

BLOOMSBURG UNIVERSITY

WARREN

2019

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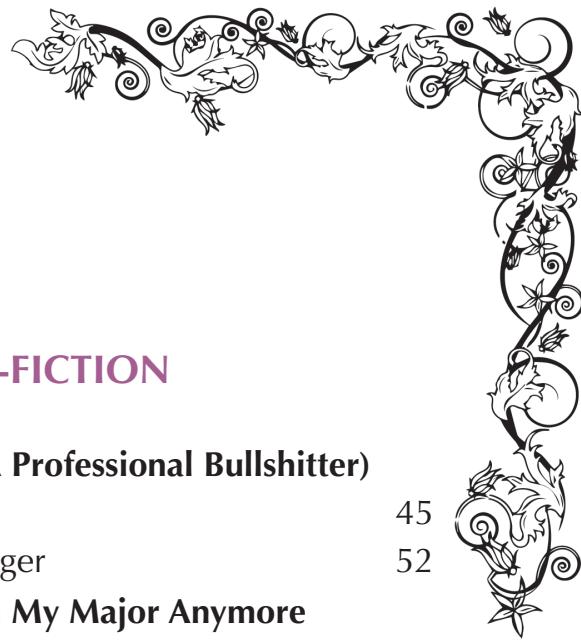
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AWARD WINNERS

The Peters Award for Nonfiction 2019

Serenity

by Jon Beaver

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can and wisdom to know the difference.

~

The first one was infinitely uncomfortable. We were the second arrival, just behind the guy who was to lead that night's meeting. I think his name was Jim or something like that. We approached the side doors as he was unlocking them. After exchanging empty greetings, he led us to the church basement. The harsh light gave me a better look at him. This man was ancient, with long, silvery, slicked-back hair – a style that was much younger than he was, and pieces of this and that crumpling from his face. The wrinkles on his face were like chasms and his nose hairs probably doubled as a toothbrush if he chewed with his mouth open. This was the man we were supposed to relate to.

The basement was a big room, but the eerie emptiness and the uniform rows of white tables made it seem vaster than it really was. Behind us was an abandoned kitchen, lined with reflective metal that bore likeness to an operating room. A mass of bulging garbage bags in the corner waited to be taken out. The smell from a lonely coffee maker on the counter nearby, already brewing mysteriously, was the only inviting aspect of the place; though, even the warm, comfortable aroma couldn't mask the tinge of moth balls underneath. We sat at the same table as Jim, as far from him as we could. He made a useless attempt at small talk before we all sat there in silence, twiddling our thumbs and mentally crying for someone else to show up soon.

Probation was forcing my Mom to go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. She attempted to go to the first one on her own, but was too nervous to go in. So, I agreed to start going with her for support. We were welcomed at this first one but weren't addressed much; our discomfort must have been plastered all over our faces. But over time we were encouraged more and more to speak. Me, not as much, since I'd always hit them with, "I'm just here for my Mom." They really wanted my Mom to participate, though, and she never did. We were there because we had to be, not because we cared about getting sober. The other members were all old; very old, and I was doubtful that, even if I had wanted help, I'd ever be able to find a connection with them. During most meetings I was preoccupied; thinking about getting

home to take another pill. After a few of the A.A. meetings, my feelings changed, and something was beginning to pry open my attention a little more each time.

My Mom's official reason for not going to the meetings anymore was that the program was too centered on God, and I would have normally been with her in flipping the bird to Jesus. Holding hands and reciting the Serenity Prayer at the end of every meeting should have solidified my contempt. Surprisingly, I didn't quite feel that way. As far as my experience with religion goes, my Dad forced his short-lived venture with a Lutheran church on me when I was ten and made me go with him for about three months. It was all just a bunch of painstakingly boring stories to me, and I decided at age ten that I was not religious. Talking biblically would most often crank up a white noise in my ears but that didn't happen at the A.A. meetings. In fact, I listened intently. It was hard not to, since the stories these people shared were so vulnerable and personal. Despite their age, the experiences and insights these people recounted were surprisingly relatable; even though they'd often divert into religious preaching. But I didn't mind with this group.

There was something specific in these sessions that struck me deeply. One speaker would talk about faith in a way that I hadn't been exposed to before. Rather than promote Christianity, he suggested finding a higher power. He explained a higher power is one person or idea to which you dedicate your entire life and every action you take. It didn't have to be Jesus or God, but simply whatever or whoever you feel spiritually devoted to. An aspiring biologist might consider science to be their higher power. Family could be someone's higher power as well. It's something to believe in; to fall back on; to live for. These A.A. meetings really did have a lasting effect on me; they convinced me that finding a higher power is essential to living a normal, fulfilling life.

When I think about it, a little spirituality could probably fill the persistent void gaping within me. I've always associated spirituality with religion, so I was never interested. The idea that you could have a higher power that isn't religious seems so obvious now that I know about the concept. For a long time, I've lacked a direction or a sense of purpose. I want to commit to something; to being someone. But the problem is always the question: Why?

It'd be nice to have a person or a story or an idea; just something to believe in and to motivate me and drive me forward. Lately, I've been numbly slogging through life, trying my best to do the right thing. Things have been decent, sure. But why do I do it? That's the nagging question. Who or what serves as my inspiration – my reason? Doing it all just for me and my health and my future seems selfish. It's about time I had something bigger than myself to live for.

It feels as though I've been moving along just because it's what you're supposed to do. I haven't been able to find my higher power, and it's hard to fight the feeling that this is all pointless. Depression is terribly widespread, and it's no secret that most people largely feel the same.

The incessant commands that little voice in my head keeps giving me; the ones telling me to give up; are really starting to get to me. As cliché as it sounds, giving up is not an option. There's nowhere else to go. In the past, I've craved other things. Now, I simply crave peace of mind; that sweet, elusive serenity.

I sometimes think of myself as a father. Then, I recoil in horror at such a terrifying thought. People change, I know. Maybe one can't predict it, but one thing I surely can't imagine ever changing is my desire to have kids. Realistically, I could never be a good father because I haven't had a consistent father figure to raise me and serve as an example. It's natural for a boy to desire a strong male role model to learn from. Living with my Mom for most of my life found her husbands in that role. Unfortunately, they both turned out to be violent narcissists with massive insecurities that resulted in severe anger issues.

For almost all my teenage years, I was around these guys, looking up to them as if they weren't human garbage. Even when LeRoy held a knife to my Mom's throat after breaking into our house, or when Bob punched through a window and smeared his bloody hand all over my Mom's face, I was still blinded by some primal need. It was that need for approval from a father figure. So, I went on convincing myself to like the same things my stepfathers liked, to talk the way they talked, and to act the way they acted. It's a good thing they both eventually went too far, waking me up and making me realize that there was nothing about these two that I should aspire to.

One morning; I couldn't have been older than thirteen; I was awakened by a sharp pain in my back.

"Wake up!"

Another blow to my back. I turned to see my Dad standing over me. He kicked me in the back once more.

"Why did you do it?!" He stood there with balled up fists.

"What, Dad?!" I managed to squeak out.

"Scaring Kelsey last night! And all the fucking noise!"

The rest of the conversation was a mess of my confusion and his anger. The night before, my stepsister Kelsey had been sleepwalking, as she'd been known to do. She made a mess of the house and, apparently, had a nightmare about me coming into her room and scaring her. When she told my Dad that all this had really happened, his immediate reaction was to storm up to my room and start kicking me.

A rift formed between my Dad and I long before this day. Outbursts like this one were always part of who he was. He wasn't an overtly angry guy all the time; much the contrary. Most of the time he was nothing but a big, often funny nerd with a spot-on likeness to Napoleon Dynamite, decked out in obsessions with rocks and Hot Wheels and a persistent proclivity to perceive the whole world as being against him. But when Dad did get angry, it'd come out explosively. As a little kid, I was often the target of these blasts, and violence was always a possibility. I was a very nervous kid to begin with, so I became afraid of my Dad with every episode. Fear can be blinding, which is a shame because it prevented me from seeing all the good things my Dad would do for me. Good things like taking me on hiking adventures to Council Cup and the Powder hole; like letting me be in the Blair Witch spoofs he filmed with his friend; like teaching me how to drive his four-wheeler. Through all he did for me, I was only ever able to see my Dad as a threatening authority figure.

My Mom made the situation much worse. My parents divorced when I was 8, and I chose to live with her. Being severely manipulative, my Mom filled my head with ideas about my Dad. She told me that he didn't care about me; that everything he said was a lie; that I was better off with her. Thanks to her and my weak and paranoid mind, I began to see Dad as a flat-out villain. After that morning when he kicked me awake, I stopped going to his house on the weekends. We didn't talk about it much, until one weekend when he picked my sister up and I saw him briefly. He asked me why I wasn't coming over anymore. Then, with glassy eyes, he asked if I hate him. I assumed he was putting on a show and shrugged.

~

It's funny; I remember one night when I was drunk on the couch with Bob, my Mom's second husband, who was far drunker than I was, having a deep conversation. Let me clarify: a deep conversation with Bob meant that he did all the talking and would cut me off when I'd try to respond, until he got bored and stopped paying attention to me. His ramblings drifted and landed on an ignorant exploration of all the things that are wrong with me. I tried my best to explain my struggles with anxiety and depression, to which he had a surprising and sour solution.

"It's all about Jesus man." Bob leaned in close to me. I could smell his hot, sour, vodka breath fornicating with the stench of onions and burgers wafting off his clothes. His pudgy, unshaven face was flushed to the point where it looked like he was going to pop; his milk bottle glasses fogging up from the sweat coming off him. He pointed to the ceiling, "You just gotta give in to the guy up there."

"You know I'm not into that stuff." I tried to sneakily inch away to escape the trifecta of odors emanating from him. But he just

moved closer.

"It doesn't even have to be religious, bro! Just gotta love Jesus!" He gestured imploringly. I looked at the TV and tried to focus on the Led Zeppelin concert. I didn't want to be preached to by a guy who would routinely beat my Mom and destroy the house. "Make him the center of your life and you'll be free, man!" Bob got up and moved in front of the TV. "You can do anything, and he'll take care of you! No matter what!" He shook his fists out in front of him like he was trying to go Super Saiyan. "Anything!"

"Bob, I just can't. That kind of thing –"

"All your hipster bullshit... This is why you've got so many fuckin' problems. You won't open up your heart." Bob straightened up, letting a hand go limp and placing the other on his chest. A warm, wide smile spread across his face; a smile of the sort I'd never seen Bob produce. "Jesus is everything good in the world. If you'd just learn the facts..." He closed his eyes shaking his head. "You can always count on Jesus." Bob picked up the fifth of six-dollar vodka and took a long drink. Then he turned to the TV and started playing air guitar along with the song.

~

I've been to some very low points throughout my life. In the midst of my lowest one, when I was nineteen, I stole a couple hundred dollars from my Dad. I did it to fuel a terrible habit. When you're in as deep as I was, your negative traits and emotions mutate, feeding off the bad energy. My resentment for my Dad bubbled and gurgled, transforming into a complete disregard for him as anyone meaningful to me. I stole from him; he found out and blew up. I bawled tears I didn't know I had for him. If we were distant before, now we were mountains apart.

A year later I'd try to end my life. There were several reasons why I did it, but the gnawing guilt from what I did to my Dad was a big one. When I woke up the next morning in the hospital, I was still heavily intoxicated from the bottle of pills I had swallowed. So, when my Dad came to see me, I was able to act happy to see him, like I had never stabbed him in the back and like we had spoken more than twice since then. Not long after he showed up, a nurse came into my room to inform me that they'd be moving me up to the psych ward in fifteen minutes. As I ripped all the suction cups off my body and got myself together, I can't quite remember what my Dad was saying. But I remember the last few words we exchanged.

"Hey, could you help me? I'm kind of embarrassed." I struggled with the back of my hospital gown.

"What?"

"Could you tie the back for me? I can't get it." My Dad tied the

gown shut. "Thanks." I turned around to look at him and his face was all screwed-up.

"I wish you wouldn't have done this," my Dad lamented. I started fiddling with my gown again. "I tried to kill myself once." I heard him, but I didn't hear him, and he knew this. My Dad quickly hugged me, then averted his eyes and told me he loved me as he hurried out of the room.

Three and a half years later I'd spend most of the summer out of state with my grandparents. One day, my grandmother and I had a conversation about me, and we reached the topic of my suicide attempt. She told me that my Dad tried to kill himself once and I realized I already knew this. Then, she told me the story.

I was a year old. My parents were both in nursing school and would leave me with my Nana, my Mom's mother, while they were at school. One day my Dad came to pick me up, but my Nana wouldn't let my Dad in. She was on one of her crack binges and conjured the delusion that my parents weren't good enough for me. So, she decided that I belonged to her now. Between fits of hammering on the door and yelling, my Dad called my Mom and his mom, hysterical. He was panicking. When my Gram and Mom arrived there, my Dad was gone. After an hour or two of cops being useless, and a visit from Child Welfare Services, I was finally pried out of my Nana's clutches. While this was happening, my Dad's brother was finding him passed out at home after swallowing a bottle of pills. My Dad tried to kill himself because he thought he was never going to see me again.

^

I needed a haircut, so I decided to try out a barber within walking distance. I'd never been here but had heard this place was viable and it was right in downtown Bloomsburg. It was a comfortable place upon walking in - a real classic barber shop vibe. There was one of those iconic red and white barber shop poles, and the shop had that familiar, sweet, alcoholic smell. The guy seemed nice enough. He awakened from his trance of eating Fritos and staring up at "Hancock" playing on his tiny television and tells me to take a seat. As he wraps the plastic cloak around my shoulders, he asks me what I want. I tell him exactly how I wanted my hair, and even show him a picture for reference. He says: "Nah, I'ma do it better." Okay, sure. His sign says "30 years of experience" so I trust in his judgement. I didn't oppose this. He goes to work.

Maybe they do it differently in Harlem, where he said he was from; but man, he was rough. He's practically punching me in the side of the head with the clippers. To get me to turn my head, he hooks his finger in my ear and pulls. At times he's straight-up carving into my skin with the smaller clippers, as if pushing harder will make my hair look

better. But it was nothing I couldn't handle. He's just kind of rugged, I thought. I'm no wuss; I can put up with this. As long as the final product is good, no big deal.

Then he starts talking about Jesus.

"I'm not very religious." I tell him. From the mirror, I can see him shoot me an angry sideways glance. I follow up nervously, "But I guess I keep an open mind." He shuts off the clippers.

Wagging his finger in my face, wide eyed and excited, he tells me "Okay, first, never say that word again! Religion is an institution!" We dive into his sermon. Rambling on and on, he tells me how faith is all about letting God fill the hole in your heart for he is my father. How would I feel if I had a son who never paid me any mind? I must become one with Jesus Christ because I could die tomorrow. There is darkness in my heart that must be cleansed. It was a whole lot of Bible vomit being spewed at me so quickly.

Then, for whatever reason, he brings up homosexuality. Wildly waving his arms in the air, he tells me that being with someone of the same sex is pure sin. He runs to his desk and grabs his bible. "I'm about to give you proof. This is the King James bible, alright? That's the only one you listen to." He flips open to a passage which is bookmarked and highlighted. Shoving it my face, he tells me to read. I start reading in my head, just to humor him. "No, out loud," he commands. Remember, my haircut is only half finished at this point, and it just so happens that he had been using a straight razor before this moment. So, there I am, half a haircut, reading a bible verse out loud from the King James Bible as the offensively holy barber hovers a razor blade next to my face, desperately trying to read fast so I can escape this nightmare. He continues his argument. I could have opposed him – deep down I wanted to. But I felt it better to just smile and agree with everything he said so I could get out of there. Also, the fate of my hair is in this man's hands.

It must have become obvious that I wasn't into anything he was saying, probably after he had me read yet another bible verse out loud, because he got legitimately heated. He's passionately yelling – screaming – now, spitting warm spatters of saliva in my face as he preaches, waving the razor and the bible around in dramatic, animated motions. Minutes zipped by as I became afraid that I'd be stuck in that squeaky red chair forever; doomed to listen to this bullheaded freak's fervent homophobia and fallacious wisdom for the rest of eternity. Running over to a shelf, he tells me he has something for me. He hands me a few small books, "The Fruit of the Spirit" and "Miracles," and informs me I must read them as soon as I get home.

It wasn't until some other guys walked in that he snapped out of it and rushed to finish my haircut. After being in that seat for over an

hour, I was finally clear to leave. "Sixteen dollars," he says, but I wasn't going to ask anyway. I shove a twenty into his hand, telling him to keep the change, and turn to hurry out of there. But his hand catches my arm, stopping me. Now he wants a handshake. So, I put her there. "Make sure you read those before you come back," he says, pointing his finger in my face. I smile and nod, feeling surreal as I remembered that this wasn't the first psychopath trying to push Jesus on me. I hurry out of his shop. Needless to say, I'm going to stick to Holiday Hair.

This was very recent and at the peak of my newfound psychological short-circuit. I knew how ridiculous and admittedly funny the whole ordeal was, yet I couldn't keep it from shaking me on a deeper level. Positive emotions are always overtaken by negative ones and on this night, I couldn't help but fixate on how desperately I needed a higher power – a reason to fight, because depression was really cleaning the toilets with my will to go on. It must have been driving me legitimately insane, because this barber shop fiasco was starting to feel like a sign. Maybe Jesus was the unlikely answer. Could it be possible for me to delude myself enough to accept him as my higher power? At least then I'd have someone to live for, no matter the fact that I'd be banking on something that I'd spent most of my life shaking my head at. Maybe, on a long shot, it could work. At this rate, it might have to work.

Summer 2018 was the first extended period I spent outside Pennsylvania. My Gram and Pap took me in between school years. They live in Southport, North Carolina, a popular tourist destination right next to the beach. Along with a drastically different environment, my grandparents were also drastically different people than what I'm used to. That whole Summer had me operating as a different person. No more doom and gloom and acting up – my only slip-up over those three months was a speeding ticket. I attribute much of my temporary straight-edge zest to being around my Pap.

Growing up, Pap was always kind of an inside joke to my siblings and I because he was different and dressed different. At this point, I know it's just because he doesn't care, even slightly, about what the rest of the world thinks of him, which is actually pretty badass. Pap, a retired Navy veteran, knows his values and ideals, and sticks to them tightly. Honestly, I don't think the man has the slightest dribble of insecurity in him. Along with that, the set of general skills he has amassed are wildly impressive. Any household maintenance or carpentry project is no big deal to him. His proficiency with mathematics is nothing short of unbelievable. Even in social situations he always manages to be the most interesting man in the room. All this renders him the manliest man that I know; deeming Pap prime role model material.

For that Summer, I was more mentally sound than I'd ever been before for an extended stretch. Living with my Pap allowed me to live under and observe the kind of role model I'd always been aching for. I wanted to make him proud, and to secure his approval because he was everything I could hope to strive for. Trying to model myself after my Pap eventually resulted in realizing the hard truth: it's not meant to be. Pap may be great at trades and math and the like, but he shows, and maybe possesses, zero emotion. He was also not big on fun or frivolity. Chewing gum is one of the most carefree things I've seen him do. I, on the other hand, am very emotional, and prioritize fun over most things, regrettably. Midway through the Summer I was beginning to realize that even though I could look up to Pap, I could never truly be like him. Though, it was still nice to be around him and to lobby for his encouragement, which helped me stay sane and focused.

There's always that one day last Summer where Pap basically evolved into a veritable demigod; the day when I knew for sure that his wise sensibilities and unabashed old-man-swag would never be within my reach. My Pap is the president of the Southport Lions Club, a charitable organization dedicated to providing and promoting eye care. One of Pap's big projects this year was helping a homeless man who had gone nearly blind. Pap was to pick him up and take him to a hospital where he'd have surgery on his eyes to restore his sight, paid on behalf of the Lions Club. The morning of the surgery, Pap wasn't the least bit apprehensive. He ate his plain Cheerios and sipped his black coffee like any morning, as if he wasn't about to do something so divinely philanthropic. He walked tall through the front door right on time, and that moment when he walked back in at the end of the night made me feel like I was dreaming. Here was my Pap, walking through the front door, hands in his pockets and chewing gum like there was no tomorrow, after a hard day of literally restoring sight to the blind and homeless, proving himself to me as a shining example of a perfect man equipped with a steel state of mind that I know I could never hope to attain. If only.

Whenever I think about my Pap, I'm reminded of another moment from mid-Summer. He and my Gram were fighting, which they never do, and my Pap was not happy. It was the first time I'd seen him truthfully angry. All in all, the fight was inconsequential. However, one thing my Gram said in the heat of it pierced the air and stuck around like a tuning fork.

"You always turn into your father."

~

Over ten years ago, I wrecked my Dad's four-wheeler; rolling several times and mangling my right leg. A few weeks later, my Dad would be sitting in the waiting room of a specialist with me so that the

doctor could realign my broken toe. I don't know how long it took me to notice, but I was suddenly aware that my Dad was glaring at an older guy sitting across from us, nose buried in a magazine and looking about as inviting as a bloody garbage disposal. Dad slowly turned his head to me, still scowling, and pointed his finger at the man.

"See that guy over there?" My Dad spoke loud enough for the whole waiting room to hear him. "That's your real grandfather. He doesn't care about us." The man never looked up; only shifted slightly in his seat. When I glanced back to Dad, he looked more nauseous than angry now. Without warning, he stood up and walked out the doors where he bumped into my Mom, as she was running late, who he exchanged rushed words with as Mom looked at the old man worryingly a few times. She came in and softly explained "That's Daddy's daddy. He was very mean to Grammy and Daddy for a long time, so he's going to wait outside."

Once I was away from my Pap and back in Bloomsburg to start my junior year of college, pressure started mounting. I had lost that role model I needed so badly, and I was on my own with a whole lot of schoolwork and a new job. I tried pretending my Pap was still here with me, but he's so far away physically and we hardly speak at all. It was back to square one, but with a ton more responsibilities and duties to fulfill now. It's cliché to say the world was on my shoulders, but that's how it really felt. My body started to respond when I held firm on my mind.

It started as a mild nausea every time I'd eat. Soon, it was a sharp, burning pain in my stomach at random times throughout the day; the kind of pain that causes you to stop moving and gasp. I became miserable. Everything seemed even more pointless than before, like there was no real reason to keep pushing if I was just going to feel this way all the time. Something malicious had crept within me, eating away my insides and dusting any last cobwebs of optimism that I had hidden away in the corners of my mind. Read two hundred pages, type thirty pages, pain, write up a blog, give up, pain, read another two hundred pages, give up, fill out eight worksheets, pain, compose a film review, pain, two club meetings, pain, give up, pain, presentation, pain, ePortfolio, pain!, tutoring, PAIN! It simply wasn't going to work.

The pain became too intense. Backed into a corner, I decided that I had to tell someone at the very least. Since my Dad has been a nurse for twenty years, I figured he could probably at least tell me what the issue was. I sent him a text, to which he responded with a few questions asking details about symptoms. Then he slapped me with a question that I definitely wasn't ready for.

"Will you be at your apartment at noon tomorrow?"

Usually, if I needed my Dad to help me, it was like convincing grass not to be green to get him to come out here. But here he was, ready to come out to me in less than twelve hours without even saying why. I agreed to meet with him. The next day, I approached the driver's window of his red truck in the middle of the street, which was still running. Dad was in his work scrubs.

"How's it goin'?" He gave half a smile.

"Good. You?"

"Miserable, as always. How's your job?"

"Great. I really enjoy it."

"That's good. I'm glad it's something you like." He opened his center console and took out a bottle of pills. "I figure you probably have ulcers. This is Zantac. It should help. Take them twice a day."

"You think that's what it is?"

"Most likely. I had ulcers in college too. In fact, I almost died from them." He looked off into the distance. I heard him this time.

"Really? That's... Insane... I really appreciate you running these out here. You didn't have to do this."

"I know I didn't have to... You should still see a doctor, though. I can take you if you need a ride." We caught each other's eyes for a few moments. As much as I wanted to hear about his near-death experience with stomach ulcers, and just to talk to him about anything, I knew he had to get to work and he knew I had to get to class. He handed me the bottle of pills.

Now, I've heard of people "finding Jesus" in all sorts of mundane ways, like watching the sunset or seeing God in the suds of the kitchen sink. It seems these moments of spirituality can strike when you least expect them. It turns out I had one right here, as my Dad handed me a bottle of Zantac. When I went inside and popped open the bottle, I found much more than a bunch of brown, acid-neutralizing pills. I found serenity at last.

The Fuller Fiction Award 2019

All the Bones

by Sarah Goulet

The morning that I wake up to the news notice on my phone that the cure has failed, I get up before the sun has fully risen.

The floors are too dark, the walls too close and cold, this time of year. This building was never meant to be a place where people lived, and you can tell in the way frost draws along the hallways, in the scattered wrappers and coffee cups that my neighbor litters around his doorway, a careful crumb trail to ward off intruders, at odds with the light scent of incense and butterscotch that always lingered in the air. I get up and check the lock on my door. It still holds, although light still glints at the bottom of the doorframe.

My feet grow cold too quick, but the floors are bare wood or bare stone; I hadn't been able to afford carpet on my own, and the ever-absent landlord certainly was never going to install it. I loathe cold feet. It's up there with wet socks and broken umbrellas, but for once I don't feel like I should be caring and instead go to the window, pulling aside the curtains. The skies are pale, icy, no sign of airplane slipstreams, but I know they'll be coming soon. It was on the news, what to do when the worst came, news anchors with raw circles under their makeup, voices carefully composed. I drop the curtain closed and get to work.

As I systematically pull the plugs from the few appliances around my apartment, I think about the old church cemetery a few miles west. I haven't visited my grandmother's grave since the day she died. Her body isn't really there, I know; dad took the ashes, said he scattered them. For all I know, he might have poured them out the window into the flowerbed and called it a day. The day she died he woke me up, surprisingly quietly for such a large man. He sat on the side of my bed, mattresses protesting under the weight, and had placed one hand on my knee. He never said a word. Considering his condolence when my first cat, Antsy, died was, "Well, he'd had a good run," I'm glad he didn't; I yank the cord from my microwave particularly viciously, hard enough for it to spring free and creakily crash towards the floor.

Leaping away takes a few solid minutes of breath to recover. When I straighten, hands first on my knees, then the bare plywood counter, rough against my sweating palms. With the humming of appliances muted, I can only hear my breath whistling through my nostrils - and then, although I'm not sure if what I'm hearing is real, a far-off roar, like the ocean tide. New Broxton, run down, is far inland. I'd only ever seen the ocean once; the only photograph on my fridge

is myself and Scotch, her smile blinding under her sunhat next to my squint, the sunset dying behind her.

When I'm fully straight, I sweep the few dishes on the counter into the sink. I think I hear at least one break, ringing in my ears, but it's fine; I'm not going to be doing any dishes soon, and the tap water stopped working Tuesday anyway. In my nightshirt and bare feet, I stand with my hands braced on either side of the sink. I think the sun must be only a minute from daybreak, by now; I've worked slowly, and the edges of the curtain slowly tinge fiery, vibrant, molten.

I slide to the right and open the breadbox. I have one glass of water sitting by the stove, and that's it; I'd been trying to partition the water as long as I could for Antsy the Second, but he'd died two painful days ago, breath rasping as he licked my knuckles and laid his head on my knee, buzzing purr fading into darkness, the lurid abrasions stark against his white fur finally stilling. I'd buried him at the end of the walk in the flowerbed, between heaving gasps; it was all the farther I'd been able to physically go, and I didn't want to be too far away when the planes came, one way or another.

That was the last time I'd cried.

The sickly scabs on my arms burn as I draw the bread to me. I'd never been much of a cook, and besides, when Scotch was around she was the designated cook. In the past few months my most recurring daydream was of the meals she used to make, plump roast chickens in fragrant rosemary, great dollops of mashed potatoes in their fragrant butter drippings, salmon moist with brown sugar and honey, saccharine strawberry drizzle over pillowy pancakes. I haven't had a pancake since she was taken away, but yesterday I found a packet of yeast and made a loaf of bread, thinking about my grandmother's calloused hands dusted in flour and the way Scotch would dance in the kitchen, smile larger than life, hands curling over my hip bones, my most loved but least visited dream.

I still have her olive ring, hanging over my heart, the only piece of jewelry I've ever been able to wear, the only one I've been willing to chafe against the sores that spread cancerously down my chest. I don't have a bread knife, but I don't need one. I place my hands on either side of the loaf. Dark grain and molasses, I think, warm stone and soft light. The groan of the oven, the smell of yeast. The grandmother, the lover, and the lost morning. Antsy's warm blink when I'd press my nose to his.

And then I see my mother's face in my mind's eye for the first time in years, the burn in the crook of her elbow, her sky blue eyes, and her plump hands. I see her face framed against the early morning light, her hands wrapped around a towel, the smells of bacon, of butter, of frying things. Perched on a stool, I dropped a cup of flour that plumed

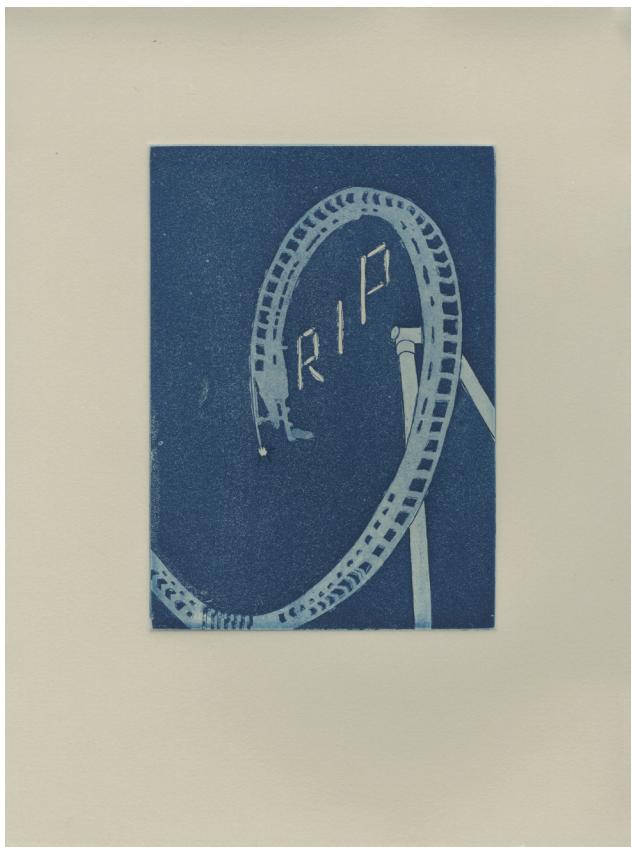
around my bare feet, but for once she laughed; in the lines of her face I saw my present, my future, all the children I never would have, and all the parents who live past their children.

I take a breath.

The ocean's pulse is loud in my ears. I can see them above, the airplanes, the last few healthy pilots preparing to jettison their cargo on the ailing masses below. The horizon stretches far past them, nothing they could ever hope to reach.

I breathe out.

Somewhere, it has just rained, and somewhere a little child wakes up to the scent of honeysuckle and the cuckoo's cry. Somewhere someone has just died, alone in their beds, portraits of old lovers tilted askew on the bedside table. Somewhere a new baby sucks in a breath, unaware of all the bones underneath the floorboards. And as the first of the canisters hit the city, the last attempt, I hope they never look down.



Final Destination
by Courtney Moyer

The Fuller Fiction Award 2018

Evanescence

by Patrick Sriharsha

The sun was low when we met, setting when we spoke. Snow stretched and rolled over the land like a blanket, catching the lazy light, which was scattered crazily - an unselfconscious sprawl - around the tall and ancient pines of our meeting-place grove. It didn't bother seeking entrance to the dark beneath the boughs, and so they had no need to seem foreboding, no need to be anything other than what they were. We know the light will come, the trees didn't bother to say, we don't wish for it. To the trees, it was all the same. Sometimes I wish I could be like that, but I'm not.

It was just the two of us, together inside the gold-edged darkness. I took after the sun and the snow to look at, but I was standing in shadow, standing close to the trees. He was dark, dark...bright. A radiant dark. I never could fit him into a metaphor properly, but I guess I was a contradiction too, or an imitation of a contradiction. I wanted to be what he was. But I wasn't that either.

I remember how my hair had grown long, how I'd wished I'd cut it. There were shears - we'd been cutting wreaths, that's why we were there - and I remember thinking, insanely, I should cut my hair right then. That was just how it was around him. How I was.

"Thanks for coming out," he'd said. He'd said it before, when I'd arrived. His breath had been short then, I had the feeling there were sounds getting lost that my brain just filled in. But I guess I don't know when it really is doing that. My doubts only have the power I can give them, and I don't have a lot of power.

Anyway he'd said it differently the second time. Patient and measured, since the work was done. Not that he ever got impatient. Just - focused, somewhere that wasn't you, somewhere you wanted to be, so that it would be you after all. You waited on eggshells for him to say things. I waited on eggshells, I mean. Do you care? Are you me? Me, I hadn't said much. The air smelled cold and sometimes when we passed there were traces drifting through it, aftershave and insulation, probably, and even though I took deep breaths there wasn't anything more personal to take in or to let out. Does that make sense? It was too cold to talk the way I wanted, to be vulnerable, there were too many layers we needed to survive. I spent all my time working too fast, scraping my hands through my lame gloves, and now I was a little out of breath. I couldn't relax, either. I didn't know how to stand. Here, I wished he'd have told me, reaching out to stand me how he wanted, like this. I wished I knew how to ask someone how to stand the way they wanted.

"It's no big deal," I lied.

He smiled at me. Like - like when someone smiles. What am I gonna say? Like the stars cut the sky? It wasn't, though. It was the kind of smile you want to write stupid poetry about, but you know it's stupid, and you never finish. The kind of smile you couldn't mar with stupid poetry. That's how I felt - like stupid poetry.

He'd been talking and I hadn't been listening.

Regret is a pause you can't fill. It just stretches out in front of you, a canvas left blank, swallowed up by time.

"I said," he said, "It means a lot. It's shitty work and it's cold and all. But I like hanging out with you. I'm glad I got a chance, before," And he didn't stop there, but I had to, my breath caught, because I saw how his arm moved and I realized that as if it was the most casual thing in the world he was about to step forward and put one hand on my shoulder, his thumb across my throat, and slam me back up against the pine tree - I knew heartbeats before it happened, struck by prophecy and lightning, how the bark would be rough and uneven and jam into my back and send something almost sharp enough to be pain racing up and down my spine, snap my teeth together, leave me in shambles. He had rough hands in rough gloves, and I remember being glad of that.

Anyway he didn't.

Stupid, right? Stupid poetry. I'd lost track of what he was saying again. My mind was everywhere. I had the opposite of his focus. I think I heard maybe one word out of two the whole evening, except at the end. He was saying something about leaving, things he'd miss, maybe things I should have heard, maybe things I couldn't have. I think the thing I hated most about it, aside from the occasional bouts of winter wind, was the way I kept shrinking. All my fantasies were about - well, you know. But I could have taken the lead, you know? I could have said something, done something. Anything. Only when I tried to picture myself stepping forward, shoving him down in the snow, I just couldn't quite imagine the part where he lost his footing. It was always me, stumbling, helpless. It was the least cool thing about me - and that's still a list, my little religion - but even alone in my head I didn't want to win.

Maybe he'd have let me.

Anyway I didn't.

He stepped closer to me. "You about ready to head back?" He said - no, murmured. He murmured that. He was reaching past me to get the axe and I didn't move the way you're supposed to, so the edge of his coat brushed mine. When he leaned past me a finger of sunlight slid across his cheek and I remember the sudden spike of jealousy, thinking, if I ever kill anything, it's gonna be that star. I hoped it died cold the way I was. All I had was the edge of his coat brushing up against me, an electric shock suffocated in the tyranny of fleece. I think I told him yes, because I knew if I didn't say anything, I'd suffocate too.

The axe was stuck, frozen a little - we'd been ignoring it for a while. He had to strain to pull it free, but the muscles of his arms were hidden in layered fabric, and I added every fashion designer in the world to my kill list. All the way back to the first thoughtless asshole to skin a wolf. I could imagine the way his forearms were changing their shape. His rough gloves sliding down the handle, fingers tightening - I could imagine it, couldn't see it, couldn't turn my head, couldn't move. As the axe scraped and shifted in the earth I felt myself shifting with it, giving ground, and when it finally broke free with a crack I bit my lip hard enough I tasted blood. He was looking at me, but it was too dark to see it. Not too dark to tell something was off, though.

"How is," I started to ask, hating myself instantly. Couldn't say her name. The girlfriend. I couldn't even say his. I felt like it was the other way around, anyway, like she was the possessor, the hoarder. Chaining up his beauty in her slender arms, imprisoning it behind lock and key, somewhere only she could see it stripped bare the way it was meant to be seen. I hated her the way I hated jammed traffic, or having to smile when there's gristle in your teeth. It wasn't personal really, but I needed her dead. I'd half-convince myself some nights that killing her could be considered self-defense. I imagined him finding the body, his desolation, his tears running down my neck, my bare shoulders -

Sick. I felt sick to my bones, thinking like that. But it didn't stop me. Maybe that's why he chose her. Maybe she never thought like that, maybe she was clean, inside and out. Thinking that way almost let me bear it. "How're your friends handling it," I finished. I'd paused too long. He paused a little longer, then stepped back, swinging the axe over his shoulders. He could have swung it right into the side of my head the way I was feeling. Part of me wanted that too.

"I don't know. They're being chill mostly. I think it's hard on them," he said. Eyes distant - focused. Somewhere that wasn't me. Fuck me. Fuck me, I thought. Ugly, irreverent, vulgar, worthless. Waiting. Waiting is the erosion of etiquette and death to every civilized thing. I was going feral between breaths. I could have thought love me instead and it would have been the same thought. A wish whose granting, or denial, would hurt just the same. It's strange how much you can want to be hurt.

"I mean, they're - the way we are, it doesn't make sense to make it too sad, or whatever. But I guess everybody knows there's gonna be this space soon, where I was - where I was, like I'm gonna die or something, right? But yeah, so we're all sticking a little closer together. I think they'll be alright. They're more happy for me than anything, really. I can read them pretty easy. Not like you," he said. He smiled at me. "You're hard to know. Forget them for a minute - how are you handling it?"

I was so glad his friends weren't here, in this cold, in this quiet, caught here between the setting sun, the rising moon. They were so fiercely boyish, so loud. They weren't unkind, but neither are hurricanes, and you can't build houses in hurricanes.

No hurricanes here. Even the wind had wandered off. The most exhilarating and terrifying thing for me, in that moment, caught between the starry smile, the laughing eyes, was the silence, because I knew he could hear my breathing. When it sped up. When it stopped. I wanted him to hear me. To know me. I wanted to know him. I wanted to be brave. I wanted to be afraid. That's all I was with him that close, just wanting, desires all tangled up like the Gordian Knot. I couldn't have done a thing with myself, but he was a conqueror, he could have cut me in half where I stood, done anything.

He just waited for me to speak instead.

I-I shrugged.

Somewhere in that movement, like a trick of the light or the radiant dark, something disappeared.

He grinned suddenly, I remember that, right in the middle of me realizing. "Way to be," he said, and he didn't sound sad at all. And then he put the axe down, leaned it against a tree, and he stepped forward right into my space, and I thought, absurdly, inanely, oh. I actually thought oh. I think I said it too. I don't know. There was this thunder in my ears that I think was probably my heart and that was what I was hearing, and my brain wasn't filling in anything at all.

He took off one rough glove, reached out. Letting my breath out against his skin was the boldest, the most perfect thing I have ever or will ever do. Just three fingers - yes, I counted, I count, I remember - running so lightly through my hair you would almost believe they weren't breaking me, I was broken open, burning, frozen, alive for once, for the first time, my lips parted like seas before the steady hand of God -

He drew away again, showed me the twig that had gotten caught. "Sorry," he said. As if you could apologize for that, for having the steady hands of God. Gods can't just say sorry. "Alright. I'm glad you came out, anyway. I'll miss you," and he said my name, and that was all it took. But it was too dark now to see that I was crying. I was too quiet. I have always been too quiet.

Two steps away now, or forever depending on your reckoning. He took up the axe again. Paused. Kill me, I thought. You could tell he was a monster, because he didn't. But I loved him all the same.

"Don't break too many hearts while I'm gone, okay?"

He smiled again. It was too dark to see that, actually, but I know he smiled again. I can't imagine it any other way. I can't imagine he felt any other way. I can't. Can not. Will not. Must not.

After that he left. I stood watching him leave, like a tree and not like a tree. My hands clenching and unclenching, yearning to be filled.

Three boys walking along the train tracks, headed to the airport, unconscious of irony, unconscious of everything precious and subtle and rare. Two friends laughing while the third smiled. It was snowing. It was noon. It was the end of the world.

"Hey, man," one of two said. "You say your goodbyes?" They all knew to who. I don't know how they knew. I suppose because it was obvious.

"Yeah," said one of a kind. It's strange how much you can leave off, along with the 's' in 'yes.'

"How'd it go?" Their grins were hungry without malice. Jackals that never ate meat.

"Alright," he said. Did his mouth maybe twist? Who knows? The sun was in the way, I'm told. Some old grudge it held, perhaps, for all those poems about parasols and the blessings of shade. Or maybe it heard me thinking, earlier, when I wished it dead for touching him when I couldn't. "She seemed kinda spaced out. Bored, I guess. Making wreaths was a dumb choice. I don't know. It probably wouldn't have mattered. I don't think she'd care."

"You tell her you and Sarah broke up? That you're all heartbroken and lonesome, on the eve of great adventure?"

I've imagined a pause here. No one remembers the little details like that later, the ones that are so essential.

"I don't think she'd care," he said again. He shrugged.

Somewhere within that movement, like a trick of the light or the radiant dark, I took a breath and disappeared.

The Baillie Award for the Literary Essay 2019

Victoria's Inversion: A Post-Colonial Examination of *Dracula*

by S Michael Shrawder

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has forever cemented its place in history as the vampire story of all vampire stories. When we think of the vampire, we most often picture at least one of Dracula's many literary and cinematic forms. This persistent relevance alone constitutes a particular perception of the vampire in modern popular culture. But what is this perception? What does the 'vampire' represent? It can be said that The Count represents the natural, an inversion of christianity, sexual transgressions, and Eastern European culture as well as many other things. However, one underlying commonality that all of these subjects have in common is their place outside of the Victorian zeitgeist. 'The natural' directly conflicts with the growing industrialization and scientific progress of the time period, 'an inversion of Christianity' is in direct conflict with the predominant religious views that were being challenged at the time, 'sexual transgressions' serve as a mirrored opposite of acceptable standards of gender-norms of the Victorian era, and 'Eastern European culture' serves as a locus for all of these fears to reside. In this paper I will attempt to define the Victorian anxieties portrayed in *Dracula*, provide insight into how these anxieties attributed to Victorian xenophobia, and construct a paradigm that is applicable to the current political climate of Western society.

One of the most important factors to take into account when writing about *Dracula* is the political and social climate at the time. To be frank, Britain as a international powerhouse was in a state of decline, and it's not so much that Britain would no longer be in the international spotlight (I mean, they're still there today) but more so that they would no longer be a Roman-esque empire vying for global supremacy. This striking realization was a profound force in the works of many Victorian authors, Stoker included. As Stephen Arata puts it in "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization":

The decay of British global influence, the loss of overseas markets for British goods, the economic and political rise of Germany and the United States, the increasing unrest in British colonies and possessions, the growing domestic uneasiness over the morality of imperialism -- all combined to erode the Victorian confidence in the inevitable British progress and hegemony (622).

These anxieties are historically preserved within Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and have continued to in the character of 'the vampire' in science fiction and supernatural horror. What The Count represents is the fear

of reverse colonization in the face of a reality that British national supremacy was proving to be just as much a fiction as the story itself. This fear is exemplified in the manner in which Dracula attempts to learn English culture as a means of blending in. "I am content if I am like the rest" writes Stoker. "So that no man stops if he see me, or pause in his speaking if he hear my words, to say, 'Ha, ha! A stranger!" (Stoker 26). This is a direct link to the anxiety of reverse colonization because it shows that Dracula can, and perhaps desires, to become a mirror replica of the British citizen. The fact that he could potentially blend in so well while at the same time being a colonizer shows that, in action, Dracula represents an enactment of the same policies the British empire turned upon themselves. And so, faced with a realization that the distance between 'us' and 'them' is not nearly as vast as it was once perceived, a seed of fear is planted. This fear, Arata claims, is a sort of cultural guilt in which "...British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms" (623). This is the collective consciousness of a nation opening Pandora's box by asking "Could these things happen to us?" and in the decline of their own superiority, the answer was a horrific "yes".

But these fears don't directly manifest in concrete colonization, but rather through the vampire inserting itself within English society and acting in secret and subversive ways. A prime example of this is the battle between 'good' and 'evil' over the women of the novel. The idea that the vampire's conquest can take place by way of a domination of a culture's female population is a theme that still persists today within the rhetoric of xenophobia, and contributes to a urgent sense of justice that places women in the role of the protected and males in the role of the protector. This urgency or exigence then is used as a rhetorical tool that manipulates masculinity to fight against an amorphous concept: foreignness. But foreignness is hard to understand because, well, it all depends on the scope. The term itself denotes fluidity and movement foreignness cannot be categorized because no one sees themselves as foreign. Daniel Novak writes, "Precisely because of the fluidity of foreignness (one becomes foreign through travel and mobility, and one can be perceived as foreign against one's will or knowledge)" (Novak 142).

This fear of the amorphous can be seen and linked to the fluidity of vampiric sexuality. When the female vampires attempt to seduce and feed off of Jonathan Harker, Dracula appears and in a fit of rage exclaims that "This man belongs to me!" (Stoker 43). This serves to make Dracula a sexually fluid character who not only wants to feed off of and control women, but who is willing to commit to an act of reproduction with a male. This comes into direct conflict with the presumed way that males should interact according to victorian principle which

is exemplified later in the novel. In a scene where Dr. Seward is comforting Arthur Holmwood over the loss of Lucy, Stoker writes “In such cases men do not need much expression. A grip of the hand, the tightening of an arm over the shoulder, a sob in unison, are expressions of sympathy dear to a man’s heart.” (Stoker 152). This downplaying of intimacy between two male characters shows a rejection of homoerotic values in the Victorian perception of sexuality and romantics. By creating such a staunch comparison between the outsider and the exemplary male, sexual fluidity and homoeroticism become ‘foreign’ entities by principle of exclusion. This is crucial to understanding the nature of xenophobia in literature because the othered is often dissociated from humanity. It would be extremely hard for Stoker to make a case against a simple Eastern European man who just wants to buy some real estate and marry a nice British woman (mostly because those are relatable desires for his audience), but if we make him the prince of darkness, stylistically remove his motivations from the text, and have his partners become his unwilling thralls, then we’ve got a pretty horrific tale (and more importantly motivation to reject that which we do not fully understand). It is to the amorphous and elusive nature of foreignness that creates a blank canvas for fear. It is this same way that a caravan of gypsies can be reconstructed into a horde of banshees protecting their vampiric master.

One of the most crucial parts of this formula of demonization is the silencing of the condemned. The epistolary nature of *Dracula* is one that only allows us to focus on the British perspective of these anxieties. This technique functions ideologically by silencing the voice of the “monstrous Other” (Hollinger 149). Through the scraps of notes and journal entries of the novel we are only exposed to the perspectives and motivations of ‘The Crew of Light’ who represent the pillars of a British society that, as noted, felt tremors in its foundation. Dracula’s ambiguous foreignness, on the other hand, is only stressed by this perspective. We, as readers, are never given any information about the history of The Count, his ethnic background obfuscated in mystery. However, based on what little is revealed, Attila Viragh gives us a fairly surprising perspective on the vampire:

Dracula can be read as a prescient depiction of a globalizing world in which minority cultures and languages are increasingly threatened with assimilation and extinction. Transylvania, Dracula’s place of origin, is even today a center of such a fight for cultural survival: ethnic Hungarians living there have struggled against “cultural genocide” and assimilation. The Székely, with whom Dracula initially claims kinship, are one such Hungarian-speaking people whose culture has been threatened in Transylvania, where they face pressure to adopt the language and culture of Romania (Viragh 232).

To me, it seems far from coincidence that 'flipping the script' in this way, and providing insight into the background of the vampire reveals a mirrored image of circumstances between the colonizer and the colonized, the reverse colonizer and the reverse colonized. This conclusion holds relevance today as we live in an era of mass migration, destabilization of states, and perceived decline of the Western standard. There is a direct relevance to the reading of *Dracula* in 21st century to understanding the current climate of xenophobia in the United States and the Western world in general.

With an understanding of the political climate at the time, we can see a direct correlation today between the rise of white nationalist demagogues (notably Richard Spencer and Gavin McGinnis) and white nationalist groups (The National Policy Institute and The Proud Boys, respectively) and the anxieties of the era of Victorian England. Hindsight has helped us understand the irrationality of these anxieties and has allowed us to look at them objectively from a more cause and effect standpoint. Still though, we seem to fall victim to the same plot of fear, and so in order to understand how these anxieties shape a culture we need to understand what *Dracula* represents. In *Dracula* and *Philosophy: "Dying to Know"*, Nicolas Michaud and Janelle Pötzsch make an attempt to understand what it is about *Dracula* that makes him so scary. "First, he's an outsider," they write. "Wherever *Dracula* comes from, whatever his motivations, origins, or powers, he comes from outside the society" (Michaud & Pötzsch 138). This is important to understand, because unknowing is a crucial part of fear, and fear is a crucial part of hatred. To expand on this, I'd like to take into account the genre of cosmic horror, particularly H.P. Lovecraft. The genre and the author are both notably horror inducing not because of their terrifying details, but because of their ambiguity. It's the lingering uncertainty to the true nature of creatures like Cthulhu and ancient texts like the Necronomicon that are most striking. Stoker makes use of the fear of the unknown as a means of glorifying the known early in the novel as Jonathan Harker contemplates how relieving seeing the sun rise is to him. "No man knows until he has suffered from the night how sweet and how dear to his heart and eye the morning can be" (Stoker 49). This line contains a major theme of the unknown (the darkness of the night) as worthy of fear. The known, in this case, would function as the light of day. So, as light overcomes darkness, it would seem through this rhetoric that it would be permissible for the known (British culture) to dominate the unknown (Eastern European culture), less we lose all light. So in capturing the concept of the 'unknown' and placing that aspect into a humanoid creature, Stoker has managed to find the root of our own cosmic fears and personify them. Michaud and Pötzsch continue, "The second crucial aspect is that *Dracula* is an aristocrat. He's not just

outside, but above. He's rich, or sees himself as above the common lot of humanity." (Michaud & Pötzsch 139). I found this to be a crucial statement in bringing the fear of Dracula to life, and finding its place in the here and now. Dracula, while talking to Harker about fitting into British society says "I have been so long master that I would be master still--or at least that none other should be master of me" (Stoker 26). In this line, there is a clear sense of superiority coming from the character of Dracula. On one hand, this could be read as the outsider rightfully demanding a certain amount of autonomy in a foreign land, but to the insider looking out, this might be read as a presumptive statement in which the law of the land is ignored and disrespected by the opulent outsider. There's a reason that white supremacy and xenophobia stereotypically find their strongest footholds in rural America. There's a reason that Identity Evropa uses the rhetorical tool of placing pictures of a brown skinned woman in a boardroom next to a picture of a homeless white man when they attempt to argue for an end to immigration. The reason is that anxieties about class intersect directly with all other anxieties of identity. The answer to the question 'who am I?' expands past our skin and blood to our bank accounts and wallets, and as long as fear remains a central part of our culture anxieties of class can be deflected onto the outsider without a question asked.

In the same way there are parallels between 'The Crew of Light' and The Count, there are parallels between Victorian England and the 21st century United States, and if history repeats itself, then so does the rhetoric that creates it. The monsters are never real apart from what we can see of ourselves in them, and so long as we fear there will be monsters, and so long as the fight is against an 'other' the fear will never cease.

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The Savage Poetry Award 2019
The Highest Point Possible
by Julia Miller

the highest point possible
out on the woodchips,
he can swing and jump off
at the highest point possible,
floating to the dirt
like a magician's black hat
tossed into a crowd of spectators.
i watch, picking splinters from my knee.
when he hits the ground,
face awash in a nimble grin,
his eyes are like staring into the sun
and mine are hollow like water,
swallowing up the silver light.

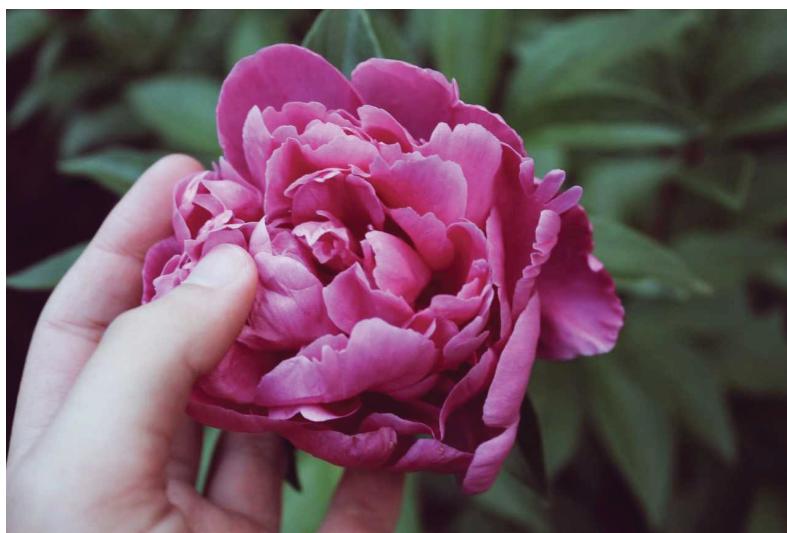
in the classroom, i'm fifteen and perched
in the back on a rickety desk
as mrs. h wades through
the condensation of adolescence
and pauses at his desk,
tapping her primeval claw on the wood.
he assesses her coolly
under the fluorescent lights,
and his jaded eyes have the ache
of a strung-out arsonist:
yeah? what do you want?
his irises could send flames
licking up the pitted cement walls.

he parks his jeep
in the neon glitz
of the movie theatre marquee.
i am rigid in the chill
of silent november
but he is at ease like lush wax
dripping off a candle.
he drills me about the movie,
about the popcorn,
about the temperature in the car.
i tell him i'm fine,

but the parched heat
fuming from the vents
steals into the threads
of my sweater and boils my neurons.

i turn away,
only for a moment,
and catch two shards of light
reflected in the passenger's seat window.
a flint of silver moonshine
radiates in the glass,
or an oncoming car's twin headlights
illuminates the jeep,
but no.

then, i am out
on the playground
and his lips boyishly
meet my neck
inside his red-hot jeep,
on that empty november street,
under that magnetic marquee,
and i am just a kid,
blinded by sunlight,
soaring from the swing
at the highest point possible.



Full Bloom
by Kacie England

FICTION

Dancing While We're on Fire

by Kacie England

She struck a match. Her eyes fixated on the scarlet matchhead, glowing defiantly, almost smugly, as if to say, "Ha, I am your lamp, your only gleam, and there is nothing you can do about it." Sulfur danced off the matchhead and into the air. Her nose could detect the oxidizing of the flame.

Damn it.

Burnt again. "Why is it always so damn hard to light a candle when its almost through?" she thought as she sucked her toasted ring finger. It's always hard to strike a flame once it's been burned out.

Autumn was nearing its end. The candle she was trying to light sat near the one transparent window, the one that wasn't clothed in heavy curtains. Stained glass stretched to cover each pane. It was golden hour—he'd be coming by soon. The glass was painted in a diamond pattern; each shape fits into each other with precision. And the rainbow glints from the 5 o'clock sun created an aurora on her face. Through one of the purple-frosted diamond inlays, she looked to see the blanket of leaves on the ground. Vibrant, dead, hues of foliage surrounded her home that lay in a quiet neighborhood of town. Only a few nosy neighbors were around to bother her about their kid's Girl Scout cookie sales or to remind her that "she should really decorate for Christmas soon."

She snatched another match from the box, carefully trying to light her candle and succeeds. Soon, she delights her eyes on the success, the product of unstable phosphorus and volatile sulphur's union. She's lit all her candles. The living room was a utopia of wicks; Evergreen Evenings and Red Apple Wreaths.

Enough gazing. She needed to get moving. Her coffee had already run cold. She released a long sigh as she looked at the mug perched contently next to a pile of yet-to-be-read books.

"He'll be here soon," she thought.

The place was wrecked from the night before.

With a cling and a clatter, she swept up the trail of glass she must've forgotten to take care of before she drug herself to bed last night. With all the commotion, it was easy for her to forget things lately. Shards formed in an assembly-like fashion towards the fractured picture frame that lie wounded on the wood floor. Her eyes scanned the walls.

Blinking her lashes, she shifted her gaze upon the crucifix hanging on the sheetrock next to the mantle. Jesus was sitting slanted.

Next to Him was another passion: a fist-sized hole in the wall. Jesus seemed to have an even more sunken-in frown than she remembered. Her hands guided the cross back to its original, upright position.

Damn it.

Blood seeped from her ring finger, traipsing its way onto Christ's crown.

"Must've been from that frame glass," she muttered, wincing at the trail.

Picking the glass out of her finger, she ran it under the tap in the kitchen. All better.

On her way back into the living room where she would wait for him, she peaked her nose into the full, crystal-cut vase of flowers that sat on the kitchen table. Lilies, a tad wilted. They had been delivered this morning by a man in an ill-fitting polo with "Olp's Flower Shoppe" sprawled across the pocket.

"For you," he declared as she peered out her door.

She reached out for the card nestled in the bouquet that read:

Sorry about last night. Love you, M.

Picking her nose up from the petals, she reasoned, "They still smell good, even though they're droopy."

She couldn't blame herself for not being able to resist smelling their sweet nectar, nor could she resist jumping when she heard his knock at the door.

~

They sat, hands folded, looking at each other. Her lips parted to let out a breath; it was a sigh of great magnitude, as if part of herself had scurried out.

"I suppose we need to have a talk."

"I know."

He moved closer to her on the sofa. Her nervous hands were fiddling with the pulls on the couch; his knuckles stuttered, looking for a place to go. Her hands wanted to pack their largest suitcase and catch a train. Or perhaps even jump out in front of one. Anything other than confiding in the warmth of his knuckles again. That's how you get pulled in.

With the jerk of her hand as he reached for her, his face contorted.

"Fine," he exhaled, as he rose to walk around the living room.

He strode past the flickering candles, past the stained-glass window that framed the autumn scene. The trail of his steps made their way to the hearth.

"Let me start a fire for you, for us," he insisted as he extended his arm for the box of matches.

"No, really it's fin—"

"I insist," he says, cutting her off.

"Do you have something to say about last night? You said you

wanted to come by to talk, to apologize..."

"Look, that's over with. I said I'm sorry, didn't I? You got the flowers?"

"Well, yes. But I'm, I'm—"

The words were held hostage in her mouth, clanging against her teeth with a tin can, desperate to escape their imprisonment. While suffering from her word paralysis, she was rubbing her tender arm. She pressed down on the muscle, grimacing. Lifting up her sleeve, she noticed the bruise getting darker. It was the reminder she needed, yet her lips refused the call.

"Sweetheart, set up a game for us while I light the kindling, okay?"

He kicked a Scrabble box that lay on the coffee table closer to her with his boots. She jolted.

"Alright."

As she listened to the rustling of the newspaper he was crumpling up and how he stacked the logs in the pit, she laid out the game board. And with a shake of the felt bag, she pulled out her titles. O, H, E, P, and three blanks. She left the bag of tiles next to his wooden tile-holder.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed as he gestured towards the hearth. Inside lay a boisterous fire; flames exuded high into the canal of the chimney.

"Beautiful," she murmured.

Before sitting on the floor across from their match, he flicked on the radio positioned on the mantel. An unruly trumpet played over the soft melody of a sweet piano; he smiled with delight.

"Ready to play?"

~
"Damn—what a shitty hand of letters I have," he says, examining his random selection.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I'll go first."

M-I-N-E

"Your turn," he said with a smirk.

Her hands, pink with warmth, decided to lay down all her blank pieces. She played a word off his "E."

S-A-V-E

"Good move. I'm still winning, I think," he declared, examining the tiles.

She sat in quiet, waiting for him to get going with his turn. Then, the fireplace caught her attention. The burning bark let out an astounding, ear-calling crackle.

"Hey!"

Her head spun around like an owl in the night.

"I compliment you, commend you on your turn, and you can't even look at me? You don't say anything? This is about last night, isn't it?"

He rose from the floor with vigor, and with a motion of his wrist, he sent the board sailing. MINE and SAVE are gone. And the board followed suit, landing in the fireplace flames. In grave panic, she rose from the sofa.

"Please, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it. Thank you. Thank you for saying that about my word."

"No—I'm sick of your game! I said sorry. I sent lilies, damn it!"

In a rage, he lunged over the coffee table, directed towards his desired grasp. She circled around the couch and fled for the stereo. "I must turn the radio up," she thought. The neighbors can't hear them again. The dial is turned, and the voice of Ella Fitzgerald reverberates through the home. The sound danced, melodies echoing off the stained glass, off the mantle, off the flickering flames, and off of her. As soon as her fingertips slid off the dial, his fingertips slid around her neck. Up against the wall he holds her, her head making a large thud next to the gaping cavity in the wall from the night before. She's next to the now slanted, again, Jesus.

"Say you're sorry!"

"I'm—"

"Louder!"

"I'm so—"

She couldn't make out the words. All it was was five little letters. Five scrabble tiles. S-O-R-R-Y. But his grip was too tight. Her eyes peered open wide. Pop went the flames once more. Behind his head grew boughs of smoke. With the smoke came the flames. The game board that had once gruesomely laid in the hearth had tumbled onto the living room rug. The crimson carpet was now set ablaze, spreading like wildfire. Between gulps of tainted air, she cried through her teeth, motioning towards the engulfed room.

"I don't care! Burn. We'll burn. Say it."

But she couldn't. His grasp was tightening, and the fire was devouring the room. Smoke twirled onto the wood beams of the ceiling. And now the couch was a gulf of orange streaks. And, God damn it, the music. The music was ringing. Ella sang, "While I'm alone and blue as can be—Dream a little dream of me."

"Say it!"

He slammed harder. With the slamming of her head came down the Crucifix. The Cross stumbled to the floor. His face seemed bluer to her than before.

"I'm—s—sorry," she manages to get out. The apology leaks from her compliant lips like the trail of faithful smoke after you blow out a candle. Maybe that's why the room seemed even more clouded to her

now. The living room was taken over with her I'm-sorry-smoke. He let go of her neck. With the release of his hands, she fell to the floor, gulping for oxygen. It seemed as if there wasn't any left in the room, on the planet. As she sits on her knees, she sees the Cross at her side. Heaving, she lies there. Ella sings, "Stars fading but I linger on dear— Still crave your kiss."

He bends down to pick her up. Grabbing her from her underarms, he held her on his breast, stroking her fallen hair. They seemed to be surrounded, though the smoke made it hard to tell.

"I'm sorry!" he sobbed.

He swayed to either side, incessantly consoling her head with the motions of this soot-stained hand. She cried.

"I'm sorry," he insisted.

He continued to shift his weight to either side, keeping up with the rhythm of the radio. A new melody played. And in between the somber apologies, he spun her around. He twirled her and dipped her to the tune. A new song sounded, again—sirens in the fall night.



Can't Breathe
by Kim Eckenrode

Swinging Door

by Anna Olivier

I'm sorry about the time I pretended not to hear. I remember someone in our grade had leaked your secret, spilling it like a carton of cafeteria milk. It oozed between the cracks, the drip-dropping fabrications like the mess under the table, growing larger. James asked me once if it was true that you and I hung out. He said it in such a way that as soon as the words were out of his mouth I knew what I was going to say. He played basketball and was nice looking and popular. I said no, that I just felt bad for you. I'm sorry that the rumor of you being with an older man became the talk of eleventh grade. They switched out their gossip about Douglas cheating on his Lit test and Sandy being first to get a tattoo to now guessing the age of this mystery man and debating about whether you did "it" or not. I'm sorry I never told them to shove it. I'm sorry.

And I'm sorry that when they laughed at your Halloween costume that year I stayed silent. Your alien outfit succeeded in being out of this world. It looked like smoothed tinfoil. The fabric was a glittery silver and the pink boots you wore with it made you look like an astronaut ready to explore space. I'm sorry I just stood there, idle and indifferent. I'm sorry I was worse than the people that laughed because for the longest time you saw me as a friend. I'm sorry for ignoring you in gym when you asked to be tennis partners because I didn't want to be seen with you, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you where your backpack was when they hid it in Physics class. I'm sorry about the time I saw you in the bathroom. The way you were curled up in a fetal position, sobbing on the unwelcoming tile floor. You. Who always stayed collected outside, now gripping your face with your horrible neon colored nails. The bathroom was empty. Your sobs echoing off the white, cinderblock walls. As soon as I stepped through the doorway, I wished I hadn't. Your crying ceased and was replaced by gulping sniffles. You looked up at me. Your brown bloodhound eyes meet mine for a moment. I expected to see hatred or anger at the way I'd been to you, but I only saw disappointment. As I turned around I swore I heard you call my name, but I kept walking, letting the thick, swinging door absorb the sound behind it.

Slideshow

by Kori Hassinger

1. I was broken, and I came home to a place I never knew was my home. I was scared. I didn't know anyone, except for one. He bailed me out of the prison and brought me here. When I walked through the door, I panicked. I slinked through the house avoiding the outstretched hands of my homecoming. I found the darkest corner and hid. The girl tried coaxing me out and she reached toward me but I flinched away as if it was a physical blow. She quickly pulled her hand back, tilting her head in question she slowly stood up, backing away but still caringly watched me from a distance.

I sat here scouting out the house from my space in the corner and after a couple of hours, it seemed pretty safe. I checked to make sure they weren't looking and I slowly slinked to the next room. The farther away from them the safer I felt. They didn't threaten me for the time being, but how can I trust people when I just met them a couple hours ago? How do I know they won't abandon me like the last people? At least the guy who got me out of prison gave me a little more attention than the last folks, even though he doesn't feed me enough.

I wish I didn't feel insignificant anymore.

2. Sure I may not have found my own family, it was them who found me. Just like the girl has just found me laying in the middle of the floor sleeping the day away. The bright, refreshing sunlight shining through the windows and the heat of the rays absorbing into my darker skin color. If I focus hard enough I can smell those fluorescent orange Tiger Lilies that grow outside the living room window. Oh wait, I smell something else. It's a strong perfume scent which means only one thing: it's the girl again. I roll my eyes and I see her with a big gleaming smile on her face as she walks towards me. Sighing, I close my eyes quickly and try to ignore her. Apparently it doesn't work because I feel her hands on me, touching my neck. I can feel something being tied around my neck, but then once I don't feel her near me, I open my eyes and see it's a bright blue noose with a paisley design on it.

Before the guy saved me from my prison, my caretaker came to retrieve me. I remember her last words to me, "Hey, boy. It's going to be all right for you now. There's a nice man here to take you away. Now just remember one thing: don't be so quick to find an escape. There are still beautiful chances out in the world for you. Just make sure to give everyone a chance and you will find the perfect family." Her words have been my motto since I arrived at this house. I hear a click and I get brought out of my daydreaming, at least for now that is.

I at least feel accepted now.

3. The smell of the outdoors attracts my attention like the clouds and ground always attract the water in the seasons. I survey my terrain to get a sense of ownership and I see no threats around. Looking to my left, there's white, soft, billowy powder slowly blowing in the wind. Straight ahead, I see that snow collecting on the petite hill that used to house a small gathering of grape vines. To my right, there's the shed and all the vehicles sitting, just accepting the elements of this winter as if they have given up. I stand on the porch and hear the creak of a door. It's the girl once again but this time she has a camera to capture the beauty of nature today. I hear her walk closer and when I know she is right by me, I tilt my head to face her and give her the biggest toothy smile.

I am still skeptical of the girl, but she hasn't done anything to harm me, except make me look ridiculous. Luckily, the mother of the house hid the horrendous reindeer costume away from the girl and she hasn't been able to find it. Even though the girl knows I hate being her dress-up doll, I have accepted her weird behavior. I do anything I can now just to hear her overly dramatic laugh like she is doing right now because I know I have a goofy smile on my face.

Just as quick as she takes another picture, it begins to flurry again. She quickly corrals me into the raining flakes then flees back under the protection of the porch roof. Looking around to make sure the area is still safe, I follow her back under the roof and continue with my scouting. "Jack, look here." Automatically I turn my head towards her voice, and click, she takes another picture of me covered in snow.

I am finally comfortable somewhere.

4. Lying on the couch, I slowly melt into the cushions. Burying my head into the pillows to block out the streaming sunlight but to also cover my ears to mask the sound of laughter coming from the girl sitting on the recliner. As soon as my eyes are covered, I feel a soft, skinny mass flop against my chest and head. Uncovering my head, I see it is the cat. For being just a couple weeks old and being on her deathbed for a few days, I let her lay with me in comfort. I lay back down and I see the girl staring at me with admiration and I only relay that back to her.

With the tiny fuzz ball cuddled against me, we both end up falling asleep. It isn't until I feel a weight being draped over us that I end up waking. I look around and spot the girl's face leaning towards mine. I look down at the floor, feeling shy since she caught me actually napping with the cat, but I still accept her kiss on my forehead. As she walks back to her chair, I lift my leg and let the cat settle in closer to keep warmer. There's no use in fighting the fact that I actually like her. That is, for right now, till she gets older. Then it will be acceptable for me to love her, yet also dislike her.

This is my family now and I will protect them until my last breath. I am the dog of the house.



Under My Own Skin
by Rowan Shaffer

POETRY

Dive

by Daniel Pintos

Crack open your calloused soul,
see the strange rain
drain into the sands,
floating and flowing
to the ocean floor,
where your skin swells
with fat tears, full
of salt – but you
are more than tears,
more than rain,
more than a storm,
darling –
no shore can contain you.
you are an entire sea.

Dream Eaters

by Daniel Pintos

They seek to deplete me completely.
Perched upon my silken sheets,
pale nightmare weavers
slit my mind open,
letting onyx consciousness
bleed onto the blanket.
licking their claws clean,
they drink deep my liquid dreams,
craving the candy taste of fear,
sweetly leeching away the lust for life.
the moon departs and they melt into shadows,
whispering in their cosmic, unhallowed tongue.
in time, they'll deplete me completely,
moon becomes sun and I become memory.

Loss

by Bryant Lebeau

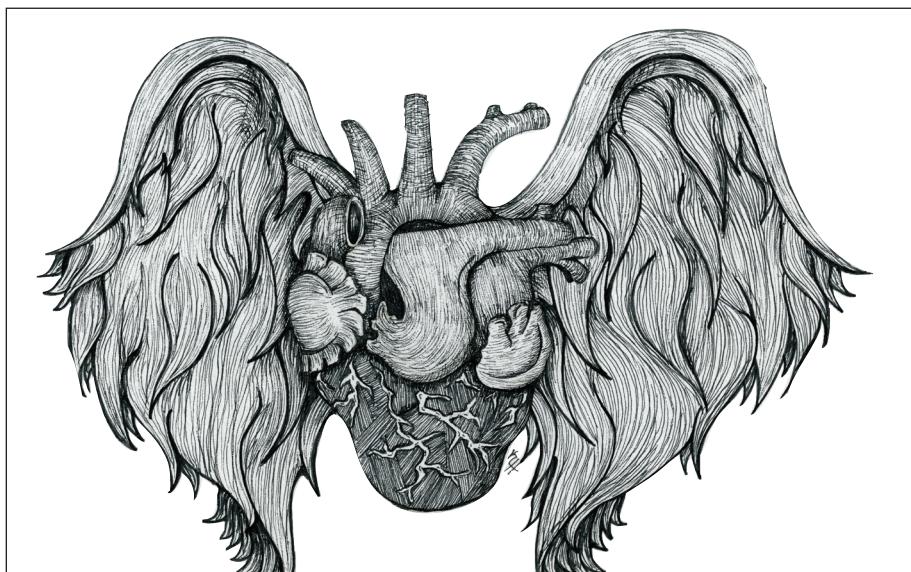
Eighteen years you have jumped and ran,
You played with the energy of three dogs,
regardless of your tiny size.

Eighteen years you have been strange,
You understood what it was to be different,
like me.

Eighteen years you have been loyal to me,
You saved my life when I was sadder than sadness,
you brought me back.

Eighteen years you have grown tired and frail,
You taught me to care for something more than myself,
I don't want to lose you.

Eighteen years you dug holes in our yard,
I expect it will soon be my turn to dig.



Finding Wings

by Kasey Halbleib

Writing in the Dark

by Derek Praschak

We are all children
Infantile, naive
Sitting outside, wind blowing gently
Rain tapping lightly
Above the shading trees
Darkness blinding sight
In the evening glow
Holding pen to canvas
Raindrops staining corners
Forming written words
Attempts at explanation
Not knowing what we see
Not knowing what we write
Scribing down our answers
Without knowing the question
The paper wet and torn
Yet gripping at its ends
Holding onto answers
Ignorant to what is written
Living as an infant
Writing in the dark

Toy Story

by Lauren Bruce

He seemed as real as anything else.
Wings, helmet, and body made of cheap plastic,
Cool buttons that made noises, and colors that blinked.
His name was Buzz Lightyear,
and he was my favorite toy,
my favorite movie star.

As a child, I loved the first Toy Story film,
hitting the replay button at every chance.
He was my favorite character,
I admired his bravery and determination,
Because he lost so much
In his short lifespan.

He thinks he is someone he's not,
His name didn't mean what he thought it did,
He tried to fly and fell instead,
He didn't know he was a toy.
And the other toys seemed to just play along,
They didn't want to upset him.
I always argued it was
because they loved him.

I would bring my Buzz Lightyear toy to my Grandma's,
There I felt like me and him were one and the same,
Both living with different identities.
When I was at my grandma's
my name was Barbra.
Not because she couldn't remember my name,
but because she couldn't remember me.

She grew old and got sick with forgetfulness,
Her seven children in her mind turned to five,
Two children complete strangers in her eyes.
She called me the name of her daughter, my aunt,
And I played along like the toys,
How they pretended with Buzz,
Because I too loved her.

All Jokes Aside

by Brent Pisarek

I've seen my fair share of crazy.
from hamburgers walking into the bar and getting promptly
kicked out,
because "We don't serve food here!" says the bartender
to horses that just want to have a drink in peace
without being questioned
about their anatomy.

I frequent the place almost every weekend,
and each time it gets crazier.

A centurion once walked in here,
held up two fingers,
and asked for five beers.

One time a termite came up to me and asked
"is the bar tender here?"

another time, the whole bar tensed up,
when Past, Present, and Future walked in.

The streets outside aren't much different,
from the magicians who walk by and turn into stores,
to the peanuts who are assaulted.

Be careful you don't get urinated on by the pterodactyls that live
in the trees,
their p is silent.

we've got fish in tanks
that they don't know how to drive.

People always get fired from our calendar factory,
they take too many days off.

Oh, don't even bother trying the German sausage here in town,
it's the wurst.

the steak is better, but even that
is a rare medium well done.

People here prefer elevators,
their stairs are always up to something.

When we started getting addicted to using the elevators,
we had to take steps to avoid them.

I saw a man lose his whole left side in an accident.
It's okay, he's all right now.
Every morning I open the fridge and watch
as the tomatoes turn red,
because they saw the salad dressing.
Living here is really something.
The craziest stuff happens here, but I think we're all used to it.
Oh, but don't get me started on all the chickens.



Untitled
by Rosemarie Baston

Star Song

by Catherine Baker

I'll go and catch a star
and keep it in my chest
and take it near and far
and love it most and best.

I'll go and catch a star
and feel it burning bright
like the end of a cigar
in the quiet of the night.

I'll go and catch a star
and keep it tucked away
and treat its cuts and scars
and teach it what to say.

I'll go and catch a star
and let it burn me through
and tell it in return
I'd do the same to you.

I'll go and catch a star
and we'll learn how to heal
and when that's said and done
we'll find what's most and real.

I'll go and catch a star
and teach it how to love
and where the lilies are
I'll show it stars above.

I went and caught a star
and when my time is nigh
it will keep us as we are
and take us to the sky.

Take A Stand

by Nastalgia Jenkins

Walk into the room full of snow,
Noticing the only thing that stood out was the
complexion of my skin color, that glow,
Their heads turn slow, following me everywhere
I go, as if seeing me was a show.
We go through the same things,
Black folks, never be ashamed, continue loving one
another... We need to take heed on
what we agree on...
Power to our people black people keep the lead on
because they got us keyed on, and we feed on what
they throw on
knowing that it was our ideas that got cheated on.
Now they walk around here with their crowns and
our potential? Frowned upon.
Your ancestors didn't make a way.
I love being black and we've come a long way,
especially through the nonsense, and I
think we all got that. One way, one love, no respect,
and I want it all back, but we can't
do that, they don't want us having each
other's backs.
When we teach them with knowledge if you notice
all the intimidation that we conquer
they no longer have time for it.
They push us down, we get back up,
I am going to speak my mind because I'm tired of it.
God doesn't pick, so I'm going to stick, stick it out
to the end and go back to the
beginning and sit down, slowly let them think
they're winning."
My actions speak louder than my words
I'm not a pretender, but when I hit that circle that's
black and white... I'm a WINNER"

NON-FICTION

I Want it ALL (Tales of a Professional Bullshitter) by Alexis Lopez

Soup— no— no salad, remember to grab that extra diet coke on your way out- fuck who is texting me now? Fuck! I forgot to tell Taylor I couldn't make it to that customer service event; at least the five dollar tip my five top is going to leave me on their 100 bill will cover that. (Can you feel my vindictive energy boiling?) Okay now where were we? Oh right, salad. Let's drop this baby off with a diet, hopefully it will keep the ravenous mom's with their I-want-to-see-the-manager haircuts at bay for at least five minutes so I can- fucking hell I'm sat again. Seriously, what in the actual fuck is wrong with the hosts, don't they know that I already have a table OUT of my section. Maybe they'll get my drinks. Actually never mind, it'll will be faster if I do it. Shit, the momzillas need more Bellini tea. Damn Sharon this is like your 4th one, I see where those love handles came from. I'll just grab the quick go over to the other tabl— CAN YOU FUCKING NOT. I swear to the high heavens that the next time a busser runs into me I am going to kill someone. Okay, Bellini, Bellini, Bellini. There. Now time to go greet these assholes.

~
“Hi everyone! How are you all doing today?”

grunts

“Well that's.. good. My name is Lexi and I am going to be taking care of you this evening. Can I start you out with a complimentary wine—”

“Water. Lemon.”

“Oh okay, so no sangrias for either of yo—”

“I want a water too.”

Okay! I'll be right back!”

~

“Lexi! Your food is up!” my manager Brad yells to me from across the alley.

“Okay, I'll be right there!” I say looking up from my copy of *The Written World*. I finish my page and scribble my notes alongside of my most recent table's order. I grab their chicken and shrimp carbonara and lunch portion of shrimp scampi and waddle off towards their table, thinking in my head the entire time about the reading. I wonder if Buddha is one of those guys who tip their bill. He seems like he might be, all enlightened and shit. He really cared about impoverished

people, and I'm broke as shit. Maybe if I had Buddha at a table I would actually make some money.

"Um, excuse me," the guest at my table says. Fuck— it's time to switch server mode on.

"Yes?" I say, putting on my most tip-winning smile.

"Why is mine so much smaller than his?" she says staring at her lunch-sized portion shrimp scampi and then her husband's DINNER-sized portion chicken and shrimp carbonara.

"Oh, well you had said you wanted the lunch portion, and that's how big it is," I say back, holding my breath after the last word.

"Well.. I didn't realize it would be so... small," she retorts disapprovingly. "Had you told me it was going to be the size of a kid's meal I would have just ordered the regular one, but you didn't."

BITCH YOU SPECIFIED THAT YOU WANTED A LUNCH PORTION NEVERMIND THE THREE BOWLS OF CHICKEN GNOCHI SOUP THAT YOU HAD AND THE FOUR BREADSTI— "I am very sorry about that ma'am, would you like me to ask the kitchen to make you more?" I ask, feeling annoyed.

"No," she grumbles back, and then she does it. She gives me THE LOOK. Almost anyone who has ever served at a restaurant before will know what the look is. The look includes narrowed glaring eyes, a frowning mouth, and is sometimes accompanied by the refusal to eat. The look is usually something that customers give their servers when they are displeased for dumb reasons that have nothing to do with the actual server. They normally know that they are in the wrong but refuse to actually acknowledge it. More than likely they will not ask for your manager or make a scene; they will simply give you the look. However, what the look signifies is one very important thing: you will not be getting shit for a tip. As soon as I notice one of my customers getting the look I go into full-on recovery mode. It doesn't matter whether I'm in the wrong or right in the situation, now is the time to be a superhero.

~

"Oh great! I see you're both done with your meals. I just wanted to let you know that I am going to give you a free desert today to compensate for the misunderstanding over your entree. All of the deserts are listed in the book in the middle of the table," I say, plastering a huge smile on my face all the while.

"Oh... that's really..." Wait for it. "Nice, thank you. I can pick any of these?" she asks, her eye widening and frown disappearing. Fuck yeah, fall into my trap.

"Of course, couldn't have you leaving hungry!" Oh the goddamn irony. (Remember people THREE bowls of soup.) I'll have my manager comp it off as soon as you decide," I say back, smiling all the

while. I turn and leave the now tamed lioness and her ratty-ass mouse of a husband to argue over whether they want the black tie mousse cake or the warm apple crostata. I go back into the kitchen and find my manager Brad. There's no point in telling him why I did what I did, if he even asks. If he does ask, I'll tell him I need a birthday dessert comped off and he'll hand me his manager card, never needing to know anything else. Again, that's if he even asks me. I've been working at the good ole OG for a while now and not to toot my own horn, but I'm one of the best fucking servers they have. My managers never ask me questions when I ask for their cards anymore. It's definitely a helpful perk, and sometimes I feel a tad guilty that I use them to fix my problems the easy way. Actually, scratch that I don't feel that guilty, Brad would honestly probably rather me lie to his face then get him involved with petty little Miss Shrimp Scampi, and besides, I'm a pretty good bullshitter when it comes to customers if I do say so myself.

I walk back to the table and they tell me that they would like the black tie mousse cake (much to Miss Shrimp Scampi's husband's chagrin) and I go back to the kitchen to grab one for them. On my way back to the table I see them looking at their bill on the kiosk, and thank the high heavens that I rang and comped their desert at the same time. I see Miss. Shrimp Scampi insert her card into the kiosk and then watch her hit the "add tip" button which automatically sets itself at 20 percent.

Bingo.

~
"Do you like college?"

Wow. First of all, what a fucking question. I literally feel like I could talk about this one all day. Second of all, not fucking really. Learning is cool and all, but everything that accompanies it fucking sucks and leaves me more exhausted than a 10 hour shift does sometimes. I mean come on, who wants to go to 3 classes a day and then spend every single second of your free time doing things for those classes? Not me. I do it of course, but I don't fucking like it. This is why when my 13 year old sister looked up at me and asked me this question I had no clue what to say. I didn't want to tell her that I was currently struggling to keep my entire life afloat because of school, or that I was paying thousands of dollars to make myself have massive anxiety attacks and never ever feel good enough. But I also didn't want to tell her it was all butterflies and rainbows.

"It's alright," I say back.

Again. Wow. Fucking wow Lexi. What a grade-A answer to that question. You're fucking inspired. No wonder you can barely keep a 3.0 GPA. This is why you're not actually doing great in school, because you don't take anything seriously enough. You party too hard, work more

than you study, and smoke way too much to get the grades you want to. Nothing you ever do is enough, and even when you think you're ahead you're actually five steps behind. Woah, reign it in. We were getting a little dark there. But seriously, I do smoke, party, and work too much. These three things seem to be a quintessential part of my 21-year-old being. For some fucking reason I can't seem to survive or function without any of these things, and I sacrifice a lot of time I could be dedicating to getting educated to these lesser things. So I guess I should go back to sacrificing more sleep, because for some reason I have to do it all.

~

Puffy-eyed and yawning I drag myself to the shower. I turn on the water and slink over to the counter, leaning my head on the wall. Last night I closed down the Olive Garden, leaving at 11:03 pm and then heading straight to Delta Pi for a night of good old fashioned college drinking. Luckily, I behaved myself for once and am not that hungover. I peer at myself in my bathroom mirror and use a makeup wipe to chisel off the remainder of last night's make up. Underneath my foundation I can see dark circles under my eyes, a pimple forming on my cheek, and a few dark spots on my skin that have only just began to form. I ignore all of this and stick my hand behind the shower curtain, feeling to make sure that the water is warm. It is and I slip behind the shower curtain, desperate for the warm water to revitalize me. I lean back and feel the water fall over my body I relax, close my eyes for a minute and the next thing I know I am slipping. Shit, I fell asleep again.

~

"Fucking hell Lexi, you're going to class in that?" one of my sorority sisters says to me staring at my fishnets and giant t-shirt ensemble.

"Shannon we have a mixer tonight and I have a 6:30-9:30 right before," I say back, casually smearing more eye makeup on. Four out of my seven semesters in Bloomsburg I have had 6:30-9:30 classes on Thursdays. Not only has this been torturous, but it has taken time away from my one extracurricular activity during college: my sorority. Joining a sorority was never in my plans when I got to college, but my sophomore year all of my friends who were freshmen were doing it, and I figured why not? I had no fucking clue what I was getting myself into. Pledging, partying, sisterhood events, date parties, community service events, weekly meetings, secret sister, and so many other events began to cram themselves into my already overstuffed schedule. Like I said before though, I want to have every experience I possibly can, so I've clung to my srat life the past few years, seeing it as my escape from the adult world.

So what do sorority girls do on Thursdays at 9:30 pm? They

get fucking trashed. Every single Thursday, my sorority has or goes to some sort of mixer which normally fucking exhausts me. These events are mandatory, aka you get fined if you don't go or if you're late. Now I know what you're thinking, it's fucking crazy that I get fined if I don't go out and party. But it's not just all about drinking and drugs and what not, mixers are about making connections with other organizations, socializing, and making friends. In no way shape or form do you have to get fucked up, you're just required to be there and be social. (Unless you give 24-hour notice that you have a huge test or something that you need to study for instead.) All of that being said, if it's a Thursday night, my bitch ass is going to be wearing my 420 mixer costume to class. I really don't give a fuck what you think about my pot leaf socks, marijuana flower crown, and "best buds" shirt, this bitch has quite the night ahead of her.

Not giving a fuck has actually helped me in most of my classroom situations. I used to put up a front as soon as I got to the classroom. I mean really, who wants their professor to know that they're a raging workaholic-pothead-sorority-girl hybrid that's struggling to keep her eyes open during their lecture? No one. Fucking no one. I'm honestly thankful for having sat through years of church sermons at this point because it has made me very good at looking like I am paying attention, even when I'm not. However, besides pretending to pay attention, I have stopped pretending. If your classroom smells like pot it's probably because I took about 10 grav bong hits on my way out of my apartment, and no I don't care that you're judging me for it because my 10 page paper is done, and it's fucking good too. If you ask me what smells like weed I'm going to be honest with you and point at my crumpled up srat jacket on the back of my chair. I've got too much shit going on to not be medicated, and I dare anyone who isn't dealing with everything I am currently to judge me.

~
"LEEEEEEIII," Nicole's voice blares through the phone, "WHERE ARE YOU BITCCCCH?"

"Nicole, it's 12 am, I have work at 10 am tomorrow, I'm at home sleeping," I mutter into the phone, fumbling with my bedside lamp and trying to not wake up my sleeping boyfriend.

"Fuckin' lame," Nicole belches into the phone, "Wake up bitch, it's time for PITCHERS!" After this last word I hear screaming in the background of the bar, my sisters have obviously heard Nicole's battle cry, and are all probably surging towards the bar at once to get refills of their favorite liquor drinks. I try to think of something in response to Nicole's words, but come up short.

"Lexi?" I hear a different voice this time, one that's much more

masculine. "It's Andres, I'm not drinking tonight and Nicole said that I am supposed to come get you and bring you to GOD's, where are you at right now?" Fuck, she was smart enough to find someone sober.

"YOU CAN'T DITCH ME LEXI I'M YOUR PLEDGE SISTER," Nicole's voice screams at me over the phone.

"Andres?" I say, and once I hear him grunt back I follow up with, "I'm in my apartment MPA 102, and I'll be ready in ten." I drag myself out of bed, text an explanation to my sleeping boyfriend in case he wakes up and is confused as to why I am gone, and begin to throw on going out clothes. Here we go again.

~

Beep, beep, BEEP Goddammit, ugh that's my alarm.

Wait... Where am I, last thing I knew I was at the bar and... Oh right I'm in my bed. There's Randy, there's my canvases, there's my money, and there's my going out clothes from the night before. FUCK. It's Friday, which means I have a meeting with my seminar professor at 9:50 and then class at 10, and work at 11.

God, it's another long day. Time to drag myself to the showe— FUCK MY HEAD HURTS UGH WHY? Why do I do this to myself every goddamn week?

Every Thursday I go way too fucking hard and wake up the next morning internally hating myself. I wake up with stiff joints, a stomach ache, a pounding headache, and normally no recollection of the night before. I'm dead inside and normally only drag myself through the day because I absolutely have to. However, for some reason I cannot resist the sweet kiss of death a vodka pineapple pitcher delivers to me. Every time someone says to shotgun something, take a shot, or challenges me to a game of flip cup I am always down. I think part of it is my competitive nature, and another part has to do with my insatiable desire for attention. I love the attention out-drinking every frat boy in the basement gets me, I love the shock on people faces when I shotgun a Twisted Tea in 4 seconds flat. It's thrilling, and makes me seem way more badass than I actually am.

The reality of it all is the next morning. The next morning I wake up with puffy eyes, dehydrated, and wondering how the fuck I got home. It certainly does not feel badass on mornings like those, and in fact it seems moronic and childish. I'm sure someday I'll learn to stay in and get some actual sleep. But until then you can find me upstairs at GOD's hitting the fuck out of my dab pen and running up at least 30 dollar bar tab.



Bold
by Kasey Halbleib

Hopeless

by Kori Hassinger

I can't put this any other way. I was sweating. It wasn't the sweat that lingers on your skin after an extreme workout, it was the sweat that you don't even notice until you feel like you are so hot that you are going to pass out. It's a nervous sweat. I turn on the radio and try to focus on the beat of the music instead of the hot raindrops that were falling from the red clouds that took over my eyes. It seemed dangerous to even try to wipe them away. The hot streaks burning my face were a reminder that I was a different person.

It is funny how when you are at your lowest point in life that the radio can somehow know that and only play super slow songs when all you really want is something fast paced to try to keep you upbeat. With my left hand on the steering wheel and the right hand trying to change the radio stations, I notice the only landmark I ever look at when I am driving this road: a truck garage. It's weird, but I always find it calming when I am driving on this road, through the valley of trees that surround me, to find this little place. I used to think of the garage as a reminder of all the road trips that I have gotten to experience while going along on the road with my dad, but I don't anymore. This is now a reminder of another person who thought I wasn't good enough.

Another slow song plays on the radio and I quickly keep changing channels until I get sick of it and turn the radio completely off. Only two more minutes.

I begin to feel the nagging silence over the slight droning of my black 2004 Saturn Vue that I drive. Deep breaths don't help since I can feel the heavy pounding of my heart. I tell myself that everything will be just fine. It doesn't matter that I haven't seen him in years. It doesn't matter that he thought we were dating in high school even though we weren't. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters at this point.

I try to keep my hands tight on the steering wheel as I slowly pull into the grocery store parking lot. I always find myself driving slower when I am nervous, which is odd, since I am never nervous, just always anxious. Driving slowly through the lot, I begin to think he didn't show up. At least until I see the obnoxious looking pickup truck parked with the headlights still on. I mean, honestly, who parks and keeps their headlights on?

I slowly pull up beside him and park. I unplug my phone that was charging while also turning off my headlights. Putting my heavily used and dirty wallet into my sweatshirt pocket, I feel the small pepper spray that my mother insisted I take with me.

~

"I don't approve of you going with him, but it is your choice to make. If you go, you have to take your pepper spray." That's what my mother told me right before I left. "I just don't see how you could possibly want to willingly hang out with this kid after all the pain he caused you. Wasn't he the reason that you were going to quit high school if you hadn't gone through the college program instead?" she says to me while shaking her head in disgust.

With tears still running down my face, I comply and dig through my backpack for college until I find that little black canister and stick it into my pocket. By this time, my brother, Scott, comes downstairs after he heard our argument and sees me upset. "Then why don't you just take my handgun?" He asks me while also making a jab at my mother for how ridiculous she is being.

Glaring at Scott, she replied: "She's fine with the pepper spray. I don't want her to also get arrested tonight for having your gun then yet."

"You are so insistent she doesn't go, but tell her she can make her own choices?" Scott questions Mother. "I would just let her take the gun, especially. . ." Ignoring their little argument, I double check I have everything and quickly leave my house with the tiniest goodbye.

~

Before I open my car door, I take a quick peek over at his truck to make sure it is him inside and no one else. All I see is a shadow of him, but I could recognize his outline anywhere. After being best friends with him for five years, I would be able to pick him out of a crowd. I take one last breath before I open the door and get out. I quickly turn and lock my car, double checking it did lock by testing the door handle of both doors on the driver side.

I can feel eyes watching me as I make my way over to the passenger side of his truck. I try to open the door, but it doesn't move. Did he really lock the doors on me? I hesitate, but I try the door again but slightly harder and finally it opens. Hopping into the truck, I can feel the stiff air already consuming the small cab of the truck. It feels as though I don't belong.

"Hi," he says to me as I finally look over at him. I can't deny that I did miss seeing him for those dreadful three years from when I saw him last. I try to give him a small smile as I try to answer "hi" back, but nothing comes out. Quickly taking my gaze off his sly sneaky smile and his saggy looking face because he lost a lot of weight quickly, I focus on getting comfortable in my seat. The leather seats in my car are soft and you can feel the cushions slightly forming to the shape of your butt, but his seats don't do that. The hard cushion feels as though I am sitting on a piece of metal. The seat is cold, and the camo cover does not help with making the seat feel any more inviting.

"Where are we going?" he asks me as he puts his truck in drive and begins to pull out of the dimly lit parking lot.

"Dairy Queen," I answer instantly. I feel two vibrations on my belly through my sweatshirt pocket and remember I didn't text my mom as soon as I got to the parking lot. Of course, she already texted me asking why I didn't text her. I quickly answer saying I just got to the parking lot and we were leaving. I can feel the tears try to flood my eyes again, but I try to fight them. The heat of my face slowly evaporates the wet feeling on my cheeks at least.

"I told you I don't have any money to waste on ice cream," he says to me as he slows down to turn the corner. I look over and his mouth is pulled tight in annoyance, and his eyes are darker than before. He is leaning towards the door with his left hand holding his head up and his right hand in charge of the steering wheel. He sits almost like he couldn't be any further away from me.

"I-I told my mother that we were going for ice cream. I don't want her to yell at me any more when I get home. Danny, she already threatened to track my phone the entire time," I tell him, and I uncomfortably shift my hands in my lap to hold my phone tight to me.

"Why would she do that?"

"I told you she didn't want me to go with you as it is. You know from years ago that she didn't like you. Do you really think she likes you any more after the things I told her you did to me?"

He sits straighter in his seat, changing hands on the steering wheel but keeping his hand in his lap, away from me. "So, you are saying a person can't change in about three years?"

Giving him a quizzical look that he didn't see, I answer, "I didn't say that. I am just saying that you were kind of mean to me and my mother doesn't like that you treated me like that."

"So, me caring for you and deciding it was better that we weren't together anymore was me being terrible towards you?" he asks.

"Did you know you almost hit me with your truck at least three different times during senior year? Did you know that everyone told me all the awful things you said about me after you decided to steal my best friend away from me because you were her boyfriend's best friend?" I angrily ask with the hurt of those times reflecting through my voice.

"I don't remember any of that. The only stuff I said about you was to Kelly and John," he admits to me. "Also, I can't help if they ended up liking me better than you," he matter-of-factly states.

With tears still cascading their way down my cheeks, I don't give up. "And did you know that Kelly liked to gossip? She loved to make sure I suffered during high school and always threw it into my face how terrible of a person I apparently was. She never cared that I was the one

who saved her life when she tried to kill herself, but she never could admit that. She just always told me it was you that saved her and that I was nothing," I sniffle, wishing I had brought a pack of tissues with me. "I even told her that you didn't want to save her. You never believed me when I called you that night. You tried to brush me off and blame it on not having the time to go deal with that 'nonsense' as you called it," I stated with an unstable voice barely louder than a whisper. "Sh-she took nine extra strength Tylenol and texted me her goodbye. She texted me, not you, and yet, she still chose you over me?" I say with a quiet voice.

"Well she's a bitch and I don't talk to her anymore; so, I don't care," he quickly interrupts me. "If you ask me though, I just think you are jealous that everyone we knew in high school ended up liking me better than you," he states as though it was a matter of fact.

Disappointed, I look out the window but don't see much since the darkness put a blanket on anything the street lights don't shine their light on. I try to stop the tears, but I just can't. With only the almost unbearably bright glow of the green cab lights in his truck, the atmosphere almost feels toxic.

"So, you don't recall seeing my best friend laugh at me during clubs we all three had together in school after you decided not to be my friend anymore? You don't remember how many times I left that classroom with tears running down my face while I roamed the halls just waiting and waiting for that bell to ring so I could leave the class as fast as I could and try to fight all the memories that always flooded my head of the fun times we all had together?" I ask him while slowly gaining courage for not being able to talk about these things.

He sits there and just shakes his head no. "Don't get me wrong, I still cared about you afterwards." I don't answer him but instead focus on the window and how dirty it surprisingly was with all the small smudges coating it. He takes a deep breath and relaxes a bit in his seat as though he gave up with the tough act. His whole demeanor shifts like a switch. "I never could find a girl I had so much in common with before other than you. You were always the girl I was comparing every girl to. You were the one I always thought about and I always wanted to try an actual relationship with. I miss always talking to you even when we didn't have anything to say. I miss the connection we had that was so strong. We always wanted the same things in life, but we never got the chance to do any of it. I miss all the ideas we had when we tried to plan how our first time would be together. I miss all those talks we had about how we would drive each other crazy. I just want that back," he says in almost a whisper.

I look over at him with sad eyes, remembering all those times and almost laugh until I notice he is still sitting as though he can't get

any further away from me. I don't answer him but instead let some of those memories come to the surface.

He shifts in his seat once again, but this time stretches out his legs. His tone switching back to the tough guy act. "Oh, man. I am just so sore from working out today. I ran three miles in under thirty minutes," He says to me while glancing at me with high eyebrows and a sickening, cocky smirk on his face. "When's the last time you worked out?" he asks me.

"I, uh, I don't have time to," I tell him as I am caught off guard. "I work 40 or more hours a week at my job and am a full-time student on the only two days I have off work. I never have time to go to the gym."

He makes a scoffing sound in the back of his throat. "Yeah. It doesn't seem that you work out as much as you used to," he says as his now black lit eyes swipe over my body. I can feel his eyes lingering on the small pouch of my belly that I have always been self-conscious about. He always knew this fact too.

I can't help but remember the times he has made me feel uncomfortable like he is now. Like the time I asked him to come support me at a soccer game and he came late. Late, as in the game only had seven minutes left in the second half. Not only was he late, but he told me the best part of the whole night was when I ran off the field and he only noticed my breasts bouncing with each stride I took. He didn't notice the big smile I had on my face from taking out the other team's best offensive player. I couldn't even tell you another time when I was so disgusted and uncomfortable at the same time.

"Drive thru or inside?" he asks me once we pull into Dairy Queen's parking lot.

"Do you want anything?" I ask, since he said he didn't have money for anything.

"Not really," he answers. "I told you I was fucking broke. I need to pay for new tires for my truck. I don't have any extra money to waste on some bullshit ice cream, especially when my tires are more important," he says with a grunt.

"Then fine, we don't have to get anything," I say annoyed.

He lifts his head in acknowledgment. "Oh, that's right. You just made me drive here in case your mom is tracking your phone," he says while lifting up his eyebrows in disgust. He pulls into a spot, and turns his headlights off but still leaves the green cab lights on. I sit in my still uncomfortable seat, and wait. I look out the windshield at the golf course that sits right on the side of the highway. The stillness of it kind of freaks me out because of the eerie willow trees that are peeking out of the slight fog due to the small stream that runs through the course.

"So, in class today," he starts telling me, but I don't listen. I pick

up some parts of the story he is telling me, but it's hard to pay attention. He acts as if I know his friends at college. Still zoning out, I begin to pick at the necklace I am wearing. The necklace my brother got me for Christmas one year. The small key hangs off the thin chain through the little notch in the mouse ear that is cut out. I can't help but think how much better that necklace suits my personality better than all the necklaces Danny had bought for me years ago.

My thoughts are interrupted when I feel Danny poking my elbow. "What's wrong, Babygirl?" he asks me.

I glance over at him and see his eyebrows scrunched and his head tilted toward me. I shake my head and whisper "nothing." As he shifts in his seat again slightly leaning more towards me, I notice a reflection coming from his wrist. Curious, I slowly grab his wrist and look at the metal bracelet that reminded me of a handcuff cops carry around. A small symbol is engraved on the top of it of two snakes entwined around a sword. The symbol for a hospital.

"Here," he says as he takes it off and hands it to me. Flipping it over I read:

*Danny Jo Crappins
Heart Valve Replacement*

"At least it is a pretty bracelet they gave you," I tell him as I keep looking at the bracelet as if it isn't real.

"Yeah, well, I think it's ugly as shit," he says as he grabs it roughly out of my hands and attaches it back on his wrist. "They left me with an ugly scar on my chest and demand I be on a constant diet. Like, fuck them assholes," he says.

"I'm sorry, I just wanted to look at it," I admit while beginning to feel the tickling of sweat creep its way down my back in fear.

After a couple minutes, Danny stares at the clock that reads 7:54pm. "I need to be home by eight, that way my mother thinks I came home from school instead of being here with you," he says to me.

I barely glance over at him surprised. An unsettling feeling begins to rumble in my stomach as I replay those words over and over in my head. He doesn't want to tell his mom he's hanging out with me and, yet I found the heart to stand up to my mother and tell her it was him I was hanging out with?

I open my mouth to question him about not wanting to tell his family he was hanging out with me, but a hand grabs my cheek and roughly pulls me almost out of my seat. Next thing I know, I am face to face with Danny. His eyes are dark, and his facial expression looks like that of a bad actor trying to look sexy. I give him a questionable look but before I can pull away, he smashes his lips against mine while keeping a sturdy hand on the back of my neck.

As his small, thin lips dramatically dance against my own, I can't help but believe the same Danny is still there that I knew only three years ago. My mind slowly wanders back to those times remembering the secret kisses we shared and the intimate conversations we had trying to figure out how our first time would be once we finally got to spend our first time alone together. Which would be right now, in this exact moment.

I can feel the tears streaking down my face, as I can feel Danny's fat, yet tiny, hand gripping the back of my neck tighter and tighter intensifying the kisses. By this time, I don't feel any comfort in his kisses. In fact, I don't feel anything at all. I notice my mouth isn't even moving to the rhythm his is. I put my hand on his chest and slowly push against him to get him off of me, but he just grips my neck tighter, making it hard for me to move my head at all. I push with more force, but his other hand snakes its way underneath the hem of my shirt, gripping my hip. I use both hands and try to push him away, but he only grunts and moves his hand further up my shirt, onto my chest.

"God, I have missed you so much, babygirl," he tells me in a whispered out of breath voice. "I don't know how I lasted this long without seeing your beautiful smile and always having you by my side."

I smile in appreciation for the compliment but keep my eyes closed just trying to enjoy the moment as much as I can. "I've missed you too," I tell him as he pulls me closer into one of his famous bear hugs. Even with all the weight he lost because of his surgery, he is still the same teddy bear that I missed getting hugs from every day in high school.

"Alright, babygirl, I need to get home now," he tells me as he pulls away and quickly puts his truck into drive.

Along the route back to the grocery parking lot where my car is, we don't talk much. Instead, he turns the radio a bit higher and keeps his hand on my lap. The smile only grows on my face as I remember all the times we both had admitted we wished for this exact moment to happen just a couple years ago. As he drives, his hand slowly taps to the music as his other one slowly slides up and down my leg.

I watch his hand caressing my leg, but it just gives me chills. It isn't the kind of chills you get when you wish that hand went a little further up your leg but instead the kind of chills that give you an uneasy feeling as though there is something wrong. By the time I convince myself it's just me worrying too much about going home, Danny is parking right by my car. I hesitate to get out of the truck and instead glance over at him.

He gives me a small smile, but he doesn't move. Slowly, I lean towards him and he gives me a quick hug then ushers a quiet goodbye.

I give him a quick kiss on the cheek that turns into a little makeout session and I still feel nothing. It's as if I was kissing a chubby formed bit of air.

"Goodbye, babygirl," he says. "Text me when you get home." He smiles at me again as he watches me slide out of his truck and shut the door.

I barely get my door shut before he is already peeling out of the parking lot and zooming down the road towards his house. I take a couple of deep breaths and finally make my way home.

The next day, I get a phone call.

"Hey," Danny says.

"Oh, hey. What's up?" I answer him.

Silence.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him.

I hear a deep breath come through the line. "There is something I have been meaning to tell you."

My eyes instantly go shut in disappointment just knowing the exact words that are going to come next. "Just say it," I tell him in an annoyed whisper.

"I-I am still not over my last girlfriend, Dawn."

Tears dance their way down my embarrassed cheeks. "I thought you haven't dated anyone lately?"

"We dated last semester."

"Oh, so last night didn't mean anything to you?" I ask him the typical disappointed girl question.

"N-No, that's not what I was saying."

"So, you are just saying that you decided to string me along and use me as the test to see whether you were ready to move on with your life or not?" I ask him.

"No, I honestly loved hanging out with you last night and I meant everything I said to you."

The tears start to consume me as my mother's voice plays in the back of my head. *"He is trouble. He is only going to hurt you."*

"You know, it's funny that I actually believed that I was important to you. I am so glad that you could make me feel like you were going to be the most important guy to me and that we were actually going to have a chance to date each other and live that life that we had talked about living years ago when we were best friends." He starts to interrupt me, but I don't let him. "I should have trusted my instincts and my mother's advice and not given you another chance. Apparently, an asshole always will stay an asshole no matter if they have to go through open heart surgery or not." I hang up the phone and let it fall straight to the floor.

I don't even care that I can hear the cracking of the screen and the pieces of glass skid across the floor. I just feel a blanket of loneliness envelope me in its warm disappointed arms. It doesn't comfort me. It doesn't do anything to me. I just feel nothing.



Clothing is Not Consent
by Kim Eckenrode

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Time's Up
by Kacie England