one potential threat to the next. There was a seemingly endless anxiety over dangers surrounding us. My own eyes trained on something close, just through the stalks of tall grass. A sheep, drenched and rotting, its tongue flopping out of its gaping mouth, rolled calmly in the shallows of the foul river. Its eyes seemed to focus on me. I could imagine how it had died—how it had slipped on the banks and splashed into the muddy water. It had probably gasped for breath, bleating in fear, but could only suck in silt and slime. Death would have slipped over its eyes as its fellow sheep looked on.

One week into Iraq, my disdain for the people had begun to grow. Everyone felt like the enemy, and my distrust of the civil-

ian population only burned stronger with time. It started with the friendly kebab vendor three blocks down the littered road from our exposed patrol base. He seemed to be sincere and helpful. Through chapped lips and plaque-ridden teeth he would divulge information about improvised explosives in the area and give us intelligence on weapon caches and insurgents living close by. We all felt he was an incredible asset—but when his kebab stand exploded, killing an Iraqi police officer and sending Corporal Evens to the hospital in Germany, our trust was shaken. Ten days later, while performing surveillance, our designated marksman Lance Corporal Ortiz shot the vendor in the sternum after observing him plant two 155 artillery shells in a road called “Wagon.” After Explosive Ordinance Disposal had cleared the area, they called me to check the body. Even with his two front teeth missing, I recognized the kebab vendor’s dusty, lifeless face without question. My confidence in the population fell to an all-time low, and hatred began to look like the safer choice when dealing with the locals.

Emerging from our concealment by the river, I caught my stocky platoon commander, LTJG Marvin, making a smiley face with his gloved forefingers from the edges of his mouth up to his ears. “Joy,” he was saying, a hand signal of his own invention. Our reconnaissance must have radioed in, telling him that it was clear to move. The silhouette of the town loomed fifty yards from our rally point and we entered the outskirts via a five-foot-wide space between buildings, our weapons at the ready. I stepped over puddles that might have been either water or sewage, but kept my sights on the rooftops until we reached the entry point to the dusty town. The insurgent’s residence, made of cinderblocks and plaster, sat two stories high across the street and was guarded only by its inconspicuousness.

In the war zone silence I could hear our extraction vehicles start up about a mile away. We made quick work travelling across the rubble in the road and stacked ourselves against the front door, one Marine behind the other, me in the fourth position. Sergeant Roberts and Corporal Jimenez threw two stun grenades—smashing through the pane of the front window. The burst made my ears ring. LCPL Duncan forced his way through the front door with a well-placed front kick a few inches from the handle. The entire door came off its hinges and crashed into the living room. Dust drifted down as I entered the house. My stomach churned as I observed a room full of children too dazed to cry. The lights switched on and Duncan made his way up the stairs to the second story with two more squad mates. A child wailed, and I noticed a small boy bleed-

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without question.*

*I had to help
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I had learned
to hate.*

ing from the right side of his forehead where the door had slammed down on him. Another one of the boys, perhaps fifteen years of age, made a stumbling run for the stairs before Lance Corporal Courage snagged his collar like a misbehaving puppy and threw him to the ground. His skull bounced as it hit the cement floor covered only by a thin rug. Duncan’s voice called down from upstairs that he had the man we were after. I responded that the living room was clear of danger. As Duncan’s heavy stomps came down, Courage’s urgent tone caught my attention over the rumble of the extraction vehicles now idling outside.


He stood over a scrawny little girl on her knees unable to breathe from the force of her sobbing. Her tiny hands pushed frantically on another body lying inert on the cold floor. I told Courage to contain the girl and got my first look at the victim. A tear-soaked face, wrinkled with age, half-open eyelids, stared unresponsively at the crumbling ceiling. The elderly man’s fragile chest heaved and abruptly stopped. Sure sign of a heart attack, I knew. I looked at the girl, whose legs had given out from beneath her in her anguish, as the old man gasped again. Duncan strode by with the target insurgent, who was struggling against his zip tie handcuffs. When he caught a glimpse of the old man lying prostrate and gasping for life, his resistance against Duncan’s heavy grip quickly turned to helplessness. “Help!” he yelled at me in accented English, gesturing at the old man before Duncan yanked him out the door. At that moment, I could only think of helping the old man, and I began to perform CPR. LTJG Marvin stood over me. He was screaming, but I hadn’t noticed, his face crimson red with anger. He ordered me to load up and leave, that we were done here. I responded with more CPR. I had to help these people I had learned to hate.

“I’ll stay with you, Doc,” Courage’s voice rang in my ear, but a moment later a sharp tug on my flak jacket lifted me off the floor, and I was dragged by my obedient Marines out the door toward the vehicles.

“*Muschtefa!*” I called to the girl. “Hospital” in Arabic.

LTJG Marvin glared at me and spat, “Think about who you’re trying to help, Doc!” He turned and spoke on the radio as I climbed into the vehicle. The girl attempting to drag the old man’s limp body out the door turned, and her swollen, red eyes locked onto me.

“Mission success,” I heard someone say as my eyes welled and we rumbled away down the hard, war-torn road. ☞



A CICADA SHELL IT SANG ITSELF UTTERLY AWAY

By Brendan Craine

My feet are hideous.

At least when compared to the smooth, pink extremities that most people have within their shoes, the contrast is striking. Mine are rough, callused, and oddly colored, with bulging tendons and misshapen toes. The pinkies stick out at odd angles from being broken and re-broken, and my insteps are covered in minor cuts and rug burns. Where most people have skin on their soles, mine are like elephant hide. The balls of my feet are dark and hard, like scorched earth, like the site of some mighty volcanic force. Further up, my shinbones roll like sand dunes, a geography of lumps of scar tissue and calcified bone. My knee-

caps are scraped raw, discolored and hard. All over, I am worn and weathered. The beauty has long been battered out of me.

Yagyu Renya, famous swordsman of Japan's middle ages, wrote in his *Seven Principles of Swordsmanship* that "It is not good to be overly conscious of one's physical condition, especially aches and pains."¹ Last week I woke up and found that it hurt to straighten my fingers. A lump of bone had been pulled loose, had re-fused inside my knuckle, and I could feel it sticking out sideways when I tested it with my finger. The toe on my right foot had swelled and turned a sickly purple during the night, broken the prior evening when it caught against someone's *dō-gi*². I flexed my fingers to warm up the joints, and taped my broken toe to the ones beside it. These are the weekly wounds. Only by chipping away at a rock did Michelangelo create his *David*.

It is autumn in Boulder, Colorado, and the sidewalks and streets are littered with dead leaves and seedpods like the beaches clogged with samurai corpses at Ichi-no-Tani³. Slowly, the trees are becoming more withered and barren. Everywhere the world dies around you and it sheds itself, decomposing in the grass and on the rooftops. Off in Colorado's prairies, old forgotten houses mold and dilapidate with time. Over centuries, rivers carve deep paths into the mountains.

Doing pushups on your bare knuckles hurts at first, but then the skin toughens over and you stop feeling it. After that, you roll your wrists in and balance on the calluses, and the pain comes back as you rip them off and re-grow them over and over until they come back so thick that you can't tear them on carpet or gravel or ice. When that's done, you do pushups on the sides of your hands so that your wrists seize up and it hurts to type. Eventually, the tendons strengthen, and you can start clapping between each repetition, slamming the blades of your hands against the ground like guillotines. When that stops hurting, you do pushups on your fingertips, digits stretched far apart, so that your finger joints strain and shake, threatening to give and splinter. When they've strengthened, you move to four fingers, and

1. John Stevens, *Budo Secrets*, (Boston and London: Shambhala 2001), 22.

2. *dō-gi* or *keikogi* is a type of white three-piece uniform worn by Martial Arts practitioners.

3. One of the most famous and decisive battles of the Genpei war, fought in the late 12th century. The Minamoto pinned the opposing Taira against the cliffs, and claimed a stunning victory.

*Batter away
at the ribs for
long enough,
and eventually
you will reach
the heart.*

when that stops hurting you move to three. Ancient masters used to shove their hands into bowls of rice a thousand times a day, until their digits were like railroad spikes.

It is written in the *Kokoro no Maki* that "When the heart is full of things, the body feels constrained; when it is empty, the body feels expansive."⁴ I've always liked walking on snow-covered leaves, brushing away a layer of winter, like uncovering the past—like traveling back in time. If you walk everywhere barefoot, it hurts for the first day. You form blisters the size of half-dollars, and leave bloody footprints on the sidewalks. The second day is worse. On the eighth day, you feel nothing but the pressure of pavement, gravel, pine needles. The world's hardness becomes softer.

When I was eight, I buried my mother, and then when I was thirteen I buried my best friend. My cats, my grandmother, my grandfather—after a while I became good at burying things. It was only after three funerals that I realized they weren't like pushups. I liked to watch heartbreaking movies, *Titanic* or *Pay It Forward*, trying to build up a resistance. When you can watch Jack sink below the waves and feel nothing, you rent a copy of *Old Yeller*. When you can do pushups on your fingertips, you do them on the backs of your wrists, hands cupped like crane's beaks solemnly bowed.

If you take beer bottles and roll them along your shins and ulnae a hundred times a day, it makes the bone calcify and strengthen. If you don't have beer bottles, you can roll up the Sunday edition of the newspaper and use that. This week I woke up and noticed that my nose was slightly crooked from being punched the night before. I spent that day blowing blood into a tissue and groaning whenever I breathed in too rapidly, aggravating the bruises on my ribcage. Batter away at the ribs for long enough, and eventually you'll reach the heart. What was in Minamoto Yorimasa's mind when he sliced through his chest at the battle of Uji?⁵ What words did Benkei⁶ whisper when he died on his feet at Koromogawa castle?

4. *Ibid.*, 36.

5. The first battle of the Genpei War, beginning in 1180. Yorimasa commanded the Minamoto side, and after losing the battle, subsequently committed seppuku (ritual suicide).

6. Bodyguard to Minamoto Yoshitsune during the Genpei War, Benkei expired from his wounds while still standing.

You don't feel your injuries when they happen. They are buried under adrenaline until they can resurface. When samurai were preparing to ride into a battle they couldn't possibly win, they used to burn their houses and kill their families so that they could fight with complete abandon. Their honor compromised, women of class would tie their knees together with cloth before they committed suicide, so that their bodies would be found in a modest position. After a forest fire, the soil is rich and fertile, and flowers spring up and bud with tenacity. At the pond outside my window, I like to watch the ducks vanish underwater for seven, eight seconds, before appearing once more, shaking the water in droplets from their feathers.

Venerated sword-saint Miyamoto Musashi wrote, "Do not grieve when you have to separate yourself from someone or something."⁷ I remember raising monarch butterflies with my mother, watching them form hard chrysalises and burst forth to flutter around in the summer sunlight, alighting on cabinets and bookshelves and our bodies, until they found the windows and escaped. We have a picture of her lying on her back on a Mexican beach, arms and legs spread, her bald head pressed against the sand. A wave might have come in and carried her far out to sea forever, like emperor Antoku⁸. She looked so peaceful. The first time I went camping, I found cicada exoskeletons in piles underneath the pine trees, like tiny suits of antique armor. I crushed them to dust in my hands and scattered them to the wind.

While she was going through chemotherapy, my mother started losing her toenails and fingernails. Her body abandoned the excess as it tore itself apart. I remember her sitting barefoot on the bed, her raw pink toes curled and grotesque, as she cradled me in her lap and whispered to me in hushed tones about nothing in particular, as if she were sharing all her most important secrets with me. After a while, she started wearing an eye patch to account for double vision, and she used to make pirate jokes while she wore it, arrghing at me from where she sat, exhausted, in the living room. I would stare with my two eyes into her one eye, loving her bald head and her bare toes. She was falling apart until only the persistent parts of her were left.

*After you've
been hit enough,
you learn to
anticipate and
tighten, so that
it just feels like
dull impact.*

7. Ibid., 74.

8. During the final battle of the Genpei War, (the battle of Dan-no-Ura), the child emperor's nurse took him in her arms and plunged into the sea, letting him die rather than be captured by the enemy.

Ancient masters used to shove their hands into bowls of rice a thousand times a day, until their digits were like railroad spikes. When they turned sixty, their hands were withered tree branches that shook and trembled. After you've been hit enough, your body loses that initial shock reflex, and you stop being ticklish. After you've been hit enough, you learn to anticipate and tighten, so that it just feels like dull impact. Harry Houdini died when a stranger sucker-punched him and ruptured his appendix. This summer, the girl I love lost her father to a senseless, sudden act of violence, and for two days I cried and shook with emotion. I remember her looking at me with hollow, empty moon-eyes, enduring it. That look drove straight through my chest, and when I woke up the next morning, I felt it resounding like church bells.

If you walk everywhere barefoot, you learn about decay. You learn about snow-covered leaves and rotting piles of pine needles. You learn how things go in soft and come out hard, how they go in hard and come out beautiful. Old trees are struck by lightning and burned to ash and the great masters could still hold their grandchildren in their brittle hands. When you are done pounding your fists into the floorboards, when you are done wearing your knees and elbows into battering rams and your shins into cudgels, beneath it all, your heart will not have hardened. Musashi killed men and created beautiful calligraphy. The warrior Tesshomaru shed his armor for rags, his sword for a walking stick, and traveled the world. If you scrape away at yourself, eventually you uncover something that exists more deeply. If you walk barefoot everywhere, you get worn down and exposed and your feet become ugly. My mother painted pictures of her cancer in bright pastels and hung them in the room where she would eventually die. During his final days in Osaka, as he lay sick among his disciples, the poet Matsuo Bashō wrote,

falling sick on a journey
my dream goes wandering
over a field of dried grass.⁹

☞

9. Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō*, (Stanford University Press 1998), 279.



THE EAGLE

By Samantha Webster

In the fall, she memorized a poem. A short poem, only six lines, but it took her awhile. She wrote it out on a note card carefully, stashed it in her pocket so it became wrinkled and dirty. She muttered it under her breath on her way to and from class, stood in front of the mirror in the communal bathroom, trying out a different facial expression for every word. When she finally had it memorized, she would whisper it to herself in the dark, atop her lofted bed, while her roommate snored below. *He clasps the crag with crooked hands.*

She spent a lot of time looking at her hands. She'd stretch them as flat as she could, then try to make a fist, listening to them creak. I'm like the tin man, she thought, perversely amused. An oil can to grease her joints. If only.

She lived a reduced existence, she decided. It was simple—class, homework, food, sleep. She was adrift in time, anchored only to her schedule and to the silence that settled around her like snow. In it, she found neutrality, and it was a relief. There were no good days or bad days anymore, just days. This must be what being a monk is like—so in the present that real life became its own form

of escapism. *Close to the sun in lonely lands.* She would mutter the poem to herself like a mantra.

It was possible to get used to pain. Memories are insubstantial things, and whether by necessity or by happenstance, hers seemed to be more ephemeral than most. What had it been like to be able to run? To stand without help? To bound down stairs? She could remember, but it was like remembering a photograph; she couldn't quite project the feeling of power down to her ruined extremities, couldn't quite forget the constant ache that demanded her attention. And so she adjusted, recalibrated. Overcame by giving in. If it was here and here to stay, might as well let it do some good. At least this pain was tangible.

She hit milestones. *Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.* She'd quote it to her first boyfriend, on a weekend trip to the mountains, while they waited in line to see the President. She mentally catalogued her firsts, stored them away for later perusal, the remember-whens to be pulled out, presumably, once she grew old. It was always with a sense that these moments would mean more to her as memories, and she lived them as one takes an Instagram picture, the present in ready-tinged sepia.

She voted for the first time at her old elementary school, and she felt acutely her own lack of displacement. What had really changed since then, besides the fact that she now hobbled like an old woman to her voting booth? She should have left—and yet she had stayed, retained her juvenile characteristics, delayed adulthood. Only now, she was a disparate mix of too young and too old, and she hurried back to campus to where, she thought wryly, the uncomfortable in-betweens were institutionalized for their own good.

There were bad days, despite what she wanted to believe about neutrality and perpetuity and whatever else. There were days that doors were impossible, and the campus enormous, and her lofted bed a cruel joke. These were the days that her knees buzzed and her fingers were so swollen that she couldn't hold a pen, and the short walk to the dining hall was so prohibitive that she ate cereal for dinner. *The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls* she would remind herself, and, with no cast and no crutches, take the handicap-only elevator.

She noticed different things than most—the shape of door handles and the slight incline to walkways. Her bike was some comfort; she could feel almost normal on her bike, those terrible distances reduced to mere fractions. But inevitably she'd have to get off, and her hips would protest as she swung her leg over the seat. Stairs were

*... she lived them
as one takes an
Instagram picture,
the present in
ready-tinged sepia.*


*There was
a future,
and there was
a past,
and once again
she was balanced
on the knife's edge
between them.*

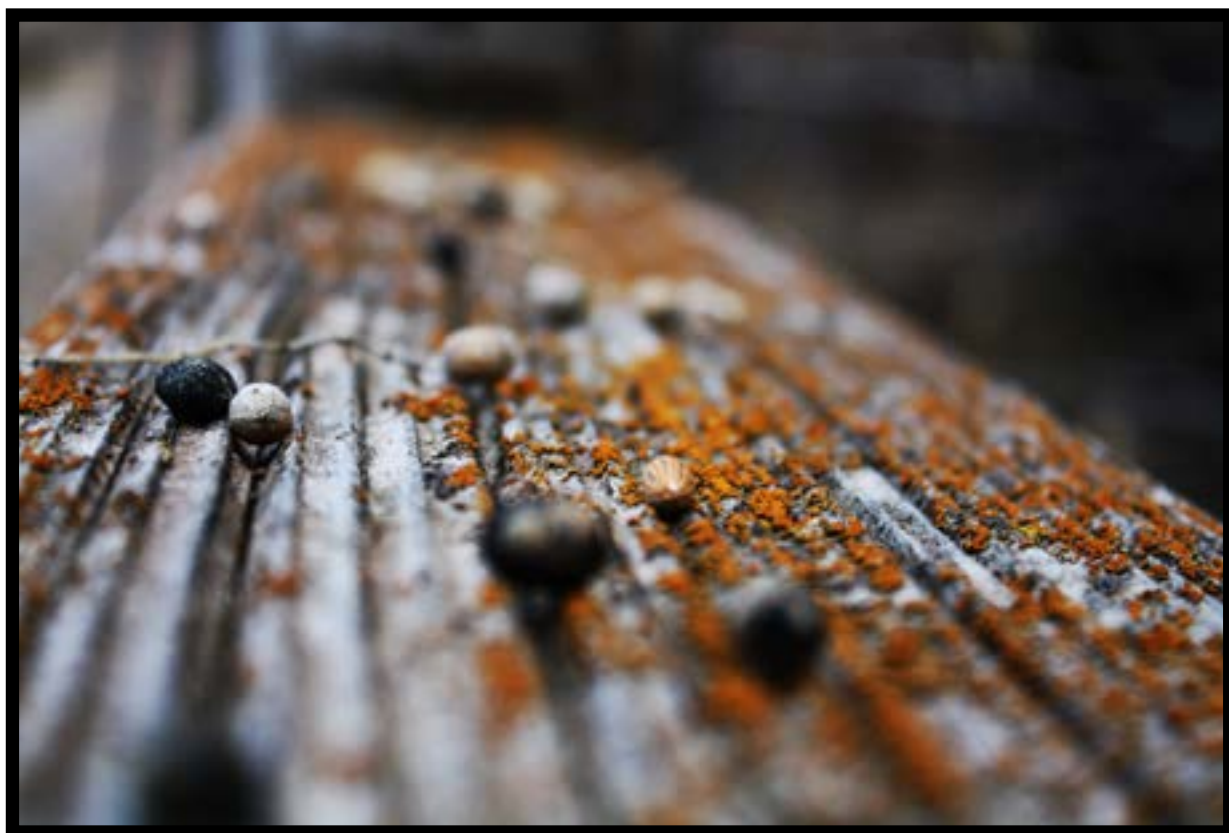
unavoidable. She'd grip the railing with a talon-like hand, trying desperately to take pressure off knees unwilling to bend. People liked to think she was drunk when she did this, and it wasn't worth correcting them, even when they yelled horrible things. She felt like Hamlet, a bit crazy—or pretending to be crazy, who's really to say—and she always ended up feeling like she could observe herself from afar, limping past slurs with little more than casual indifference.

She had trouble with words. She, I, you—some sentences sounded better with one than the others; a single scene could be described from a million points of view before she acknowledged any one was really her own. *He watches from his mountain walls*—or had he watched, or will he watch? Was this story a comedy, a tragedy, a cautionary tale? Was it an existentialist's diatribe or young adult trash? How much sex could she reasonably include? There were too many ways to write her life, and too few ways to live it.

They called it prednisone, and it was magical. She went to stand from her seat after a lecture, used her forearm to heave herself up and she realized she didn't have to: her knees supported her weight. She opened doors. She went for a hike. On a break between classes, she sat on the lawn. She was endlessly fascinated by her hands, opening them, closing them, making fists. Once she even gave someone a high-five. She tried to do yoga, but maybe that was something that had always been outside of her range of abilities.

It was temporary, but it was now. Now, now, now; she felt it in every step that didn't hurt, every morning she wasn't stiff, every moment she could devote to other thoughts. And she was grateful. What was life, but the pursuit of order in the face of inevitable chaos? This present ought to count as much as any other. She thought about summer, submitted one application, then another. There was a future, and there was a past, and once again she was balanced on the knife's edge between them.

She composed her Academy Awards speech as she rode to class one day. To my mother, who never gave up on me. To my chemistry professor, who somehow got me a free textbook. To Shakespeare and Tennyson. To the baked sweet potatoes at the grab-n-go. To my bike, which gave me agency when I had none. She smiled to herself and powered up a hill. *And like a thunderbolt he falls.* 



THE NATURAL HAIR DILEMMA: WHY BLACK WOMEN NEED TO FOCUS A LITTLE LESS ON THEIR HAIR

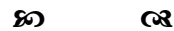
By Sayoni Nyakoon

When I was in my junior year of high school, I discovered I had natural hair.

The term “natural hair” belongs solely to the black community. So do the words, “kinky-curly,” “Afro,” and “nappy.” Having natural hair is similar to, but could be different from, having “good hair.” In the black community, “good hair” is genetic, and considered a by-product of having white ancestors, while any woman could choose to wear her hair “naturally.” If you wear your hair naturally, you refuse perms to chemically straighten it. For some, it is refusing to straighten their hair—by any means—and preferring to wear Afros, dreadlocks, and other styles to showcase pride in their African roots.

As a black person, when you wear your hair naturally you are thought to be more cultured, more in touch with your African heritage. It's assumed you refuse to conform to the majority's idea of what is professional, acceptable, and beautiful. It could also mean disregarding other lines of ancestry (Native American, Hispanic, and White) in favor of learning more about, and embracing "mother Africa." As a black person without "good hair," the decision to "go natural" is met with praise for your presumed courage. If you happen to have "good hair"—that is, easily manageable, loosely curly, rarely frizzy, and usually light brown hair—and you make the decision to "go natural," the response you get from the black community is not likely to be so positive.

Outside the black community, fewer people notice when a black woman with "good hair" decides to "go natural." This is because her straight hair or loose curls were already regarded by the dominant culture as acceptable, if not beautiful. Though she may feel pressure to straighten her hair to look more like her white friends, she would not be looked at with confusion or disapproval if she does not "go natural." Her hair curls nicely, naturally (or so it would seem). But some natural hair enthusiasts might claim—from a place of resentment, jealousy, or ignorance—that her hair is not truly "natural."



Until my junior year of high school I never thought of my hair as a political statement.

When I was seven, my mother, in a bout of frustrated depression, decided to cut my and my twin sister's hair. I was happy with my new short "do," until we both went to our father's house for a visit that turned into an extended stay. My sister had "good hair," so she escaped most of our father's complaints. She had "good hair," so she escaped appointments with the perm and the hot comb. By the end of eighth grade I too decided to escape the perm and the hot comb. But my hair was uneven and heat damaged by this point. It was "nappy;" my father would not stand for it. For the second time in my life, I got a major haircut.

When I was fourteen I went to a public high school in the inner city of West Philadelphia. Attending school with a "low cut" and later a TWA (teeny weeny Afro) was not easy. My

*By the end of
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for me either.*

hair wasn't cool, it wasn't in fashion, and as a friend would tell me—toward the end of my sophomore year—"I'm sorry, but men don't look at natural girls anymore."



When I was in my junior year, I thought about how Blacks are portrayed in the media.

Movies like, *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Superfly* were low budget, high action movies with black characters. Some call these movies blaxploitation, because of their appeal to black audiences. The characters talked tough and they always overcame their obstacles; they beat the White Man. The characters looked like the people in the audience who watched them: they had Afros and braids and dark skin. These movies made it seem cool to be black and struggling. These African American movies were popular with non-American blacks and non-whites from many cultures—eventually this popularity spread to the dominant, white, audience.

TV executives saw how much money could be made, simply by having a black character on television. But wary of ostracizing their main audience, the blacks shown on TV were not struggling too much. The blacks on *Good Times* generally only got into comic trouble, and Dr. Heathcliff from *The Cosby Show* was an OB-GYN. His wife, Claire, was lovely—and she straightened her hair.

Somewhere between the 1970s and 1980s, becoming a successful and professional African American meant giving up a part of your culture—becoming "white." The kids who used to dream of becoming Black Panthers went to the movies and decided they wanted to be like Superfly instead. But their parents would say, "No. Look at Bill Cosby. You don't want to be a pimp, you want to be a doctor. Cut your hair or straighten it—I don't want them to think your tryin' to be like that fool (or slut) in the movies." And it did seem that those African Americans who were most successful did have a perm, or had such "good hair" they didn't need one.

Of course, there was backlash. The micro-braids and love yourself culture of the 1990s seemed to fight the idea that you had to assimilate to become successful. There was one Moesha

in a sea of Martins, Parkers, and *Cosby Show* kids. But then even Moesha went away with Brandy's braids, and it was no longer cool to wear your hair "natural."

I grew up when it was not cool to wear your hair naturally. And as the Gabby Douglas spectacle shows, in the black community, how you wear your hair is everybody's business. I couldn't walk in the hallways without hearing a black man yell, "Yo, Afro," and I couldn't walk down the streets of Philly without getting a dirty look from a black woman. I could almost hear them say, "Ah, she's so pretty. Why won't she just do her hair?"

Even my twin sister, with all her "good hair," could not escape natural hair scrutiny. An English teacher pulled her aside to ask, "Honey, do you have a mom at home?" When my sister answered "yes," the teacher grew tight-lipped and sighed. Then she adjusted her wig and walked away with all the good intentions and self-righteousness the world has to offer.

I honestly could not fathom why an Indian boy or a white boy would ever find me attractive. I turned down a prom invitation, thinking it was a joke. After high school, I moved to Denver and I noticed the pick-up lines and invitations increased. I would walk across the street and hear, "I love your natural" from black women I had never met. My white friends raved about my hair and my black friends asked me how I did this style or that. When I was chatted up for the fifth time in one day, I realized the social current had shifted.

Are you still with me? Let me try to explain it like this: natural hair is a trend. A trend like bell-bottom pants, bra burning, foodism, and any fashion. The thing about trends is there's no way of knowing whether they'll stick around, for better or for worse. Certain trends, like black power, fuel drastic social movements that have shaped our world for the better. Other trends, like those in fashion, exercise, or education, do absolute nothing—at best.

Only history can determine whether something was a trend or a movement—there are some people who only agree or endorse something because it is popular. There is no denying the fashion of the black power movement or how cool you were if you said you were a feminist in the 1990s. My own mother was an advocate for women and education and she loved me, but she had no idea how to care for my hair. Before I moved to Denver she suggested a perm, to improve my curl definition.

*Let me try
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like this:
natural hair
is a trend.*

I do feel it is important for people, especially women, to be comfortable in their own skin (or hair). And I do think women of color who choose to wear their hair natural are strong, for refusing to conform to society's beauty norms. But when you let the superficial become who you are, who are you when your exterior changes? Who are you when society changes its opinion about how you look?

I let myself be defined by my weight and my ability to run in high school. And when I went from "super skinny" to "thin" after high school ended I was scared. Being "thin" scared me more than walking home alone, late at night. If I were no longer skinny, what would I have to offer the world, or more specifically, a mate? It took me years to realize I am more than how much I weigh—that I have more to offer the world besides my looks. To be clear, I love my hair, but it is not a vital part of my identity.

I realize people are judged on their looks and this won't bring about the downfall of humankind. While it's wrong to judge someone's character based solely on how much she weighs, how much make-up she wears, or how she chooses to wear her hair, many judgments we make based on another's appearance are perfectly accurate. The secret is to let the superficial shape who you are without allowing it to engulf your total identity. I plan to cut my hair in the near future. Not because I do not want it to be a part of my identity any longer, but because I am not afraid to cut it. I am more than how I choose to wear my hair.

I'm tired of my hair. I'm tired of washing it every week. I'm tired of the occasional bad hair day. Of course I'll miss the compliments, but perhaps people will start to notice me instead of my hair when I walk into a room. I want to be remembered by the books I've written and the lives I've affected—not by how amazing my hair looked. ✎



OUR OWN GHOSTS

By Kathleen Childs

“Are you okay?” my friend Avery asks on Saturday night. It’s the 29th of June, we’re down in Denver, and all around us are women and a few men celebrating our newly acquired potential for someday acquiring federal marriage benefits. Sitting at a table facing the spectacle, I feel as though I’m being unfair by not enjoying myself more. I sigh, pick up her glass, and roll the whiskey around before taking a small sip. She knows I’m avoiding answering the question. Instead of pressing me, she asks me what I think of the spirit. I tell her it’s pretty good, but it’s trying too hard to be sweet. It’s very well made, but it doesn’t work for me. The sherried vanilla highlights mask a long smoky bitterness underneath. My thoughts are hundreds of miles away with a distant friend of mine—Mary. Last I heard she was in the Northern part of the Midwest, living with a pair of women she has a “semi-serious” relationship with, and to her annoyance when her supervisors harp on it, the lone white person working the sewing machines at a performance clothing company. She’s not particularly interested in the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act’s overturning. I doubt she’ll ever get married, settle down, or even have interest in that sort of relationship.

Mary is in her mid-twenties. She left home at age twelve after coming out, which she told me was the worst mistake she's made in her life. The mistake wasn't leaving—she needed to escape the enormous emotional and physical abuse her religious mother put her through. She did sex work. She ran drugs. She bartended. She was raped multiple times. Earlier this year when she thought she was going to kill herself, she donated what money she had left to RAINN (the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, an anti-sexual assault organization), who earlier had picked her off the street and taught her about feminism. Her humor is sharp, fast, and as black as the tar in her lungs. For now, Mary escapes into books, video games, White Russians, and the vastness of the internet. The last time I talked to her over Skype, she opened the conversation like this:

[3:20:08 PM] Mary: hi i havent spoken to you in a long while but my life has been all over the place and im gonna die and i have to wake up at like 4:30 every morning forever now so bye



A growing consensus of research suggests that between 20% and 40% of the homeless youth population identifies as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender.¹ This figure becomes even more staggering when one takes into account that LGBT people account for only 3%-5% of the population of the United States. (Surveys may even under-report the extent of the problem—some respondents may fear reprisal if they out themselves to the surveyor.) When asked of the most pressing concerns of the LGBT community, LGBT respondents to one survey explicitly mention employment equality and legally sanctioned same-sex marriages, while fewer list support of LGBT youth organizations. News articles in the popular press on LGBT issues focus almost exclusively on same-sex marriage.²

1. Whitbeck, and others, ed. "Mental Disorder, Subsistence Strategies, and Victimization Among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Homeless and Runaway Adolescents," 41, no. 4 of *The Journal of Sex Research*, (2004), 330.
 2. Pew Research Center, "A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times," (Washington: Pew Research Center,

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The marriage equality advocacy group The Human Rights Campaign received \$25,479,071 in contributions and grants according to its 2011 IRS form 990.³ It claims 350,000 volunteers. This is over six times the same year's revenue, and 1,100 times the manpower, of the only explicitly youth-focused homeless shelter registered in the Denver Metro area, Urban Peak, at \$4,029,748.⁴ In the HRC's 2012 study entitled "Growing up LGBT in America," homelessness among LGBT youth is mentioned only at the end of the report in vague allusions to programs the campaign supports.⁵ Upon visiting the HRC's website, the viewer is immediately solicited for a donation. A message on the popup says that the fight for equality isn't over. They couldn't be more true. The struggles of the most vulnerable members of the queer population—the young and homeless—are all but invisible.

Youth who run away or are forced from home are extraordinarily vulnerable to drugs, violence, disease, HIV/AIDS, and a host of other difficulties. A 2004 longitudinal study found that young, homeless, lesbians and gays report markedly higher physical and sexual victimization than their straight peers, are more likely to engage in survival sex work, and are more likely to be the victims of sexual abuse.⁶ 40% of LGBT youth in the study were identified as suffering from symptoms of major depression, 47.6% of post-traumatic stress, and 57.1% had attempted suicide.⁷ Those who are chronically homeless are often so heavily damaged by their ordeals that they never quite recover.

While reports vary, 1,000,000 youths are estimated to run away or become homeless in the United States each year.⁸ The total comes to an unconscionable number of people whose needs

June 13, 2013) http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2013/06/SDT_LGBT-Americans_06-2013.pdf.

3. United States Department of Treasury, Internal Revenue Service. 2011 *Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax (Form 990): Human Rights Campaign*, (2011), 1.
 4. United States. Department of Treasury, Internal Revenue Service. 2010 *e-file Signature Authorization for an Exempt Organization (Form 990)*. (Urban Peak Denver, 2011), 1.
 5. Human Rights Campaign, *Growing up LGBT in America*, (2012), 22.
 6. Whitbeck and others, "Mental Disorder," 334.
 7. *Ibid.*, 335.
 8. Ray, N. National Coalition for the Homeless, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness*, (2006), 12.

are not being addressed while our money and attention is fixated on marriage equality: a 2013 Pew poll reports that 58% of LGBT people view same sex-marriage as the top priority,⁹ even though only 52% of the same population ever imagines themselves being married if the right is extended to them.¹⁰ With DOMA overturned, recent court cases filed challenging state gay marriage bans,¹¹ and general, but not overwhelming, straight favor towards gay marriage,¹² the fight for marriage equality is being won. Even as the struggle goes favorably, the LGBT community cannot afford to lose its fighting edge. It has the resources, the strength, and the willpower to fight against youth homelessness. It is high time for a paradigm shift in activism.



I pick up the glass again and honestly, I'm not sure how Avery is so good humored about it all. She lived with me for a while, and later bounced around between romantic interests to escape her parents' own hostility toward her queerness. Just minutes ago we were joking about how her mom is perfectly reasonable about the whole thing when it's not personal—her favorite nephew is a trans man. The famous quote though, is, "It's okay for other people's children to be gay." Avery's been living with them again for a while now, not counting the month last semester she slept in her car. Her car. She's going by she again. I stumble over asking about it, and it's maybe the first time the facade cracks this evening. Of course she's not thrilled about it, but she's got to make do with what she's got. The family didn't even get to the point of having a real conversation about identity, about normality, about happiness before the hammer dropped. As Avery tells me, right now she's doing what she needs to do to survive. "Other people's children can be gay—but not mine."



"Other people's children can be gay—but not mine."

A heterosexual society expects straightness and gender conformity from its members.

LGBT youth have not come to be seven times over-represented in the homeless population by accident. Unfortunately, LGBT kids are frequently thrown out of their homes. An oft-cited study conducted in 1989 finds that 26% of boys are told to leave their households when they announce they're gay.¹³ A 2011 study suggests that 40% of transgender people's relationships with their parents and family end entirely.¹⁴ Abusive parents who know that their children identify as LGBT are likely to focus their abuse on their child's identity,¹⁵ adding additional stress to a situation that already drives many youths, queer or not, to the streets. While some who end up homeless are not exactly thrown out, between neglect, threats, hostility, attempts at control, it can become untenable for youth whose parents react badly to their sexual orientation or gender identity to remain at home. Many of the subjects interviewed in the National Gay and Lesbian task force's study reported that they ran away to escape abuse, or that they feared being subject to abuse if they had stayed at home.¹⁶

At their core, the reasons LGBT youth leave home stem from an inability to meet the expectations placed on them. A heterosexual society expects straightness and gender conformity from its members. Parents expect good grades, happiness, religious observance, any number of things that the endemic stresses of growing up having one's sexuality suppressed can make difficult. LGBT youth across all income levels and races report high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, which can be worsened by hostile familial reactions to their perceived failure. 40%-60% of all homeless youth come from physically abusive homes.¹⁷ When the strain of playing along becomes too great, something naturally has to give. Most teenagers are completely financially reliant on their family. If they can no longer stay, they've nowhere to go but couches or the streets.

9. Pew Research Foundation, "A Survey," 67.

10. Ibid., 71.

11. M. Kendall Wright vs. State of Arkansas. Pulaski Circuit Court, AK. 2 (2013): 1.

12. Pew Research Foundation, "A Survey," 65.

13. Ray, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth*, 16.

14. Grant, Jaime M. and others. "Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey," *Washington National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*, (2011), 100.

15. D'Augelli and others. "Parents' Awareness of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths' Sexual Orientation," in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, No. 2, (2005), 479.

16. Ray, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth*, 21-23.

17. Ibid., 18.

For this reason, researchers point to parental acceptance and a supportive schooling environment as essential for positive outcomes for LGBT youth. Research of at-risk behavior in several New England high schools suggests that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are more likely to feel unsafe than their straight classmates in several schools.¹⁸ Harassment and stress cause 15% of transgender students to drop out of school.¹⁹ Recent interest in anti-bullying campaigns, school safe space policies, and peer education all help to keep LGBT students in school and at home. Similarly, campaigns like the Family Acceptance Project and the advocacy organization PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) provide educational resources to families and LGBT youth who are struggling for or fearing acceptance. Such advocacy directly attacks the causes of LGBT youth homelessness, and represents a sound general health policy. Family rejection is highly associated with negative health outcomes. Recent findings published in *Pediatrics* magazine claim that health disparities between straight and non-straight adults can be correlated with the stress of parental rejection.²⁰ The opposite is true as well. There are numerous supportive families, and they are essential for positive outcomes and success.



[4:04:24 PM] Kathleen: how was the phone
 [4:04:34 PM] Mary: okay i guess
 [4:04:36 PM] Mary: as far as phones go
 [4:04:43 PM] Mary: my phone is literally a tracfone from like 2004
 [4:04:50 PM] Mary: every time i use it i think its gonna snap in two
 [4:05:15 PM] Kathleen: that's exciting
 [4:05:27 PM] Kathleen: it makes every call an adventure or maybe a disaster waiting to happen

18. Kann, Laura and others. *Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9–12—Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, Selected Sites, United States, 2001–2009*, (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011), 12.
 19. Grant and others. “Injustice at Every Turn,” 33.
 20. Ryan, Caitlin and others. “Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults,” *Pediatrics*, 123, No. 1 (2009).

*The addictions
 run deep,
 and the scars
 run deeper...*

[4:06:22 PM] Mary: how has your life been
 [4:06:28 PM] Kathleen: My life has been good!
 [4:06:34 PM] Mary: well good!!!
 [4:06:57 PM] Mary: im already v jealous

Sometimes I choke on my words when Mary talks with me. It feels almost shameful to confront how lucky I am in the scheme of things. While coming out for me was a rocky, long process, I’ve managed to survive. I was sixteen when I came out to my family by letter on New Year’s Eve, and even as I trembled in my girlfriend’s arms at a party miles away, I didn’t once fear losing them. Years and years passed before my being queer really clicked in my parents’ minds, but they supported me through the depression that consumed me during college, and even if they didn’t understand my identity, they kept me afloat. I’m not strong enough to make it on my own—I’ve never been that strong. Mary, though, reprimands me for being self-indulgent. It’s no good to despair for her past, and she feels awkward enough bringing it up to begin with. The addictions run deep, and the scars run deeper, but she directs her anger outwards. There are millions of people who don’t understand, she tells me, or worse, people who do understand, but don’t care what we do to our outsiders.



The outsiders are exactly the ones who need attention right this very moment, and with a focused effort, the LGBT community can make substantial inroads towards lessening the hardships of LGBT homeless and runaways. The movement’s greatest political strength lies in its indefatigable spirit. It has never backed down from a fight. It never fails to educate, to force a dialogue, even beneath the historical indifference of a society that once refused even to conceptualize the movement’s existence. Improving conditions at home and school, in foster homes and hostile juvenile courts, all starts with humanizing the damage, and making its victims visible. Teenagers and young adults who are homeless are twice as likely to die as their peers, and the risk climbs rapidly the longer one has been

homeless.²¹ Chronically homeless adults die as much as thirty years sooner on average than the general population.²² The LGBT community has already struggled against, and forced an understanding of, a killer at least as endemic and deadly in the population: HIV/AIDS. As in the early 1980s, however, the conversation isn't yet loud enough. The banner's not yet being raised. The LGBT community is not yet shouting for help and running to remove the blanket smothering so many of its youth.

Voices are getting louder. In 2012, The Forty to None project, the first organization with an explicit mission to end LGBT youth homelessness, was formed. In a Huffington Post article, director Jama Shelton lays out the organization's tactical vision. As she describes it, the way forward is best accomplished by skills that the LGBT community already has.²³ Promoting general acceptance and understanding at home and school lessens stress on at-risk LGBT youth. Programs that aim to reconcile runaways or children forced from home have the capability to strengthen ties and support. In some cases though, familial reunification may remain impossible or dangerous. Shelters that work with the homeless need to understand the specific needs of the LGBT population, and be willing to work with them. In 2004, at least 4,200 youth were turned away from Basic Center Programs.²⁴ It is critical that the mental health and addictions of the population are addressed. It is imperative that the presentations and identities of transgender youth are respected. These are all reachable goals. These are all areas where there is already an activist presence. With focus, with dedication, the community can ease the suffering of our homeless.

LGBT people have made great strides in integrating to society since the fiery birth of gay liberation on June 28th, 1969 at The Stonewall Inn.²⁵ Gay sex has been decriminalized nationally. Many states have non-discrimination laws in housing and employ-

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21. Thomas, Benthan. "Homelessness Kills: An Analysis of the Mortality of Homeless People in Early Twenty-first Century England," [Summary] (Crisis UK: 2012), 4.

22. Ibid., 4.

23. Jama Shelton, "Ending LGBT Youth Homelessness: Forty to None Project's Multi-pronged Approach," *Huffington Post*, 22 May 2013.

24. Ray, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth*, 31.

25. Often seen as history's first major protest for LGBT equal rights; on June 28th, 1969, police raided a gay club in New York City for selling liquor without a license, and other violations.

ment. LGBT couples in states with gay marriage can now access federal benefits. Gay people can sponsor their partners for immigration. There is certainly plenty of work to be done on every front of the struggle for equal rights and a stable place in society, but the singular focus of LGBT activism on marriage equality in the recent past is not the way forward for the movement. There is room for LGBT voices, time, and effort to help families, to help support students, to provide services and education for those who are struggling and often without outside support. The queer community cannot sit around while so many of our young are literally dying in the streets.



This is the state of things: lives are ending before they even begin. This is what happens to those of us we forget and leave to survive on the margins. As I sit—comfortable that I'm scratching out a living with my supportive family, my network of friends—there are as many as one million peers of mine who have been on their own for what may as well have been their entire lives. I've since talked to her again, but this is the way, sitting at the bar on that Saturday, wondering why I wasn't sufficiently happy to see DOMA overturned, my last conversation with Mary ended:

[5:15:01 PM] Mary: im p strong willed

[5:20:13 PM] Kathleen: yeah

[5:27:34 PM] Mary: dont make fun of me!!!!

[5:28:42 PM] Kathleen: I'm not

[5:29:31 PM] Kathleen: but drugs are not really things that care about will I guess

[5:36:54 PM] Kathleen: IDK, sorry if that was a weird thing to say :/

[5:37:05 PM] Mary: it wasnt

[5:37:11 PM] Mary: im just in a slump i guess

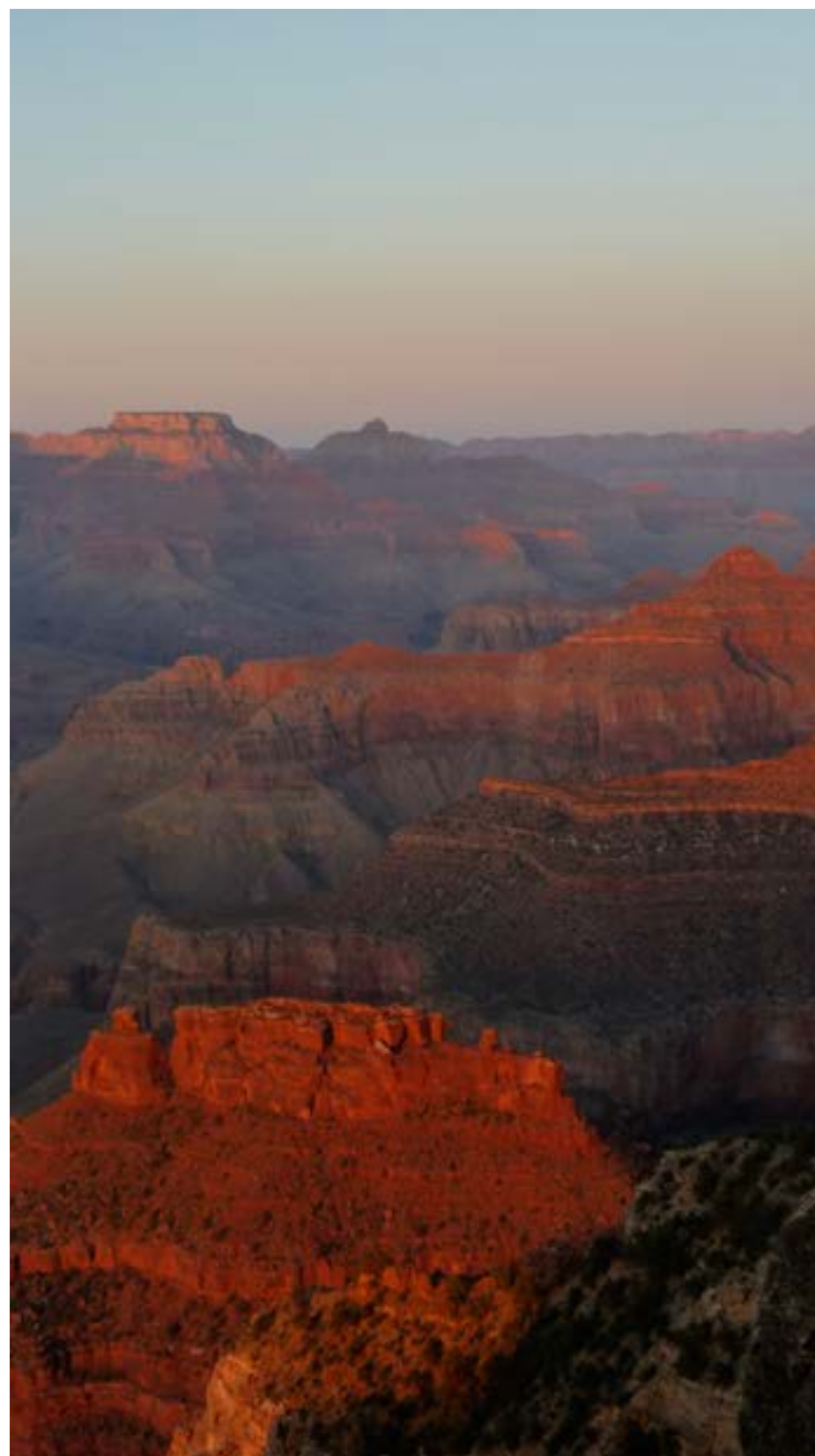
[5:37:12 PM] Mary: idk

[5:37:15 PM] Mary: life!!!!!!!!!!!!

[5:37:22 PM] Kathleen: indeed

[5:39:40 PM] Mary: a lifelong slump lol

[5:40:22 PM] Mary: idk i was hoping id get more stable from being in shittier situations again but nope!!!! that didnt work out



BECOMING CHANGING WOMAN

By Kimberly Preston

As I took off running to the east, the first beams of sunlight peeked above the horizon, transforming the sky into a million shades of pink. Although I had been awake all night, I felt alert and energized as I ran in a thick woven wool dress and turquoise jewelry. My heavy necklace bounced against my chest as the chill air whipped my face and my newly washed hair flew behind me. My moccasins felt light on my feet despite being bound in huge layers of buckskin around my calves. As the sun rose higher, I could hear the sound of my family and friends running behind me in support. As I came to a stop on top of a tall rock ledge and looked out over the vast desert landscape, I felt different. I knew that when I returned to everyone, I would be seen as an adult instead of the small middle schooler I was.

Growing up, I visited my family on the reservation often, sitting quietly in small hogans and trailers, listening as my family babbled away in Navajo. “*Yá’át’ééh*,¹ child,” they would say as they shook my small little hands. They would sit and talk for

1. *Yá’át’ééh* (*ya-at-eh*): A Navajo greeting used for “Hello.” Literally translates to, “It is good.”

hours, intermixing English and Navajo words in each sentence. When I was lucky, I would escape out into the dry, red dirt and play with my cousins until the stray dogs came looking for food. We would wander down dusty dirt roads until we could look out across the edge of the mesa, or ride in the back of a pickup out to my parents' hogan with its view of *Doko'osliid*,² one of the four sacred mountains.

I was always the “cousin from California,” the one kid that didn't look native, the one kid with colored eyes and lighter hair. My skin wasn't as dark, and neither was I as tall or as round as the other kids. I hadn't lived in a trailer on the reservation my whole life, wasn't learning Navajo in school, hadn't grown up in the harsh desert climate. I was somewhat of an outsider—although everyone knew it, I was still family and had grown up with an understanding of the traditional beliefs.

Once I got older, everyone started asking my parents, “When will you have her *kinaaldá*?³ Where will it be? Better start preparing now.” Much like in the Jewish tradition, the Navajo perform a coming-of-age ceremony for girls when they reach puberty, but instead of one large service, the *kinaaldá* spans the course of a few days.

I had been looking forward to mine for years with nervousness and anticipation. The ceremony would transition me into adulthood and demonstrate my strength in front of an entire community. In some ways, I was surprised at how many people wanted to help me into this new stage of my life. From the cooking to the nightlong prayers, every member of the family was involved. Family friends from around the country, who had watched me grow up, came to see me. Even people I had never met were there to support me and celebrate the traditional and ancient ceremony that would bring another *Diné*⁴ woman into the community. All these people stayed up with me throughout the nights of prayer, and spent the days keeping me awake and giving me advice. The medicine man and his wife sat with me for

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didn't look native.*

2. *Doko'osliid* (*dob-koh-ooob-sleed*): The San Francisco Peaks, regarded as one mountain.

3. *Kinaaldá* (*kee-nahl-DAH*): The traditional coming-of-age ceremony for Navajo girls.

4. *Diné* (*dee-NEH*): Navajo word meaning “The People,” which Navajos use to describe themselves.

hours during the day, talking to me about my new responsibilities as a woman, how to respect myself, others, and how to continue to work hard in everything I do to make an impact on the world.

For an entire day, I sat in the sweltering hogan, grinding corn with a grinding stone for the *alkaad*, a large cake baked during the last part of the ceremony. The circular cake, which spanned a few feet in diameter, was placed in the ground, lined with cornhusks and buried. A large fire was built on top and tended to throughout the night by my uncle Roy, my brother Bob, and my other male family members. While I ground corn, a sheep was slaughtered and skinned by the women to prepare the next day's large meal. I took a break, and watched in astonishment as my grandma dug through a large bowl of sheep intestines, preparing a traditional dish of intestines coiled around strips of fat and grilled. In addition to the cake preparation, I was required to run in the four directions at dawn, noon, and dusk, to show my endurance and strength. The ceremony was grueling, and when I wasn't working on grinding corn or running, I was struggling to stay awake from being up all night in prayer.

The warmth and support that surrounded me was amazing. “You're doing great,” everyone said. “If only your father were here; he would be so proud to see you doing this,” my tiny, frail grandmother said to me one morning. I knew that although he wasn't there to support me physically, he was thinking about me and staying up all night in prayer as well.

*Just like Changing Woman,
I ran for the last time,
starting before the sun rose
on the last day.*

Coming into the ceremony, I was still a girl. A girl who loved her culture and was eager to be brought into the world as a young woman in a special and spiritual way. I recall being told as a child the story of Changing Woman, the daughter of First Man and First Woman, that depicts the first *kinaaldá*. Changing Woman created the plan for the Earth and from her

skin she created the initial four clans, one of which, *Tó dích'íinii*, “Bitter Water Clan,” is mine. Just like Changing Woman, I ran for the last time, starting before the sun rose on the last day. My hair had been freshly washed with yucca root and tied back in a *Tsii'yeel*⁵ by my mother as the fire above the corn cake outside died down. A lot relied on that cake. A good cake, cooked all the way through without any burns, meant a good future. When I returned from the run, the sun had risen all the way, and even more people had arrived for the end of the ceremony. Seeing all the people standing around waiting—waiting for me—was intimidating, but I knew I now possessed the strength to push past my shyness and be introduced to my community.

*My closest female family members
began to touch my arms and legs,
symbolically molding me
into a woman.*

They had all come to be blessed, not by the medicine man, but by me. In the Navajo culture, women are the leaders and are sacred for their ability to bear children and to nurture. When people hear about a *kinaaldá* taking place, they come from all around to be blessed by the new woman. As over a hundred people formed a line, I lay down on a rug outside, and my closest female family members began to touch my arms and legs, symbolically molding me into a woman. Afterward, each person approached and asked me to bless and mold them. Many asked me to touch their back to heal pain or their head to clear their minds of any bad thoughts. Although it felt strange to be seen as a healer, I was beginning to feel the maturity the ceremony had symbolized. I was now the center of attention, the focus of the prayers of every member of a community that I had only been able to visit a couple times a year—a community I had often felt separated from. I had often felt like I couldn't

5. *Tsii'yeel* (*SEET-yeel*): Traditional hair bun of a Navajo woman. It is tied at the back of her head with white buckskin or white yarn, signifying that she is a woman.

relate to my cousins or the other women in my family because I had not grown up the same way they had and hadn't lived in a community of Native peoples my whole life. I had always been proud of my heritage and was grateful I was able to experience traditional ceremonies throughout my life, but I had never felt so accepted by my community until then. As the ceremony ended, and the women in my family greeted me, I realized I had been accepted and initiated into a group of strong and spiritual women who understood the significance of the traditional ways and teachings: a group of women who would continue the legacy of our people. ☪





THE FINE ART OF AWKWARD FIRST DATES

By Andrew Hecocks


The combined trembling of everyone involved will cause roofs to cave in. The sweat will flow like a biblical flood or Boulder circa 2013. The speech stammering will create a cacophony of rattling voices, all desperately poured from the mouths of people who are just trying again.

They will run through the litany of coffee shops and sit across from one another at rickety wooden tables that aren't level, tables so small that when they sit down, their knees will knock and both of them will stammer hurried apologies. One of them will fold a napkin into a small square and put it under the uneven leg of the table to make it stop shaking. This is their first mistake, as it gives them one less thing to talk about. Instead of cracking a joke like, "I guess these tables must cost an arm and a leg," they are left with the slow clinking of ice melting in a glass.

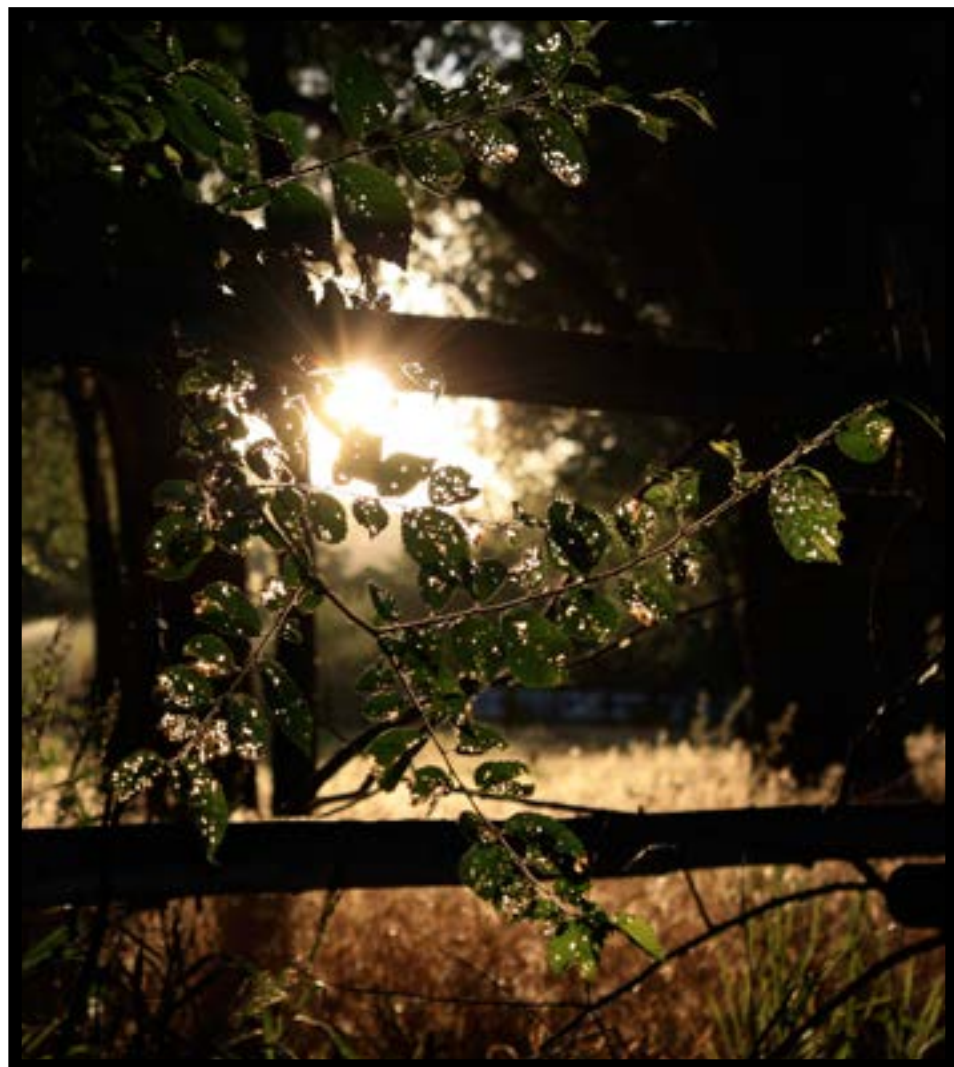
It is more like an interrogation than a first date. The pair will quiz each other about favorites and music and cinema and something funny they found at the thrift store. Other times the collective silence will be as suffocating and stale as graveyard air,

a mortuary of exhausted conversation topics. This is not so much a fine art as it is a crash course, a trial by fire, trying to get into the deep end when you really don't know how to swim. Sadly, most of these people will drown. Calls will go unanswered and peoples' thoughts will change from what could've been to, "Oh, I remember him. No, we never really hit it off." One person will hopefully text the other every once in a while, but will be disappointed by one-word replies, if they're replied to at all. People will doubt themselves and wonder why, in the end, they were so forgettable or undesirable. They may run through the first date over and over again in their mind, replaying the finer moments and lamenting their awkward silences, making a list of everything they could've done better—maybe I should've told the table joke.

Laundromats will have a heyday with people wiping anxious, sweaty palms on shirt hems and jean thighs. The post-date mental state of immediately harping on the night's failures is not for the faint of heart, and yet we've all been put through its paces. A person can stand in the middle of a winter street or another area of such poignancy, and think about their collection of first dates, like looking into a vault or thumbing through a photo album. Awkward first dates become an infinite number of faces and names that are slowly forgotten. As needless as this backdrop of blank faces seems to be, it couldn't be more important in getting over the hill into finding somebody who will matter more than a first date. A first date will turn into a second date, which will turn into a third date, which will turn into any number of dates that leave the number line and eventually become the aggregate mass of a "relationship."

But that is the fine art of awkward first dates. Not everyone is an artist, and now and again I will walk by a coffee shop and consider it the ground zero of an infinite number of first dates to come. It is where dignity goes to die. It is the fine art of social suicide committed in the hopes of finding somebody perhaps a little bit better than you. 





CROOKED LETTER

By Samuel Joseph Carrothers

I wish there was a word for the way that cottonmouth snakes move across the top of the water in Copper Sage Pond. I used to watch them with fascination, fixated by fear. The biggest one we ever saw was about six feet long, but the babies terrified me most of all. In the spring they would gather, sometimes nearly twenty of them, in the stagnant pools of water on the edges of the pond, and slither madly in figure eights, frantically moving over each other, swiftly twisting, going nowhere. We fished that pond often—perhaps daily in the summertime. Four of us total, each with the Southern sensibility ingrained in a boy who spent every summer day, dusk to dawn, in the thick woods of East Texas. We knew how many crawdads to bring Ms. Jerry before she'd do us a boil, and where to find them. We knew to stay clear of stray dogs, and that timber hogs were the meanest animal in the 100 or so acres of our own little world.

☞ ☞

I don't know if I'll ever go back there again. I revisit Copper Sage Pond so frequently in my memory that even today, 10 years after my last summer there, it projects with vivid realism in my mind. Even the screen in front of me lacks that visual depth, that richness of image that paints every detail of the old pond of my memory. Every detail of that special place seems so perfectly contained in my mind. Nothing feels that way now—every aspect of my day or week or year seems mixed up. A wash of fluorescent light drapes itself over my daily reality. I perceive the world through a barrage of LCD; everything about my life seems to be reflected back at me only through a series of screens. I live my life in 16:9, and it makes me yearn for the warm blanket of green light that pulses through the Texas timber of my youth.



Neither of my parents being born and raised Southerners, I never took to any of the delicious variances of the Southern accent the same way that the other three did, so I was always the one that talked a little funny—which means I made use of every syllable in a word and didn't talk exceptionally quickly or slowly. Brandon's voice was a perfect copy of his dad's and rang with that beer can twang distinct to North Florida. David spoke with a quick, Creole excitement. Tyler's words, on the other hand, were caked in that muddy, Mississippi drawl that mimics the way "Mississippi" itself is spelled. For a few weeks every summer, he'd go visit his dad back in Starkville, and return with a new Mississippi colloquialism. For an entire summer, everything he described was "—as the day is long." I fell in love with listening to the drawn-out way he would say something as simple as, "My cousin Ross is lazy as the day is long." I never thought once about the grammatical implications of "they is" or "fixin' to" or my personal favorite, "where y'at?" I just devoured the sweet sound of our conversations. One summer, I spent a week with some distant relatives (my extended family alone may very well be responsible for stereotypes about Catholic family size) in Maryville, Texas. Even at age nine, I relished in the trading of phrases as if they were baseball cards with the wiry, white boys of North Missouri that I now only see at funerals.



*To us,
"S" was always
"the crooked letter."*

I don't talk the way I used to.



We never spoke the letter "S." To us, "S" was always "the crooked letter." I'd even spell my name out loud that way: "Crooked letter-A-M." We associated this letter with snakes on several levels. The "S" itself linked the idea of the snake in our minds to the serpent of Genesis (we were all good Christian boys at the time). Then there was the shape itself. The same shape that allowed the water moccasins of Copper Sage Pond to move from one end to the other. These connections were easy to make because our world was so small. Letters and language and movement and light and sound and gods and evil and right all made sense because the logic of a ten-year-old in the woods allows for those sort of slithering associations that allows imagination to glide over reason and logic. It was only when I really started to try and make sense of things that it all stopped making sense.



Everything used to have meaning. The simplicity of it all, the interconnectivity of these thoughts, shimmered like fresh rain on the surface of the entire world. It was like running barefoot, or that inexplicable appreciation for a brief shiver on a chilly day—aliveness? I feel closed-in now. My shoulders are taut. My senses interweave and overlap and mute each other out. Sight-sound-taste-touch-feel; squinting at the incessant, over-exposed reality of reality. It is ceaseless and I am finite.



The water moccasins often coiled themselves on the banks of the pond. Their eyes were all shiny and black, flickering to a matte shade of the same black. When I first read the Book of

Genesis, Eden was the timber surrounding Copper Sage Pond. The Tree of Knowledge was a sagging, solitary willow, wrapped in cypress and wreathed in cattail flowers, and Satan an old black cottonmouth that we all knew. In our minds, she was eternal. She was there the very first time we went to the pond, carefully woven in between the cattail stalks and water lilies. We were certain of her gender because for about a week each spring, she would be blanketed by babies about the size of our fingers. Eventually, we would find ourselves more afraid when we did not see her than when we did. We thought she was evil. I had looked into her mouth, white and wide. There was something comforting knowing where the snake was. She exuded a terrible calm, as if she wasn't worried about our presence in the slightest. It seemed that she knew something we didn't, and she—more than any other snake we'd encounter—frightened us to no end. I liked knowing what could hurt me. I liked knowing what to be afraid of. I liked being able to look my biggest fear dead in the eyes, and I liked the feeling I experienced when I pondered the physicality of my fear.



What does it mean to face your fears? If you're afraid of heights, do you overcome that fear by going mountain climbing? If you're afraid of drowning, do you take swim lessons? The water moccasins terrified me growing up. How I wish that my present fears possessed a similar weight and mass to them. How do I face my mom's illness? How do I face the deteriorating mental health of a close friend? It's like trying grab all the air in a room and arrange it a specific way.



I remember vividly the day that we killed the old snake underneath that willow tree. I don't know why we did it, or who decided to bring the shovel from Tyler's garage with us that day. More so than a decision, it was a feeling. We knew we could do it, and so we did. It was slow. Gruesome. Exhilarating. Electric. The experience wasn't divine. It wasn't particularly life changing at the time. That evening, I wasn't overcome by a wave of guilt or a surge of power. We hardly spoke of it in the

*I find my present
self envious of the
boy that helped
take the diamond
head off the snake
with an old spade.*

days, weeks, even years to come. Something about it, though, has prevented me from shaking it away completely. The more I distance myself from it, the more I try to think about it in romantic terms—like it was some symbolic turning point in our lives where we finally had to confront the consequences of our childish ways. But we didn't. When we went back the next day, something had eaten most of the snake's body and we threw the rest of it into the pond for the fish to finish off, and that was the end of it. Time, though, has slowly adjusted my perspective on it all, and I find my present self envious of the boy that helped hack the diamond head off of that snake with an old spade. We were scared of something (demonic association aside) for a very rational reason, and we were able to resolve that fear with nothing more than a shovel. If only I could cure my mom so easily. If only my fears of today were half as comfortable.

I haven't seen a cottonmouth in years now, but I take comfort in knowing that they are almost certainly still there at Copper Sage Pond, moving from end to end in billowing S-curves. That pond was ours for a few years, or at least the snakes and the gar and the sunfish shared it with us, but the place is eternal. The very movement of all of the snakes emits power. The way they wrap themselves around themselves with crooked ease on the bayou banks of the East Texas woodland is a very real thing in my mind. I wish there was a word for the way that cottonmouth snakes move across the top of the water in Copper Sage Pond, because it is something that is both beautiful and horrifying, but even more so, admirable. As I move through the world that I inhabit, I often stumble, often act foolish, sometimes cowardly, and frequently without confidence in myself or trust in others. I envy the sureness and might of animals in movement—the kinetic display of confidence in both purpose and ability, and to me, this will forever be most true of the coffee-colored S's ebbing their way across the pond near my childhood home. ☪



REYNOSA

By Paul Henning

We always approached the border by automobile. This was the same South Texas/Mexico border that had been there since the Treaty of 1853. Long lines of cars and the comfortable transition of business signs going from mostly to entirely Spanish invariably marked our proximity. I would open the door of the car and step onto the parking lot's cracked asphalt, which seemed to emit more heat than our home stove, and anticipate the meal that awaited me. Then we would walk towards the looming bridge, nod politely at the somber Mexican Border Patrol agents guarding the gate, slide a few coins into one of the rusted turnstiles, and slip easily into another world.

The fence along the river was tall, and because of the beggars, the bridge we had to cross seemed longer than it really was. Looking down through the loose wire fence that protected the sides of the bridge, we could see dozens of topless children from four to twelve years old standing on the southern banks of the Rio Grande River, some fifteen feet below us. They had cut the top halves off of milk jugs and crudely attached them to long sticks and poles they struggled to hold with their small

hands as they banged them aggressively against the sides of the fence, demanding in Spanish with their tiny, faraway voices that we give them spare change.

My hardworking, ever-present mother took my brothers and me to have a cheap, delicious lunch, practice our lazy Spanish, and do some light shopping, making sure we never got too far away from her.

“They steal little blond boys here sometimes. You have to stay close,” she would say.

“*Una Coca Cola, por favor,*” we recited to the waiter after my mother reminded us not to drink the water.



My even harder-working, scarcely present father would sometimes take us out for lunch too, but that was mainly because we were with him when he needed to make a stop at the local *pharmacia*, where they knew his name and required no prescription. We would walk through the same dirty streets we had with my mother, except my father did not hold our hands or tell us to stay close. We struggled to keep up with his long strides, and when we entered the refreshing cool of the drug store, Spanish was not used—the names of pharmaceuticals need no translation. Our father felt more calm and comfortable here, and so did we.

To my mother, anyone could look too smooth, and dangerously suspicious. My father would transfer pills into a bottle with a different label before we left the *pharmacia*. When we passed the U.S. border agents with these, I worried that we looked too smooth, and dangerously suspicious ourselves.



The first time I crossed that border unaccompanied by my family, I was sixteen. My friends and I parked in the same lot my parents used, and when I gave the familiar nod to the Mexican agent at the turnstile, I hoped he did not notice the anxiety on my face. On the other side of that river we felt a newfound freedom, and we reveled in it. People may like to call the United States “the land of the free,” but it wasn’t to us. The U.S. had rules, regulations, curfews, and identification



checks. Mexico had whatever we could think of, no questions asked. This was how Pinocchio felt on Pleasure Island. I sat at a table at the first bar I would ever get a drink in, lit a cigarette, and ordered the most appropriate thing I could think of: a Corona.

Sometimes, it was a late night event with a big group. Other times, just two of us would go for a short visit to enjoy a cocktail with our lunch. All you needed was a simple driver’s license or state I.D. to re-enter the U.S. I received my driver’s license at sixteen years old, only six months after 9/11. Unbeknownst to us, a law was being drafted that would end our escapades, but might well have saved our lives.

*You could eat two tacos,
drink seven beers,
and return to your homeland
feeling ecstatic,
especially because you were
far from the legal drinking age.*

The Spanish word “peso” translates into English as “weight.” Ironically, the peso did not seem to weigh much compared to the dollar. The dollar was flexible, and you learned quickly where you wanted to spend it. At first, all you needed was ten-dollars to have a blast. You could eat two tacos, drink seven beers, and return to your homeland feeling ecstatic, especially because you were far from the legal drinking age.

I was one of the few who owned a cell phone at the time, and from calling my father I knew that when one was in Mexico the phone did not ring. Instead, it played a long recorded message in Spanish explaining how international service could be obtained for a fee. I could not have my parents, or girlfriend, knowing where I was, so the phone always stayed in the car on the U.S. side where it could ring and ring contentedly, disclosing nothing.

One afternoon, as I was buying a souvenir for myself from a street vendor in between bars, I was amused to realize that I had become a combination of my parents. My friends and I bought cigarettes and beers, sat and laughed with each other, feeling as free and unrestrained as anyone could. We had fun, and we were definitely breaking someone's rules, but the whole routine was mostly harmless.



We got old enough to purchase tobacco in the United States and graduated to another level of accessing Mexico's stimulating commodities. Now, we never left the country without at least thirty dollars for our border crossings, and our interests began to vary in their specificity. As soon as we crossed the bridge, ignoring the pleas for food and money below and around us, we bought marijuana for cheaper than the already low prices we were used to. The group would split, some headed straight for the bar to order beers and cocaine from the encouraging bartender, while others would meet there after going to the *pharmacia* to get Xanax and other prescription medications. Everyone seemed connected to the drug trade somehow. The bartender would ask how much *pase* (the slang term for cocaine) we wanted and then upsell the deal by offering twice as much for just a little bit more money. We always said yes. While we sipped our drinks he would run down the stairs, then up the street and back in less than five minutes with our purchase. It was customer service at its finest.

*This led to more
and more insobriety.
It was sublime.*

Having an abundance of illegal drugs on us created a new, welcomed challenge. Since most of us wouldn't dare to try transporting cocaine or marijuana into the U.S., whatever we purchased had to be devoured then and there. It became a group effort at the end of each visit to use up everything to keep from feeling like we wasted money. This led to more and more insobriety. It was sublime.

Someone might ask cheerfully across the noisy room, "Hey man, do you know where I'm supposed to be right now? Seventh period math." We would all collapse with laughter.

We drank more alcohol and smoked more pot to compensate for the cocaine's shaky high, chain-smoked Marlboro Reds, and blurred our vision as the night grew more clouded—laughing, shouting, vomiting, and dancing, sometimes all at once.

*Miguel was stabbed by a local
Mexican youth for being
too friendly and loud at a small,
dirt-floored bar . . .*

In the midst of all the excitement, I developed some disconcerting feelings about these trips. Visits to the doorless toilet stall to retch my guts out, after having dug the key to my parents' house too ambitiously into the powdery bowels of some small plastic bag, became so normal that I would simply wipe my sweaty face with the bottom of my t-shirt and head directly to the bar to refill my newly emptied stomach.



One night, Daniel pulled out of the border parking lot to head home with a swerve as wide as the grin I'm sure he had on his face, and was immediately pulled over and arrested for drunk driving. Not long after, during a night that I had fortunately been absent from, Miguel was stabbed by a local Mexican youth for being too friendly and loud at a small, dirt-floored bar, where the bartender, who could not have been more than twelve, served beers out of a broken ice chest. Looking back, I'm sure our careless, arrogant attitude and our ability to cross back and forth over the border—a privilege that many can only dream of having—boiled their blood.

At nineteen years old, Christina and Desiree were speeding home after a night of the usual blackout drinking and pill-popping when Desiree ran her car off the road and died on the spot. Christina was in heartbreaking disarray for a long time after that. The usually animated guys that were closest to

the feisty duo fell eerily silent as they smoked a blunt in the funeral home parking lot, before going inside to embrace each other in grievous crying, bent low over Desiree's appropriately closed casket.



We were no longer free. The lifestyle we had created in Mexico carried over into our lives stateside, and it became a cage.

*By age twenty,
I knew I needed a major change.*

We now found ourselves in Texas inside messy, dark, smoke-filled homes of drug dealers, nervously watching infants crawl around the floor in dirty diapers, while we waited an eternity for our irritable, unpredictable business associate to return from some back room with, hopefully, what we had paid for. By age twenty, I knew I needed a major change. I was trapped in the same ups and downs of substance abuse, but it was no longer fun and exciting.

In a strange twist of circumstance, I soon found my new definition of autonomy within the strict confines of U.S. Navy boot camp. With my head freshly shaved and my mind clear as spring water for the first time in a while, I sighed deeply with relief and tried not to smile thankfully at the men howling at me to stand up straighter. There was an unexpected freedom through restriction, and it was exactly what I needed.

I was twenty-three when, on June 1, 2009, the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative went into effect, requiring U.S. citizens to present a passport or special driver's license when re-entering their home country. Some of the poorest areas of our nation are located along the Texas/Mexico border, and most young adults do not have a passport lying around at their leisure to allow them to walk impulsively across that bridge. We certainly did not. This initiative was prompted by events leading to the attacks on 9/11, and was put in place to strengthen border security and prevent false documents. Unfortunately, the crime and violence along the borders of Texas have not been reduced

since then. In fact, they've gotten worse. Tighter security along the river was met with stronger opposition from Mexican cartels and drug dealers. Many people think that the act has done nothing but make these problems worse, and they may be right. I, however, was grateful for it in a more personal way. Having two younger brothers that lived in the same place I did at their age, I understand that because of this new law, there will be parents having dinner with their children, who otherwise might not have made it home safely from a night in Reynosa. ❧



INSTRUCTIONS

By Stela Knezevic

Start.

I'm crouched in the darkest corner. The coats, heavy with a shallow spring's rain, engulf my shrinking frame. I can hear it all outside: whispered curses, hushed conversations, my name cooed repeatedly, gently. I crouch lower. The commotion comes and goes in waves as bodies move like liquid, getting closer and farther away from the door. I have enlisted my cousins as bodyguards. I can see their shadows through the cracks in the wood as they stack Legos in the shape of sticky technicolor castles, ones to ward off my enemies.

I left my letter of resignation on the coffee table this morning:

I am not going to America.

It is simple.

I even spelled all of the words right.

☞ ☞

Go somewhere new (maybe New York).

The wallpaper is the kind of yellow no one would say is their favorite color. Walking back from the motel bathroom, the

lights fluorescent and the air thick, I hear voices through every door—not a single one shaped in a tongue I understand.

I told you I didn't want to come.

We are only here temporarily. They need to look at our papers before they can let us enter.

They only ever look at papers.

My mother smooths my bangs with her spit-soaked index finger; she smiles gingerly. If they looked at you to decide, with all of those little teeth missing, they would never let us cross the border.

I laugh as I stick my tongue through the gap in my mouth, formed by the absence of my two front teeth. Do I feel better? Hopping over her, I squeeze into the space between her and my dad.

Right there, the air is soft. Their stoic sobs mingle with my dreams.



Go back to Start. Make sure it's July.

As she takes a sip of her coffee, my aunt looks at me—the eyelashes decorating her lazy eye lethargically brush the broken rim of the mug.

It's been a while.

I know. I'm sorry. The time and money always run out before I can make it back here.

Nine years in a row.

Sometimes it seems like that's the best I can do.

Her pained smile is a reflection of all eight siblings'. How's America? Last fall your parents visited. They told us you're going to university.

It's all the same. Some places are just louder than others.

Don't be modest. We are proud of you.

You can only be so proud before you become bitter. When I'm sitting alone, sometimes, I imagine getting all of you out of here.

All of us?

I see it in the creamy brown constellations of her pupil: a father-in-law, a husband, two kids, a son-in-law, grandchildren. She sways her head lightly.

*It's all the same.
Some places are
just louder
than others.*

We got out while we could, but it has only been thunderstorms. It's so spectacularly heavy to be seen as the winners of a game we all lost together. Do you know that? Do you know how badly I wish you had gone instead? Any of you. I can stay here, make wine and cheese, and pick the figs in late August. You can go see the lights, the dishwashers. Did you know that they don't even use wood to heat their homes? They use switches, attached to wires, attached to magic.

She pulls the earthy wool sweater, draped over her petite shoulders, closer to her heart. You can't blame yourself for the world's problems.

But I should.



Go somewhere new (again). Pretend you recognize it.

As I watch the sun set behind the rusty apartment buildings, I hear you come home; it is the subtle difference in the echo that resonates when you set down the car keys that marks you. From the balcony, I predict where your foot is going to fall next, how many seconds it will take you to get to the fridge, the number of drawers you will unsettle in your quest to find the bottle opener. I never hear you coming, but the years have introduced me to the moment when I can count on the glass door's whispery squeal. I pull my legs in for you to pass and, catching the first wisps of cigarette smoke from the corner of my eye, I turn.

How was work?

Spectacular. The syllables drip warmly through your eroded teeth.

You do look especially brilliant this evening. Reaching over, I giggle to disperse the minute shards of light illuminating your hair.

I thought of something today. Can I tell you? I've been waiting.

This one isn't like the others. We've never talked about this.

I don't believe you.

The dried paint on your forehead floats away in shy flakes of white, migrating to the rosy cliff of your nose. I'm being as serious with my words as any other night.

I know. I fell asleep in class this morning because we were up so late. We need to start pretending our thoughts are shorter.

It's short.

Tell me.

Will you believe me? My words are as serious as any other night. Today, I remembered that you are my only friend. And then I remembered that you are my greatest friend. And then I remembered that nothing has made me happier in the last 47 years.

Dad, you don't have to—

I know.

☞ ☞

Save the world.

Wars happen: one land becomes seven, homes become dust, disrobed hearts become hollowed suns. The survivors leave and the dead stay. That's the deal.

But I'm breaking it. ☞





OPEN HOUSE

By Sayoni Nyakoon

Park Swing

I am not exactly sure how old I was, but I know many years ago I was stuck in a park swing.

My sister asked, “Sayoni. Remember when you were stuck in that park swing? How old were you? Do you remember?”

My mother answered, “She was old enough to know better.”

I know it was before I entered seventh grade, because it was the subject of a personal narrative I had to write. It was before I moved to Philadelphia with my twin sister, my father and the rest of his family—it was before I entered the eighth grade.

When I still thought love was a deity that never faded, when I still believed beauty had nothing to do with a person’s character, when I could force myself to believe my mother would take care of my sister and when I could close my eyes and fall into a world of my own creation—I found myself stuck in a park swing.

I thought the sky was a beautiful color. It was beautiful and it warned of

Rain.

My mother looked at the sky. Then she looked at my twin sister and me. She told us it was time to go home.

Before we left, we had to do one more thing. We had to swing one more time. Just for a little while.

There was a swing in that park

It was meant for toddlers

And babies.

My sister said, "What if you could fit in that swing?"

I hesitated.

My mother said, "Sayoni, you're so skinny you could probably fit right in there." And she was no longer irritated by the weather and its tendency to cut our time outside short and remind her she no longer had a car.

My sister and my mother held back laughs as one of my legs squeezed out of the openings of the swing. For the first time, I learned what it was like to wear clothes that are too tight and heavy.

To complete their show I pushed my feet off the ground and pretended to enjoy being the only kid my age who could squeeze into a swing for "little guys." After awhile the show was no longer entertaining.

"All right Sayoni! Get out now! We need to get home!"

My mother had the voice of an educated, African American, southern woman. Sometimes she yelled when she was angry and sometimes she yelled when she was only pretending to be. Either way I tried to get out of that swing.

I tried to get out of that swing. I tried and I was tired because headaches run on my mother's side of the family.

I tried

and

I tried, but

I was stuck.

The fire department was called.

And it never rained. ❧

*And she was
no longer
irritated by
the weather and
its tendency
to cut our time
outside short
and remind her
she no longer
had a car.*

Car Baby

For awhile my mother's favorite way to categorize my twin sister and me was to say we were "car babies."

You are a car baby when:

- You are used to having someone drive you around in a car.
- You complain every time you have to walk to the grocery store, or buy clothes at the Goodwill for the first day of school.
- You aren't used to riding bikes, and getting exercise, to get where you have to go.
- You are pampered and spoiled and not used to working hard. When you believe the lies your father tells you,

"Because there is nothing wrong with shopping at the Goodwill or Aldi's or getting a little exercise."

- You suffer because your mother has made "childish," "silly," and "foolish" mistakes.
- You let a hillbilly hick turn his nose at you and smirk and call you a nigger.

We were car babies when we didn't want to walk up the street to get milk, and when we were tired after going across town for bread.

❧ ❧

The summer before my gap year, I took a car ride with my mother and twin sister. I don't remember where we were going or why, but I remember how my mother felt as she drove.

She took a detour.

“I want to show you guys the house I grew up in.” So we drove and the road whined as the sun beat it down.

We passed
Sturdy Strong
Old houses
With vines
Overgrown.

And I get sick trying to describe those houses and that road.

We reached an old house with brown bricks and green ivy climbing up its sides. The door was a red brown and beautiful—like dark brown skin after a long day in the sun. The cement porch might have had cracks; the cement steps did. The hand rail was a worn metal pipe and the lawn was yellow-green, a badge of the Kentucky Summer. There may have been a car in the driveway but I was certain no one lived there. At least, no one was home. “This is where I grew up,” she said, and her sunglasses hid her expression.

But she had grown up in the projects?

“Conrad bought this house, for my mother, after he got out of the army.”

What happened?

“Shahida was supposed to take care of it, but she let the bills get out of hand and she lost it. Isn’t that a shame? It would’ve been nice to keep this in the family.”

We took our time returning the car she borrowed. I’m pretty sure I gave her gas money. ☞

City Park

There are no park swings in City Park. There are only statues and wide lush fields that are excellent to play soccer on.

On the 11th of November I woke up to a text message.

“Soccer @ City Park today—be there”

I didn’t plan on going to the park. I planned on sending my mother a steroid cream for her eczema (the cream was also supposed to treat my acne but I never used it), but the post office opened at noon and the clock said 9 am. I put on my dance shorts and left around 10:10.

*“Isn’t that a
shame?
It would’ve
been nice
to keep this
in the family.”*



I was late arriving to the park, my shorts were way too tight and short; I felt self-conscious. Every time I got on my bike I’d stop after riding a few blocks and tug at them.

After playing an awful game, I paused, tugged at my shorts, and checked my text messages. I had three: all from my boss.

“Nuni, call me immediately.”

“Nuni, call your aunt.”

“Nuni, there is an urgent personal matter. I need to speak with you.”

I called my boss, silently praying I was still going to get paid. His tone alarmed me more than his words.

“Hey Nuni, have you spoken to your aunt?”

I had not.

“Okay, well you need to talk to her soon.”

Her number was not saved in my phone.

“I can text you her home phone . . . I just want you to know that we’re here for you, Nuni.”

On red alert, I hid behind a statue and called my aunt. I was choking before she said a word.

“Your mother had a heart attack.”

That was all right. Yes, it sucked but I still had time to see her—I had trouble breathing. TJ and Samantha were behind me though I never saw them approach. There was no space between us when my aunt asked,

“Who is there with you now?”

I told her. I told her I wanted to see my mom, soon. Then she told me,

“I didn’t know how to say it before sweetie, but

She’s

Already

Dead.” ☞



THE EGG-IN-A-HOLE LENS OF MY BROKEN HEART

By Michael Harris

8 and hungry.

I sit on my bed. The stereo downstairs hums Kenny G; it's seeping through the walls. My dad loves Kenny G. It's the only stuff he plays in the house that isn't Christian worship music.

I have a plate in my lap. My breakfast is what my mom calls an egg-in-a-hole. Lots of people call it an egg-in-a-hole; I just don't know this. I think my mom invented it. I'm eight, so I don't know a lot of things.

Like how to eat.

I mean, I know how to eat. I just don't know there are rules, like, you shouldn't lie on your back on your bed and hold the egg-in-a-hole up and see how long it takes for the egg to fall out of the hole.

This ability to not know things is one of the reasons I can peel off layers and not even know I'm doing it. It's what fancy people call inner work. It's what pretentious people call enlightenment.

Because of this, I have an unforced slowness not common in children. This will go away in a few years when I dis-

cover candy and especially (especially) Mountain Dew, but for now, I am reflective without trying.

And this is why I notice light, maybe for the first time. I honestly don't think we've met before, which sounds strange, because it doesn't make sense. Regardless, light, it is wonderful to finally meet you. Or maybe I've met you every day of my life, but I forget every night, and wake up with a blank slate like Drew Barrymore in *Fifty First Dates*. Or maybe that was a series of dreams I had, and not a movie?

That makes more sense, actually, because that movie came out years after this happened.

I am so distracted by the light that I forget I'm dangling the egg-in-a-hole above my head. The splat of the egg on my face gently reminds me of this fact. My vision is immediately yellow and white and dark and runny and sort-of scary. I don't want this stuff to kill my eyes or something.

But I don't scrape it off, because I like the way the light has changed, or, how it appears to have changed. Now, I'm viewing it through a syrupy filter. The hues are different, the shapes barely defined, and I laugh. Of course, I don't have the words to talk about any of this. I just feel it.

And at this moment I feel something I'll never un-feel.
I am a lens.



22 and flying.

I slam my head against the steering wheel. The feeling I hate penetrates my chest. I gasp for air but sputter and cough instead. I glimpse the speedometer through watery eyes. 75 mph. 85 mph. 95 mph.

I pull my head up, wipe the tears from my eyes, and regain enough focus to keep my little Saturn from barreling off the side of the thin road. But I don't slow down. The trees whiz by, like the cinematic montage I've engineered my life to be.

But this is real. I realize again that it's real.

"How the fuck could you let this happen?" I scream.

At myself.

At God.

And still, for the audience to hear.

*"How the fuck
could you let this
happen?" I scream.
At myself.
At God.*

*We are perched
where the land
ends.*

I grit my teeth. Is there actually a difference between physical and emotional pain? This agony is more than I imagined. I grip the steering wheel tighter and slam my head into it again.



16 and suave.

I'm perched on a sandstone rock, clad in my latest Goodwill suit. It's a warm September night, but I'm glad to have the blazer on as a light breeze rolls in. The moonlight bounces off the guitar resting on my lap, my brown tie playfully hovers in the wind, and I can't contain the smile stretching across my face.

Just a foot from me is Maria, the girl of my dreams and, miraculously, soon the girl of my reality. Her silky brown hair drapes over her shoulders, and she sits on a rock a few feet from me with a blindfold over her eyes. It's all part of the show in which she's the star, and I think—well, I hope—she's loving it. Her dazzling smile seems to say so. And it is dazzling.

"You can take the blindfold off, beautiful," I say. She slowly pulls it down, revealing her shimmering eyes, and her smile widens as she takes in our surroundings.

On one side of us is a gentle slope dotted with trees. The other side is a steep cliff overlooking a meadow, which sits in the shadow of the monstrous Rocky Mountains, ominous but beautiful at night like this. We are perched where the land ends. All around us, sandstone rocks jut from the ground like castle towers. It's a breathtaking sight, but not as breathtaking as her. This all feels like a dream.

But it's real. I realize again that it's real.

I breathe in deeply as the anticipation hits me. I'm shaky and nervous but more elated. The butterflies in my stomach flap their wings with alacrity, like the crack-addicts they are. Is there actually a difference between physical and emotional excitement? Her wondrous gaze subsides and her eyes turn to meet mine. I grip the guitar tighter, and slide my hand into place.



I'm 22.

The sound of my heavy breathing and pacing footsteps on the hardwood floor fills the living room. I'm clutching the letter in my sweaty hands. My gaze darts between it and the street outside the window. Every new second pulses in my temples. I interrogate myself again.

Is this the right decision? The pressure intensifies in my chest and I swallow. She'll be here any minute. I have to be strong for her.

My eyes catch a flash of reflected light and I turn to see her Honda pull up in its usual spot, the spot she's pulled into hundreds, if not thousands, of times. My heart races as I rush out to meet her.

The car door opens. Maria is already sobbing. She's figured it out.

"Please don't do this, Michael." Her voice is muffled as she buries her face in my chest and whimpers, "I love you. You're my best friend."

This slices into me. It takes every fraction of willpower I can muster not to give in and admit I'm being ridiculous and stupid for my lack of faith. "I love you too, beautiful," I say.

We hold each other in the middle of the street for a while. Then I put her hand in mine while my other hand clutches the letter and we walk to the house.

I'm about to do something I know I'll regret.



*It takes every
fraction of
willpower I can
muster not to give
in and admit
I'm being
ridiculous and
stupid for my
lack of faith.*

I'm 16.

The sound of my guitar and voice echoes across the meadow. There's a neighborhood a mile or so down the hill that I'm sure I'm disturbing at this hour, but I don't care. My gaze darts between my left hand, making sure I've got the right chords, and the girl I've thought about non-stop for six months, who happens to be sitting right in front of me as I serenade her.

The light-hearted, slightly jazzy sounding verses tell of the first time I saw her at our high school youth group. I bounce from word to word.

"Every time I look at you, you shine our savior's light."

"And I'll never forget the first time I saw it in your dazzling smile when we met that Wednesday night."

I arrive at the bridge in the song, and the chords get emotional. I pick at the strings gently.

"And I feel like it's Sunday night, and I'm flying down Powers."

We smile at each other knowingly. A few days ago I floored the accelerator of my Sebring Convertible on Powers Boulevard until the speedometer read 110.

"Cause whenever I'm around you, baby, my heart's going at a hundred and ten—"

I mute the strings and click the small button beneath my foot. The trees around us suddenly illuminate with white Christmas lights. Maria jumps. She had no idea. My voice rings through the night.

"Miles an hour!"

The guitar erupts back into the night. I strum passionately, smiling inwardly and outwardly at the perfection of the moment.

But my thoughts start racing. ☞



EXPOSÉ

By Amy D. MacNair

“They’ll never believe me. Not inside of here, nor outside of here, despite the story I have to tell. In the one form of my existence, I’m defending the other version of myself, and vice-versa. This is the torture I’ve known—a living shell of who half of them want me to be, but never whole.”

Whiplash. Denver. October, 2009.

*Balance the cost of the soul you lost,
with the dreams you likely sought.
Are you under the power of gold?
—Dan Fogelberg*

It’s been sixteen years and I’m still going strong. They always said I’d make a brilliant salesperson. Hell, they all said I’m brilliant. But, is it just a relative term? Brilliant compared to what? Was it a lame attempt at flattery that would get them nowhere? I’ll give them credit. I think they were actually being genuine in

their estimation of who I presented myself to be. I could work it as well as the best of them. I always chose to take the path less traveled, in my pursuits, my education, and within the confines of my job. You could call it a sort of rage against the machine. It became a pride thing for me. Somewhat fabricated, somewhat innate.

People are people, and everyone has something to offer. I would be enlightened to this truth over the years in a surprising manner during my extended stay in this rather non-conventional career. Although the money would prove to be my largest gain, it was the conversations with the customers that I found to be the most satisfactory part of the job.

“So, where are you from and what is it that you do?” This was the typical, one-line icebreaker that I used to gauge my potential “sale.”

“I’m a freelance writer and a professor of advanced writing at Villanova University. I got my undergrad at Brown University in Rhode Island and my Ph.D. at Arizona State University.”

It was like a welcome mat and a punch to the gut all at the same time. Unbeknownst to him, I was a college graduate with a dream to now further pursue some sort of advanced degree. A master’s degree, perhaps? A juris doctoris? Yeah, that’s more like it. But he would never believe me, and with good reason. Sitting across the table from this man in a three piece suit I was wearing nothing but a two-piece outfit: a swimsuit with rhinestones and six-inch heels.

“So, tell me something interesting about yourself,” he said.

My normal, scripted response included where I grew up and something about my horses, but in cases like this, I was compelled to unleash the truth about who I *really was* and nine times out of ten I was brilliant in my assumption. I captivated him with stories of putting myself through my undergrad as an exotic dancer and my refusal to be phagocytosed by the lifestyle after all these years.

“I’m thirty-six years old, never married, no kids.” I said proudly.

“Um, are you gay?” he asked as it was almost expected that most dancers two-thirds my age and already been divorced twice and had accumulated several children.

“No, just independent and *free*.” I always considered this my vehicle for financing an education that my successful, wom-

“So,
tell me
something
interesting
about yourself,”
he said.

anizing father fell short in providing for me and my brother. In respect to the rest, however, I was one of the lucky ones. There were so many young women over the years whose dreams and goals faded behind the quick, easy money of the job. Education was last on their list. This was the end of the road for them. They actualized themselves from high school dropout to 50,000 dollars a year, part-time.

I witnessed so many of my coworkers die from the inside out. The flame of life slowly receded to embers as they sold themselves short to this place. To some, it was manageable, and in the best case an opportunity—if she was wise enough to use the job as a means to something bigger. But usually it turned out a dead end. The biggest stumbling block was the drugs. The Fast White Lady. Black Beauties. Smack. Spotting the ones hooked on drugs was easy. Under the dark, purple lights of the club they appeared as calendar girls. Under the bright, white lights of the dressing room they transformed into the walking dead. Their addictions slowly reduced them to chasing their next high in primal desperation to simply survive, let alone function. Dark circles enveloped their eyes as they dragged themselves into the dressing room at the start of the shift, temporarily sober and in need of their next fix.

I never judged addicts as much as I felt sorry for them. I grew up in an addictive household, mainly alcoholism, and loved my family regardless. I bonded with them and respected them. I sensed my dad’s loneliness behind the bottle despite his padded life and world travels from his high paying, white collar employment. The collision of the ice with his favorite blue glass indicated his first drink after work. It was a familiar sound in our household. It was one-half rum, one-half Coke, all night long. We would sit out on the deck and talk past dark as his mistress in the glass slowly seduced him into oblivion. By ten o’clock my father’s face was flat on the table, bearing the weight of his torso rounded over from the chair. Years later it would become three-quarters gin and one-quarter tonic drowning his extremely forgiving liver in a toxic bath. Despite decades of uncanny, residual health, the bottle had the final word. His successful career as a nuclear engineer was abbreviated due to his relationship with booze, and the once-strong, sub-professional cyclist was reduced to a prematurely-unemployable old man who walked with a cane.

I got to know the faces behind the veils from a very tender age and learned that compassion is one of the greatest gifts bestowed upon us—compassion for deep suffering. I was always the big sister at work, the one who lent an ear. And I wanted to hear. But this often put me in a precarious situation. Despite my eagerness to lend compassion, I dreaded this vulnerability I often signed up for. I felt it was my duty to listen to the girls . . . just let them vent without the risk of penalty that they were so used to in their normal lives. But I also internalized so much of their grief and frustration as I sought to make sure they knew I truly understood them. I ruminated over their problems and responded in the best way I could to their need for advice. I carried their stories with me and struggled with my inability to solve their problems. My shoulder absorbed countless tears of grief wept freely. I wept with them over those losses. Lost loves, lost children, lives stolen by addiction. It gave me a purpose to be strong for them, my younger sisters in this strange life we all lived. But from this I learned that you cannot be open to others without being vulnerable. It was a gamble. A gamble I chose to take because I loved these lost souls. I, too, even in my relative sobriety was a lost soul. What was I doing here? How did I get here?

Of course, I know how I got here. I was a sophomore in college looking to make some extra cash when my dorm roommate introduced us both to the world of stripping. That was sixteen years ago. So, why was I still here? The rationalization was always a legitimate one. The money. I could still keep my horses and compete with them at local shows. My horses provided me with a refuge from the very place that allowed me to afford them. The same animals had given me refuge while growing up in a household falling apart—and that household had financed them. Was this the same setup? Something compelled this conservative woman to continue to remove her clothes for complete strangers. I was massaging the egos of men who would stuff my pockets at night, and was hanging out with drug addicts from the ghetto. Then, during the day I changed masks and disguised myself as normal on campus and at the grocery store. I was constantly re-inventing myself from one to the other on a twenty-four hour basis, working at Z and living at A. I was drained to the point of exhaustion. Normal daily routines came to be too much work as I attempted to rebalance my core for the next task at hand. Whiplash. Which identity was I? Or could I be both?

*I was
massaging the egos
of men who would
stuff my pockets at
night,
and was
hanging out
with drug addicts
from the ghetto.*

*“It is through
your relationships
with others
that you better
understand
yourself,”
my grandfather
told me
when I was just
five years old.*

A few of the dancers I had the pleasure of meeting were without a doubt the most brilliant people I'd ever met in my life. They knew how to avoid the whiplash. They tucked that organic part of themselves away while at work and put on a desirable armor for six hours. They exemplified stoicism as they traded one face for another, blanketing away their core and presenting simply what was to be desired. Despite their obvious genius, their refusal to open up to anyone under that roof left me hungry for more of their secret. They were satisfied doing just enough to make the money and run, only dancing for a few years before they moved on to medical school, law school, business, etc. So why was I still here? And why was I still so good at what I did?

I enjoyed listening to people and learning about them, and they enjoyed having someone listen to them. I will always believe it was not my scantily-clad presence that drew them in, but rather the lending of my ears that kept them coming back to see me. Many of these men became my regulars. I went on a trip around the world each night, living vicariously through their stories of travel and experiences, and in return I got paid handsomely for it. It wasn't the removal of my clothes or the vertical gyrations that did it. It was my interest in who they were, off stage. This was a secret—no, a gift—that few other dancers ever understood.

“It is through your relationships with others that you better understand yourself,” my grandfather told me when I was just five years old. But it's an insatiable pleasure, as the more you learn about yourself, the more you realize you don't know. I'm sure he never expected me to level with his words of wisdom in this way.

“Well, I'm so glad you asked!” I told the professor from Villanova. “I recently decided to go back to school, pursue a different degree, then graduate work. I am at the University of Colorado studying . . .”

We sat there and talked. None of my clothes were removed, and I was bought off the list. I accrued two hundred dollars an hour to be removed from the DJ's dancer list (no stage dances required during that time) and after four hours found myself eight-hundred dollars richer on my drive back home. It was easy money.



Ten Feet Tall and Bullet Proof. Denver. September, 2011.

*You'd think I've learned my lesson,
but I'm still payin' dues
each time I drink and start to think
I'm ten feet tall and bulletproof.*
—Travis Tritt

“Come talk to me in the office as soon as you get dressed, Kaylee.” These were the Olympic level buzz-kill words I’d heard Matt tell me at least a dozen times after losing my cool, thanks to mismanaged consumption of the only protection I thought I had. He was the club’s long-term, iconic manager. The club owners, a married couple, had adopted him at a mature age for some mysterious reason and secured for him one of Denver’s most powerful positions in the entertainment industry. He ran the place in Nazi fashion and when he called you into the office during your shift you always began to sweat.

Matt was a force to contend with at the club. Whatever he said *went*. Tidy and timely as a Swiss watch, yet as crazy as a wild stallion, he successfully played the roles of both the man in charge and the eccentric loose cannon that kept us all on our feet, and customers craving for more. Everyone wanted to be Matt’s friend. He gained celebrity status and was not easily crossed. I tested this fact on many an occasion in my inebriated glory.

“I just had three customers complain to me. They said you told them to leave your stage because you felt they weren’t tipping you appropriately.”

“Not true. I was going to let *all* of that go until one of them pulled out a cell phone and started snapping shots. That was the straw for me and I asked them to leave my stage. Really! Please believe me!” I exclaimed in the most sober voice I could command.

“Kaylee . . . they were three people in sweater vests. Please. Let’s face it, you and I are college-educated. How long have we worked together? We both know that when you do this shit, it gives all of them a glorious excuse to make us look like the pieces of shit they think we are. Come on. I need you to get dressed, go home and call me before your next shift.”

*I loved
the numbing
effect alcohol
had on my
emotions.
It was
my armor.*

“*Damnit!*” I’d just been slammed again. I’m such an idiot! Shit.

Five hours earlier, I relished the taste of the sweet candied liquor finished with a floral accent bathing my tongue. My loyal friend in the bottle was once again offering me the wonderful, mind-altering effect of numbing all of my defenses, awakening the inner seductress, light on inhibitions. This fantastic relationship with the bottle offered me the confidence required to swim with the sharks I was soon to face. Each sip of booze would transform those sharks into dolphins, and eventually those dolphins into passive bottom-dwellers, at least as I saw it. Each level down in this ritual made me the shark inside those windowless, four walls that would attempt to contain me for the following six hours.

The first sips were actually sucked from the nipple of a pre-filled water bottle. It was the pre-buzz opening act that started at Colorado and 23rd and lasted through twenty-two intersections of stoplights. To me it was glorious rebellion and self-satisfaction. To passive observers, it was Gatorade. By the time I pulled my car left onto Virginia Drive, my sensible self reaching for the brake was hogtied as a greater sense of my inflating ego took over. It was this ritual suppression of my true self that paved my entrance into this place for which I carried a natural aversion, felt more clearly on a sober scale. It was the same place that paid my bills and kept my horses in oats, right up there with the Joneses.

Booze was introduced to me at a very tender age. I hated it. I felt superior to it. My own infatuation with my wonderful father was challenged as I watched these spirits slowly steal his dignity. I never understood how someone as smart and strong as he was could fall victim to this seduction. I privately judged him with harshness for his desperate infatuation.

“What a waste,” I thought. It drew him away from all of us. His authenticity was lost through this weakness.

Now, twenty five years later I was becoming a mirror image of this disparity and I could care less. I *loved* the numbing effect alcohol had on my emotions. It was my armor. Each sip taken between the flip of mascara, brush of blush, and consecutive set on stage lent me a growing fortress of seeming protection from the nasty crowd of perverts.

Still in a relative state of sobriety, I approached the front of the club carefully, reaching for the brass handles of the heavy,

wooden doors. I heard the music and the DJ announcements as I walked through the bar in my everyday wardrobe, making a point to avoid eye contact with of any of the customers sitting in the shadows. I still needed to create more space. I entered the back room and headed down the fifteen stairs to the dressing room.

“3:40. I’ve got twenty minutes to the start of my shift,” I thought to myself with slight trepidation. I needed all of those twelve hundred seconds to carefully dispense makeup to my aging face and pick out an appropriate outfit. I preferred working the four to ten shifts. I felt as if I still worked relatively normal hours aligned with much of the outside working world and appreciated the wallets that tended to walk through the doors in the earlier hours. It was a buffet of older generations with decent manners and expendable incomes opposed to the later crowds chock full of young testosterone and shithead, cheap attitudes. While putting on my makeup the effects of the alcohol slowly slid over me like a cool, soft cotton sheet draped lightly over my body in the middle of a summer night’s sleep. My sense of confidence bloomed from somewhere inside, inspiring my devil self to rise once again.

I was often tempted to engage in safer addictions that would not perhaps cost me a driver’s license or felony driving record. One such option was the Fast White Lady, which strangled many of my coworkers with her dangerous seduction. They flew around the club, impervious to others with their dizzying and swirling energy. I was scared of the white powder, though. Call it my conventional, snob-bish New England upbringing, or just sensibility, I was “above” that. Additionally, I witnessed too many drug dogs randomly entering the club and sniffing up the locker room to think twice about carrying any on me. Granted, I’d done my fair share when offered, only to wake the next day preferring to die rather than get out of bed. So my addiction remained enclosed in the bottle, despite regular payment of morning headaches and lost memories of the previous night.

*I had flesh of steel tying
my body together.
Where one rounded muscle stopped,
another one began.*



After putting on my face, my nail polish, heels, and cocktail dress, my boobs and I walked upstairs. We were ready to face this crowd of jerks. For at least a moment, I could present myself as bulletproof. Despite my ability to mix in with the crowd and present myself with confidence upon initial greetings, I always felt extreme discomfort with the shallowness of the industry. My value was only threads deep to them. A large part of me hungered for that greater sense of appreciation of who I really was. I needed to stand out in the crowd in a positive way, yet so often I felt neglected. Concerning physical appearance, I was often the last finisher in the claiming race. I was far from the anorexic body type that graced six of the seven stages while I danced invisibly on the seventh. The other dancers had noticeable knees, hip bones, and wrists. I had flesh of steel tying my body together. Where one rounded muscle stopped, another one began. Often times, I would walk my strong physique up the stairs to the stage only moments later to watch men flee in fright. At times there were even dust trails left behind. They wanted to see little miss pretties with their helpless youth, naïve presence, and tiny waistline. I was the walking contradiction to all of these qualities. Therefore, my income was forcibly dependent on a unique selling style. I would have to reach deep into the psyche of these men and challenge them, to awaken their mental drive that fell asleep upon entering the front doors. This was my clutch and it required tremendous energy on my part—energy to be used wisely and selectively, and it required a solid buzz with which to erase any doubt that I was still qualified enough to play this game.

*The shoes he wore
told me stories
of his past and present.*

When not on stage, I would search the crowd for my kill. Ideally, he would be sitting alone at a table, drinking a martini or wine suggestive of expensive taste and an inquiring mind. The shoes he wore told me stories of his past and present. Tennis sneakers spoke of limited income and education. A nice pair of Italian leather loafers or Asolo’s from REI lent a much better appeal. Chances were good that he was most likely in for a little fun to be

had with his residual play money from an income adding over six figures. And if his posture spoke of desire for company, this was my guy. While most of the girls walked around and planted their butts in an empty chair with no thought as to how to cater the conversation but only whether “he would like a table dance” or not, I was the silent wolf. It would be a challenge of my intelligence against his to determine who would be the smarter, more stealthy predator.

“So, where are you from and what is it that you do?” I said with an unassuming approach.

“I’m here on business from Chicago.”

“Fantastic! My mother grew up in Chicago, in the southern suburb of Lemont. And I’m sure you’ve heard of Lake Geneva?”

“Oh, absolutely! We have a vacation home up there.”

“Well, wouldn’t you know it, my grandmother lives on Lake Shore Drive and she’s been there for over fifty years now. She’ll be ninety-seven in January. She and I frequented Popeye’s during my last visit.

“Oh, for sure! I love going to Popeye’s. I’m usually there at least once a month.”

This was my wise attempt at forcing common ground. My words would fly out at a much more forceful tempo than normal, as if I’d known him for years while my eyes scanned his for a glimmer of interest, or better yet a feeling of comfort and connection. My goal was to keep tugging at who he was until I got him to feel important and desirable in my eyes. Suddenly, he was the one trying to impress me, intoxicated by my appearance of hanging on his every word. Enter two more glasses of wine and thirty minutes of intensive conversation and I was hopefully on my way to five private dances. It was another one hundred dollars in my purse for the effort. If I could repeat this performance four times a night, in between sets, I would leave the club with a feeling of success. Nights like these proved I didn’t have to feel as if I’d sold my flesh for an underbid price. Rather, my wits alone opened his wallet. My dignity was still intact.

On a nightly basis, I set the rules to this game. I was everyone’s friend, secretly appraising their individual value and doing my Sunday best to humor them all with my natural grace and appeal. I was smarter than them. I was the silent predator of predators. They were mine, not the other way around. My over-inflated ego sustained my pseudo-strength and removed my sensitivities that would normally render me vulnerable. I bravely

*It was another
one hundred
dollars
in my purse
for the effort.*

entertained NBA stars, Hollywood actors, and corporate millionaires. I was the main attraction and quite attracted to myself, likewise. My buzz increased my comedian’s sense along with my peace and love attitude. I was an unmistakable genius . . . up until about my fifth glass of wine. Then it would all change.

My intoxication would eventually come spilling out the other side, catching the stern attention of my boss, Matt, many times over. It was clearly evidenced by my outrageous gestures, often decorated with my middle finger in its solitary glory followed by vulgar statements aimed at desiccating any remaining morality of the customer who took liberties at mocking me or shorting me on cash. My badass would come flying out. I never escaped this brutal twist. It was as if something else took over my better judgment and often cost me dearly. I got to a point where I realized I was in the *wrong* place.

“I *wasn’t* raised this way, and how *dare* these guys look at me like that?”

My relationship with the bottle turned against me with more frequency as I advanced in my career while I continued to abuse it for emotional protection. This codependency would turn out to be my greatest failure.

Leaving the office following Matt’s familiar lecture and not knowing if I still had a job, I collected my belongings. I was now the loser among losers. It would be another sleepless night.



Uncertainty. Denver. November, 2011.

*I could’ve done so many things baby,
if I could only stop my mind from wondering what
I’ve left behind and for worrying about this wasted time*

...
*maybe someday we will find
that it wasn’t really wasted time*
—Don Henley, Glenn Frey

I can’t imagine what I am going to do now with my life. What once was my freedom has now become my sentencing. My résumé is anemic at best, hopelessly pathetic at worst. Every night here I

attempt to exhume the past in some way to deny the reality that I am truly in the twilight of my eighteen-year career. I am holding on with a death grip. I look around at the other employees and see shades of myself in each of them. I see a young girl in the corner of the room with a customer. She is wearing a tiny, blue, sequined dress that clings to her one hundred-pound body and her hair is in an up do accentuating her baby round face. Her twenty-two-year-old energy radiates glee at the attention she receives from this man in the form of compliments and Ben Franklins placed neatly into her cleavage. She is a hard reminder of my age. I think back to the days when I was her. I wonder what would've happened if I'd channeled my income into better investments and money markets affording me the opportunity to walk away, comfortably. Now, I scramble for leftovers from this place to stock up for what could be a very long winter season in my life. I am reminded of a recent discussion I had with my best friend who has been an alumna of this job following her own fifteen-year career in the business.

"Don't let this job fool you. It has a dark side of its own. The hands of opportunity this job promised to us early on in our career are now threatening to strangle you and suck the life out of you, just as they did me. I had a home on the coast of Florida, a home on Lake Michigan, drove Ferrari's, and had a quarter million in the bank at age thirty. Now look at me. I am 40 years old, living in a small apartment in Boulder, attending CU on loans I cannot repay, and living on a prayer."

We both sat on the edge of her second-hand futon couch that doubled as her bed. We drank coffee from mugs she got for ninety-seven cents each at the dollar store as a gentle, mountain breeze blowing from the mountains into her studio apartment, tossing sleeves back and forth on her hanging shirts and jackets she got at the thrift store. I believed her words as I'd witnessed this disintegration as well, but they were painful to digest.

"What do you think it is that leads to the disappointing end?"

"It's the energy," she said. "We spent so much time gaining possessions and money, but all the while falling further and further into spiritual bankruptcy. We sold our flesh for shallow gains. It's Karma. It is a debt that cannot escape repayment. And there is no aging gracefully in that joint. The customers will remind you of that with brutal honesty," she said with intensity in her eyes, backed up with resurrected anger.

*"What
do you
think it is
that leads
to the
disappointing
end?"*

"Do you want another cup of coffee?" she asked after a brief pause.

Refilling our mugs, she turned to the window and collected her thoughts.

"It really is better now. I have lost all of my material gains but have regained a priceless peace. I wouldn't trade it for the world," she said with a relieving sigh and convincing nod. "Trust me. I think your time is coming. You will know it, just as I did. You will look around the club one night and finally decide you are done. It won't occur with anger, but with peaceful surrender. Then you will collect your things and simply walk out without ever looking back. Just be grateful that it will be a voluntary decision. The greatest success you will achieve in that job is the ability to tell it goodbye, not the other way around. Remember all those girls who fell into the cracks of addictions, demise, and occasionally death at the hands of an abusive partner, drugs, or the end of a rope? They were the real victims."

"... and the beautiful Kaylee will be joining us on stage five," sounded over the loudspeaker in a voice only an overly-enthusiastic DJ could expel.

As I arose from my bar stool and trance of recollection, my eyes were drawn back to the girl in the corner of the bar. She was sixteen years behind me in experience. Her cliff was still far off in the distance. I couldn't judge her, though. I was once her and she would eventually be me, looking back. ☞



BLUE AGAINST BLUE

By Lexi Evans

Sunday, March 4, 2001:

I'm standing in front of a bloated corpse. His arms form a cross on his chest. His skin is gray and stiff. His eyes are swollen shut. I stare at the black fabric of his tuxedo and try to imagine where the bullet hollowed out the flesh of his abdomen.

Tuesday, February 27, 2001:

I've relived the moment a thousand times over:

I'm pulling back the overstuffed, pink-flowered comforter on my canopy bed. The frigid February air whistles against my windowpane before crystallizing to frost. A pair of yellow lights flash across my room. A red car is positioned haphazardly in the driveway. I'm home alone. My eleven-year-old heart flaps in my chest. I'm not sure whether to run, hide, or embrace him, but it's been months since I've seen him, and as I trudge across the thick carpet I know he won't hurt me; my bare feet find the courage to meet the frozen pavement.

David rolls down the passenger window. His face is all shadows and bones. Before I can even open my mouth, he urges me

to go back inside where the furnace is humming, where I won't catch a cold with my shoeless feet. Then his tone softens and he asks for my mom. He's white-knuckling the steering wheel. His hands are the hands of skeletons. He asks me to tell her he stopped by. Thin black hair covers patches of his scalp. A faded Rockies jacket swallows him whole. "See you later," I shout as he backs away from the house. "Good night," he says. His car chases two spotlights into the pitch-black night. I'm left standing alone in my driveway.



The next day when my mom picked me up from school, she told me. Her face was perfectly poised, expressionless like stone. Her speech was clear and unwavering. "David was killed today. He was shot, while trying to rob a bank. He's dead."



David and my mom had met seven years earlier in Georgia, shortly after my parents separated. David had accidentally received my mom's developed film from the drugstore because they had the same last name. Instead of returning the pictures to the drugstore, he found out where she lived and hand-delivered the photographs because she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. They quickly discovered they were both from Puerto Rico. So two Puerto Ricans with the same last name found each other somewhere in redneck Georgia in the middle of a blistering summer. David never picked up his pictures. He didn't need them.

When my mom, my brother, and I moved to Colorado after the divorce, David followed. My dad did not. I was five years old, and being that my dad occupied physical space in my world about two times a year, David began to feel more and more like a father. By the time I turned eight, David had moved in with us. My mother was a flight attendant, and while she lived in the sky for days at a time, David made sure my brother and I were safe.

Every Saturday morning while David lived with us, the smell of fresh pancakes would waft through the crack under my

door, creep up to my bed, and gently pull me from a dream. I'd slip out from underneath my covers and tiptoe downstairs as the soft morning light flooded the kitchen, hoping to catch him mid-flip. With that spatula he could flip the whole world upside down and make it right side up again before I could even reach the next step. Sometimes David would catch me out of the corner of his eye. When he did, he'd turn away from the stove, give me a bright smile and whistle a little tune as the pancake somersaulted in mid-air—then turn back around to catch it centimeters before it met the skillet. An artist's precision. He would meet me at the bottom of the stairs, pull me into his chest with one arm, and plant a kiss on the crown of my head. After breakfast, we would eagerly pull the bikes out of the garage and race for hours in the shadows of trees. And on the way back, when I was too tired to pedal, David would take one hand off his own handlebars and grab mine, pulling my bicycle alongside his like a superhero until we reached home.

His eyes were wet and his entire body trembled as though thunder cracked through it.

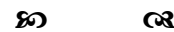
If I thought then that David represented some semblance of stability in our chaotic and semi-nomadic lifestyle, I was wrong. Inexplicably, we moved out of the townhouse we shared with David, and he moved into an apartment. My mom was a reason short of an explanation, and thought that David's "strange behavior" and "extended disappearances" would be sufficient to justify why yet another person had been severed from our lives. It wasn't. We still saw him on occasion, but the visits became less familiar and less frequent until he disappeared altogether.

Six months later, David's silhouette was framed in our doorway. His eyes were wet and his entire body trembled as though thunder cracked through it. He muttered something to my mom that I couldn't hear, something that prompted her to let him into our home. In an instant, David's life was reduced to the mattress in our loft, which he slept on for days at a time and would abandon for just as long. One day I snuck upstairs, hoping to catch him singing in Spanish or dancing salsa like

he used to when he thought no one was looking, only to find him thrashing violently in the sheets, writhing in pain, a hand cradling his belly while he twisted and folded in on himself like a contortionist, too empty even to prop himself up on his elbows. Droplets of sweat gathered on his skin, which was stretched so tightly across his cheeks it looked as if the bones might snap through at any moment. Blackened bags sagged beneath his vacant eyes. Horrified and unnoticed, I retreated to my room.

*He tore it down
and I built it back up again,
with fragments
of drugs and sex
and tiny pieces
of hell.*

I recognized David's debilitated state from a scene in "Basketball Diaries," a movie based on the true story of Jim Carroll's teen heroin addiction. In a vignette eerily similar to the one I had witnessed with David, the main character was in the throes of a heroin withdrawal, strung out in an alley with a needle still poised in his sickly green veins as he clutched his stomach with an emaciated hand and shrieked for more drugs. My father had made me watch the film three years earlier, and though it served as his best attempt at protecting his children, he was ripping apart my innocence. He tore it down and I built it back up again, with fragments of drugs and sex and tiny pieces of hell.



David was born in Fajardo, Puerto Rico on January 20, 1965 to divorced parents, two sisters, and three brothers. David's two sisters lived with their mother. David and two of his brothers lived with their father. The fourth brother lived with their grandmother. When David turned twelve, his father forced him and

his two brothers to push drugs in the projects. They sold marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. Those three boys became drug addicts. The fourth boy did not. David left Puerto Rico in 1988. He wanted to escape.



On Christmas Day, my brother and I took some shiny red and green wrapped presents—all snowmen and Santas and bows—up to the loft where David had been deteriorating for days, fading into a ghost. He said he didn't have anything for us, so he couldn't open our gifts to him. I told him, "It's okay." I knew he had stolen my leather jacket, my rollerblades, my favorite childhood movie (*Free Willy*) and countless others, my brother's remote-controlled cars, and my great-grandmother's wedding ring, and pawned it all off for heroin. I wanted to tell him that that was okay, too. That it didn't matter. That I just wanted him back. We left his presents on the floor, beside the mattress. He never opened them.

Then David vanished entirely, this time at my mother's request. A few months later when he reappeared in our driveway, I was the only one there to answer his unspoken plea. As I would later find out, faced with the grim ultimatum of paying back his drug dealer or having his son murdered, David chose the former. With the desperation only a parent can have, he decided to rob a bank. Save for a tainted armor of cocaine and heroin, David stepped into the bank unarmed. He was met by a cascade of bullets. On the other side of the gun was an off-duty police officer who murdered him on the spot, targeting his vital organs first. That night would be the last night I would ever see David, just sixteen hours before he took his last breath. This would make me the last person of David's family and friends to see him alive.

Guilt slowly began to gnaw at my insides until it became a part of me as intrinsic as my heartbeat. With the heroic delusion characteristic of children, I was convinced that I could have done something or said something that would have stopped him. I thought that I could have saved him, but I didn't say anything. So I dreamt about guns pressed against temples and woke up in a perpetual scream.

*Save for a
tainted armor of
cocaine and
heroin, David
stepped into the
bank unarmed.*

*Clumps of Puerto Rican
soil bury the soft,
velvety red petals.*

As David was balancing on a fine line between life and death, the line I was tiptoeing between childhood and adulthood was thinning at a dangerous rate. David's addiction sank its teeth into him like a beast that wouldn't let go—he lost his balance and plunged into the blackest void. I, too, was free falling, unsure whether I wanted to land in a reality constructed of needles and bullets, or to retreat into the safety of nights in my mother's arms—nights that began with “once upon a time” and ended with “happily ever after.” But I sensed that it was too late, that I had already seen too much. I didn't want to watch my childhood crumble around me yet again; I wanted to leave it in a pile of rubble at my feet because rebuilding it hurt more than watching it collapse. I knew deep down that no number of fairy tales could restore my innocence, and that my mother's arms could no longer keep me safe.

☞ ☞

Sunday, March 4, 2001:

A single red rose falls from my fingers onto his casket. Clumps of Puerto Rican soil bury the soft, velvety red petals. I can see where the ocean meets the sky from the top of this hill—blue against blue. And in that place where the two converge—where you're unsure whether you're sinking or flying, that's where I imagine David. My knees slam into the earth. An arm on each side of me lifts me up. One is my brother's. The other is my mom's. Hot, salty tears sink into the dirt. Part of me will die down there with him. I wish I'd hugged him that night in the driveway. I never would have let go.

☞ ☞

I've recreated the moment a thousand times over, always the same way:

I slip into my shoes so I can greet David in the driveway, but instead of stopping at the passenger's side, I circle around to the driver's side. I open the red door, and have him step out onto the pavement. I wrap both arms around his body as tight as I can. I don't let go. I whisper, “I love you” into his ear.

When I fast-forward it, though, it always ends the same way, because even the purest of loves wasn't strong enough to stop him. I wish I could've pulled his handlebars like he did for me countless times, but when he rode through his battlefield, he was steering, and I couldn't be his superhero. He never made it home. ☞





KERING TEMPE KACANG

By Kathleen Childs

Kering Tempe Kacang

Indonesian fried tempeh and peanuts. Perfect for a party!

Serves 5 and your ex.

Cooking time: 25 minutes (6 years prep)

Ingredients:

- 4 ea. cloves garlic
- 2 ea. shallots
- 4 ea. Thai chilies
- 2 ea. blocks tempeh
- 1 c. peanuts
- 2 tbs. tamarind paste
- 1 tbs. palm sugar
- 1 tbs. soy sauce
- 1½ in. galangal
- 2 ea. bay leaves (pref. Indonesian)

- 2c rice, uncooked
- Sambal olek to taste

Method:

Mince garlic, shallot, and chilies. Wonder if it's still too soon. Start rice. Slice tempeh into thin, short slices and fry with peanuts until your mind is golden brown and earthy with the smell of the pine needles outside your ex's house in Evergreen. Drain and season. You dated in fucking high school and it's absurd to be either reminiscent or nervous now. In a separate bowl, whisk tamarind, sugar, soy sauce. Heat wok or large pan over your continued embarrassment at your meager accomplishments and calm down. Breathe. Slice galangal. Add 2 tbs oil to wok, heat to simmering like her—no, you're not going down this path again. Add galangal, lose yourself in stir-fry. When you're cooking, the world vanishes. Anything else that comes in is an interruption, and will probably screw something up—you know that oil's hot. Add vegetables and bay leaves. It was cold those nights in her car. You splatter oil on your left forearm. Wince. Remind yourself of your actual skills and accomplishments. Add tempeh, peanuts, and sauce. Cook until coated, shiny, and dry.

Remove from heat and pick out galangal and bay leaves. Remember hostess said not to bring food, but it's normally meditative to create things and it would be the ideal dish. Inoffensively vegan, a little showy, but relatable. Hesitate. Decide not to bring tempeh. You could use easy breakfasts next week. Eat tempeh for lunch with rice and sambal olek. During lunch, decompress some—you have a closet full of anxiety, but you're a damn good cook. Realize your ex never learned that. You hadn't yet become one. Accept that you've developed into a substantially more reliable person than the one she broke up with. Imagine she's grown into herself as well. Resolve to interact with your ex like a mature adult. Tempeh in refrigerator, feel duty-bound to bring something to party regardless.

Go out and buy beer. Think yourself clever for buying IPA called "Stranger." Place yourself and beer in vehicle. Drive to Westminster for party. Wonder what it is about Colorado that's made so many old friends come back. Turn question on yourself, and feel too much like a salmon swimming upstream.

*Heat wok or large
pan over your
continued
embarrassment
at your meager
accomplishments
and calm down.*

Arrive. Set beer on table and scope out where she's sitting. Greet hostess, greet other friend, introduce self to strangers. Avoid eye contact with ex. Berate self, make move to reintroduce self to ex, but she beats you to the punch. Fail not to notice her engagement ring. Wonder if that's really as significant as it feels. She asserts that you look like you're doing well.

Yeah. You are. You really are.

Serve and enjoy. ☘



YOU FIND WIFE

By Ben Song

Saying you've had a perfect dating life is like saying the Titanic never sank, Oprah never retired, and VCR's are still trending. I am part of the 99.9% that proudly admits the failures of their dating career. At the ripe age of 21, my dating experiences can be summed up in one word: disaster.

Being a Korean American, you get the best of both worlds. I grew up watching American sports, listening to American music (boy bands are still my guilty pleasure), and admiring beautiful American women. Drowning in all this American pride, I would still get spoiled with extravagant Korean meals at home and all of the fun-but-unnecessary Asian holidays that started my childhood bank account. I'd thought of myself as an ambassador between the two nations, American by day and Korean by night. My rebellion played out in a timetable opposite that of a rebellious teenage girl—my “sneaking out” happened during the daytime in the carefree air of American society, but at night it was back to those strict Korean family rules where curfew was 9 p.m. and homework was first priority, closely followed by practicing the cello.

Have you ever signed a contract without reading any of it, and then later, the actual terms of the contract come into effect and change everything? That's a little how it was being brought up by Asian parents. From birth, I signed a contract to succeed in school, to be #1 in the class, to practice the cello at least one hour a day, to get nothing other than straight A's, and to choose only extracurricular activities that look good to Ivy League colleges. Don't get me wrong, I love my parents. If it weren't for them, I can guarantee I would be the laziest man on the planet. That being said, there was one fine line of print that I managed to miss—a small specification that will haunt me until my wedding day: *You are the only successor of the Song lineage. To carry on the Song name, you must marry a Korean woman.*

*“If you don't
marry a Korean girl,
I will move to Alaska.”*

“I've never been any prouder, knowing the Song name will continue with such a handsome, fine gentleman,” my mom said. “If you don't marry a Korean girl I will move to Alaska.”

No pressure, right? One slight problem: I'm not attracted to Asian women. There's nothing wrong with Korean girls; I've just grown up obsessing over the Spice Girls, Britney Spears, and G.I. Jane. Over the years, I've never dated a single Korean girl. I desperately hope that if I bring home an amazing girl, even though she might not be Korean, my parents will forget my destined path. However, bringing any girl home to *Meet the Parents* has been an obstacle in itself. Throughout my dating career, I've never brought a girl home. It's not because I'm afraid of what my parents would think, or that my game is so terrible no one wants to come home with me (well, hopefully this isn't the case)—it's because I've never had the chance to end a date on a high note.



The universe is wired to follow the laws, and the laws for me are, apparently, to date Korean girls until I find a Korean wife. If anything disrupts the natural course of the universe, the universe will find a way to fix it. Therefore, I blame all my failed dates on the universe. I feel as if there is some master hand purposely forcing the most awkward and uncomfortable dating situations onto me until I fulfill my mother-given quest. It's like a game of Monopoly. You put so much effort and strategy into making your way around the board, and just as you're about to pass “Go,” you get a chance card that sends you straight to jail.

We all have that one girl we can't help but chase, even though she's way out of our league and failure is inevitable. Mine was Carly. The first time I laid eyes on her she was in a bikini on our school fun day at Water World. A bikini. I had no chance. She was the captain of the dance team; I played cello for the orchestra. She had a part-time job modeling; I built toy models of cars. She was the junior class president; I was an awkward sophomore. How did she know I existed? Because I tutored her little brother, Sam. How did I ask her on a date? I used that 10-year-old little brother as my wingman.

Advice #1: Little kids possess great powers of persuasion—they're like puppies that can speak. There I was, frozen at the doorway of her house. Flashes of all the “what ifs” started playing in my mind—she's clearly older, cooler, and more experienced than I am, but here I stand, in straight midnight jeans with a shirt I had to iron a thousand times. Is my hair okay? Do I smell good? I basically had to take out a loan to buy this seventy dollar cologne, but did I spray enough?



Stumbling.

Sixth grade: I was paired up with dream girl Hayley as my lab partner. Before we got together, I ran into the bathroom and basically took a shower in Axe Deodorant Spray. As I walked back into the classroom, every head turned toward me, noses in the air. Beaming with confidence, I sat down next her, only to be greeted with a face of disgust.

“What is that awful smell?!” She looked at me, gave me one sniff, and ran away.



Snacks.

Carly was the closest to an Asian girl that I have ever dated. She was half Korean, half Caucasian. The perfect loophole for the contract. There’s a common belief that every Asian knows every other Asian in existence. With my luck, of course, Carly’s mom actually knew my mom. I was on a double date, needing to impress both Carly and her mom. One slip-up and she would report to the warden.

The night led up to Carly and me alone in her basement, “watching” a movie. The entire night had been a success, with my rehearsed jokes, talking about how Sam and I were best friends, and how much I admired her. Now here we were, undressing each other. I won’t lie—my thoughts during this time were not about the situation and the task at hand. All I could think about was how I had finally conquered that stupid contract.

But the universe doesn’t believe in loopholes.

Carly wasn’t fully Korean, so of course things had to be set right. As we made out, her mother decided it was a good idea to come downstairs to give us snacks. Everything was a blur—snacks soaring in the air, me dashing for the bathroom, stumbling, pants at my ankles. I slammed the door and waited an eternity, listening to them argue.

Double-checking my zipper, I stepped out of the bathroom only to be greeted by Carly, covered by a blanket.

“My mom says we can’t date. You need to leave.”

Advice #2: Don’t start getting frisky at 10 p.m. Parents are still awake.



She said yes.

Her name was Alexandria. We played the “eye staring” game in my U.S. history class, trading glances and never listening to the teacher. After a lot of pressuring and teasing from my friends, I finally got the courage to ask Alex on a date. It was a

Tuesday, and the date was planned for the upcoming weekend. But even before we had the date, it felt as if we’d been dating for months. Throughout the week preceding the date, every morning I had a “Good morning handsome, have a nice day :)” text (RED FLAG). I only thought of it as a nice gesture and couldn’t wait to take this sweet girl on a date.

In high school, I lacked the creativity to break the “dinner and a movie” format. I was on my way to pick her up when she texted me that her parents were going to join us for dinner (RED FLAG). Free dinner, though. I couldn’t pass that up.

“Hey son, it’s nice to meet ya. My daughter here is full of only high praise whenever she mentions you,” he said, shaking my hand vigorously.

“Uh, thanks. It’s nice to meet you too, Mr. Douglas.”

“You’re right, Alex, he is tall and in shape. Great genes, probably,” smiled Mrs. Douglas, as we took our seats.

The majority of the dinner consisted of highly personal questions directed towards my life and future (RED FLAG). The single light fixture above our table only added to the interrogation ambience. Nothing else existed besides the two cops in front of me, asking about my life decisions.

“We understand you’re going to CU, but what happens when Alex goes to Penn State? Will you move out there with her?” asked Cop #1.

“How do you see yourself supporting my daughter?” questioned Cop #2.

“Do you love my daughter enough to be her loyal husband?”

We never made it to the movie.

Advice #3: Pay attention to your red flags. They’re waving for a reason.



Squeaky shoes.

College: the time in our lives where possibilities are limitless, regrets don’t exist, and two dates are too much of a commitment. As a hopeful eighteen-year-old, I envisioned college to be a fantasy world crowded with beautiful women parading around campus.

In this world, you can't walk anywhere without turning your head to view these majestic creatures. It's even easier to catch glimpses of these women in class. Let me explain. While you're walking on campus and see a pretty girl, your stare-down can't be obvious lest it interrupt your stride. You have two options: (1) be obvious, stop and stare, and creep the girl out entirely, or (2) accept the three seconds you have to look at her, and move on, spending the day kicking yourself for not saying hello. Not all hope is lost, however. The fifty minutes in each class should be seen as nothing but a gift for undisturbed staring.

It was through this gift that I met Ashley. A four hundred-person lecture hall, and I immediately saw this girl. There were many lectures where I froze and couldn't muster the words to start a conversation with her. It wasn't until she offered me food that a path through the maze I couldn't maneuver revealed itself.

"Do you want a date?" she said.

"Of course. Let's go bowling," I said immediately.

"Excuse me?" she laughed. "No, I meant the food date, not an actual date," handing me a crumpled raisin-like object. "But since you suggested, yes, I'll go on a date with you."

It was my first date in college and I knew I had to raise the bar. What better way to say you're sophisticated than to take the girl out for sushi? She looked gorgeous in her white summer dress, while I'd pulled out the white slim-cut jeans, influenced by *GQ*, a magazine for desperate men wanting to impress women. We were seated at a half booth, and I took the chair, even though the booth side was obviously more comfortable.

*Did I spill some tea?
Wait, we never had tea.*

Ashley warmed up to my sense of humor quickly, her leg touching mine beneath the table as I joked about the sexual names of the sushi rolls. I was enjoying the confidence booster that her laughter gave me. Until I felt a warm sensation on my leg. Did I spill some tea?

Wait, we never had tea. My eyes grew wide and I stopped talking. Ashley stopped laughing. She just stared at me.

"I need to go to the bathroom. My contacts hurt." I got up and made my way towards the restroom. *Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.* My shoes seemed to be making the only sound in the restaurant. Afraid to confirm the truth, I looked down—the pants that were supposed to be white were now an unpleasant yellow from the knee down. I headed back to the table (*Squeak. Squeak. Squeak*). Ashley hadn't moved since I left.

"I need to tell you something," whispered Ashley. "I have a bladder problem where if I laugh a lot, I pee. I kind of—sort of peed under the table. Can you take me home please?"

To this day, Ashley believes I bought my white pants with a funky yellow pattern on them.

Advice #4: If ever a girl pees on you, don't talk about it. Some things are better left undiscussed.



The universe is unfair and my curse is unbreakable. The only cure that exists is a Korean woman. My mother might as well start packing warm clothes for her move up north. ❧



WINTER

By Megan Sakas

The winters in Struthers, Ohio are the kind that make you question why you ever decided to live in that miserable place. The industrial smoke from what remains of the steel mills blackens the snow and the smog, and the thick ice covers everything it can dig its fingers into. The trees bend downward in solemn defeat. These silent, frozen winters don't depart thoughtlessly; they have the capacity to instill a certain immovable sadness within a person. They carry this sadness down from the weighty storm clouds and pour it upon a defenseless town.

When I turned seven and my parents decided I could take an airplane alone, I began visiting my grandparents every winter in Struthers. I still don't know what drew me there, especially during those brutal winters, but I continued to ask my parents for a plane ticket each year. There was something magnetic about the snow and the hush of its placidity.

During these trips, my grandpa and I would walk through Yellow Creek Park down a forgotten trail next to the water. It was very still there. The only sounds were the crunch of his cane upon the frozen ground and my clumsy footsteps dancing in front of him. He'd hum everything that my quick

young heart could handle about his time serving in World War II as a Marine in the Asian Pacific. He flew in the bombers as a machine-gunner: Squadron VMD-154. He never told me battle stories—no matter how much I prodded him—and instead told me stories about games with makeshift footballs, his best friend Thomas who had a laugh you could hear from the opposite end of camp, and how much prettier Grandma was than the women in the towns he was stationed in. These stories never gave me an indication that war was a struggle. Growing up, I believed that the draft was a glorified summer camp. His descriptions of the life-long friendships, the traveling, the letters he wrote to my grandma as a lovesick twenty-two-year-old, all left me completely spellbound. My grandpa's past was a shining space in my mind, made up of valiant, worldly things that I dreamt of experiencing one day.

When I was fourteen, though, something shifted. I still don't understand what changed—maybe it was just a break in spirit, or a heart too heavy, but my grandpa stopped telling me stories. My grandma would say, "Maybe he's just run out of stories to tell, Megs," which I reluctantly accepted. That winter, I watched from across the room as my grandpa sat in his new wheelchair, staring at the television screen, his hand deep in a bag of butterscotch to keep him from lighting another cigarette. His skin had become grayer. His eyes had sunk deeper. Our conversations became perfunctory, having to do more with school, my friends and my part-time job—trivial things I'd recite details about while I silently begged him to tell me another story about Guam, or Guadalcanal, or Thomas.

One year, a snowstorm hit worse than any of the others I'd seen. Grandma stocked up on water and groceries. Grandpa complained about his aching, tired bones. We sat in the living room playing Scrabble, the television murmuring quietly in the background, surrounded by an unrelenting, heavy stillness. The TV started playing Ravel's Boléro, a solemn medley of flutes and strings, and my grandpa's gaze became distant. The Scrabble tiles dropped from his hand as he sat motionless—

"Archie? Archie, what's wrong?" My grandma kneeled at his wheelchair. We sat in silence until the percussion and the flutes died away. In a low, unsteady voice, my grandpa told us about how he and Thomas had been in a bomber together, machine guns in hand, when a stream of bullets whizzed by the

*I silently begged
him to tell me
another story
about Guam,
or Guadalcanal,
or Thomas.*

right side of his face. They hit Thomas, who died there in that plane, right next to my grandpa. He recounted how Thomas's blood covered his face and his hands, how it soaked through the small photograph of his high school sweetheart Thomas kept in his breast pocket. I'm not sure why that song brought my grandpa back to that place, but his skin turned pale and his body slumped as if he could not help but sink into the frozen ground. Some darkness in that song had carried him back to the bomber.

It was then that I realized how perfectly deceptive my grandfather had been. He had me convinced that his skin was nothing but thick, that his heart was unscathed and perfectly whole. Now I wonder what happens to him when he's alone in his thoughts, lying in bed at night. I wonder what defenses he employs to fight off those images, the phantoms of blood, panic, and fear, and I wonder what other dark memories he has been conquering by himself for forty-some-odd years. That day, his despair was nearly tangible. I wished with my entire being that I could lift the permanent weight that had been placed on my grandpa's heart.

As a young girl, I had been too enthralled by his fairy tale life of bravery and homecoming to understand the truth within my grandpa's stories. His valor lies in his heavy, broken heart—in the destructive memory of what was.

The winters in Struthers paralleled something within my grandfather. They both understood grayness. They both understood solemnness—a perennial return to frigid silence. ❧



COLUMBIA CEMETERY

By Erin Greenhalgh

The couple lay among the headstones as if at a banquet, sprawled, tangled, tanned. The more animate family of Ernest Severne, baby, FATHER under the tree. Such inspired progeny of stone (some chiseled grey, some white and chipped like teeth), languid under the sun. April, the month providing a warm hollow between Amelia Prescott, mother and wife, and Julia, died at nine years, four months, six days. They stretch out their bones as if they recognize the pattern: they still have tendons, stomachs, eardrums, and breath, but it is quite comfortable to lie outstretched and still, a name, a date hovering above each head. ✎



CONTRIBUTORS

SAMUEL JOSEPH CARROTHERS grew up just outside of Houston, Texas, the oldest of three. Currently studying English and Film at the University of Colorado, Sam has always been interested in writing and more recently has become interested in writing for the screen. His first short, “Blink,” is set to screen at a festival in spring, 2014. Sam currently works as a freelance cinematographer and editor and most recently had the opportunity to travel to Kona, Hawaii to film the IRONMAN World Championships for Newton Running Company.

KATHLEEN CHILDS is thrilled to be a returning contributor to **JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY**. Author of “KERING TEMPE KACANG” and “OUR OWN GHOSTS,” Kathleen seems increasingly to write about LGBT interests and concerns. Kathleen is a senior in the French Department, expecting to graduate in spring, 2014. Outside of school, she makes her living as a freelance composer and entertains an inordinate interest in the culinary arts. Kathleen is unsure whether or not the author is dead, but likes to pretend she truly appreciates post-structuralism.

BRENDAN CRAINE entered the world in Denver, Colorado, where he majored in Creative Writing at the Denver School of the Arts from 7th grade on through high school. Beginning his martial arts training in the same year he started studying as a writer, he continues to pursue both passions, though his attention to martial study has possibly begun to border on the obsessive. He is currently majoring in Japanese at the University of Colorado Boulder, and is spending his junior year studying abroad at Sophia University in Tōkyō, Japan. His essay, “A CICADA SHELL / IT SANG ITSELF / UTTERLY AWAY,” is a departure from his usual preference for short fiction, though it very much reflects his unabashed geekery for Japanese martial culture and history. When he isn’t overseas, he teaches Shorin-ken karate at CU and reads books by people like Haruki Murakami, Roald Dahl, and Douglas Adams. He recently got really excited when he noticed that his name could be written in Japanese with the characters for “martial,” “training,” and “man,” which is just way too perfect to be coincidence.

LEXI EVANS, the author of “MAKESHIFT PATRIOT” and “BLUE AGAINST BLUE,” is an Integrative Physiology and Neuroscience major who grew up in Aurora, CO. A self-diagnosed adrenaline junkie, Evans has been bungee jumping & skydiving, and feels most alive when she is snowboarding, mountain biking, backpacking, scaling 14,000-foot peaks, falling, and writing. “I write because to me, writing is a process of inner exploration. To write is to create. Creation, at its core, is the essence and beauty of being human.” Evans thinks her life would make an interesting memoir, in some ways resembling “Running with Scissors.” Until then,

she hopes to join the Peace Corps and later attend graduate school, meanwhile balancing her passion for writing and the mountains. “Mountains are my soul food. I hope they never cease to inspire me to create.”

ERIN GREENHALGH is relishing her last year at CU Boulder. She has been involved with CU’s *Honors Journal* and *Walkabout Creative Arts Journal* since she started college, and she is thrilled to be involved with **JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY** as the author of “**COLUMBIA CEMETERY**.” She does have a propensity to wander Boulder’s local graveyard, but more often you can find her working in the CU Student Government office, sweating in spin class at the Rec, engaging in a discussion about modernist literature, or eating dark chocolate. Erin will graduate in May with a double major in English and Linguistics, and looks forward to chronicling more beautiful moments wherever life takes her.

MICHAEL HARRIS grew up in beautiful Colorado Springs, Colorado. He is now a CU Boulder film student—minoring in Philosophy—whose brain is always throbbing with the joy of constantly acquiring inspiration. He tries to write with words and with light. He aspires to PhD-dom and to help pioneer a church-ish/not-at-all-church-ish community one day. And no, he is not sure what that means, either. He’s finishing his first book, currently untitled. It’s his story of growing up as a radical Evangelical, leading people to Jesus, falling in love with God, then the girl, attending Oral Roberts University to become the next Billy Graham, and more. It’s a whirlwind of theology, philosophy, heartbreak, and hilarity. Also, Michael Harris feels strange when he is writing about himself in the third person. He blogs inconsistently (in time, topic, and tone) at themichaelharris.com.

ANDREW HECOCKS grew up in an area roughly ten square miles large in Westminster, Colorado. Such an upbringing developed his love for the poetics of suburban space and piqued his interest in writing about them. Currently in his third year as an English major, he has spent most of his time as an undergraduate looking for an opportunity to spread his work. Podiums like **JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY** have provided him with the motivation he needs to pursue his dream career of being a published writer. He still lives in Westminster, and kills time by waiting tables and reading books by John Green and Chuck Palahniuk. Included on the long list of things that fascinate him the most are airports, parking garages, and the human condition.

PAUL HENNING is a senior in the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department, who grew up on the south Texas border. It wasn’t until his freshman year in college at Texas A&M that he realized his thick Mexican slang and accent did not match his long blonde hair. Paul writes sometimes because he feels he has a story to tell, and other times because he wants to be able to look back on the details of his life—details he might otherwise forget.

STELA KNEZEVIC hails from a tangle of refugee programs and foreign tongues. A first generation immigrant to the American Dream, she only recently started writing words down on

paper she pretends is stone. She counts her days in letters received from parents who scrub staircases in the suburbs of Munich, and enveloped action figures from a brother discovering the first grade. Her nights live in cups of coffee and completed sentences. Stela’s hobbies include traveling for cheap, sitting under trees, and eating books. The author of “**INSTRUCTIONS**,” this International Affairs major is looking forward to being an ambassador—playing tag with the winds of Moscow, and writing small words in big books on glittering iron benches. She hopes to one day shake your hand.

AMY D. MACNAIR grew up in small-town New England, with a standing population of two thousand. For her first three years of school (K-2), she attended a three-room schoolhouse on the end of a dirt road deep in the wooded hills of Western Massachusetts. After graduating from high school, she moved out to Colorado to attend college, following in the footsteps of her brother, who found his escape out West. Her dad passed just recently after fighting a long battle with a disease that has inspired much of her writing. Although her academic focus is Integrative Physiology and Molecular Biology, her newest focus has been writing her first novel, “**EXPOSÉ**.” It was the blooming out of the original creative nonfiction narrative strongly encouraged by the wonderful faculty in CU Boulder’s Program for Writing and Rhetoric. She is eternally grateful to the university and to all of her peers for accepting this rather painful and dicey piece. It has been very healing for her to explore this memoir through writing and she is very excited to see where the final product will end up.


SAYONI NYAKOON plans to publish a book and teach underprivileged kids how to use writing as a constructive outlet. She loves writing because she enjoys knowing that her writing may evoke a positive change, and what she creates will last. Writing has been one of the best parts of her CU Boulder experience.

KIMBERLY PRESTON grew up in San Carlos, California, and graduated from Sequoia High School in Redwood City, California. Her Native American heritage has always had a large influence in her life, and she often uses her cultural experiences to inspire her writing. Both writing and music have always been creative outlets for her, and one of her true passions is playing the violin. Kimberly is currently an International Studies major at CU Boulder, who spends her time focusing on school, the gym, and hanging out with friends.

BENJAMIN ROSS was born and raised in Missoula, Montana, where he learned the joy of the outdoors, adventure, and patriotism. After high school, Benjamin enlisted in the United States Navy to become a Fleet Marine Force Corpsman in the 2nd Marine Division. During his two deployments to Iraq and his six years of service, Benjamin was fortunate to learn how much emergency medicine meant to him. He now resides in Boulder, where he rock climbs, fly fishes, and is continuing his medical experience through the University of Colorado in hopes of becoming a physician assistant.

MEGAN SAKAS is a Spanish for the Professions major with a minor in Business Administration and finds writing to be a key element of her major, especially with respect to translation. She believes writing is important because the basis of success is good communication. She recently visited Spain and found the stylistic differences between American and Spanish writing to be of great interest—something that further informs her own writing process.

BEN SONG graduated from the University of Colorado Boulder in May 2013 with a Bachelor's degree in Advertising, after writing "YOU FIND WIFE" for an upper-division course in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric. The past four years attending CU Boulder have built the attachment he has to this beautiful city, causing him to continue to live there today. Ben is an avid fan of football and basketball. He loves the outdoors and cannot stand staying indoors while the sun is shining, which happens only three hundred days a year here. Ben draws his creative inspiration from musical artists, like the Postal Service and The Killers. He currently works for the college ministry, The Annex, and plans to pursue a career in advertising after his time there. He has a traveling heart and wants to fall in love with another city as much as he has with Boulder, Colorado.

SAMANTHA WEBSTER is a sophomore major in both Biochemistry and Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology at CU Boulder, and she likes to write in third person, so this really should be a piece of cake. She spends a fair amount of time on East Campus messing around with RNA molecules, and she considers the hours spent in Gen Chem recitations as an undergraduate Learning Assistant some of the best of her week. She wrote "THE EAGLE" specifically for JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY and promptly fell in love with the genre of creative nonfiction, since she realizes she's best at writing nonsense and that's all real life is anyway. She hails from Louisville, Colorado and has two large dogs she likes to take on hikes because they would probably protect her from bears. Probably. 

Call for Submissions

CREATIVE NONFICTION WRITERS

All University of Colorado Undergraduate students are eligible to send us your writing for consideration by JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY. Submissions go through our blind review process before possible consideration by our full Editorial staff. We retain FNASR—First North American Serial Rights—which means you agree not to publish submitted work in any way (including by yourself online) until accepted work appears in our print journal or debuts online. After that, rights revert to you and you may republish wherever you wish.

We seek only creative nonfiction, but in any of its genres:

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- Creative Scholarship
- Humor
- Lyric Essay
- Graphic Creative Nonfiction
- Travel, Food, and Sports Writing
- Portraiture
- And yes, Memoir

Send a brief message to our email at journal2020@colorado.edu, and follow the guidelines from our auto-reply. You may also see our web page at journal2020.wordpress.com. We do seek media-rich content for online publication, and growth online will include scholarly work about creative nonfiction, composition, and other aspects of the undergraduate writing life.

ARTISTS

Send us your picture stories—artwork of any type—for consideration by our Art Direction staff, for inclusion in either our print publication, or online complement. We especially seek multi-modal work for our website, including video, animation, music for podcasts, etc.

WE NEED YOU

The creative hands and eyes that helped us launch Issue 1 and grow in Issue 2 will teach new Editors and Art Directors to carry forward our third issue next spring; then Volume II, Issue 2 next fall; and so on. We will have a home course each semester to generate each issue while growing online: WRTG 2090 (beginning spring 2014). We also welcome Independent Study students and volunteers, all to work together, increasing our depth in every aspect of creative nonfiction publishing. We need Business and Marketing majors as well as students in Art Direction and Editorial, and to reach an audience across the country we must grow online. No matter your existing skill set, join our staff and learn how to do things you don't already know how to do. Ask our current staff, and they'll admit it's hard work—but fun.