

# Folio

The Undergraduate Art and Literary Magazine  
of Southern Connecticut State University

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2016



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## 2015-2016 Featured Readers and Artists:

Dani Dymond, Jason Mangles, Julia Page Zeidler, Sam Schwind, Carlin Huckel, Mel Hare, Sarah Locke, Phylcia Daley, Mary Rudzis, Gigi Bellettiere, Dianna Vega, and Urfa Kadeer

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# Poetry

## Leash

i don't think i've ever owned my mouth.  
ever since i was a kid i've been trying to  
put a leash on it;  
train it to not rest in places it doesn't belong,  
to not nip at strangers  
and for god's sake,  
don't make a mess all over the floor  
when company is over.  
slowly, i groomed it into shape;  
from ah's to R's,  
from stuttering to simplicity,  
and when i thought it was barking out too brashly,  
i would shame it into silence.  
now it's been years and i'm afraid  
that i've lost my voice;  
when i talk it whimpers in my throat  
struggles out a few anxious syllables  
hey, how are you, good, goodbye,  
and my lips seal before my tongue  
can trip over itself too much.  
so sit, lay down, roll over,  
put the thoughts down on paper  
there's enough time to coax them into eloquence,  
prose, rather than foaming at the mouth.  
and with every word that falls into place,  
there will be a pat on the head;  
a reward,  
*good boy.*

## Gary Scaramella

---

### Cremation

On the day you died,  
your mother picked out  
a shiny black-and-red urn.

She came back to a  
house full of your friends  
wet-eyed, but smiling;  
content to have found  
a suitable new home for her son.

On the day of your wake,  
I knelt before it;  
shining in the high, holy church lights  
and swaddled in the low,  
soft buzz of the organ.

I prayed to a god I'm not  
sure I believe in  
that there was such a thing  
as an eternal soul-  
that when they burned  
your body to ashes,  
you burst forth from the flames  
like a phoenix,  
covered in the black soot of a past life;  
but beneath,  
red,  
glimmering,  
and alive.

## Flashbacks from the Fifth Story

I blow bubbles  
out the screenless window,  
and think they never pop.

Windowsill

Fifth Story

On snow days, plowmen make mountains.  
I hike and build tunnels  
from one side to the other.

Fourth Story

When Mother drives  
underneath the tunnel,  
I count the lights overhead.

Third Story

I love to stare into flashlights.  
Count the seconds  
until light-headedness.

Second Story

I drop polka dots of milk  
onto the corduroy couch,  
“Milk pancakes.”

First Story

Saturday mornings: The dogs bark  
to go outside. Dad says we’re low on eggs.  
I burn my finger on the stove.

Ground Level

I fall from my bicycle,  
back pulses hot.  
I had flown for a moment.

Dani Dymond

---

## In the Grip of a Ghost

The grooves in your knuckles, popped fat  
by purposed cracking, have imprinted  
on my mind, clearer even than your voice,  
or eyes made colorless by time.

That tenor and those irises have fallen  
from memory like snow from gutters  
in the spring, heavy marbles  
departing from relevance, lazy  
to leave, but the smallest of limbs  
linger, permafrost in May.

The images of those fingers, made rough  
by your sorrows, press flat against my insides,  
mental photos of purest saturation,  
ready to flash when my eyelids lengthen.  
I squeeze, hold them there, closed, hugging  
your ridges that have redefined the creases  
of my brain, where nerves rest.

It is because of your hands that I fragment,  
disconnected from the kinesthetic,  
unhinged as if tendons were tearing,  
phalange bones bending. You'd find me there,  
wallowing half-whole in the unintentional caress  
of bending thumbs and pinkies.

I'd search for solace in that sudden  
90-degree angle, content in the pressure –  
pretending it's an embrace.

## Moonchild

The depths of my ocular cavities  
are surely lined with lunar dust  
that's eager to reunite with its source:  
my birth mother amongst the stars,  
who so demands I meet her gaze  
in the soft delivery of evenings,  
when she takes over for the sun.

Her glowing chariot distracts, the glare  
of her greatness blinding to those of us  
who are weighed down below, distant  
from that cosmic caress while she flies  
free around the earth each night.

My luminous parent hovers quietly  
above, a whisper of rounded grace,  
resting lightly in place from dusk to dawn.  
She knows my heart – how it's tinged  
with craters equal to hers, how it hides  
itself in shadows much like its maker.

She smiles, a crescent, doting upon her daughter.

## Dani Dymond

---

### Police Code 904B

Once I dreamt that you were burning.  
Your soul stood two inches tall  
as it ran screaming down a staircase  
of tangled vertebrae. While your spine  
acted as the fire exit, the rest of you  
was blazing, sweating globs of ashes.  
The 4'11" human frame had no eyes,  
empty sockets where your life had been.

That frantic soul of yours kept on,  
a silver droplet of hope that couldn't quiet  
the infernos within you. She had to flee  
down every laddered bone, desperate  
to keep her own pieces intact as you  
started to fade with the flames. Her tears  
tried to clean a blackening skeleton...

Caution tape outlines the woman  
whose body gave way to a yearning  
for nicotine. The small light inside  
her, unable to escape, went down  
with the ship, a soul licked bare  
by hell's tongues, until there was little  
left to save. The building of your body  
was in shambles – then I woke up.

## Another Mad Girl's Villanelle

And so it goes, another love gone dead;  
I fear another will not bloom again.  
(I still hear your music inside my head.)

I used to dress up all in lively red,  
but then those dull black clouds came waltzing in:  
And so it goes, another love gone dead.

I think of you when I lay down to bed;  
my moonlit dreams drive me near-half insane.  
(I still hear your music inside my head.)

The clocks tick on, but memory won't fade:  
you are no longer more than other men.  
And so it goes, another love gone dead.

*We'll write our songs for years to come*, you said,  
but time has passed since you last spoke my name.  
(I still hear your music inside my head.)

Some days I wish I'd been born deaf instead;  
at least I'd never hear the past again.  
And so it goes, another love gone dead.  
(I still hear your music inside my head.)

## Kiernan Norman

---

### No Title

June took root in the same way you learned to scream  
but now it's fall and you're trying  
to sing.

It slipped away from muddy lids like lifting a veil,  
like stepping into a bath,  
(toes, sole, calf. toes, sole, calf.)  
and crawled unseen behind apartment-light echoes;  
crooning sultry half-truths,  
weighing down vascular walls.

My heartstrings aren't laundry lines but the conversations  
we never finished (last night, last week, last year)  
hang from them, unbothered,  
starching in the sun.

It's pulling on my sleeves, heavy and damp.  
The wind isn't howling but  
I don't want to hear about the dream you had  
where I was a Priest,  
where I was hitchhiking,  
where I cut off my hair in a taxi's front seat,  
and gave it to you in ziplock bags.

A hazy sky; slow and sweet,  
coats my traipsing moods like honey  
and sticks to the bottom of your favorite mug  
(Yeah, that one. It's older than I am.  
It's not vintage- it's gross.)

We rev our engines but we're still here, springing forward.  
Listening. It's growing.  
It's humming cold verses in a new language  
while the exhaust spells out his name.

You don't mention how fiercely I'm blushing and I'm grateful  
I don't have to laugh it off.  
Some days laughing feels worse than puking.

We are still here.  
We are still.  
We are.

I'm looking for something important and I won't know it  
until I see it.  
morning; it's warmer,  
we lift our chins to the coastline and  
blow our smoke upwind;

Today physics is purely speculation.  
Today secrets are extinct.  
The view is so much clearer on the days  
I don't avert my eyes.  
The horizon is wide enough,  
you can keep June, I'll take the sky.

Tilted Gradually

I never really notice the color of people's eyes but  
I can tell you that the way you hold a pen makes me think  
the words twisting inside of you  
are streaming and surging and sharp;  
a deafening waterfall I can't chase.  
They're throwing themselves into the dips of your eyelashes and demanding to  
be set on  
fire-  
they're screaming to be loaded into a barrel,  
cocked and aimed at the crosshairs of your moleskine-  
You're hunting wild words for the thrill of the kill.

I don't remember your license plate  
so each passing pick-up,  
(cobalt, clean, too high to just step in) sends me reeling.  
As winter fades, the memory of rushing heat  
that struck bare shoulders and spider-scurried  
in deep, mascara-laced blinks from your passengers seat vent  
to the base of my spine replays sweetly-lonely,  
it echoes tightly-comforting.

I tread sensory smiles because spring can't get here fast enough.  
My boots are always drying.  
My thoughts are always climbing.  
I'm craving a day that has shriveled up  
and blown away; giddy on these too-tough  
March ghosts and gales-  
being tangled in it feels almost safe to me now.  
In a certain moonlight rejection resembles refuge.  
No border tries to contain me;  
I burned my passport.  
I'm growing out my hair.

These light-and-sweet iced coffee, round-tummy, solid-thigh days  
find me a galaxy away from the springy, sinewy nights of us-  
the nights when I didn't slouch  
and I had hands worth holding.

My shoulders aren't the smooth golden brown;  
\*(shea-butter-softened, an amber, wrinkled velvet

that demanded your caress,  
that confused my heritage,)\*  
they were when you were driving me places-  
They're thicker now;  
thick and full and that yellowy,  
greenish kind of pale that pulls drum-tight over dewy purple veins.  
Veins that weave and sprout in every direction;  
that bottle Mediterranean blood across leaky night lectures  
and fevered weekends.

An arrangement of flesh that smiles the picture of pretty health  
and tired vigor with a vineyard tan;  
but limbs sickly sallow when dodging the sun.

I'm flipping through notebooks and turning out  
coat pockets. I'm looking for any little bit  
of my autumn daydream to slip out  
and remind me that it was so much better  
inside my head. The receipts have faded  
and we didn't take enough pictures-  
fingers clutch my memory's b-roll negatives,  
the soundtrack a roughly translated laughter  
in a knotted, almost-vocabulary.

My hands are full of crumpled words  
and the small, neon lighters  
that I liked to buy and forget about  
at midnight October gas stations.  
There are words hiding in other places too-

words I've strung up  
like Christmas lights and dubbed poetry,  
the frozen solid words you held  
which I begged for but could never extract,  
and the noble, solid words you offered me  
like a fireman's blanket while we both sat upright and facing forward  
from opposite ends of the same couch.  
The words that detailed, in no uncertain terms,  
all the ways in which I was not enough.

I think, if I ever fall again,  
I will let the dressed-up details  
coarse through my veins first.  
The descriptions, the elaborations,  
the tacky garnishes-  
they can bloom in my memory void of language.  
I'll let the tiny bits that do nothing for me  
perch on my sternum,  
then, sweet as a mockingbird,  
call out, sing to and mirror back the lives  
and centuries and twisted roots  
of migration and exploration within me.  
My birth certificate is lying-  
I've been biting my nails and humming  
across six thousand years.

I'm still learning;  
now I know the shade of your eyes,  
the make of your car,  
the cds in your glovebox;  
they're fine details I can shoulder  
through the winter and won't imitate  
bullets the way words seem to  
when it's time to hibernate inside my skull.

Maybe by next spring  
I'll shake off the novels my thoughts  
are dripping with and writhing on the floorboards in reaction to.  
Maybe by next spring  
I won't wake to find my finger on the trigger  
of a loaded paperback gun,  
its howling muzzle aimed toward the sky.

Ryan Meyer

---

## Imperfect Fit

Portray my thoughts with shadow puppets  
As the light flickers against the walls

Lean in closely and tell me they don't make sense  
So I can finally understand that nothing ever will

The rabbit with the crooked ears cocks his head  
To show me that he's sympathetic, but minimally

And it's not clear along the plaster, but he bends  
Over and begins to remove his insides so he can

Stare at them, splayed out along the floor  
Like a grisly jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces

Don't fit cleanly back together

## Some Things You Can't Undo

Peeling her shadow from the wall  
Was easier done than I'd thought.  
Like the clearance sticker  
On a bargain-priced novel,  
The outline of her frame slid  
Cleanly from the plaster  
And left not a mark on the blank space.  
It lay limp in my palms,  
No foundation to cling to,  
And it felt like velvet laid  
Across my fingers.  
When I looked at her, shadow-less,  
I saw a girl faded from reality  
Blurred against the backdrop  
Of her near-empty living room  
With bare wood floors  
And thick beige curtains  
Open just enough to let in light,  
But only a little.

## Paige Tillinghast

---

October.

The crackling and spitting of the fire whispers to me from across the room,  
my eyelids  
fluttering open. My fingertips latch onto the blanket and tug it up towards  
my face,  
cradling the only warm air that's left.

Soft breaths seep out of my brother and sister's mouths who lie on the floor  
below. I prop myself up to look out the window only to find a sea of black,  
laps of water licking at our windowsill.

But creatures are stirring within the silence.

Creaks and moans are coming from the poor giants outside, crying out from  
the heavy weight.

A tremble here and there signify those who have lost the battle, and yet here  
we remain,  
blind until the morning sun arrives.

## Broken Promise

*Sealed by two pinkies in the dark*

The first thing you said to me that night,  
After a sloppy kiss, and a “hello” in my ear,  
Was that a full surgery had just been done,  
To give a young boy a new pair of hands.

I wondered why the news mattered to you,  
Or why you thought it would matter to me.  
Of all the news in the world, of all the ways  
To get me to hold your hand.

We compared the size of my thumb  
To your pinky. The same pinky that  
Slipped its way around my own later that night.  
“I’ll see you before the week ends,” you said.

The week ended, and I stared at my hand.  
Another, and I thought about the boy and his surgery.  
Now, months have passed, and I am writing this poem,  
With my two hands. My pinkies never touch the keys.

Terri Davis

---

## Rebirth of Hope

Soft, quiet light stretches its arms—  
reaching across the chilled wooden  
floor and warming the corner  
next to my bed that's never swept.  
Even the dust looks regal as my dead skin  
dances on dawn's golden streams.  
Rising too—born from the folds of cotton  
and quilt, I open the curtains so that the light  
may shine in and warm all my dark corners.

## Obstructing

memories sting me like bees  
when i look down at my hands and  
knees and notice all the places i've  
bruised too easily.  
kiss and taste the blood-  
leave it to discuss  
at another time somewhere else  
it's too good to waste right now.  
there's something obstructing my  
view, evergreen and everlasting  
i'm wanting more; i can't take each  
step without hesitating but i do.  
you are the only face i miss;  
i'll call just to hear your voicemail message  
spiraling off into a  
sleepless neverland  
and in your car i'll  
mouth the words to your favorite song  
even though i want to sing it out loud  
instead.  
i'm keeping it to myself. it comes out  
at night when i trace the maps of your  
veins with my fingertips and  
sing you into dreams  
of me.  
keeping it to ourselves.

Alice

These days when Alice drinks straight from the bottle,  
she doesn't grow until her head strikes the roof  
or shrink down to the size of a Cheshire cat.  
Wonderland slammed its doors and filled the rabbit hole.  
These days when Alice takes a tumble, she lands  
on the hardwood floor in a cold manor,  
no White Rabbit, no March Hare,  
and the only playing cards sit on the writing desk  
in a constant game of solitaire.  
Empty bottles line the halls, a collection  
of ineffective poisons that keep everything the same.  
She is the same person as yesterday, and the days before.  
She wanders the halls and asks the walls, "What is real?"  
When children come ringing the bell  
looking for stories of Wonderland Alice  
covers her ears until they give up ringing.  
She never speaks of Wonderland,  
but when Alice drinks straight from the bottle,  
she seeks Wonderland, where they are all mad  
as hatters. She hosts tea parties in the shade of ash  
trees on a lush green lawn, and her guests talk of  
the latest fashions and the Queen, but nothing  
ridiculous enough to keep Alice from yawning  
and resting her chin in her hands. When she mentions  
imaginary mathematics the ladies stare at her and  
change the subject, so instead she counts in her head  
the number of steps to the day she fell asleep  
beside the riverbank.

## Origin

- 1  
The nights are the longest
- 2  
You know what this is, what a genocide looks like?  
Like being dragged away, handfuls of hair wrapped in someone's grip  
under an otherwise idyllic,  
cloudless blue sky.  
(Waiting for the sky to split open,  
because how can today  
look like yesterday and the day before when tides are  
turning, turning, turning.)  
Like forgetting every word in a language except for grief.  
Like hearing a newborn's first cry  
and knowing that you cannot protect them. The way  
your mother couldn't protect you.
- 3  
There are so many to mourn.  
Every step you take feels like a funeral procession,  
like dragging your feet, half stumbling to your own end.
- 4  
Displacement isn't among the English words that your mouth  
can wrap itself around yet.  
You know it only by the feeling;  
the ache sitting deep in your bones,  
the tugging you felt as tiny ocean waves  
lapped at your ankles for the last time.  
Like your home was bidding you farewell  
from the other side of the sea.
- 5  
This is where you're from now.  
Here, this land of strange and bitter crops.

6

You're from this:

Shame, an invisible weight, heavy as mountains,  
slumping your shoulders,  
and ramshackle backyard huts.

From where the moonlight breaks through ceiling cracks,  
bounces around,  
illuminating your dark skin.

7

The nights are always the longest.

The only distraction is the  
occasional cricket chirping. This is the only time you have freedom  
to flex your tired tendons and  
wonder if you'll ever be from anything else.

## Violet Vein

Violet Vein treads through the Appalachian Trail in  
Connecticut, and observes the compass of consciousness.  
She's a squarish circle. She cups the mushrooms  
In her hands, pokes one with the tip of her tongue,  
And tastes a concoction of dirt and nuts.  
The fume of green zeros encircles her securely like a coil.  
She's actually a circular square.

Because Violet's favorite song isn't more than two minutes long,  
She watches the leaves detach from the trees  
And sway in the shape of a Z until they drop at her feet.  
She bends down to pick up a brown oak-leaf  
Only to find it attached to another brown oak-leaf.  
It flutters out of her dirty hand and exposes its colorful interior.  
It's the camouflaged butterfly that she dreamt of the night before.

Violet floats mid-air with the butterfly,  
While the unnatural trees watch them both.  
Her understanding of existence is ineffable  
And it must be written in a book.  
Une merveilleuse blague cosmique.  
The trees begin to sing in harmony, "Laugh it off,"  
As the compass melts into a deep puddle inside of Violet's mind.

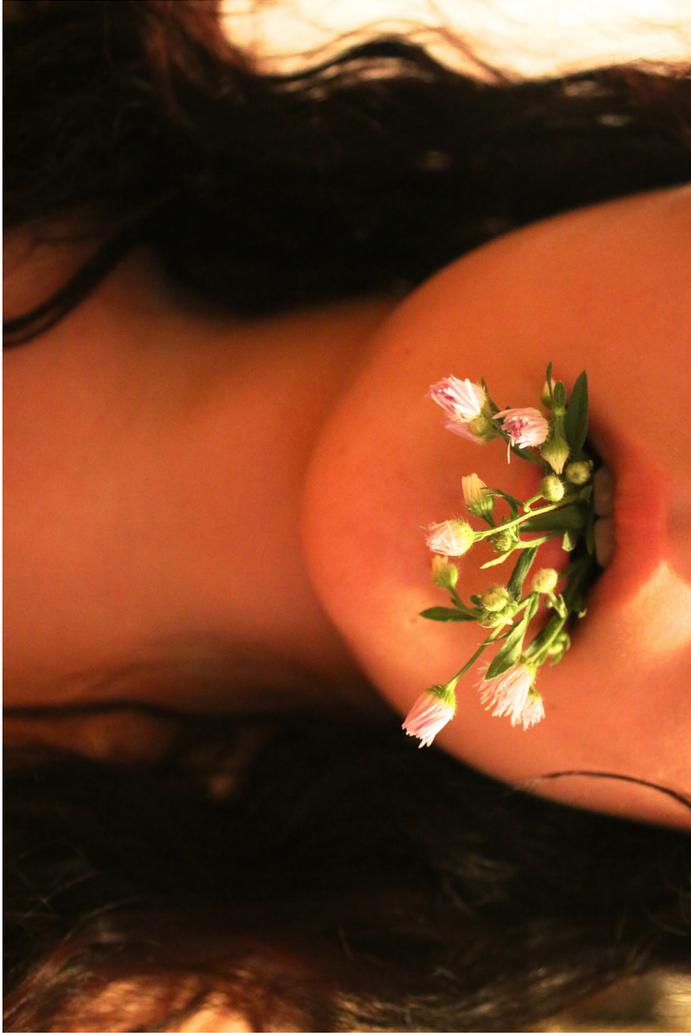
# Art



A Drop in the Bucket

Mary Rudzis

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Baby's Breath

Mary Rudzis

---



Mosaic

*cover art*



## Dark Knight

Kyle Broderick

---



Lift- Estes Park, CO.

*second place*

Kyle Broderick

---



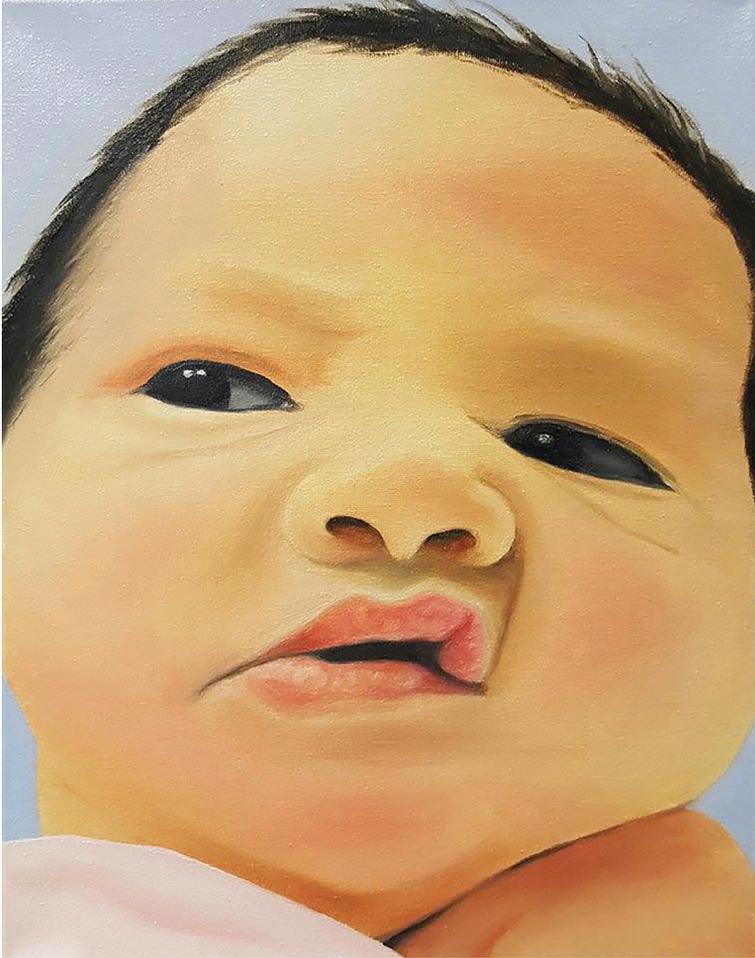
The Breakthrough

37

*third place*

Rosita Laureano

---



Nya

38



Mystifying Essence

# Fiction

## They Will Come in Cycles

All they left behind was her filling.

The amalgam filling on #31, found in the woods about three hundred meters away from the local health food store, to be precise. No footsteps tracked in the mud. No strands of hair. No blood. Just a tiny little sliver of metal.

Their parents used a picture that Naomi always hated, the one from her sixteenth birthday, the one where she's sitting with her shoulders hunched at the kitchen table, stringy brown hair tied up in a bun and a heart necklace dangling over her clavicle. She hated the way her teeth looked with braces, and always tried smiling without showing them, but the metal poked through the crevice of her lips anyway.

"This is stupid," Lucy had said, sifting through the stack of Missing Persons flyers they'd printed out. Naomi's hair had been cropped short for two years, now, her skin clearer and her eyes darker. "She doesn't *look* like this anymore. No one will recognize her."

But they'd put it up anyway, stapled it to every third telephone pole in the tricounty area.

"We like this picture," her mother had said curtly, smoothing her small hands over a flyer she'd just tacked up. Short nails in chipped pink lacquer—usually she kept them long, and never let them chip. "She was happier then. We like seeing her happy."

Lucy was silent, staring at the picture of Naomi as her sister stared back.

Even then, her eyes had been loud, trying to yell something her mouth wasn't sure how to say. But twelve months later, the eyes on that flyer can't stare back at Lucy anymore. They've been gouged out, snapped in each pupil with a rusted staple, and the ink bled down to her chin after rain and rain and rain. Reward money, crossed out and rewritten three times. \$10,000. \$15,000. \$20,000.

They're brown, Naomi's eyes. Brown like she'd got acorns dropped in them from staring up too much.

Lucy stares up, too, but her eyes are so blue you wouldn't even think they were sisters. A strange, pale kind of blue, like the wrist veins you can see through an old woman's rice paper skin. Like blue lips in the winter.

The sky can be blue, too, but it's fading into dusty red. Statistically speaking, most UFO sightings have been reported to have occurred at around 9:00 PM, but according to Lucy's watch, it's only 5:13. It always got dark early in the winter time.

Her teeth clench, an ache throbbing in her shoulders. Had she taken her medication this morning? A lump of worry sits tight and dry in her throat, like a pill she couldn't swallow down. Mornings were a haze of delirium, all stiff joints, all pounding temples, all too many aches and pains for a girl of fourteen.

That's what her mother always said in waiting rooms, sitting stiff in the chair across from her (never next to her, never too close) while grandmas and grandpas shuffled by. She was always the youngest person in the waiting room. Too many aches and pains for a girl of fourteen.

"Stupid," she mutters to herself, rubbing at her neck. She'd almost felt a flare-up coming on earlier that day, on the bus ride home from school with her forehead pressed against the window, but she went out anyway.

The sky is dark, but the air is too warm for November. Naomi used to say the earth was burning up like it had a fever, and all people kept doing was making it sicker and sicker.

"They always say if aliens find us, they'll want to take all our resources," she remembered her sister saying once, one January evening a few years back. Naomi had popped out the mesh screen from her window to blow out smoke so it wouldn't pool at her bedroom ceiling, but that evening she just leaned on the sill, her elbows dangling out as she stared out at the beech tree standing naked in their neighbor's yard. January, and it still hadn't snowed. "That they'll come in cycles. First year, our oil. Next year, the forests and the crops. Year after that, all the water in the ocean." A peal of smoke slithered through her teeth, seeping into the frigid air outside. "Bullshit. When aliens come, there'll be nothing left for them to take because we'll have used it all up."

"Nothing left to take but us," Lucy mutters to herself, just like she did back then. This time, though, Naomi wasn't there to laugh.

Her knees burn as she treks uphill, and the sky grows darker.

There's no path to follow, but Lucy knows the place. She knows the fallen tree, all rotted and covered in gray fungi, and the dip in the forest floor where wet leaves and slugs are swallowed into the earth, and that patch above where the tree-tops seem to pull away from each other and open up for the sky.

The crime scene is long-tread but quiet now, like abandoned carnival grounds. Ribbons of tattered caution tape flutter from the waists of tree trunks, the color almost faded to white. They float slowly in the fall breeze, like the tendrils of sea anemone on the ocean's floor. The soil is darker, here, freshly turned from where they'd dug through layers upon layers of dirt, searching for a body, for evidence, for a clue that never turned up.

Nothing to find. Nothing but an amalgam filling.

Lucy slumps down against the rotted log, the muscles in her legs sighing in relief. There's work to be done, but she'll get to it in a moment. For now, she needs a moment to rest.

A breeze rustles awake the hair clinging to the back of her neck, cooling the sweat she'd built up on the walk there. Quiet and lonely. It's nice, for a crime scene. No wonder Naomi had come here.

Her muscles continue to ache as she leans over and reaches into her backpack, pawing through half-finished knitting projects, a pamphlet on *Living with Fibromyalgia* folded over three times, and notebooks filled with more doodles of crop circles than schoolwork. At the bottom is her analog camcorder, the one she'd bought for three dollars at Goodwill.

She would've used her phone, but you can't use digital. That's what all the websites said online. The aliens, they said, have ways of tapping into the network and editing anything of them that you've taped, to hide any proof they've been there. Sometimes they can be sloppy, though. Sometimes they leave behind a single frame. A silver little sliver of spaceship they forgot to erase. An amalgam filling from tooth #31.

It's still only 5:30 (three and a half more hours to go, three and a half more hours until the sky opens up and they'll see she was *right*, she was *right* all along), so Lucy rewinds the tape in her camcorder. All she has on here is a project she'd filmed for her English class—blurry, black-and-white clips of the partner she'd been stuck with, stiffly reciting *Hamlet* in her backyard. He'd been the one who wanted it in black-and-white. It was artsier that way, he said. It also hid the fact that the bowler hat he was wearing was a lime-green leftover from St. Patrick's Day.

She plays it halfway through it, and grits her teeth to see the way her hand shook while filming. Had her elbows hurt that day? She can't even remember.

"This is what tripods are for," her dad had said when she finally showed her family the finished product, pointing a finger to the television screen, as if he knew anything about film.

Some directors, she thinks bitterly, make the camera shake on purpose. Like whoever directed *The Blair Witch Project*—but that's probably not the best movie to think about when she's knee deep in the thick of the woods.

Her partner's voice can barely be heard above the wind that whips against the camera's microphone. He was one of those theatre kids, the kind that always tucked his shirt in and called all his acting teachers by their first names. The acting he tried to do might have made for something halfway decent, if he had actually bothered to memorize the lines he was supposed to recite.

*"And he, repelled—a short tale to make—  
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,  
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,  
Thence to a lightness, and, by this—by this—Uh, shit—"*

“*Declension*,” Lucy can hear herself hiss behind the camcorder, and she cringes at how high-pitched her voice sounds on camera. “*Declension*, Shaun. *God—*”

The taping cuts off abruptly, into a soundless pan over the brush in her backyard.

She erases everything, and closes her eyes for just a moment.

The forest is licorice-black when she wakes up again, but bright lights flash behind her eyelids, illuminating red veins, screaming with urgency. Her heart jumps into her throat, throbbing so furiously that she can barely swallow. *This is it. This is it.* Lucy snaps her eyes open and scrambles deliriously, snatching blindly for the camcorder she’d dropped somewhere on the forest floor when she’d fallen asleep.

“Oh my God,” she whispers breathlessly, trying to blink the burned splotches of light out of her vision. *I need to see everything. I need to know. I need to see before they disappear again.* “They’re here. They’re really here. Naomi—”

“Lucy?” The flashlight finally cuts away from her face and angles itself towards the ground. It’s held by a police officer, a gawky man in spectacles and high-water pants. “There you are. Your mother was awful worried about you.”

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The clock in his police car reads 10:14 PM. The radio plays *Eighties on Eight*, and Lucy can’t remember the name of the song, but she can almost see Naomi mouthing the lyrics in the passing trees. The ride seems to take longer than normal, or perhaps shorter—sometimes the passing of time can be hard to tell in the night. Every dark corner is the same until you’ve finally circled home.

“Awful worried. Yep.” He exhales with something that sounds like pity through his nose, lips pursed as he turns the wheel. “Not wise to worry your mother that way. Not with—you know. With all things considered.”

*Not with what happened to your sister. Not with you and your condition. Not with not with not with.* It was at the tip of his tongue before he swallowed it back down, and she hates how much this stranger seems to know about her when a stranger shouldn’t know anything at all.

She keeps her forehead glued against the cold window and closes her eyes. The thump of drums on his radio vibrates at the back of her jaw like a toothache, and all of her fillings feel intact.

When they pull into the driveway, she can see her mother’s silhouette in the window, surrounded by a flock of cartoon turkey decals she’d pasted on for Thanksgiving. Lucy can’t see her face, but she can see her arms wrapped tightly around herself, cardigan pulled tight enough to swath.

“Home sweet home.”

She does not stay to listen to the officer explain to her parents where he’d found her, explain giving her a breathalyzer test with the surprising revelation that a

missing teen he'd found sleeping in the woods hadn't been drunk at all. She storms past them, clutching the blank camcorder in her hand. Nothing to show for it. 10:34 PM, and she'd missed the UFO.

If there'd even been one at all.

There's an anger, now, (or perhaps there always has been), a burning anger that aches deeper than the usual throb in her muscles, but she's too tired, too sore, too hurt to do anything about it but lie down.

The sickness does not sweat out. She swallows it down, and holds it in, and just keeps trying to look up.

Her bed is waiting for her, crumpled linens and an electric heating pad that never seems big enough to soothe every aching muscle. She peels off her jeans, and all the flecks of dead leaves that had stuck to her when she'd fallen asleep on the forest floor shed themselves now, fluttering to her feet and looking very wet and very brown against the beige carpeting. Every joint is stiffer than usual as she gingerly climbs in, throbbing viciously beneath her shivering skin, but it hurts so much that once she hits the mattress, she can't bring herself to get back up and take a pain reliever.

She might have dozed off again for a moment, but she's awake when her bedroom door swings open. Her mother is tight-lipped, and all Lucy can see are the shadows that hollow out her eyes. Brown, like Naomi's. Brown, like she spent too long looking down and got dirt kicked up in them.

"Are you trying to kill us?" she asks quietly.

Lucy just stares back, silent blue eyes peeking out from beneath her blanket.

"Are you trying to kill your father and me? Because that's what's going to happen. You're going to give us a heart attack. You're going to kill us, Lucy."

Her mother walks stiffly into the room and sits down at the edge of Lucy's bed even though she didn't invite her in. She stares down at her hands, small and cracked, unpainted nails chewed to the quick.

"I pay for these doctors. I drive you to your appointments. I do everything for you. But you just want to see me dead."

"I don't want to kill you, Mom." Lucy's voice is small, muffled in her pillow. She is still stiff with pain, still motionless and confined to her bed.

"Then why would you go there?" Her mother's voice never quavers. It just sounds deep, tired, dead and bare as a naked beech tree in January. "Why would you go there, Lucy? After your sister—"

Lucy cranes her neck up, her voice cracking as it gains momentum. "It's been a whole *year*, Mom. And they said—they said online that UFOs come in cycles. And it's been a year, Mom. A year. What do they need her a whole year for? I thought they might bring her back—"

"My god. You're still—" Her mother drags her hand over her face, pulling

sagging skin until Lucy can see the slivers of red under her eyes. “There is no ‘they’. There’s no—*alien conspiracy*. There’s no one that *took her*. The police searched and searched and they found nothing. Your sister ran away. She ran away from us and she’s never coming back.”

“But—”

The door slams before she can say ‘the amalgam filling.’ Her mother’s heard it before, and she doesn’t care. There’s no point in trying to prove something she’ll never believe.

Lucy’s eyes burn, but Naomi was the one who cried. She’d hear her in the other room, sobbing and slamming her head against the wall, and she learned to swallow it down and pretend nothing bothered her while the aches throbbed in her knees. Her eyes burn, but she just buries her face back into her pillow.

Something in her feels numb, numb the way she felt sitting huddled on a bench outside the mall two years back, the cold aching her fingers brittle, so cold and so dark at 6:10 but still another winter without snow. The only Christmas gift she’d managed to buy was a pair of leather gloves for her mother, before the throb in her knees started screaming so loudly she wondered if the people around her could hear it.

She didn’t want them to hear it. She didn’t want strangers to listen.

Naomi was there to pick her up early when she called, window rolled down for her cigarette. Her acorn eyes darted over the parking lot as she waited for Lucy, watching the Christmas shoppers bustle past with bags of gifts.

*First, our oil. Then, our forests and crops. And then, our water.*

She never liked crowds, either.

“Invasion of the fucking Body Snatchers,” is what she’d muttered under her breath, still watching the droves of people shuffling in and out of the mall’s entrance when Lucy swung open the door. Her fingers impatiently *tap tap tapped* against the steering wheel as Lucy clambered into the backseat, red-faced and shivering and clutching her purse so tightly to her side that her knuckles were bone-white.

She’d cast one pitiful look back at Lucy before poking her cigarette between her teeth and turning back to the wheel. “That’s the trouble with growing up, huh? You want to be independent, but the older you get, the more scared you are of being alone.”

And now Naomi was gone somewhere, floating lost and so very alone between the milky-purple rivulets of galaxy, and stars that lived their whole lives and died three times over in one single, human breath.

At 12:09 PM, a single light blinks over the horizon as it does every night, patterned and deliberate, like celestial Morse code. Lucy will never see it, but she knows in her gut that it’s there.

## Tomatoes

The children's screams were enough to drive anyone insane. She put down her cup of coffee with too much force, causing the black liquid to spill and spread across the white granite surface. A sad sigh escaped her mouth and her shoulders slumped down as she stared at the expanding mess. She tore off a paper towel and sopped up the coffee, and then a particularly piercing shriek caused her to jerk her head around at the two girls. She wanted to toss insults and curse words across the room, but the words died behind her lips. She couldn't say such things to them without consequences. Turning back to the spill, she picked up the gray sponge and began scrubbing the counter to make it shine. Twilight descended on the front yard, and the shadows

blanketed everything until it was all hidden in darkness.

"Mommy, when will Daddy be home?" Eliza yelled through her giggles.

"Soon. I don't know."

"When, Mommy?" A screech that shook her skull.

"I said I don't know! Will you two please be quiet? I have a headache."

"But Mommy—"

"Now, please!"

The two girls, aged nine and six, stared at their mother's back as the last of their laughter faded away. Piper picked up her favorite doll, Miss Peppercorn, and squeezed it against her chest. The doll's hair was black, the flesh was ivory, and the clothes were patches of gray. The black, luminous, watchful buttons that served as its eyes followed Piper everywhere she went. She loved the doll dearly. Eliza, the older sister, stared at her feet and ran her fingers through Otto's thick, black fur.

Moments later, Amelia saw headlights turn into the driveway. She spoke without facing the children. "Your father's home. Go upstairs. Mommy needs to talk to Daddy." She poured the last half of her coffee down the sink and washed the cup right away. Josh liked a clean sink. She didn't hear the creaks of the stairs.

"I said go upstairs!" She turned around, waving the sponge in the air. The two girls quickly set off and didn't look back. Otto whined at the loss of the girls' attention.

After straightening everything on the counter, Amelia smoothed her hair and wet her lips. Running her hands down her shirt, her finger plunged into a smear of peanut butter. She gasped in disappointment and tore off another paper towel to wipe it away. Josh came through the door at that moment, but he didn't notice her. Otto had run up to him to get attention.

“Hey babe,” Josh said as he rubbed the dog’s face between his hands.

“How was your day?” she asked, throwing away the crumpled towel.

“Nothing to report. Where are the girls?” He stood at the refrigerator, leaning into it to find a beer.

“I sent them upstairs so –”

“Why would you do that? I like to see them when I get home.” For the first time he faced her, and his face held anger and confusion.

“I just wanted to be the first to say hello to you.” She spoke quietly, stepping towards him with a smile.

“Oh.” His lips twitched and he kissed her lightly on the mouth. “Eliza! Piper!” He called for the girls before he had completely turned away from Amelia.

She closed her eyes and listened to her family laugh and scream and talk in the other room. She gripped her hands at her sides, digging nails into flesh.

“When’s dinner?” Josh called.

“Soon.”

Hours later, Amelia stood naked in the bright, white bathroom. She tow-eled off the water droplets and wrapped her hair on top of her head in a cotton shirt. Josh was putting the girls to bed, and then he would walk Otto one last time for the night. This was the family’s routine every night.

Wrapping a gray towel around herself, Amelia walked from the bathroom to the bedroom. She picked out her pajamas, and also took a moment to glance over her wardrobe. All of this would be left behind, except for one outfit, of course. She pulled down a pair of black skinny jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt, and she draped them across a chair in the corner of the room. These would be comfortable for a long car ride. If Josh asked about them, she would just say that she wanted to pick out her outfit for the next day. He wouldn’t suspect a thing. Looking around for her favorite black flats, she heard the bedroom door groan as it opened. Josh surprised her. He usually went right from the girls’ room to the kitchen.

“Is everything okay?” Amelia asked, clutching the towel to her body.

Josh was only three inches taller than Amelia, but she saw him as a giant. He could easily carry her, and she drank up his masculinity. She enjoyed feeling fragile and small beside him. His pale blue eyes reminded her of icy waters that could easily drown her. His dark brown hair was just long enough to grab onto when she needed it. She had loved every ounce of him, and for so long all she needed was for him to want her. He had let her down.

He walked to Amelia and grabbed her left forearm. “I don’t like what you did tonight.”

“What do you mean?” She tried to pull away from his grip, but he held on tighter.

“You didn’t like dinner?”

“When I come home, I see the girls.”

Amelia was silent. He tightened his grip further, and she knew there would be more bruises.

“Do you hear me? My children come first.”

She nodded.

“Good.” He let go. “Be in bed by the time I get back.” He left the room.

Breathing deeply, she pulled on her bone-colored nightshirt and grabbed a magazine to read. What she didn’t say, what she was honestly too afraid to say, was that she wondered where she placed in his life. Was she just the person who made dinner? He hadn’t even looked at her when he came home. He paid more attention to the dog.

She settled into bed and flipped through the pages of interior design. In a few hours, this would all be behind her. She just needed to wait until he was fast asleep. When he came home, he climbed into bed and turned on the flat screen. He said nothing to Amelia.

When Josh had been snoring for over two hours, she slowly slipped out of bed. After grabbing the bundle of clothes from the chair, she tiptoed to the bathroom. She dressed quickly in the midnight shadows. Her fingers fumbled over buttons, and the sound of the zipper echoed throughout the bathroom. She carefully turned on the cool water and rubbed her face with a wet hand. Noise had to be minimal. She could not wake them. Even though she couldn’t see herself in the mirror, she picked up a comb and ran it through her hair. The bundle of bedclothes laid beside the toilet, and she grabbed them and stuffed them in the closet hamper. She needed as much time as possible.

She opened the door, stepped into the hallway, and paused. Her eyes were wide and her ears were pricked. The only sounds were the soft whirring of the air filter and his snores. The children were soundless.

She crept down the hardwood hallway to the girls’ bedroom. The starry projector lit upon the corners of the room, the toys and clothes on the floor, and the girls’ sleeping faces. A few throw pillows were strewn across the floor. Amelia picked one up and stepped to the side of Piper’s bed. She stared down at the sleeping child, and her eyes found Miss Peppercorn’s shining black buttons.

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She flew down Haven Avenue through the blinking yellow lights. It was normally the busiest road in town, but at the moment it was deserted. People either lived north or south of it, and it was hard to get anywhere without going onto this street.

Everything she needed was in the car. She’d carefully packed it over the last two weeks. The two suitcases remained in her trunk, and she would occasionally bring clothes, toiletries, papers, and other items out to the car. Usually this happened while Josh was at work and the girls were napping. The biggest loss was her phone.

She couldn't possibly bring that with her, but she would miss the games and the apps. In order to get where she was going, she had purchased a simple GPS system last week. Josh thought it was frivolous, but Amelia explained that she needed it to take the girls on a school trip. She was good at lying, and he didn't pay much attention to her.

The full moon sat in the cloudless night sky bearing down at her. Its white light reached out and glinted off of the black 2007 Mazda Josh had bought for her last year. He had said she didn't need a brand new car like he had because it was just going to get dirty from the kids.

She had agreed. She had always agreed. That was her job. That was her duty. That was an unspoken vow she had made at their wedding. Disagreement meant bruises, and sometimes bloody noses. If he had caught her tonight, she wasn't sure what would have happened.

Josh was certainly an angry man, and sometimes that rage manifested into violence. But he was also a dumb, boring man. He liked plain white rice, but he didn't know how to boil water. He was an accountant, but often needed help figuring out a tip. He had been so different in college, long before their wedding. She didn't know what had happened. At some point, he started grabbing her and pushing her around. Still, he didn't inject himself too far into her life. She had a part-time job and a few friends. He didn't pay attention to her expenses. He really only cared about dinner, the dog, and the kids.

After driving for two hours, she'd driven two towns away. It was time for a break. She saw a Starbucks up ahead, but that wouldn't open for another hour or so. Another minute of driving brought a convenience store into view. She pulled into the parking lot and checked her wallet out of habit. The cash was there. Walking into the bright store, she smelled bleach, but she noticed the tiled floor was stained. There were small aisles of snacks and microwavable foods. She walked up and down each one only because she wanted to stretch her legs. The pale, skinny man behind the counter was playing some game on his phone that made lots of shooting sounds. He looked like someone who didn't see the sun often.

Amelia grabbed a bag of mixed nuts and slowly made her way over to the coffee machines. They had regular, decaf, and hot water for tea. She had never understood the point of decaf coffee. She thought of how Josh liked to drink a decaf cappuccino after dinner every night as she poured herself a large cup of regular. She left it black and unsweetened.

As she approached the counter, the man looked up and his phone stopped making noise. She suddenly realized something important.

"Can I use your restroom?"

In response, he reached over to his left and picked up a key. Amelia took it and looked around until she saw the door in the back corner of the store.

“Is it alright if I leave this here?” she asked, setting down her coffee and nuts.

He nodded and returned to his game.

The bathroom was almost as small as an outhouse, but it didn't smell so bad. It also looked clean enough. She tried not to sit on the seat.

The man didn't say anything as he rang her out except, “\$5.54.” Amelia paid in cash, thanked him, and left.

As she drove through the night, she turned on a talk radio station and let the useless chatter distract her. She was tired, but she was determined to drive until she met Rosa. Rosa was waiting just inside of Arkansas with a white 2003 Toyota Avalon. Amelia was going to hand over \$2,500 and then ditch the Mazda. She wasn't going to let Josh find her.

She drove, her blinks lasting longer and longer. Men discussed the problems in women's health care on the radio. Draining the coffee, she realized she had to use a bathroom again. She wanted to go at least two more hours without stopping, but she couldn't. At 5:28, she switched off the radio and pulled into a nice-looking Starbucks. They were open this time.

She parked and walked around to the trunk. The laptop she bought three weeks ago and had only turned on once in order to set up everything was in the smaller of the two suitcases. She pulled it out. It was completely charged and wrapped in a soft blue sleeve.

Amelia had been able to buy everything for the trip with cash. She'd been storing it up for months. Each time she went to the store, she took some out of their bank account. Josh never noticed, and he was still giving her the allowance. It was supposed to be for her spending needs' and the kids, but she'd been frugal lately. The kids didn't need much.

Inside Starbucks, the lighting was a bit harsh, but the music was calming. She ordered a large latte and sat by a window. There was nothing she needed to do. She just wanted to review her plans. It would take three days to get to the Mexican border. In another few hours, she'd meet with Rosa to buy the Toyota. Josh would be awake by then.

She wondered what he would do when he woke up. Would he look over at her side of the bed? Would he notice that her car was gone? How long would it take him to call her cell phone, which she threw out the window while driving down the highway?

She smiled at her laptop screen. She wished she could be there to watch it unfold. He had certainly put her through enough. The last few years had been the saddest of her life. There were no words to describe them. Having a second child was a bed decision, but it's not like Josh had given her a choice. And as soon as the children were in the picture, she was pushed out. He didn't care about her anymore. Their love was dead.

She often felt that she didn't matter to anyone she knew. If she were pathetic, which she knew she wasn't, she might have been on the cusp of suicide. No one she knew paid much attention to her, or asked her about her needs, or even asked how her day had been. It's not like she was the sort of person to call attention to herself, or to start rambling about her life to anyone who would listen. Every human being needed someone to look at them from time to time. No one looked at Amelia.

She had made these decisions one year ago, and everything slowly fell into place. It was somewhat difficult because she was wary of writing down her thoughts, ideas, and plans. But then she realized she could keep track of them on her computer in the home office. Josh never looked there. Of course, she deleted everything three days before leaving.

Once, she had thought her wedding day was the best day of her life. Ever since she'd given birth for the first time, she'd regretted marrying Josh. Some nights she wished so hard, and even prayed to God, to go back in time. Nothing ever came of that. Only her own actions would save her.

The sun slowly peaked over the horizon, stretching out its rays to caress the black car. Amelia drove down the three-lane highway, and she stayed in the middle lane. She didn't want to speed since she was wary of being pulled over. More cars were out on the road now, and occasionally she was passed by someone in a great hurry.

She remembered how Josh hated driving on the highway. He would let Amelia do it because he felt safe with her.

Amelia shook her head. She didn't want to think fondly of him. After all this time, all this planning, she'd finally managed to make her escape. She couldn't let her mind wander to such things. She turned on the radio and listened to Maroon 5 try to seduce her.

When her stomach started to really grumble, she realized she probably hadn't eaten anything in almost eleven hours. A small rest stop was coming up, so she decided to stop there. It didn't have much besides damp sandwiches and weak coffee, but she would take what she could get.

As she browsed the selection of egg, bacon, and sausage on various rolls, a man's voice made her jump.

"What brings a pretty thing like yourself in here?" The voice was deep and unsettling.

She turned completely around with a look of shock. "Excuse me?"

"I said I'd like to know what you're doing here."

Staring at him for a few seconds, she took in his watery eyes and bad breath. Then she gestured toward the display. "Well, I'm looking for a bite to eat."

“I could take you someplace nice. My truck is outside.”

She paused and almost laughed. “No, thank you. I’m married.” She held up her hand.

The man grunted and rubbed a hand along his stubble. “Where’s your husband then?”

“He’s –” She realized she didn’t know what to say. The truth wouldn’t work. “He’s waiting in the car, so if you don’t mind…” Slowly, she turned back to the display.

“Uh-huh.” The man stood there for another moment, but Amelia refused to look at him. She felt her body trembling and didn’t know what to say to make him go away. Then finally, he walked off with a low chuckle. Amelia grabbed a sausage, egg, and cheese sandwich, and then heard the tinkle of the bell on the door.

Turning around with the warm roll in her hand, she scanned the store and didn’t see any other customers. The clerk was filling up the coffee dispensers.

Amelia hurried over to the coffee and filled up a large cup with a dark roast. She smiled at the young Pakistani woman. Then she decided to take a turn around the store to stretch her legs. She realized this would probably become her routine – stop for food, get a coffee, walk around the entire shop. Many of the shelves had a thick layer of dust, and when she checked a bag of candy’s expiration date, it told her the candy had gone bad a month ago. This led her to check the sandwich in her hand. There was no date.

“Excuse me,” she said as she approached the clerk. “I was just wondering when these sandwiches were made?”

“They came in about an hour ago. We heat them and put them on display.”

“Oh, okay, great.” Amelia smiled and walked to the register. The clerk followed.

“There are picnic tables outside if you’d like to sit and eat before driving again. Most people need a break, you know?” The clerk spoke quickly as she punched numbers into the machine.

“Thank you, I think I will do that.”

“Enjoy.”

As Amelia sat and stared at the sandwich, she found herself wishing for the Saturday breakfast Eliza had made with Josh’s help last week. It hadn’t been wonderfully delicious. In fact, it had been quite terrible.

With a sudden flash, the memory she’d been trying to keep away hurled itself through her mind. She sat there frozen, mouth hanging open. She still didn’t know how she could have done that. The pillow was just on the floor, and then in her hand, and then she was standing over their beds in the dark.

Pushing the thoughts away, she looked back down at the misshapen sandwich and took a large bite. Risks like these were the whole point of this adventure. She chewed the mushy bread and watched the cars driving west.

Back in the car, she glanced at the odometer. Already, she had covered nearly 250 miles and was approaching the border between Tennessee and Arkansas. Crossing that border was going to be a big step in this endeavor. She was born in Tennessee. She went to college in Tennessee. She even had her honeymoon in Tennessee. With luck, she'd never see this place again.

Seeing that blue and white sign sent a thrill through her body. A grin broke apart her solemn face. "Welcome to Arkansas, The Natural State, Buckle Up For Safety." The moment was over too soon. Rosa was waiting. It was after 9:00, and they had agreed to meet at 9:00 sharp. Amelia had no way of contacting her, so she had to hurry.

Taking the exit in Osceola, an extremely small town, Amelia remembered that Rosa had said in her email that she'd be waiting on the side of the road right off the exit. Her heart raced as she traveled down the ramp, and she realized she didn't know whether to go left or right. When she stopped and looked around, she saw the Toyota parked next to a white Honda on the right. Two people were standing near the cars.

Amelia had to drive past them and make a U-turn in order to park on their side of the road. The man and the woman, hopefully Rosa, stared at her. Amelia gathered up her purse and keys. She took a second to think about the suitcases, but then decided she could move them afterwards.

"Hello there." The man said. He spoke with a bit of a twang.

Amelia smiled at the pair, then made eye contact with the woman. "Hi! I'm Amelia. Are you Rosa?"

"Yes, ma'am, and this is my husband, Jonny." Rosa also had an accent, though it was subtler than Jonny's. She had long, pin-straight, black hair, and her flawless olive skin didn't go unnoticed by Amelia, who realized at that moment that she'd forgotten her wrinkle cream. She meant to use it last night and then pop it in her purse, but instead it was sitting on the bathroom counter.

The man, who was tall and angular, had very pale skin, but his cheeks were flushed from the heat. His crew cut and blonde hair gave the impression that he was bald. He smiled back at Amelia.

"Great, well, I'd love if we can make this quick. I have an envelope here for you." Amelia reached into her purse.

"That's great. That's just great." Rosa took a set of keys out of her pocket.

"Well, now, what are you gonna do with that car?" Jonny nodded toward the Mazda.

"Oh, um," Amelia glanced back at the car. She had planned on leaving it behind after Rosa left.

Jonny seemed to read her mind. "Are you just gonna leave it here?"

"Jonny, it's not our business."

“Well, it’s a nice car, ain’t it? What if we take it off your hands?”

Amelia widened her eyes. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

He screwed up his face in a visible sign of thought. “Why not?”

“Jonny…” Rosa said quietly.

“Hey, I’m just wondering.”

“I just don’t want to get you two involved,” Amelia paused. “You’d be asking for trouble.”

“Yeah, Jonny, I’ll tell you about it in the car.”

“Okay, then.” He shrugged and walked back to the Honda.

The women watched him for a moment. Then Amelia looked back at Rosa. “I really appreciate this.”

“Hey, it’s a fair deal. Just take care of yourself, and be grateful you never had kids with him.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Good luck to you.”

They exchanged money and keys. Amelia watched them drive off, then hurriedly moved the suitcases. She stuck the keys of the Mazda back in its ignition, then stopped to stare at her left hand. They had chosen platinum bands, and her engagement ring was worth nearly \$12,000. She stared and twisted the rings around her finger. She only ever took them off when she showered, or when she baked something messy. Looking up, she saw her face in the rearview mirror. She realized what she was doing.

She pulled the rings off and threw them on the floor of the passenger’s side. She slowly got out of the car, slammed the door, and got settled in the Toyota. It was a comfortable car, and it would take her to Mexico.

The truth was, she felt a bit bad about lying to Rosa. The woman seemed kind enough. Amelia just didn’t know any other way to get what she needed, which was a decent car at a cheaper price with no questions asked when she produced cash. She couldn’t leave a trail, so going to a dealer was out of the question.

After just another half hour of driving, Amelia saw signs for a farmer’s market. Something in her felt intrigued, so she decided to go and check it out. The girls had always liked farmer’s markets. Amelia liked them, too. They felt very old-world to her, and Josh was always happy when she brought home fresh fruit and vegetables and flowers.

She followed the signs and discovered the market was enormous. It was already later in the morning, so of course it was ridiculously crowded. She decided to park as close as she could get, which was almost half a mile away, and roam through the stalls.

Gentle music was coming from somewhere, and one of the first stalls she

came across was selling honey. She tasted it and smiled. Josh loved to have honey on pancakes, and those were the times he tasted the sweetest. She bought a bottle. Next, she came upon a fresh flower stall, and a bundle of bright peonies struck her. The smell reminded her of hair. Soft, thin, light brown hair. She bought these, too.

As she walked, looking at the stalls of strawberries, cakes, peaches, jams, yellow squash, apricots, and pies, each stall reminded her of her family. There was the time Piper tried beets for the first time and spit them all over the table. There was the time Josh's mother showed her how to make the perfect peach pie. There was the time the girls dragged their mother through a market similar to this one and made her buy something from almost every stall.

Tears began to well up in Amelia's eyes, and she questioned her decision. Was Mexico worth it? Had she made the right choices, done the right deeds? Then, the tomatoes made her stop and stare. The stall was practically overflowing in flaming, bigger-than-baseballs, ripe tomatoes. She walked over and picked one up, and she thought of Josh. It was bigger than her palm. He loved a tomato and cheese sandwich.

Staring at the tomato in her hand, she could see the bruises on her arm out of the corner of her eye. She began to tremble.

"Are you alright, miss?" The tomato vendor had noticed her.

She glanced up and placed the tomato down. "I'm completely fine."

As she walked back to her car, she came across a large, full-to-bursting garbage bin. She tossed the honey and peonies on top.

## Reaper of the Birds

Death, for me, has always carried with it the absolute worst timing. For instance, my beloved hamster, Winston, abruptly stopped racing around his wheel one afternoon the day before my sixth birthday, leading my parents to sit me down for the “life isn’t eternal” talk on the eve of a fluffy pink pool party. When my great-grandfather finally kicked the bucket as I turned twelve, the school nurse took me out of my U.S. History class to awkwardly explain that your grandpa wouldn’t be coming to Thanksgiving dinner anymore... My concerns revolved around the assessment exam I was missing while I stood staring at the carpeted hallway floor, struggling to keep the last-minute memorization of state capitals shoved between both ears. Once I was allowed to return to my seat under the reproachful eyes of my peers, my mind had been wiped of anything at all related to such information, with thoughts of Granddad dressed as a plump turkey at his interment to fill the vacant crevices.

I was recalled to that bitter birthday and blank sheet of test questions in a funeral home years later as I wrung my hands red with frustration, staring down at coffin catalogs. I’d been forced into this selection of an eternal underground abode, indoors on a spring day, because of my sister’s suicide. She up and quit this life by slashing her wrists in an overfilled bathtub, going out like a miserable employee might by making the most melodramatic mess possible; even from the grave, she had managed to send a final middle finger flying my way, knowing my inherited debts, hectic schedule, and inescapable responsibility as the family’s janitor to mop up this latest fatality.

Fucking Clare.

It’s ironic, really: we were both named for light – hers meaning “bright” in French, my Aurora a direct nod to the aurora borealis – but it had never really applied to either one of us, especially her. Just a year apart in age, we were eons apart in every other aspect. My younger sister was terribly quiet, pensive, and artsy, while I spent my time competing in whatever I could get my hands on – spelling bee championships, soccer games, debate tournaments. Growing up, we had bedrooms across the hall from each other, but we might as well have been Craigslist roommates, the kind who intentionally avoid each other in the public areas of the house.

Our mother always told the story of how we used to squabble as babies, how sharing a play space or toy would morph into a wrestling match of chubby legs and faces mutated by infantile anger. I’d slap Clare’s hands away from me, a toddler from hell, before pulling her hair when she wasn’t looking. She took the bullying in

stride, refusing to make a peep whenever I pinched the back of her scrawny bicep in elementary school. We were stupid kids, but she was the good sport.

The sadness my parents felt at seeing their two daughters never get along was a closeted sadness; they had timed our births so that we could be the best of friends. Well, look how that turned out. I didn't really know of their disappointment until seventh grade, when they took us to family therapy in an effort to understand the strangeness of our situation. The Freudian quack with the prop glasses and poorly assembled necktie just bit his pen in silence, trying to piece together an explanation while his displayed doctorate degrees practically sweated under the pressure.

After barely sharing a kind word throughout eighteen years of sisterhood under the same roof, Clare and I were like opposing Martians to one another, content in breathing the same air but fostering an understood distance all the while. It had begun in the crib and grew into an immovable wedge, two opposites who were shoved apart even further after puberty, the hormones only adding fuel to the perpetual fire. Come college time, she flew off to an expensive arts school for sculpting, happy to get away, and I stayed put to earn my law degree at Stanford, a milestone I had conquered just in time for the most major loss of all.

Death really doesn't take life's schedule into account, as I've said; Winston and Granddad's passings were substantial in their own ways, but it was my parents' deaths, in a massive freeway collision that also claimed the lives of four others, that truly did me in. To say that this accident shook me doesn't suffice: it destroyed me, and left me with nothing in the way of financial support as I broke into the legal field headfirst. My pill addiction was just itching under the surface then, another demon that would shove itself into my struggle of an existence over the next isolated years.

The worst part of it all? My sister. She was busy making art out in New York, and when I called her, sobs absorbing unintelligibly into my words, to deliver the news of our being parentless, she hissed, "This is your fault," before hanging up on me. Her reaction to the words "Mom and Dad died" was to shut me out, retreat into a haze, and lose herself, never to speak to me again. Was I supposed to be liable in the mess, being the only one of us still near enough to home to visit every Sunday? I turned into her scapegoat for their loss, and it was only fair of me to do the same to her.

Without our parents around as the buffer, Clare and I were at odds more than ever before, the years of conflict between us acting as a warm-up. Geography numbed the sting of rejected sisterhood. She became a ghost, just like our parents. We both might as well have died with them that night.

The memories still made me tremble with an awful mixture of heartbreak and rage, a vile cocktail. My bare legs shuddered with the cold of the funeral home, and my exorbitantly high-priced heels suddenly screeched against the marble floor, alerting the director from his half-asleep post beside me on a plastic-covered couch.

His face was nearly as gaunt as mine, and while he had the excuse of old age and a gloomy career, I only had the crutch of “adult orphan” to cling to, although I could then add “without any siblings” to that elegant title. “So the birch option is within your budget, but anything from there onward is probably out of range,” he murmured.

I had forgotten his name and had tired of the conversation mere minutes in, so I simply nodded. “That one then.” I paused before going on, “Do these things lock once they’re closed?”

Bulging eyes widened further as he responded with a startled cough, and I swear dust puffed from his cracked lips. All I wanted was assurance that Clare wouldn’t climb back from the dirt once buried. I utilized this second to grab a peek of myself in the ornate mirror hanging on the opposing wall, where a ghoul greeted me.

I was a measly month sober, quite aware of the tragic opportunity provided for me to relapse if I chose to. My hair, formerly auburn, looked gray under the flickering bulbs above, and my eyes were as dead as Clare herself. While organizing a wake, I had zero time to “fix myself” outside of the clinic I had left just days before, burdened instead by the obligatory happenings of funeral prep. Of course, Clare likely planned her dramatic exit around the very fact of my recovery, psychically cognizant of, along with everything else, my recent departure from rehab. At least she didn’t choose to go by oxy – my widely known preference – which was a slight courtesy.

“We will, uh, make sure your sister is comfortable, Miss Renshaw, if that is your concern,” the director sputtered once he regained some composure. I stared evenly back at him. “Sure. Yes, that’s the concern.” My Coach tote, heavier than ever thanks to a growing pile of case files, made my gait crooked once I stood, impatient to leave. “If that’s all...?” I hung about until the director produced a clipboard with several pages of paperwork for me to sign. It was only when I handed it back to him, pricey check attached, that he said, “I am very sorry for your loss.”

“Aren’t we all.”

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Clare had recently moved back to northern California, to Oakland, after bumming around who-knows-where for the last ten years, so we were just forty-five minutes away from each other for the first time in a decade. She sent me a postcard from San Francisco. Nothing was written on the backside except From Clare, her handwriting like a time capsule carrying with it my long-silent sibling. Maybe her relocation, back to where our parents died, was too much for her to handle.

Our years-long stretch without communication had felt like a solid isolation already, but knowing that she was no longer walking around, potentially sculpting things, altered me. There’s a distinct coldness to being the last remaining member of a family, a curse typically reserved for a grandparent or childless widow, but my case somehow necessitated this loneliness at 31.

The morning of Clare's funeral found me squirming into a constricting black knee-length while intercepting calls from Phillip G. Emerson, Divorce Attorney, and my business partner. Emerson-Renshaw was a firm still in its infancy, and it had suffered when I took the personal time to kick my drug habit over the past several weeks.

I shouldn't have stopped by the firm before driving to the service, but I did, the window of mourning be damned. Some employees halted and stared when they saw me saunter in, dressed for death. Emerson was on the phone in his office but he dropped it flat onto the receiver when I walked through his open door, jaw dropping for only half a second in surprise.

"Jesus, Aurora." He spared me a "hello," knowing the circumstances. "I mean, shit, I was sorry about your sister, really... I didn't know you had a sister, to be honest." Sadly, he was the first one I called when I got the news. I wasn't sure who else to turn to, and I had felt the need to at least express it to someone, anyone. Emerson was my first speed dial so he won the draw.

"Sweet of you, Phil, but I need another favor. I'm headed to the memorial now and I wanted to come in personally to tell you I'll be out for a few more days." His jaw visibly tightened at this; I could see his stress level rising hot behind his eyes, like a cartoon villain's. "I'm sure you understand, given the situation," I added. As I said this, I felt a heavy gloom settle around me, an unwelcome blanket. Emerson fought to earn back some professionalism, his guilt evident. The multiplying lines in his forehead paralleled my own, making us sort of unintended twins of burden. Maybe I had a sibling after all. But squinting into his dull face, I felt nothing. He cleared his throat.

"Absolutely, yes. Sorry. Just... I need you back here soon. But take your time."

I let him work out this personal quandary alone once I had gotten confirmation. With a sigh that shocked me with its authenticity, I left the firm, destined for the dreariness of yet another wake.

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It was on the outside of my car, the same compact I had cared for since junior year of high school, that I saw my dark reflection, dress zipped, hair done; I was reminded vaguely of something Clare told me once in front of Fairview Elementary. We were waiting for the bus home when she said it, and it had stuck with me like a wayward splinter ever since: "The pack name for crows is 'murder.' So when you see many of them together, it's called a murder of crows."

Her words, unsolicited, had summoned a beaked grim reaper to my mind, wielding a scythe that mirrored its aquiline face. A hood would shield the eyes from view, but in my imagination, I pictured its button-sized gaze boring holes into its many victims, merciless.

"The reaper of the birds," I muttered back to her then as one of the black rats floated down to land right in front of our sneakered feet, a real reference to the

conversation.

That feathered visit had caused me to recoil, unmoored by the coincidence, but Clare just watched him, kneeling down to offer him a bite of her granola bar. The crow flinched at first then took two slow steps forward before greedily snatching the bar from my sister's fingers and taking off for the sky. Her affinity for birds was one of the few features of this sibling that still hung firmly to my memory. She called them "angels" when we were young, only growing out of the misnomer when other kids made fun of her. If a flock of geese flew overhead, she'd stop mid-walk, staring so far upward you'd think her head would roll right off of her straining neck.

This reminiscence followed me all the way to St. Martin's Church, the Catholic default for Clare's service. That otherworldly girl who was always looking up was now laid flat in a cheap wooden box, adorned with the few bouquets I could afford to beautify it. The peculiarity of this proximity to her lifeless body sent a shiver up my bare arms. As some relatives and acquaintances trickled in, finding their spots in the painfully empty pews, I greeted them, shaking too many hands with too many strangers. A woman I recognized as our great aunt squeezed my wrist as we shook.

"Golly, sweetheart, what a tragedy," she sniveled, a hanky shoving at her nose.

"Indeed," I replied, as socially inept among family as ever. She lingered before toddling off with her stoic husband in tow.

Some far-removed cousin stepped up to hug me, and I stiffened compulsorily at her gesture.

"You poor thing," she whispered with stomach-turning sorrow, breath hot against my ear. It took everything I had left not to wring myself from her grasp.

When it came time to finally address this handful of people, the few I knew to actually contact about Clare's death and the impending funeral, I had to follow the priest's opening remarks with the eulogy. This was the part I dreaded.

Walking up to the podium, I spotted my mom's acquaintances from the country club, still honoring their friendship after all this time.

There was our neighbor from the old house, a senile gentleman who used to sip beers with my dad on the front lawn while I rode my bike on summer days; Clare would simply draw in the grass, laying at their feet like a puppy.

Some of her friends from high school, married with families of their own, accepted the invitation to attend, sitting silently near each other. Stray cousins who were accustomed to picking sides – Aurora or Clare – while growing up made sure to come, eyes watering.

My fingers crunched around a few jotted notes on a bar napkin from my purse. I was taken back to my parents' memorial, where I was also the only adequate person to eulogize their deaths, having been abandoned by my sister in maddened grief. I had been crying too hard then to really get any words out, but here I was striding up to talk about Clare without any distress

ing up to talk about Clare without any distress.

But it was only once I stopped before them all, squeezing the napkin and its contents of what little I knew of Clare's professional life as an artist via Google, that the breath was torn from my lungs. My heart felt like it was trying to dig through my skin and out of my chest, the friction of this getaway attempt sparking into internalized flames that made me wince. Some people stirred below me, tears ready, and I was able to swallow the gravel building in my throat to stifle the inferno brewing within me, glancing up at the pews. Then I began, notes falling from my hand.

"I remember," I started, my lip quivering involuntarily, "in May of 1995, when Clare was about to turn nine, our dad thought up this birthday present for her..."

And I was there again, the both of us flying free in the backseat of the Chevy Blazer we grew up with, inhaling the whipping wind that fed itself through the sunroof on the journey to Dad's big surprise. I had looked over at my sister, seeing her unreserved excitement at what was to come. A Nirvana song was on the radio; Kurt had just met his release through the barrel of a shotgun the year before, so my dad was droning on to us as he drove about the delicacy of being, urging us to follow our dreams and keep a positive outlook on life and its offerings.

Clare wasn't listening, just nodding along absentmindedly to his words. Her hand made waves on the airstream out her window, tiny but bold against the cutting air.

"He took us to Birds Landing," I explained to this gathering of mourners, inadvertently glancing at the birch casket to my left, almost expecting her to react. "Neither of us had known what this town was, so when we noticed the highway sign, Clare jumped up and asked, in that pipsqueak voice of hers, 'What's in Birds Landing?'"

A few friends chuckled sadly at my impression of childhood Clare, and the effort it took to evoke her sound jolted me. "I saw my father look at us in the rearview mirror with that huge grin on his face, and when we arrived at this hole-in-the-wall falconry academy, he actually had to unbuckle Clare from her seat since she got so worked up that she couldn't manage it herself."

I managed to laugh a bit at that image, revealed in my mind's eye just for her eulogy. The intricacies of this day were rolling back, a tide that left me feeling cold.

"It took all of twelve minutes for my sister to get her mitts on a real falcon." I grinned, despite myself. "The monitor was this beefy guy, and he quickly showed her how to keep her arm steady..." I held up my own arm, imitating the memory with ease; I was withdrawn once more to the past, the present vanishing into the recollection of Birds Landing. My sister was entirely changed, a different person to me then. She was suddenly this dynamic creature, her enthusiasm propelling the birthday present forward into what would become the catalyst of that

of that eulogy, as unexpected as Clare that day.

“She learned how to earn the falcon’s trust little by little while supporting it... And she was beyond beaming, just thrilled. It was almost comical, seeing this nine-year-old blonde misfit holding a mid-size falcon, so elated about it. So happy. And... it was really beautiful, too.”

I had to pause for breath, it being stolen from me once more with the effort to remember, and renew. “This was how I pictured my sister from then on,” I told my fellow funeral-goers proudly, voice dropping as I went on, “even though she never smiled like that again.” I stopped, continuing, “Age nine was her peak.”

There was a depressed murmur from the pews. I saw her like this too late, commemorating her death – saw her like she was as she held the falcon, grinning so wide I thought her face might split in two, and I felt her joy in front of the entire procession, like an aura radiating outward, sliding a warm arm around everyone in the room. It was silent except for the sniffing.

My eyes closed, thanking my brain for the courage, the memory. It was overwhelming, that tide, rushing to comfort me in the broken places, its healing balm tingling. I may have been alone, but I still had this. I still had the past, in its flawed glory. I still had to go on, despite the regret.

“It was contagious,” I said, “that delight of hers, in that instant, and I want us to always think of her that way.” Clare, the Nine-Year-Old Falconer, was her best and brightest moment, the sole time she embodied her name, and I embodied mine, the closest I had ever felt to her.

But I frowned at the podium, picturing her slipping lower and lower into bathwater at death, wrists gushing. Instead, I closed my eyes, imagined Clare atop a skyscraper, or perhaps the tallest point in Birds Landing, whatever that may be. Arms rising from her sides, embracing the breeze that whispered to her fly, she’d jump, wings soaring, body gliding as if gravity had no say, freeing the both of us. The tears finally fell as I turned to the casket beside me. That is the way you would go, I thought: brilliant, burning, like a phoenix in flight. This is the way that the young falconer should have perished in the end, if it had to be by her own hand. And I almost smiled, just at the thought.

## To Be Gone

There's this dirt parking lot by a lake in my hometown we always used to go, and no matter how cold it got we'd put the seats in my Pathfinder all the way down and look at the stars through the windshield. Even under my winter jacket, his familiar warmth in the seat next to me was enticing.

"You think there's a heaven behind those stars?" I remember asking him one night, a year before he died.

"If there is, I'm not going to it." When he said it, he laughed to himself. I guess he didn't know better.

I don't remember exactly when I stopped believing in God, but I could never shake that question from my head. When I came out to my mom, she said I'd never make it to heaven and that I broke her heart. I guess if he's not getting into heaven, there's a special spot in hell for people like me. Sometimes I forgot that I didn't believe in all that.

After graduation, his problem became more apparent to me. I even watched him shoot up one time, and I had to pretend like I didn't see the purple spots on his arms when he would hug me. I guess after a little while he figured out not to do it around me. Sometimes he wouldn't come home for days and days. When he did, the bags under his eyes made him look like a panda. He became shaky real quick, even when he wasn't doing it. And he smelled different then. I was scared but I would hold him anyway. I knew he was fighting some demons within him that had been there long before I was.

When his mom called me to tell me he died, I was smoking a joint in my car behind our apartment building. "Just fell asleep and didn't wake up," she'd said, but that wasn't it at all. His sister told me he choked on his vomit after getting high and falling asleep. I spent that night trying to pull every inch of his scent out of what was once our bed.

My mom didn't go to his funeral or say she was sorry. I went by myself. It felt strange without him next to me, and the January air was sharp in my lungs. They all looked at me strange, except his sister. Before that moment, I never thought it was my fault. The grief was almost unbearable.

I wanted to imagine him in heaven or some place, but I knew I was lying to myself. Even if it was real, he wasn't getting in and neither was I. He's just gone. He's in a box beneath the dirt in the graveyard by the Amtrak station.

After I left the funeral it was dark out. I just drove and found myself at that dirt parking lot by the lake, and the stars reflected themselves in the black water. Their freezing coat wrapped itself around my lungs, and I put myself to sleep with a cocktail of lake water and stardust and grief.

## Flat Line

“Damn it. He’s coding,” I yelled. My patient deteriorated quickly. One second I was hand deep in his abdomen, skillfully in the moment, working to repair a lacerated spleen like it was nothing, and the next, I was covered in the child’s blood, wearing it like the battle wound I couldn’t forget. Hemorrhaging... uncontrollable bleeding pouring out of the open cavity. He was bleeding out, and all I could think about was my daughter. All I saw on that table was her bleeding out just like him. But I couldn’t see her. I had to see Evan, just Evan. I had to stay there in that room with my patient, not back on the road with Kate. I couldn’t go there again.

We thought he was stable, the bleeding caught and handled, but it wasn’t enough. It was never enough... Not for me. The surgery should have been routine, but there was bleeding beyond what the scans showed, and not even my years of experience were enough to diminish the internal rush of adrenaline and nerves. I needed another Xanax. Life was slipping through my hands, and there wasn’t anything I could do to stop it. We worked seamlessly to get the bleeding stabilized, jumping over every hurdle, pushing the necessary drugs, clamping and cauterizing, replenishing his blood supply... The bleeding tapered, but still no life.

“Charge to 300,” I shouted as I made a desperate attempt to save him, preparing to place the paddles on his chest. “Clear.” It wouldn’t do anything, but I had to try.

After the jolt, we watched the monitors, looking and praying, for any sign of life. But it wouldn’t come; logically, I knew that. There was no beep, no beat of a heart, no rise and fall of the gloomy landscape, just the continuous monotone hum of the green, flat line.

The scrub nurse looked for the time making me feel like the ticking clock was humming the Jeopardy song, counting down to the final answer. Would I get it right? “It’s been twenty minutes Dr. Jennings.” Twenty minutes and no change. “Still in asystole. No rhythm.”

“Charge again.” The whole room stilled, and it felt like all eyes were on me, staring at the killer that just hacked up her victim in front of them. The odds weren’t in the kid’s favor. Even if, by some miracle, we got him back, the lack of oxygen to the brain was sure to leave permanent cell death, but I couldn’t give up. My vision blurred with tears, I shook my head to get a clear read on the situation. There was a boy on my table. It wasn’t Kate. “Charge again,” I stated, more determined than ever to save this patient. It didn’t matter if it was Kate or not; I had to fight for each child as if he or she was my own blood. I couldn’t save her, but I could try to save them.

Hesitantly, the team reacted, getting the machine ready for the continuing code, but it was no use. They only did it for me, sympathy for the pitiable doctor. They must have sensed my inability to stop and called in the one person at the hospital I would listen to. Dr. James Knight, he was the first and only friend I made when I came to this hospital. He became my confidant and guardian, even when I didn't want him to be. I heard there was an office pool betting when we'd figure things out and get together. I was too afraid to ever open that door, not because he wasn't attractive, or that I wasn't attracted, but because I couldn't lose anymore, no one else.

"Dr. Jennings... Annie, you have to call it," James said, his ungloved hand breaking the sterile field, clasping my shoulder.

I shook my head.

"You did all you could. You have to call it," he encouraged.

It had to be me. It was a test that I had to pass, but it took some coaxing. He knew me, knew what I went through and went through it with me, but he also knew when enough was enough. He still had his objectivity while I was subject to my tragedy. Over an hour and nothing. No one was helping, and I couldn't do it on my own. They indulged my desperation enough and called in the big dog to put an end to it. What choice did I have?

"Fine." I silently apologized to the body. "Time of death, 11:49." The overhead lights felt like spotlights on my failure, the sudden heat becoming too much.

Defeated, I rushed out of the room trying to be inconspicuous, trying to keep James from following. I didn't need more of my issues to be fodder for hospital gossip, and I could feel the tell-tale tightening in my chest. My heart raced, blood echoed in my ears, the pounding in my head increasing as the world felt too small for the grief I carried. Locking myself in the on call room, I fell to the ground, knees buckling under the weight of it all.

My breathing turned into shallow pants, as I kept seeing visuals of the little body, a petite blonde girl laying on the pavement, the foreign sounds of my own voice pleading with her to live, to stay with mommy. "Please baby, please..." It felt like a stab to the chest, like I was lying open on my own table without anesthesia, stripped and bare for anyone to see, awake to feel the scalpel slicing at my heart. I actually preferred that scenario. At least that came with a chance of recovery.

Every day was like living with an open wound in desperate need of repair, one my gifted hands couldn't mend. I could barely wake up in the morning, couldn't sleep at night, and I was popping anxiety meds like they were Altoids and I had halitosis. I couldn't do it anymore. Something had to change. The hospital would be the death of me if I let it. With every new patient, even the ones that lived, I saw Kate on that table, bleeding out, flat lining. And, though it tormented me, I wasn't sure how to let it go. Horrible as it was, it was my last memory of Kate alive. The very OR I was in that night, was also home to my last memory of Kate, dead.

There I was, two years later, reliving the worst night of my life, and I had to go tell two parents that their kid was gone so they could face the same nightmare. Pushing away the memories and popping open the child-proof cap, I spilled a few tablets into my palm and sucked them back dry. My head needed to be clear, but I needed to feel numb in order to get through this. No matter how many kids I saved, they never made the losses hurt any less. This was always the hardest part of my job, and I couldn't handle it anymore.

"Look, it's the doctor." They were hopeful, and I was about to crush every dream they had for their future. I had to wonder if they'd have the same thoughts I did, thoughts about never doing all they planned. For me, it was knowing I'd never get to show Kate the world, the great big world full of possibilities and dreams. I wanted to take her to all the places I never got to see, to teach her culture and tolerance, to expose her to art and music... We barely had a chance to break the surface. I only just had her rocking out to some of the greatest bands of all time. I never got to take her to her first concert. Never got to do any of the things I promised to do when she was old enough. Old enough was never coming.

"Mr. and Mrs. Peterson," I greeted with a calm exterior, my heart racing as I escorted them to the chairs. They would want to sit for this.

"How's Evan? Is he ok?"

"I'm sorry. We did everything we could..."

Mrs. Peterson let out a harrowing sob, Mr. Peterson stunned into paralysis. Before I heard them myself, those words, "I'm sorry, we tried," felt like the most comforting thing doctors could say. It was how we were trained to handle it, to comfort, but they were just empty syllables. We might as well just tell parents we murdered their kids. It didn't matter anyway, once they heard the bad, they stopped listening.

Once the tears became silent, they made it clear didn't blame me, and I wanted them too. I felt like it was my fault, so why didn't they? My own reaction was much different than the Petersons'. When Dr. Engel, came out of the OR not long after I was forced to exit, I just knew. He didn't have to say anything to me. I knew the look; that empty, sorry, look of pity, probably the same one I offered the couple before me as the grief took them. I was furious, maybe a bit in denial.

"You said you'd take care of her. You promised to help, but all you did was kill her. You killed her," I yelled, before weakly pushing him out of my way and running back into the OR. I had to see her one last time, even if the open body on the table wasn't my Kate anymore.

I wanted that reaction from them. I needed something to mask the other guilt and pain, a reason to follow through on my plan. Instead, I got the most understanding people in the world. Even through their tears, they just looked at me with the most empathetic eyes and thanked me for taking care of their son when he was hurting and scared. I didn't understand them or anything about my life anymore.

Was I the anomaly? Was I the only one who didn't know how to live after loss? It hit me that they weren't where I was, not yet. It was new. It was raw, but it would happen. They'd hate me, and they'd hate themselves. It was inevitable. No one ever saw that kind of end coming, but, when it did, nothing could stop the hollow void from taking over.

It was November when it happened for me. I was off work, so I took Kate out. The roads were slick with patches of black ice after the snowfall. I remember bundling us up in the matching scarves she picked out. Everything about that day was engrained in me with such striking, agonizing detail, down to the trivial little button that fell off Kate's coat that morning. I promised to fix it. I never did. She refused to wear anything else but the purple, polka-dot pea coat and now all that was left of it was the button I carried with me, and all I imagined was that coat being cut from Kate's body as my colleagues worked on her.

The day didn't feel like it'd be different. It was girls' day, not unlike most days, just on a grander scale to make up for the long work week it turned out to be. Manicures, dress-up, dinner, and shopping if we had time; we planned to do it all. We just about made it through the list, too. Happiness was a prelude to the storm.

When we were leaving the restaurant, the hospital called. Though I wasn't on call, they needed me. Apparently, there was a big trauma and it was all hands on deck. I hated to cut the day short, but Kate loved coming to the hospital and getting to play with the kids at the daycare, so I didn't see the harm. I usually said no, what was one time?

"Don't play with the seatbelt Kate," I said as I peaked at her through the rearview mirror. She hated the belt and always toyed with it.

"But it's itching me," she pouted, making over exaggerated scratching motions.

"We're almost there, Lady Bug. Just leave it on for now."

"But mommy."

"Just leave it Kate," I scolded.

"Fine," she huffed, still playing with the belt while I wasn't looking.

That was when the accident happened. I thought Kate was safe and buckled in the booster seat. Our light was green, so I went through the intersection, and then bam. My head slammed against the window, glass shattering, and I could hear the crunch of the metal as the car slammed into us, the screeching of the car dragging, desperately seeking traction, metal scratching against pavement until we were just about upside down against the guardrail. The first thing I did was look around for Kate. Dazed, I fell from the car, the scent of iron overpowering all else, the fragrance of death. Taking her away from the scene, I laid Kate on the ground. She was hurt and bleeding, me too. No amount of training could have taught me how to cope with the situation. Kate was crying for me, "Mommy make it not hurt." She was asking for help, and I couldn't give it.

She took off her seatbelt, I realized when I pulled her from the wreckage, and I was angry with her for it. When I really saw the damage, a part of me must've known then that she wouldn't make it. Her head was bleeding, my touch stained red. Everything looked injured, likely internal bleeding. Adrenaline allowed me to ignore my own pains and focus on hers. She needed surgery, but I couldn't do anything for her there, just check her over and prepare. All I actually did was beg her to stay with me, offer empty promises that things would be ok, and pray I could buy time for help to arrive. I was losing control of my own battle when I heard sirens. It was out of my hands, and that wasn't something I was used to. Fading, I barked a few orders at the EMTs, apprising them of her condition, insisting they help her. I was fine.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up in the hospital with James there, his eyes wet as he told me what happened. "I'm sorry Annie," he said. My mind went to worst case scenario.

Tears were shed as I cried out, "Oh God, Kate. Is she?"

"No, no she's in surgery." He couldn't look me in the eye. "It doesn't look good."

"I need to go there. I need to see her. I can help." I threw the blanket off, trying to get up.

He pushed me back down into the bed and said, "Annette, you can't help. You're hurt. You have a concussion. Even if she wasn't your daughter, with that hand... there's nothing you can do." I couldn't believe that. I got off easy, a broken arm, some fractured ribs, and stitches, a few things they wanted to keep an eye on, but nothing that couldn't eventually heal. I would be fine, but the one person I lived for took the brunt of it. She was fighting for her life all alone, when it should have been me. I would have given anything for it to be me.

"Take me to the gallery."

He refused, but it didn't matter what he said. When he stepped out, I forced myself to the OR and gowned up, ignoring the calls and stares from the staff as I did. No one was going to stop me, not even my own weakness. I needed to be there to help. So I went into the fray, the room chaotic with alarms. She was bottoming out, her pressure dropping, hemorrhaging open on the table. Stepping up, offering my help, I was told to get away, but I disregarded their pleas. I tried to remain objective, but with each word came more tears. That was Kate, my Kate, dying before my very eyes, and I wasn't allowed to be there. I wasn't in a place to help. But that was my job. As a surgeon, I fixed kids. As a mother, I protected her. And that night, I wasn't capable of either.

"Get her out. Somebody get her out." Hands wrapped around me and dragged me away.

In the moments following, three lives were irreparably damaged, an unending ripple effect spreading the hurt far beyond. The driver, just a drunk kid, made a mistake that we all had to live with. He murdered Kate, stole my little girl from

me. And then, I was devoid of all life. I didn't have anything. He took my very reason for being.

Now, here I was...

"Hey Annie, you left so quickly, I didn't get a chance to talk to you after the surgery. Are you ok?" James always asked me about the tough cases, always checked in with me. He was always there.

I knew him for eight years. He was with me through all the good and all the bad. He was a point of contention in any romantic relationship I ever had. We bickered like an old married couple, and he knew how to press my buttons, but he was, aside from Kate, the only other person I ever loved. I never actually admitted that. Honestly, I never let myself feel it until I saw how much he loved Kate too, how he suffered with me in our loss. But after that, I knew I'd never allow myself to act on it. Did I deserve that happiness when I was the reason for such grief? It was my choice to cut that day short, to change plans for work, and it cost me my daughter. It cost me life.

"What?" I pulled myself from the clouds. "Yeah, yeah I'm good."

"You sure? You look..."

"I'm fine," I mustered up a half smile. "I'm just tired." Wasn't I always? Just breathing was exhausting, simply existing felt like a task.

"It's quiet tonight. Why don't you head home?"

I shook my head. "No... no I can't."

"Come on. You're always here. We haven't done anything outside the hospital in, I don't even know how long. You have to take care of yourself. When was the last time you went home?"

That depended on what he considered home... If he meant the empty house that carried one too many reminders of my near perfect life, it had been months. It became too quiet, so I spent my time split between an on-call room and a hotel, going home only when necessary. "I've... I've been here since Friday."

"Today is Friday."

"Last Friday..." I admitted. Being at the hospital kept me busy and my mind off the memories that forced me deeper into hell, deeper into the dark corners and darker thoughts.

"Go home. Being here that long doesn't just put you in jeopardy, but the kids you work on, too." I resented that, but I knew he meant well. He wasn't wrong. I played it safe to that point, but the spiral was destined to come, and, if I got there, I could never turn back. I wouldn't survive that.

"I don't know if I can." It was a painful thing to admit, being afraid to go to my own home. If I was honest, it wasn't even the memories. Remembering the good things helped sometimes. It was what I was afraid I'd do to myself because I wanted to be with Kate again. Going home meant confronting the past; it meant feeling that desire to free myself from the burden of life and give in to the freedom of what might come after by letting go of my hold on the world.

“Let me come with you...” James offered. “Looks like you could use a friend.”

He was a great friend, and maybe, on some level, he could understand that living felt like punishment to me. How could I save so many kids, but not the one that counted most to me? How could I not check if she was still buckled when I knew she was playing with the seatbelt? How could I let any of it happen? What kind of mother was I? He always tried to answer those unasked questions reassuringly. He tried to make living a little less painful.

“Ok...” I gave in. I needed to go home. I needed to face a few things, make some decisions, and it was nice not to be alone for once. I didn’t want to live in solitude anymore. I didn’t want to live shrouded in death and sadness.

James escorted me out of the hospital, hand resting on the small of my back before chivalrously opening my door, helping me in and, later, out of the car when we arrived at the house. Inside, he looked around my place. There were no signs of life, just emptiness. “You’ve been staying at the hospital.” I didn’t bother to lie, and he didn’t bother to ask how long.

We talked a bit, about nothing in particular, mindless chatter to fill the silence. It was one of the rare awkward moments between us. I always wondered if it was because he suspected something, suspected that I was at my precipice, forced to choose one way or another.

Needing a minute alone, I excused myself to the bathroom. When I caught myself in the mirror, I was bothered. What stared back at me was the reflection of a stranger, definitely not the person I remembered. I used to have life in my eyes, used to wake up and ask how I got so lucky. I used to smile because I knew there was a reason. But after her death, I found myself stuck in limbo. I saw nothing good about the world.

And I thought about it, killing myself. I thought about just downing a whole bottle of the anxiety meds I was dependent on, followed by a nice wine chaser. I imagined my cold scalpel running against the flesh of my wrist, slicing through the layers of derma until it pierced the artery. I’d run the blade down my forearm in a perfect line, a surgeon’s cut, and I’d watch it bleed with a sense of catharsis, knowing that with each drop, a little piece of my pain went with it. Something always stopped me, though. Part of me always felt it was Kate, and I’d hear her say, “Mommy, don’t be sad. Katie loves you.”

“Are you ok?” I jumped as his hand squeezed my shoulder. The other part of me thought it was him. “You’ve been in here a while.”

Quickly wiping the tears away, I said, “I’m fine.” I wasn’t, but I wanted to be. I wanted to see Kate in my reflection. I wanted to see her soulful, curious, blue eyes, my eyes. “I will be.”

“I made tea for us. Come downstairs.”

He almost caught me red handed reaching for a bottle, ready to douse my sorrows in a lethal dose of benzodiazepine. But, again, he stopped me, they stopped me. That was when something clicked. I had a plan. I put things in motion the week before, got my affairs in order so to speak; updated my will and everything. I had it wrong though. So many things were so wrong. But the common factor was me. I was my own problem.

Taking another glance at my reflection, searching, I was able to see just a tiny piece of Kate. I saw clarity, catching a glimpse of her smile and hearing her say my name. I never let myself feel it, never let myself feel a lot of things, but she was always there. Someone was always there. Maybe it was finally being in the house that forced me to realize the shell my life had become, but it was in that moment I made my final decision. I had to end something, and it was either my life or my career. "There's somewhere I need to go first. Will you come with me?" I asked.

"Sure, anything you need." I was starting to feel the real truth in that. He'd do anything and be anything I needed.

I asked him to drive us to the cemetery, somewhere I never wanted to go again, and I talked to him, telling every happy memory I had of Kate as we sat by her grave, most things he already knew. He was a father figure to Kate, the only one she'd ever know. And he was an active part of both of our lives, his Jennings girls.

Sharing a story of his own, he said, "She was just like you, you know. Smart as a whip, cute as a button. An amazing kid."

"Yes, she was." I placed my hand on the headstone, gently running my fingers over the epitaph. Her whole life was in that one little dash. "I can't forget about her."

"You don't need to and you won't, not ever. No one will. It's impossible."

"But I don't want it to destroy me either, to destroy what's left of her," I said quietly, unable to look at him. "I need to say goodbye." Not to her, but to this piece of her I was holding on to. She was gone and had been for two years, but I spent my time waiting for her to come home.

He sat with me, putting his hand on mine as I spoke to Kate. I told her how much I loved her, still did, and how life was different without her, but it was time I made a change she'd be proud of. For a moment, I thought I heard her laugh in a gust of wind, an "about time" kind of laugh, and it made me feel like it was the right choice. "There might be a time when I'll see something that reminds me of you, and I won't feel like my world is collapsing, but I'm not there yet, Kate. And I can't keep being here," I said and let the words settle.

"What does that mean Annie? You're leaving?" James asked after a beat of silence. I nodded. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm putting in my notice. I'm going to travel." I always wanted to take her around the world when she was older, I always said I'd get to it, and now it was time I did something to honor her memory instead of tarnish it.

“Really?”

“Yeah... I can't be at that hospital anymore. That was where she was born, where she died. I need... I need a clean slate.” He didn't say anything, just let me reason aloud. “I'm thinking I'll start in Europe, do some sightseeing. Maybe one day, when or if I'm ever ready, I can settle down in a hospital again or a private practice. I can do my job; that hasn't changed. It's all the death I can't deal with. Private practice seems... I can handle that.”

“I'm sure wherever you end up, you'll be just fine.”

“I just want her to be proud of me.”

“She is. I am.” He squeezed my hand harder. It was the first time in a long time that I felt free, like I was allowed to breathe again, to love and live. I was holding on to a dream I could never have, forgetting about all the good still there. I was afraid to be hurt again. I loved her more than I ever loved anyone, but it wasn't fair of me to hold onto her memory as a means of self-destruction. She was worth more than that. I was worth more than that. In order to move on, I had to rediscover who Annette Jennings was. That meant leaving this life behind and starting over with my memories as a keepsake.

“Maybe I'll be ready for more when I find my place again... For more with you too, if you want it.”

He smiled to let me know he had been waiting to hear those words all along. “I'll be waiting.”

Something told me, he wouldn't be waiting long. “I love you. You know that, right? I never thanked you for all you've done for me. You were the only father Kate knew and you treated her like your own. You've been my support when I know you were suffering too, but I have to do this on my own. Just don't forget about me.”

“I couldn't, even if I wanted to,” he said as he pulled me in for a hug. Though we squeezed each other like it was our last goodbye, I knew it was only temporary. I was leaving with a sense of purpose which offered me a small comfort when I never thought I would have that again.

## The Lake Effect

Down from Canada the mass of cold, dry air had come rolling through the November weekend over Lake Ontario. Quiet and surefooted it came, feeding on the rich, warm moisture of the lake. It was the first day of December. A piece of dust, microscopic, stirred up from some place from some time long ago, from the very beginning of things, had been carried on an updraft east of Oswego into the weather system that was bearing down on the Tug Hill plateau, north of Syracuse. Water vapor had condensed around this particle, and among the updrafts it rose contentedly. Reaching colder temperatures it froze into a six-sided prism, growing and expanding at the corners, dancing, pirouetting, among the silent and uncountable millions. It rose and grew until it could rise no further, and then fell. Agglomeration of oxygen and hydrogen spinning like a bladed dervish down through the troposphere, toward the wooded hills outside Fayetteville the White Pines standing like mutes in wash of headlights, the silver Civic chugging down route 8 like a creature forsaken, and then landing finally to expire on that heated windshield amid the frantic squeak of wipers and brakes.

Six years and as many miles away in the late winter dimness lay the houses of Foxrun Farms. From his window Rory watched as the slow orange burn of dawn crept down the snow covered corridors of this suburban fastness, throwing the softened forms of lightwires, trees, and mailboxes into shadows long and portentous, like ghosts of a vanished age. It was March, probably the last big snow of the season. He looked at the digital thermometer he had suction-cupped to his window. 24 degrees. Judging by the mailboxes they had gotten a good 8 inches, maybe 10. School was sure to be cancelled. He had fallen asleep with his Xbox on again, and he rose and jabbed at the power button with his foot. He took a moment to stretch in the dawnlight in the center of his cluttered room then returned to the window. He sighed. There they were.

In this frozen desert, this white stillness, Rory could see in the yard across the street Mr. Ozymandias and his three sons preparing to begin their work. The boys stood at attention in descending order of height, themselves like three diminutive malformed ingots, faces yet obscured by morning shadow, breath pluming, as Mr. Ozymandias paced before them with a clipboard, gesturing to it, then to various corners of the yard.

build all day, Mr. Ozymandias overseeing the work with his clipboard, striding amongst his sons, delivering either praise or admonishments where warranted, picking up a shovel or taking a son's place whenever one needed a rest or to go to the bathroom. Mr. Ozymandias himself never seemed to need a rest. Even during meal breaks he could be seen at the dining room window, still in full snow gear, sipping his steaming mug of coffee and staring out into the rambling excavation of the front yard, his dark eyes gleaming in silent ponderance of what wonders still to come, imagining, willing, what life remained out in that cold emptiness.

Of course people came to gawk. They came in droves, from the neighborhood and further still. When the roads weren't clear they came on foot, some dragging their children on toboggans or sleds, the parents leaning into their loads blowing at the nostrils like beasts of burden. They would gather around the sidewalk, snapping pictures, speaking in hushed and reverential tones and cautioning their children to do the same. They were like bewildered pilgrims of some new sect, come to grovel before some miracle whose subtleties and intricacies were wholly beyond them. Like a page of prophecy laid out in a language indecipherable.

Mr. Ozymandias himself had no time for questions. He seemed to exude this understanding to the onlookers through his body language, and for the most part, none were posed. One year a news van had showed up from channel 3, and on this occasion Mr. Ozymandias had taken a few moments to speak in front of the camera. Rory, wet and freezing in the gathering dusk after a long afternoon of sledding, had seen him there, bathed in the blinding white light of the camera, standing rigid and erect with his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes and hair shining like obsidian. Rory could see his mouth moving but could not hear the words. He had meant to look for the interview on the news that night but had forgotten.

Rory slid down the cold hardwood steps in his sock feet, feeling the small bones articulate each polished lip. Through the hall with its ticking clock, past swaths of dawn brilliance that fell oblique from the curtains and rolled over the boy as he passed like dumb harpstrings in the dimness. Into the dark and freezing kitchen. Rory stared at the note from yesterday: There's Stouffer's in the freezer and plenty of snacks in the fridge have fun in the storm, Stan should be around to plow the driveway and check on you later, see you Wednesday! - Love Mom. Alone. Until Wednesday.

Rory couldn't help but wonder why they put up with this ordeal all the time. Spending an entire day, especially a snow day, from dawn until dusk, doing manual labor under the watchful eye of a humorless micromanaging father, was not Rory's idea of a good time. Granted, the results were impressive, no, more than impressive, but still it seemed to him like an unreasonable amount of work to expect of one's children.

Elias, the oldest, was in 8th grade, followed by Daniel in 6th then Noah in 5th. Daniel was in Rory's class at Racebrook and the two sat across from each other, Rory against the wall and Daniel by the window. During fall afternoons amid the droning of social studies lectures Rory would watch as the light fell behind Daniel, casting him in blazing cameo, his head opaque and silent among the motes of dust that burned and floated like sparks. While Rory and the other kids spent afternoon recess playing kickball on the baseball diamond or performing dangerous stunts on the monkey bars, Daniel seemed to spend his time around the trees by the back fence, scratching in the dirt with a stick or arranging mosaics from pebbles and bits of broken glass. Once Rory had strolled by after the bell rang to investigate. He found what looked to be a woman's face, built from stones and trash and bits of plastic with jagged pieces of brown glass for eyes. He hadn't liked the way his silhouette had been reflected in those eyes, dark and bent and outsized amidst the cold double of the afternoon, and before turning to go he scrubbed the face out with his foot.

Rory pulled his attention away from the window where two of the boys could be seen unfolding a great blue tarpaulin in the side yard. He had seen it all before: iceblocks would be arranged on the tarp for further sizing and shaping where Mr. Ozymandias would later match them to the numbered yellow placards and their respective places in the structure. Already people were watching from the street. Rory sighed deeply and stared into the blinking cursor on the empty white screen in front of him. It seemed to match his heartbeat. Feeble against the staring silence around him in that room, that house, the mocking blankness of that page. Beside him on the desk, with the sticker proclaiming "property of the Racebrook School Library," lay the well-worn book *Our Solar System*. He had to write a report and prepare a short presentation, due in the next day or so. He had tried to read the book, but could not stop looking at the end. The end and the beginning. To him that seemed all that mattered. Daniel had been assigned as his partner for the project, but Rory didn't think he would have free any time until tomorrow. Mr. Ozymandias had instructed forbearance from homework on days such as today. The cursor blinked and the temperature slowly crept higher.

The partners had been chosen by their teacher about a week ago. They had to pick a topic that interested them from the lower school assembly. That day, last Friday, a professor from the local community college had visited to speak. "Science Friday" they had called it, and Rory and his classmates had all piled into the auditorium that

morning to have what was promised to be “A weird, fun, and interesting time.” Rory watched as a short man with deep, sad-looking creases carved into his face walked out on stage. He wore a dark grey faded suit, as if in secret mourning, and a bright green tie. He began like a magician, asking for volunteers, telling jokes and performing spectacles involving refraction of light, surface tension, friction, perspective. Soon all the children were laughing on cue and waving their hands in the air eagerly, the teachers smirking and nodding along. The professor frowned out over the crowd.

“The universe is over 13 billion years old”

The professor spoke this with his eyes squeezed shut and his short arms stretched way out to the sides, as if trying to physically embody this temporal immensity.

“The earth is just 4.5 billion”

Flapping his hands.

“And our Sun, about the same age, will only be around for another 5 billion years. In fact, it’s dying right now. It’s dying and growing bigger and hotter bit by bit, until... Poof! gone”

Behind him on the projection screen a clip of the Death Star exploding.

“But it will look way cooler than that, trust me. Too bad we humans probably won’t be around to see it. We’ll run out of Co2 and collide with the Andromeda Galaxy before then.”

Rory was thinking. He nudged the kid next to him. “We’ll probably have moved away on spaceships or something by then, right?”

“What?”

“Before the sun goes out.”

The professor had continued on and now everyone was laughing at something Rory had missed. To Rory he still looked sad.

“Now does anyone know how us little-bitty humans on this little bitty planet came about? We didn’t just pop out of nowhere. How could something so fancy grow out of snot? it’s called.. anyone? Evolution. Hmm, okay, let’s use the example of the eye, the ‘window to the soul’ as it were. It started with just something veryyy simple, and then...”

Rory stared distractedly out the window of the auditorium onto the empty athletic fields, stark white and desolate. Not a thing breathed or stirred. The audience laughed.

The day grew warmer still, and Rory spent the afternoon sledding with his friends in the next neighborhood over, on the hills around the reservoir. The ice was thinning over the water and the first few boys had let their momentum carry them beyond the shoreline, but then on the fourth run the ice had cracked and a kid had almost fallen in. They were careful to stop before the bank after that. The sun fell and the shadows of the bare trees grew long over the reservoir as if reaching to reclaim something lost. A red Cardinal flapped and doted on a branch against the dying sky, watching the children.

Trudging home in the dusk he could see the small crowd gathered in front of the Ozymandias house. There it was. He saw the softly undulating walls rising in stepped terraces. He saw the sculptures, the lions, the tall cowed acolytes, all in attitudes of imperious menace, their painted faces. He saw the splashes of dyes and food coloring, gaudy and precise in great tapestries of color. He saw the meticulously placed halogen light rigs, sheathed in amber filter paper, setting all to gleam like treasure from a nightmare. He saw the twisted geometries, the patterns, the cryptic symmetries. The onlookers all whistled softly to themselves and pointed and nodded their heads approvingly as Mr. Ozymandias ducked and tinkered with the lighting. Daniel and his brothers were nowhere to be seen. Rory crossed to his own deserted side of the street, the wind whipping down the shoveled corridors of the sidewalk, sending freezing tendrils of powder to snap and tear at his florid cheeks. He looked at the unplowed driveway. Stan had forgotten to come. It got dark so quickly here. Through the cloud of his breath Rory looked up at the darkening sky. What few stars there were burned cold and unfathomable out in the night beyond the radiance of the light rigs. Rory went inside and slammed the door.

That night Rory had trouble falling asleep. From his window the light from the snow structure seemed to burn like a city of the damned. He stared at the patterns it threw against the wall through clutching tree branches and venetian blinds. He listened to the empty house. When he did sleep it was fitful and contained all manner of strange dreams. He dreamt he stood in a vast frozen alkali plain. Around him milled great multitudes of people, walking, mouthing words into phones, holding hands, carrying shopping bags. Except there was nowhere to go. He alone stood still, staring up at the feeble sun through the grey haze, his small hands trembling with cold, counting the eight minutes he knew would mark the end that was already come. Eight minutes for the last light of the sun. He waited. When he blinked the sky was fire and the great sightless stone heads loomed over him with mouths agape and spoke no words.

The day passed quiet and uneventful. He waited at the bus stop and talked to his friends and dodged snowballs. He sat through the periods. At recess the kids kicked out lines in the snow and warned each other not to cross then laughed and crossed them anyway. Daniel came up to him and told him to come over after school. Rory tried not to look at him by the window that afternoon.

The door to the house was ornate and carved with filigrees and icons Rory did not know the names of. To him it looked very old. He rung the doorbell, shivering a bit in the shadow of the high walls that loomed behind him. He waited, noticing the name A. Smith embossed into the doorknocker. The door opened and there stood Mr. Ozymandias tall and implacable, his dark eyes sparkling like chips of jet.

“Hello there, child.”

“Hi.”

His dark suit was of a peculiar cut. Rory felt a slight breath of warm air from inside, faintly perfumed with some exotic spice.

“Please come inside. Daniel is finishing his chores and will be down presently. We shall wait for him in the study.”

Rory clutched the straps his backpack more tightly and stepped inside. They walked down persian-carpeted hallways hung with oil paintings, glassware, ornaments of polished wood and brass. The scent of incense.

“Who’s A. Smith?”

“Why I am, of course. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Wait, I thought your name was Mr. Ozymandias.”

“No, just an unfortunate sobriquet I’m afraid, an allusion to a Shelley poem. The truth, in this instance anyway, is far more banal.”

“Oh.”

Rory watched as Mr. Ozymandias glided down the long gallery like a spectre, through the bars of crepuscular light and curling ringlet of incense smoke, changing and disturbing nothing.

“Please, sit.”

They were in a warm wood-paneled study with tall bookshelves, great leather armchairs, and old maps in frames on the walls. Every object in here seemed to contain some secret history. There were ancient weapons and taxidermy and small mechanical oddities that whirred and chirped and more books than Rory could count.

“May I offer you anything warm to drink?”

“No thanks.”

Rory held his backpack tightly to his chest. Mr. Ozymandias’ eyes seemed to bore straight through him.

“Tell me child, what is this project you and my son are working on?”

“It’s the solar system.”

“Ahh, the solar system.”

Mr. Ozymandias tented his fingers and closed his eyes, letting his tall frame settle deeper into his armchair.

“A beautiful topic, is it not?”

Rory suddenly thought of something.

“Hey um, do you, do you think that when the sun dies we’ll be ok, like humans I mean, we’ll probably build spaceships to find other places to live right?”

“Mmm, perhaps. But to go out with the sun wouldn’t so bad, it would be a beautiful end. But then all endings are beautiful, don’t you think?”

Rory said nothing. He looked at the floor.

“You disagree?”

Rory shrugged and picked at the nylon strap on his backpack.

“We will all vanish from this earth one day, all of us, and then the stars will flicker out one by one until only one remains, the last star. Then it too will die, and there will only be black holes. The pieces will drift apart and away and all that ever was will perish out there in the cold and the dark.”

Rory was trembling.

“Does this frighten you child? You tremble as all men tremble but this trembling, his fear of the cold void, and though justifiable fear it may be, is not what makes beauty, it is not what makes life.”

“Then what?” Rory sniffled.

“Ah, child.” Somewhere deep in Mr. Ozymandias’ eyes there seemed to spin antipodes of a chaos and a harmony that wound in tandem around the frightened reflection of Rory’s face. Wound and refused to annihilate. “It is temerity.”

“What’s te merety?”

“Boldness, Audacity, the thing that is life, that sits in defiance of the end, refuses to accept the futility which is programmed into all things. Think of all who came before, building their empires upon sinking sand, their hopes, their children. We are the light that danced in the dreams of the dead. Then that light, incubated in sacks of flesh and viscera, continues on dancing and building through to the end of things, dancing as the very vessel rots and the walls crumble and the meteors come raining down.”

Mr. Ozymandias was studying Rory intently. Rory returned his gaze with red-rimmed eyes.

“Do not weep, child, for yes we are condemned to some end but without it we would only have a freeze frame, a stasis, and a thing in stasis ceases to be a thing at all. It becomes the very emptiness life seeks to avoid. So, as we sit here in our dungeon cell and await our sentence we paint the walls with poetry. And contained in that poetry is everything that is ever worth doing. In that poetry we have life itself.”

They spoke for several minutes more, the boy asking questions, the man nodding and periodically rising to hand over a book or gesture toward a painting. Eventually a quiet settled over the warm study and they sat listening to the whir and tweet of the small mechanical contrivances doing their work. Rory wiped his nose on his shirtsleeve and looked out the window. Outside on the lawn under the silver moon lay the grand edifice of Mr. Ozymandias, all sparkling under a thin patina of ice like an eidolon dollhouse.

“It seems I’ve forgotten to turn on the stage lights this evening.”

“I kind of like it better this way.”

Mr. Ozymandias stood with his hands clasped behind his back and scrutinized the yard.

“You know you may have a point there, child.”

There was a polite tap-tap from the door of the study.

“Yes?”

“Excuse me father, but I’m ready to work with Rory.”

“Very good.”

Rory rose, smiled at Daniel, and the two set off together down the hall, Rory looking back one last time at the tall man standing in the light of the warm study, hands clasped behind his back, gazing intently from the window to the darkness that gleamed beyond.

The following days were warm, with temperatures climbing into the 50’s. Rory had heard the weatherman say the reason they got so much snow was something called the “lake effect,” but that it should stay warm for the next few weeks and that the snow was probably done for the year. His mother came home and hugged him excitedly, handing him a new Xbox game and asking if anything exciting had happened since she had been gone.

“Nah” he said, then thanked her and ran upstairs to play it.

When she went to wake him the next morning the television was on and the game was paused. Rory was curled asleep in a nest of blankets. Scattered at odd intervals around his floor and bed were several books. Among them was a library book from his school, and then several older, expensive looking books. She stooped to read the titles: Caravaggio and the Baroque, The Poetry of the Ancients, The Music of the Spheres. She scratched her head and reached to open the blinds.

He would spend many a late night with these tomes and others, studying the strange words and the strange pictures, running his hands over their covers, imagining the dead men who’d written them, the dead men they spoke of. Of what he read he understood little, but he found deep solace in the fact they were there: those words, those pictures, the weight of them. As he lay he would balance them on parts of his body like talisman stones, feeling the strength their physical presence shared with him on this plane of being. They would rise and tremble with his breath and heartbeat, and in the pressed pages there was contained no space of silence.

It rained on Tuesday, and on Wednesday morning on the way to the bus stop Rory paused to look at the yard of Mr. Smith.

The fruits of all those hours of work and careful planning were now fading and returning to the earth in great stained, sodden heaps. All the lines of dye and food coloring had run and mixed lurid among the indistinguishable lumps of snow like some great contusion. The lions gleamed like sweating piles of carrion. Rory had not noticed the woman standing next to him.

“Isn’t it nice what he does for his children?” she said.

“What do you mean?” Rory asked. She was tall with long brown hair. She

wore black. They were the only two people on the street.

“His wife, she died some winter several years back. He does this for his children, to cheer them up this time of year. To help ease the pain of the loss.”

Rory didn't say anything. Before him stood one of the acolyte statues, the most intact thing left in the yard. Food coloring had run down its cheeks, like blood from the eyes of a saint.

The woman turned toward him and smiled.

“Such a loss,” she said.

She turned to walk away down the empty street, her high-heeled boots clicking on the wet pavement. Rory watched her go. Light from the new sun danced golden in the quivering puddles where she stepped.



# Judges' Commentary

# Poetry Judge

## Marty Williams

### FIRST PLACE:

*Alice- Jessica Cummings*

“Alice” appeals immediately for its surprising take on a has-been Alice in Wonderland looking for the old magic in a bottle, and, like so many, finding mostly emptiness. Still, this doesn’t wallow, and moderates the seriousness of being past one’s finest moments with humor and grace. Despite her fall, we can still like Alice in this poem, maybe because she is even more human, more like us.

### SECOND PLACE:

*Flashbacks From the Fifth Floor- Madison Csejka*

This poem seems simple upon first reading—splashes of memories caught in fine and direct images, each stanza whole and clear as a child’s moment. But its archetypal descent from a simple hope for forever, through the blink of moments passing into and out of light, and to that final fall to ground gives it weight, but, not in a ponderous sense. Its playfulness remains.

THIRD PLACE:

*Tilted Gradually- Kiernan Norman*

This poem demonstrates a voracity toward language and weaves its love for it through the workings and failings of relationship. Images surprise and the poem satisfies that need for words about words, what they cannot do, what they can.

**M. L. Williams** is author of *Other Medicines* and co-editor of *How Much Earth: The Fresno Poets*. His work is forthcoming or appears in *Miramar*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Clash by Night*, and other journals and anthologies. He co-emcees the Poetry Corner for the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books and teaches creative writing, poetics, and contemporary literature at Valdosta State University in Georgia.

## Art Judge

# Muffy Pendergast

### FIRST PLACE:

*A Drop in the Bucket- Mary Rudzis*

Such a compelling piece for it's color contrast and reflectiveness. Did the photographer add a drop of oil into the bucket or did she come upon it and find it's beauty waiting there? Doesn't really matter, it was captured and we get to enjoy it. I love how the oily water relates to the sky reflections, the way they merge in some areas, looking like they are part of the sky together. The composition is balanced and strong, with the rusty pipe and piece of plastic providing a counterpoint to the wide piece of wood on the left side of the can. The round watery shape evokes an ethereal glow, like we are looking down at the earth or into space and infinity, all the while encompassed in the earthy brown mulch of dead leaves.

### SECOND PLACE:

*The Breakthrough- Kyle Broderick*

In "the Breakthrough" by Kyle Broderick, I can hear the chirp of crickets and the peep of frogs and I can feel the quiet nervousness of waiting in the night until the light lands in just the right place. The source of light is mysterious, but I feel the power of the moon silhouetting the leaves and glowing on the few strands of a spider web. Broderick delivers the promise and a solid reminder that nature is a source of pure joy.

### THIRD PLACE:

*Nya- Rosita Laureano*

Fleshy and innocent, shocked and hungry....appearance and needs collide in this creamy version of a newborn by Laureano. Birth must be terribly abrupt and uncomfortable, but this one looks as though all will be well once her needs are met. The artist chose to paint the head going off the edges of the canvas, making the composition exciting and bold. Though newborns are tiny and dependent on others for their care, the artist portrays this wee one larger than life, making me wonder if she has entered the all consuming state of motherhood, would like to be there, or is enamored with the notion.

**Muffy Pendergast** is a graduate of Boston College, BS, Public Relations/Communications and began looking towards the arts and landed a job in an NYC ad agency in the early 90s. Switching to Public Relations while volunteering at the Children's Museum of the Arts in SoHo, NYC, she began to appreciate education through the arts. Then came a decade for Independent Study, traveling to Africa, Russia, Mexico and the US, with an easel and oil paints and journals to be filled with paintings and notes about traveling. Currently she juggles family, various artist/community organizing roles (including her favorite: The Giant Puppet and People Making Mayhem Parade, every weekend before Halloween in her beloved Westville, New Haven), teaching studio art to elementary aged students, coordinating the Edgewood school garden, and being a visual artist in the summer.

## Fiction Judge

# Sarah Pemberton Strong

### FIRST PLACE:

*They Will Come in Cycles- Zanny Stowell*

I'm delighted to award first prize to Zanny Stowell's "They Will Come in Cycles." From the first unsettling image to the final revelation, Stowell's keen eye for lyric detail is matched by an impressive ability to imbue those details with narrative drive. As the plot unfolds, we place our own provisional understanding of the central tragedy alongside the mother's and daughter's wildly different versions of what has occurred. Not only the story of a family's attempt to cope with loss, "They Will Come in Cycles" is also a captivating meditation on larger themes: the power of denial, the subjectivity of belief, and vulnerability—of the human body and of our planet.

### SECOND PLACE:

*Tomatoes- Allison Shannon*

In "Tomatoes," Allison Shannon portrays a battered woman and her abusive husband with nuance and complexity. We see Josh as capable of both violence and tenderness—a man who loves his daughters, his dog, and good food, yet bruises and bloodies his wife. Amelia is equally well-drawn: even as we cheer her for having the strength to leave her husband, we question her decision to abandon her daughters. Shannon makes the wise move of having Amelia question that decision as well, so that we come to appreciate not only her bid for freedom, but its attendant casualties. Juxtaposed images—of abundance and relinquishment, sustenance and garbage—create an apt metaphor for the complexity of Amelia's

THIRD PLACE:

*Flat Line- Melanie Defrank*

I was impressed by Melanie Defrank's unflinching depiction of Annie, an ER surgeon haunted by the death of her young daughter. Defrank's careful attention to the physical manifestations of psychic despair brings to life the realities of an emergency room and the surrealities of living with unresolved trauma. Realistic without being sensational, and emotional without sentimentality, "Flat Line" offers us hope for Annie's capacity to heal while paying tribute to the persistence of grief.

**Sarah Pemberton Strong** is the author of two novels, *The Fainting Room* and *Burning the Sea*, and a collection of poetry. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *The Southern Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Southwest Review*, *River Styx*, and *The Sun*. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Warren Wilson College and has taught writing at Quinnipiac University and the University of Hartford.

# An Interview With Sheila Squillante

**Sheila Squillante** is the author of the poetry collection, *Beautiful Nerve* and co-author, along with Sandra L. Faulkner, of the writing craft book, *Writing the Personal: Getting Your Stories Onto the Page*. She has published work widely in print and online journals like *Brevity*, *The Rumpus*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Phoebe*, *Cream City Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Literary Mama*, *South Dakota Review* and elsewhere. She currently works as associate director of the MFA programs in creative writing and assistant professor of English at Chatham University. There, she serves as editor-in-chief of *The Fourth River*, Chatham's nationally respected journal of nature and place-based writing. From her dining room table, she edits the blog at *Barrelhouse*.

**Folio:** When did you start writing and why?

**Sheila:** When I was five. I don't know, honestly, but I remember the first poem I wrote around that time (which I'm not gonna recite right now), but I think I just always liked to play with language and I think by the time I got to middle school I definitely thought of myself as a poet. You know, publishing in the school paper and literary journal.

**Folio:** How has your writing style changed or adapted over the years?

**Sheila:** Well, in a couple of pretty significant ways. The first way is that I went from being a poet to being a poet and an essayist and that happened in graduate school, fairly late. I did take a fiction writing workshop when I was here at Southern, but after I left Southern and I went to Penn State I took a memoir class, with a writer named Vivian Gornick, who was a visiting professor at the time and I had really never written any kind of prose before. So, I wrote in that class a couple of different fifteen page memoirs and one of those pieces after I graduated I submitted to a contest that Glamour Magazine was sponsoring and it won their contest, which was a whole other fun story. But that was a big shift in my kind of writerly identity, so a poet and essayist. The other thing I would say is that when I had my kids, specifically my first, my son, it kind of broke my brain a little bit, so the poems I had written prior to becoming a mother were generally, not entirely, but generally speaking, more straight forward, narrative or lyric. And after he was born I think I had a harder time thinking in a linear way because my life was no longer linear. Mothers have to do everything at the same time, so my poems kind of reflected that, I think, and I started playing with more experimental forms, like collage and more associative kinds of things.

**Folio:** Are there certain themes or ideas that you find yourself coming back to a lot in your writing?

**Sheila:** Yes, definitely. In my poetry, I would say, I have preoccupations with communication and the way that either we connect or don't connect. The poems that I'm going to read from tonight in Beautiful Nerve are pretty anxious poems; they reflect a certain kind of anxiety around relationships, which I think is something I also come back to a lot. But, since I'm a memoirist, I also return in my non-fiction work, specifically to family and childhood and grief. My father passed away when I was in college and that's been kind of a constant source, a wellspring of content and inspiration. It seems weird to say inspiration, but you know. And I think, generally speaking, kind of feminist issues, questions of domesticity and the female body and motherhood, these are

all kinds of things that encroach constantly on my writing.

**Folio:** How has your gender influenced your writing or has it at all?

**Sheila:** Yeah, it really has. I would say it absolutely has. When I was in graduate school, at Penn State, the program was in a certain way kind of reflective of that cliché that you might hear about where women are the body and men are the head and the intellect. So I was working with three poets, but there were two on opposite sides of the spectrum. One, who was a woman, whose poems were very grounded in the world and the physical form, and the other, was a man who was a much more cerebral, experimental, associative kind of writer. I watched myself and my classmates kind of bounce back and forth and then eventually take sides, and it pretty much broke down on gender lines. And I rejected that, I wanted to learn from both, so I think my work plays with that. It's why I have chapbooks of poetry that came out before my full length that you would read next to my full length and be like how is this the same person because these over here are very straightforward and narrative and these over here are something else. I think that has to do with gender, for me.

**Folio:** You talked about grief as a kind of inspiration, what would you say your other inspirations are?

**Sheila:** My kids, to a certain degree, although I don't consider myself, I don't know how to put this... I'm not a "mommy writer." I don't write only about my experience as a mother, though it is an enormous part of my identity and certainly worthy of exploration in writing. Search for identity. This trip, because I was coming here, so we drove from Pittsburgh to Elmsford, New York. I specially started the trip a day early because there is a structure called the Tappan Zee Bridge, which crosses the Hudson River between Nyack and Tarrytown, NY. I love the bridge and I think of it kind of a home because my family is from that area and I was born in Yonkers, NY and lived in Dobbs Ferry, NY and New Jersey and CT, so this part of the world is very important to me, but none of my immediate family remains here. My father's past, my mother's in Florida, my sister's in South Carolina, and so I wanted to go back through those towns and kind of see how it felt to be there. I hadn't been in Dobbs Ferry, for instance, since, 1981 when my grandparents moved to Florida. So we just did this yesterday, two days ago, and I think it has a lot to do with trying to figure out where I belong. Like, I feel very comfortable here, but I only lived in New Haven for a year of my life, but it happened to be a year when I was going through a really important personal shift. I had gotten divorced and the program at Southern kind of was like a life-line to me during that time. So, place is becoming especially more important to me. The MFA program

that I teach in has a specific focus on place and nature writing and I never really thought of myself as a nature writer or even really as a place writer, but now that I'm there and I'm immersed in it and I think more about my own writing I can see where it actually does come together.

**Folio:** So, how did it feel to go through those towns? Was it a pleasant experience, was it bittersweet?

**Sheila:** It was both; it was poignant because of course it's changed so much since I was there. Dobbs Ferry is where my dad grew up and it's where (I had forgotten this until my mother told me) it's where I first lived when they brought me home from the hospital. Just wonderful memories because my grandparents were really dear to me and we walked around yesterday and we were starving at the end of it. We saw the church where I was baptized, we saw my grandparent's house, and then we were starving, so we ourselves on Main Street and the only thing that was open was this bar called Double Days, so we went in and then I remembered that my mother had written to me to say that there was a place on Main Street that used to be called The Shamrock where I had my first bowl of mashed potatoes as a baby, and this was Double Days. So I found myself sitting here thinking, looking at the bar, going, "My grandfather used to get drunk at that bar. My father probably got drunk at that bar. And I had mashed potatoes." So, mostly it was a lovely, poignant experience. I got choked up a couple of times, but any time I come east I get very nostalgic.

**Folio:** How would you describe your collection *Beautiful Nerve*?

**Sheila:** I think the word anxiety is the one I use a lot to describe the collection and what I was saying before about themes of connection and misconnection. A lot about misconnection. There is a sequence in the book that are based on dreams, which comes from my whole life, not so much anymore, but prior to having kids I always had a rich dream life. I had very very vivid dreams and great dream recall and I always liked to tell people about my dreams in infinite detail and it bores the hell out of them. I also thought, well let me write poems about my dreams, which is really like, who cares about my dreams, but the dreams also, I think, the surreal landscapes fit that kind of anxious space where the poems mostly exist. So, I have these chapbooks that came before which are really about my life, like they're very clearly 'these are the poems about my father's death and here's how I dealt with that' or 'these are the poems about my divorce and first marriage.' These you can't point to and say, "Oh, there's Sheila" necessarily, unless you really know me very well because they're much more associative, they're much more surreal. There are places in it where they come out of clearly

autobiographical spaces, but not all of them. The book is definitely the culmination of my education between these two polar opposites that I was talking about before.

**Folio:** What advice do you have for young writers?

**Sheila:** My advice for young writers is, first of all, to write, second of all to read widely, and deeply, and if you're a poet don't just read poets, read philosophers, read garden manuals, read everything because you don't know what's going to feed your writing at any given time and what's going to find it's way in there that's going to make you a better more interesting writer. But I would also say, this again comes from the two experiences I had, the one of working with the memoirist, when I was a total fish out of water in a memoir class, one of the best things that ever happened to me as a writer because it pushed me into this space that was completely unknown to me, I didn't really have anything at stake and it turned into one of the best, most fruitful parts of my writing life. The other thing is working between two polar opposites; don't choose sides. You can hone your voice, but I think it's really a good idea, once you feel like you've gotten something down and you're really good at it step back from it and go do something else. The worst thing is it becomes like a gimmick. You know, if you get really good at line-breaks, for instance, so that's great, don't become the poet of line breaks, go find something else to learn. I'm a big believer in getting out of your comfort zone, but then again, the program that I teach in has a travel component where most of the students travel. We have a field experience where we usually take students to places like Ecuador or Vietnam, something really other than what they're used to, but the idea is that we think getting you physically out of your comfort zone is good for writing because it forces you to be resilient in ways that you wouldn't be normally and all of that kind of stuff gets into your writing. So whether you're actually, physically removing yourself from comfort or intellectually through your reading, through your writing, I think that's always super good for you as a writer.

# About Our Contributors

KYLE BRODERICK is a freelance Portrait and Wedding Photographer from New London, attending Southern Connecticut State University for a BA in Graphic Design.

HALIMA CECUNJANIN is a senior majoring in philosophy. She enjoys hiking, taking photographs, and pondering the nature of being. After graduation, she hopes to backpack in New Zealand and various parts of the world.

MADISON CSEJKA is a freshman at SCSU with three cats and a Netflix subscription. Her hobbies include doing puzzles, watching Jeopardy, and editing her friends' essays. You can always find her at your local Chipotle.

JESSICA CUMMINGS is a senior studying creative writing and psychology. She spends her free time tap dancing and drinking too much coffee. She likes to take photos of trees, dogs, and zombies. Before attending Southern, Jessica was a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where she achieved 7 O.W.L.'s.

TERRI DAVIS is an English Major at Southern Connecticut State University with the intention to teach in secondary education. Reading and writing has always been her passion. She used to skip her high school classes frequently to spend her day reading at bookstores instead of being cool like other teenagers. She is a mother and a *slightly* older non-traditional student – How do you do, fellow kids? She is insanely jealous of those majoring in creative writing and is honored to have one of her poems chosen for Folio.

MELANIE DEFRANK is a senior at SCSU majoring in Psychology with a minor in English. Writing is a passion of hers that helps make the boring days adventurous and the strenuous a bit more fun. She finds writing cathartic and sees reading as a way to better connect with and understand the world. Melanie hopes to pursue a career in psychology, but plans to continue writing however and whenever she can.

DANI DYMOND is a senior at Southern Connecticut State University, where the twenty-two-year-old is finishing up her undergraduate degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She plans on reverting back to her home state of California in the fall of 2016 to complete her MFA degree, a goal she has always dreamed of accomplishing. Her poetry has been published in various collections, such as several college publications in both Connecticut and California, and independent journals like *Outrageous Fortune* and *Young Ravens Literary Review*. She hopes to someday publish her creative writing regularly while pursuing a career as a

AMANDA GELADA is a thoughtful and dedicated sophomore who is majoring in Elementary Education and works at a preschool in her hometown of Naugatuck. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her family and friends. She captures memories by taking photographs.

CARLIN HUCKEL is a senior English Major who focuses in creative writing. She can often be found listening to emo music, playing video games, or crying about both of those things. Carlin also loves animals of all kinds, and hopes they feel the same about her.

ROSITA LAUREANO is a senior graduating in the spring of 2016 with a Bachelor's Degree in Graphic Design. She has always been a shy person but is not afraid to take the initiative and explore new things within art. Her motivation in art reflects her dedication to academics as her determination is put towards anything she sets her mind to accomplish.

RYAN MEYER is a senior working towards a double major in English and Media Studies. He is the President of the English Club on campus, Bookmarks, and he has had work published in Freshwater Poetry Magazine and the Beechwood Review. Ryan enjoys long walks to the fridge, embarrassing himself and others on a regular basis, and terrible puns.

ANDREW NEELS is right handed. A long time ago he got lost in the mall after hiding inside the circular clothing racks. A boy he did not know ate ice cream and stared back through faux foliage. Andrew prefers wings to drumsticks. Andrew prefers the corner seat.

KIERNAN NORMAN is a junior in the Theatre Department. She has appeared in the films *Letters to Iza*, *Tilt Shift*, *Toddler Control* and *The Hollow Waltz*, among others. Kiernan recently competed in Region 1's Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival and was awarded first place for both her work in dramatic criticism and dramaturgy. Her poetry has appeared on newsstands nationally in *Entity Magazine*, as well as on web issues of *Germ Magazine*, *The Insomniac Propagandist*, *Wild Quarterly* and *Contraposition Magazine*. Her piece 'I don't write love poems' narrated the arthouse film *Languor of Life*, directed by Wouter Hoes, and was among the finalists in Amsterdam's 2015 Short Cutz Film Festival. Forever alive, forever forward.

MARY RUDZIS is a sophomore journalism major and studio art minor. She spends her time being a crazy vegan and president of the campus Humane Society club, going to shows, and getting tattoos. She is also often on the search for vegan baked goods, and cute animal pictures on the Internet.

GARY SCARAMELLA is an English major in his sophomore year. In his free time, Gary often attempts to pursue creative ventures such as music or art; however, these attempts usually result in long hours of staring at walls and repeatedly strumming the same chord while gently murmuring unintelligible nonsense. He runs Homebody Records, a music and art collaborative which you should totally get involved with!

SAM SCHWIND is a part-time villanelles and full-time villainess studying English and psychology at SCSU. She works as a writing tutor at SCSU, guiding other students through essays while procrastinating her own. An avid lover of words, Sam enjoys writing Found poetry and reading books about people. Her other interests include fortune-telling, love stories, making collages from old magazines, and all dogs ever.

ALLISON SHANNON is a third year English student, concentrating in creative writing. She started writing when she was twelve, and she hopes to continue to produce short stories and novels for as long as she can. When she's not writing or studying, Allison enjoys reading any available book, playing the latest video game on her PC, and blogging about politics and pop culture.

AMANDA SMERIGLIO is a senior creative writing student (fueled by a slight addiction to Mountain Dew.) Wants to live a life worth writing a memoir about one day, but for now she mostly writes poems and cringe-worthy journal entries.

ZANNY STOWELL is an SCSU senior studying Creative Writing in the English department. She is pleased to say that this is her third fiction publication in Folio, and probably the least weird, which isn't really saying much. She would like to thank her parents, for their unwavering support, and her adviser, Tim Parrish, for helping her hone her craft.

PAIGE TILLINGHAST is a twenty-two year old graduating senior, majoring in English with a concentration in literature. When she's not planning ways she'd like to rescue animals around the world or taking on a new student leadership role, she's attempting to write or has her face stuck in one of her favorite fantasy or young adult fiction novels. She loves anything to do with Harry Potter, and while she isn't exactly sure what she wants to do with her life just yet she knows she wants to help people grow and appreciate life in whatever way they perceive it.

BIANCA VERNALI is a sophomore at SCSU who enjoys the simple things in life since they are always more meaningful. She is taking on life challenges one day at a time and continues to try and make sense of the world we live in. She desires to master the raw beauty of the female body along with many natural aspects of nature. Ms.Vernali is currently on a journey to fill her life with the art of creation that supplies a boundless amount of color, beauty, and happiness.

# Folio would like to thank....

Everyone who contributed their work

Jeff Mock

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The Media Board

Open-mic participants & reading attendees

Featured readers and artists

Tom Dorr

Bookmarks English Club

Daphney Alston

Charlene Cammarasana

SCSU English Department

Sarah Pemberton Strong

Marty Williams

Muffy Pendergast

Sheila Squillante

Past Folio staff

The Fireplace Lounge

The assortment of old photos in the office

The broken fish sculpture

Avocados

Coffee