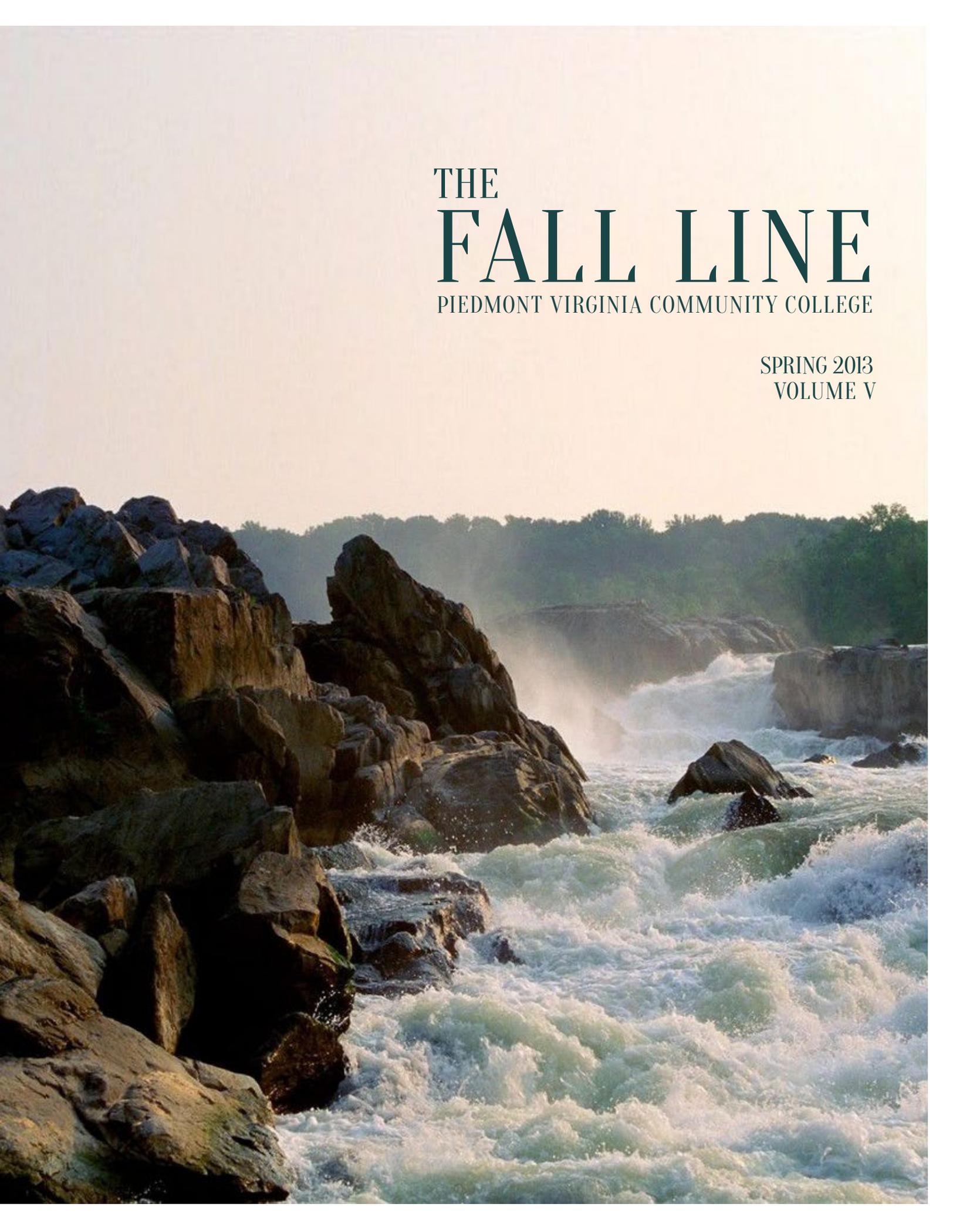


THE  
FALL  
LINE  
2013







THE  
FALL LINE  
PIEDMONT VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

SPRING 2013  
VOLUME V

# THE FALL LINE

Spring 2013  
volume V

The Fall Line, Spring 2013, is the fifth volume selected, edited, and produced by the PVCC Creative Writing Club.

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This year, in addition to our submissions, **THE FALL LINE** is publishing the three winning essays from the college's QEP [Quality Enhancement Plan] Essay Contest.

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# METANOIA

\me-tə-'nɔɪ-ə\  
*noun*

A transformative change of heart, especially spiritual



*Daughter of the Stars ~ Sarah Murphy*

# BLUE SILK

DANA RIGGS

Last night, I was on the phone too late.

I talked outside, under a deep, starry sky. The Milky Way was a dusty stripe in the blue silk. I lay on the hood of my car.

On the other end, I heard him laugh, dry and quiet, and I reached up and trapped a star between my thumb and forefinger. For a second, I thought that maybe I could catch it, pull it down and stow it in my pocket. It seemed so close. He seemed close, too.

I got up and walked barefoot down the center of the street. As I neared the corner, I saw the moon coming up. It was huge and orange and half-full. It sailed slowly upward over the black tree line on the horizon, and I was the only one awake to watch it.

Last night, I was on the phone too late. I should have hung up an hour earlier. But my velvet weariness beautifully matched the silken sky, and my solitude matched perfectly the sound of his laughter.



*Pool ~ Nalani Williams*

# PAUL ABERCROMBIE'S HAND

JOHN RUDOLPH

We were all around 15, I think, and used to hang out on those late summer nights in the neighborhood park. This was before the time when people would freak out if they knew teenagers were hanging outside this late at night. You probably remember those nights during summer breaks yourself, where you and your friends would hang out practically all night, just sitting outside and talking about the world, the existence of God if there really was one, and the girls in the neighborhood and who we all liked, etc. There was never a dull moment back in those late nights, and it was on one of those nights we came to wonder about a few things of a certain kid named Paul Abercrombie.

You see, Paul wasn't an ordinary kid, by any standards, and his dad? Well, he wasn't so normal either. Paul's dad so happened to be my science teacher, and he was, well, let's say, *waaaaay out there*, and totally unlike any other teacher I'd ever know for the rest of my high school days. Mr. Abercrombie did some weird stuff. I had heard he'd trade Playboy mags with some of the guys in his class, but after school hours. We all thought he was just an old pervert. I knew that he and his son and his wife lived in the same apartment complex as we all did. Mr. Abercrombie used to do a lot of kids some big favors in the summer months and one of them was where he'd watch pets while some of his student's families went out of town to hit the lake up north, or would go away for a week or a weekend. He'd watch those animals for them for free. But whenever he got started on science stuff in class, he never ran the class the way the other teachers did, no way. He was into telling stories about scientific theory and all. He used to tell us the one about the atom particles, how some guy split up two particles, took one to Japan and the other to England and such, and how he made one spin in one way and the other one, on the other side of the planet, would spin in the opposite direction. There were no tests in Mr. Abercrombie's class. All you had to do was listen to whatever crap he had to lecture about, and you damned well better know it the next day when he'd sit on his stool and point right at you and ask something about what he said the previous day.

One time he watched this girl's cat during the summer. When we all got back to class, she was crying because Mr. Abercrombie told her the cat went missing and such and he couldn't find it. But one day a week later, Mr. Abercrombie came in with something really cool. It was the skeleton

of a cat mounted onto a piece of black wood and the bones looked like they were shellacked, I think that's how you say it. Anyway, we were all looking at it behind the glass of the cabinet where he put it, and that's when Joey Mitchell looked at Roseanne the way he always did with those giant glasses of his, real sincere-like, and he told her that this was really her cat, that Mr. Abercrombie killed it and all, and boiled the hell out of it so there was nothing left but a skeleton and he is the one who mounted it onto the wood. This freaked out Roseanne so much that she left school for a long time and got really upset. But Mr. Abercrombie kept on telling the kids that he bought the skeleton from *The Edmund Scientific catalog*.

Mr. Abercrombie and that damn scientific catalog of his. One time I met Paul Abercrombie sitting out on his front porch and it looked like he had a rocket. I asked him where he got the rocket and he said his dad got it from the Edmund Scientific catalog. Knowing them, they probably got their groceries there as well. He said he wanted to fly the damn thing but he was going to have to make rocket fuel for it, so I told him he should just buy those Estes model rocket engines we could get at the five and dime down the street and where you could get three of those engines for two bucks and they even came with recovery wadding to protect the parachute and also came with igniters. But he told me no, he wanted this thing to fly into the clouds so he was going to make his own rocket engines, fuel and all.

Paul was about as weird as his dad was. He was kind of a loner and you'd see him outside with that camera of his, snapping pictures of weird stuff, like grass, the inside of people's parked cars and such. He never really spoke to many people and I think the only reason he used to even talk to me was because I lived in the same court as he did at the apartments, and he knew I dug science and used to make my own model rockets. I remember he laughed his head off when I set the woods on fire once with my rocket. You see, I stuffed that thing with cotton balls soaked in gasoline and glued the nose cone to the body so that whenever the ejection charge lit off to release the parachute, instead, gas-soaked cotton balls would come down out of the sky. I did this at night once and the damn thing, sure enough, came down in flames, but it went into the woods. The fire department took all of my rocket stuff away, telling me *never again* to even think about making any more rockets, and that was the end of it *after* my folks grounded me for three weeks straight! They took all of my books and writing materials away and left me up in that room with nothing to do, except come downstairs for dinner, wash the dishes, and march right on back upstairs again to my room.

So anyway, Paul took this rocket into his house, and he told me to come inside. His house wasn't unlike anyone else's, except there was a bad smell of cats and litter boxes everywhere. He had like, twelve cats running around. Not only that, his curtains were always drawn up tight and it was dark as hell inside his house. The hallway was full of stacked nudie mags and newspapers. He led me down to the basement, and for the first time I saw some really cool stuff that I thought only existed in horror movies.

He and his dad had this giant lab set up in their basement. It looked like a scene from an old Boris Karloff flick. There were Bunsen burners, glass tubes, pipes of all kinds, and different colored

liquid in different beakers and such. One of the beakers, I swear to God almighty, looked like it had blood in it. There was a jar that contained a baby pig. One even had what looked like a human brain. He then showed me something in a beaker and told me to sniff it. I did, and lemme tell you, I got dizzier than a kite caught in a wind tunnel! This was the rocket fuel he made up for his rocket. Powerful stuff! I remember him saying there was something like ammonium nitrate in it, and something he called a stabilizing agent that would burn off as the rocket engine was ignited, making the rocket fuel extremely volatile and unstable, it would act like some sort of catalyst, but he said that his rocket would take off like a lightning bolt once that engine ignited. The rocket was made totally of aluminum and it looked *almost exactly* like the rocket in that movie where people had to leave the earth to avoid the collision with another planet. It was slick and silvery and such. I asked him if he was going to paint it and he said no, that this was the only color he wanted because he'd be able to track it down better as it gleamed in the sunlight when he launched it.

I hung around a while in his basement. That's about the time when my hand landed in something furry, and I realized what it was. It was a cat skin, dude. I ain't even lying. It was a genuine cat skin. That's when I decided to leave well enough alone and get the hell out of Paul Abercrombie's basement. Besides, it was time for me to head home for lunch, and that is exactly what I did.

Well, *you know* what happened after that just a day later. That's right, there was this huge BANG. I woke up to this ear shattering explosion. I looked out my window with this goddamn ringing in my ears, and sure enough, from across the court I could see thick black smoke looming out of the Abercrombie basement windows. It looked as if he had been burning tires down there. That's how black this smoke was. I could even see a fire. I went into my mom's room and she woke up, freaking out. We could then hear sirens off in the distance and they got louder as fire trucks roared into the apartment complex. Sure as anything, everyone in the damn neighborhood came to check it out. The ambulance guys came in and took out a body and it had a blanket over the head, which told me and the fellahs in the neighborhood that someone had died. There was a really bad smell coming out of Paul's basement windows. I was betting it was that goddamned rocket fuel that he was mixing and it blew up. Maybe he forgot to add the stabilizer and it went off, who knows. But man, that summer was unforgettable. Turned out that Paul was hurt really bad and all. He lost an eyeball and also his left hand. It broke off at the elbow, so actually he lost his hand *and* the forearm bit as well. We all felt bad for him, but something else happened that summer. Mr. Abercrombie and his old lady split up and we never heard from her again because she moved out. She probably got sick and tired of our old science teacher. So, Mr. Abercrombie and his son ended up alone in that apartment, sitting around eating Chef Boy-ar-Dee Beefaroni, and watching Bugs Bunny, but let me get back to telling you about Paul and his injuries and such, and what happened.

Paul ended up with a damn pair of steel *hooks* mounted on the stub of his arm. He looked like something out of a grindhouse flick. But he had a flesh tone colored piece of wood dangling from the stump where his forearm used to be. It looked a bit insulting as if to say *goddamn right I am a real arm*. The hooks were attached to a steel cable that ran up this fake wooden pink arm, attached to eyehooks like a rudder cable on a radio controlled model plane. His face was all twisted up, and where there used to be an eyeball was nothing but a pair of fused up shut eyelids. Man, he looked like something from a horror movie. During that Indian summer, the other kids at school would



*Raven ~ Natalya Majorin*

tease him, calling him a freak and all. This was about the same time, oddly enough, that Paul and I became best friends.

During the winter that followed, I used to wonder about something, but I was afraid to ask Paul the question. My friends I hung out with used to ask *me* to ask *him* the question, but I couldn't do it. These jerkoffs wanted to know that one thing I wanted to know too: *What happened to your arm and where did it go?* You know, *that* question, the one that any right minded teenager would want to know, but were afraid to ask. We'd probably go to bed at night asking ourselves what the hell happened to his arm and all. Did it end up getting thrown out by the hospital? Did it end up getting incinerated? Or, even more interesting: Did Mr. Abercrombie salvage the arm and mount it, probably like he did to Roseanne Ross's cat? Well, as those winter months passed, none of us asked that question. It was too bizarre to even think about (but all of us did anyway) and one day we even sat around the park's ice rink and asked ourselves if maybe we were all warped by just thinking about it. We just threw it off, put on our skates and played an intense game of ice hockey.

As the years went on, I graduated from high school with honors. Mr. Abercrombie retired the year before from teaching; Paul moved out of the apartment complex and ended up taking drugs and stuff, probably because his mind was so messed up from the accident. I had this full year's scholarship to the University of Michigan because I won the John Philip Sousa Award in high school band. I was also thinking about becoming an animal doctor. But, one day, I went down to the navy recruiting office and went into the navy, full bore, and went on to finish up with twenty years under my belt.

Well, you know that bit already. So now I bet you're going to ask me to move on with the damn story, so here goes.

I met this girl in Spain, we fell in love, we got married, and one time when my ship went out to sea, she decided to cheat on me and so there I was, left alone and with an apartment so full of stuff that I decided to give it all away and move back onboard the ship as a single man. I decided I'd go back up to Michigan and all, to visit my parents for a couple of weeks to just relax. I flew up that way and dad picked me up, so we went on back to the apartment complex where they lived. During one of my days in Michigan I ran into some of my old buddies from the neighborhood. Johnny Granger got married and he was divorced, just like I was about to be. Steve Orendorf, he was still single and got a job at Farmer Jack's as a manager; and Charlie Barclay was doing roadie work for the rock band heavies that used to come to Detroit; what a cool job to have. Anyway, Paul Abercrombie's name soon came up. Seems he was back in town and became a complete screw-up on dope. Steve said he was on some serious drugs and became homeless and such. I felt bad for Paul, man, let me tell you. He was a good kid in high school and he just turned into a freak after his accident. I have to say at this point, I really felt bad for him. Know what I mean?

One day as I was walking out of the Southland shopping mall, I heard a voice call out my name. Sure as hell, it was Paul Abercrombie. He was looking like he was still tripping out and

looked like he had slept in a garbage can. He asked me what happened and why did I get all of my hair cut off. I told him I was in the navy. Feeling bad for him, I took him to that Greek restaurant down on Fort Street, and he chowed down on some *souvlakis* like no man has ever eaten before. He said he wished he could've done something with his life, how he even met a girl he liked, and they broke up mainly because of the same shit that happened to me and such. By this time, you know what? That freaky damn question we used to ask each other came up in my mind, so guess what – I dropped the question on his lap like I would drop a hot steam iron on someone's chest, who was sound asleep, just to watch them wake up suddenly, screaming in pain. *What happened to that arm of yours?* I really needed to find out. Surprise, out of the blue one day, he started to tell me. But it freaked me out the way that he did. He looked right well *annoyed*. I felt as if I was asking him the darkest of secrets. Although he looked like he was really angry, he barked out the story, but it bewildered me the way he told it.

Seems that Paul's dad got the arm from the basement right before the ambulance and fire trucks arrived. Being the damn psychopathic lunatic he seemed to be, he put the arm inside a steel tool box, took that real horror show looking thing to the woods and buried it underneath an old oak tree that had fallen down some years ago but was never seen again. That's all he knew. But when I told him that I wanted to find it to see it with my own eyes, he told me to leave it well enough the hell alone. Paul also went on to tell me how his mom ended up committing suicide and his dad, well, he took a really bad stroke one day and fell down a set of stairs, snapped his damn neck in three places, and he died with a chunk of meat and cartilage sticking out from the side near his right ear. Paul went through some major stuff though. I gotta tell you. Sure as anything, Paul was living in his old car, the same car he had a few years back, an old beaten up olive green Ford Maverick with a raggedy black Naugahyde top. After the lunch we had, I went back to my parent's apartment, went up to my room, and took a nap.

Soon after, I woke up, and started to think about what Paul said to me, what his dad did with his arm and such, and sure as shit, this got me thinking and wondering out loud: *I wonder if that old toolbox can be found?*

Instead of eating dinner with my folks, I told them I wasn't hungry, and that very late afternoon I decided to jump the fence over by the creek and headed out into the woods. Realizing it might grow dark out there as the sun set, I took one of those honkin' huge flashlights I found under the kitchen sink at the apartment along with me. I crossed the creek at the same place where my friends and I once built a dam and that same shopping cart from K-Mart was in the creek where we put it there years ago. I went on into the thicket. *Where was that oak tree at,* I wondered, as I marched on into the cool autumn air. To make matters a bit dreary, it sure was getting right *dark and spooky* in these woods already. Suddenly I got this anxious and edgy feeling that I was being watched. At one point I stood by a tree, and I caught someone moving off to what would be about my eight o' clock position, right over my left shoulder. That really freaked me out. *I started to feel that I was being stalked.*

I went all through the woods, even past Coate's hill where we used to go for tobogganing down the hill and all and even where one time we stole a kid's big wheel and rolled down that same hill faster than that goddamn plastic tricycle ever moved in its life. I crossed the same field where I used to launch my model rockets, and that's when I started asking *I wonder what happened to that aluminum rocket Paul had*, and how I would like to have that. Anyway, as sure as anything can be, I could see it directly ahead, plain as day – my intended location. I spotted an old fallen oak tree. It was still partially alive, or may have somehow managed to survive the fall. I went over there, and started looking around. Nothing seen, no spot where anyone might've buried this damn arm of Paul's, but then again, if it *was* buried, the spot might never be found unless someone who was smarter than me took along a trusty metal detector and dug the grisly thing up. So as I started walking away, I felt my foot hit something with a *CLICK*. This turned out to be the rusty handle of a damn tool box, sticking out of the ground, halfway buried like. *Come and get me*, it seemed to cry out. I dropped to the ground and began moving old, smelly leaves out of the way. Sure enough, Mr. Abercrombie, being the lazy son of a bitch he was, didn't bury the toolbox. Instead, he buried the damn thing with leaves in a low point of the ground. All it took for me to do was dig up the leaves with my hands, and soon enough I got to the point of digging around a rusty old toolbox. Sure as anything, you know what my next step was: to open the toolbox!

I carefully sprung open the two latches that held it shut. Inside, I found the nasty remains of a forearm and a hand. Believe it or not, you know how you'd think that after all these years the flesh would have rotted off? I mean, this thing even smelled bad. Some of his skin had clung to the bones like dry parchment paper. It was hideous – it was just sitting in that old rusty toolbox and was unceremoniously placed in there. But there was a note inside. It read:

*Dear John,*

*You really shouldn't have come here looking for my arm. I am watching you, right now. I am standing right behind you, crouched low in the brush. Don't look around, I don't want you to see me when I get ready to swing these steel hooks of mine deep into the base of your skull, just as I've done with those other creepy bastards you knew as friends.*

*Try your very best not to scream. We don't want to disturb anyone.*

*Sincerely,  
Paul Abercrombie*



Lino ~ Alison Watkins

# I WAS A SURLY TEENAGER

RYAN HARRIS

QEP Essay Contest Winner

I was a surly teenager.

There wasn't much behind my surliness: teenage angst, certainly; a touch of egocentrism, of course. These things are typical (or, at least, I like to think that they are), and they are things that everyone experiences. I blamed my parents, my classmates and my friends for my dissatisfaction with my life. I'd had numerous conversations with similarly "burdened" peers in which we bemoaned our lots in life, the family members that didn't understand us, and other such things. During these conversations, we carefully kept the blame off of ourselves. This is normal.

I was also immensely drawn to books. Fantasy books, specifically—there was something about the hacking-and-slashing Dragon-slaying adventurousness that piqued my interest, but mostly it was the concept of The Hero. In these books, The Hero was always kind, always a listener as well as a speaker; he understood the problems of others and did what he could to lessen the sufferings of the people that he cared about. More than anything else, I wanted to be a Hero of some sort. So, one night, after a long period of time spent deliberating on the matter, I identified the traits that I wanted to cultivate in myself; these were listening, understanding and kindness. After figuring out what I wanted to be, I brainstormed for actions that I could take in order to better embody these traits.

My first step was to bring a tray full of brownies to school. For all of my failings, I could make a mean brownie, and I always got joy from eating them (and honestly, I'd thought, even a bad brownie is a good thing). So I brought these brownies and gave one to each person that I passed by, even if I didn't know them or if they had been mean to me in the past. This is a tradition that continued, taking place every second and fourth Monday throughout my junior and senior years of high school. This was a Kind Act that I understood, one that was easy for me to use as a stepping stone.

My second step was to stop talking about my problems and listen, instead, to other people. In

writing, this seems insignificant and small, but it was probably the hardest step to take. Listening to someone—really listening to them and hearing the things that they are saying—is a difficult thing to do; it requires attention and care. I began to learn about other people and how to empathize with them; this is no insignificant feat, especially for an egocentric teen. These traits—listening, understanding and kindness—were, to me, the core of Compassion.

In time, I began to take more steps. There were meditative practices that I'd read about that were geared toward developing this thing called Compassion. I practiced them, extended kindness to people outside of my small circle of friends. I began volunteering with a club at school, helping clean up the nearby beaches. I made it my mission to perform at least one kind act every day. At first, I was proud of myself for doing these things; I was being the Hero. Then I began to forget to notice that I was doing them. This, too, is an element of Compassion.

Finally, I graduated high school. I felt the need to leave home, go somewhere else. I didn't like who I was, didn't want to be around people who remembered me as I had been. I moved away, drove a thousand miles to remake myself. I ended up in Richmond, Virginia, living in a tiny apartment with an aunt who had been looking for a roommate. I found a job and worked to make myself the very image of Independence, and worked to obliterate all of the parts of me that I didn't want: the shy parts, the awkward parts, the scared parts.

It took a long time before I realized how impossible it is to get rid of these aspects of oneself. For the better part of a year, I thrust myself into situations that I was uncomfortable with, hoping that I would somehow come out of them stronger. As time went on, though, I began to realize my error: compassion isn't just something that you do for other people. Compassion involves forgiving and loving oneself; by doing this, one can better forgive and love others.

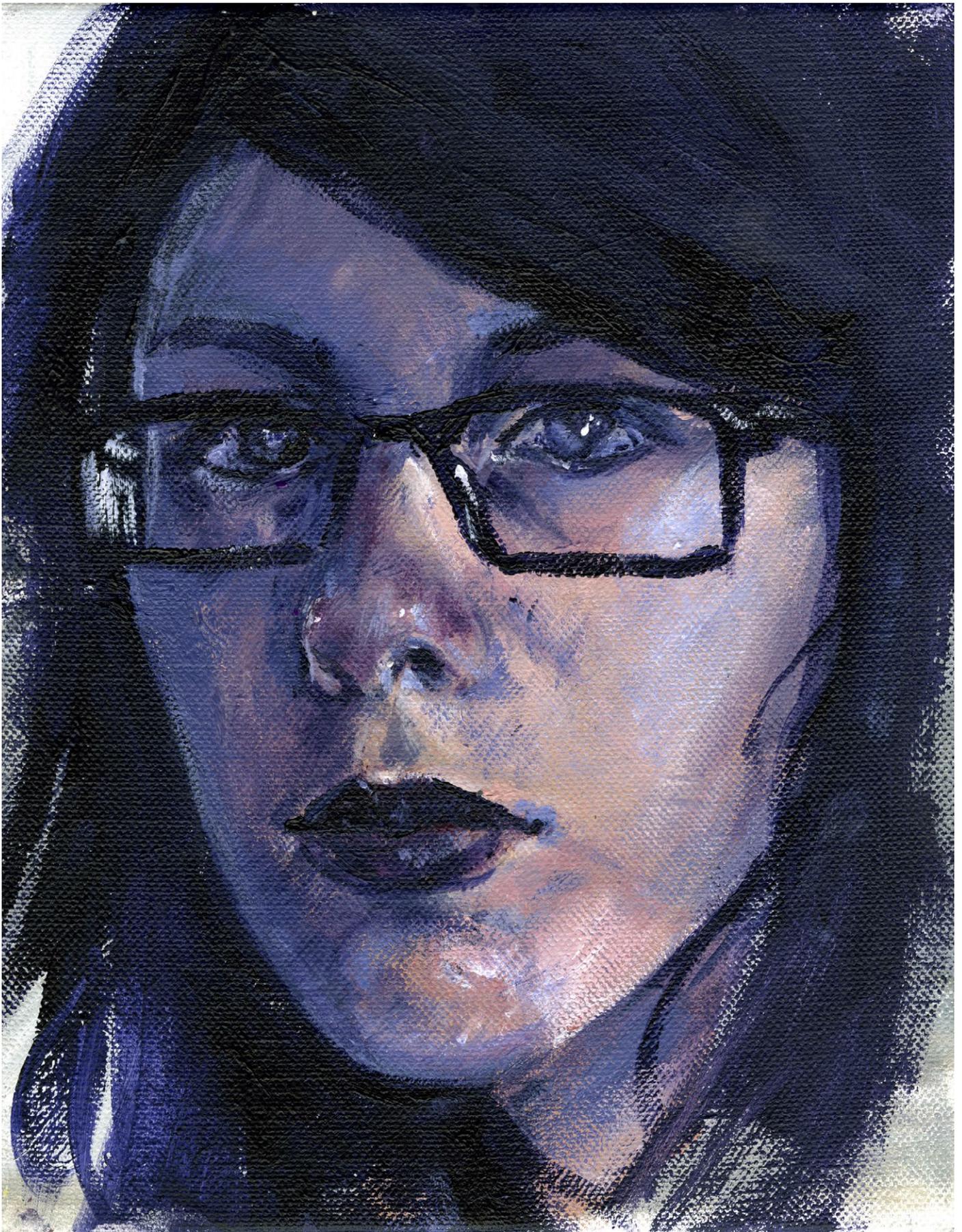
Loving oneself and forgiving oneself, however, is much more easily said than done. After all, we've all done things that we're ashamed of. We've all done things that we hate. We've all hurt other people. We've all been hurt.

It took a while, but I realized that part of being a compassionate human being is realizing that everyone is hurting and everyone is scarred. The compassionate person has to be able to see that and love other people, regardless of these hurts, these scars. Doing so allows us to grow as people, enables us to become something that creates change in the world. From everything that I've seen, from all of the people that I've spoken to, this seems to be the reason why we're here in the first place.

We're here to love.



#1 ~ Austin Rich



*Self Portrait ~ Clara James*

# ROOTS, TREES, AND SAPPLINGS

REBEKKAH GIBSON

Take a look around this house;  
trees and wood stacks and tumbleweed in the breeze,  
only some several yards from the gentle street,  
with furry little creatures on little cat feet  
and Emma sitting tall.  
But caution my memories, please don't fall  
into a deep fold  
before I can hold  
you close to me.  
You: so many, many memories.

Oh, how these roots have made me strong!  
Lasted me this long,

and will continue to last me forever still.  
Heaven looks down with a delightful shrill.  
Here he comes cradling with the corner of his heart,  
his precious, most blinding art,

that little baby girl wrapped in his arms.  
Echoing along the hills are the many farms,  
but here he is priceless across the grass;  
soft against the grown man's laugh.

This is our family, our love in all.  
I am about to crawl  
over his arms to that safe stead,  
but I take a picture here instead.

He has my heart, my soul too,  
for, I laugh, how quickly it flew!  
Latched itself onto his devoted core  
which I couldn't help but adore.

I smile  
so benign  
and step a little further,  
and give a little murmur,  
whispering sweet somethings to my daughter,  
and then to my husband, a sweet kiss I offer.

This is my home.

# HURTING TRUTH COMES WITH UNEXPECTED EPIPHANY

HEEYUN (JASON) JOO

Halo—I didn’t see it when his heart drew a horizontal line with a long beeping sound followed by dead silence. Bright light—he might have seen it, but I didn’t. I wasn’t there when his life was turned off by a doctor with his parents’ permission, but I was sure that he would get better treatment than the hospital’s treatment in either world, heaven or the earth.

I was 9-years-old when I got out early from my elementary school. It was a fairly sunny day after a few hours of rain; a perfect day for a funeral.

My parents took me to my grandparents’ house right after I got home. While we were in the car, I tried to break the unusual silence.

I tried to guess why we were going to my grandparents’ house all of sudden, why I was pulled out of school early. “I heard Grandpa and Grandma just finished remodeling their home!”

“Yeah, honey. It looks like a brand new house,” Mom replied in a low and awkward voice.

I knew my guess was wrong, but I felt she was not in the mood for talking, so I remained silent.

The smell of new furniture tickled our noses as we entered the house. I looked around, shocked because the house was nothing like how I remembered or imagined it to be. I started to wonder why we were there. I noticed my parents were having a serious conversation with aunts, uncles and grandparents. It did not look like a celebration for the newly remodeled house. Now even more curious, I went to my mom.

“Mom, are we here because John is sick?” I asked, pretending I did not see the serious conversation between them.

I became the spotlight at the moment.

“..... Yes, yes we are honey.” Mom answered with a deep, dismal voice that I had never heard before in my life.

I returned to the spot where I was hanging out with my brother and cousins. I wasn't too concerned about the reason we were there; I was just happy about skipping the rest of the school day. I was worried about John being sick, but I thought it was momentary. However, I did not know that the happy day would turn into one of the most tragic moments of my life.

Everything had started a few weeks earlier. My cousin, John, had been standing at the street corner, waiting for a bus and holding a balloon in his hand. He was 15-years-old. Although I wasn't there, once I tried to imagine what happened to him, it became an unforgettable scene.

John tried to inflate the balloon despite the strong winds he was facing. However, when he was inhaling the air through his nose, a gust knocked his face and forced a rubber piece deep inside his throat.

Five minutes was all he had to find a way to live. He must have been running around with soundless yelling from his mouth. His lungs must have filled with the smell of rubber instead of fresh air. His tongue must have tasted frustration towards people who were wondering, What's wrong with this kid?

After four minutes and fifty nine seconds, John must have known that he would no longer live, that he wouldn't be able to spend his time with us, his family. John must have realized that even a little rubber piece is capable of blocking a passage between life and death. At the same moment, I realized the body we saw at the hospital was John's body breathing, without the presence of his soul.

I tried to convince myself that John was just sick. He would be okay very soon and would play with us like he used to, with his angelic smile (condensing the sentence). But my Maginot line collapsed when I got the answer from my father.

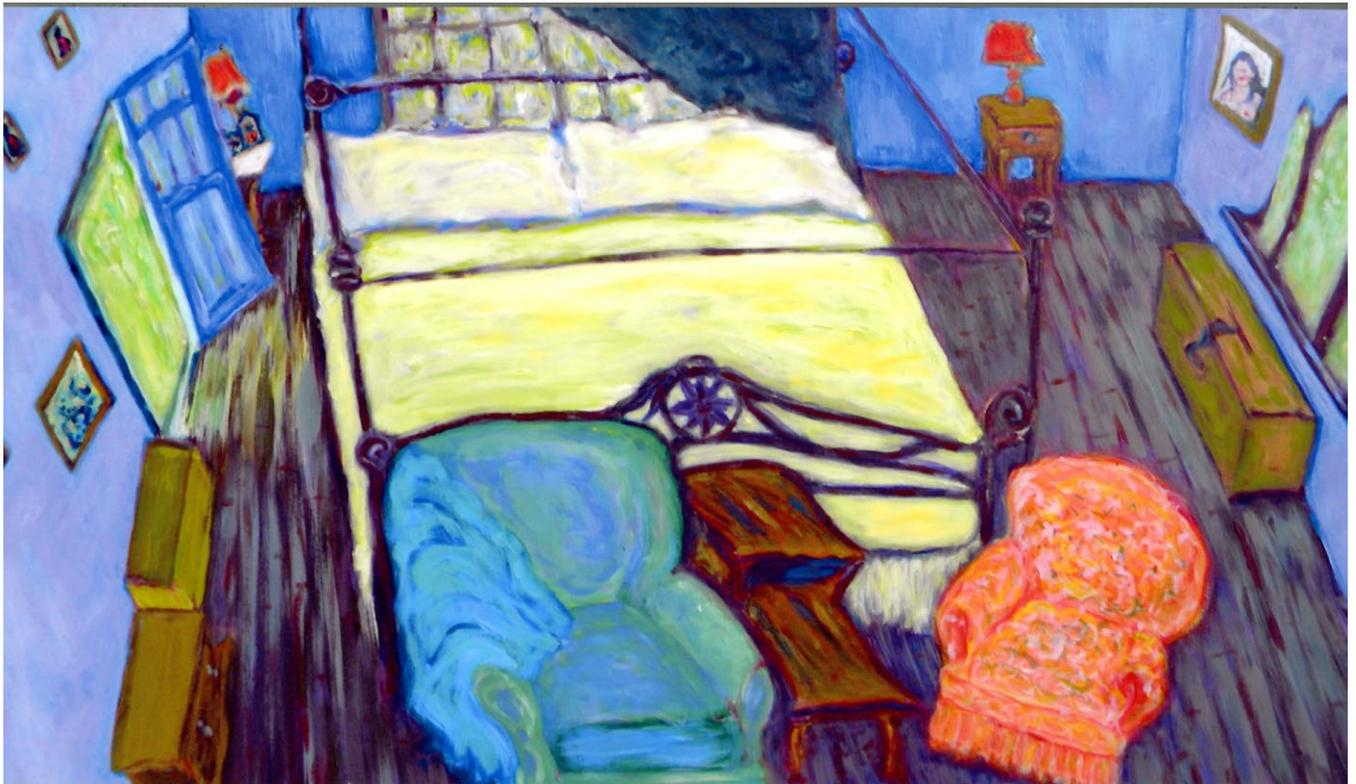
On a week day morning, I called my father to my bed. I threw a question at him. “Dad, isn’t John going to be okay?”

Father looked confused; he seemed to be trying to find the right words to say. “Well, son, the Lord called him before us. He needed him so badly.”

My cousin’s body was placed in the crematory on a clear sunny day. I stood with my mom watching John becoming millions of pieces. It was terrifying and depressing. I thought, “From this moment, I will not be able to laugh much during the family reunion.” But I was wrong.

After a few months, everything went back to the way it used to be. Even John’s parents went back to work. I was furious that they went back to their normal lives when John was not there anymore.

However, I did not know that I was one of them as well. When I was in middle school, I suddenly remembered John, but not a single tear was coming out from my eyes. I remembered from Biology class that ‘Humans adjust themselves to the environment.’ I never thought that what I learned from my Biology class would have anything to do with my personal life, relational life. I still have an image of John playing board games with me, but since that day thirteen years ago when I cried all day long, no tears have come out.



*At Arles ~ Stacy Sheer*



*Pear 5&6*



# OUR TEARS

ANNA MURPHY

QEP Essay Contest Winner

Devan's mother was not a stranger. I'd spent time with her on half a dozen occasions. I always told Devan that her mom's mannerisms reminded me of my stepmom. Devan's mother, Laura, was usually joyful and always wanted to make sure we were having a good time. I'd never seen her in disarray or upset, so when she came to Devan's apartment in tears, that was a first. At the time, I didn't know it was to be one of the last occasions Devan and I would see her alive.

I held the telephone in my hand, having no clue how to talk to someone who'd lost a mother. Devan wasn't particularly close to her mom, so I wasn't sure how I should approach her with my condolences. I'd known her for five years, and at that moment, no number of our good or bad memories together could help me. I decided to just call-- it was my duty.

"Hello?" Devan's soft voice answered.

"Hi, it's Anna, I read about what happened."

Immediately the shift in atmosphere was felt over the phone. I was hesitant to say anything more, but felt that my friend needed to hear a voice of familiarity. I did not regret my decision to call, as Devan sounded relieved to hear from me. Half an hour later, I hung up feeling better about calling, yet worse about hearing what had happened. She was pleased that I'd called. I was the first person to call and send my condolences. Devan assured me that my call was not at a bad time, at least given the circumstances. It had been about two or three days since she heard the news, and for the most part her sadness was in remission.

It wasn't for another two or three weeks after that fateful day that I'd truly understand her pain. It took a Friday night with a box of wine to bring the subject up into conversation. When the subject of her mother, Laura, came up, it was like being hit with the news article all over again.

We spoke about our relationships with our parents. Part of why Devan and I got along so well was because each of us were capable of understanding the difficulties we faced in those relationships. Both of our fathers were compulsive liars, and each held their daughters at arm's length. My father never gave straight answers. I'd always have to decipher between what was truth and what was fiction. His lies varied from small to large, one of the largest being that he had a 26-year-old son he had never mentioned it. Despite all the issues I had with my dad, Devan told me that I should take advantage of having him because his number might come up suddenly, and then I'd never have those opportunities to talk to him again.

Our mothers were both delusional women, never in check with reality. Their children suffered from the consequences. Devan's mother, Laura, was easily manipulated by others. She had been in a relationship with a man who had taken advantage of her overly active imagination, and made her believe that he was a legitimate businessman. For years Devan had pleaded with her mom to see the truth about this man; she constantly tried to snap Laura back to reality. This man was a wedge between them, stopping any relationship from forming. When Laura did finally learn the truth, it was ten years too late.

The deeper our conversation went, the closer we came to crying. When a hot tear rolled down Devan's face, I cried too. She sat on her corner of the bed and held her face in her hands. It was the first time I'd ever seen my friend cry so hard. Devan was a very reserved person, always nervous about how her actions would translate to others. The image of her slender form crying helplessly into her hands was overwhelming for me. I felt like I was watching a stranger cry, but she was one of my closest and most cherished friends. My chest ached and I felt a sour ball of emotion rise into the back of my throat. My friend, my "brain twin" as we used to call each other, was so miserable, and I felt her misery. What was worse, I knew I did not hold the power to lift that loss from her heart.

The minutes passed like hours, and we held each other and cried hysterically. What had been a light shedding of tears for me had transformed into an episode of extreme sadness. I'd never expe-

rienced losing a loved one, especially not someone as important as a parent. Yet in an evening I had experienced it through the eyes of another, and it had weakened my body and my mind.

Devan had not had an easy life. Her father struggled to make ends meet, and Devan usually received the pleasures of life such as clothing or high end chocolate through the kindness of others. Her childhood had suffered because of constant poverty.

At the climax of our anguish, I lightly lifted her head from my chest and said, from the bottom of my heart, "I am so sorry for what has happened to you."

Never in my life had I meant something so sincerely.

Devan looked at me with her shining eyes, her face wet with tears. In a raspy voice choked by emotion she replied, "Thank you."

The next morning, waking up in my home, I felt as if I'd hiked up and down mountainous trails without food or water. My body was sore, and my eyes burned. Despite my physical discomfort, I felt that I'd truly not only helped my friend get through the hardship, but that I'd helped myself to understand compassion, to mentally and physically feel someone else's feelings. I learned that there is a distinct difference between compassion and understanding. We can look at a person's situation and understand the difficulties they are experiencing. Yet when we feel compassion towards that person, we are emotionally involved, and our feelings are parallel to the other.



*Cactus ~ Allison Smith*

# CRIMSON MEMORIES

MARIA CHAPMAN

Why is it, that as a writer  
I rarely express myself (by or with) the art form I am “talented” at?  
Instead I keep a pensive expression fixed on my face.  
The similes, short stories, thoughts and memories swallow my want to be social.  
Simply, because I’ve found something massive and I need to put these eclectic ideas into  
words.  
I rub the skin behind my ears with my index finger.  
Three fingers wait on my earlobes and my thumb rests on God’s imaginary hand.



*Untitled ~ Susan Otis*

# TRIP TO FLORIDA

ALEXANDRINA TVERSKY

I have a very emotional and reactive personality. I engage easily, I raise my voice, I use my hands and I assume a lot. I have gone to many seminars to learn how to deal with my over-grown ego telling me to take over or to fight, how to develop emotional intelligence, and how to interact with people in more peaceful and productive ways. The seminars were helpful at some level, but mostly I have to remember the techniques to make them work. And because emotions and rational thinking reside in different hemispheres of the brain, I still struggle here and there. I also find this kind of struggle interferes with my driving.

Since my ego from time to time takes over the wiser me, I consider myself a mediocre driver despite never having had a ticket or a collision, thank G-d. I have not had many chances, though. I have been driving for only four years. For the same reason I do not drive far away either. On all the car trips my family has gone on so far, my husband has been driving us on each and every one of them. So this past summer when we decided to drive to Tampa Bay, Florida, I saw an opportunity to try myself on the long road.

I wanted to try. I thought I could control myself and keep calm, even though I sometimes get intimidated by trucks. Their roaring bulks swish by with condemning speed, almost making my car lift and swirl in their tail current. Even some people drive in such a manner it seems they learned offensive driving. Have self-concerned tailgaters ever heard about keeping distance? They get so close, the radiator's grill practically gets pressed to my neck; I could almost feel the driver's breath behind my ears. My ego said, "Stop abruptly right in front of him. Make him scared to get that close to you!" I fought that urge and instead I learned to flip the rear-view mirror to erase that

picture of the radiator's grill from my sight and mind. And when this does not help, I exercise the golden rule of the 3 D's. In Russian, "Dai Dorogu Duraku" means "Let an idiot pass." Given my nature, it is hard for me to yield, let go, forget and move on. My ego would nag at the back of my mind, asking "Why do you let them pass? Are not you going to keep up with them?" But I consciously choose to be happy over being seemingly right because when I get angry, I am more likely to make stupid mistakes.

Even my husband, one of my harshest judges, recognizes me as a safe driver. Last fall he presented me with a new elegant silver town car. The car was not very mighty, but it had some nice features my old car did not have: continuously variable transmission, iPad and iPod connections, and, most importantly, it has a big enough trunk to hold backpacks, groceries, books, coolers, and whatever else a family of four may need to carry. Unfortunately, my prize lost a bit of its shine within the first three months with some help from one elderly lady. I was backing out of parking spot, twisting my head like a spinning top to avoid knocking over any pedestrians. They do not mind cars in parking lots. I guess they do not see the danger presented by a slow moving car. With caution I was backing into the space between two rows of parking cars, about to shift into drive, when I saw the white reversing lights of another car aiming into my new car's rear end. It was the first time I was in such a situation. Obviously, I thought slowly. I did not return to the parking spot and could not yet move forward. Instead, I started honking, trying to draw her attention to me out in the middle of the lot.

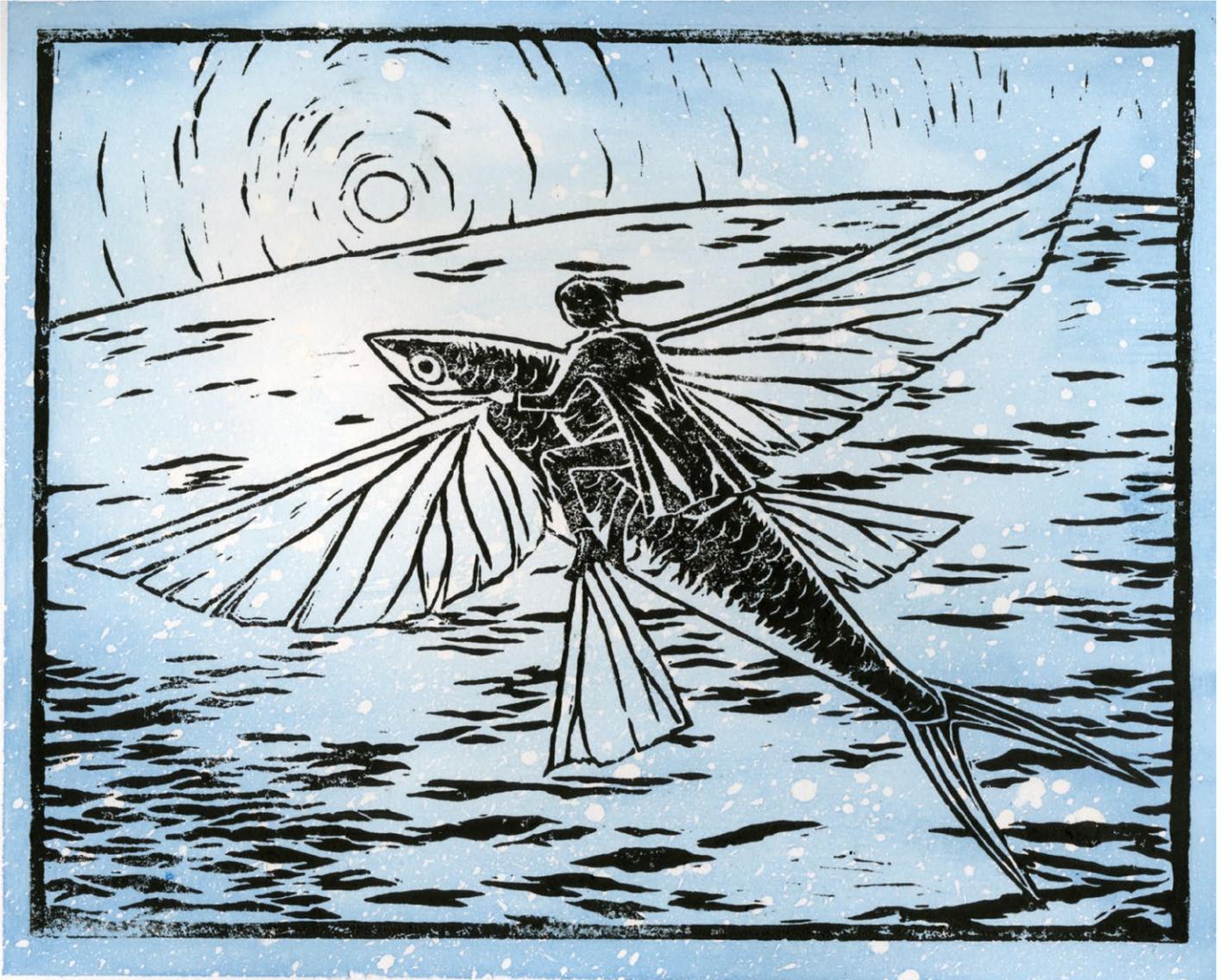
She did not even dent my car, only scratched it a bit. In that particular spot the finish was no longer smooth and sparkly. But my car was only three months old. I was furious about her lack of attention and about my own stupidity to expect an elderly person to be as agile as a youngster. I stepped out. She did too. I only remember some small details about her: neatly done, absolutely white curly hair, manicured nails, and wrinkly skin. I realized she was much more seasoned than I thought. Whatever I wanted to accuse her of got stuck in my throat—I chilled. I still wanted to remind her that she has to watch around, and for some reason, I hesitated for which word best fit the purpose: "watching" or "looking." Next moment I felt all the sensations shame can bring: cold sweat, a hot wave across my face and a tremor in my hands because "watching" and "looking" got mixed up together and I heard my mouth saying, "I wish you were walking." It was very rude considering her age and my equal participation in the fender scratching (rather than fender bender). She returned to her car and sped away. I suddenly felt like that idiot from my golden rule, to whom it is easier to yield than to protest.

I was boiling over that tiny scratch on my brand new car for another week or so. But still today I feel so embarrassed for my words. I have learned my lesson. I live close to the assisted living facility, and if I see white reversing lights (especially by the steering an elderly driver) in the rear-view mirror, I know better than to dispute who has to yield to whom. I just move as fast as I safely can from their path.

A few months after the scratch, when planning the Florida trip, my sweetheart was thinking of fun activities he and the kids could do while it was my turn to drive. It was about sixteen hours to our destination. We planned to take turns every four hours. My husband was very generous; he allowed my turn to last for two whole hours. I do not know if I am an intolerable driver or if my dear accepts only one way of doing things: his way. During my turn he found he could not stand me driving with him present. After that he took his turn and it did not end until we got there. In some places I was even happy he did. In South Carolina we rode through some town where most houses were crooked or had broken windows, many businesses were closed, grass tall and un-mown. It seemed we drove into Halloween in the middle of June. At some other place we got stuck behind a tractor pulling a strange looking agricultural machine. It had huge green arms so widely spread it was taking both lanes and there was no way to pass it. We and many other cars dragged ourselves along like small ducklings behind mother-duck for a long while. You almost could hear a sigh of relief when the tractor pulled aside. In addition, I got a feeling all the trucks from all the US gather in Florida. There were so many of them bustling about with nearly cosmic velocity. I felt much safer observing them from the passenger seat than if I had to navigate between them.

Thanks to being a passenger I could fully enjoy one of the most remarkable roads I have ever ridden on—the Sunshine Skyway Bridge to St. Petersburg, Florida. This road across the Tampa Bay meanders through water for about four miles. Somewhere in the middle, the road elevates over the sea to allow passage to ships and boats. The bridge hangs on numerous cables high in the sky. Driving over this marvel is breathtaking; it feels like flying. I was grateful I did not have to concentrate on keeping car from becoming airborne, because wind certainly tried to blow us off.

For a whole ten days in Florida and all the way back home my dear was driving all by himself. I did not object. As soon as a year ago I would have tried harder to prove to him that I was a good driver. I would make noise and talk a lot. But I did not. I did not need to. I did not feel like it. I did not want us clashing. I do want to be recognized and appreciated, but at what cost? I would rather be in peace and enjoy reading, sleeping, keeping the kids quiet, and seeing the majestic view of the roads I passed by. All of a sudden I heard Freddie Mercury singing “Surrender your ego, be free” and it dawned on me that I had changed. I guess I had started developing emotional intelligence.



*Flying Fish ~ Erin Chilton*

# 1

RYAN HARRIS

I was born a tree.

*I understand, I say.  
This is not at issue.*

But it is. A tree,  
long-limbed and twisted,  
but a tree, yes.  
I remember:  
I was ripped from bark to leaf;  
I cut off my own roots.  
I am not the first to do so.

*There was need of it,  
I say. Wasn't there?*

Need, yes, and knowing.  
There is knowing that must be had  
to shuck off the heartwood,  
lay bare the naked back.  
The need, then,  
was consequence.

*Consequence, of course.  
If there is anything at issue,  
it is consequence. Sin,  
hurt, knowing --*

Love of air and light,  
of warmth. I  
was a lover. I  
skinned myself for love.  
There came a time that I,  
as all trees do,  
left my audience of squirrels  
and gave myself up  
to wolves.

*It is not trees  
that succumb to wolves, I almost say.*

This is what I learned: wolves.  
There is nothing evil in wolves,  
but there was something hurtful,  
black-furred and gripping  
that eats away at trees,  
at stillness.

*I have known that, I say.  
I have known wolves  
such as this: wolves with  
teeth and fur and warmth.*

Of course.  
What's at issue here is not  
hurt or treehood or  
wolves; it is the heartwood,  
that naked self I had forgotten,  
the tree in the dead old tree.

And what's at issue is knowing.  
There is something I have forgotten,  
something here in the skin of my skin.  
I fear that all untrees have forgotten it.

# PLAYGROUND PURSUIT

## STEPHANIE MORRIS

When I was in either second or third grade, a family of four moved into my neighborhood. The family had two sons. The eldest was named Jeff. He was older than me and was one of the most beautiful boys I had ever laid eyes on. He was the color of sundown: golden hair, tanned skin, dark eyes, darker eyelashes, and a smile that made me weak.

But Jeff was not nice. He could be charming—grown ups liked him, and he once caught a gopher that had been excavating our front yard, which saved my parents the expense of bringing in an exterminator. But when Jeff wasn't sucking up to adults, he was a monster—full of himself and taunting me and my friends. His teasing made me cry more than once.

But I was also infatuated with him, enough that a part of me was grateful for his taunts. They at least meant that he noticed me.

But he noticed me for another reason, quite separate from the first: I could run. *Fast*. I terrorized my playmates at chase and hide-and-seek. At school, team leaders fought one another to have me on their teams. Running fast was simply something that I did; it made me proud, but I never thought much about my ability. Running was fun, and running won me friends and allies.

And running won me Jeff's attention.

It happened suddenly, one day: my friend Jamie and I were playing, at the same time that Jeff was outside with his friends. Jeff came over to bother us. He teased us, knocked us around, tried to scare us into running, but we refused. "You couldn't even catch her anyway," Jamie said. "She'd be faster than you."

Jeff looked at me, and my stomach, which had fluttered at the sight of him looming over our play, began to twist itself into intricate sculptures. He smiled.

"She can't outrun me," he said.

This statement caught me up short. “What do you mean?” I said. “I can.”

I began to grow hot and itchy with excitement, with the thrill of having dared to address Jeff—to *challenge a bigger kid*—outright.

“You can’t,” he said. “Come on.”

He started walking toward the curb, which was two houses down from where Jamie and I were playing. I followed, almost skipping, graceless with glee.

“We’ll race to that van,” Jeff said, when we had reached the curb. He pointed back in the direction we had come from, toward the champagne-colored van that belong to Jamie’s parents. “Whoever touches it first wins.”

“Sure.” My voice was weak.

We faced the van. Jamie and all of Jeff’s friends watched us. One of Jeff’s friends counted out a “ready, set, go!”

I burst forward, arms pumping, feet pounding the sidewalk hard enough to make them ache. The glory of it was the most familiar feeling in the world.

But my ecstasy lasted for only a moment. Because there was Jeff, right beside me, face tight with concentration, and then there was Jeff ahead of me, pulling farther and farther away.

I turned cold. I pushed myself, so hard that I nearly fell.

But Jeff reached the van first. He smacked against it, and the the sound of kid on metal echoed through the neighborhood. I ran into the van a moment later. He was laughing, when I had regained my balance; he smiled and said, “Told you.”

For once, I did not register his smile; I only felt my loss burning through me, making the world unsteady and unreal. I could not quite believe I had lost. I must have done something wrong. I opened my mouth to demand a rematch and Jeff said, still grinning, still breathless, “Want to try again?”

We raced each other so many times that day that I finally lost count. Jeff’s friends drifted back home as the sun sank and streetlamps flickered on. Jamie went inside, after a while, to eat dinner. She never came back out. And still Jeff and I raced, again and again and again, the slap of our bodies colliding with the van ringing through the neighborhood and *always* it was the same—he always reached it first.

By the time my mother called me inside, I was shaking and wheezing, my chest hot and

ragged with exhaustion. Jeff was still smiling. He said good-bye to my mother and sauntered off home, and I watched him and hated him. The picture of Jeff's golden beauty had disintegrated; all I saw now was a boy who always reached the van first, even if it was just by a second. I burned with humiliation. My head throbbed with the unfairness of it all.

And as I trudged inside the house, a thought broke through my confusion and shame.

I had to beat him. Somehow, someway, I had to beat Jeff.

And to do that, there was nothing to do but run.

I began a track and field program. Every morning, I would wake up before my parents and sister, go into the backyard, and run around the orange tree, which was basically all the backyard that we had. I ran until I was dizzy, until I couldn't breathe, until every centimeter of my skin was as hot as concrete in an Arizona afternoon. I had no idea if I was doing things right. I had no idea how to measure my progress. I just ran.

I found myself wondering how I would approach Jeff, when I felt confident enough to try and race him. I tried to imagine it: me walking up to him, trying to hide how jumpy I was, saying, "Want to race?" He would sneer at me or maybe he would smile, and we would go to the curb, get in position, and someone would shout GO! I imagined those first few steps would be like being launched into outer space.

But the thought of approaching him so openly made me sick to the stomach.

Another, more probable, scenario that occurred to me was that Jeff himself would ask me to race. The idea made me feel even more nervous; I began to dread going outside. When I did, I shied away from Jeff.

He never asked me to race him again. I guess he felt that he had made his point.

I saw him at school one day. The sight of him surprised me: because he was older than me, he took a different bus to school and had class in another building. But there he was, squatting on the ground in the midmorning sunshine, surrounded by friends, laughing. I stared at him, as I walked past. And as if he felt my eyes on him, he looked up.

And smiled.

It was such a beautiful smile. It was loose and surprised, as if I were a friend he had not expected to see. His eyebrows rose. He said, "Hi."

I never quite caught that; I only remember him saying that in retrospect. Because the instant our eyes met, I felt a sudden, irrational feeling of ecstasy fill up my stomach, like there was a balloon between my ribs. I knew, suddenly, what I wanted to do. I turned toward him. Began to walk faster. Let my backpack slide off my shoulders and thud onto the ground.



*Prep Peas ~ Jane Freeman*

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“Catch me,” I said, and I smacked him across the face.

There was a moment, a breath, between the smack and my takeoff, that I watched Jeff change. His face shut down. His body became steel.

I fled.

But unable to help myself, I looked back. And saw Jeff, running as hard as when we’d first raced, his face tight, his arms pumping.

I had never seen anyone look so angry as Jeff did. And for a moment, my insides deserted me. I felt as if I were running on air. I imagined him reaching me. What would he do? Shake me? Hit me back?

But even as the thoughts occurred to me, they slid free of my brain, unable to catch hold.

Because I was *running* and *Jeff* was running and this was what I had worked for all those mornings in the backyard. Running was all that mattered.

I closed my mind to my anxious thoughts, opened it to the great, wet field around me, and *ran*.

My ears were full of the wet slap of my sneakers in the mud, the wheeze of my breathing, as I tumbled down the hill that led to the jungle gym. The playground had gone quiet around me; maybe it was because I was running too hard to hear the sounds of the other kids and maybe it was because everyone was watching us. In the moment just after I had hit Jeff, I thought I had caught a glimpse of his friends' sudden attention, their confusion. I imagined them lining the sidewalk, staring after us, shouting to Jeff *what happened?* and *get her!* A surge of giddy terror swelled through me.

The playground, outside the circle of sand where the swings and monkey bars stood, was a dirt field, dotted with crabgrass and littered with canals. The recent rain had turned it into a sludgy soup, and my feet slid sideways, awkward as a calf on its first legs. Mud speckled my arms, face, and tongue, crunched between my teeth. I glanced back at Jeff, saw his jeans turning black with mud, saw him eating up ground.

I turned forward—a second before I hit the mud ocean.

There was a particular part of the field that grew especially swampy after heavy rain. I was well acquainted with this spot: popular girls had goaded me into leaping over it time and time again, and time and time again, I missed the dry ground and ended up so muddy that the school would have to call my mother and have her bring me a change of clothes. These incidents—the way the girls abandoned me, laughing, the way my mother's face looked when she caught sight of me cowering in the nurse's office—burned through my mind. But it was too late to avoid the ocean. I did the only thing I could.

I jumped.

It was an ugly jump. My foot slipped through the mud, and I landed on my hands and knees inches from dry ground. But there was no time to dwell on my failure—Jeff's ragged grunt sounded behind me, so close that for a moment, I could almost feel his hands close around me. I skittered to my feet, heart in my stomach, and splashed onto dry ground. I dared a glance behind me, as I pounded toward the monkey bars. Jeff slogged through the mud ocean, holding out his arms and frog-stepping like some kind of grotesque ballerina, his steely face suddenly human with disgust. He caught my eye and he became all steel again. He waded free and was once again a thing of speed. But the sight of him in the mud had broken down whatever remained of my terror. I started to laugh.

The monkey bars loomed before me. Beyond them, there was only the chain link fence that encircled the field. I had a vivid image of slamming into it, bouncing off, into Jeff's muddy hands and vengeful bellow. Unless I leaped among the monkey bars, I was lost; my flight would end in that fence, and the whole playground would watch me pay for hitting Jeff. But I simply did not care. I would try for the monkey bars, I decided; I would dodge them and make a dash for the hill. I would outrun Jeff, whatever it took.

I flung myself toward the monkey bars and dared them to give me all they had.

And then—the bell rang.

I was saved.

I celebrated by smashing into the fence, as if it was the champagne-colored van Jeff and I had used for a goal, all those days ago. I split my lip on the metal.

And when I turned around, I saw Jeff crouched in the field, glaring, arms taut and bracing his shaking body. I laughed, shouted wordlessly, waved; Jeff staggered to his feet and stalked back toward the school buildings.

I wanted to say something, something wonderful, deliver some kind of verbal final blow to Jeff's stiff back—but there was nothing for me to say.

I grinned all the way back to class.

The teacher sent me to the nurse's office. My mother had to bring me a fresh change of clothes.

★

When I saw Jeff again, back in the neighborhood, among his big boy friends, he ignored me. But I knew he saw me, knew he heard the saucy little taunts I flung in his direction.

For a long time afterward, I waited for him to ask me to race him from the curb to the van. I wanted him to ask me. I wanted to feel the weightless ecstasy of beating him, of holding his attention in the palm of my hand. But he never did ask.

I guess he felt that I had made my point.



*Untitled ~ Cameron Tanous*

# PERSEPHONE

# DREAMS OF GOLD

STEPHANIE MORRIS

Kiss my mouth,  
the pomegranate stains  
I cannot wash from my lips.

Wake me with the smell of brimstone,  
the scent of gold in your blood.

I dreamed of my mother  
wailing in the wet sunlight.  
I dreamed of pears rotten on the bough  
of cattle still and cold in the black grain.

I dreamed of Andromeda, crucified.  
I cut off her face and danced at a masquerade  
wearing her blue lips, her white face.

I crave her golden hair.  
For gold of my own.

Mine the gold from my wormy womb  
pile it among the coins you raked  
from the eyes of corpses.

Do not tempt me.  
I am already sold,

for six bloodied seeds.

# THE PERFORMER

TOM STEVENS

Not a single moment of the day had been wasted on anything expendable. Jessup had spent the morning in a trance: mechanically eating and not tasting, bathing without a chance of relaxation, and meticulously grooming himself to the point of obsession. His clothes had been picked, sorted, edited, and handled with regal care. He had even taken his car to be serviced the previous week. The slickest brass on Wall Street would nod their approval had they followed Jessup about on the day of the performance.

He arrived at the concert hall with hours to spare, having demanded of the organizers that the doors be unlocked all morning in anticipation. A tired, pitiable janitor glanced at him and then carried on with his duty, not caring for all the world whether the stuffy-looking man might be the most well-dressed serial killer in recent history. If Jessup noticed the cleaner at all, it was briefly—and purely instinctual. He was fast at work. After checking once again the spare, minimal stage set, he lumbered back and forth from the specially designated chamber in the sub-basement up to the stage with his equipment. He set it all up lovingly as he had so many times before. In the end, it was an admirable computer system. Besides the sleek tower, monitor, and keyboard, there was a substantial-looking case with an array of wires coming out of the back. These would be hooked into the theatre's A/V system. Once Jessup had coddled the mass of cables and electronics to his satisfaction, he hustled to the control booth and began throwing switches and turning knobs.

Ten minutes passed from the time Aronsen entered the theatre until he spoke. He moved quietly to the control booth door. If it had been anyone but Jessup, Aronsen would have marveled that a man so out of shape could conduct himself with such vigor.

“I’ve cued it all up,” Jessup said suddenly.

Aronsen was surprised that Jessup offered a whole sentence so generously. He wondered how long Jessup had known he was there. Probably the whole time. “I figured. Where’s Lydia?”

“Haven’t seen her,” said Jessup. His narrow eyes never once looked up from the flatscreen monitor, dark with glowing text that varied from yellow to green to blue. “I had her working the promo materials, and they were on my desk last night.”

“You haven’t called her?”

“Should I have?” There it was—the old, familiar peevishness that nearly every soul who braved Jessup’s company was subjected to.

“I’m only concerned about her, is all. She seems depressed.”

“Yes, it’s been a damn nuisance. Soon as she comes in the lab, it’s a like a funeral. I’m firing her. I’m not gonna put up with it. This is too damn important.”

“You know, Jessup...”

“No! I’ve had it with you, too.” Now he shot a white-hot stare at Aronsen. “I’m sick. And tired. Of your Complaining. Of your...do you not even appreciate, SEVEN YEARS, of my life for this moment. And you STILL are trying to be my conscience. There’s no reason to! It’s nothing moral or immoral. It’s not the end of the world. Well, it is the end of OUR world. Our current history. This,” he now pointed to the computer onstage, “will shake the earth. It will PROVE, CONCLUSIVELY, that there is nothing special, nothing sacred, about humans. Nothing.”

“Really? Because it can make music?”

Jessup put on such a show. As he ranted, his arms whipped out every which way like water spurting from a fountain. He pulled his square, frameless glasses from their perch on his nose and gripped them precariously between thumb and forefinger as he flailed. “You don’t understand—you are just like everyone else, aren’t you? I thought another scientist might know better, might appreciate all of it, but no. It’s not just that it ‘makes’ music. It COMPOSES. Twelve studies, and not one group could tell Senza from a human composer.” He came quite near Aronsen. “What is it, then, that makes humanity unique? It isn’t language or building or inventing. Animals have those skills. And now, I’ve proven, it isn’t even art.”

“You are prepared, aren’t you? All ready to bask in the applause and the press tours and everything else. I know you. And what’s more is—you’re wrong. I may not be as eloquent as

you...”

“Get out.” Jessup pushed past Aronsen and exited the control booth. No longer would he tolerate these idiots. No longer would he be treated with less than absolute seriousness. This was his moment, and he would never again experience one like it.

Jessup checked his watch and determined that there was little time left. None really. He found his dressing room for the first time and paced about, fretting. He began roaming the backstage, looking for something. He was almost frantic. His face was dripping with sweat, and he pulled at his clothes feverishly. Finally he found it—a long strip of metal lying on the floor near the stage left wing. It was dull but thin enough. He positioned one end carefully where the wall met the floor, and then, with great force, hurled forward with every last ounce of strength and impaled himself. He slumped to the floor, his mass pushing the metal against the floor with a screech. As he lay there, he gazed, still lovingly, at the mighty system onstage. He offered it praise and thanksgiving, and then he died without a sound.

Soon Lydia was found. Her landlady had noticed the lights were on constantly and went to investigate. After some effort to open the bedroom door, she discovered Lydia's body slumped against it. One end of a leather belt was around the knob, the other around her neck. The authorities determined that there was no foul play; Lydia died by her own hand.

In subsequent years, Jessup's research was carried on. He had willed Senza to a professor in Switzerland who had contacted him years earlier with great interest. The almighty composing software, a true work of genius, was studied extensively once again. However, work was discontinued abruptly after the professor leapt from a tall bridge into a shallow river. Later the bodies of two of his graduate students, both assistants in his research, were found separately, both suicides. It was puzzling. None of the three had shown any tendency toward self-harm in the past. Family and associates did recall, though, a sort of distance growing between each of the three and the rest of the world. And although it was deemed superstition, no one else would have anything to do with the exemplary software.



*Back Line ~ Bridget Moriarty*

# THE FERAL FLY

NICKOLAS URPI

The morning was stamped with a sallow seal of weary melancholia. People wandered about in a state of direct purpose stimulated by a predetermined location or action which had the satisfaction of being atop their cranial to-do lists. Once these series of actions were executed to contentment, the huddled persons receded back into a lounge chair stuffed with desire, upon which they leaned back and slept—all the weight of their dreams tightly packed beneath a leather or cotton sheet, and crushed beneath a heavy body filled with want—. What was wanted and what was acquired were two entirely foreign entities, their only relation being a common body which felt both (and one more keenly than the other, though which one is difficult say).

They seemed a flooded mass, like too many olives in a can, with only one red-bell-peppered eye-pupil staring out the sides of the jar from the murky oil-water in which they drenched themselves. Some were lucky enough to have a front-row view, and some were squeezed into the middle like commuters on a subway train. The coffee shop was thus crowded, the line stretching so far back the menu could not be read halfway through the stretch of bodies. People had to wait to read it till they arrived at the counter to place their order, unless they already knew what they wanted—.

The man in the suit and overcoat silently swam in his own narcotic musings, fluctuating between the past, present, future, and most important of all, what might have been. Everything from what people must do when they arrive at the office to what one could have done twenty years ago when he was still in college and had a chance to take a trip to Norway with the history professor investigating the Viking's treasured remains to what was on the menu for tomorrow for dinner was

compressed into a minute of deliberation. His thoughts would swirl downwards like a vast and docile vacuum at the bottom of the sink, where all the aqueous content drained away leaving behind the damp remnants of what used to be an ocean.

A fly landed on the man in front of him. It scurried around on the gentleman's thick black overcoat. Slyly and imperceptibly did he explore the gentleman's back, scuttling thus. The blackness of the coat seemed to fascinate the miniature black colossus. It groped around, observing and studying every strand of cloth, every pattern, every mystery concealed in the cloak adorning the man waiting in line in front of him.

He turned his head, the fly's obsessions entertaining him for less than a mouse's minute, and stared at a board to his right. The board was advertising a new drink: a chili pepper mocha, artistically labeled, "The Montezuma."

The line moved on and the board slipped out of sight. As quickly as it was noticed, it was forgotten, as bodies, content with hot caffeinated drinks in their hands, formed a curtain behind which the Aztec civilization perished, them following the ancient example and exiting the shop. He stared at the long thin line of heads that lead like stairs straight up to the cashier. It seemed infinite for a while—so long and futile—almost purposeless. There were blonde heads, and red heads, and black heads, and brunette heads, and auburn heads, and mixed hairs of all sorts, with a variety of hats more numerous than the variety of insects flourishing in the Amazon. Nevertheless, all this "variety" that stood between him and the cashier seemed to blur slowly into one black line, like a thin film or screen placed in front of him, separating him from his final decision.

He began to think of their other qualities, something to distinguish them. Some requested a new type of coffee every day, in quest of a peculiar element of spontaneity that set fire to the repetitious medium of life in which they lived, whilst some remained fervent in their order, favoring the stable comfort in a familiar taste and smell, day by day, as though they could turn off time and perpetuate their lives without finding the release of death. Some decided beforehand what they wanted, sure of themselves, proud that they were able to determine in that instant what it was that they desired in that one singular moment of the capitalistic freedom of choice. It was as though their entire lives were built upon uncertainty—like little particles of clay that melted away at will and left a void wider than a canyon in its place—. This was the one place they were able to firmly resolve themselves. Or perhaps others were truly as ordered and preemptive as they were in the coffee shop. Maybe their lives coincided with the predetermined drink. Life was principally a practical plan initiated by its proprietor to puncture chaos and perpetuate a pleasurable palace of

permanence in what was otherwise an anarchic universe. Others still would have a firm resolution, carrying it like a cross on their backs, and then suddenly, take a different direction, as though their GPS changed routes midway between the beginning of the road and the end destination.

Then there were those who could not decide, even if they could have read the menu from the back of the line. They wait until the moment is at hand and then cannot find a solution to the dilemma at hand. They panic. The cashier delicately balances their emotion between polite and exasperated—as though they were a fork on a telephone wire, waiting for a gust of wind to disrupt the fragile balance—. Meanwhile, the indecisive customer reads the menu so rapidly that none of its contents takes firm roots in their mind, and thus the need to repeat the action ensues, all this indecision propagating into new indecisions and confusions. An uncultivated impatience begins to spread across the room like ripples in a pool, until the entire population of the coffee shop is irritated with this administrator of vacillation.

Then, finally, there are those whom do not know what they want—they simply ask for something because they have nothing upon which to decide—

He was like this, the man who was watching the fly. All his musings led back to himself, as though he were the circular center of the universe of his thoughts. He knew then why the coffee shop put up boards around the shop advertising specific drinks, like “The Montezuma.” He had known it before—but each time he thought about it, it seemed like fresh new knowledge—something preconceived, a simple part of the machinations of the daily routine, otherwise referred to as “life.” The rest of the coffee shop seemed to swell up into an ocean of grey water particles evaporating into an intangible purple sky. He did not know what it was he wanted. He did not know if he even wanted coffee. And yet it seemed as though his existence—his clock ticking backwards towards zero—only consisted of time spent in this coffee shop, as if he were simply the nameless protagonist in a dreary short fiction. His life seemed composed of decisions forced by the circumstances of a universal dogma. He did not know if he wanted coffee or not, he did not know when he stopped wanting it, or if he ever wanted it, or if he still wanted it. He did not know, even if he wanted a coffee, which coffee he should select as his choice for that day, whichever day it was. It seemed as necessary to him as breathing, and so relevant—as he did both without thinking. He felt shame and discouragement take him apart piece by piece, as though he were a pile of sand, or a clump of seaweed on the oceanfront, waiting to be dismantled by flies.

Flies, like that fly on the man’s coat—which had long disappeared to other ventures—were slaves to instinct as he was slave to indecision. He wondered how living creatures could be so free and yet so thickly covered with chains, that they cannot see the light of the sun. He wondered if he should leave the shop, and not come back. He wondered if he should sit for a while and think about what he wanted, instead of follow a pattern carved by the footsteps of other sheep. He contemplated whether he should look at the menu, perhaps, and decide if there was anything there he

truly desired—and whether he should act on that desire—as a feral fly acts on its desires—or temper himself and leave—. All those lives he had spent within this coffee shop felt spent—his hard-earned money flung like leaves into the wind—blown away with a few sips of the hot liquid, often-times finished before he had arrived at work—. His thoughts were rough—chopped up like cow in a butcher’s shop—. Even the purpose of a daily cup of coffee seemed as vain as wanting to eat the clouds, or looking for gold in a stack of paper clips. All his decisions were decided by a billboard at the front of a coffee shop—there was no need for any rational exertion on his part—. He felt water clutching at his eyes. He wanted to weep in front of all the people in the coffee shop. He wanted to leave the shop in a hurry, make straight for his car, and drive until he found a reason for living the way he had for so many years. There was a reason; he knew that, but he had never taken the time to find it. It was as though it were behind a door he never saw, and never opened, but one that he passed every time he entered the coffee shop. He did not know if he could even call his thoughts his own— perhaps he couldn’t until now. A tornado formulated in his stomach as—

The line had vaporized as though it was a mist that came and went with Nature’s absolute command. With it went his rebellious thoughts, just as frail and transparent—dispersed with the wind. He did not feel his sheepish nonage re-colonize him, nor the miniscule foundations of a wakeful sunshine wash away like tears.

“What would you like, sir?” the cashier asked.

He did his best to smile, his somnolent reveries having carved a placid, grey fjord into his face, and said, “A Montezuma, please.”

“Will that be all?” she asked.

“Yes—that’s all.”

# 7/20/1969

TODD BURKS

People say 7/20 changed everything. In some ways, I suppose they were right.

I opened the Outpost early that Sunday. The tavern had been busier than usual since the Apollo 11 liftoff in Florida on Wednesday, and I knew we'd have a big crowd on hand when Neil and Buzz landed on the Moon. I'd ordered extra cases of beer and more burgers for the grill. Our location right outside the Johnson Space Center meant we got thirsty engineers and astronauts coming off shift, plus all the guys grabbing a bite before work. Christa came in early, too, figuring there'd be good tips with happy folks celebrating.

As it turned out, you need alcohol for wakes, too.

"It's gonna be a good day, Dave," Christa said as she put on her apron. I was getting the register ready with change.

"I hope so," I said. I'd worked for NASA before buying the bar. I'd been part of the team that recovered the bodies from the smoldering crew compartment after the Apollo 1 launch pad fire. Gus, Ed and Roger had been friends of mine. I loved NASA, but I couldn't face losing anyone that way again. Owning the Outpost gave me a way to keep in touch without being too close.

"It'll be okay today. You'll see," she said. She gave me a peck on the cheek, then went to check on the bar supplies. Artie, our cook, slouched in, looking like he'd just rolled out of bed at noon.

"Good morning!" I greeted him loudly.

"Ow, Dave. Man, don't. I can't take that cheerfulness first thing," he said.

"Well, Christa thinks there's going to be a lot more cheeriness today. You might want to be ready for it."

“Right,” he mumbled, then started warming up the grill behind the bar.

There were guys already waiting outside when I unlocked the door. Clean-cut, MIT-type NASA engineers in short sleeves and ties, but still young men all the same. This group had just come from Mission Control. Rotating shifts of technicians monitored each mission around the clock. The team overseeing the Moon landing was at work now over in Building 30. These guys were tired and thirsty and looked a little rumped.

“Dave! About time! We’ve got appointments!”

“Come on in, fellas. Mr. Budweiser is waiting for you,” I said.

They filed in, laughing and talking. While they waited for Christa, they got the jukebox going. Glen Campbell started singing something about Galveston. I was more of a Bob Wills kind of guy, myself, but if they were putting in the quarters, they got to pick.

The place began to fill up. It was a mixed crowd of men and women. Some secretaries usually stopped by, but even more were there that day. One scruffy fellow came in after the rest. He kinda looked like a hitchhiker. This close to the highway, we got a few. He sat at the end of the bar and ordered a beer. I could see him looking at all the autographed astronaut photos on the walls. We got pretty busy serving drinks and lunch platters and before I knew it the clock was reading three in the afternoon. Somebody called out for me to get the television going. We only had a little black and white above the bar, but it wasn’t a big room, so everybody could see it. We watched any mission that the networks would cover.

Walter Cronkite was on hand at CBS to walk us all through the landing. Astronaut Wally Schirra and science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke helped with commentary. A lot of the guys knew Wally, of course, so good-natured comments about his TV makeup and fancy Hollywood life flew around the room.

Cronkite and his crew kept up a steady stream of information and trivia about NASA, the astronauts, and the mission. People all over the world had gathered to watch the landing on television. As the screen showed crowds in Red Square and Times Square, we could hear Mike, Neil and Buzz work through their Lunar Module separation checklist. When everything was ready, *Eagle* parted from *Columbia*, the Command Module, leaving Mike to orbit the Moon alone until the upper part of the lander returned. They were on their way to the surface. There was no live TV transmission from *Eagle*, since Neil and Buzz were too busy flying their spidery-looking ship, but the network whiz kids had put together animated sequences to show the audience what was happening. The audio feed from NASA supplied the soundtrack. The group horsing around at the pool tables quieted down and arranged at the back of the room to watch the broadcast.

Somebody called out, "Dave! Don't forget the box!"

I'd been so busy, I'd forgotten to dig out the squawk box, a special radio that allowed monitoring of restricted NASA transmissions. Astronaut wives and other VIPs had them installed in their homes, but I'd been able to get ahold of one when I'd worked at Cape Kennedy. Listening to the astronaut chatter and the flight controllers working made me feel like I was still part of the action. I got it set up and turned it on and turned down the TV speaker. We could hear Charlie Duke talking to Buzz, confirming some guidance computer numbers. Each mission had dozens of people that monitored the spacecraft, but in order to keep things from getting confused, only one person talked to the astronauts. The capsule communicator, or CapCom, was always another astronaut and today was Charlie's turn. His gentle country voice belied his cool intelligence and made this incredibly complex technical operation seem like a walk down to the fishing hole.

"Hey, Dave, did you hear about the Russians?" Pat Geisler called out from over by the dart board.

"I heard they've got an automated sample return mission planned, that's all," I said.

"It's up there right now! Luna 15. Word is, they're trying to get a sample off the surface before Neil and Buzz lift off, so they can claim first Moon rock," Pat said,

"Crazy Russians," I said.

The crowd settled in for the descent to the surface, everybody pitching in with details or comments on the work going on a quarter of a million miles away. We were moving a lot of beer and I noticed that the hitchhiker had been putting away quite a few.

"Haven't seen you before. Are you from around here?" I asked.

"No, man. Just passing through," he replied. His hair was longer than we usually saw in Texas, with bushy long sideburns. His scuffed leather jacket had a peace symbol button on the lapel.

"Where you headed?"

"Upstate New York. Big music festival next month," he said.

"Sounds like a good time," I said. He nodded.

"You guys all seem pretty excited about that," he looked at the TV, his words slurred a bit by the beer.

"Well, that's the industry around here. You're pretty much surrounded by NASA folks," I said.

"Isn't it all a big waste? I mean, with a war going on, and all? Seems like a buncha bull to me," he said.

I'd heard that kind of thing before.

"Well, pardner, I suppose it could be, but you might want to keep your opinion to yourself while you're in here."

"Yeah, maybe so," he said, and went back to his beer. I decided to slow down his refills.

"Dave! Getting close!" a voice called out from the watching crowd. It looked like the little cartoon *Eagle* was getting close to the surface. I turned up the squawk box.

"Avoiding a big crater," came Neil's voice.

Buzz called out the distance to the surface and movement from side to side, "Two hundred feet, ten forward".

"One-fifty, five forward."

"Thirty seconds," said Charlie, giving a time on remaining fuel. That was cutting it kinda close.

"One hundred, ten forward."

Neil's voice, "Rocks there. Still looking for a good spot."

"Ninety. Three forward," came Buzz's voice.

"Eighty-five."

"Eighty. Five forward."

Neil said, "Still looking. Too many boulders."

Buzz again, "Seventy-five feet, five forward."

Static in the signal grew louder for a second. There was a metallic bang, an exclamation. Then, a long silence.

"*Eagle*, this is Houston. Do you read?" Charlie Duke's voice.

"*Eagle*, this is Houston. What is your status?" Charlie tried again.

Nothing. Just a crackle of static.

Charlie kept trying, over and over, his voice wavering, "*Eagle*, this is Houston. Do you read?"

A full minute passed. Everybody in the Outpost was frozen in place.

Then, finally, Neil Armstrong spoke, sounding a little out of breath, “Houston, the *Eagle* is down. The, uh, thrusters shut off at approximately, uh, 75 feet and we came down, uh, pretty hard. We have sustained damage and are assessing. Repeat. The LM is damaged. We are assessing. Stand by.”

“Roger, *Eagle*. Standing by,” said Charlie.

We could hear them talking to each other, going over checklists to make sure they’d shut off important systems.

Now we could hear Buzz, “Houston, we are venting something. Crew compartment appears to be intact. We think at least one of the landing legs is broken. We’re heeled over at a pretty good angle. Let me go over the readings we’re seeing.”

Charlie Duke responded, “*Eagle*, this is Houston. Flight controllers standing by for readouts.”

He and Buzz started comparing the damage reports from the lunar surface and the readings as seen by the engineers in Mission Control.

Silence in the Outpost. Nobody moved. Then five or six guys bolted outside, the bright afternoon sunlight flashing like a strobe as they each slammed through the doors to the parking lot.

On the silent TV, the network animation of the lander froze on the screen, then the picture went blank, then cut back to the studio. Cronkite took off his glasses, stunned by the news from the Moon. Wally Schirra left the set, probably to talk privately with NASA officials.

As the next minutes passed, a picture began to emerge of a badly damaged Lunar Module. Two landing legs were broken. Fuel was leaking. Neil and Buzz were safe inside their suits, but oxygen was limited. They’d have enough for the planned surface mission, but that would be running out in about 36 hours. If they couldn’t get back to the Command Module in orbit around the Moon, they’d be staying on the surface. For good.

The bar stayed quiet. Nobody started the jukebox again. Anybody that could make the excuse to go back over to the NASA complex did so, but you pretty much had to be on shift to get into the buildings. As people came off shift, though, they came to the Outpost and gave us what news they could. We all just sat or stood and listened to the squawk box.

After it appeared that Neil and Buzz were safe for the moment and that Mission Control would need time to explore options, they asked for permission to go on the EVA. They’d planned to set up some experiments and collect rocks from the surface to be brought back to Earth for study. There was no reason for Mission Control to disagree, even if the rocks might not be coming home. It would keep the astronauts busy, and maybe some good news would turn up in the meantime. At about 2 a.m., Neil made his historic step onto the Moon. The TV camera that was sup-



*Strange Bedfellow ~ Garland Caldwell*

posed to broadcast the images was damaged, so we could only listen. Buzz followed a few minutes later and they completed their assigned tasks. They set up the American flag on the surface, then climbed back aboard the damaged *Eagle*.

The Russians had been monitoring everything, of course, and Brezhnev called Nixon to offer support. That surprised everybody. We heard later that Yuri Gagarin's widow pressed him to call. The Luna 15 lander was still in orbit around the Moon and could have been instructed to land near *Eagle* in the Sea of Tranquility. Flight controllers looked at the specs for the Soviet craft, but it turned out that the fuel was incompatible and there was no way to transfer it to *Eagle*, anyway. Another crazy idea was to have Neil and Buzz hitch a ride back to lunar orbit on the Soviet lander, but it was too underpowered. The whole idea was bold, but, in the end, not practical.

There was no good news when Mission Control called *Eagle* after the EVA.

All of the flight controllers and their backroom teams had been over every number six ways from Sunday, but there was no way to make them add up right. After two hours of discussion with Neil, Buzz, and Mike, there was a long final silence.

Gene Kranz, the Flight Director, took over for Charlie Duke as CapCom. Charlie had been on duty for 20 hours.

"*Eagle*, this is Houston," Gene said. "We've been over this again and again, fellas. We've run every simulation we can think of. I'll have to be blunt. We have a negative launch assessment. With the readings we have and your corroboration, it's a no-go for ascent from the surface. Fuel is too low. Damage to systems too great."

Finally, Neil spoke, "Roger, Houston, that's our assessment as well."

Long pause.

"Houston, can you get our wives on the line?" said Buzz.

Gene's voice broke, "Roger, *Eagle*, they're on their way."

I looked out into the room. From behind the bar, I could see all the faces turned to the TV screen, mouths either set in a grim line, or open in disbelief. Correspondents around the globe were standing in front of somber crowds. Somebody was sobbing in the back of the room.

Christa came over. "I'm so sorry, Dave."

"It's okay, Christa. They're doing exactly what they wanted to do," I said. She hugged me.

After a long silence, the hitchhiker decided he had to put in his two-cents-worth.

“What’s the big deal? Guys are dying in Vietnam every day. Vietnamese women and children are massacred over there. I don’t see you crying over that.”

Murmurs from the room. I could see some guys edging toward him. I turned and tapped Artie on the shoulder.

“Easy Rider has worn out his welcome. I’m taking him out back,” I said.

“Right,” said Artie. He wiped his hands on his apron and moved to intercept the crowd.

“You might want to shut up, pardner,” I said to the hitchhiker.

“Two guys! It’s bullshit, man,” he said.

I could see this wasn’t going anywhere good. I grabbed him by the jacket and yanked him toward the back door. I shoved him out into the night and followed as I heard Artie calming the guys inside.

“You’d best be moving on,” I said.

“That’s bullshit, man. Why do you care about those guys up there?” he said, as he stumbled into a trash can. The air was warm and the little light on the back of the building lit up a small circle. Beyond was darkness and I could smell Galveston Bay in the distance.

“Those men are friends of mine. No, I take that back. They’re family. Even if you can’t understand why they’re doing what they’re doing, you need to understand that I’m losing family. And they’re family to everybody else in there. So you can see why none of us are real excited to hear your opinion on the war and what is and isn’t bullshit.”

“I don’t get it, man.”

“You don’t have to. Just leave.” I went back inside.

Preparations at Mission Control were being made to let Neil and Buzz say goodbye to their wives and children. After that, they’d shut down communications and their oxygen would eventually run out. I’ve heard rumors that they had cyanide with them for just this situation, but it wasn’t true. They faced the end with their eyes open.

Neil and Buzz each took a couple of minutes to say a few final words. They talked about the honor to be chosen for Apollo 11, and the work of those that helped them get to the Moon. They both took responsibility for any mistakes that led to their situation.

Neil had one last statement, “When we planned this trip we wanted to honor those who lost

their lives in this great endeavor.” He cleared his throat. “So we brought some small mementos: An Apollo 1 patch for Gus Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee, and two Soviet medals, one for Yuri Gagarin and one for Vladimir Komarov. They made our journey possible, and like us, they’re not coming home. We’re proud to be in their company.”

Gene let them know that their wives had arrived and that they’d be able to speak privately. I turned off the box. Somebody who was there in Mission Control said later that Jan Armstrong and Joan Aldrin hugged Pat Collins for a long, long time.

We didn’t close, but kept a vigil, joining millions on Earth that night. Drinks were on the house. I turned up the TV when Nixon gave his “Forever Mankind” speech. I had never really liked him, but his words acknowledging Neil and Buzz’s sacrifice made me see him a little differently.

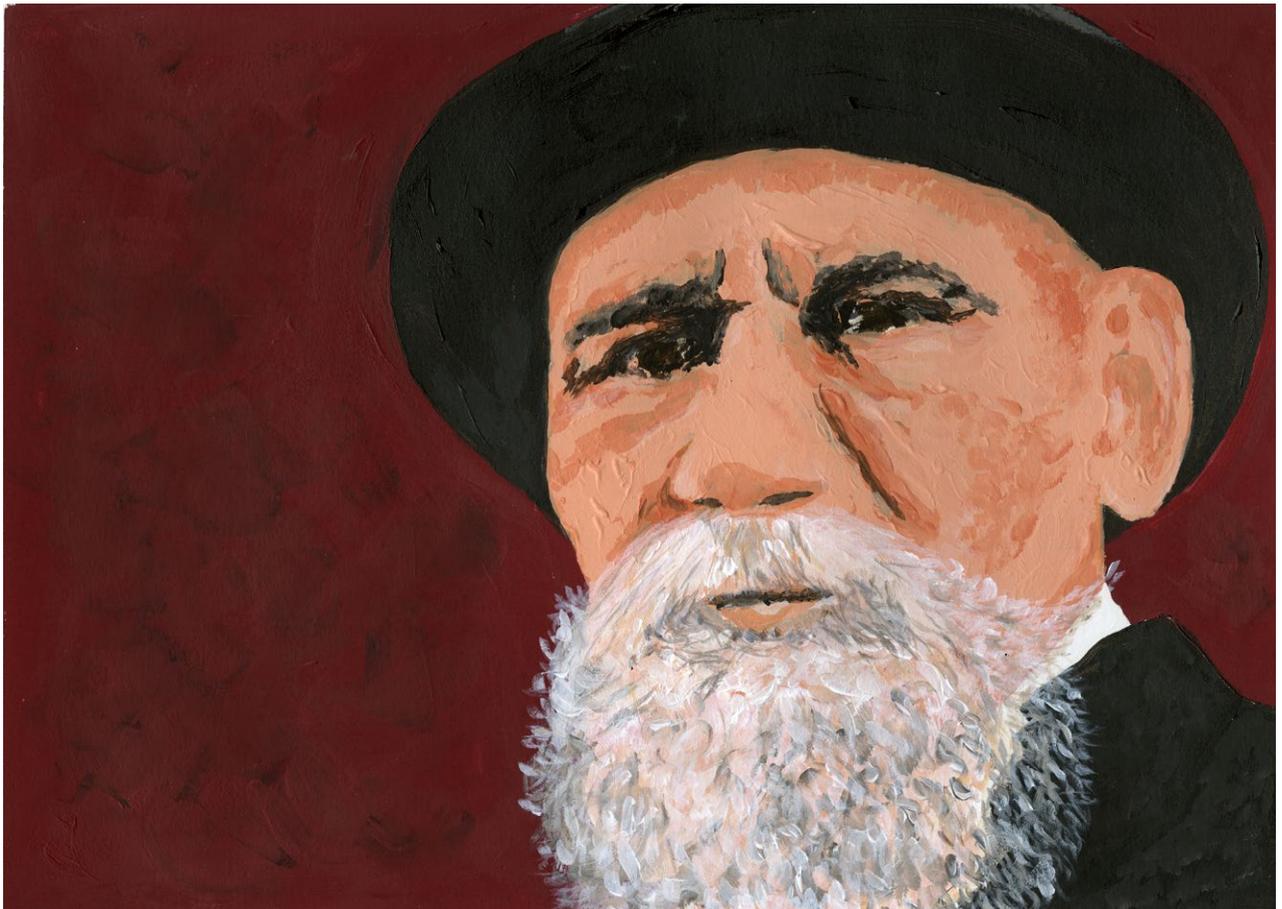
When there was no longer any doubt, Mike Collins came home alone. He was in constant contact with Mission Control, of course, and Pat got to talk to him more than she’d usually have been allowed, but he had lots of time. Too much time. His splashdown was perfect and there was no need for the isolation chamber that had been prepared to check for contamination from the lunar surface. There were no parades, no interviews, no medals. I saw Mike a few years later, and he said he felt like a marked man. Nobody would talk to him about what had happened, but his book about the mission sold millions of copies.

Apollo 12 picked up the fallen banner and that mission went flawlessly, partly because of improvements made after Apollo 11, according to the guys at the bar. NASA moved on from success to success. Jim Lovell’s perfect landing at Fra Mauro with Fred Haise was only one example. Congress and the nation reaffirmed support for the space program, and with the approval of missions through Apollo 20, Mike Collins finally walked on the Moon in 1972 as the Commander of Apollo 17. His elegy for Neil and Buzz from the lunar surface to dedicate Tranquility Memorial Park had us all wiping our eyes. The Soviet offer of help during the crisis set the stage for Nixon’s later trip to Moscow and further cooperation in space. The Apollo-Soyuz missions led to the construction of Mir One and Two, Armstrong Base on the Moon, and Aldrin Station in lunar orbit. A manned Mars mission is coming together, though people say we’re only doing it to get there before the Chinese.

In the end, though, the space program has been the only bright spot in the last forty years. Nixon finished his second term with high approval ratings, due to his tireless efforts to put an honorable end to the Vietnam War, but the Manchurian Conflict has dragged on and on. Reagan’s impeachment and Clinton’s assassination left the country struggling to recover.

I sold the bar to Artie and Christa and went back to work for NASA, though in a different capacity than before. Being close was better than being too far away, I guess. I retired from the Johnson Space Center commissary where I got to know most of the astronauts and support what

they did in my own way. Every year on July 20th, there are memorial services for Neil and Buzz. Around here, everybody heads for the Outpost. We all raise a glass, and if the Moon's up, we give them a wink. I've had a good life, but I sometimes think how much better everything would be if Neil and Buzz had made it home.



*Face ~ Anonymous*

# SUNDAY

RYAN HARRIS

Generally,  
I am  
isochronal,  
a tempo –

but

there was a moment  
of brightness,  
sudden: a held breath,

or an unraveling of skin  
against touch. I delayed,  
splayed myself against  
the stiller dawn, my body  
a countermelody.

There were  
delphic murmurings  
against the linens;

and you, tidal,  
thrashing mildly  
against the morning

and me –



*Untitled ~ Paul Loykedis*

# WHAT I UNDERSTAND ABOUT COMPASSION

GALE GIBSON

QEP Essay Contest Winner

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, believes, “[i]t is under the greatest adversity that there exists the greatest potential for doing good, both for oneself and others” (O’Brien, 2010). No one welcomes misfortune into their lives; however, hardships arise in everyone’s existence. Instead of cursing and blaming poor fate during adverse times, perhaps one should use the situation for positive personal growth. Our individual hardships create opportunities to understand and to embrace with compassion other people who are undergoing difficulties.

The challenge of a compassionate act arises because of the empathy required. Often if one has actually walked in the shoes of the person under duress, one can better understand the feelings of others who are suffering. As a result, the more experienced individual may more effectively lend support to ease the sufferer’s distress. For example, during 2007, criminals invaded the home of Dr. William Petit and his family in Connecticut. Dr. Petit’s wife and two daughters were brutally murdered. Dr. Petit survived the ordeal but was understandably grief-stricken by his tremendous loss. In a remarkable act of compassion, Dr. Pettit later used his experience to help others by founding an organization to “extend a blanket of comfort for others affected by violence” (Petit Family Foundation, 2012).

Hardship has touched my life in the past several years as I struggle to cope with my father’s terminal illness. Over the summer, his declining condition made it necessary for him to move out of his home into a senior care facility. Being the oldest of his children and because he appointed me power of attorney, I am assisting him with liquidating his real and personal property in order to pay for the rapidly mounting expenses of his long term health care. As I struggle with this difficult task, I remain very grateful for the many compassionate acts of others – but I hold one particular moment close to my heart.

Nearly twenty years ago, as he neared retirement, my father acquired a house on the waterfront of Lake Murray in Chapin, South Carolina. The home quickly became a magnet for every-

one in the family to gather, especially during the summer months, and the house was often full to bursting because Dad's door remained open to anyone at any time. Particularly after his retirement, his lake house overflowed with visiting family members and friends. Nearly every warm day Dad could be found presiding over the festivities in the captain's chair of his pontoon boat, listening to music and enjoying a cold beer. Sometimes the boat would remain tied at the dock all day while he watched us fish, ride jet skis, or just float around in his cove on rafts. Other days, we would all pile onto the boat so he could take us to Hurricane Cove, a popular gathering spot for boaters on Lake Murray. In the evenings, my father enjoyed navigating across the lake to a waterfront restaurant followed by a stop at Bomb Island, where we watched the spectacular showing of thousands of purple martins flying in to roost for the night. Later we would motor home, enjoying the beauty of the sunset and laughing about the day's adventures. Dad's health was excellent then, and it was easy to take all those moments for granted. Thus, it was with a heavy heart that I undertook my first act as power of attorney by selling his pontoon boat.

One day in early August, my husband and brother loaded the pontoon boat onto a borrowed trailer, and together the three of us took it to a boatyard in order to sell it on consignment. As the boat was being unloaded from the trailer, I gazed at the vacant captain's chair and felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of that emptiness. With so many memories flooding my consciousness and the finality of that moment, a wave of grief that felt the size of a tsunami overtook me. My husband, who lost his father in 2006, was standing by my side. He took my hand and said to me, "I understand. It was difficult when I sold my father's boat, too." I huddled in that blanket of comfort he had provided for me, and my spine felt physically strengthened by the gift of his compassion.

A key to compassion lies in the enormous power of two words, I understand. By nature, people band together during times of distress, and the resulting solidarity creates an unbreakable bond of strength. Through their empathetic understanding of the sufferer's plight, many times the giver feels a renewed sense of purpose in their own life because of being able to lend comfort to someone in need. In this way, all negative experiences have the potential to end positively through an act of compassion.

#### WORKS CITED

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O'Brien, B. (2010, December 30). *About.com*. Retrieved September 25, 2012  
*Petit Family Foundation*. (2012). Retrieved September 18, 2012

# TASTE OF SUMMER

STEPHANIE MORRIS

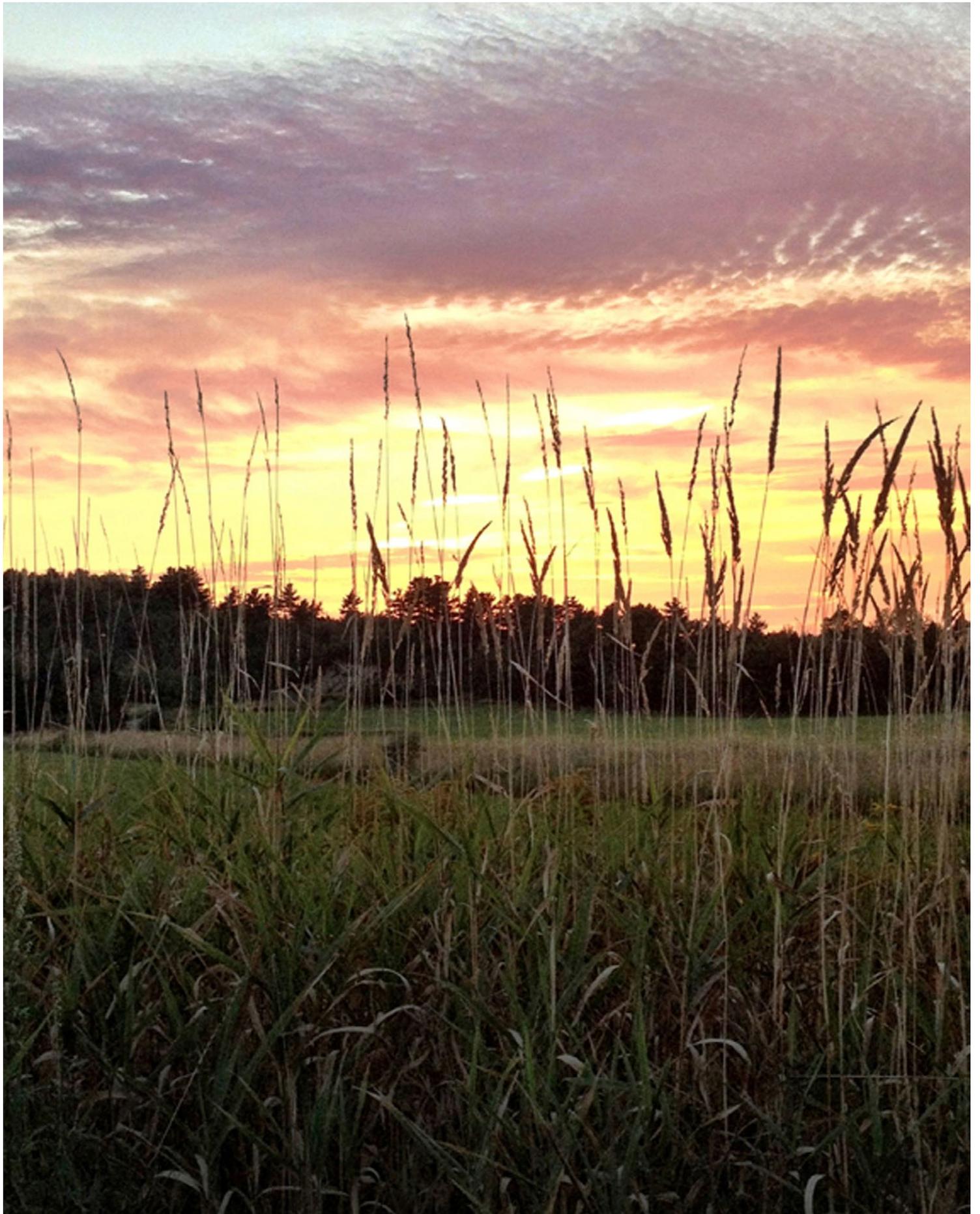
Wet, warm  
nights that smell of  
living things: sunflowers  
and broad, blushing roses, fallen pears,  
new peaches

and the  
chamomile tea  
we steep at noon and drink  
by moonlight, tea that tastes of dew,  
sweetens  
each dawn we spend waking slowly,  
drunk on sleep, on summer  
on the taste of  
nights that

made my  
skin hungry and my bones ache with  
need, nights when bright Venus  
yielded to dreams  
of clouds.



*Watch Your Step ~ Emma Terry*



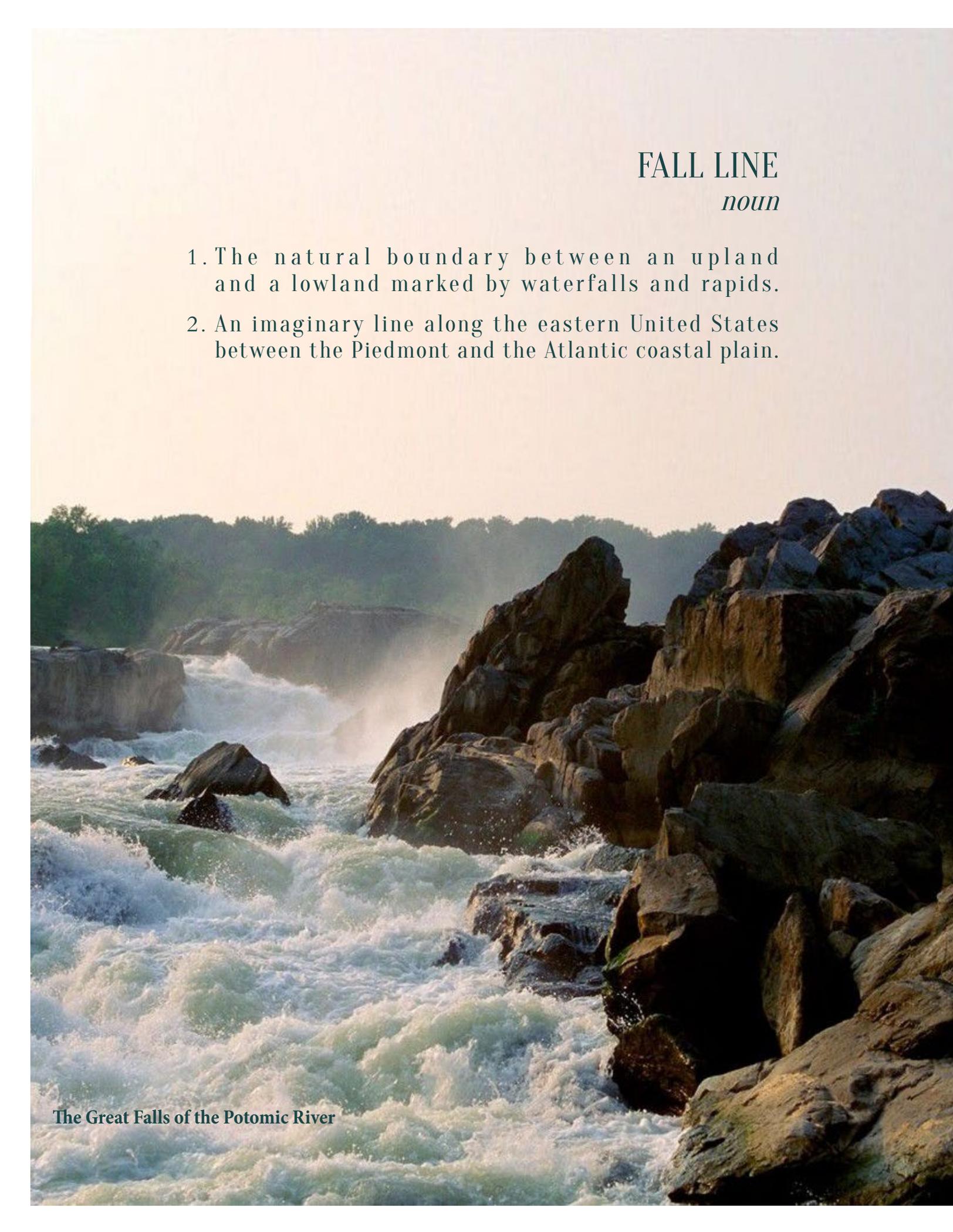
*People of the First Light ~ Sarah Murphy*



## FALL LINE

*noun*

1. The natural boundary between an upland and a lowland marked by waterfalls and rapids.
2. An imaginary line along the eastern United States between the Piedmont and the Atlantic coastal plain.



The Great Falls of the Potomac River