

A Journal of Art,
Literature & Culture

The Quatrain

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The Quatrain is managed by faculty and students from the College of Liberal Arts at Louisiana Tech University. The journal is housed in George T. Madison Hall, where students and graduate assistants collect, assess, and edit submissions from colleges and universities in the four-state region and make recommendations to faculty regarding their acceptance.

From The Dean



I am pleased to introduce the third volume of *The Quatrain*, a publication of literature and art managed by the faculty and students of the College of Liberal Arts. The Editor for this volume is Genaro Ky Lý Smith, an award-winning author who teaches creative writing in our English department.

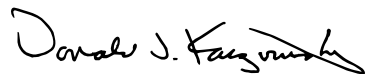
As Genaro Smith will suggest in his Foreword, there are only three subjects we write about: religion, death, and love. All are present to some

degree in this volume, though, of the three, the subject these pieces seem most concerned about is love. It is the very title of the poem by Khalilah Al-Amin that stands in the center of the collection. However, love is not often presented in traditional forms of teenage or young romance. Instead love takes on less positive or innocent connotations.

In a twist on fairy tales close to the work of Angela Carter, Kenneth West considers a love between the human and animal, while Zeppy Cheng provides us with a bizarrely intriguing sci-fi story of love between man and machines. The sometimes difficult love between parents and children is analyzed in Katie Welch's essay about *Special Children*. Finally love becomes more terrifying in the dark story of a mother's love and longing for a daughter that turns self-destructive in *Unmother*, written by Sarah Bryant. The last narrative in the volume, *Hopeless*, by Nathaniel Gardner, offers, as the title suggests, an even more despairing story of a daughter's rejection of love, or even forgiveness, for her mother, who "fucked a fiend," and brought the entire family to ruin.

Yes, Love, as James Joyce wrote, the word known by all men (and women). In this volume, that word is sorely tested.

Donald P. Kaczvinsky



Donald Kaczvinsky
Dean, College of Liberal Arts
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Foreword



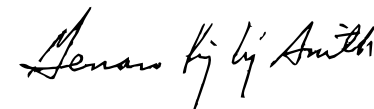
Jean Cocteau once said, "The desire to tell a story: what is this sickness?" Pulitzer prize-winning writer Robert Olen Butler's philosophy of what makes a story of any genre or medium great is "yearning": to exist in time as a human being. Simply put, characters try to obtain what cannot be obtained. This is the character's motivation in any given work of art. Poet John Wood said what makes art universal is that we write about three

subject matters: God and religion (or our questioning faith), death and the fear of dying, and love and sex.

These subject matters are most evident in the art we produce, and it is so in the poems and short stories published in this issue of *The Quatrain*. Whether it is confirmation of being loved by a hard, plastic sentient with wires and a voice box, a lover of the same sex, or wanting a man ten years older, the yearning is there, and every word put down on paper—or, in this present time, the computer screen—aches for what is within our reach, and we cannot type fast enough to have our characters' and speakers' fingers close around that which eludes them. It does not matter if we are dealing with science fiction, or a retelling of a fairy-tale, or making macabre the Lord's Prayer, we want to struggle and slough through whatever problems the characters are experiencing.

What entertains us is what scares the artist, and a true artist must do two things as John Wood once told his students: lie. Tell as many lies as possible. Be the best liar. Pile lies upon lies, and only then will the truth surface, not only about the character/speaker, but the artist who has suppressed or tried to suppress his or her feelings of remorse, regret, anger, shame.

So enjoy.



Genaro Ky Lý Smith

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impressions of vincent willem

by Kenneth West

tripping

on turpentine dreams, i descend
a steep and winding staircase--worrying
what lesser angels
of dubious intent will fly
from the rails in this yellow house where
i press my pastel hands
against the window pane--

my sixth sneeze this morning
and the wind comes breezing in
with fog-frosted eyelids shuttering close--

take this and keep it
well.

do not fear,
for this is only one
of two ears, i said-
handing the whore that withered,
wrinkled horn--cornucopia
of clotted blood and wax
swaddled in a handkerchief.

her screams still
ring clear--tingling
my left temple. i touch

the pulse. o ruse of absinthe--
devoid of dilutions,
my bruise purples blue--
it throbs for you.
now i find

myself
in a cornfield sketching
forms of sunflowers dying,
petals wilting-aureate in their sweet

impermanence, and
suddenly the four corners of the heavenly
firmament fall
at my feet.

leegte- the emptiness

that endures. the emptiness

that abides, even
in our moments of unbelief.

in the dirt--i wiggle--
a broken-winged bee-
dizzying in nostalgia's nectar,
a child

making crippled snow angels, a man
who yearns

to return
the pounding pressure
of his revolver's kiss,

not bliss—but art.

The Bear

by Kenneth West

I.
The woman's hands gripped the tattered scarf. The veins on her gnarled hand bulged out on her skin which was blotched with spots of brown and beige. Her body was shaking as if some terrible tremor was at that moment arising from the epicenter of her arm and radiating outward from every bone and sinew all the way to her extremities. No one could doubt that her hands felt the worst of that violent force. With full determination, she pressed her free hand to the arm of the chair in order to steady herself, but to no avail. Her hand slipped, and she left it to dangle at her side.

I could not reach her in the throes of her anguish. I don't think I could have said anything at that moment to alleviate her pain. I was a bachelor, and in the mind of a woman and a mother, I would know nothing about the suffering that comes with losing a child, of the pain that follows the doubt of not knowing about the well-being of one's daughter. I could only promise to do my best to find her. My best was all I had to give. I put my hand on her shoulder. We sat together in silence, and I could feel that she was on the threshold of sobbing.

"It's alright, Mrs. Nelson. We'll find your girl."
"I hope so. She's the only child I've got."

Her shoulder kept heaving and I withdrew my fingers. 'I'll do my best, ma'am."

I put on my overcoat with a dramatic flourish, nearly knocking over the candle. I clasp Mrs. Nelson's hand and look into her eyes before she quivers, lowering her head again. I didn't know how in the hell I would manage to get this job done. But I had to figure out a way. I ushered the old woman out of the house. I knew I had to help her find justice. Some no good sonofabitch had her child. I would find him and blow his brains out. The hard part would be finding the man.

There are so many places to hide out around here. So many places to take someone and never come back again. I was the law back then in Tuckahoo. The only law. The good part is that

I was the arbiter of right and wrong. I settled disputes, diffused ruckus, and maintained order. The bad part is when deep shit came along, I was up to my knees.

I had to make my way to the forest. That was the most logical place that someone would take a little girl. You could get lost out in the trees and not see no one for miles around, except for wild animals, birds, and the like. I hopped in the Model-T and went on a search. I had my lantern with me. It was pitch black. I didn't intend to see nothing besides shadows and maybe a raccoon skittering about. It was ten o'clock at night. I didn't expect to see anyone out and about. Only a crook would be up at this hour. There was nothing to do after dark back in those days, so I was quite surprised when I heard a rustling in the bushes behind the church.

I grabbed my revolver and hopped out of the car. My foot nearly caught on a rock as I stumbled, but I got up quickly and limped toward the commotion. I saw a figure running out from behind the bush. I couldn't see any details, because my lantern didn't give off enough light. From what I could see, the man was short and fat, so I could close in on him if I moved quickly.

"Stop, or I'll shoot." I hollered.

The man did not slow down, and he did not even acknowledge me. I really didn't want kill anybody, but it seems as if people only cause problems when you are having a bad day.

"You must not have heard me. I said stop."

The man kept running.

"I'm the sheriff. I'm armed."

Finally, I stopped yelling, and just gave chase. It didn't take long for me to catch him. I grabbed him by the collar. At first, I pulled him close, and then I slammed him to the ground.

"Let me go." He said.

"You should have thought about that before you made me run."

I kicked the man in the back of his leg for good measure. He whimpered with pain, and a glass bottle fell from his hand. The Volstead Act was in full force during those days. I couldn't help but think to myself that this was going to be a good night.

Folks had told me that there was a ring of wets in Tuckahoo, but I didn't have any leads on it. People were getting drunk and keeping quiet. They weren't doing any harm as far as I knew, so I didn't actively pursue the matter. But stopping those wets and bootleggers would help my career big time. I'd be so popular I could become mayor. Nothing could stop my career then. I would likely get some money too.

"Turn me loose."

"Hell no."

"Let me--"

"You made me run. I'm going to kill your ass. You'll die here on the dirt, and no one will know. I bet you don't even have a mama to miss you."

That kid was drinking, and he wore me out. I was going to give him a hard time. I was going to scare him straight.

"You ain't got no mama, do you boy?"

"She dead."

I held my breath. I must have really struck a nerve. I had the sensation that I had just started something that I might not be able to finish. Holding him close, I pulled and grabbed a tuft of his short, curly hair. I was dismayed to see that he was bald on top. I didn't expect to see an old man drinking. I thought drinking was a young man's sport. I got close enough to smell his rancid breath, and I saw that it was Reverend Holmes. I was startled, to say the least. I had a lot to say, but I couldn't find the words.

"Please don't tell anybody."

"What--"

"It's my wife. You're not married. You couldn't understand."

The preacher was standing in front of me, nearly drunk, and quite frankly, I didn't know what to say. I just stood there slack-jawed in amazement.

"Please don't say nothing. It will ruin me."

I let go of him. If I didn't have more sense, I would have become an atheist right then and there. Damn preachers. I knew I wouldn't ever give any more offerings though. I was giving my hard-earned money to get someone else drunk.

I would have punched him in my throat, but God must love his preachers, because he steadied my hand, and I calmed down.

I knew I had bigger problems to deal with. If I didn't find that girl soon, I wouldn't ever find her. I was battling against time, and a young life was in the balance. The night would soon come to a close, and I knew my chances of finding her would diminish with the passing of hours. I let Reverend Holmes go. He raised his finger to his lips and patted me on the back. I walked back to the car. The Reverend buttoned his suit jacket and hobbled off in the opposite direction. I cranked up the engine, and I glanced behind me, as the reverend seemed to shrink, becoming a small speck in the distance.

Before you reach the forest, you have to go past Chattyhorse Creek. The water is pristine and beautiful, but nobody ever goes there much. About thirty years back, a woman drowned while washing her clothes. The creek water isn't very deep, and folks being how they are developed all sorts of superstitions about the matter. The old folks would say that a giant snake lived in the creek, just waiting until it saw a human leg to spring out and sink its caustic fangs into some unwary person's flesh.

In truth, I was pretty scared myself at that time, and I didn't know anything about the matter. Monsters thrive in the uncultivated imagination. I didn't want to wade out into the creek, but there was no way around it. I got my lantern, and walked into the water. The water didn't move in a very substantial way, just a gentle ebbing as it inched in the direction of a larger tributary, just as the tributary's waters flowed into the big river.

The moon glowed above me, and I could hear the cicadas belting out their guttural songs. Small fish tickled my feet, which frightened my feet, but I soon grew accustomed to it. I reached the other bank within a few minutes. I look along the shore for signs of a struggle, but I find nothing. I had no choice, but to go into the forest. The woods were inviting in an eerie way, the way I imagine the old women in the fairy stories must have been inviting to orphan children. The branches of the big oaks slouched like exhausted cripples gasping for their last breath. I looked behind me, and I saw the way the light of the moonbeams danced upon the surface of the waters.

"Harriet!" I yelled. "Your mom is looking for you. Come out, Dear."

No one answered me. I didn't hear a sound, not a scream in reply, not even the suggestion of a muffled sound. I didn't know what to do. The child may be dead by now. Nothing but despair and the foreboding silence that ensued. I walked ahead into the dark woods, allowing the glow of the lantern to illuminate the ground. Then, I saw something that made my guts lurch.

Ahead of me, in a thicket of grass I saw a small shoe. The shoe was pink, with dirt caked around the edges and scuff marks at the front. Five paw prints, bigger across than the length of both my feet, left their impression on the damp earth. I swallowed my spit. It was a bear.

There was talk when I was a child of a bear terrorizing the locale. A group of men went into the woods to go hunting, and they never came back. No one knew what happened to them, and their disappearance had caused a stir. Men came from several counties around. They formed a search party to find the missing hunters. After a week, they discovered that a bear had gotten to them. They were maimed, and they died from severe wounds.

The search party became a war party, as they were filled with anger and fear. They were aware that the deceased could have been any one of them. They went into the woods within the span of two nights, they came back with the dead bear's claw and his head. I will never forget the day they came back and stood in the middle of the town in front of the courthouse. The leader of the group raised the bear's head up, and all the people that were gathered around. I was excited, and I had arrived early in anticipation of seeing the dead beast. I will never forget looking into the cold, beady eyes of the dead bear. The steeliness of the glazed gaze would remain with me forever. The empty look of a head unhindered by a mind would haunt me.

At that moment, I could not help but wonder what the bear who killed Harriet was thinking, or if he thought at all. I didn't know what occupied the bear's mind.

II.

I kept calling to her, but the louder I hollered the more she withdrew. Though mostly bald and lacking fur, she was beautiful. Her paws were so dainty and exquisite I could not help myself.

She made me feel hunger, not the way the stomach somersaults at the smell of a fish, or the tongue's insatiable itch upon seeing a beehive. No, it was different from all of these feelings, an ecstasy I could not articulate, a feeling I could not put my claw on.

"Come back. You forgot something."

The more I said, the faster she ran away. The details whirl and blur like a hummingbird dancing in front of your nose. I didn't mean to cause any harm. I did not know why she was so intent upon running away. I reached out and grabbed her. I swallowed her face, and somewhere inside of me the well-wrought features are dissolving. Nose and eyes and teeth so small you wonder how she ate, how those minuscule incisors could ever stop a deer from squirming. After nibbling on the neck and limbs, long and thin as the boughs of a pecan, I ripped past the chest's flesh to find the lungs. I swallowed her breaths.

Let It Be

by Kailee Harkins

In all things, I cannot say that it is so
For all things, I do not yet know

Let it be in sickness and in health
Let it be in poverty and in wealth

Let it be in loneliness and in company
Let it be in comfort and in agony

Let it be in peace and in fear
Let it be in distance and when you are near

For I need to know all things, to know all of you
For I need to know all things, for my faith to be tried and proven true

Let my mouth cry hallelujah because I have experienced hunger
and you have given me bread
Let my feet cry hallelujah because even through the storms your
spirit has led

Let my hands cry hallelujah because they have known emptiness
and what it is to overflow
Let my eyes cry hallelujah because they have seen death and they
have life rise from the seeds that I sow

Let my back cry hallelujah because it has carried my cross and it
has learned to lean upon your chest
Let my mind cry hallelujah because it has known chaos and it
has known rest

Let my ears cry hallelujah because they have heard negativity and
they have heard well done my good and faithful servant
Let my heart cry hallelujah because it has known pain and
because it knows that it was all worth it

In all things, I know it is so
For all things, I have come to know

So Lord let it be
Let it be, so that you may receive all of me.

Robots Love in Bugs

by Zeppy Cheng

Blue hair. A pretty face that's too symmetrical to be real. The power to accelerate the growth of plants. A thin, wiry body that doesn't show any signs of being mechanical. Lots of bonsai trees in my house. A charging station instead of a double bed. A perfectly cultured front lawn, complete with rare and specialty orchids that may or may not have been imported illegally.

I unlocked my door in the cold of winter when metal was sticky to the touch and the ground was covered in a thin layer of frost, even though it hadn't yet snowed. My breath came out in layers of fog that spread out across my face and wrapped around itself in thin tendrils that looked kind of like smoke but also kind of not like smoke at all. My garden was in hibernation, and as I surveyed it I wished that the summer would come so that I could continue to cultivate the plants that I loved.

The door opened without a sound and I closed it behind me as quickly as possible. It was warm inside. Very warm. Soon my girlfriend would be home, and I wanted to surprise her today. That's why I had left early. I shivered, taking off my jacket and hung it on the coat hanger next to the door, relaxing as soon as the warmth of the house took over and calmed my shaking nerves. I walked into the kitchen and took out a couple of flowerpots—I kept a whole row of them, next to the potting soil and fertilizer, in my cupboards—and I planted a few carrot and onion seeds. Then, I placed my hand over the pots and concentrated. At first nothing happened. But soon after I started concentrating a small green shoot appeared, then another, then two more. After about a minute I had three full grown carrot plants and a fully-grown onion. I dug the plants out, washed them, and minced them, placing them into a preheated wok. With a couple of flourishes they were mixed.

After that I added meat and sauce, and twenty minutes later I had a nice stir fry that smelled and looked delicious. She would be home any minute now. She had a job at the local school, working as an assistant to a teacher—she wasn't paid.

It was the job she was created for. Because, my girlfriend was a robot. There was a knock on the door. I wiped my hands on a towel and walked over to the foyer where I bounced on the balls of

my feet a couple of times, preparing myself. The door opened. I wrapped my arms around the figure who appeared in the doorway—my girlfriend.

"Happy birthday, Mii," I said, still holding her. There was a distinct lack of motion on her side. She stood stock still, more still than a potted plant. After a moment she spoke. "I do not understand. Why are you hugging me?" "It's your birthday, Mii. Happy birthday." She still hadn't moved from her position in the doorway, and her arms were still at her side, one of them holding her backpack. "I do not have a birthday. You must be mistaken in some way." "You do have a birthday. But you must be getting cold out there. Come in where it's warm." I pulled at her arm, not budging her an inch, and eventually she blinked and walked into the room. The door closed behind her, automatically. "I wore a sweater today, like you asked me to," said Mii. "Are you satisfied with the produced results?"

I examined her figure. She was only a couple of inches shorter than me, at five foot nine, and she had a thin, wiry body that was more lanky than it was compact. A small chest and long legs made her appear boyish, even though her hair was distinctly on the girly side, long, parted, and colored bright blue, a regulation imposed by the government to make robots distinct. Her facial features were robotic, non-humanoid in their structure, but more stylized than the face of a real human being. Everything packaged up neatly in a feeling of metal and plastic, of oil and of shining packaging that was lovingly maintained. She wore a thick woolen sweater with a short dress that didn't even reach her knees. The juxtaposition almost made me laugh.

"You know, when you wear warm clothing you're supposed to cover your legs, too. You must be cold." I touched her skin. It was soft, not at all like human skin. No hair, for one. No blemishes, either. It was cold, almost icy to the touch. I sighed. "They need to take better care of you." I pulled at her arm—I was never going to move her anywhere without her help. But she understood me. We walked past the kitchen and into the garage where the contraption looked like a blend between a table and a cage. I strapped Mii to the device and turned it on, and it lifted her into the air a couple of inches. Then I took out my toolbox and slid a separating tool across the skin of her leg. When I saw what was underneath, I frowned.

"You have ice buildup in your mechanisms," I said. It was as I had feared. Dinner could wait.

"You said it was my birthday," said Mii. I took my tweezers and removed an ice crystal from between two of the carbon lattice tendons attached to her knee. "Yes. It is. Today is the day you were finished." "I was not born. I was never born." "Don't say that." "I apologize. Did what I say offend you?" "No, it didn't. Look, just accept the fact that it's your birthday so that we can eat dinner and have cake." "I have never eaten cake before. According to My Cook Book dot com it, quote, 'tastes like heaven.' Is there a taste to the ethereal plane?"

"I have no idea. Ask a dead person." I removed the last piece of ice from her mechanisms, and closed the self-sealing artificial skin over the opening. My hands were starting to go numb from the cold. "Let's get back inside before the ice builds back up." There was no heating in the garage.

I set Mii back down on the ground using the work table and unbuckled her. She walked past me and into the doorway to the house. When she reached it, she turned to look back at me.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "I was told that you and I were going to consume cake." I shrugged. "Yeah, that and some good stir fry that I made." I paused. "Open your mouth."

"As you wish." Mii opened her mouth.

I took a look inside, at her tongue, and took a quick diagnostic of her taste receptors. They were working fine. I had been having trouble with them for the past couple of weeks but it looked like that trouble was over. With a grin I walked past her and into the house.

Mii followed me into the kitchen, where the pots of soil were still sitting on the counter. I had forgotten to put them back. Before I could, Mii took them and carefully placed them into the cupboard where they belonged.

"Thanks," I said.

Mii said nothing, only looked at me blankly. Then, after about five seconds, she smiled. "You are welcome."
I put my arm on her shoulder. "You and me," I said. "We're going to do great things. Amazing things!"

"I apologize, but I do not think I am built for such adventures."

I laughed and grabbed the box of candles and the small ice cream cake from the fridge. After putting that on the table, I grabbed our plates.

The stir fry tasted wonderful and fresh, but then again, most of my food contained wonderful and fresh vegetables, because I could grow them in a couple of minutes straight out of my kitchen. It was a cool power, very useful, and I loved it personally.

Not so much other people. You see, in a world where everyone has superpowers, growing plants quickly—and only small ones at that—is not very well-respected. People with flying and super speed and electromagnetic manipulation powers, those are the guys on top. Not me. That's why I ended up in my dead-end job at the local plant nursery.

It was perfectly suited for me, though. It fit.

"Is it good?" I said, after watching Mii eat for a couple of minutes.

Mii looked me in the eyes. "I enjoy it."
"That's great."

There was a long silence in which we both ate. Robots didn't need to eat. They were designed to run off wall power, plugged in just like a phone, but the stock models were shipped with food disposal units and nobody at the elementary school had bothered to modify her. She had been almost at the edge of breaking down when I had found her. I recognized it instantly because of my hobby. She was a sentient.

A sentient. A robot that had somehow, through a trick of programming, learned how to think. Robots were built with self-modifying AI that started out as nothing more than a glorified computer but eventually learned how to do the job it was assigned. However, in rare cases, robots reached a tipping point in their learning software that caused them to become truly sentient.

Or at least that was what I believed. No one had proved it yet. There was no reliable test for a sentient, because a kid in a garage could make a passable imitation in a week, and there would be no telling the difference.

I reached across the table and touched Mii's cold skin. There was something bothering her. I could tell. Whenever she had something on her mind she would start to analyze my facial expressions and stop talking, which was kind of hard to pick up because she always analyzed my facial expressions and she rarely talked. But I knew her well enough that I could pick up when she was thinking.

"What's wrong?" I said. "Did something happen at work today?"

Mii blinked, but that was the only movement she made. "I am surprised at your ability to understand what my processes are doing. Yes, something happened today. Do you want me to speak of it?"

I smiled. "It's okay if you don't want to."
"I want to."

That was it. Sometimes she didn't like talking about things that happened to her, or anything about herself really, but when she wanted to talk she talked.

There was a short silence. "You can tell me now."
"As you wish. Today Jeremy got a scrape on his knee. When I tried to apply a band-aid he ran away. He does not like me."
"Ah, Jeremy again. His mom hates robots, thinks they're the plague."
"I do not understand how robots can be likened to a pandemic."
"That's fine. It was just a metaphor."
"Oh. Okay."
"So what happened after that?"

There was a noticeable pause before she spoke. "Ms. Rundle applied the band-aid."
"So why are you bothered?"
"I did not mean to harm Jeremy. I do not understand why he ran away."
"He ran away because his mother has been filling his mind with her hatred of robots. Parents can do that. When they hate something, their kids start to hate it too. It happens with race all

the time.”

“I see. So you are likening me to a racial minority. I understand the connection.”

“Yep.”

We continued to eat for a couple more minutes before we were both finished. After we put the plates away I took Mii into the garage and connected her to the food disposal tube, through a vent in the side of her chest. If I left the food in there for too long then it started to get gross. We would have cake after this, but I wanted to make sure that nothing got mixed up because when it did, it was harder to remove.

Living with Mii was different than I imagined. I had always had a fascination with mechanical things. Things that walked, ran, drove, chugged along on gears of metal and plastic, those were the things that I loved. When I learned of robotic sentience, I decided that I would find a robot with the trait and meet it.

I never thought that it would lead to where I was today. It was a complete accident. I did not mean to fall in love with a robot.

At first I fought it. At first I thought that it was the stupidest thing in the entire world. I was on the side of most people, who said that loving a machine like a person was something that could only happen in fiction. But when I started talking to her and getting to know her I found a kernel of the most innocent and loving being this side of the heavenly gates. She had no biases. No hatreds. No infections of the social milieu. Just a pure sentience with the workings of a baby child that had somehow gained access to a computer that could talk and understand. It was a strange feeling, knowing that there was a sentient being in this world who had no dark side. At least that I could tell. But I believed what I saw, because it was too amazing to be fake. She was really a person with no emotional scars from her childhood, with no meanness pressed into her by neglectful parents, no memories of being bullied as a kid or losing a fight in middle school or breaking up with a boyfriend in high school. Just a blank slate.

After the food had been siphoned out of her repository, I took her hand and led her back into the house. “We’re going to eat cake now,” I said.

“I am excited,” said Mii, in a deadpan voice. “My memory does not contain any incidences that can be used to interpret this event. Therefore, I am unable to imagine what will happen next.”

I took the cake out of the refrigerator and placed it on the table. It was small, the best I could afford with my meager paycheck, but it looked about as delicious as was possible under the circumstances.

There were matches in the drawer by the sink, along with some candles I had bought for this occasion. I took them both out, placing the candles in the cake—three of them—and lighting them with a match. Mii watched, mesmerized.

“The flames—they are hot.”

“Yes, they are,” I said. “It would be bad to touch them.”

Mii held her hand over the cake. “My hands feel warm.”

“Yes, hands do that when held over open flame. Careful, don’t want to melt your skin. The principal would be all over me if that happened.”

Mii pulled her hand back. “I apologize.”

I pulled away from the candles, having lit the last one.

“Er, you won’t be able to blow them out, will you?”

“My functions do not include an apparatus that can push air.”

I put my palm against my temple. “I forgot. I can’t believe I forgot that robots don’t breathe. Wow, this is, like, the stupidest thing I’ve done in a while. Of course robots can’t blow out candles. I’m probably the stupidest person in the city right now.”

Mii frowned. “If you wish I can create wind in some other manner. Perhaps I can wave my arms back and forth.”

“Great. Do that. We’ll have to make do.” Her ingenuity always surprised me—it was a feature that was impossible to program manually, and yet somehow had emerged from her matrix of self-modifying programs. Everything about her amazed me.

Mii closed her eyes. “Happy birthday to you.”

“Happy birthday to you,” I replied.

“Happy birthday to you,” we sang, her voice perfectly on key, mine wavering in its tone.

When we were finished Mii grabbed a piece of paper off the counter and waved it back and forth in front of the cake. The candles were snuffed out. I removed them, and with a knife from the drawer beside me, cut it into six pieces. They weren’t that big—the cake was small. We ate the cake together, small pieces for her, large chunks shoved into my mouth because nobody was

watching who cared. Mii had never learned table manners. She had not been programmed to eat, and so I had to teach her how to use a fork, which didn't take long because robots learn fast. That's part of their functionality. When you buy a robot to do a job, you want to spend as little money refitting it to its purpose as possible.

I just wondered. How long would it take to refit her for the purpose of love? I didn't know if she loved me or not. I certainly loved her. A lot. But she was a robot, and robots had no conception of love, or even of emotion unless a third-party software was installed. And even then the emotions would only be emulated, not felt. Who knows how a robot felt? Who knows how a robot tasted? Who knows if it even felt pleasure? Happiness?

Maybe robots had emotions that we, as humans, couldn't even fathom. Maybe they did love, only in a way that a computer could understand. Maybe.

Maybe. I smiled at Mii, and she smiled back, repeating my gesture in the manner that robots often did. They were like babies in that respect. And she was only three. Though she had the maturity of an adult, she sometimes acted like a child. Was she my child?

That was an interesting thought. We finished out cake and I took Mii back into the garage to siphon her food disposal tank for the second time. Stock robots came with a lot of parts, and when you bought one, you removed the parts you didn't need. Usually. Mii had come with every option on the menu, and hadn't been bought by the school. Instead, she had been passed through various owners and taught various jobs. Who knows? She could have done anything. There were no records of her history. Like a used car, she had been bought and sold at a lower price until she had degraded enough for an elementary school to be able to afford her.

I still remembered when I first saw her. Languishing in the trash heap next to the school, her skin melted and cut, one leg missing its tendons and the other without a joint. I had offered to take her home and fix her, and the elementary school had been glad to get it off their hands. Disposing of robots was expensive.

And then, when I had restored her to working capacity, she had said one thing that told me everything I needed to know. That told me, she really was alive.
"I want to go back to school."

When I fixed her, she had said it. Again and again, she had asked me to take her back to school, to allow her to work there once more. I didn't know what to do at first. But then, I decided. I would bring her back to school. I told the elementary school that I had fixed their robot up as a charity project, and of course they took her back instead of purchasing a new bot.

But I knew. I knew that it wasn't a charity project. Not for them. Not for the school.

It was for her. And it was for me. Because, after fixing her, and talking to her, and getting to know her, I had fallen in love.

With a robot. Her heart had touched me. Her purity had changed me. It had taught me, among other things, what it really meant to be human.

And though my decision to live with her had caused me many problems, I was glad for it. Because, it was worth it. It was worth it.

We finished the cake and I plugged Mii into the wall, powering her down with a couple of switches, and then I watched her fall asleep, slowly, her eyes closing and her movement stopping. I watched her for a few minutes, and then I walked over to the couch, sat down, and finished the last of the ice cream.

Mii had chosen it. For me. Strawberry. It was funny how she remembered these things. As I sat, watching the wall, thinking, I wondered.

Did she love me?
"Do you love me?" I asked, out loud, not expecting anyone to hear me. I was just musing on the topic.

I heard a whirring noise behind me, and someone wrapped their arms around my neck from behind the couch.
"I have learned, from my lessons, that when people ask for affection you are supposed to hug them."
"Why aren't you sleeping?" I said.

"I activated my emergency boot-up call. Your question seemed to be important."

Her arms were still around me, cold as ice, kind of plastic in texture, though they weren't uncomfortable by any means.

"So?" I said. "What's your answer?" I laughed, though it wasn't at anything funny. "You probably can't, right?"

Mii shook her head, which I could tell because her hair brushed my neck. "I ..." she said, halting. "My processes tell me that ..."
She said, again halting mid-sentence. Then she was silent. "I do not know. Is love sweet?"

"Sweet?" I said.

"Because my taste programming has acquired a bug, in which I am tasting something sweet, and yet I do not have anything in my mouth."

I closed my eyes. "I'll take that as a yes," I said.

"I'll take that ..."

"I love you," said Mii, and then I took her hand.

"I love you, too," I said.

Kissing a robot was kind of weird. It was cold, like kissing a plastic doll, which was probably what I was doing. No, it was what I was doing. Her servomotors whirred beneath me, and I could feel the vibrations through her lips. It was strange. I had never done it before. Perhaps I had wanted to, but I had stopped myself because, well it was weird.

I was weird.

But hey. At least I understood.
Now I knew how robots loved.

And wasn't that an interesting thing?
Robots loved in bugs.

Like China

by Kyndal Evans

I wish my body was electricity,
but I feel like china,
pretty but poised to shatter,
showing I was worthless all along
compared to the reliable stoneware,
especially with all the faults
already running through me.
You're in love with a skeleton,
and though you choose to be bound in bones,
the key to my rib cage hangs in your prison,
promising one little twist and you're free;
though understanding, I would beg you
to leave me forever in mine, yours.
This painless weapon killing us
as we slow-dance to acid rain
carves off your flesh to patch over mine,
and I can't bear to take so much from you
while you bury me in your being.
Yet still you guide my ghost
and call it its own reward,
a grasp of cold against a melting palm.
You dress me in your own lightning
and sip gently from my rim
so as not to disturb the surface,
your care with my fragility showing
how much worth you put in me,
delicate but fine and beautiful,
and you make me feel like china.



I'll Wait
Gabriella Lindsay

The Beauty of the Lord

by Nathaniel Meeks

The beauty of the Lord
has graced us with the ability to see
thee. It falls on the eyes of the hearts of the
young. It has graced the mind of the wise and
old. It flocks to those who are need and Believe
the most. The light of its glory blinds those who
are unworthy. It hurts those who miss treat it
but forgives the beauty of the lord is a harsh but
wonderful thing. Every man, woman, child,
blind, deaf, lame, leopard, and old rise in
the glory of the beauty of the lord that
has been upon you. Just have faith
in his name and you will see the
truest beauty of the Lord.
That is the gift of his
LOVE.

Angel's Tear

by Nathaniel Meeks

As
it falls
from the cheek
of the servant of the
Lord, you see the pain
and suffering that the tear
falls for. The suffering of men
the pain they bring upon themselves.
The Angel weeps for the children of its
masters that have been called to serve
Him. As they fall into each other's
hands and sins, this tear of
an Angel falls for man

Love

by Khalilah Al-Amin

My eyes fell in love and kindness
and dreamt of kisses
from a young boy's lips
only to be dismissed
by the wonders of a wandering eye.
Feelings are ephemeral, and
familiarity is fleeting,
and the body fell in love and kindness.
All the while,
dispelling notions of conventional morality
by indulging in the darkness
of broken souls
until my soul fell in patience and kindness.

Like Books

by Khalilah Al-Amin

We breathe like books—
stale and stagnant and always hoping for a new shelf.
Never finding comfort in the dust of pages,
we continuously seek hands to caress our stiff spines.
We take joy in being open when we're wanted
and we pass ourselves along
spitting our stories to any eye that will catch them,
pining for someone to settle on our sentences
rather than requesting for a person to be rooted in the
spaces between our letters. Our last exhales are hinged
on the forgetful minds that once memorized our capitals
and periods.

Final Thoughts of an Empress

by Khalilah Al-Amin

Dearest Harrison,
Of all the things I had ever experienced in my lifetime,
kissing the ceiling with you was by far the best.
How many can say they inspired a small revolution
of joy and grace.
There was no better way to die.
Sincerely,
The Empress

The Third One's Path (to my older brother)

by Afinju C. Bailey

I step I prattle, I skip I pat
While behind you I have often sat
Watching thinking hoping caring,
Trying to find a personal bearing,
Not in thought hope or sight you see
For one person two people cannot be.
It's in watching, critiquing your ways I find
A true and unadulterated state of mind.
You stumble, you tumble, you often fall
Over stones and holes, throughout it all
I watch and learn and walk the path
Your mistakes have paved on my behalf.
It is the smile you make after every mistake
That from your proud face no one can take.
It is this smile you make when flaw's your mate
That proves true that malleable is my own fate.

Joyful Occasions (to my younger siblings)

by Afīnju C. Bailey

Follow me you three,
 Albeit one of you is not with me.
 Might you follow me dear three,
 I shall have each of you to teach me.
 Love, like life, may be all your own.
 You shall still by me, have your lessons shone
 Rightful learning will have us all agree
 Emotions like happiness are always free
 Undoubtedly, ask anyone, and they'll agree
 Nothing's better than what is free.
 In getting together we'll make it known
 Only family gatherings are what make a home.
 Now being together we all will see
 Serenity and happiness there will always be.

Roles of Special Children in Science Fiction Literature Versus Reality

by Katie Welch

A common theme among many famous science fiction stories is the presence of a "special" child or children who lead the plot. These children have peaked the interests of readers for some time. Children in our society are capable of great feats, but not quite to the caliber of these characters. Though the possession of powers or magic is unrealistic, children in these stories are not so unlike children in the world today. There are many studies to prove that savant children are incredibly intelligent even though they may lack in areas such as social skills or behavioral skills. Maybe the strength of savant children and science fiction children comes from the unlocking of the mind. Darold Treffert says, "The theory I favor...reflects the process Kapur termed "paradoxical functional facilitation" in 1996 in which one area of the brain is released from the inhibiting influence of some other brain area" (3). Maybe the brain is the secret behind the abilities of these incredible children. Through comparison of science fiction children and savant children in reality, the possibilities will be exposed.

In the short story *Mimsy Were the Borogroves*, the parents and child psychiatrist are very concerned about the children possessing an "X" theory of knowledge. This theory says that a child can be more observant and understand things that adults cannot because their young minds have not been conformed to the commonality that adults have been exposed to. They have not been in society long enough for their minds to lose their innocent curiosity. The statement that "2+2=4" can mean a variety of things besides a numerical representation. As hard as the parents try to understand the new behaviors of their children and their strange toys, they are shrouded to the abilities of their intelligent children. All that they can discern is the fact that their children are acting bizarre so they assume the answer must be to separate the kids from the strange toys that messed with their small minds. This results in the parents literally losing their children, much like what happens when a parent loses the connection to their child when they are born with some

type of learning disability and refuse to sympathize and aid their children in the appropriate way. We grow up assuming that babies are ignorant because their minds are so small and their learning abilities are continuously developing. But, just because babies are unable to express themselves through words does not mean they are completely pitiful. They cannot care for themselves, but maybe we have underestimated small children.

In *It's a Good Life*, little three-year-old Anthony calls the shots in his entire town by manipulating the people around him in any way that he sees fit. Anthony wants only goodness in his life, so he gets rid of anyone who stands in his way of that. Though Anthony is an evil little thing, his mind capacity is so vast that he can control whatever he comes across. Power like this may not be realistic, but like Anthony, savant children have unlocked their minds to do unique things as well. Everyone fears Anthony and instead of trying to teach him or work with him in a way that everyone can benefit from, the town suffers to please him. They see him as a hindrance; the bane of their existence. If children like Anthony were a reality, life would be miserable for everyone. Anthony would never grow up to be treated the same way as other children and instead his difference would control his future. Much like an autistic child, they will always be labeled as different, and many times allowed to act inappropriately because it is easier to blame their "condition" as a crutch instead of facing the hardships. This is not fair; Anthony is not a real boy, so autistic children should not be able to relate to the way he is avoided.

A savant child, by definition, is a young child who scores low on particular IQ tests but shows exceptional skill or intelligence in areas such as rapid calculation, music, art, etc. Many of these children have been diagnosed with a form of autism or other types of developmental disabilities. "The three most common aspects of the behavioral disturbances are obsessional repetition of behavior, the lack of language or the failure to use it, and probably most important of the three, social withdrawal. It is this last aspect which makes it appear like autism" (Lewis 1). We are quick to think that these children are unfit to independently live in society. We pity them and speak down to them. Gregory Wallace states, "While the pejorative connotations of the idiot-

savant label necessitated such a change, savant syndrome fails to convey the paradoxical nature of this intriguing condition" (230). People are still vastly unaware of the talents savant children possess. They are born without the basic brain functions that normal children have, so they adapt by channeling incredibly rare parts of the brain that aren't typically used by people. Savant children are much like the blind; they are impaired so they take advantage of the senses (or brain capacity) that they do have. Why haven't people taken the efforts to use these gifts in fields where they are truly needed? Minds such as these can be curing cancer, composing beautiful music, or leading top charity organizations. If people were to change their minds about the capability of these exceptional children, they could be the new leaders the world.

The children from *Mimsy and Good Life* are not so unlike the "special" children today. Both have unlocked a part of the world that no normal person could begin to comprehend. Reading about these children is so fascinating, but we fail to realize they are all around us, waiting to be lifted up and pursued. Instead, we view autistic children as a hindrance. If we chose to learn the ways of these real world "special" children, there is no reason to deny that they could defy all logic and perform the magical deeds that the children in science fiction do. Maybe not as evil as Anthony in *Good Life*, but still use the brain power to take advantage of our surroundings. "The specialized abilities and obsessional interests of the "autistic-savant" represent the only small segment of reality to which such children can attach themselves. These activities help fill the intellectual and personal void born of impoverished drives" (Goodman 276). The small segment of reality that these children attach to has the ability to greatly impact society. The idea of an intelligent child that can open up new planes should not be considered impractical but instead peak the interests of anyone who is concerned in making use of the time we are given on earth and change lives. These "special" children should no longer be overlooked.

In conclusion, the magnificent minds of children are cherished in science fiction literature but not so much in reality. Although IQ does not truly determine someone's complete range of intelligence, the incredible low scores from savants deters

others from the thought that these individuals are not capable of making an impact on the world. This could not be any falser. Children with an altered point of view see the world in ways that we cannot and we should learn from this. If we were to go along in life without taking note of the differences around us, nothing would ever change, and monotony would rule. In Plato's allegory of the cave he states "Then there would be need of habituation. I take it, to enable him to see the things higher up. And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likeness or reflections in water of men and other things, and later, the things themselves, and from these he would go on to contemplate the appearances in the heavens and heaven itself, more easily by night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than by day the sun and the sun's light" (748).

If men opened their eyes, they would see the gifted souls of the savants and continue to investigate. The minds of science fiction writers are ahead of the game. Maybe, these silly stories of wonder and power coming from the minds of strange children is not so silly after all.

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Adoration of the Pineapple

Meredith McWhirter



Catching Pineapple

Meredith McWhirter



Hello My Name is Pinelope

Meredith McWhirter



Pineapple in Wood

Meredith McWhirter



White Mugs
Meredith McWhirter

Succubus

by A. B. Harrison

Your mouth rests perfect
A diabolical mess
Encased in a dark shade
Of plum lipstick.
Lips and teeth tug harder
And pull
Taming me in snares with foul webs
Like moth and spider.
Arms wrap
All eight together
Around my back,
Holding my hands down,
Dig into my hair,
And trap me immobile.
All the while
I am engrossed
By your venomous smile,
Your moon like eyes
And stare
With lids held shut
As if through a looking glass
And wait to be cocooned
For your next meal.

Self-destructive

by A. B. Harrison

Fire burns reborn
Between tightly rolled
Leaves of a relit cigar.
Tiny bits of binder and filler
From a cap
Too far snipped
Cling to my lips
And in the cracks of teeth
Like unwanted grains of sand
Constantly needing to be spit out
Following each series of three puffs.
I am enthralled at how
The ashes cling together
Like a cylinder of grey silt
Refusing to fall.
The warmth of toasted tobacco
Is felt as fingers run along the veins
Of a wrapped Maduro skin
As its soul is snubbed
On the face of a crystal dish
And life again
Dies.

Blues Man

by A. B. Harrison

There goes the wayward traveler,
A tin sandwich in hand.
Where he goes, his shoes must lead
Held by torn stitching and
Cloth patched soul.
The road dusty, long and thin,
Full of weeds, the sky a downward inferno.
Wandering man ponders along a stretch
Of endless filth, back aching,
Cotton rags clinging to skin
In beads of sweat
With a busted guitar
Strapped across his back.
Eyes bat bloodshot
In search of live oaks and a cool patch
Of soil to rest a spell.
Teeth rattle loose to rot.
Tongue dry and sticky
Licking a warped wooden comb.
The Louisiana air begs for a hint
Of breeze below
A blanket-less July sea of azure.
Yet all that moves are funeral bells
Off in the distance
And a man dressed black
Out spilling the blues.

Kitchen Morning

by A. B. Harrison

Moments fill
Time like a vase
Ready for lilies,
And set upon the sill
For Sunday morning
Peace and Renewal.
Moments flutter
Of Grann slicing peppers
And bagging parsley.
The way her freezer
Stood like endless time
Filled with foods
Marked half
A decade old
Never to be
Gotten around to
And eaten.
In years to come
All will be lost
I know
As tears fill
The brim
Of a new
Cemetery vase.
Childhood
Like happiness
Is a memory
Soon to be ash.

Unmother

by Sarah Bryant

Drs. Mary and Arty White were transplanted from their small Tennessee ranch to the vast and ivy covered estate they now inhabit in the heart of Baltimore. In their first year at Johns Hopkins Hospital amidst increased career income, sky-rocketing stress, and Baltimore's constant bottle-neck traffic, Mary and Arthur turned the cool white walls of their castle into the warm walls and rooms of a home. Lamps, Persian rugs, pillows that never quite matched, and within this crafted sanctuary, the sanitized morbidity of scalpels, gloves, and needles was kept at bay.

A new thought came upon Mary, though, the longer they thrived in their marital and doctoral bliss. Slowly and yet somehow all at once, this thought consumed Mary. She was sitting erect in her bed next to Arty with a focused stare toward no particular spot. Intellectual Arthur, brain overrun with endless facts about the human body, the human brain, and how people function, smart Art, as his close friends called him. Even he could not have guessed in these preliminary moments that what his wife was thinking as she stared very hard into nothing was about having a baby.

Our house is so big, and we are more than settled. We have a yard, we've made friends with our neighbors, we should do this. I think I can do this. I am nearly 35, and Arty is only a year away from 40. How do I bring this up? This human thing that will change both of our lives forever? No, Arthur would be a wonderful father, and he would love having a son. Or a daughter...wow. He would cherish a baby girl. I'm going to ask him in the morning.

She woke up the next morning, scrambled eggs and fried bacon on their \$3,000 stove. She beckoned her husband downstairs with the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Never one to mince words, Mary White poured Arthur a cup of coffee, grasped his hips and looking him square in the face declared, "I want us to get pregnant." As if Arty had been silently suffering imprisonment from being an un-father, he squeezed Mary and did all that he could not to run screaming joyously into the streets. Such are the moments one wishes to record in memory,

perfectly, permanently, and exactly as they occurred—the smell, the light, the sound of the girl-ish noise issuing from Arthur's mouth, and Mary's simple ecstasy at her partner's reaction.

Vitamins, vegetables, exercise, and sleep each ensue with varying levels of regularity. Sex, not scheduled at first, and loving gazes in the half a minute on switching elevators at the office. In the best hospital in the nation, they were in the perfect position to have a healthy pregnancy. They were surrounded by doctors, nurses, every resource that so many are denied.

In the glass that Mary was now more prone to stand in front of, she let her taut belly grow round and large. She didn't begrudge how her beautifully tanned legs became swollen, and she didn't mind the waddle she could already feel herself walking. These visions did not disgust but enchanted her. Mary could not help but feel that her imagined child already existed, a past memory she was simply dwelling on in her fifties with her daughter?—son? while they waited on her to pick them up from school. For now, though, Mary was the one waiting. Waiting in front of the mirror endlessly—the mirror in the hall as she strolled past, the mirror in her well-lit bathroom while she waited more for the little pink symbol, and the mirror in the convex, metallic oceans of Arthur's eyes. All these mirrors and still her otherworldly double refused to reflect what her heart knew to be a certainty. Mary's mirror addiction made her realize something else. She would be happy with a child, a healthy and vibrant baby that belonged only to her and Arthur, but deep within, she let herself confirm it: she wanted a girl. Her glassy doppelgänger whispered to her, convincing Mary of this truth.

Arthur is lovely and smart, but a girl will look like you. Your strong sinews, stout yet slender limbs and midriff, the deep Italian skin from your great grandmother, and your light eyes that see everything. Your genes are stronger, and any daughter of yours will adopt your goddess-like form and will learn to walk with your sure and graceful gait. You'll have a girl, teach her to love life and value both brains and beauty. She'll be perfect. Neither could have known, but the mirrors probably had an inkling. Who of the supremely happy could ever dream that birth and death reside so closely together? That tragedy and ultimate joy tread parallel paths? We all learn, though.

Six months passed before the alarms in Mary's head started sounding. Her periods were regular, she was never nauseous, and she was just as full-bodied and fit as ever. She had purchased a pink-tinted, two dollar app to track her fertility—ovulation, menstruation. Egg after egg wasted away before her eyes and disappeared into bullet-shaped cotton. In an attempt to grasp the control slipping away from her, Mary started eating differently, living differently. Milk and red apples for breakfast, no more coffee. Salads and grilled chicken for lunch, no late afternoon cocktails. Yoga and swimming classes to reduce stress and increase blood flow. Sex, now on a schedule, became less about love and more about productivity. Of course the issues rested with her. She somehow knew beforehand, but with confirmation from her gynecologist, she learned she was simply not going to give birth. Pills and injections failed, and Mary's medical prowess would change nothing. The endless plastic tests were just daggers in the small, wicker bathroom wastebasket, mocking her with the blue and uncaring line of nothingness.

Still she rose. Still she ate her morning apple and took her morning pills. Still she pushed on with the career she had spent her lifetime building. Her life became a series of erratic movements, images that came in and out of her perception rather than existing in unison and rhythm and chronology. Perhaps this external shift allowed for the equal seismic rupture within her. Mary, at first in anxious preparation for her own child and now desperately, more like an addict who hurts but cannot stay away, had begun volunteering her clinic hours with the seven nurses on the neonatal floor of Johns. To be around babies at their very youngest, around humans who cannot but be weaker than her, Mary maintained a sliver of power as the rest of it was shredded before her eyes.

Elizabeth and her unnamed daughter came into the wing on a Thursday. The new mother looked weak and exhausted. She had lost a lot of blood in her 36 hour labor period, and no matter how much the nurses gave her to eat, her lips and cheeks remained the same ghostly shade of off-white. Elizabeth required serious attention, but her daughter, two months premature, required more. As soon as the dangerously small but perfect baby was rolled in, the air itself seemed made of glass, just a movement

away from shattering. Everything stopped—except for the wheels behind Mary White's skull. An idea almost mechanically played itself out in Mary's mind. She did not consciously accept her plan, but there it was, beginning to end, and she had all the tools to accomplish the sinister vision.

Elizabeth didn't handle labor well and was scarcely improving as days passed. All Mary had to do was tweak with a few of her dosages, make her skip a few meals. The longer she attended to the unnamed human of almost unthinkable size, the more her plan seemed possible, probable even.

Elizabeth may not have survived anyway. This might be my only chance to have a baby. A girl.

The little girl, who she began calling 'Snow' after her porcelain skin and weightless form, was beautiful despite her complete weakness, perhaps because of it. Snow's whole life lay out like a map in her nearly black eyes—an infancy, adolescence, adulthood. In the tiny globes, Mary could see her own youth, before age and stress sealed off her uterus like a tomb without an inhabitant. Though losing her inner strength and her hope along with it, Mary continued gazing into glass, car windows, elevator mirrors, anything that would show her the person that was slowly replacing her. Every new day whitened the deep olive of Mary's skin, ate away the tone and thickness surrounding her arms, legs, face, stole her thick blonde hair and replaced it gradually with coarse, gray strands. Every day Mary emptied more than half of Elizabeth's different drips of electrolytes, pain medicine, meal replacement formulas. Daily she stole glances at Snow in her many blankets and electrodes, and nightly Mary pulled a stool up and simply stared over the small frame of the daughter she craved, the youth she wanted to dwell in her home.

Rather than gaining strength and hope from her plot, Mary only saw less of herself reflected in her fun house world of mirrors. The athletic, vibrant woman once dwelling in her bathroom mirror now had dark circles and not a bit of her former elasticity and hopefulness. Mary's increased effort at work, both true and false, sat squarely on her shoulders.

She relinquished her sleep for the few opportunities that her seven fellow nurses were tending to other children, other tasks.

Still, somehow, Mary was failing. The nurses who were able to devote their undivided attention to mother and daughter unknowingly thwarted Mary at every turn, and Elizabeth was slowly but consistently improving. Where Mary struggled and pushed to achieve, Elizabeth simply slept as nutrients filled her sunken belly and brightened her dim cheeks. Where Mary nightly dwelled in Snow's presence, Elizabeth lay in her separate room, not yet allowed to hold her daughter. Still, Elizabeth's effortless force over the girl grew as Mary's waned. Mary shriveled and greyed, Elizabeth expanded and glowed. While Mary attempted to usurp the innocence and youth before her, Elizabeth received these gifts freely and without vain struggling. Mother and un-mother.

Though not sleeping and never entirely certain of her surroundings, Mary heard a few nurses at a time saying Elizabeth's name. Not nervously, but joyfully, excitedly. They were healthy. They were done, and they were leaving. Real mother and daughter going home to a real family that will likely grow in the future. One more night. The doctor had a few last minute tests for Snow and wanted to monitor Elizabeth's sleep just once more. The night nurses checked Snow's pulse, took her temperature, set her under a UV light, and left to prepare Elizabeth for her last sleep study. Mary watched all, heard all, but she also heard something else. Coming from an observation window, she heard a slight whisper. Though incoherent, she felt it was a sound of ultimate importance. In the half dark she walked towards the window, eyes always partially on Snow, hands clasped around an extra UV lamp to place over the small girl. The sound of the whisper was drowned out by a quick and lacerating crack. In these eternal but fleeting seconds, Mary caught a last glimpse of herself: complexion faded, face thinned, dark purple circles under her dark eyes. One more blow against the hideous creature sprayed a layer of different sized pieces of window onto the tile below.

The once vibrant doctor could not save herself from the innocent power before her. The little girl she couldn't have will live on without her. One Mary lay whiter than ever, smaller than she had been, in a repulsive heap on the linoleum two feet from the cause of her death. Another Mary, though, one that had not existed in nearly a year looked out from the jagged and bloodied piece of glass on the floor.

1/15/17

by Leighann Myers

"I used to dream in
Red cinematic pieces.
Now I dream statues.

Music videos
Ran through my head,
Slow moving pictures.

I used to dream
A world bright and fresh.
Now my dreams are dust."

Old Hat

by Tristan Salter

When the first plane left the ground,
Audiences watched in admiration.
Our accomplishments had no bounds,
But now there's hardly exclamation.

Man departed for lunar voyage,
Earth froze with astonishment.
Breaching the sky, we felt so joyous,
But now the moon gets little acknowledgment.

When we happened upon each other,
You looked at me so amazed.
But now I have to wonder,
How long until that magic fades?

Blooming Angel (I always want men that I cannot have.)

by Caitlyn Elizabeth Petrus

Fifteen-year-old fantasies
About a man ten years older,
He's my candy coated sugar rush,
And I've got this fever for him.
My cheeks are red as ripe cherries.
And I'm in full bloom.
Too bad he's taking care of his wife.
She's got layers on her like a cake.
I'm just young enough to be fresh.
I've got a jump rope and track team.
I got stars in my eyes.
They shine as bright as diamonds.
Too bad the ring belongs to her.

Nightlight (Since I moved away from home, I have to decide for myself who is appropriate to give the time of day.)
by Caitlyn Elizabeth Petrus

Now, I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord, my soul to keep.
Don't let the skeletons in my closet
Keep me from falling asleep.
Don't let him rob my cradle again,
For I am guarded here and safe.
These rails were built to protect me
From older men who want to take me.
The carousel that dances above my head
And the demons hidden under my bed
Will sing to me a lullaby to remind me
The age gap is something I should dread.
"No means no," but he has never asked.
Could I introduce him tomorrow at tea?
Would the other toys be open to accept
Or will they blankly look at him and worry
That their precious baby has become sick.
It used to be dark in my room at night.
I built a fortress to protect my feelings,
But this baby girl still felt vulnerable in the dark
The nightlight was all I had to remind me
Age is just a number.
And if I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Primary Color: Blue (A sonnet)
by Caitlyn Elizabeth Petrus

I will not be a fool for appearances.
Sharp looks and lovely voices
Are alluring as they float over me.
He, who loves me, I will not leave.
You may play Beethoven and Bach;
Remember that I first liked classic rock.
You may be intelligent, whip smart,
But not the one who owns my heart.
His blue eyes are all I could gaze in;
Our friendship is nothing but a sin.
This knife is the sharp thought of
You to carve out my desire.
Because you are not the one I love,
I need to flee or be called a liar.

Identity Crisis pt. 2 (Again, I am watching my life moving forward as I cross from my past life as a teenager into the present adulthood.)

by Caitlyn Elizabeth Petrus

Crossing the threshold scares me
 Real life isn't the dream house with Ken and Barbie
 And elegant music box theme music.
 It's the callous handed laborer
 With his less than tight baby doll.
 Holding hands loses its excitement
 Real life isn't simple tea parties at grandmother's house
 And the field of wild daisies swaying in the breeze.
 It's deciding to join someone you finger and enjoy.
 This is a brief moment compared to an eternity.
 And I worry to close my eyes.
 I only want to fall asleep in your arms.
 It's no lie--you are the most important to me.
 But consummation intimidates me
 more than changing my last name.

Little Ones

by Brandie Crain

The city of New Orleans is color. But it is also darkness. Such darkness can swallow up little boys and little girls. Even the winters here are hot and this heat is where we find our two little ones at the beginning of this tale. William and Maggie, on a muggy November day, sit upon their Victorian porch, facing St. Charles Avenue, wiping sweat from their brow. The house is the same greenish blue that eggs sometimes are at the farmer's market. The trim is beige and the porch currently inhabited by these two is a giant wrap-around, covered in white rocking chairs and giant, potted ferns, stopped only by a colossal bay window which displays the thousands-of-dollars-spent chandelier hanging in the formal dining room. Their father's money cannot buy their smiles; his gold digger woman, posing as a makeshift mother, made sure of this. She pommels them with Mardi Gras beads when she drinks her Sazeracs or her bourbon or her wine, which seems to be always. And these beads are the big ones, the kind the kings throw from high upon their float thrones, winking at the little ones as they mosey on by, ignorant that they are her dealers, ignorant of the misery contained in their house, the facade of which screams wealth and happiness. One night, Maggie is not asleep when the gold digger thinks she is and overhears her telling one of her bimbo friends, surely sipping something, of her evil plot:

"This weekend, I will take the children out to the swamps for 'quality' time. They always ask to go out there; they have friends who have done the tours there. What he doesn't know is that I won't be coming back with the children. They will get lost in the bayous. I will make sure of it. No longer can I keep them here, taking away his attention. I am hungry for him and there isn't enough to go around." Her evil hisses are more than Maggie can bare; they are the sounds of a nightmare.

Maggie cries. Wakes William. He assures her that worry should have no home in her carnival heart. He will make sure of a plan to find their way back. Maggie nods her head, but thinks, "Brother, I am not sure I wish to find my way

home. Perhaps the bayous are a better place than here with this evil woman.”

She eventually falls asleep beside her brother, her keeper. Without him, she knows she would perish.

Wake up. Goodbye, Father. Yes, we wish you could come with us. Father cannot understand Maggie’s tears. Father cannot understand how this woman he loves could also be evil. He is blind to their pain.

The swamps of Louisiana are a sacred place. A sacred darkness. The water is dark and the back of the mind is ever wondering what lies in this murky darkness. At the beginning of their journey into this southern wilderness, William drops pieces of beignets along the path, that they may find their way back once lost.

Lost comes quickly. They tire from walking. Gold digger says, “Lay down, you imbeciles. Lay down beside that tree. Sleep, you lazy bums!”

Maggie cries, begging William not to sleep. She knows they will be left. But they cannot fight sleep. So tired. So little sleep the night before.

Wake up. Alone. The bread has been eaten; egrets are hungry birds.

Hungry.

Wander.

“Hello there, little ones,” whispers the Voodoo queen, Claudette. A snake slithers around her feet and a stationary serpent sits about her ankle in ink. Hungry and lost and hot and afraid, they follow her. The crickets chirp a death march. The mosquitoes are relentless in their hunger. Inside her hut, complete with brick dust outline and a horseshoe wreath upon the door, they eat gumbo and lay their heads upon a cozy mattress surrounded by mosquito netting. “Tomorrow,” she whispers in their ears as she strokes their heads, “tomorrow, let’s make a gingerbread house, cheres.

Christmas will be heh ‘fo we know it and I never have little ones around to delight in such things.”

Sleep.

Wake up. Work. And not of the candy house variety. Claudette has Maggie sweep her kitchen, feed her snake, dust her book of gris gris. William is nowhere to be found. Maggie cries. Claudette explains, “Your next chore, little one, is to begin fattenin’ yo’ brother. My snake craves human flesh and the mo’, the bettuh,” hastening Maggie’s tears, until they are one continuous stream and the whites of her eyes are red as her boiling blood.

Claudette provides her with the directions to the cage where William is kept and a big bowl of jambalaya.

“Hasten yo’ steps, girl,” hisses the Voodoo queen, “we haven’t got all winter.”

Thinks.

Thinks.

Throws most of the food in the waters surrounding their prison peninsula. She gives William only what he needs to survive. Her tears reach down to where he is. She will make sure of a plan to find their way back.

One February morning, with Mardi Gras season in bloom, the answer comes to her by way of Claudette, who hopes to make young Maggie her apprentice. Hopes to bring her over to the darkness. Maggie hopes to fool the woman and pretends her interest. Claudette begins to show her the gris gris, all the spells one needs to get rid of whatever, to change whatever forms to whatever other forms and whatnots and so ons. Maggie turns a frog to a black cat. A mosquito to a pelican. A fish to a muskrat. She recites her chants with conviction and closes her bloodshot eyes hard. She tells Claudette she never liked her brother and can’t wait until he’s gone. She tells her he is fat, when, in fact, his ribs face her like a guilty verdict each time she hands him his morsel of supper, seasoned with her tears.

Surely one runs out of tears eventually.

Eventually.

She knows she must hurry. But she knows she only has one shot. She knows the gators feast on small rodents that dwell in the swamps. Claudette would make a fine possum, she suspects.

It all happens so fast. The spell. The transformation. The key. Freeing her brother from his prison, hardly any mosquito-bitten flesh left on his body. Hardly any light left in his eyes. No strength. She carries him, running. But to where do they run to escape their bayou hell? At the end of her rope and wishing for the end of this swamp, she cries out in her exhaustion, "Can no one help us?!"

Alligator appears.

"This is the end," she tells her brother, almost relieved.

Gator bows his head. Minutes pass. Not knowing what else to do, they climb upon his back.

Into the water they go. Carries them across the water. To the other side. Familiar sights. This time, Maggie's tears are those of joy. Fall upon the gator's head, letting him know of her gratitude.

Walk. Across miles and miles. The city awaits. The musical delights of Frenchman, the colors of the Market, the clippity-cloppities of Jackson Square, the bells of the streetcar welcome them back like an old friend. Even life with the Gold Digger could never be as horrific as life in that swamp. They are eager to return to the kindness of their father. They will tell him everything. He must believe them and get rid of her.

They will live happily ever after.

Streetcar rattles them home. He's on the porch. He runs to them. They fill up his arms. Such a sweet homecoming for a father who thought his children were lost to him for all of time. He found out she left them. She spilled the beans.

"She's gone," he says, "but come and meet my new friend."

Their eyes hadn't made it to the porch yet. That's where she sat. A beautiful woman with raven hair and eyes so light they were almost white. As she uncrossed her legs to rise from one of the white rockers to greet them, Maggie caught a glimpse of an all-too-familiar snake tattoo upon her ankle.

"Hello there, little ones," she whispered and hissed all at once. "Y'all come in and get some jambalaya, cheres. You must be hungry and when it comes to supper, I always say the mo', the bettuh."

Sleep

by ReAnna Rowden

Whining
until my hand
launches its toy
into the sparsely wooded mercies
of a body strenuous to subdue,
Sleep
is a dog
I must amuse.

At morning

by ReAnna Rowden

At morning,
I know nothing initially
than the garbage truck's thundering
over neglected pot holes,
the hymns of brown, blue, and red
nestled in backyard foliage,
the yelps and howls of territorial offenses,
the slammed openings of crooked, rusted mailboxes,
the stray breeze's tap tap against paint-chipped doors,
the grooming of dewed, leave-strewn lawns,
the shouts and revels of little explorers,
and the loud glare of gold on linoleum.
But after a minute flees,
this perception recedes
and soon
Life is,
once again,
Menace.

The Mirror

by ReAnna Rowden

Our dynamic is
capricious
as one moment
I am Beauty
and the next
just barely Decent.

Yet,
I keep coming back.

I keep staring
into his face.

Today

by ReAnna Rowden

Today,
Youth left me
a message:
"I've had my due.
Now, Time
must attend to you."
Though afterwards
I say
"It's nothing"
and fulfill my duties
with white-mural grin,
tomorrow I'll wallow and sigh
as I witness
what paltry good follows
Deception.



(top) **Scarf**
(bottom) **Another Late Night**
by Cinthia Rincon



Calm Night
by Cinthia Rincon



Em
by Cinthia Rincon

American Chicken
by Cinthia Rincon



Hidden Object
by Cinthia Rincon



N405DM
by Cinthia Rincon



Mountain Landscape
by Cinthia Rincon

Breakaway

by Marshall Schoth

Mother worry not
For I have been set free!
I now, like a chime lost in the wind
Sway deep in philosophy

With these thoughts that flow
And hair no longer afraid to grow
I find myself creating through poems
My very mind is a crescendo!

And ever steady as I trek
Into the unkind
I'm unsparing in love
And in my mind
I can almost hear it...
It's my very own voice!
Can't you hear me World?
Now is time to Rejoice!

Transience

by Marshall Schoth

In spite of Entropy, We write
Some with their words
But most with their lives

Naïve are we to think
Our legacies, like smoke
Will stop the deathly brink

A slow descent into disorder
The fight against our own decay
We struggle and hope we've authored something
Anything that might make it past our last day

But my Love we are written everywhere!
Our worlds are in the teary-eyed.
Written and spoken through countless lives,
Our significance is not seen through worldly eyes

Oblivion is not to be unknown.
It is to be lived, but die unwritten.

Thoughts of a Twenty-Something

by Marshall Schoth

Our souls stir up questions we seldom hear.
Postponed by the sensational now,
We happily disregard all our fears.

But the numbness will wear off,
And drunkenness does fade.
As realization creeps in
Of all the decisions we haven't made.

For lies are loud
And truth is soft-spoken.
Why do we only begin to hear
When we are finally broken?

Torn and shattered
In shambles we lay
Stubborn man stands defeated
For he finally got his way.

Surrender now and listen to your soul's cry.
There's more to life than living it,
And there's more to do than die.

Bricks of Burden

by Marshall Schoth

Cast into this world
Like bricks, we're formed
Unlearned to our purpose,
Fighting the great unknown,
We merely sojourn.

Becoming and understanding,
We search for our meaning.
I must be significant!
What is the reason for my being?

Seeking out our own differences,
In vain attempts of divergence we labor,
Not knowing that we are like bricks.
Together in our passing lives,
At our best, we are vapor.

Bricks they break and fall apart,
But they are strong in their closeness!
Belonging to something greater,
We, like them, find the truth:
Our purpose is through our service!

You see, up close a brick looks unique,
But far off in a wall,
Serving the purpose it was made for,
It's almost indistinguishable, unified like us,
As if you couldn't see it at all.

Dale runs to the corner of the shop where his puppy chow is stored in a duct-taped five gallon bucket and commences a feast. Hazy sunlight enters the dusty shop through small cracks in the wall, and something shiny and silver catches Emma's eye in the glistening light. Emma forgets about her hungry pup and investigates the mysterious object.

The shimmer appears from the still chrome handle of a rusty fishing reel that rests on a cluttered plywood tabletop that has been mangled from years of hard use, dented from the pounding of heavy hammers. The neglected reel sits in a spotlight atop sixty feet of tangled, high tensile, used green fishing line that smells like dirty lake water. The reel is surrounded by sawdust covered heaps of loose nails and screws, a tangled orange power cord, a shop light, a rusty hack saw, various hammers, coils of wire, crumpled cans of Copenhagen, empty Miller Lite bottles, a large tackle box, and boxes of hunting ammunition. Deer antlers, stuffed ducks, and faded football trophies line the walls.

Emma snatches the reel and runs back into her living room, full of friendly but emotionally disheveled people.

Something big has happened, possibly a holiday, curious Emma conjectures. She thinks, "Uncle Ben usually only comes in for Christmas, so this must be a big day. I hope I get the new American Girl Doll!" Dale happily stuffs himself until he is sick and unable to walk. Eventually he will vomit profusely in the kitchen to Laura's delight.

Emma skips around her house until she stumbles upon a tall, lanky man among a crowd of her relatives. He has a broad forehead and bright, mysterious brown eyes that constantly scan the room; he sports a salt and pepper moustache and wire rimmed glasses.

The man forces a smile as he acknowledges his only niece. She looks up to him and yells, standing on her tippie-toes, "Uncle Ben! What is this?" Holding the reel as high as she can with a big smile.

Uncle Ben takes the reel and shakes his head, saying in his articulate, reassuring voice, "This was your Papa's favorite fishing reel. It is an Abu Garcia Revo S Baitcast reel, the best money can

buy. Sadly it is broken." He fingers the smelly fishing line and thinks to himself, "Falling apart just like this family, its gears no longer meshing, problems a little love and grease will not fix. But I do love this smell of the Lake Grant!"

Emma, with a perplexed look on her young, chubby face asks, "What's a reel?"

"Honey, a reel is what you use to catch fish." He walks in a circle and scratches his chin. "It goes on a fishing pole, one of those long rods that bends." He holds the reel, pretends that it is attached to a fishing rod, and acts out the motion of a cast. A simple motion he has practiced thousands of times eases his grief, takes his mind off of his problems for a few short minutes. He then points up to a stuffed Largemouth Bass that hangs above the fireplace next to a family portrait taken on vacation in Florida and remembers the sunny day that Brent reeled in that scaly monster.

Ben thinks back on the countless hours he spent fishing with his brother and their father, who recently killed himself by overdosing on prescription drugs, ending his battle with depression. His beloved father was found dead near the bank of a lake on the exact spot he and his sons used to set trout lines to catch catfish. After the old man had been missing for four days, a fisherman launching his boat spotted a dark blue form among the reeds, and to that poor man's dismay it turned out to be Grandpa's decomposing body, dressed in his nicest pair of blue overalls, face down in the shallow water.

Ben remembers a time before he went off to a prestigious college and graduate school, when he was a proud outdoorsman; when he did not think he was superior to men with farmers' tans in holey jeans and decaying, leather work boots who chew tobacco all day long. Ben thinks back to simpler times to when he was his father's pride and joy, back before he was a cynic, before he lost his faith in the innate goodness of humanity, before he was preposterously "let go" from his job and his wife left him for his former boss so the bitch could have a nicer Mercedes and a bigger house.

He subtly chokes up and whispers, "Your Papa used to use this reel when he would take his boat out to the lake." He untangles the fishing line. "I gave this reel to him when he was promoted

to Chief of the fire station, not long before you were born." Ben smiles and ruffles Emma's curls.

She hugs the leg of her broken uncle. They cross the room to sit near the empty fireplace on a hole-ridden, comfortless red couch under a painting of cow skulls and tumbleweeds on the plains of Texas and she crosses her stubby legs, playing with the ends of her hair.

She asks, "What do you mean 'used to?'" She wonders why her Uncle Ben has lost so much weight and why everyone is so sad.

"Stop pulling out your hair!" Laura demands from across the room, trying but failing to be gentle. She dons a simple black dress and a white sweater, both of which she bought at a second-hand shop; her makeup is ruined from tears, cheap mascara smeared under her bloodshot eyes.

Laura is in a manic state, abhorring human interaction. The newly ordained widow does not know how she will pay for her husband's funeral. She does not know how she will support her daughter, only working at a local daycare in the small town in Arkansas where she has always lived. She blames herself for every bad thing that has happened and scolds herself for being friendless and dependent, she does not even know how to pay an electricity bill. Laura cannot think of a single positive memory, although she and Brent shared thousands.

Guys constantly hit on Laura. This young mother stands five foot one and hardly weighs one hundred pounds; she could easily convince a stranger that she was seventeen. She has strawberry blonde hair, pale, smooth skin, and an athletic build, the physique of a gymnast. She looks no different than she did when she was a member of her varsity cheer team. Her perfect posture enhances grapefruit sized, rounded breasts and aesthetically muscled shoulders that lead down to smooth, toned arms and tiny wrists. She has a sharp, shapely nose that could cut through the heart of any man and her full, pink lips reveal a gorgeous smile. Well they did until her blissful life ended when Samson moved back to Hope. Her big brown eyes used to reveal curiosity and excitement about life, but now they reflect only uncertainty and disgust.

She can think of nothing but her next cigarette. Laura says to herself, "Brent did everything for me. I cannot be alone!" She unconsciously taps the pack of cigarettes in her sweater pocket and briskly walks outside to the back porch to get some unrefreshing air.

She likes to sit on the wooden porch swing that Brent built for her that hangs by braided ropes and to write as she smokes. A poem in her tattered pocket notebook reads, each coffee stained page a new stanza from a different Marlboro Smooth cigarette:

In My Clouds

This confounded air,
Respiration fails me
Clean oxygen does not soothe.
I would rather inhale carcinogens
Impair my lungs
Clog my heart.

Beloved memories
Of good times increase the pain
For faces do not console
A rapid insincere heartbeat.

Lungs irreparably damaged
Time unequivocally gone
My husband taken from me
Like a lifejacket taken
From a blameless child wading
In the cold,
Black ocean

Yet the honeysuckle sweet
Life taking
Breath giving
Taste of menthol
Remains for my rehabilitation.

My end will come, but I am already over
Death will visit me one day
But also Death comes
To those of perfect health,
Of doubtless innocence.
Death the tax authority

For the risky business of life
Always gets his due.

At least I choose my ending
Asthma, bronchitis, lung cancer?
All viable paths.
One will take me away
No blind guessing,
Worries puffed out long ago.

Ben answers as Laura shuts the screen back door, "Leave the poor girl alone! At least she does not pick her nose like her Papa did when he was a kid." Ben muses that it has not truly been long since his baby brother was a kid.

That baby brother was never destined for Harvard, but he was mechanically inclined and a natural athlete who was popular everywhere he went. He was the kind of kid who would punch a in the jaw without a second thought. That boy is now dead because he put the lives of others before his own.

Ben never cared for Laura, confident that his brother could find a much better woman, a woman who gave at least half as much as she took. She was nearly two years older than Brent. He feels guilty for never warning his brother about Laura. He had hoped that she was just a phase for Brent; he regrets getting so tied up in his education, career, and worthless ex-wife that he lost contact with his family members. He lost everything when he replaced the ones who loved him most with a quest to pursue illusory dreams of wealth and power.

Taking Emma's tiny hand in his own thin, calloused hand with abnormally long fingers, he chokes up and says, "Darling, your Papa was not just asleep in that pine box at the church. He is dead, he will not wake up." A tear falls from his bony cheek. As he dries his tears with a pocket-handkerchief, a bald spot on his wrist becomes visible, the spot his Rolex occupied before he was forced to sell it to buy groceries.

Emma thinks back to that morning at the church. Her mom had forced her to wear a nice dress, even though it was Tuesday, not Sunday.

Preacher Samson had taken Emma on his knee in the parking lot of the church before the service, looked into her guiltless eyes and professed, "Emma, I know this is a hard time, but know that we all love you. This church is your family. Please do not lose faith in God our Father." Although he knew that she did not understand what happened, that she did not mourn. "Your Papa was a great man! He was without a doubt the most selfless person I have ever known." He wishes he had always been a man of integrity like Emma's father was. Emma smiles, teeth showing, blue eyes sparkling,

"Of course my papa is the best! But I don't know where he is. I haven't seen him since he dropped me off at school last Friday. He dropped me off in the fire truck! All of my friends were so jealous."

She remembers Brent telling her as he grabbed her with his bear hands and lowered her down from the tall fire engine, "Have a good day at school Squirt! I love you; your mom will pick you up." He had smiled when his goddess blew him a kiss from her strawberry lip-gloss smeared lips.

She draws a misshapen heart in the dirt next to Preacher Sampson with her shiny white dress shoe, totally unaware that she is crushing his heart. "He was supposed to take me to ride horses at Paco's ranch this weekend. And mom won't tell me where he is." She points at her mom with her t-Rex arm and grimaces.

"Your mom loves you more than you could imagine." He forces a smile as he strokes Emma's back, wondering if he just lied. Laura does not even acknowledge her daughter's complaint, unprepared to explain the situation to her daughter, to accept the implication of the loss on her own life. She mindlessly stares at the church steeple, but eventually she returns to reality and nags Emma until the nymph skips to their seats at the front of the church. Laura is lost, refusing the support of her family and friends. She will talk to no one.

Preacher Samson can do nothing but pray for her and remember the Laura he knew years before, a Laura that was not cruelly tied up to the train tracks of adult life and run over by the dirty locomotive of reality, even pelted with stones by him. Laura never speaks to Samson and always brushes off any remarks he

makes to her. She is troubled by the past she shared with the "reborn" preacher and refuses to recall a single second the two shared. She believes he is just as rotten as he was on the day they met, even though he was a god to her at the time.

Sampson moved back to Hope five years ago. He had graduated from seminary at Baylor six months before and had been traveling the world on his father's money ever since, visiting Paris, Barcelona, Dublin, and Dubai and taking a river cruise down the Amazon in South America.

While he was sampling the distinct flavors of fine wines and prostitutes of all nationalities, his baby, Little Hope Baptist Church was being constructed.

He goes to Hope's only office supply store to buy a large wall calendar for his office at the church, which is mostly built. As he checks out, he spots Laura walking in, her resting bitch face tuned to high and a navy blue pair of athletic leggings accentuating her short legs. She does not see him.

He leaves the store and puts his calendar in the back seat of a five year old green Honda Accord, which he traded his Mercedes for to assure the town of Hope that he has been humbled. He sits in the cloth front seat of the car that he hates and listens to a local country radio station for five minutes, then he re-enters the store.

He scans the store aisles until he runs into Laura, who is picking out decorations for her board at the day care. He pretends to be looking for construction paper, which so happens to be on the same aisle as his favorite redhead. He picks up a pack of green paper and awkwardly spits out, "Hey, it's been years."

She pretends not to see him, then slowly turns and says, "I see your church is going up, you hypocrite." She stares at various, bright tubes of glitter.

"Want me to show you around Little Hope Baptist? The construction is almost finished."

"No thanks, I need to decorate my classroom." She picks out a cardstock rainbow from the shelf and begins to leave the aisle.

"Wait!" His eyes dart directly to her butt as she walks away and he then takes a few, swift steps and reaches for her arm, "It would be nice to catch up! I could make you some tea." He remembers that she is obsessed with tea. She got him into drinking it when they were together, and he now has a valuable collection of tea kettles he and imports various teas from all over the globe.

He purchases the decorations for her, and she agrees to tour the church, on the condition that she has to be somewhere in forty five minutes.

Ten minutes later they are both parked behind the church, the construction equipment blocking the view of their vehicles from the highway.

He shows her the nave of the church; it is spacious with a very high ceiling. There are no pews and the walls have not been painted. The main church building is one room, but the offices and Sunday school rooms are located behind the Church.

They enter his office and the only thing inside is a large, expensive looking, L-shaped wooden desk. Laura sits on the desk, legs apart, her eyes sensually scanning his body. He is dressed in designer jeans, a white undershirt and a navy suit jacket, looking like a Nautica model. He tries to ask her how life has been treating her, but she presses her finger to his lips and answers, "Don't." He slowly steps toward her.

He is between her legs and he gently kisses her. She reaches her hands inside of his jacket, feeling his hard, lean body and their kiss becomes a competition, who can consume who first, lips smacking and tongues jabbing. Three minutes go by and only underwear covers their warm bodies. Laura is still on the edge of the desk, Sampson between her legs, his erection pressing against her belly.

He notices that her boobs have grown considerably since the last time he saw her, which was when she was fifteen. He peels off her bra and grins naughtily. She asks, "You wish I was still a little girl? Huh, big boy?" She teasingly pushes against his chest, trying to read a tattoo on his shoulder.

"No! Your body is more amazing now, if that's possible."

"You're just as full of shit as you always were." But her breasts have changed, they have gone from firm peaches to Florida oranges, her areolas from the size of a thumb print to that of a fifty cent piece. But her left boob is still the best one, slightly larger and more round. They continue to kiss and he gently strokes her leg with one hand, his other hand in her hair.

"Hurry up! I told you I can't stay long."
"I don't have a condom."

He takes off his boxers and she slides down her purple panties, she says, "Of course you don't dumb ass."

She stares at his six pack abs, demanding, "Ugh, do it, but pull out. I swear to God!" She strokes his cock a few times and then inserts his purple head into her shaved pussy and moans.

He fucks her violently, without a word for about five minutes, wondering why she has become such a bitch, on his church desk, the same desk he will sit at to write sermons. She yells, "Ahhh. Oh Sampson, keep going preacher man! Your shaft of justice is so hard. I'm almost there." She digs her long fingernails into his back, leaving scratches. About to cum, he tries to pull out, but she grabs the back of neck, "Fuck me harder!" And as she orgasms he fills her with semen.

She quickly dresses and walks out, not making eye contact. She would never again speak more than three consecutive words to the preacher.

At the time the affair happened, Brent and Laura had been dating for a year and a half, an eternity for a courtship in rural Arkansas, and planned to get married in the near future. Brent was in Fayetteville at the time for a firefighter's retreat where he was surprised with a promotion to Fire Chief, the proudest moment of his life second to the birth of his only child, Emma. Laura or Sampson never mentioned the steamy twenty minutes they spent together to anyone.

Ten short weeks after that day, Laura found out she was pregnant. She and Brent quickly got married so as not to ruin Laura's reputation or bring about the disdain of her conservative family. Besides, Brent loved Laura and was fully committed to her. He would proudly deal with the consequences of his actions

by raising his child, although he never had unprotected sex with Laura until after they were married. He never questioned his girlfriend's faithfulness for an instant.

Everyone loved the groom, the Eagle Scout, the small town high school quarterback. He was honest, hard-working, and took good care of a needy, selfish Laura.

Samson has been close with Brent since they met when he became pastor of Little Hope Baptist Church. The preacher had no choice but to befriend this pillar of his community. Brent attended weekly bible studies and ushered at church every Sunday morning, but Laura had no interest in a relationship with God. She was as self-centered as simple Brent was giving.

Samson will not give up on Laura's daughter; she does have his engaging blue eyes, a feature no one in either Laura's or Brent's families have. The preacher will fight for the right to act as a father figure in Emma's life, since Ben lives three states away and has enough problems of his own. Deep down Samson knows that he will only drive Emma out of the church if he takes up this fight, that he will cut her off from a relationship with the Heavenly Father because her mom would stop taking her to Sunday services.

Every word he says to Laura drives her further away, causes her feelings of self-blame and pushes her deeper into depression. He carelessly ended the life she had, but he will not cause the disturbed woman to end her life. Laura's days as captain of the cheer team are long gone.

Samson tells himself that he only wants the young, attractive widow to have consolation for her loss, to receive the love and help of a higher power.

Preacher Samson leads Brent's funeral service and as he stares down from the pulpit, he is astonished at how much Emma resembles her mother. This mini-woman weakens Samson in the church that he personally designed and built with his father's money, his father who refuses to speak to him, who has never once stepped foot in Little Hope Church. The one room church is lined with faded pine pews. Rays of sunlight shine through

the cracked windows onto mourners who are forced to squint. A sharp pang of emptiness manifests itself in his gut and he is forced to stop speaking in front of his congregation for thirty seconds, time seems to stop and he can hear his heart rapidly beating. He feels like he is on the stand in a courtroom trying to convince a jury that he is innocent of rape and murder. Finally he calms himself enough to continue preaching to his flock in his normal, wolfish manner.

He stumbles to the end of his unauthentic sermon and follows the funeral procession down a dirt road to the untrimmed, grassy field where Brent is to be laid to rest. He cannot help but wish that he were still ignorant of the painful truths of life, of death. He wishes he had stained glass windows for his church that would not let the blinding Arkansas sunlight through, just like he wishes agonizing knowledge would not leak into his brain, an understanding of his transgressions and their lasting consequences.

He remembers learning in seminary that knowledge does not always lead to happiness; ignorance makes for an easy life. However, awareness is valuable, and remembering life's cheerful times even in the most solemn moments is necessary for moving forward. He tells himself that faith cannot exist without uncertainty, and uncertainty is unbearable in absence of faith. Doubts must be buried like dead bodies, regardless of our strong connections to them.

Preacher Samson simply sees Laura as his first love, his only romantic love, not as the once popular girl who fell from grace, the girl whose innocence he soiled. She shared her first kiss with him when she was barely fourteen and he was seventeen; he was a real troublemaker at the time. He thought the rules did not apply to him, being the bratty, only-child of a heartless, overwhelmingly successful trial attorney. His father made his millions by suing doctors for malpractice when they made honest mistakes, ruining the lives and careers of countless medical professionals. Samson got in with a mischievous crowd, the guys who smoked weed in the school parking lot, popped pills in class, and shoplifted for sport, and the girls who intimately got to know random, venereal guys in restrooms at rock concerts for free drinks and slept with their teachers to pass high school.

He was arrested at the age of sixteen for using a fake ID to get into a bar and then getting into a fight where he blinded a drunk man who stepped on his boot by hitting him in the head with a bottle of tequila he had hidden in the back of his pricey, black leather jacket. When this happened, Samson's dad moved him away from Little Rock to Laura's backwoods hometown of Hope, where he could do no further damage to his father's reputation; because ambulance chasing is fine but having a prodigal son is unacceptable.

Samson and Laura met at their county fair. She was so nervous that she accidentally spilled her cup of lemonade on him after they rode the Tilt-a-Whirl. They had exchanged glances at school, but their large age gap had prevented them from interacting. Tall and lean with dark skin, unforgettable blue eyes, and a square jaw, Samson was innocent, ninety-five pound Laura's poison apple. The two fell in love quickly. They snuck out of their homes to get together as often as possible, only telling their closest friends.

They exchanged flirty glances across the school gymnasium and had sex in the most random places: the deserted fourth floor of the public library, the restroom at a frozen yogurt place, the stage at school when it was set for a production of "Romeo and Juliet," and the middle of a department store one night during the Christmas holidays with Laura lying completely naked on her back on top of a display of red, white, and green sweaters.

The sweaters proved to be itchy. Her situation on the display was uncomfortable, but she got used to it and moaned loudly as he rhythmically fucked her. He then pulled out, took off his condom and came all over a white sweater, his fantasy of having sex in a department store fulfilled. Her mom managed the store and she had "borrowed" the key.

One day he skipped his afternoon shift at a local burger joint and she got out of her after school cheer practice early. Laura lived only a few blocks down the street from the high school so she walked home every day after school or practice. He picked her up on a side street in his new, black Mercedes and drove to the employee parking lot of the movie theatre, which happened to be mostly empty since it was a weekday afternoon. They started kissing as soon as he put the luxury car in park, shifting his stick to overdrive. Laura crawled into the backseat,

and when she was over the center console he grabbed the top of her cheer uniform and pulled it completely off, leaving only lacy black panties and a sports bra on his horny girlfriend. He could smell her bodily fluids, mostly the ones from between her perfect legs.

She bragged about her new sports bra to him, excited that she was finally a B-cup. He took his black button up shirt off to reveal his well muscled upper-body and joined her in the back, grabbing her tiny waist, placing her across the smooth, tan leather back seat and lying on top of her, feeling every inch of her barely fourteen year old body with the tips of his fingers while still tongue kissing her, starting from the back of her knees up to her developed hamstrings and soft butt, then her hard abs and visible ribs, she was so thin.

He didn't even care that she had just come from cheer practice. Besides, they weren't supposed to be together, so every moment he could steal was more valuable than anything else in his life, his struggle for purpose.

He tasted her salty sweat as he bit and kissed her neck, she firmly grabbed his powerful arms and softly moaned, digging her long fingernails into his skin. He took off his Ralph Lauren khaki pants and slid down her panties, revealing a mass of bushy red pubic hair that she refused to shave. As he began thrusting his hips he removed her sweat-soaked sports bra to feel her rather firm, developing breasts, to tease her sharp, pink nipples.

He entered her by accident when his erection busted through the slit in his boxers. She smiled while biting her lip and stared into his eyes, encouraging him to go all the way. They had never had unprotected sex before that day. They finished the deed, rocking the car, his boxers on the entire time.

Their relationship lasted for six months until Laura's parents found out, at which time her dad, a state police officer and a giant of a man, threatened Samson's life with a twelve-gauge shotgun and jail time.

Samson was eighteen for the last two months he and Laura were together. Since the age of consent in Arkansas is sixteen, Samson

committed statutory rape. If justice were served he would have been forced to go to trial and register as a sex offender.

From that point Samson laid low until he graduated high school. He tried to join the Marines, but they would not accept him on account of his numerous run-ins with the law. He ended up going to seminary at Baylor, where he got in only because a client of his father's was the dean of students there.

While enrolled at Baylor his curriculum required him to hold a job in campus ministry, and he worked as chaplain for the football team. He pretended to be a pious disciple of the Savior in front of the coaches, but really he went to crazy parties with the football players, making buddies with them so he could meet slutty girls and drink free beer. The coaches loved him, never before had they seen a chaplain connect with the players so well.

He secretly keeps a picture of his once love that he cut out of a high school year book in his bedroom drawer, tucked deep inside his personal bible next to the preserved petals of flowers from each funeral he was a part of. In this St. James Bible lie snapshots of dead times hidden in the frayed pages of Samson's truth, the words from the forgiving God that gave him a purpose: to better the lives of others instead of destroying them, a purpose that Samson has struggled to fulfill.

Most members of the rural community are present at Brent's funeral service, especially the firefighters of the firehouse Papa was a part of. Not a single friend of Laura's is in attendance.

The firemen are clean-shaven and dressed up. They would rather eat broccoli or clean their rooms than dress up, but it is a small sacrifice to make for their fallen patriarch, the man who acted as a father to them in their risky line of work. Paco seems to be the most upset, his customary smile nowhere to be seen. Papa treated these firemen as his sons, and they referred to him as "Papa," even though he only lived to be 27. They went to Papa for advice and guidance on all subjects. He had enough wisdom to make up for the boyishness and petty insecurities of his "sons." These boys unflinchingly run into collapsing, burning buildings

to save assholes they do not know, and they burn away the integrity of their lungs by smoking, always playing with fire.

These men covered in tattoos with scruffy hair and bulging muscles risk their lives every day to save people who scorn their appearances. They serve as the pallbearers in the funeral procession, carrying Papa in his simple, still unpaid for pine box on their wide shoulders, Rob standing on his toes because he is so short. As Samson says his final words at the gravesite and people start to leave, the firemen are the only remaining mourners.

Rob, Papa's childhood best friend and the new Fire Chief, says to his brothers in his deep, raspy voice, "Papa was a man's man, respected by all those he encountered, a natural leader with honest eyes and an unshakable demeanor. His body may be charred beyond recognition, claimed by an earthly fire, but the flames of love and care he shared with us will never be extinguished. Earthworms can never eat away our memories."

His eyes watering, he helps the boys, his boys now, lower the cheap casket into the clay-rich Arkansas ground and then dries the wetness from his eyes with a red bandanna from his back pocket. Roots that had to be cut when digging the hole lie behind the flower displays and a starving, flea-bitten coyote watches from a few hundred yards away.

After Papa is laid in the ground under the grand oak tree into which he had carved a heart with his and Laura's names with a pocket knife six years before, the eleven remaining firemen of Arkansas Fire Station Number Thirty-seven return to the firehouse, their canine companion Spot tied in the back of Rob's prized, green Ford F100 truck. The truck's engine rumbles loudly from the modified exhaust pipes that Papa lovingly installed for Rob, even after insisting that Rob should save his money instead of spending it as soon as he makes it.

The boys take no time to shuck their suit jackets; they reveal their old, sweat-stained, white undershirts that they wore under their starched button ups, long body hair protruding through the holes in their undershirts.

Hank Williams Junior and AC/DC blare from the aftermarket speakers of the boys' vehicles. Not a word is shared yet their heads shake from side to side in disbelief.

Spot is a mutt because the boys could not afford a purebred Dalmatian like the big city fire stations have; he bellows unceasingly as cars pass. Spot's long, curly, brown, black, and white smelly hairs blow in the wind as Rob speeds along Highway 154 with a line of gas-guzzlers in tow.

The fire station is an old brick building with a tall pine tree out front. A brown gravel driveway leads to the garage where the rusty, red fire engine sits, surrounded by tall, faded blue tool boxes filled with heavy wrenches and grease guns. Brand new fireproof suits, hats, and boots hang from the walls surrounding the open-air garage housing the engine, equipment Papa begged for years and was granted only after he received a third degree burn on his left calf muscle where flames burned through his boot.

The boys of the station nicknamed their 1972 engine "Sexy." Sexy constantly breaks down, but thankfully the boys know how to take care of a diesel engine better than they know how to care for their bodies, which are constantly primed with booze and energy drinks and never properly rested, because Madden football games on the Xbox are without a doubt more important than sleep.

The boys park their trucks, jeeps, and muscle cars in their customary spots behind the fire station in the grass, where a playground used to be when the station was the county elementary school. The basketball hoop from the playground still stands; it is often used for pickup games when the boys are waiting for a call to turn on their adrenaline and put out a fire.

Next to the basketball court is the firemen's "weight room." There is no actual room but only a cracked concrete slab with a few weathered benches, a sketchy looking squat rack, and rusty, mismatched weights that look like they would give a man tetanus from merely glancing at them.

The boys dearly love their weight room. Most of them being former athletes, they enjoy pushing their bodies to the limit. The day Papa died, he broke the former bench press record of

385 pounds with a maximum attempt of 405 pounds. Papa easily lifted the weight and was planning to go for 425 the next week. Papa loved to train his body, to consistently work towards a goal and to achieve it. He inspired his sons to work hard, telling them that the lessons of the iron apply to all areas of life. He was obsessed with Arnold Schwarzenegger as a boy and strived to match the star's work ethic.

He told them while sitting around a fire and drinking a beer that if they do not believe they can lift a weight, they cannot, and similarly if they do not believe they can save someone's life or make the world a better place, they never will.

Sick of Spot's barking, Rob grabs a can of Natural Lite from his faded red plastic ice chest and then unties the mutt who jumps out of the scratched-up truck bed. Spot scurries to the garage to his customary spot on the couch in the lounge, which is adjacent to the garage.

The boys sit around their homemade "fire pit," a blackened circle about six feet in diameter, surrounded by misshapen rocks they found in the woods. The pit is about a hundred feet behind the station and directly in front of the woods. Many nights they sat around that pit on big hunks of firewood with Papa and told stories, drank, laughed and talked about life.

The day Papa died was an ordinary Friday. Papa wakes up at 4:15 AM, cooks a breakfast of bacon, scrambled eggs, biscuits, and strong coffee for his sons and made them get out of bed to eat, since they go "on the clock" at 5 AM.

He leads the seven boys working that day in prayer, saying, "Lord, thank you for this day, for these young men, for our families and all of our blessings. Help your spirit to guide us to do your work, to not be selfish but to put the lives of others before our own. Allow us to be brave and to honor you in everything we do. In your name we pray, Amen."

"Amen," the deep voices of the boys answer. They eat breakfast, which they slather in syrup and hot sauce. After that they watch the news and complain about the Clintons, about how the crooked liberals don't give a damn about the "dumb, uneducated, working man."

After their food goes down, Papa drives the fire engine a mile down the road to his simple home to wake up his Emma and take her to school. Laura refuses to wake up early, so every morning, even when he has work, he shares an hour with his angel, begging her to get out of bed, cooking her French toast with no crust and a mountain of powdered sugar, picking out her clothes for school, packing her homework into a purple Dora the Explorer booksack, and watching Dragon Tales on the living room couch with her and Dale until 7:15.

After Papa drops Emma off, he and his workout partner Drake lift weights and Bill shoots basketball while the other five firemen stand watch in the firehouse, playing Call of Duty on the Xbox and flipping through crumpled muscle car magazines.

Papa maxes out on bench press. When he breaks the record he jumps up off of the bench, high gives "bro hugs" to Bill and Drake, and then runs into the firehouse to tell the other boys. He thinks to himself, "This day could not get any better!" He writes "405" in chalk on the concrete in front of the bench. Drake does his normal workout routine, not lifting weights half as heavy as Papa. As soon as Papa and his workout partners get back into the fire station, the fire bell goes off. The men inside drop Xbox controllers and throw on their heavy fireproof suits, dented hardhats, goggles, and rubber boots in a matter of seconds. Rob flips on the ignition of the fire engine and Sexy's engine turns over for a second and then roars to life.

A fire at a nursing home.

The boys load up the fire engine with thick hoses and make sure the ladders are tied down. They hop on the truck. Paco, a young, Hispanic man from south Texas, is in the seat closest the door. Papa runs into the garage and leans into the fire engine door, still coated in sweat from his workout, and winks at the pudgy Hispanic, gently grabbing his arm, begging Paco to stay and allow the Chief to take his place. He gets out and Papa jumps into the fire engine. Sexy takes off.

Papa yells back to Paco as the engine speeds away and the sirens wail, "Thank you!" He never likes to miss a fire, a chance to rescue somebody, to get a good adrenaline rush.

When the boys arrive at the scene of the fire, the small nursing home, called the House of Hope, is ablaze, the interior heating up to nearly a thousand degrees Fahrenheit, oxygen rapidly running out. The building has been a fire hazard for years, but the county building inspector takes cheap bribes; he needs the money for coke.

The nursing home owner is the firehouse's biggest donor, the chief reason the boys have new protective gear. Mr. Mathis, a medical resident who works at the home, is Paco's best friend and next-door neighbor. Fireman Steven's Aunt, who has Alzheimer's, lives in there too.

After Papa and Rob do a quick head count, twenty-one out of twenty five nursing home residents and all of the staff are accounted for.

An old hydrant is around the corner. The fire is at a very advanced stage, but the fire hose could give the boys an additional fifteen minutes to explore the building. The structure cannot be saved, but lives can.

Three of the boys unhook the hose from Sexy and run it over to the hydrant. Papa hears Steven yell, "Fuck!" "What is it?" Papa asks.

"This hydrant is shot. There's a hole in the tank so there ain't no water!"

"Well get over here! We have to get in the building." He is mentally preparing himself. He is as calm as he was when he pressed four hundred pounds over his face less than an hour earlier. A light smile still lingers on his pale lips from when his daughter kissed his scruffy cheek and waddled into the schoolhouse, turning her head to glance at him every few feet.

Rob stays outside to keep peace and work with the EMS team. The other boys and Papa rush in with their heavy axes, oxygen tanks exploding, walls and ceilings beginning to weaken. Four firemen emerge from the main entrance within a few minutes, carrying three terrified yet unharmed elderly men and women in their arms.

Only Papa and Mr. Mathis, a Marine veteran, paralyzed from the waist down, remain in the building. The three boys plead with

Rob, the second in command, to go back in to help Papa, but he will not allow them. It's too dangerous. The cringing sound of walls collapsing and an old man's screams of agony fill the air.

Emma is now fourteen.

She has the same, firm body her mom did at her age, but instead of naturally straight strawberry blonde hair, she has a garden of golden blonde curls that she fries straight every morning, withholding from the world the beautiful gift she was given.

She has a less feminine jawline than Laura but her eyes are blue like the water of the Great Barrier Reef and her rounded, full lips appear as soft as puffy clouds on a sunny spring day. Her skin has a Caribbean glow as opposed to her mother's Vampire-like paleness.

She faked sick that morning so her mom would not make her go to school. Laura currently works as a secretary at an Insurance Agency. Sampson is now the pastor of a mega church in Little Rock and the manager of his deceased father's sprawling estate.

Emma is packing her big purple suitcase, hastily throwing in long sleeve shirts, Abercrombie and Fitch skinny jeans, 26 b cup bras, a lime green makeup bag, Walmart brand granny panties, and a straightener. She gently adds to the suitcase a teddy bear, kissing him on the head. He is ragged from hard use, his stained limbs sewn back to his fluffy body multiple times. Brent gave her that bear, Lovey, for her fourth birthday. She is leaving Hope behind, never to return.

She found an advertisement for a modeling job on an Internet chat room, an ad looking for slender teenage girls, paying two thousand dollars for each photo shoot. The ad asked for girls to send in sexy pictures but gave few details other than the monetary compensation and an email address. She emailed some pictures of herself in a bikini and her cell phone number to the modeling director.

Fifteen minutes later he called her, telling her how beautiful she is, how she can live a life of luxury on the West coast with no parent telling her what to do. She opened up to the smooth talker, melting from his manly, Australian accent, telling him

about her insecurities, loneliness and hatred for her mom and hometown, stepping into his strategically placed trap.

He has sent a limousine to pick her up at her house and drive her to the airport, where she will be flown to Los Angeles, California. He assured her in his sexy voice, "Baby girl, you will forget about that inconsiderate mummy of yours when you live with me. I can give you a life of adventure," as he typed her name into a list of new recruits for hardcore child porn.

Before she leaves the house, she places this note on Laura's bed:

Toodle-oo

Mother from a young age my life has been
Quite dreadful due to your lack of concern.
You yell out to me, "What does this life mean?"
Try devotion or love and you might learn.

The only good thing you have ever done
Was marry the kind, immaculate Brent.
To your pitch black he was the midday sun,
He the fulfillment to your malcontent.

But Mom you had to have more than one cock,
You fucked a fiend, you queen of disgrace
You lied to me, trickery your bedrock
Emma the bastard, Sampson her father.

Goodbye, you will never see me again.
Go pray with my holy father, Amen.

Contributor Biographies

Khalilah Al-Amin loves finding new ways to communicate with people whether through design, art, writing, music, etc. She tends to romanticize everything and enjoys writing about things she has never experienced. *Harrison Bergeron* by Kurt Vonnegut is probably her favorite short story.

Afinju Bailey was born in Monroe, Louisiana and was home-schooled until he entered college. He began his junior year this fall. His two poems, though not necessarily meant to be read together, were both inspired by fond memories of his siblings.

Sarah Bryant is a graduate student of martial arts at Louisiana Tech University. Her literary role models include but are not limited to Napoleon Dynamite, Judd Nelson, Sabrina, the Teenage Witch, and of course, Cameron Frye. Born in Smallville, KS, Sarah enjoys helping aspiring super heroes and villains, but her ultimate dream is to write a novel about the time she bested Jackie Chan with the five point palm exploding heart technique.

Zeppy Cheng is an author whose only claim to importance is an IQ of 146, of which he is inordinately proud, probably to his own detriment. He has written seven books and four novellas, none of which have been published, much to his chagrin. Time will tell whether this is bad luck or he is simply incompetent.

Brandie Crain is a high school English teacher and dual enrollment instructor at Peabody High School in Alexandria, Louisiana and a graduate student at Louisiana Tech University, studying English, in the hopes of someday teaching at the collegiate level. She is wife to James and mother to William and Maggie. When not studying or grading papers, the four of them enjoy riding their bikes or planning their next vacation. Words and family and travel--that pretty much sums Brandie up!

Kyndal Evans is a computer science student at Louisiana Tech University. Writing is her favorite pursuit and her inspiration to pursue video game design: to create stories with multiple paths. Sometimes, however, it is her outlet. Words have kept her alive through immense pain, some physical, some not so.

Nathaniel Gardner is a finance major at Louisiana Tech University, an aspiring attorney, and a lover of fiction. He is chiseling away at the work of art that is his life.

Kailee Harkins is a Secondary English major at Louisiana Tech University. Her love for writing stems from my first love which is Jesus Christ. God himself and His creation are her inspiration, and she enjoys bringing God glory through her poetry. Acts 20:24

A. B. Harrison is a Masters student at Louisiana Tech University in the department of theatre. He has his Bachelors in Secondary English Education and will be pursuing his MFA in Playwriting from Southern Illinois University. He has previously served as President and Vice-President of the Louisiana Tech Poetry Society, and currently he is the Editor-in-Chief, a position he has held for the past three years.

Gabriella Lindsay is a freelance photographer and has pursued photography since the first time she picked up a camera. She currently attends Louisiana Tech University and plans to major in secondary English education.

Nathaniel Meeks is a kinesiology student studying to be a physical therapist at Louisiana Tech University. He writes poetry in his free time to relax and let go of stress.

Meredith McWhirter is a sophomore studio art major and is originally from Katy, Texas. Her focus is on ceramics, but she is finding her passion for many different areas of design. She strives to make work bring up feelings of warmth, either reminding the viewer of good times and feeling safe or wanting to lie on a beach in the sun. Her hope is that for just a moment her work will take the audience somewhere fun and exciting and set them free from daily life.

Leighann Myers is a sophomore student at Louisiana Tech University.

Caitlyn Elizabeth Petrus is an English Literature Major at Louisiana Tech. She is a member of the Louisiana Tech Poetry Society and enjoys creative writing, especially prose. She writes

poems and lyrics as they come to her and as an outlet to express what is happening inside of her head.

Cinthia Alicia Rincon is a Studio Art major at Louisiana Tech University. She is from Houston, TX, and she moved to Ruston at the beginning of summer in 2015, three days after high school graduation. She was originally a Professional Aviation major but changed majors when some unexpected events happened in her life. This wasn't a huge change for her because she has been creating art for years and continues to do so as she follows her passion to create.

ReAnna Rowden is a senior English major at Louisiana Tech University and a native of Jonesboro, Louisiana. She is twenty but has written poetry since her discovery of literature and its appeal during middle school. She earned a silver key distinction in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards for a selection of her poetry during her senior year of high school. Also, since her entrance into Louisiana Tech, three of her poems received publication in the first volume of *The Quatrain* and one poem in the second volume. Her primary purpose for seeking publication in the third volume of *The Quatrain* is to continue to expose her work to new audiences and, in effect, grow closer to becoming a poet in her own right.

Tristan Salter often considers how humanity gets bored so easily, tending to let the magic fade from the most wonderful things. Whether it be air travel, outer space, the wonders of nature, or even love. This has always troubled Tristan as well as intrigued him. There's no better way to tackle that fear and intrigue, for him personally, than to write it down.

Marshall Schoth is currently enrolled at Louisiana Tech University. He is pursuing a Bachelor's degree in the field of mechanical engineering which may be surprising coming from a poet. However, he strives to be a renaissance man, as the great Grecian philosopher Thucydides said, "The State that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting by fools."

Katie Welch is a freshman at Louisiana Tech University. She is currently a pre-nursing major (college of ANS) on the road to become a Nurse Practitioner.

Kenneth West is a writer from Monroe, Louisiana. He graduated with a BA in English from Louisiana Tech University in 2017. He enjoys writing and learning new things. Included among his many vices are reading too many popular history books and eating too much candy, and although he has an insipid personality, he hopes to find readers who take pleasure in his written works. In his writing, West tries to show the dissonance between individuals as they are and how they perceive themselves. Other recurring motifs include animals, desire, the nature of violence, the limits of communication, and the extent to which we are all trapped within our minds and bodies.

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