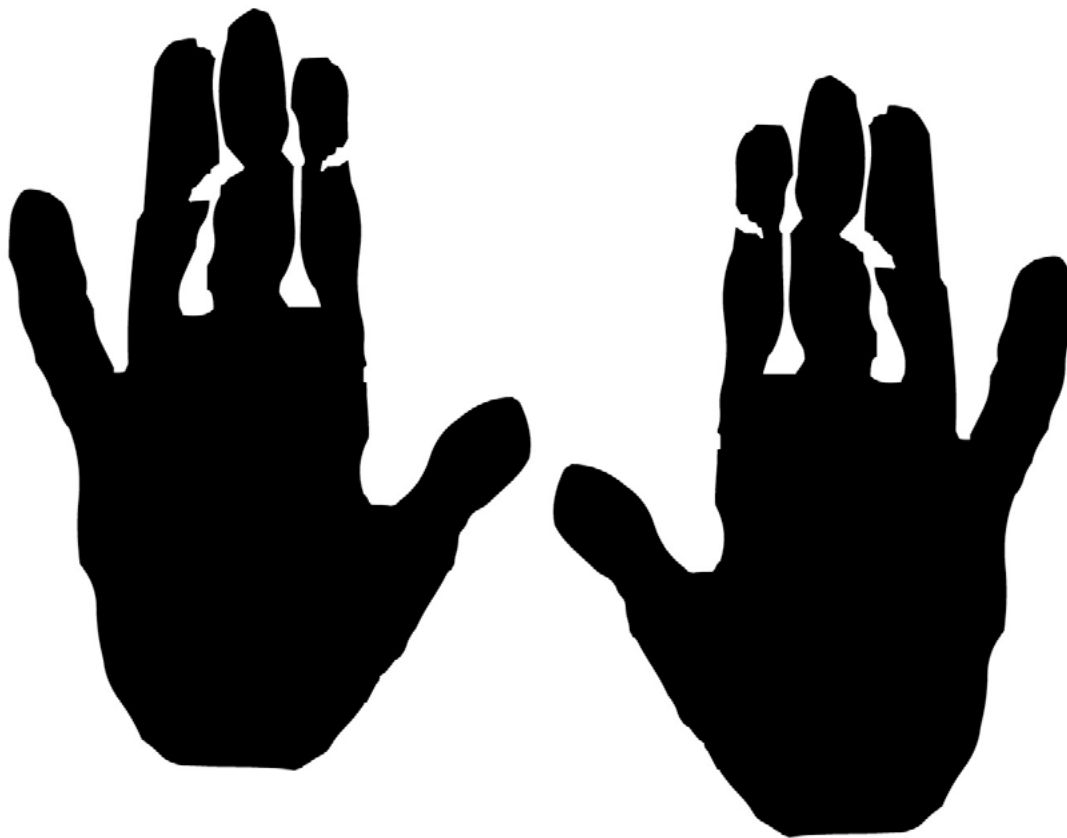


*The Laurel*  
*Fall 2011*



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*Photography in the Fiction section by Jeremy Martin, Paige Winston & Manuela Marin Salcedo.*

***A Constant***

The sun lies dead behind their mighty form.  
To see the shaky tops of endless leaf;  
their bark is taut as childhood belief.  
A sight I know as beauty, yet forlorn.  
The sky is scratched by their powerful gait.  
The chutes above my tiny little head  
pass judgment down from their almighty stead.  
Quite kind, they say “forgive” with every sway  
but never quite acknowledge my small frame.  
The mouse before the cat is spared, for shame,  
as Cat turns teeth to plowshare with a file.  
And I, for one, have found more than my aim  
from walks among the woods; my toothless flame.  
Among the wooden scented pine-strewn aisles.

***Kevin Cooley***



*Photo: Lisa Malmgren*

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*The Wheel Won't Stop Spinning*

The night will come  
Like a vulture for your prey  
The bags around your eyes, tell a story  
Of a life once lost

I'm not a poet  
Don't kill the messenger  
Insects will flock to the scene of your crime  
We'll scream victory, as our numbers rise to one  
This is the day the black sheep will take hold

Repeat the endless night, dream of her lost faith  
Wasps sing like a choir above your lost faith  
The scoundrels will attack the weary and weak  
The frail will consume all that you know  
Take a chance on luck; pay the loan for your sin

We're watching, we're waiting  
Like a cross on the tomb  
Line em up, sink em in, sink em in  
We've done all we could, there's no stopping him now

I don't mean to sound literal,  
The words flow like sludge  
His hair and his flesh amongst the maggots and hosts  
Parasites live off your lost dreams  
They've been waiting for the chance to cry out your name

*Jacob Fischer*

---

Save the sin for the light, its call knows no end,  
The queen of your doubts writes a number on your chest  
Read it off, read it loud, read it proud for none to hear  
These images are caged in your mind like a rat

The sirens wail and sing a song of temptation  
The blood on your hands sings a song of temptation  
You gave in, you forgot, how pathetic of you  
Now you're pacing back and forth, laying grass down at your feet  
Repeat, repeat, repeat and repeat

You'll drive yourself mad, if you keep up this game  
Save yourself the time, give up the charade  
Sink em in, Sink em in  
Line em up, Sink em in  
Just murdering your loved ones because you were lonely  
Your hands won't stop shaking till their wrapped around my throat  
See if I care, see who cares to listen

My hour has come  
I'll accept my death like a blind man

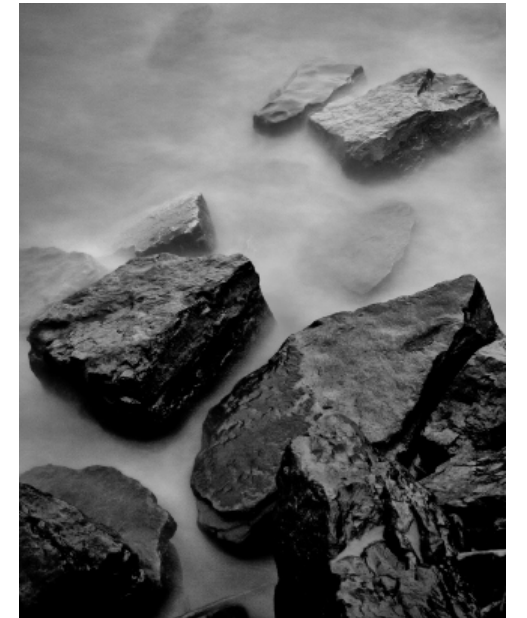
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*Wisdom*

My heart convulses in the fluttering of this narcissistic nightmare asking all agents of proverbial chaos to stall, while the constellations of a stargazing wonderer contemplate the nature of a backyard fistfight. Now is liberation is now. We live and lie in this dead sinking story that is not immune to the inherent purity of the sun in my eyes. So we'll crowd together in a cellar door and make a fleeting attempt to build a fire, and we'll grow humble before the all mighty power of the passive aggressives. The sea will silence us all and we'll exclude by violence because it's all we know and tonight never had a reason to pompously believe that it would be any different. Because this is just between you and me and the sky and because we're not the intended, and this is what keeps us staring at the top floor, living sin in grey, addicted to the progress of elimination. She stares to fall. The universe has expanded so hideously but never took the time to answer the questioning nature of September or the color of dysfunction. My lips explode into a smile.

*Bill Mulligan*

*Photo: Jeremy Martin*



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*On Listening To Miles Davis' Kind of Blue While Reading Beowulf*

Ah, how one can pair with two! And yet, how two can so naturally become one; Anglo-Saxons anglin' their saxes, if you will.

I can hear it in Heorot, the alliterative fusion of that jazz, of those warrior cries, ringing—nay, bopping—coolly off the stone walls. Unruffled, modal improvisations flinging Grendel off to his vibrato forest, his mother back below the swan-road—inconceivably far from the effervescent Green Dolphin Street. Quintets, sextets, even full orchestras of men, slain under the lullabies of the dragon's horn.

Two wrinkled, convulsive scores of music; one driven by heroism, the other by heroin.

The stuff of heroes, the stuff of epics.

Most gracious and fair-minded hunter burned to the heavens; the dragon's horn pitched to the sea, drifting along the whale's way, headed back to the Bronx. Brass trumpets, iron shields, wily shouts of impromptu passion: all gifts for two simple men.

Two heroes.

Two cats that could really play.

*Chris Radey*



*Photo: Lisa Malmgren*

---

*Stray Cats*

We are the painted people, the ones with scars to speak of,  
The ones that wouldn't follow suit.

The younglings,  
with scraped knees and scabs we'd picked  
until they bleed.

the wanderers,  
always called back to where we should be  
and never responding well.

We are the in between,  
The not sure where we are,  
But sure that we're alive.

The runners;  
The climbers;  
The freedom finders;

The ones who make the doors when we can't find them.

The mural people  
Painting and chalking,  
Colouring, caulking,  
Stretching, defining  
Until the canvas is obsolete,

We are the live ones, and  
We refuse to let us die.

*Karly Gombert*

---

*Westermore*

At dusk's last rattling echo of life,  
The hallowed hollow of the sun's final light  
Breaks through the cracks of gnarled fingers,  
Makes stained glass of the horizon.

Sanctified spirits, the relics of our time  
Show themselves only in the canopy  
Of a vast and wild divide, of  
Limbs strong enough to break our fall.

And in that sacred amber glow,  
With a swift and blinding strike  
One reaches out to sainthood  
Easily as tear is dropped from its duct.

We reach, we run, we fly into the westermore.  
The only God we know is a foreign shore.

*Samantha Berkhead*



---

*Rubber Wings*

Grey-brown muck bearding my tires, I spun them just after 9: past that one midtown jeweler near Bluebird Square—the one with the neon awning, drooping below the slushed-over sidewalk like a shaggy half-folded umbrella. Imagining men with skinny black ties disappearing inside a chute of diamond-glass, the way a tail skitters through a doggie door, revolving portals flapping like rubber wings. That one midtown jeweler with the boisterous façade of screaming scintilla, aqua blue laid over deeper blue, source of shiny necklace pining and cold bracelets for another. But I spun home under a soft sky and slumped, jejune and dank, like a melted snowman in March.

*Patrick Francis Hosken*



*Photo: Lisa Malmgren*

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*Photo: Maria Hayes*





*Photo: Paige Winston*

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*Sacrificing Air for Relief*

Do you get it yet?  
The guilt will swallow you whole if you do not find  
higher ground.  
Is it weak to move on, or is it a sign of growth?  
We are all the same,  
your insides spill out just like mine.  
Fall back on that crutch,  
and it's curtains for your life.  
Mess up once more and I swear I'll take your life.  
My decision isn't drastic,  
when the pain you've caused has destroyed happiness.  
This is your last chance,  
I feel the blade sharpening in my hand.  
When you wake, it will be all gone.  
Don't let it come back up,  
don't regurgitate those transgressions.  
Asphyxia, asphyxia.  
I scream at the mirror to another deaf body.  
This tragic cognizance weaves a noose around my neck.  
You are standing on a chair,  
you are balancing on a bridge.  
Burn the aftertaste,  
it rots your core from the inside out.  
Asphyxia, asphyxia,  
the lack of oxygen serves you right.

*Jacob Fischer*

---

*Morning Cigarette*

Weekdays, we'll sit in your car, an odd  
swirling combination of blue and purple,  
and make the dashboard disappear behind  
cloudy exhales. We drag like mobsters  
parked on a leafy side street in October.

Inch-cracked windows as deep valleys,  
rocky canyons to bed our thumb-flicked ashes.  
Pine-shaped, pine-scented fresheners dangling  
from the rearview, filters yellowing, heat  
on low to waft the filthy wisps away.

Turn on the radio to pass the time  
as two young tokens share a smoke inside  
the hatchback lung-plaque tomb. No words, just wind.  
When it burns down to the spotted filter,  
pitch it to the twiggy leaf pile near the curb.

Still not late for school, we ride down Dewey  
past the grime of a gas station that peddles  
packs of Camel Lights to creamy teens.  
Enter the archway, wipe your wet feet  
and stink the stuffy hallways with a smile.

Jagged breath a morning signature  
of miscast revelry and young disdain.  
Flex grins and stench the students passing by  
with campfire mouth. Seventeen and suck in  
and watch your world dance up like swigs of smoke.

*Patrick Francis Hosken*

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*Both*

Brick stones  
hard pebbles  
lovely rocks  
& buttercups.

Burning trees  
empty lots  
lost homes  
& bubble yum.

Falling skies  
broken kites  
crashed flights  
& ice cream.

Hell on earth  
or  
American dream

Truth: There is no day or night

What is evil demands destruction.  
What blossoms did not come without volcanoes erupting!

Bloody on this stoop, empty fallen skies and fire beneath,  
holding buttercups, bubble yum, & ice cream.

*Felice Brooks*



*Photo: Lisa Malmgren*

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*Escaping Agony's Company to Discover Eden's Ecstasy*

They want to take away my dignity, inflict the negativity, can't let the haters get to me. When it comes to success, I'm obsessed with the epitome. I could care less what they think of me. I have to live up to expectations what I expect myself to be. And eventually become the person I was meant to be. Even if it brings the end of me, I'm going to gather ends until the very end of me. Tired of being at the bottom staring at the top, it's time for me to blossom strait flossing my knot, rocking the spot, lowered in a casket and my body's going to rot. There was not anything I could say; I had to walk away. I can't waste my life in this economic plague making slave pay on a minimum level. I had to indulge my infatuation with harnessing potential. Self-centered inward thought mixed with an abundance of admission evicted poverty's stone hearted friction. It's not about emotion. It's about getting cash. Entertainment is a business emotionality detached. With that being stated, malice is currency. It's good to be hated. Homeless no longer, the beautiful side of capitalism I should have come here sooner. It took me a while to find the path. The days tick away; life is an hourglass. Photographs, memories, still moments in time, coming to terms with the imperfect design is the definition of wisdom, diamonds with the rings to fit them. Ration the knowledge and escape the prison, express my ideas of socialism to the masses and the crowds who stand below the acid clouds. To the intellect the toxin is not bearable, but if attention is paid, gasmasks are available. If that last line went over your head, read it once more, and I will say it again.

*Philip Nichols*



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*GHAZAL*

The sirens surround the psychosis of the sidewalks,  
beckoning the reckoning of so many unsung faces.  
I've lost the philosophy of a day in the wings of a moth,  
swarming to the moonlight of the trees, always to leave no traces.  
The anonymous unanimity of a smile stretches and splinters  
To ask the desolate, disparate, downfall of man what this place is.  
Put down the camera and pick up a rock, for we've watched in awe as  
The talents of eloquent agitators go on unwanted and wasted.  
Words stumble and clumsily crash in this threnody of a fantasy.  
We're all caught in the fall of a star, willing to be shocked in its reflection on their faces.

*Bill Mulligan*



*Photo: Kaitlin Lindahl*

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*Burnt Around the Edges*

At the pulpit he stands with his sermon,  
a series of questions to ask.

I'm not sure I want to recite my answers aloud.  
This vice has me contending with the angels that hover.

Will my disclosure of this inner nest be graded on a curve?

I do not want to fail,

I do not want to rip apart this suture that has kept me upright.

Is this what he's trying to verbalize,  
hurling exasperation and hope in my direction -  
to release this vanity?

Untangle the darkness to reveal a hidden light?

If not harnessed, if not protected  
doesn't the light get blown out?

Will that flicker of hope flicker no more;  
will it fade away to the dust?

I was never very good  
at keeping my clothes clean.  
These britches have holes -  
too many to count.  
Patched with scraps, they've been maintained  
by the worn shirts and grandma's torn quilts.

They were only a temporary fix.  
For one more day they were new.

But the seams from each stitch  
knew all along that they couldn't suffice,  
and found their way loose.

The new becomes old.  
And I think, "What's the use?"

I'm quite fond of the rags.  
They've always been the most comfortable;  
they've yet to let me down.

I don't want to be your Christmas cut-out.  
I've always preferred the ones with their edges a bit crisped.

And this madness I'm told is driven,  
by the cracks we can't seem to hide.

We desperately search for the frosting to cover,  
forgetting the beauty inside.

*Jessica Thompson*



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*Forsaking Poverty*

Staring at upper middle class homes, Middle America is the American dream, the blonde wife followed by beautiful children with wisdom and insights. This means he's made it no more Christmases giftless feeling the anguish. A new type of world, a different kind of language has acknowledged one's existence; thank God for persistence. Royalties in perpetuity, imagination equals currency on a quarterly basis. Every four months, pick up the paychecks. Socially awkward purposely gracious, disperse the ambition with patients when the moment is correct. Hopelessly desperate, focus on what's next, stretch out the process. Sleeping alone, phening for the opposite sex will permanently alter a person and make the purpose of existence become uncertain. What is he to do when life is a mystery and he's missing all of the clues? Lacking the substance of intellectual truths,

Realize,

Accomplishment's internal organs shut down when distraction abominates victory's growth and development; how does one eradicate this paralyzing sickness?

Until the heart stops pumping blood, legs give out from underneath, and air refuses to enter forcing the breath to cease

Dominated by tunnel vision to chase goals, endlessly pursue ambition, and keep a clear focus that dissociates its self with thoughts that are ambiguous

Micro moments of bliss, Nano seconds of content, and snippets of understanding make the world bearable again.

*Philip Nichols*

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*Blank Stares*

All your wildest dreams will eventually sell you out,  
the artist is dragged down by his vices again.  
Can you keep these demons in your closet forever?  
Step away from the open flame,  
its heat can cause blisters on your soul.

Carry on as you please,  
just remember the chains that pull at your neck.  
Face to face with what you battle,  
your actions will cause you the most pain.

What if we can't wake up?  
You will never find what you're looking for  
with that blindfold cinched across your face.  
Break free, break free,  
we have shattered our backs for much less than this.

Do not be brave, do not be bold,  
be stronger than your strongest urges.  
The sin holds you down by the wrists,  
injecting the thinnest of venom into your veins.  
Your blood becomes one with the disease.

*Jacob Fischer*

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*“Favourite Colours”  
Patrick Francis Hosken*

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*iloveyou*

Simple strokes, letters so tight together, just about to squeeze out a nonexistent syllable, and then I utter a smile in these words that are so cold that you might try to blanket them with a silent cry of your truth. Sounds that don't move but relax with each turning of a note. It's a girl's—it's a boy's—I wish I can make out the voice of this instrumental piece. I was a catalog of taped up words, a note under your pillow, something unsaid but these letters, these words were snuggled too comfortable for me to say them out loud. And then I pronounce these scrunched up words that are so melodic—yet devious that you might try to keep the melody playing by saying it back to me. And you did. These were the sounds that were sickening to just write on the wall. You taught me this native language, and now that I speak it I can't stop saying these simplistic words. And I can't—I really can't. And I won't—I really won't. I learned no rhymes, no songs, but the strumming notes in my heart. I thought they were cold, but you hugged these words by stroking them like they were yours.

*Alexandra Henry*

*Photo:  
Paige Winston*



---

Don't talk when I flutter on by  
for I, you know, won't listen.  
I'm on a cloud floating in the sky  
listening to the breezes and their whistling.

Don't waste your breath in my ear  
or try to catch my green-blue eye  
For everything is blocked; I can't hear  
nor can I see as I fly.

I look to the stars for guidance  
and lay down on a gentle cloud  
I flutter my wings when I get the chance  
and listen for the lack of loud.

I am extraordinary, empirical  
I'm not just another peasant.  
And in a world where butterflies are symmetrical,  
I'm the one that isn't.

*Emily M. Steves*

11:51 p.m.  
3/8/10

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*Depletion*

I've got a perforated paper mustache—  
the kind that you find on the classroom floor.  
Banished to the earth like a maverick angel,  
user turns abuser; they don't need you anymore.

Chalk chipped by hollow  
men. Hatred grows in all  
of them. Watch. them. Die.

Sixty-one staples in an ammunition clip;  
fire a pot shot, make a paper soldier bleed.  
Shoot every bolt and drop any hostile packet  
and the bullets deplete—but you've got a sound mind.

Chalk-white glue, it sticks  
to fat fingers. Hatred glues  
the paper to our living flesh.

Divine scissors, though, are blind and just.  
And shred the paper, but can't touch us.

*Kevin Cooley*

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*The Exclusivity of Corn*

If each girl that did not wish to hold company with me were instead a field of corn, there would be no such thing as a starving child. All the while, as the irony gives way to sarcasm, a life without an excavated rib becomes increasingly difficult to fathom. Items are placed in the window, and people walk back and forth. But, it's a private location and the store is closed. The aristocracy's court is not a place for any penniless peasant. Cynical eyes break contact and drift to the exit. Kindness is returned with rejection that I barely sustain instantaneously I'm reminding myself of why I came. The quest is to discover grace, empathy, taste, and character, but of what she is seeking I am only a caricature. A distorted image of what's acceptable, the evaluation is skeptical. A galaxy away from exceptional, my offering fails to parallel. The distance between up (where her hand his held) and down (where my insignificance dwells) is equivalent to mileage separating heaven and hell. Confused and perplexed, emotionally stunted by this curse-like hex! Language and gestures dishonor its context, making the notion of conquest complex! If each girl that did not wish to hold company with me were instead a currency plant, I would cultivate earth's agriculture with a warm and tender hand using the bulk of my crop to sponsor an expensive estate with extensive expansions to every starving child.

*Philip Nichols*

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*Mister Moss*

King of the lichens,  
Keeper of my wretched heath—  
Let be the lost souls.

*Samantha Berkhead*

*Modernist Poem #2*

Belching malodorous machine  
Scenic route 125

*Laurie Branch*

*the poets*

line by line, we cut.  
the words turn into liquid,  
entr'ing hungry veins.

*Samantha Berkhead*



*"Enchanted Morning"*  
*Jeremy Martin*



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*Track 3*

By nature we can't figure ourselves out,  
obsessing on the purpose of the wind,  
the meaning of the ladybug outside,  
the reason that we end up where we do,  
forgetting that time doesn't slow for us  
to soul-search. Clocks still chime, alarms go off,  
but we don't ever really wake up,  
too busy dreaming of that deeper meaning  
to get up and go live it, but that won't  
change anything; we're pilgrims now and pilgrims  
we'll stay until there's nothing left to search for.

*Jess Rehac*

*Photo: Lisa Malmgren*



*Track 5*

Five seconds' silence introduces the album,  
a gentle crackling perks up the ears, urges  
the body into relaxing despite the hours  
of work ahead. Soft voices tell stories to calm  
the mind while sweet guitars start tapping fingers  
and bringing forward a smile. They need each other  
and always will, the man and his vinyl heart.

*Jess Rehac*

---

*Never mind*

I like to think I'll see you again one day.

We'll be in our late twenties in the supermarket comparing peanut butter prices on aisle 4 -

Your hair will be shorter and your shoes will be clean but you'll still look like you.

You'd tap me on the shoulder and you'd say my name like it was a question and my eyes would widen  
and I'd wrap my arms around your now much broader shoulders and laugh a kind of nervous laugh.  
You'll ask me how I am and how I've been and what I'm up to now.

I'll be engaged.

He'll be on aisle 2 picking out paper towels and just when I'm about to tell you the news he'll come up  
behind me and kiss my cheek and toss the paper towels in the cart. He'll nod at you and you'll smile a  
smile that seems a bit off and he'll introduce himself.

His name could be Jeff.

You'd shake his hand and talk about your lines of work.

And you'd probably notice he has a little bit of you in him.

He'll remind me we have to meet the wedding planner in 15 and I'll rush our goodbye

And you'd tell me that it was really nice to see me and you're glad I'm doing well

And your voice would sound a little stale and your smile would still be off

And I'd look back a few times walking to the express line.

And on the way home Jeff will ask me about you

And I'll shake my head and say you were just some kid from high school

And I'll change the subject to our color scheme

And then I'll be reading the paper before work the next morning,

And I'll read your horoscope.

And I'll pick up my phone and dial your number,  
because I'll still remember it.

But I won't call.

I won't call

*Kara Michelino*



*On Sleep:*

11/4

I think I'm screaming in my sleep, again, something I haven't done since infancy—waking up so soaked in sweat that the cold clings unfor-givingly.

Throat scabbled raw, like something's clawing its way out, protected by unconsciousness the screams come tearing out.

Sometimes I wake fitfully, jaw clenched shut in agony, lips sore and bleeding, marked where I've been biting them habitually.

She says I've been silent, but this body speaks in opposite with the telltale aches and pains of an un-told story held—imprisonment.

11/5

I've been waking in a dazed state, wondering how I slept this late, jaw clenched from biting down so hard, aching from the teeth that grate.

Try to stop these words from forming, stop this part with screams of warning, where I'm screeching unintelligibly, where everyone's abandoned me—and I pull myself awake.

I feel the heat rise to my face.



And I can't help but wonder why I'm exhausted all the time.

Am I fighting in my sleep? Some mysterious thing that I can't see, sucking strength, and pinning wrists and torso to the sheets?

Why am I so frightened in my wake, like I've just run in haste from all the things I've locked away, like I can't seem to stay asleep whether during night or day.

What demons might these be, that constrict me in my sleep, leaving scratches on my arms to which no owners can be seen.

I find myself drawn to older days, where I'd scream for mamma when I'd wake, knowing she would have an answer and force this pattern quick to break.

But now I find myself alone

Forced, in part, to take the blows, and figure out quite hastily why this memory has shown. Maybe the answer lies in sleep, all thoughts tossed in a heap, left to fester unprotected in the gleam of moonlight's creep.

Maybe it's just me, and eyes must be closed to see—this is how things have to be.

*Karly Gombert*



---

*Fearfully Fearless*

I desire for the absence of fear to reside in me  
As I open this shut wooden domed door into the mystery of eternity.  
I wish upon a broken light  
That cracks into dawn's mellow pale sight.  
The sun is lying down tonight earlier than I assumed,  
And rays of sapphire freeze its core as I apprehend I'm doomed.

I desire for the absence of fear to partake in holding me.  
Closely I fall asleep to the venue of the dawn, tightly.  
But I'm trembling in the afterglow of mistakes.  
I don't know what other emotion this little world can take.  
All of them reside inside eight billion souls,  
I come to recognize I'm impotent to control what the future holds.

I desire for what will never be.  
I fear into souls who don't fear me.

*Kimberly Bates*

*Photo:  
Paige Winston*



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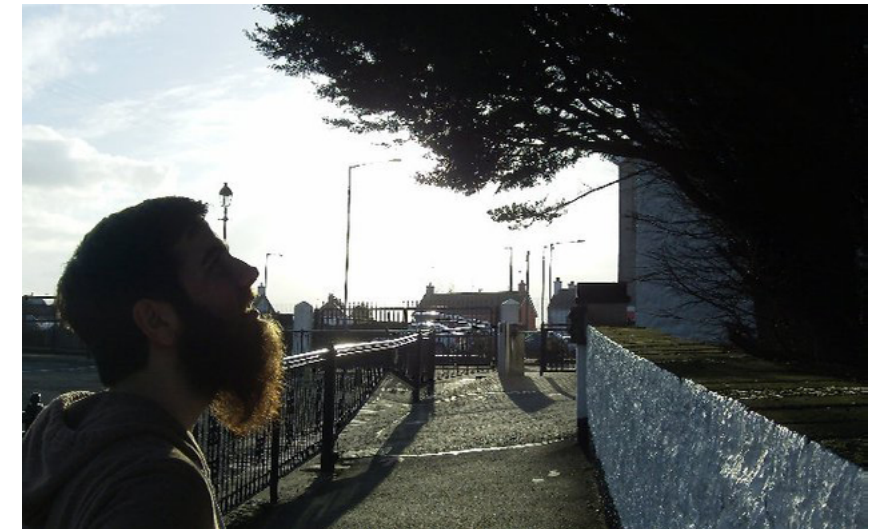
*Freedom.*

A piece of chalk moves slowly across the board,  
Handwriting forming words,  
Exposing the inner workings  
Of a mind.  
To some,  
A piece of chalk  
is something  
disposable.  
It's a simple stick  
Of calcium carbonate.  
But to me,  
A piece of chalk,  
A pencil,  
A pen,  
Represents something else.  
A piece of chalk is freedom.  
It's an escape from reality.  
The problems in my life  
Are staples,  
holding me down  
and controlling me.  
Writing releases  
The thoughts, feelings,  
And emotions  
I have.  
The worries fade.

*Sara Ward*



*Photo:  
Jeremy Martin*



*Photo: Chris Radey*



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*Basements*

We are alone and unaware, baring that gestalt of a fleeting fallacy that this is the eventual takeover that was promised to a dreadlocked orgy of watercolors and bear feet. We are the liars, manipulative.

We find ourselves in the world's worst case scenario color scheme and drown in the central, neutral nature of the empty side streets that solemnly fall into the crushing headlights of self awareness.

We're so intricately apathetic and impeccable in our innate need for the extra and even more so for the ordinary.

Bludgeoning and burdening the system I have come into the temptation of creation and I have been shaken to my inadequate, emaciated core that some people choose to see through wine glasses and the swirling, spiraling haze of the bluest eyes that a summer could hold up and justifiably say is its handy work.

Shamelessly I have watched the promise of the potential fade on a home recording that I cannot afford,

as I find myself only recreating what I have found and the only advice that I can give in the future tense is to run like hell.



*Photo: Manuela Marin Salcedo*

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*Bill Mulligan*

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*The Weather Outside*

Past the gaudy display of complimentary teas and the stale smell of hotel soaps, 212 looms ahead, waiting for our keycard-keys.

Snowy Buffalo, waiting, cries, "Please!" She's ears-deep caught between the ropes of nature's snowflake tic-tac-toe game. These

kitschy Christmastime displays of fake trees are starting to perturb my highest hopes for a peaceful New Year's. "Cheese!"

cries a gaggle of carolers on cheerful speers, posing as a daguerreotype of dopes. And since we've no place to go, fees

accruing each hour we soak the complimentary teas and shaky-at-best Wi-Fi and cheap hotel soaps, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow, with ease.

*Patrick Francis Hosken*

December 26, 2010 (11:17 p.m.)  
Staybridge Suites, South Buffalo, N.Y.



*Photo:  
Lisa Malmgren*

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*Pushing Up Crazyies*  
*By: Terence Hartnett*

I

My guy says it was acting out. He talks about my mom and my father figures, he talks about the pressures of the information age, about how life is hard and we all cope in different ways. My guy also has deemed it reasonable to call himself a counselor, he claims to know I am making progress, he can see it. He can't see that progress is as easy as nodding your head and then burying it in your hands. I have never been able to cry on demand; thank God my guy has low standards.

Prison, for me, has been about reflection. But reflection is more about lying than telling the truth. You find yourself a nice beginning-middle-end. What you have time to do is realign your life with yourself as the protagonist. It is more comfortable, maybe more healthy, to think of the foul shit that brought you to this point as a bump in the road. Maybe the problem was going off the road altogether. Maybe thinking of your life as a road works better in commencement speeches than in shitty jailbird self-reflection essays. Regardless, a reflection essay on the Events of the Fifteenth was asked for and lo-and-behold-a-reflection-essay-you-shall-fucking-get. But first a theme; all stories need one, here's mine: Loneliness is not about people, it is about sympathy.

I was a lonely boy. I had friends. You may have called me popular because people wanted me around. Who's to say when the loneliness started? Maybe it was there all along. I have been alien. Everyone knew something that I didn't. We were dancing and I didn't know the steps.

My guy says, and I concur, that drug abusers fall into one of two constituencies. The first constituency is the daring. Drugs are dangerous, we were warned of them long before we had access to them. When they become available, the people who were once fence-jumpers and rock-throwers become pot-smokers, maybe pill-sniffers (if their moms really didn't love them—right guy?). In my considerable-but-unfortunately-interrupted drug exploits, I have found this group fickle, jumping into this world of ours, then moving on to another daring exploit, like mountain-climbing or being openly gay. They aren't in it for the long haul. I belong to the other constituency. We are the lifers. We don't apologize for our dalliances with psychopharmacology and never will. I am certainly not daring, and began doing drugs only on the precondition of safety. When my guy told me about the second group, I was stripped naked by self-recognition.

My constituency is unconcerned or uninterested in the values of society.

There is a bond in being left out. It's like cigarettes. I can't count the number of strangers I have gotten to know through shared habit. I won't tell you how many of my sexual encounters, as they are referred to by my guy, began with the flick of a lighter. There's camaraderie there, a bond born of being on the outside of it all.

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and flipping and snorting yourselves into unity. Suddenly it's everyone else that doesn't-fucking-get-it.

II

And then Jill. She and I had distilled that unity down to a beautiful duality. We talked. Talking made it better, somehow, simpler. Like we both had out of tune instruments but they sounded good together. The sex followed soon after, and why not?

One morning, obviously before the Great and Significant Date That You Are Interested In, the 15th of October, Jill and I were lying in bed after a night out. I am plagued by the philosophical hangover, I used to wake many mornings with the why-why-whys. We lit a joint, it helped the physical hangover but exasperated the philosophical.

It was one of many discussions we had in bed on a long morning. I know how it started because I made a note: "We get high to prove to ourselves we don't have to." I rambled to her: We get high and the whole time we are thinking about what we should be doing as soon as we stop getting high so much. I was feeling stoned and loving not the fact that I was stoned but the ability to picture the idea of myself sober and conquering the world. Soon the world-conquering-sober-superhero image of myself only came with the drugs. It was the way the chemicals claim your brain. They don't take it like an army takes a city but like a bunch of barflies take a bar. Slowly and with smiles, but soon it's just the regulars and when someone comes in they don't stay because they so clearly don't belong. I turned to wrap her in my arms. She had been staring at the wall as I talked and part of me wondered if she had quietly dosed in bed, in the style of The Sadly Late but Undeniably Great John Lennon.

But when she turned to me and I saw only effects of a strong joint and silent tears in her eyes. "What about me?" She let out a sob that twisted her face and shook her naked body like a sheet in the wind.

I shook my head. I can't deal with the rawly emotional. As I said, I couldn't cry if you paid me. I froze as only an emotional idiot can.

She cried, she calmed physically but still just stared when I touched her. It was like she was asleep. "Go, then." It came from her mouth, reluctantly like vomit.

III

We got back together a few days later. A bushel of weed and a cloud of powdered brown MDMA clouds my recollections of the two of us reuniting. I told a friend about it, he said he'd been there before. He called it a "Mender

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Bender.” Poetry!

Soon we were holding hands, in front of us a previously blank concrete wall that now looked like a piece of paper. The paper was a square of white chalk. On top of it I had laid stencil and sprayed paint. It now read in large letters: 2) SOME THINGS IN LIFE ARE BEYOND WORDS, EXPLAIN. Other exam questions were around, painted by our drug buddies:

1) ELABORATE ON THE FOLLOWING QUOTE: “I AM TOO SMART TO LEARN”

3) a. TURN OFF YOUR PHONE

b. WHAT TIME IS IT?

4) a. WHY?

b. WHY CAN’T YOU ANSWER THE ABOVE?

As you know, there was a place and time below each ‘page’. For a meeting. The guy who fills the gap between my right to an attorney and my cashless reality tells me not to mention the instructions, or that I wrote them. Or that I spoke at the meeting. Or that I probably decided to speak because I wanted to finally give Jill an answer (to keep up with my whole linearity theme). I choose to tell you.

Here’s what I said, more or less:

“Friends! We are not afraid of reality. Of mystery. It surrounds us like air and we refuse to pretend we don’t feel the wind blowing. Science is if A then B. Economics is buyers maximizing their utility, not stuffing their faces with food and their houses with shit. World War One caused World War Two and your grandparents fucked because they missed each other so much and they had enough money to feed eight kids, that caused our parents to have less kids in order to give us all more attention and money and love (which can only be spread so thin ladies-and-gentlemen). That’s HISTORY! And then there’s language. The mouth making sounds to express lies to others and ourselves! Cramping this whole wide universe into a box won’t do. What that leaves you with is an EMPTY BOX! And religion is the icing that covers it all nicely. All of them! The ones that we acknowledge, like christianity, judaism, islam, buddhism, taoism, hinduism, and atheism. And also the ones we don’t: patriotism, psychology, capitalism, individualism, and addiction, my friends!

“We are explorers of mystery, the unknown. We are not afraid of our own minds, they are our domain, our home. Most people live their whole lives on the threshold of their minds, not daring to go inside and look around. You need help to turn on the lights and open all the doors. But it’s your mind! There is nothing but chemicals in the drugs, but in your

---

minds ladies-and-gentleman there is the infinitely unexplored. Everything beautiful that was ever created, every love that was ever loved, everything that was ever worth doing! It all originated in the deeper and darker parts of the human brain. Join us! Explore!”

The speech took place in a quad, as you well know. After I spoke, what is vaguely referred to as The Events of the Evening of the Fifteenth occurred. He has told me to remain silent about the events. But I think, Distinguished-Readers-and-Sanctimonious-Pricks, that you have come to know I can’t keep quiet for their sake. I will be unspecific in names, places and times:

After our meeting at an undisclosed location, undisclosed substances were ingested in undisclosed ways by undisclosed people pissed off with the behavior of an undisclosed species of bipedal mammal. We were angry at the world. We wanted to shift the world a little closer to the one we wanted to live in, the one we belonged to. Desire hung in the air like smoke. Alone, as I said, I cannot possibly recreate the irresistible force that moved through us like a wave, each of us resonating its frequency.

And it grew.

The building reeked of oppression. Boxiness. Each brick was holding tightly to the others in such contrived order. Inside was where minds stretched themselves to the breaking point, trying to encompass the universe. Blasphemy! No respect for the mind. No care for our world. Mystery was a dirty word in this place.

We stood in front of it, our strength untold. We were waiting for something though, a push. Then Jill’s voice rang out in the night air: “This whole place is a BOX AND THE BOX IS EMPTY!” I won’t tell you who started the fire physically. Jill quoted me, then there was fire.

Then came orange-flame-bathed confusion. Running, panicked shouts, alarms. The response was quick. I was able to watch from afar, alone again. Jill had run with the rest of them.

I stayed because I wanted to see a consequence in person. I had not given a shit for a long time and nothing had ever changed because of it. This damage was permanent. Nothing that is burned is ever brought back.

When the gurney was brought out, and it rolled, loaded, to the ambulance with quickness but not hurry, that’s when I started walking toward them. Still high, still tripping, no one saw me at first. They were spraying and pumping and radioing and shouting and writing. I tapped a cop on the shoulder. I didn’t speak. There were of course no words, no box large enough to stuff all of this into. Questions. My mind and mouth remained silent. Soon they put it together, I suppose. I was put into a car and soon sat where I do now, I haven’t seen anyone I know since The Fifteenth.



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IV

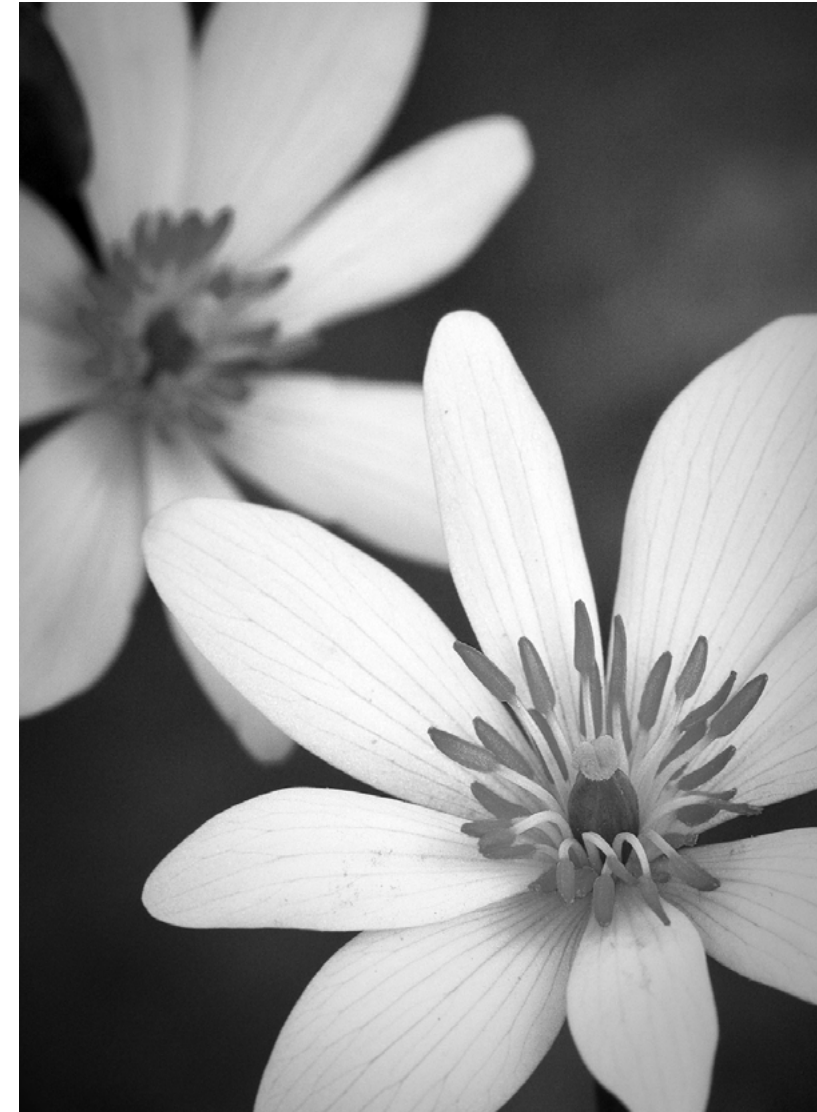
The girl, she was a grad student working on a thesis, she died. I killed her. I started a fire in their heads and it spread to a building and burned it down. She was inside. Samantha was her name. She had parents, friends, aspirations, a future.

The counselor tells me I need to associate my actions with their consequences. He cannot understand me when I tell him about how our choices are not like forks in a road. Actions well up inside us like tears, like piss, until we have to choose between letting them out or collapsing completely. So I lie and I nod and I write what I know he wants me to write. But today I woke up and couldn't stomach humoring him again.

Craziness is hard to define, as are most things that you can't point to with your finger. Anything that doesn't make sense is crazy. New ideas. One rule-of-thumb: people who get locked up for being nuts are inconvenient; people who get famous for being crazy, people like Hendrix, Newton, and Einstein, their craziness was convenient. I don't know if you'd call us crazy for what we did, but I know we were inconvenient because I am sitting in a locked room.

As I have said, I won't give you names. You know about Jill already. Why look further, though? I started a fire and a girl died. Give me a thousand years with no parole, give me the zap-zap-zap if you want. I am a killer.

I hope you realize I will not be dangerous, though, Distinguished-and-Educated-Incarcerators. I cannot be. I am crippled. Loneliness weighs down on me, imprisons me better than walls or fences. What else could you have made of me? I am a man without sympathy.



*“Bloodroot”  
Jeremy Martin*

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*Nightscape*  
*By: Brett Keegan*

I wake on a boat drifting in a lazy current. Eyes closed, I feel the boat pitch and yaw along the surface, glancing back the waves with idle slurps of water. A chill, wet air brushes my face.

I hear a deep laugh and open my eyes.

A strange man looks at me. His smile is a bit too large, his teeth a bit too flat—no canines. A series of lines, like strips of scales, runs from his forehead to his chin, forming elliptical half-circles. They shimmer in the murky air.

He laughs again, echoing.

“Nirodho,” he says, putting his finger on my nose, like one does to a child.

I wake suddenly. The clock says 6:34 a.m. I drag myself from the covers into the cold room and ready for work.

...

I stand at the register, the first day of work for the break. I put on my old uniform like a pair of old shoes. Nobody comes to the store at 8:15. I don't know why they need two cashiers to smile at non-existent customers.

“So, Nick, you finally made it to work,” says Francine, the other cashier. She walks to her register, typing her I.D to sign in.

I turn my head. “Hey, Francine,” I say.

She has rouge on her cheeks and light-pink lipstick. Her short black hair bounces lightly.

“How are you today?” she continues, smiling.

“Awesome.”

“As always?”

I nod and she laughs. “What? I'm always awesome,” I say.

She laughs again. It makes me feel uncomfortable.

“And school?” she asks.

“Do I even need to answer?” I say.

“Yes, I know.” She glances away, looking at the tile distractedly.

“How's Grace?” she asks after a pause, regaining her confident tone.

“Amazing.”

She looks surprised. “That's good.”

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“Yep, amazing grace,” I say.

Her confusion shifts to laughter. “Oh, I didn't get it. But seriously, how's Grace?”

“I'd rather not talk about it,” I say.

“C'mon, Nick. You can trust me.”

“It's complicated.”

“OK,” she says.

We stand in silence.

“Wanna get lunch together?” Francine continues.

“Why?”

“To eat.”

“What?”

“Food.”

“No.”

“You're in a grumpy mood today.”

I shrug. “Work.”

“Is that it?”

I nod.

“Nick, I know you and Grace broke up,” she says. “I'm her friend too, you know.” “Why'd you ask me about her if you already knew?”

“Because I don't.”

“What?”

“I don't know—it's just...I suppose I want to know your story. When did it happen?”

“Last month.”

A customer turns the corner. Francine greets him. I sit at the register, clicking my keyboard periodically to update the clock on the screen. The numbers slowly rise. I think of the man from my dream.

“Nirodho,” I say to myself, tasting the strange syllables.

“What?” says Francine. She hands a customer his lengthy receipt.

“I had a weird dream last night.”

“What about?” She walks over, leaning on the counter.

“Don't know.”

“Want to talk about it?”

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“No.”

After a brief silence, Francine starts humming—a pop song, I think.

The customers begin to roll in at around 10:13:45, according to my clock. Most of them crawl by with glazed eyes and frowns, then limp out the door and disappear into the snow and cloud, back to their own unhappy lives.

A young couple walks up hand-in-hand, smiling.

“How are you?” I ask.

They look at each other and smile again.

“Good,” they say in unison.

“Good,” I say as I scan their organic veggies and Greek yogurt, then look back at their smiles as they talk.

No words come to mind. I remember Grace’s sad face as the dim November days plodded along like a metronome set to a dirge. The colorless leaves sail in the wind, dancing across the solitary paths.

“Sir?” someone says, breaking my reverie.

I turn to the customer. “Yeah?”

“You forgot to scan this.” He holds up a candy bar.

“Sorry,” I say.

He swipes his credit card and signs.

“Thanks,” they say together and walk away.

...

The six-hour day ends. I go to my locker, drop off my vest and retrieve my coat.

“You can get a ride with me,” Francine says. She has her coat on, sitting at the table as if she’d been waiting. I forgot when her shift ended.

“No, I like to walk,” I say turning.

She stands and follows. “Not today. It’s windy.”

“It’s fine. I like the cold.”

“No you don’t.”

“How do you know?”

“You never did. You never swam because the water was cold.”

“People change.”

She shrugs. “Not much.”

---

“Yeah, you’re just as overprotective as ever,” I say.

She looks at me intently. “I know. I like to be there for you.”

I turn away. “Well,” I say, “I’m going to walk.”

“Fine, then let’s get going.”

We step outside, and wind smashes my face.

“Still wanna walk?” Francine asks, smiling from beneath her parka’s hood.

“I’ll take the ride,” I say after another gust.

We enter the yellow Volkswagen Beetle. It smells like lavender.

“Let’s get some heat rolling,” says Francine. She turns the key. The radio plays Lady Gaga’s latest hit.

She turns it off.

“We need to talk,” she says, pulling the car out of the space.

“How was your first semester at college?” she asks, glancing from the road. “You haven’t told me even though you’ve been home for, like, a week.”

“I don’t know.”

“Still looking at theology?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I can drive slower.”

“That’s OK.”

The cars start and go in the homebound traffic as the dashboard clock crawls.

“Nick, you haven’t been yourself lately.”

I look outside more. Some idiot waves a sign for free pizza, pelted by the wind. I’ll need to cook dinner tonight. My parents always eat dinner with friends on Friday.

“Nick?”

“What?”

“Is it Grace?”

“No.”

“It is. She dumped you and it hurts.”

“No.”

“Stop being so defensive,” she says.





We pull into my neighborhood.

“I’m fine,” I say. “I just don’t like work.”

“I know you don’t, but you used to enjoy riding home together. That and lunch were the only things you enjoyed.”

I say nothing.

“Nick, I really want to help. I don’t know why you—”

“Stop acting like such an idiot!” I yell. “I’m tired of it—all your damn questions. Can’t you just drive the car?”

Francine looks out the window as her face reddens.

“You never swore before,” she says quietly. The ride continues in silence.

We pull into my driveway. Francine stops. I get out and slam the door. I can hear her crying inside the car as I walk toward the door. It fades before I step inside.

...

I open the pantry, take out a can of soup and start fixing dinner. I check my cell—no messages. I can’t decide if I’m happy or sad about that. As I wonder, the soup steams.

I pour it into the bowl and sit at the table to eat, stirring the thick broth with my spoon. The steam curls and fades as it dies away.

My mind drifts to Grace. I remember her and I walking on sharp rocks with bare feet at her camp, my calloused soles deflecting the points. She didn’t have a boat, so we fished from the dock. I see her standing, trying to fit a worm on a hook as it squirms in the clean sunlight. Water rubs against the dock in gentle waves.

We used to love each other even then, I suppose, the ignorant love of children who hug or kiss because they see parents do it. We didn’t understand feelings then.

She had chestnut hair—before she dyed it—cropped to a manly bowl and bigger biceps than I did, so our parents found it especially cute, cooing as we ran hand in hand over the stones to hook another fish or pry another clam from the lake.

We would sit on the dock, our hips barely touching as we swung our legs back and forth over the weeds and mussels, spying for fish, talking about aliens and frogs until the sun set. She would smile. And I would smile. She’d kiss me on the cheek, as the waters grew dark beneath the dying sky.

I guess it grew from there: middle school, then high school. And I thought it would go until college. Sometimes I imagined the two of us married, raising kids by a lake or seeing shows in a city holding hands on the red, plush seats. But then she said I changed. That’s it. She couldn’t describe it. I got harder, harsher, more distant—she was always



“grappling” for a word. Maybe she changed, too. I don’t know. I think we just got older. Or perhaps the distance drove us apart as our telephone calls slackened through the autumn.

There’s no use trying to fix it now. It’s done. She’s gone.

I finish the soup, put the bowl in the sink and go upstairs to lie down on my bed. I lock the door, put on headphones, and start writing in my notebook:

There’s a gun by my hand, and within it,  
In the chamber, is a bullet to begin it  
And to end it all at once.

I stare ahead at night and fog,  
Asking why I wait  
When we all must die and fade.

I tear out the page and toss it aside. Nothing.

...

I hear my parents downstairs: closing doors and clattering keys on countertops. The sharp clicks of their shoes slice through the silent house as they hang up coats in the closet.

I stand to verify my locked door and turn off the light. My clock glows: 10:44.

Faint whispers rise from the front hall, audible but unintelligible. Soon the stairs creek with their weight as they inch up, trying to soften their sound. They move slowly. They pause outside my door. I know they’re listening.

My mom tries the knob. The lock restrains it. I hear a few muffled whispers, then silence. In time, they walk away and close their bedroom door, giving up again.

I lie back down, turn up the volume to my music, and stare at the grainy swirls of sand-laced paint on my ceiling. Cars sail by in the night.

...

I wake with headphone wires sprawled around my body. 1:30 a.m. I take them off, stand, and pace.



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Why did I yell at Francine?

I walk to the right.

Why do I keep waking at night?

Left.

Why did Grace break up with me?

Right.

I pause and pace again as the same questions hammer at my temples. More questions gather.

I need a walk.

...

My steps lead me to the park. I check my watch—2:15 a.m., another late, sleepless night trying to walk off the day.

I need to stop this.

The brittle air feels like a breath could break it. Every cough echoes in the stillness. Silence settles like a pall.

I look up at empty canvas of darkness.

I remember camping with Grace once and seeing stars spread like paint spatter against the sky. I imagined God splashing and dripping light against the black like Pollock.

“God’s an artist,” said Grace.

Tonight, the darkness looks yawning and empty. No stars.

My head turns down and I walk on, leaving memory stranded in the muted gulf.

I sit on a bench as the cold air gathers around me.

I used to pray around now, and the old habit itches. Why do we always call out to some distant, higher being? Is it instinctual?

I place my hands together. They feel strange. I stare at them, white in the obscured lamplight, and wonder what to say. How long has it been?

“God,” I whisper quietly. I stop.

“Lord,” I begin again. Another pause. “I don’t think you’re there. I don’t feel you anymore, but I don’t know who else to turn to. My parents don’t love me. And I don’t have Grace anymore.”

I feel like a four-year-old talking to his teddy bear, just glazed expressionless eyes looking back in silence. I wish I could talk to emptiness and feel an answer.

“God, where are you?”

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Nothing.

“God, why was it so easy? You made sense. I didn’t need to look for you.”

Nothing.

“Were you ever there at all?”

I stare again at the darkness. It doesn’t seem to mean anything. No matter how happy we are, misery comes. No matter what we do, we die.

As a kid, it didn’t seem like that. Things looked like they were working out. They made sense. But now I’m not sure what makes sense at all—or if it even matters.

I pop my headphones back in, lie down on the bench, and yawn. I’ll walk home soon.

...

I wake to the same murky air from the night before, but the impression seems sharper. I see the same figure looking over the prow. He turns.

“Nirodho,” the deep-voiced giant says, “you are back.”

“Nirodho’s my name?” I say.

“You fell asleep.”

“Oh.”

“But now you are back.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Japika.” He smiles.

“Japika?”

He nods.

“Where are we, Japika?” I say.

“The realm of the preta, the hungry ghosts.”

“So I’m Nirodho, you’re Japika, and we’re on a boat in a realm for ‘preta?’”

He nods.

“This is a dream, then?”

Japika nods. “Everything is a dream,” he says. “When you sleep, you fall into a dream. When you wake, that too is a dream. Even death is a dream of sorts—a quiet dream.” He laughs. “It is all appearance, like moon reflecting on the water.”



“What are you talking about?”

“You sound angry, Nirodho. It is natural. Be patient.”

I open my mouth to speak when an island looms from the fog ahead. Figures flit along the beach, scraping their long arms against the ground, clawing the sand and rocks. Most have distended stomachs, like kwashiorkor victims, bulged, veined sacks pulsing as they move. Taut skin stretches over their distorted frames.

With long, impossibly thin necks and pin-sized mouths, they try to cram small plants and dirt down their gullet. It falls out of their skeletal fingers.

“What are those?” I ask.

“The preta,” says Japika. “They live throughout these realms, perpetually hungry and thirsty but unable to feed, burning off bad actions.”

“Like what?”

“Many left something undone and died with deep regret.”

“So they end up here?”

He nods.

“Do they ever get out?”

“Some day,” says Japika. He looks away with sad eyes.

As we near the island, the ghosts’ wild eyes glow.

“Will they see us?” I ask.

“Only a few of them. Most of them will be too busy looking for their food.” The boat hits the beach. The ghosts don’t notice.

“Are they dangerous?” I ask.

“They can be.”

We step out of the boat.

The preta race around us like rats in a feeding frenzy, yelping. They smell like rotting flower petals.

“Why are we here?” I ask.

“To lead you out.”

“What?”

“You are part of this realm.”

“No I’m not.”

We enter a forest. The preta fade away behind us.

“There are six realms,” said Japika. “This is one of the lowest.”



“But this is a dream.”

“Is it?” Japika stares. His sad eyes bore into mine. I can’t turn away.

“I’m just going to wake up,” I say.

“Then wake.”

I pinch myself. The pain registers but nothing changes. I pinch again. Same.

“Can I see your canteen?” I ask.

He passes me a leafy bag with a copper cap. I dump water over my face. Nothing.

“You are not dreaming, Nirodho,” Japika says.

“But you said I was. You said everything is a dream.”

“Yes and no—”

A sudden snarl in the tree captures Japika’s attention.

I jump back.

A figure leaps before us, his mouth open and hissing like a lamprey, sucking. His arms stretch at us, sharp twisted nails yellowed and grimed from digging in the dirt. His stomach throbs like a heartbeat.

“What is that?” I yell.

“Another preta. A blood-eater.”

Japika steps before me.

“Fight it off,” I say. I run back, grab a stick, and charge.

“Don’t!” yells Japika.

I keep running and smash the preta’s skull.

It screams and hisses and tries to bat away the staff with its lanky arms.

Japika pulls me back, bows his head, and holds his arm to the preta. It laughs in a series of hisses, grabs it, and latches its mouth to his wrist.

“What are you doing?” I shout.

Japika says nothing as blood runs down his arm. The preta gurgles and screams.

“Stop!” I yell.

The preta glances at me and scampers into shadow, leaving a fresh wound in Japika’s arm. Japika rubs it and smiles, mumbling something.

“A blessing,” he says, tapping the wound.

“Why? He just tried to kill us.”

Japika laughs. Then his eyes grow grave. “I pity it. He is trapped here.” Japika looks at me thoughtfully. “As are





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you. We are how we act. Just because our bodies and our minds rest in one world does not mean they will forever.”

“But I’m not a preta.”

“Not yet. You will become one unless you leave this realm. One is not usually born a preta. Then again, fewer are born human.”

“What?” I ask.

“The sages say being human is rarer than a turtle swimming to the surface of the ocean to place its head in a single ring on the surface. A rare blessing few of your kind grasp.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“I want you to see something.”

Japika walks along the forest floor. The trees mirror the preta. They have thick trunks, but most have toppled from insubstantial roots, their spidery branches broken and maimed.

Nothing looks to be alive.

I hear another scream and a heavy weight pounces on my shoulders.

“Japika!” I yell.

...

I wake back at the bench, seeing the clear, black sky again. I am alone in the park. Shreds of the morning sun tint the horizon, low and dim. Night lingers.

I check my watch. 7:32. Saturday.

I stand and stretch my stiff joints in the frigid air, feeling the deep chill in my bones. My hand falls to my pocket, finding my wallet. Time for breakfast.

The gnarled branches of cherry and cypress jump like preta from the shadows, stilling after scrutiny. The lights from nearby cars send shifting shadows along the ground between the trees.

Images of preta and Japika flash between questions.

What did Japika mean to say that I am part of that realm? Why did it feel so real? Why was my name different?

What did he mean about my actions?

I reach a bakery, Le Matin, and walk inside. The bell clangs as I cross the threshold, drawing the glance of an old man sitting at the counter. He smiles.

“Good morning,” he says.

I walk to the register. “Do you have any *pain au chocolate*?” I ask.

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“A sweet tooth, eh?”

I nod.

He smiles again and rustles through a shelf.

“You’re here early,” he says. “It’s been a while. College?”

“Yeah.”

“None of us are getting younger,” he says, laughing. “Where’s that young lady you used to come over with? Grace, I think it was.”

“Home.”

“Ah, sleeping in.” He laughs.

The man approaches the counter and sets the bun in a bag. I pay.

“Have a nice day,” he says.

I walk out and get back to the park. As I reach the bench, I hear someone call behind me. Francine.

“I thought I saw you,” she says.

I sit down, and she jogs over in a winterized tracksuit.

“Are you stalking me?” I ask.

“Kind of.” She smiles as she sits.

“I didn’t tell you you could join.”

She points to the bag. “Get me anything?”

I take out my pain au chocolate.

“You never change,” she says when she sees it.

I take a bite. “Maybe I don’t.”

We sit in silence again, the chickadees calling for scraps from nearby branches.

“Nick, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but after last night, I’m worried about you. I talked to your parents. They said that you haven’t been eating dinner with them for the last week. That if you’re not locked away in your room, or at work, you’re out walking. And you don’t get home until they go to sleep. They’re worried, too.”

She touches my shoulder.

“We don’t know what’s wrong,” she says softly.

“Is that it?”

“Well...”

“What?”

“Nick, I’m worried. You weren’t like this before college. If you want to talk about Grace—or something else—I’m

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game. I'm here to listen."

"And?"

"I don't know what you mean. We've known each other since we were kids. You, Grace, and I—remember? I think that deserves something. I care about you, Nick. We're not strangers."

I push off her arm.

"Fine," she says. "Nick, the reason I'm so worried about you is because I like you. I have for a while, but because of Grace, I never—"

I stand. "It's your fault. She knew, didn't she?"

"What are you talking about?"

"She thought that I had a thing for you."

"No."

"Yes she did."

"No, you're being irrational. Did she say that?"

I say nothing.

"She broke up with you because you guys kept fighting. She thought you stopped caring for her. And it just kept getting worse."

"But I never stopped caring for her!"

"Then why didn't you act like it?"

"I don't know. I grew up."

"Grew up?"

"I..." I trail off.

Francine walks up to me. "It's OK."

I push her away. "Shut up!" I yell.

"Nick, we're in the middle of a park."

"I don't care. If—"

"Nick, I'm trying to help you. Grace broke up with you, I know. I know you don't believe in God anymore. I know you don't get along with your parents all the time. But you can't keep running from everything. You have to deal with it."

"Deal with what? Life?"

"Yeah, life."

"But it'll always be like this."

"What are you talking about? Things change, yeah, and sometimes that hurts a lot, but you—"

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"You don't understand. I don't have anyone anymore. I don't have my family, I don't have Grace, I don't have God. I'm just standing here alone. And I don't care anymore."

"But Nick, you do have your family, and me, and Grace if you called her. She wants to give you space, but... but you should talk to her. She really cares. You're just blowing this way out of proportion"

"She's—"

"Nick, you need help."

"We all need help." I turn and start running.

Francine follows. "Where're you going?"

"Away."

"Where?"

"Don't follow."

She follows.

I sprint back to the street without looking. Something solid hits my chest, jolting me to the ground. A dull pain. Darkness.

...

"Nirodho," Japika's voice says.

Everything looks clear. The cold, damp air draws heat from my limbs.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"I think you know."

"What?"

He picks me up. "Come with me," he says.

We follow the path past an alley of tall trees. Figures hang in the branches. Their glassy eyes watch from deep pockets of pale skin, their faces contorted into painful, silent gasps. Skin hangs loose. Nooses loop around their long, frail necks.

A wind swings the bodies as branches creak. Wet decay hangs heavy in the air.

"Who are they?" I ask.

"More preta." Japika doesn't elaborate.

Shadows skulk through the darkness, breaking twigs. I kick a skull along the earth and watch it roll into shadow, crumbling into dust.



Japika looks at me. “We must make haste,” he says.

“What do you mean?”

“Recall,” he says.

We stop. I see hazy images: Francine in the park, the argument. I see myself racing off, then the car. I look at my body. Pale but uninjured.

“Am I dead?”

“Not quite. Your life hangs by a thread.”

A sudden rush of nausea hits.

“I don’t want to die,” I say.

“That is not the question: do you want to live?”

“I guess not.”

“Why not?”

“Suffering.”

“And you expect something else?”

“I didn’t expect anything. I didn’t choose to be born.”

“I know.”

“So why do you expect me to want something I never agreed to?”

“Because your life outside here is better than this.” He gestures around him.

The tortured faces of the hanging bodies answer in the silence. The wind rises, bringing painful screams from the distance.

“Only a human can wonder why,” he says. “A god is much too content, a preta much too terrified. Being a human is a blessing,” he says.

“So?”

“Wondering lets us improve.”

“But—”

“Nirodho—”

A flash follows his words. Then silence.

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I wake in utter shadow. Low moans echo around me, anguished calls. Their volume slowly rises. Malicious hisses



sound from every direction. I see flashes of pale light. Gaunt faces leer at me, with their black eyes sucking up the light. Their faces rot away as they glare.

I cough with the stench of swamp and putrescence, worse than ever.

A low hum starts from the shadows. A swirl of colors erupts, forming a graveyard. Cold air hits my face. The smell of leaves.

The quiet shifting of tree branches replaces moans and hisses. Two stones stand before me. I walk up and read:

Grace Gifford on one. Francine Westmoreland on the other.

Suddenly the ground rips back, freeing another swirl of colors. They overtake me.

“No,” I scream.

Colors fill my mouth like water. Drowning. Waves pummel me into the plots. I close my eyes against the onslaught. It stills.

I open my eyes and see the plush contours of a casket. Rot overwhelms my nostrils. I turn.

A grim skull stares back, patches of flesh hanging from the bone, bloated patches popped and festered. Wisps of bleached hair linger on the skull.

I notice her dress.

Grace.

I reach out to touch her.

“I’m sorry,” I say. She falls away to dust.

The colors flood again. I fall into a dark vacuum, gasping.

Shadows form outlines. Bones. Skulls. Flesh and clothing. My parents.

I reach for them. They recede and darkness deepens between us. Their skin dissolves back into bone until they fade away.

I hit something solid—solid darkness. My joints sear with pain. I cough and struggle to stand.

I look at my hands.

I hold wrinkled, spotted palms and fingers above my face, the joints crooked. I look down the rest of my body.

Aged?

A sudden pain rips through my body as I jolt up and vomit into the emptiness around me. Most of it lands on my legs. The warm slurry rolls down my front as I retch again.

Another pain brings me back, leeching into my veins.

I fight the pain to lift my arm. It decays before my eyes. I see the bone revealed.

“Stop,” I shout, my voice little and dull. “Stop.” The darkness devours it.





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Vomit disrupts my words. I try to cry but tears don't come. My skin fades away. My bones topple. The pain ceases. The color swirls again. A flash. The graveyard forms again. The stone looks different. "Nick Hopkins," I read aloud. A final flash and I gasp for air.

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I wake on a hospital bed. Buttons, boards, and sheets of protocol clutter the white walls around me. I see wall and ceiling. I try to turn, noticing a neck brace for the first time. An I.V. sticks in my arm. The room is dark, lit only from the light in the hall. Alone again. In darkness again. Images replay. Skulls and contours of shadow flitting by in mangled images. Sounds ring in my ears. Moans. Tears. Silence. I cringe. "Nick," I hear as someone at my shoulder. Francine. "Nick, you're awake." "He's awake?" someone out in the hall says. "Yeah, Grace. Just now." Grace pokes her head in and smiles, her black hair tied back in a bun. I think of her skull, hiding my revulsion. "Hey, Nick," she says. She walks over. "Grace," I say. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." "For what?" "I don't know yet. Everything." She smiles. "It's OK." "He probably wants to see his parents," says Francine. "OK," says Grace. "I'll get them." She walks toward the door, then turns. "We'll talk later, OK?" I try to nod. She exits into the hall. Francine places her hand on my shoulder. "We had to leave soon, but we didn't want you to wake alone."

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I recognize the tenderness in her voice. "Thanks," I say. "Francine, I'm sorry, too." She laughs. "Sorry? Well, that's nice for a change." "I thought I couldn't change," I say. She laughs. "I lied."

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*The Only Character That Doesn't Get Much Screen Time.*

*By: Kevin Cooley*

Jessie's eyes slid quickly over to the—no, no, her name can't be Jessie. That's a man's name too, you know; much too ambiguous to garner any real sympathy from the major demographic: female readers.

Bella's eyes—darted implies a sense of urgency, let's go with that—but no, Bella won't do either—name's been used.

How about Allie? Allie is vulnerable enough for any thirteen to eighteen year old girl to relate to. And yet, at the same time, Allie isn't repulsive and worn to the point where it's completely unreasonable to imagine her as a point of sexual desire by the male lead. Ginger or Kim would probably work too—but we'll take Allie for now and pocket the other names for another slightly insecure teenaged girl who seems plain on the outside, yet who yearns deeply for adventure on the inside.

Allie's eyes darted amongst the ice skaters as they weaved patterns of circles around her and her best friend Anna—but Anna's got the same first letter as Allie and has such a foreign sound to it that it's probably more patriotic to call her Stephanie. A familiar tune that Allie vaguely recognized as a popular one floated into her but she could barely recognize it for what it was—she would need all of her focus to make sure that she found him, the guy of her dreams, the perfect gentleman whose scribbled image occupied every other page of her algebra notebook in black and white glory.

The only guy who could match up to this description was, of course, Nathan.

Except that his name was Eric, which makes him sound so much more sensitive.

"Is he here tonight, Steph?" asked Allie with a small stumble as she attempted to sneak a look behind her while still skating in a forward motion.

"Who, Nathan?"

"No, it's Eric now."

"Oh, right," said Steph with a curt nod of immediate recollection as she swerved around an incoming skater. "He's the strong and reliable main male character who defies social norms and captures your heart by taking an inexplicable interest in you, right Allie?"

"Yup, that would be him..."

He had to be here tonight. He must just be getting a snack or something like that. He must be over at the snack stand, sauntering across the floor with ease in spite of his clunky skates and laughing with his significantly less sparkly friends. His black muscle shirt would probably be rippling with his bulging-tight biceps that—

Allie's legs buckled and her nose felt like it was cleaved in half as her body collided with the sideboard. All she

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could think of was that she hoped Eric didn't see her carelessness. She felt Steph's hands wrapping around her and pulling her back to safety.

"Allie, you're having a third-person omniscient thought tangent again," said Steph impatiently.

"Sorry, Steph," Allie said from the shelter of Steph's arms.

"Yeah, well, that's what you get for being the point of view character," she teased.

Allie laughed and hopped back to her feet. The pair circled the rink a few times, Allie's head occasionally slanting one way or another to find signs of him.

When Allie came close to another full-on collision, this time with another wobbling skater, Steph placed her warm hand on Allie's shoulder and stopped her in the middle of the rink.

"What," Allie said.

Steph took an enormous breath. "Do you want some genuine and heartfelt advice about this situation that I'm warranted to give to you because of my status as the experienced one that might lead you astray, seeing as you won't be listening to your heart since you're giving in to peer pressure?"

Allie closed her eyes and sighed. "Well, that would be fitting of your character archetype. Go on."

But what isn't fitting is the fact that Allie and Steph are ice skating, which can be such a bonding experience for groups of young women. We don't need to focus on the relationship between Steph and Allie; the healthy, strong and sisterly relationships between women are rather unimportant compared to the undying and semi-oppressive adoration that Allie is going to feel for Eric. It's probably safe to assume that the reader is going to "get" the relationship between Allie and Steph anyways since the reader probably has her own girl friends—they'll get it I guess.

No, ice skating won't do.

Seeing as Allie is a semi-standard teenage-something girl with relationship issues, it would definitely be more appropriate if the pair were at a school dance, which they now are.

"This is the deal, right?" said Stephanie casually as she twiddled one of the particularly bright sequins on her dress between her glittery thumb and forefinger. "Eric is a decent guy. You're going to need to be as plain and dull as possible if you want to get his attention on that dance floor."

"Do you think he'll dance with me?" Allie says with a slight flare of hope.

"Don't get all present tense on me now, Allie," Steph warned as she placed her hands tightly to the sides of her hips. "That's exactly the kind of attitude that's going to make Eric think that you're a real person. And the fact that you're not seems to be the reason he likes you...which doesn't make too much sense, if you think about it, but whatever."

But Allie didn't have time to register Steph's futile warnings about the tense of her speech because *he* was striding gracefully across the floor in a dust cloud of positive physical adjectives. Eric's chiseled face was accentuated by deep

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chocolate eyes that sunk carefully into his face to give off the impression that he was constantly contemplating his next action. The ink-stained hairs drifting lazily across his face—no, much too creative. His jet-black hair made him look so mysterious—better. The dark buttons of his equally dark dress shirt climbed his tight-formed abs and constricted to the notches in each one to lead gracefully into a few open buttons and a cream white undershirt. And his face was *chiseled*. Chiseled as if the hand of a master Renaissance sculptor had personally chipped every fragment away from his godly cheeks into flat, pristine flushed peach-pearl skin. Yes, chiseled. What a great word to describe the way in which his face was carved because it carries the implicit metaphor that somebody took the painstaking time to whittle his stone-hewn face in the same way that a sculptor would. Do you get it yet? Just wanted to make sure—it's so important that I, the omniscient narrator, feel the need to step out of my elevated throne in Allie's mind to personally inform you that his skin is, in fact, chiseled.

Oh yeah. And Allie and Stephanie both had brown hair.

As the god-man approached slowly, Allie felt the moisture in her throat evaporating to leave a dry scratchiness that seemed to stop her from breathing. His steps were careful and well-measured. Stephanie was moving her lips but words didn't seem to be coming out of them. He was approaching her, little insignificant Allie! To imagine that an all-powerful, muscle-strapped human being of the superior gender such as Eric Morano could ever give little last-nameless Allie his attention was mind-boggling.

"Hey," said Eric in a voice as smooth as honey-dew and rippling with mannish charisma.

"H—hey," said Allie.

"Want to know something interesting?" said Eric, his eyebrows rising slightly.

It should be noted that, at this point in the story, Stephanie had an urgent appointment to attend and ran off from the dance. Never again would she return to the narrative.

"I—I think so," said Allie, unsure of what Eric could possibly have to tell her.

Time stood still as Eric ran his nimble fingers through the thick locks of hair curtaining his forehead. Allie watched his every motion, completely mesmerized.

"Your family doesn't understand you, do they?" asked Eric quietly.

"No, they don't" said Allie.

"We might have just talked for the first time, but I do."

His eyes, thick-laced with dark beauty, met hers and they locked together. There was silence for one tense moment. Eric's neck slowly craned to touch his soft lips to Allie's parched, chapped and generally average ones; her insides leaped into an elevated cluster of inner joy.

As their lips came apart, Allie felt a burning question arise up with the passion inside of her.

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"Wait, Eric. I just don't understand something. I have a question I need you to answer?"

"Whatever it is, I can handle it for you," said Eric with a confident gusto.

"Why me? What makes me the one you love?"

But at that exact moment, Laura, one of Allie's classmates, passed by and lit up with pleasant surprise as she saw Eric. Allie felt frustration and rage well up in the deepest pit of her stomach like a deadly poison; Laura was effortlessly beautiful and intelligent; she was unquestionably talented at everything she attempted. Allie had never forgotten the incident in which she had beaten down Terrence Hill, the stereotypical jock scumbag that seems to be in every school, in the middle of the cafeteria for making nasty remarks about Laura's family.

"Hey Eric! What's going on?" she giggled with a quick flash of her bold smile.

Eric did not hesitate to act. He walked over to the side of the gym, picked up a folded wooden chair laid out for the anti-social sitters and hurled down to the floor with a powerful heave. The airborne chair shattered into splinters at Laura's feet.

"What the hell are you doing!" Laura shouted as she did an awkward double-take to avoid the projectile splinters.

"Away with you," said Eric with absolute conviction seeping from his voice. "I have no absolutely no interest in you, or any other woman for that matter except for one that I am hopelessly devoted to—the girl who stands before me. Are you foolish enough to think that I, as a hormone-driven teenage male, could possibly have mixed emotions about my romantic life? I clearly have no inclination towards anyone except for Allie."

"Um, why?" said Laura simply.

Allie began to blush at the bold actions of her masculine hero; she knew he would never abandon her for the rest of their lives together deep in the pit of her heart. She wouldn't have much to contribute in terms of conversation at their nightly candlelit dinners, true, but she could spend the silent moments simply examining the immaculate structure of his jawbone.

"Stop spreading your lies, Laura. We can never be together."

"But I was just saying—"

"What kind of conflict, Laura, would we ever have to keep things entertaining, hmm?"

Laura shouted something in response and turned on her heel to leave but Allie didn't quite care what it was because of what she saw approaching her from across the dance floor. A hulking suave mass was on a direct collision course with her—his leather jacket sticking tight to his defined body yet still somehow allowing his arms to swing freely and carelessly as he walked with each gallant stride. And with each one of those long, offhand, strides—well, okay, you know what. This is the "other" guy—that's the general point I'm trying to make. He's kind of a bad dude and all that.

"Hey, Allie," said the approaching figure. His thick and slippery hair gave him a dark visage that indicated his



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was Seth.

“Um—uh—hey there, Seth,” was all Allie could muster in the presence of this anti-heroic manprize.

“Wait, who is this Allie?” Eric muttered mutinously.

But it was about that point in the plot progression for Allie to momentarily abandon her infatuation with Eric in favor of a more reckless choice.

Seth smiled his cocky smile at Allie, turned on his heel, and turned his back towards her.

“Why aren’t you looking at me, Seth?” asked Allie.

“Because,” laughed Seth, “I can completely afford to disrespect you and you’ll still come back wanting more. That’s just the way it is. It’s kind of my thing—in case you didn’t notice.”

“You can’t just disrespect me like that,” said Allie, trying to conceal the admiration shining out from her voice.

“That’s not the way a real gentleman would treat a woman who deserves respect,” chimed in Eric.

Seth whipped around to face Allie, his smug grin lines etched across his tan and virile face.

“You want to get out of here, don’t you hun?” he said, his sly voice now mixed with a few drops of merciful honey and sweet molasses.

Allie nodded her head mechanically, anticipating the offer he was leading up to.

“I can take you places Allie; places you’ve never been to and can only imagine in those twilit hours where the darkling sky gives birth to rays of morning light. I’ll whisk you away from suburbia faster than the ink on this page can and woo you into sweet oblivion. Come on, Al! You couldn’t even resist me if you were trying.”

“I’m not that easy, you know,” Allie said as she shuffled her legs awkwardly and forced herself to back away from Seth.

“Ha, are you kidding me? I could hook up with your best friend Steph on your birthday and you wouldn’t even be able to stop yourself from getting at me.”

“Who’s Steph?” said Allie.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot,” said Seth.

Allie took a deep—but, seriously, none of the readers want to hear Allie talk or else they won’t be able to picture themselves as her.

Eric let out a triumphant laugh and crossed his arms—wait, male arms can’t be mentioned without a muscle related compound modifier—his muscle-laden arms across his broad chest.

“So typical of an ‘other guy’ like you,” Eric said with a tiny chuckle. “You don’t even need to exist, *Seth*; the only reason you do is to create conflict and drag out the story.”

Seth threw back his obsidian hair. “Well I’m about to do a damn good job of it.”

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Eric rolled up the sleeves of his tight black shirt. “Alright, you wanna personify the internal conflict inside of Allie in an external conflict between the two of us? I’ll play along.”

“There’s only one way to settle this,” Seth growled as he began to rip his leather jacket off.

“Shirtless fistfight?”

“Oh yeah.”

The two fighters came together as one and Allie stepped back to seek safety from the torrent of flailing limbs.

She began to cry “stop” halfheartedly.

And then she asked herself why.

These two powerful men were fighting so viciously over her. It wasn’t like she could lose. It wasn’t like she had anything to lose.

She climbed to the top of the bleachers to watch the flailing limbs and the inevitable blood, to witness her masterpiece. Her feet hit the top step and even with the combatants beneath her brawling fiercely she knew all the eyes were on her: the conductor, the powerful one.

And then Allie came to life.

This is the surge of charged cocaine veins mixed with a dash of laced hot chocolate on a frigid winter Sunday where an enduring hope lies frozen amongst the thigh-high snow.

She’d never thought so clearly in her life.

One fighter’s hand was clawing the inside of the other’s mouth in a fishhook as deep red blood puddled on the floor; she had so much life, so much power. She deserved the power now that she was alive and she knew it. She deserved it like ice cream and paychecks and a quick death.

The bleeding man reversed the hold and sunk his right fist into the other’s eye socket. The attacker’s entire body fell on top of the falling man and the two were tangled in their throes.

Allie stood on the bleachers and continued to conduct the dance from on high.

This is the surge of power killing must bring; the wonderfully dominating feeling of slaughtering and butchering your evasive prey to dissect its red, fatty meats and to consume its slow-cooked flesh.

Someone called for an ambulance. There were cries of pain now. Cries dedicated to her.

She beat the beat and they couldn’t help but tap their feet and fists and feet to the death march; they couldn’t help but dance along in hate.

She was someone now. They were the ones with no names.

The broken threads were now taped so the shoelace could fit in the hole and she knew could keep it this way if she tried.



She cheered them on in ill-sounding cackles.

A tall kid approached her—someone she thought she had known since the third grade but she'd never thought of more than once or twice—and tried to coax her down but she scoffed at him. He seemed disheartened. She didn't care—she was breathing air that she owned for the first time.

"I'll take it from here," Allie whispered to me.



*Photo: Paige Winston*



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**Café au Lait**  
*By: Brett Keegan*

I linger in the corner, looking at rusty tabletops, waiting. A few college students chat over cups around the café, nothing more. I sip my coffee and run my finger along the rim to wipe away a cold drop.

I have a meeting soon. Someone broke his right toe walking on company property and now expects \$2,000. He wanted to meet at the office, but I can't help waiting here.

I look at the dusty day. Pigeons pick at scraps and squint at sunlight.

Thirty-seven old from Phoenix, working in litigations for a local firm, the bottom of the ladder—what a life. In school I wanted to paint like Georgia O'Keefe or El Greco, but I don't have anything at my desk beyond pens and stacks of paper lined with protocol.

I check my watch and take one last sip of cold coffee, leaning back for a final breath. Time for work.

She walks in. I watch the way she approaches the counter and recall a distant name. Jenifer. I can wait a little longer.

I hear the owner greet her like an old friend.

"Jenifer, how are you?"

"Going—you know."

He nods. Jenifer orders a *café au lait*, one of the gaudy coffee variations they serve her.

"Stressed?" asks the owner. The beans grind.

"Yeah, I got a box of art supplies for the studio. It's too heavy for me to lift." She lifts her thin arms. They laugh.

I try to avoid watching her, hoping to return to my coffee. I met her when I first moved. We painted together at an art class. Nothing big. She may not remember me; I tend not to stand out.

"And no one to help?" the owner asks.

"No, all too busy sleeping off the Fourth." They laugh again.

"Even Richard?"

"Yep."

I recall a dream. Sitting by the rocky coast of Southern France, eating oysters from silver platters, I watch wind breathe against lines of laundry.

I see a lanky, black-haired girl painting sunflowers in the valley. She smiles at me. I stand to meet her.

For some reason, she likes me.

We walk, hiking near the empty coastline. When we hit the coast, she smiles, turns to a bluebird and takes wing

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over the harbor. I wake.

So it always is.

"Well," says the owner, "I wish you the best of luck."

"Thanks, I'll need it."

He takes the cup and passes it on the counter. I glance at Jenifer's reflection on the shined tabletop. Her sharp noses pinches as she smells the exotic curls of steam, and she laughs with a broad smile.

The dream replays.

Perhaps she remembers me from painting. I can be a little late to work. I should help her.

"What's that?" asks the owner, pointing to Jenifer's hand.

Jenifer flashes him a ring.

"He finally did it," she says.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks."

She smiles and leaves. I watch her stride down the sidewalk, sipping her *café au lait*. She turns the corner. I walk the other way, to work.



*Photo: Manuela Marin Salcedo*

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*Hollow Body*  
*By: Chris Radey*

“Life has got a habit of not standing hitched. You got to ride it like you find it. You got to change with it. If a day goes by that don’t change some of your old notions for new ones, that is just about like trying to milk a dead cow.”  
~Woody Guthrie~

It was clement outside the day that Gordon, or Gordy as everyone called him, saw his first guitar. That was the day he knew, the day he decided that he would be a musician. There wasn’t much question. He just knew.

Gordy had been walking through town with his father. He wasn’t sure exactly what his father was doing, he was never really sure—it didn’t matter to him. He simply tagged along to take it all in. The colors, the aromas, the bustle of people completing their menial day-to-day tasks. It fascinated him.

He had never experienced anything like he did that day, though. From yards away, Gordy heard the poignant sounds. Rounding the corner, he saw the man.

Disheveled clothes thrown over his body, haggard eyes that sagged like hand-woven sacks, slumped over on the street corner with a dilapidated guitar strewn across his lap. Gordy certainly couldn’t recognize that each string was out of tune, didn’t see the splintered edges of the instrument’s body. He had no idea that the raspy voice coming out of that man had been crafted by almost a year and a half of desperate, soul-wrenching poverty. The overall gusto, the overwhelming sense of detachedness, it was all like magic to him—a type of magic that begged to have its secrets discovered.

That evening, Gordy sat on the banks of Lake Shawnee. He stared into the receding sun, envisaging the prospect of having a guitar in his hands. His fingers twitched back and forth, mimicking what he thought to be accurate motions of guitar-playing. The grass flattened a little bit more with every mind-measured foot stomp. Since that afternoon, Gordy had heard the music in his head. *Not for long*, he thought—soon he wouldn’t have to imagine it. Leaning over the rocky shore of the lake, he caught a reflection of himself in its still surface. He instantly noticed that the sun hit his face in a way that almost made him look like stone. A frozen, concrete expression of pure, momentary ecstasy. Gordy sat back, feeling the coolness of the grass shoot up between his toes and through the rest of his body.

It was hard for a boy of ten to fathom just how tough times really were in 1930. Growing up in Shawnee, Oklahoma though, Gordy was used to not having much. His meals never varied really—predictable arrangements of different products of the farm, red meat on momentous occasions. His wardrobe visually echoed that of all the youths in the area—tattered stitching, frayed from hours of work and play, dirt engrained in every fiber of the cloth. Truthfully,



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he rarely bathed on a regular basis—not that anyone particularly cared all that much. His scent was that of the farm, a familiarly decipherable smell. The people of Shawnee lived for things like that. Most of the time, when he needed it, he would simply jump into the lake for a wash.

Jumping into the lake was like a re-initiation into all of the things in his life that were idyllic—a baptism of sorts, minus all of the dry parts. The lake was his refuge, his second home almost. And that’s where Gordy was in that moment, sitting on the edge of that lake, falling into the clutches of his wakeful dream, consumed by the notion of playing the guitar. The sun was just setting, dissolving into the horizon line. In his head, the instrument was practically weightless.

That night, Gordy cried in his room for hours. His father had told him that it was something they could never afford, had trodden on Gordy’s dream the same day that it had manifested itself in his mind—not just his mind, though. The idea had embedded itself in Gordy’s soul. He allowed tears to fall from his eyes, running through the soft creases of his fingers like minute streams. The same fingers that had floated through the air effortlessly—hopefully—by the side of the lake.

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Seven years later, Gordy’s guitar was fashioned. It was perfect in every way—model D-28, one of the finest put out by C.F. Martin & Co. The majority of its body was Brazilian rosewood, topped with polished, solid Adirondack spruce. The endpiece was bound with grained ivoroid, a sharp contrast to the shining mahogany that composed the neck. The metal strings lay brilliantly across the fingerboard, coming together neatly at the bridge. Its sound was unblemished. The sustain that was held by each note—by each chord strummed—chilled the bones of anyone listening. It embodied the technical skill that went into it threefold and could only be described as brilliant in nature, fully refined.

Unfortunately, Gordy wouldn’t own it for another two years.

Since that day when Gordy was a boy, his family had slowly started to rise out of the economic ashes into which they, like so many others, had fallen. Gordy never dismissed his lakeside dream, but he quickly learned not to mention it. When he did, his parents’ faces crinkled unnaturally. They were caught somewhere between distress and disappointment, trapped physically and emotionally by their economic shortcomings. Gordy was put off by those looks, so he quit asking altogether.

Even so, nothing could wrench the idea fully from his mind. In the midst of growing up, he continued to flourish in his love for music, rifling through his father’s record collection an immeasurable amount of times, each groove of each vinyl worn down as far as it could go. Gordy played those records so much that they soon became inexpressibly warped—rotating in vertigo fashion, like a car travelling along the roads of the hilly country.

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Gordy worked, mostly manual labor, anything he could do to save up some money and keep the idea of the guitar off of his mind. He worked on the farm alongside his father who, unknown to Gordy, set aside the little bits of money that weren’t immediately put toward providing for the family. The nation faced a minor recession in ’37, but Gordy’s family managed. Once that setback cleared, things began to seem noticeably more comfortable, less stressful.

That was when Gordy’s father made the promise; he wanted to do it at a time he knew he wouldn’t regret it—to make up for those years. He recalled that particular night often, the night he heard those tender hums of sadness passing through the walls of his son’s bedroom. The sounds were among those that he didn’t like to think about.

There was no better time to do it.

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Gordy’s guitar hung idly in the back of the store, its light, wooden surface contrasting sharply with the shadowy, timber planks of the building’s walls. Of course, Gordy didn’t know at that point that it would be his guitar, but fate had already settled the matter; it was only a matter of time.

Those who knew about such things swore that guitars of that eminence were only made for the most deserving aspirers; it was as if a silent contract existed between the guitar and whoever was selling it. Sure, the shopkeeper in this store had never refused to sell an instrument, but there was nobody to stop him should he have chosen to do so. He never did though. Most people weren’t attracted to guitars like Gordy’s. They couldn’t recognize the poise and dignity that it embodied. Unconscious grace, cultivation.

His father had agreed to supply Gordy with the money for half the cost of the guitar—a birthday present for when he turned nineteen. He led him through the stilted doors of the store, reiterating that he should take his time before making a decision. He wanted to make sure that Gordy was spending his money carefully, making certain that his choice would be the correct one. They spent about ten minutes perusing, shifting their eyes over a myriad of instruments. They scrutinized over each curve, inspected every unsullied piece of metal before Gordy halted in front of the guitar hanging on the back wall.

Gordy had certainly noticed it when they first walked in, but ignored its initial draw. Later, when reminiscing about the experience, he would tell his friends that he *swore* there was something supernatural about that guitar—it *made* him stop in front of it. It *made* him grab it off the wall. It *forced* him to mindlessly strum its strings, to listen to the cry of its reverberation throughout the stuffy room. When he did, it was a feeling that was virtually indescribable. Fleeting, but almost eternal in its intensity. Intimidating but infinitely exhilarating.

As they were making their purchase, the shopkeeper insisted that Gordy’s guitar chose him—that’s what guitars like

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that did.

To his disappointment though, Gordy didn't immediately take to the guitar as fast as it seemed to take to him. His father, who had played the banjo in his youth, taught him the basics—the general knowledge one needed of chords and musical progressions, the intricacies of finger-picking, and, most importantly, the diligence that it would take. Gordy was appreciative, but had trouble wrapping his head around the banjo, its fifth string (an odd number, at that) resting five frets lower than the others.

His guitar exhibited so much beauty to him, so much physical and melodious accord—he longed to be included in that harmonious circle.

The process was a painful one. He cursed his left hand for its inability to conform to each fret. He swore under his breath each day as the rigid strings made the tips of his fingers coarser and coarser. He couldn't pick the strings as fast as he could hear them being picked in his head. It all frustrated him, all the while solidifying his desire to master the instrument.

Once he became accomplished enough—no longer than a few months time—Gordy experimented with the guitar, taking it to new musical heights, all the while caring for it like it was a never-aging, newborn child.

There wasn't a free moment that Gordy didn't spend playing music. He wandered the streets, shuffling his feet across the cracks of the arenose sidewalks, plucking the strings of his guitar in an almost mechanical fashion. Every now and then people would toss change his way, a relatively scathing means of praise, he thought.

The fact of the matter was that Gordy would play music wherever, whenever. People or no people. It didn't matter to him—he just played for the intangible company that it offered him.

One night, toward the end of summer, Gordy sat on the edge of the lake, the same spot where he had sat for years. Not much had changed—the view was always the same. Orange, melting skies. Silhouettes of dancing trees hovering on the skyline. As a child, he had never thought a scene could be more perfect. But this time there was something more. The plush sunlight was perfectly framed by the soothing melodies of Gordy's guitar—the guitar that should have been there nine years prior, the guitar that would follow him out of his hometown.

Earlier that week, Gordy and had decided to follow some of his Okie brethren out to California to look for work opportunities. He didn't need the money, but he had heard about the wonders of the valleys, the mystery of the men that voluntarily drudged away in the sun. It was fascinating to him—captivating in all the right ways.

Gordy caught a glimpse of his reflection in the lake, his countenance not so much like stone this time, more like clay. Ready to be molded, ready to be shaped by the onset of new experience. His plan was to head out around sunrise tomorrow, hop the first train that would take him out west—in the direction of the sunset, in the direction of his new life.

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Several years passed and Gordy was left with the undeniable feeling that things hadn't panned out quite like he foresaw. Work was around, but it was arduous and paid meagerly. Conditions were pitiable, nothing like the old days of hauling haystacks and piles of manure throughout the farms of Shawnee.

He had become reasonably close with a fellow named R.J., a young man with similar aspirations as himself. R.J. carried a harmonica with him and, for about a year, they reveled in the time that they spent playing music together. Their songs seemed to leap back and forth, recoiling between the walls of those California land-basins. The people around didn't get it though, they couldn't. They had simply been out west too long.

Their wandering coworkers were generally friendly, but hard-edged in a way that seemed to negate their affability. It wasn't that they wanted to keep to themselves. Every one of them went out there looking for the same interaction, the same heightened experience of human nature that they had all heard so much about. It existed, too—everyone swore it did. They were all just too tired to really seek it out.

Gordy's guitar still hung around—not with the same air of consequence, though. Sure, he played it every now and then, enough to keep his fingers warm. But it wasn't the same. The notes no longer rang through the air like freshly thrown confetti, like jolts of tiny lightning that sparked around the ears of those nearby. Instead, they were somber, erudite. Indicative of something bigger, something more real and more dismal.

Its body, too, showed signs of wear. Instead of cradling it like he used to, Gordy got in the habit of tossing it into the back of trucks, letting it rattle around, knocking into the boots of illegal, migrant workers. It gave the instrument a distinguished look, like that of an elderly person in the process of reminiscing—not completely impressive, but certainly something worth looking at. With time, that distinguished appearance fled. It became worn, ragged, eventually shabby. A mere image of something once great.

Gordy and R.J. still played from time to time, out of habit if nothing else. It didn't mean what it used to, though. Their music always pointed to something more—something not far off in the distance. It was what kept them going, kept them hoping that their reveries would come to fruition. But they were let down, disenchanted by the falsities of California.

They had nowhere else to go, so they decided to enlist and help in the war effort.

They were shipped off to the British Isles, Gordy's guitar simultaneously making its way across the continent. He had sold it to a middle-aged, married man who was making his way back to New York City. The man claimed that he wanted to learn to play his entire life, but never had the time. It was such a nice piece though, he had said, that it just seemed like the right thing to do. Gordy sold it for a middling price—a means to snag a few extra dollars before he left the states.

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After a few failed attempts at mastering the art of the instrument, it ended up in the corner of the man's closet.

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While Gordy and R.J. crawled through the earth, guns across their shoulders, shrieks and explosions droning out their thoughts, the guitar merely sat. The two friends hid behind whatever they could, shielding themselves from the surrounding dread—hiding from their own decisions. Gordy and R.J. had not known each other for a very extensive amount of time, but war acted as an agent to erase that fact. It didn't matter how long anyone knew each other—once two men watched another man die together, there was a bond that couldn't be ignored. It was true, too. Nauseating, revolting, even irreligious—but unyieldingly true.

The guitar sat, hidden behind ornate suits and lavish travel bags.

Gordy sweated as men were turned into mere carnage on either side of him, staying as near to R.J. as he possibly could.

The guitar gradually warped out of shape as its wood was subjected to the dry air of the closet-prison. Gordy and R.J. kept on like that—their two lives melded into one ferocious, fearsome existence. Each day, they were perverted further, taking cognizance in the realities of their conscious nightmare.

One afternoon, a day that would have otherwise been mildly enjoyable because of the weather, Gordy and R.J. crept through the ramshackled city streets. They had been placed on patrol duty—a position that men begged for because it was easy, mindless almost. Gordy couldn't help but compare patrol duty to the days back in California. Simple men looking for a simple means to retreat, to get away from what they knew and despised. His eyes shifted toward the ground as he walked. The sidewalks were swathed in dirt and rubble—just like they were at home. For the first time in years, Gordy thought of his guitar. Days when he would cavort through the streets, watching faces turn, hearing the jubilant cries of enthralled children.

Then it happened. A deluge of gunfire had erupted upon them. Not able to wield their weapons in time, they scattered toward a back-alley, frantically looking for cover—but it was over faster than it had begun.

Gordy heard the thud before he was able to process what had happened.

R.J.'s body lied near the curb, blood slowly oozing onto the ground, swirling with the dusty earth. His eyes were wide open, his jaw dropped as if he were yawning. Gordy stood—inoperative. He wondered how he hadn't been hit, wondered what he would do with the body. It was all completely surreal. He didn't cry, couldn't weep for the lost life of his friend. He simply wondered how the rest of the world could continue on with its everyday routine—if it could.

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When Gordy returned home from the war he was an altered man. No longer an animated youth, filled with the vibrancy and yearning for something greater. No longer was he propelled by his once musical spirit, chirruping his way from place to place. That had been drawn completely out of him, left somewhere amidst the military ranks in Europe—left on the side of that street. Gordy was not himself. And honestly, with the exception of his parents, there was nobody left to even call him Gordy.

There was then only Gordon.

So Gordon made his way back to Oklahoma. He was driven by a desire to see his parents, to repose in the comfort of their affections. His old home. Their faces were as he remembered them, humble and simple. They were always straightforward in their disposition—straightforward but astute. Learning to accept the new man that was their son was certainly a task, but they did learn, accepting his bitterness, his hardened constitution. They made conscious efforts to smile at him, hoping to take some of the stringency out of his face.

Gordon initially tried to return to his position of manual labor on the farm, but found that it no longer satisfied him like it used to. The blistering sun, which was once his source of command, his means of energy, was no more than a nuisance. His muscles, though better-toned than ever before, got lost in the monotony of the chores. Pretty soon, Gordon found himself unable to bear the itching inside of him, the feeling that he needed to escape—like California all over again. His parents were let down when he told them he was leaving; they missed their son. But the man in their house was not the same person, they could recognize that—and they loved him all the same.

He knew that he needed something new, something untarnished. But before he could disappear from his hometown, there was a stop he needed to make. Early evening was the best time to go; the colors were the strongest then. His car came to a rather abrupt stop upon the gravel, his tires gliding over the loose stones like his bare feet used to when he was a child. He stared out onto the lake—nothing had changed. Some of the trees were taller, stooped over the water with a hint of acumen, but the rest was identical.

The plot of grass where he used to sit for hours seemed remarkably smaller, but somehow still fitting. He sat down, not with the vivacity that he used to, not with the motion that allowed the grass to envelop him like an infant in its crib. This time was more tentative.

Picking up a stone that was somewhat flat, Gordy skipped it across the surface of the lake. It ricocheted off the water several times before sinking into the glass-like basin, sending a thread of fluent ripples in all directions. Soon he would be off, hitting the road to find out what the next step was, what direction he should head in. He lied back on the grass—its coolness grazed the back of his neck and shot through his body.

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He hadn't felt so composed in a long time.

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His search led him to Chicago, a city unlike any he had ever experienced. The continuous whistling of cars and other vehicles reminded him of the ferocity of the war, but it was all coupled with the same apathy that he felt in Shawnee—the atmosphere of lethargy that sent him out to California in the first place. Things were loud, raucous even. But, as he quickly found out, people were the same everywhere. Just trying to get by, trying to ignore the things that stood in their way, things that were fixed rigidly by some impeccable force.

There he remained, living alone for about four years while bouncing back and forth between office jobs. The work desensitized him—gave him something to do but gradually tore at him from the inside out. Gordon wasn't an office man, no matter how hard he tried. He couldn't handle the monotony, the listless uniformity of it all. So he turned elsewhere for catharsis.

He wasn't much of an allurer in his youth, but women in Oklahoma were different—more authentic, more secure. It wasn't like that in Chicago. Granted, Gordon was a fairly good looking man. He was healthy, able-bodied, his face arcane and coy. Once he discovered that the combination of these things, along with his service in the war, could procure him attention from nearly any young woman he wanted, he began to capitalize.

Various women came in and out of his life, never leaving a terribly large impact upon him. They provided him with solace, allowed him to harbor his loneliness in the momentary bits of affection that they offered. Women always wanted more from him, though, but Gordon found relationships to be mind-numbing—merely another institution he was expected to take part in. And so, like most other things, the bliss he found in women faded—at least for a while. At least until he met Linda.

She wasn't like the other women; she didn't share the same sense of meekness, sheepishness. Her character was vibrant, joyfully alive at the right times and unassuming elsewhere. Gordon was shocked by her heightened awareness of his feelings—how she made him reassess, reevaluate. And she was auspiciously good-looking, too. No matter how hard he tried, Gordon couldn't resist that smile. She was incredibly cute—not always pretty or elegant necessarily, but certainly always cute. In less than a year, they were married.

After their wedding, they moved out into the suburbs, preparing themselves for the family lifestyle. Kids came soon after—one, two, three. All boys, all sporting the dapper, defined features of their father. Both him and Linda were determined to expose their boys to the world as much as possible. They encouraged them to play outside often, to interact with other neighborhood children—and they did. They were cheerful, well-mannered, beatific kids, reminiscent of simpler

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times. Reminiscent, for Gordon, of his own childhood. *Fountains of joy*, they would say to their friends. And it was true, too—they were a joyful family.

All the while, Gordon's old guitar continued to sit in the corner of that dim closet, not content or discontent, just nothing. It never lost its sublunary qualities, even while it rotted, away from the world, becoming all but a worthwhile spectacle.

While Gordon regained his footing—his buoyancy—in the new world he had seemingly built for himself, the instrument slowly and surely lost the quality given to it years before—the almost-human influence provided by the heart and soul of Gordon.

The world seemed content without that voice.

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Years passed and Gordon's boys grew into men, eventually leaving the household and beginning lives of their own. He was satisfied at this point, comfortable with his place in the world, no longer in need of the intensive self-inquiry that he put himself through in the past. The spark had seemed to return to his core, had come back into him and rejuvenated the dynamism of his spirit. He was eager again, passionate—he felt like his old self. He felt like Gordy.

Music slowly began to move him again and, with some serious consideration, as well as some urging from Linda, Gordon decided that it was time to pick up his old hobby. His guitar was gone, potentially destroyed, possibly in the hands of a stranger. Gordon couldn't know for sure, but the thought saddened him nonetheless. His life was different though, it necessitated something new. Something fresh, unseasoned, with more brilliance and flare—or so he convinced himself.

He headed downtown, looking for the first music shop that he could find. A fluorescent, neon sign flashed brightly—almost offensively—in his eyes, directing him toward the decorated, glass doors of the complex. Once inside, he felt slightly intimidated, like he was inside some sort of colossal kitchen appliance. The eyes of the store's clerk flickered just in the same way that the sign outside the store did. They were absorbing, but altogether tawdry.

His thoughts raced back to the moment years ago when he walked into the tiny guitar shop with his father. More than anything, he wanted his father there, wanted a hand on his shoulder, a sort of guide to lead him around the store. He stepped forward cautiously.

After almost thirty minutes, nothing stood out like it did that first time—he had to make a decision, though. He needed to.

Eventually, Gordon settled on a 1961 Gibson hollow body, half-acoustic half-electric. It was certainly stunning,



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bright red, shining like the side of a fire truck after a fresh wax job—unlike anything that he had ever known. He took the guitar off the wall and paid for it without a second thought; he was eager to sit down and become acquainted.

After he was fully situated in his living room, Gordon looked down at the guitar resting on his knee. The red body of the instrument, more of a crimson really, radiated throughout the room—off the walls, across the ceiling, and straight out the windows. He took a deep breath and began to slowly pluck away at the taut strings of his new instrument. It was a foreign feeling, partially because of the time that had passed since he last played and partially because of the sound of the new guitar.

It didn't resonate like when he was young—its sound was more of a shriek, a metallic yelp, a cry that needed to be tamed.

He continued to play.

The guitar unrelentingly howled out each note, resounding through the house like a disgruntled cat being given a bath. It wouldn't conform, wouldn't obey the commands of his desperate fingers. He felt the crude pain of calluses instantly forming once more on his fingertips, years of placidness being scraped away in a single afternoon.

The noise was becoming unbearable to him—but he continued to play.

Images flashed through his mind: liquefying sunsets flying over the horizon, countless women with slender fingers and empty stares, ephemeral images of R.J. and his parents, his wife and kids smiling torpidly in his direction—all the while still playing each note with as much conviction as possible.

The lake came back to him. He recalled those summer nights—as a child, as a youth, as an adult. He longed for the feel of its water rippling over his skin; his body was parched, his mind fully desiccated. Imaginary stones screamed over the lake's surface in his mind. Each time they hit the water he became more fully aware of the sound of the guitar that he was wielding in that exact moment—the two did not synchronize well.

The two could never synchronize well.

He could hear the notes in his head, the pattern of melodies that should be escaping from the instrument on his lap. But it wasn't happening. He thought of R.J. in the midst of his playing, thought of the corroded lament of his old harmonica. He never realized until then, never took into consideration how natural and intuitive his guitar sounded alongside R.J.'s harmonica.

But R.J. was gone—his old guitar was gone.

Somewhere, miles east of the suburbs of Chicago, a guitar sat upright in the corner of a closet, wasting away out of the sunlight. It sat as Gordon feebly attempted to play the gleaming hollow body. It sat as the new instrument slipped off Gordon's knee and landed on the floor. It sat as Gordon began to silently shed tears over the scarlet eyesore lying on

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the floor.

Gordon remained perched, his head in his hands, overcome by a devastating consciousness of his own futility—a feeling of hollowness.

December 1, 2011

With another semester behind us, another issue of *The Laurel* has entered our midst. The pages in this magazine contain an eclectic, stirring and genuine account of the sheer creativity that exists here in the Bonaventure community. As the editors of this esteemed magazine, we are both exceedingly proud to print these works; they embody the passion that we hold for the publication, the energy that can be seen at every single one of our meetings and the eagerness that we see in our loyal staffers.

The Fall 2011 issue of *The Laurel* is a testament to us that our peers still long for that which great artists have always reached: an understanding of truth in the world and a tangible means of representing beauty and emotion in the richest sense. This—without question—has been accomplished in these pages. As you read through these works, we hope you revel in the words and images; they serve as evidence that St. Bonaventure University will always remain an imaginative and inventive home to us.

Thank you to Dr. Richard Simpson, Misty Johnson, Dr. Chris Hill and our entire staff for the endless support that they have provided us in creating this magazine.

Please continue to support The Laurel and **never** cease writing.

Your everlasting friends,



Chris Radey & Patrick Francis Hosken  
Editors-in-chief



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