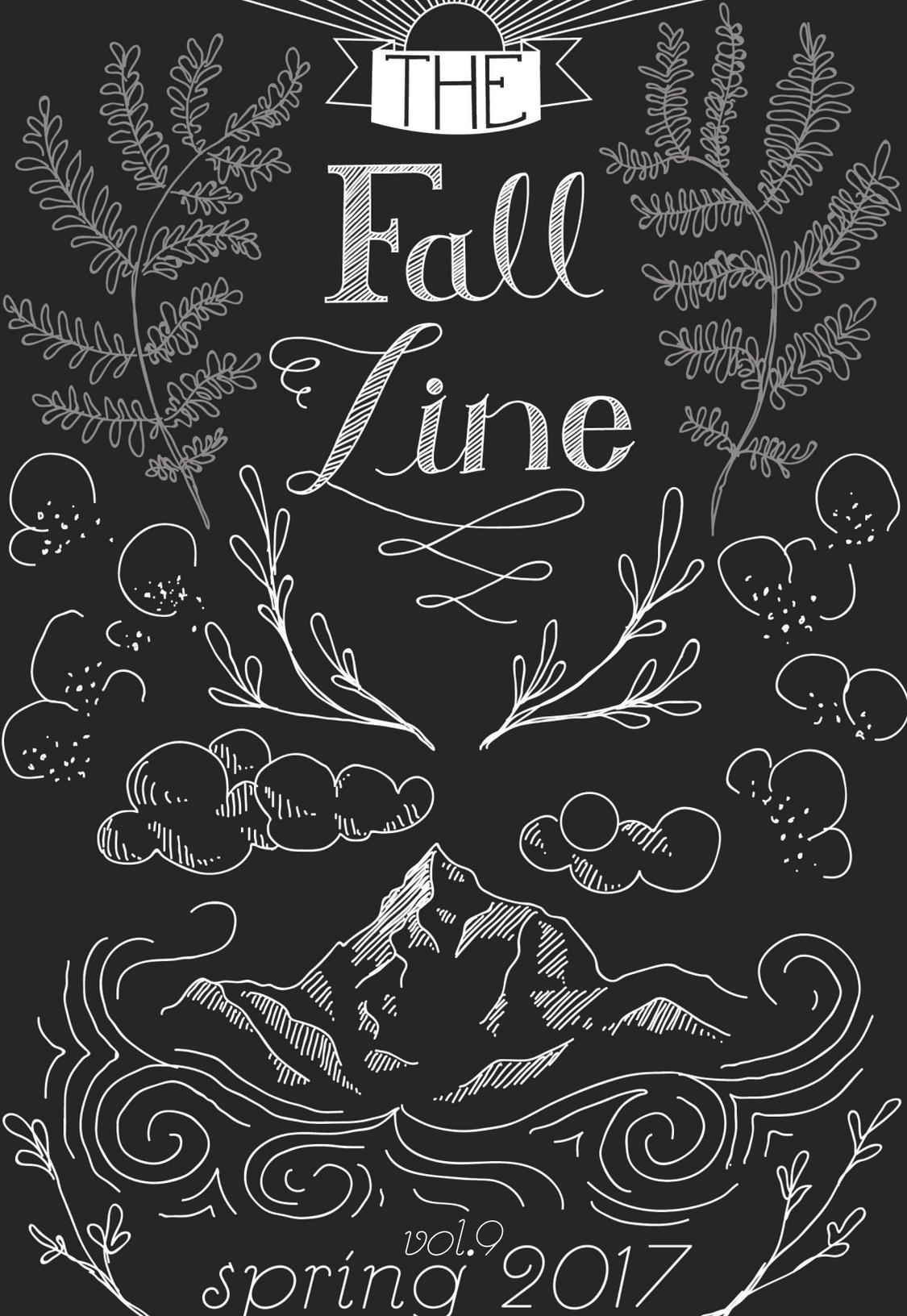
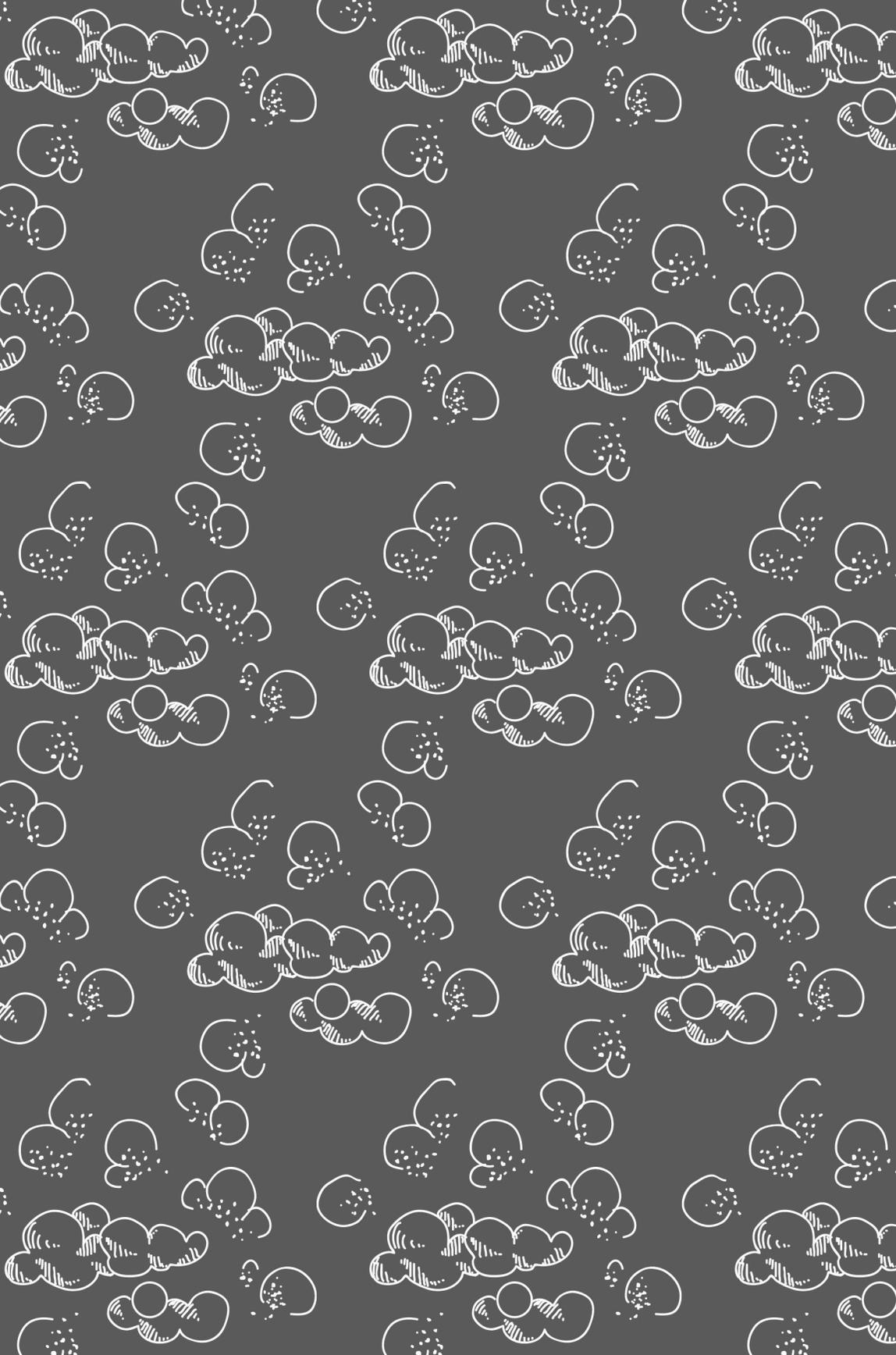




Fall Line



vol. 9
spring 2017



*Piedmont Virginia Community College
presents*



Fall

Line



spring 2017

vol.9

The Fall Line
Spring 2017, Volume 9

The Fall Line, Spring 2017, is the ninth volume selected, edited, and produced by Writers Unite, the PVCC Creative Writing Club.

Annette Cashatt & Russell Wright, Co-Presidents
Jenny Koster, Adviser

Editors:
Elizabeth Angeley
Annette Cashatt
Russell Wright

Lay-out and Design: Catelyn Kelsey

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Tabor

Tina Edwards - Poetry

It's raining tonight

Thunder

Lightning

I had a dream

I was walking

Through the rain at dusk

Down a dim and winding road

Guarded by tall pines that

Spoke like the roar of ocean waves

"Hurry! Hurry!"

I came to a wide open field that

Invited, whispered,

"Relax, relax..."

I was bringing you

A basket of oranges

Stink Bug War, 2010

Kristy Mangold - Creative Non-fiction

It was late spring in 2010, during that nervous time in between paying rent on the first and getting paid on the fifth. I was nineteen years old and living all by myself for the first time. I was working at a coffee shop, and barely scraping by. My house was on the western edge of Charlottesville, down by Ragged Mountain Reservoir, on the right just after the pavement turns to gravel. The Craigslist ad had contained those magic words, “no credit check required,” and so I’d met with the old shifty-eyed landlord Arthur and signed the hand-written lease. The rent was high for such a shabby place, but I was willing to pay up if it meant I was out from under my mother’s roof.

The house was round and twelve sided, with the door on one side and large windows on the other eleven. The unusual shape is how I learned the word “dodecahedron.” The outside had wood siding, unevenly stained dark brown. The yard had patches of grass choking in a fine layer of gravel dust. Inside, the floors were sanded plywood painted bright, primary blue. The walls had vertical white siding stained brown in places by years of nicotine build-up. There was a Barbie stove, a tan refrigerator from the 70’s, a miniature bathroom, a bed, a sagging futon, a coffee table, a chair, and a Beatles poster tacked to the wall. It was my slice of paradise.

The day of the war I got home from work around four. I walked in and almost

immediately heard a crunch under my shoe, and got a whiff of something sour. It was citrusy, pungent, and foul.

The utter amount of them amazed me. They were half an inch long, with a mottled brown shield shaped back. They weren't totally unfamiliar to me. I'd heard the stink bugs had come across the ocean, from China, or Vietnam, a foreign invader with no natural predators in Virginia. Since none of the windows sealed all the way, the little critters were nothing new. Being a lazily tolerant person, a few bugs and I coexisted pretty well. But this was different. This was a full-scale invasion.

Their dry corpses were piling up in the window sills. Above their dead comrades several more ambled aimlessly on the window glass, drawing little looping trails behind them. They were crawling through the cracks in the windows and the space under the door- up through the spaces where the floor didn't connect completely with the walls. There was a constant whirring like miniature fans, and I'd watch them drunkenly fly around in meaningless circles. With sharp taps they'd bounce off the walls, off each other, off the side of my face. Everything smelled musty and buggy.

Despite never seeming to do anything, they were annexing my house with sheer numbers.

For all the undeniable grossness of my current living situation, I was still hungry. They were, after all, just little bugs. I went to the Barbie stove and made a lackluster dinner of beans and rice. As I was stirring the pot I heard that now familiar buzzing, getting closer. The stink bug dive bombed, pinging against the back of the stove and ricocheting right into the pot, where the mottled brown body camouflaged itself perfectly with the pinto beans. I fished it out quickly, looking down into the pot. Maybe it wasn't ruined? I

peeked into the cupboard. A single generic can of cream of mushroom soup glared at me. So I tasted the beans and rice.

It was awful. There was the taste of beans, and rice, and a bitter, oily taste cutting through it all.

That's when I snapped. These buggers were going down. They didn't pay rent. Now was the time for action. I noticed how they were attracted to light, how they seemed to congregate lazily on the sunny windows and in the light fixtures. It was sunset when I implemented my counterattack. I turned on only the overhead light, opened all the cupboards and the bathroom door, and sat back on the lumpy futon, watching and waiting.

As it got darker outside, the single light seemed to grow brighter. The stinkbugs started moving toward it, walking upside down on the ceiling in little streams, reaching the light and falling into the shallow glass bowl of the shade.

I watched this procession for a couple hours, mesmerized as they marched to their demise. Steadily they crawled up the twelve walls and onto the ceiling, moving towards the exact center of circle.

By nighttime there were hundreds of them in the bowl, a dense mass of bugs crawling over and through each other. I turned on the roaring vacuum, teetered on the edge of the coffee table, and, grinning like a crazed person, sucked them all up. It felt amazing, such instant gratification. I was merciless. In under a minute all my enemies were swept down a dark tube and into the belly of the beast.

I wrapped the vacuum bag in layers of plastic and dropped it in my neighbor's trash, a half mile away.

Laying in the dark, in the silence after the war, I thought about how good it felt to have an enemy to fight against. Something concrete I could win against, me versus them, a war. It was nothing like the slow trudging battle of existing young, broke, and directionless. I daydreamed of what I'd get when I got paid. Steak and potatoes, vacuum bags, and duct tape too.



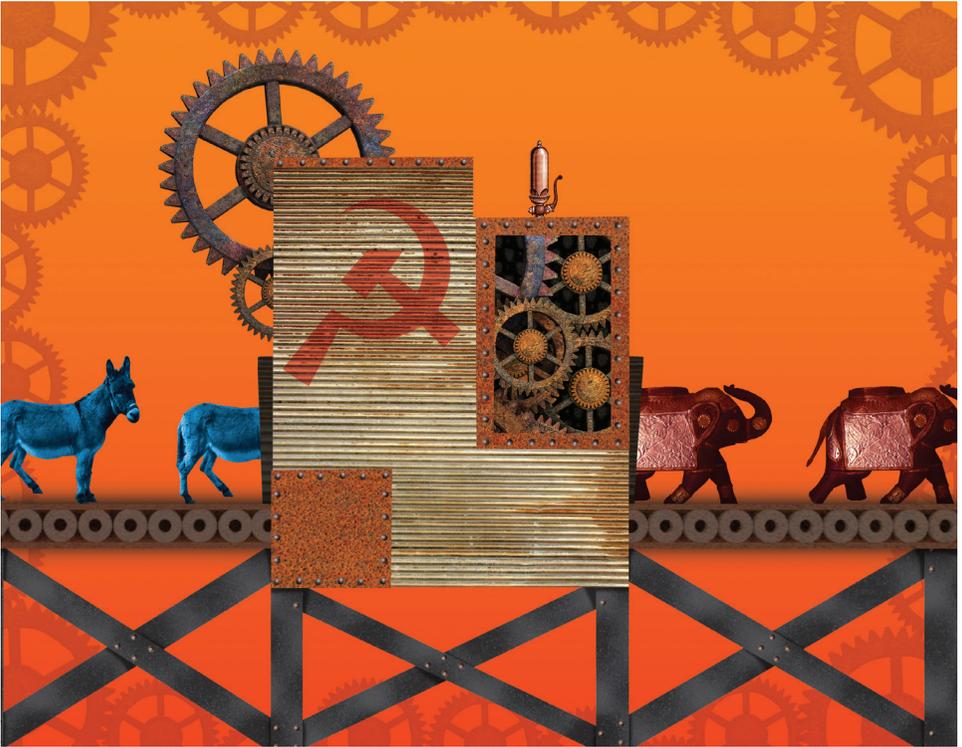
FINAL PROJECT
Annie Richardson

One Tiny Drop of Water

Emeraude Kalula - Fiction

I remember the night that my world turned upside down. My eyes were fixed on the moon; cold tears ran on my pretty cheeks. There was no star to kiss me on the neck. The sky was so dark that little wind refused to provide me its warm tender. The night seemed so long that my heart was torn into pieces. I called to the end of the world; unfortunately for me, nothing happened.

Suddenly an unspoken thought led my agitated little feet to the shower. When I arrived in the shower, my dark brown eyes began to look steadily into the mirror. Then I started to admire my wet cheeks. Why are they so steady? A feeling of bitterness paralyzed my heart. One second after, I decided to endure, always stronger. Then my agitated hands precipitated to the shower head and turned on the shower. Just a tiny drop of water on my nose gave me a smile. Then I took the next step and plunged into this auspicious deluge, a charming feeling invading me. An invisible hand gently caressed my body, those hands so fragile that it took my breath away. While smiling I began to adore life. Ah how beautiful is this tiny drop of water, a drop of water that erased all my misery, a drop that will give me an everlasting peace in my sleep. This drop of water saved a whole night for me.



RUSSIAN
Jack Gump

The Swim

Santander Brunal - Creative Non-Fiction

Summer of 1986, in Far Rockaway Beach, Queens, N.Y. We used to go there a few times of year with my father's longtime friends, Raphael, Evita and their three kids. They had two boys and one girl: Alex, the oldest; Ivette; and Neil the youngest son. Along with my two brothers and sister, I used to love hanging out with them. Unfortunately, they were not related, yet we considered them cousins just the same. We would often pair up, my older brother Charles with Alex while my older sister, Lesly, would spend her time with Ivette. As the youngest of the group, Neil and I would sneak around and play tricks on both our sisters. It was fun to make them miserable. I had a younger brother, too--Harold--, but he was young. During these hot summer days, he was content to be with mom and all the other younger kids, playing under the shade of the boardwalk. They would spend their time digging holes, filling buckets and feeling the sting of sand in their shorts.

We all spent our time swimming in the surf, trying to keep the haze and humidity of summer off our sun-red necks. As hot as it was, we were grateful for the cold Atlantic waves that would crash on the beach. Far Rockaway, with its long, worn and splintered boardwalk, was infamous for the sudden rip currents that would drag people out in a hurry. You would often watch people getting pulled out gasping for breath by the lifeguards. Today they wouldn't be any help.

The Fall Line

We were having so much fun that I hadn't noticed Neil had disappeared with his friend Hector up on the boardwalk. We continued to fight the surf and laugh when somebody would get rolled by the thunderous waves, the loud snap and deep "growl" as the energy would dissipate from the waves on to the beach. As the day got late, we could see the life guards closing their umbrellas up and down the beach. The loud screaming of kids and the constant sound of music also began to fade as people made their way to the parking lots. Just as the beach became less crowded, Neil returned with Hector. It wasn't the same 15-year-old Neil that had left. He was slurring his speech, and Hector was moving around like he had the ocean inside him. His brother Alex gave him a disapproving stare, but Neil didn't notice it. Suddenly Hector and Neil grabbed Lesly and Ivette. They pushed them into the surf. We all laughed and swam around for a while fighting the waves that seemed to get heavier this time of the day.

As we began to make our way out of the surf, I turned around to see where everybody was. Everybody was out except for Neil and Hector. Looking toward the water, I stood there in shock. Neil was in the distance bobbing up and down trying to keep his head above the water. Hector was motioning frantically. I looked over to tell someone that Neil was in trouble, but they were already under the boardwalk drying out. Trying to make my way to them, I swam, ducked through some waves and swam some more. The tide pulled me further, but by the time I reach them, I was breathing hard, and my muscles were burning. Just as I started to get my breath, Neil pulled under in a total panic. I fought him off and pushed him away. "Neil, what the hell are you doing?" I yelled in terror. I could see the desperation on his face as he flapped and flopped his arms in a frenzied attempt to hold on to something. I needed to calm him down, but Hector also looked alarmed. His eyes were wide open, red and continuously looking at me and then to Neil. Once I gained my senses, I told Hector to swim for help. While I continued to

paddle, I talked to Neil more calmly, "If you want me to help you, you can't drag me under". There we were staring at each other, paddling to stay afloat. "Calm down and float," I said with more stern voice. I reached over and put my arm around his waist. I told him "You need to paddle too," as we began to make our way in, but Neil wasn't floating very well. He was flapping his arms, but it wasn't helping. As we swam, we would get consumed by the large swells that were this far out from the break. Each time I went under, I swallowed my share of seawater.

The beach sand was so distant, and the more I looked, the more scared I got. As I began praying, "God, please help me" over and over in my head, strangely, I could feel the warm sunlight on my face. After a while, I told Neil to float, I let go, and I tried to touch the bottom with my feet. What a mistake, we were deep, and it really freaked me out. "Neil, you have to swim!" I yelled. He looked at me and I think he understood what I was saying. Luckily, with the greater urgency, we had reached the breaking waves. I was really tired now, and after a while, I could feel the ground. "Just a little bit longer," I thought. The waves were heavy, I got turned upside down and swallowed some more sea water. Neil didn't look good, his arms just barely were moving over his head as he paddled in. Finally, we caught a wave that propelled us to the edge of the sand. Crawling out of the sea foam, I could see Alex reach for Neil and everybody gathering around us.

I could hardly catch air in my lungs. Neil was practically face down in the sand, when suddenly I saw his body lurch. A mixture of bile, beer and hotdogs spilled out of him. I stood there shaking, cold and feeling kind of faint. The life guards ran over to us, but there was nothing they could do. Their shifts had ended, and legally they could not help him. They instructed us to call for 911. Just as my body began to warm up, Neil's mother and father began to thank me over and over again. Once the ambulance arrived

they placed Neil on a stretcher. With the stretcher on board, his mother began to cry. The ambulance left with its sirens blaring moving the crowd that had gathered. I felt proud of myself. Several years later I would tell Neil jokingly “Hey you owe me!” and when life feels as if it is pounding down on me like those waves that turned me upside down that day, I never panic. I just keep swimming.

I Get It

Karyn Williams - Poetry

I get it; I really do.

I believe All Lives Matter, too.

I'm saddened by the fact that people have died.

I'm frightened by the fact that cops lost their lives.

The justice system isn't providing justice.

Look at Hillary Clinton; she's not even in custody.

If you're rich or have power, you're destined to succeed,

While the 'poor folk' can barely afford their necessities.

If you're born in the system, or sell some dope to make money,

You'll get locked up, and be a prison fuck buddy.

But answer my question: have you ever walked in my shoes?

Been an African American or had your ancestor pay your dues?

Has society laughed at you because your hair comes out kinky

And tried to fit in, with a relaxer, which is quite stinky?

Has your grandma told you stories about her picking cotton?

Do you remember yet, or have you forgotten?

Our ancestors, tried to pave a way for us in society

To still have racism exist after all their rioting.
Has your boyfriend ever told you that his “friends” didn’t like you?
When finding out the color of his “boo”?
They had the audacity to ask him if he was a Nigger lover.
It took everything he had not to punch that sucker.
I get it; I really do.
I believe that black lives matter, too.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: To live in this world, among many racist individuals is frightening. I was in a newer church, and they did a meet and greet. You go around and shake everyone’s hand and introduce yourself. I walked up (in a line) to this older lady that was sitting down. She greeted the people in front of me and shook their hands. When I got to her she just frowned, then proceeded to grab my boyfriend’s hand and shake it. I was in disbelief and frustrated throughout the whole service. I haven’t been back to that church.

I know not everyone is racist or hates black people. I know that there are other nationalities that experience racial backlash as well. I know that not all cops are jerks and treat people like scum. I know there are plenty of people that want to make a difference in this world. I will accept everyone with an open heart and pray for the things that I cannot change. I will try and help those that are less fortunate. I will pray for those who serve and protect us and ask that God keeps them safe and hope they serve through him. I will also pray for those seeking unity in America among all races and ask that they do that in a way that creates peace, not violence.



THE STUDENT
James Johnson

The Fall Line

Wolf in Wolf's Clothing

Morgana Allen - Fiction

I contemplated the wolf lying on my living room floor. Its sides moved in and out almost imperceptibly with shallow breaths, and its grey-brown fur was covered in a film of dust from weeks of lying immobile in the corner. Slowly I picked up the remote, the hard plastic casing so at odds with this soft, graceful creature it controlled. After a minute, I pressed activate.

Let me explain. Two months ago, I checked the educational wolf out from the public library. It seemed so exciting to get to study this wolf, the shape of its face and body, the way it walked and ran, even get to hear its beautiful, eerie howl. But then I just never got around to activating it; there was always something that I “needed” to do instead. So week after week, the wolf lay in the corner gathering dust.

Then I got an email from the library: “materials discontinued”, it said, as well as “for liability reasons” and “DO NOT RETURN”. Apparently they weren’t interested in getting the wolf back -- ever. I called and asked what on earth I was supposed to do with it, and was politely told I could do whatever I wanted with my own possession, since that’s what it was now. Then I was politely hung up on.

“Great. What am I going to do with it?” I thought, turning to look at the still

creature.

So finally I tried it out, activated it. The instant I pressed the button, the wolf's eyes snapped open, nostrils flaring as it surged to its feet. It was much bigger than I had expected, standing up. Its yellow eyes darted to focus on me and my heart skipped a couple beats, even though I knew the wolf couldn't break free from its controls to hurt me.

Despite my fear, I had to admire its beauty. While it had been laying in the corner on standby, it had sort of looked like a dog with really gorgeous fur -- dark grey along the back and head, fading to brown and then white toward its belly and muzzle -- but now I noticed more differences. For one thing, while its muzzle was long and slim, its head was very wide and boxy, with big poofs of fur on the sides like muttonchops. Also, its tail was thick and puffy, like a fox's, but most of all it just had a wildness about it that I couldn't pinpoint to any one feature. Now the wolf's gaze was going everywhere around the room, nostrils moving as it smelled its surroundings. Who knows what it thought about being inside an apartment. Or maybe it was used to being indoors by now.

I had gotten so accustomed to seeing this animal just laying on the floor, unmoving, but now that it was up and aware, the fact that it was a wild predator really hit me; standing in the same room with such a big, potentially dangerous animal was a thing I could feel in my gut.

Once my heart slowed and I could tear my eyes away from the wolf (it took a while), I checked out the remote's options. Buttons labelled walk, trot, lope, and run were grouped together, then sleep and groom, and finally, at the bottom, growl, snarl, bark, yelp, and howl. Activate, stand-by, and stop were the biggest buttons, red, at the

top of the remote. I really wanted to hear the wolf howl, but didn't want to freak out the people in neighboring apartments, so I settled for walk, and the wolf began to pace around the perimeter of the room, nose still testing the air constantly. After a minute, I tried trot, and the wolf sped up, jogging just like a dog would, and making tight turns in the small room. How would it manage run in such a cramped space? I decided not to test it, pressing stop instead. The wolf lurched to an immediate halt, almost falling on its face from momentum. "Sorry," I muttered, and its ears twitched my way. Eyes narrowing, the wolf's lip slowly curled to show disturbingly sharp teeth as a growl filled the air.

Woah, now. I definitely hadn't hit the growl button, and the wolf shouldn't be able to do that without my say-so. Suddenly I remembered that email's phrase "discontinued for liability reasons", and my adrenaline ramped up again. I didn't know much about educationals except that they were real, living animals taken from the wild that then had controls implanted in their brains, linked to the remotes that came with them. Some people were rabidly against the whole thing, calling it inhumane and disrespectful, and some people thought it was a great scientific achievement. However, judging from the library's email, it sounded like the animals' controls might not as reliable as advertised. And there was nothing standing between those teeth and my skin. Quickly I hit stand-by on the remote; the growl cut off as the wolf's eyelids dropped shut, and its body slowly sank back down to the floor.

I stared at the still animal, who was again breathing quietly with closed eyes. What a difference from a minute ago! From harmless conversation piece to dear-god-please-don't-tear-open-my-soft-flesh! Sure, it had only growled, but if it could start to break free to that small extent, would it be able to break away entirely? I threw the remote in the back of a closet, out of sight, wishing I could do the same with the wolf itself.

That evening, I had calmed down and was trying to decide whether to go out and be social or stay in my warm apartment. It being winter, in Denver, there was freezing wind and a temperature of five degrees: hm, tough choice, but I'll just stay home, thanks. Moving to Denver had sounded really fun and adventurous, since I had mostly lived on the East coast before, but I hadn't considered just how damn cold it got. In three years, I hadn't gotten used to it at all. Also, I had discovered that I wasn't a big city person. It seemed like no matter where I went, there were people around, or I could hear someone talking or playing music, or the sound of traffic... I felt like I could never be entirely alone. Sometimes I drove up to the mountains just to get some breathing room; the endless vista of the peaks and valleys gave me all the space I needed. That was one thing I did love about Colorado: those huge, endless mountains.

For tonight though, I'd accept my cramped living quarters in exchange for warmth. I popped some popcorn, got comfy on my beat-up couch, and found my place in the book I was reading. I got to a really gripping part, where the armored biolab vehicle had just been knocked over a jungle cliff by unknown forces, when the heavy throb of a subwoofer came pounding through my apartment wall, tearing me out of the book. Ah yes, my next-door neighbor. For some reason, he would often blast his music for about three minutes, at bass levels that would rattle the walls, then would cut it off abruptly and let quiet resume. I went over once and asked him to turn it down; in reply he grunted and shut the door, and the sound went down about two decibels. Now I just ignored it as best I could. This time, though, my eyes fell on the inactive wolf, still awkwardly in the middle of the floor where I had put it on stand-by. For a second, I was tempted to make it howl, to startle the guy next door into turning off his music. The thought made me grin, but I wasn't sure I wanted to activate the wolf again, much less risk freaking it out with all the noise going on. Instead, I ground my teeth for a few minutes 'til the bass

shut off, then got back into my book.

The next day, I mentioned the wolf situation to my coworker, Shane. I didn't like Shane; his eyes were hard and mean, and he had an ego the size of Denver itself. Also he never, ever apologized for anything. But I was trying to make friendly conversation, so I told him about the wolf that had been foisted off on me.

“Ey, I know some dudes who would take that thing. No one wants to mess with a dude 's got a wolf in his place!” he said in his tough-guy accent.

I wasn't desperate enough to give it to one of Shane's friends. “Uh, that doesn't sound really great for the wolf...”

He scoffed. “Man, it's only an educational. Not like it's a real animal anyway. They're just there to do what you make them do.” But I remembered the look in the wolf's eyes. That creature had fire in it.

“Hey, you want a easy way to get rid of it,” Shane continued, “just th'ow it in a dumpster. Problem solved.”

“I am not going to throw it in a dumpster,” I said, angry. “It's a living creature, you know, same as you.” I hadn't been treating it that way, though; I had been content to let that same living creature collect dust in my apartment for a month. Suddenly I felt guilty.

“I'm just sayin', it would get it off your hands,” Shane said loftily. I was sorry I had brought it up in the first place.

Another freezing cold night, this time with sleet piling up outside. It seemed to always be night now; I was desperate for more sunlight. Apparently this was the season-

al depression thing, which I had only noticed since I moved Colorado. The far-too-long nights combined with so much cold took all my energy and enthusiasm away; I longed for a beach, for sunlight pouring straight onto my warm skin! Instead I was shrouded in layers and rotting under yellow, artificial lighting, sick of being indoors but unwilling to go out into the biting cold darkness. I made some hot chocolate in my tiny kitchen, just for something warm to hold, while contemplating just curling up in bed until spring. Maybe if I had lots of fur, like the wolf, I wouldn't mind the cold and snow. I looked over longingly at its thick, grey-brown coat, then hesitantly put down my mug of hot chocolate and knelt on the rug next to the wolf's softly breathing body. Pushing my fingers into its warm fur, I couldn't believe how thick and dense it was; I could hardly reach through it to touch the wolf's skin. Even the wolf's ears were covered and filled with thick fur. Really it was a gorgeous creature, far too gorgeous for this shabby, pathetic apartment. I felt like a jailer suddenly, keeping it here, but what could I do with it? Now I felt more miserable than before, overwhelmed by the problems in my life. Slowly I lay down and curled up against the wolf's side, burying my face in its soft, warm, musky fur and shutting out the world. I stayed there for a long time, dreaming of being able to open windows and stroll outside without hunching miserably against the cold, dreaming of heat and sand and sun.

A few days later, my friend José came over to hang out. I had forgotten to mention the wolf, so it was a bit of a surprise for him to see the big shaggy animal in the corner. "What!" he yelled, lurching backward and then darting into the other room. "Why is there a wolf in your house!" he shouted from around the corner.

"Oh, sorry," I laughed, "I should have told you I had an educational. Nice reaction, by the way."

José stuck his head around the doorway and glared at me. "You trying to play a

trick on me? Hey, I grew up in the mountains, where this crap happens for real! Although,” he conceded, coming back into the room to look warily at the wolf, “you don’t usually find them sleeping, and they usually come in the garage, not the house. But it still gave me a heart attack.”

“Really, I’m sorry,” I said, sitting back on the couch. “I’ve had it here so long I didn’t think to mention it.”

José had edged closer and crouched down to gingerly stroke the wolf’s long fur. “How can you not think about such a beautiful animal? Look at this gorgeous coat. It’s so thick! Has to be, to keep them warm when it gets down below zero.” He seemed mesmerized by the wolf, running his hands over its slender legs and knobby ankles, feeling the points of its dark nails. “So, have you woken it up or whatever?”

“Yeah, once,” I said. “It was really cool to see it awake and moving around, but it started growling, on its own; I don’t think it’s supposed to be able to do that. And I didn’t want to find out that it could move around and maul people on its own, too.”

“Jesus, no wonder it growled, it’s probably sick of rotting away in people’s houses so it can walk around for their amusement. Or just lay there and be forgotten ‘til it dies,” he added bitterly, still absorbed in stroking the wolf’s thick fur. He looked up, realizing I was that person he was criticizing. “Sorry. But this is awful, man. This animal was meant to be free, hunting and living with a pack, not growing mold in someone’s apartment like some stupid knick-knack.”

The familiar guilt was building up in my chest; he was right. While I was being lazy and indecisive about what to do with the wolf, its life was slipping by, unused and un-lived. “Well, what do you want me to do with it?” I grouched at him. “Just put it out in the

woods? What if it's not used to the cold anymore and dies of pneumonia? What if some other wolves kill it because it's an outsider?"

José looked at me scornfully. "It's not gonna die of pneumonia. Did I mention this super thick coat? And anyway, either of those options is better than this crappy non-life. This animal is not where it was meant to be. It's not living the life it's supposed to live."

I stared at the ground for a minute, weighing guilt and fear. Suddenly I just wanted to do the right thing for once in my life, instead of being too afraid. Like always. "Alright. You're right. This isn't where it's supposed to be. It might as well be dead as be stuck on stand-by indoors forever. It should have the chance to live its real life. I'm gonna set it free tonight."

José smiled. "Thank you."

I spent the rest of the afternoon looking at Google Maps, trying to decide on a good place to release it. I wanted to get as far away from any towns as I could, but I still had to be able to drive there in my Honda Civic. This wasn't going to be some epic trek on foot through the snowy wilderness; I just wanted to drive into the mountains, let the poor thing go, and come back home. I finally chose my spot, southwest of Leadville, off Route 82. I packed a sandwich and a bottle of water for the drive, piled on two sweaters and a coat, and was about to lug the wolf out to the car when the familiar sound of shouting and arguing came through the wall. Right, my other next-door neighbors. I was so sick of hearing them, and I couldn't believe people wasted this much of their lives being so unhappy. Why didn't they just separate? At least I was about to head out, so I wouldn't have to hear them. I found the remote in the back of the closet, moving to put

it in my coat pocket, when the bass started pounding through the other wall like the throb of a headache. My hand clenched around the remote, and I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I looked at the remote in my hand. Calmly, I pressed activate, and as the wolf lunged up onto all fours, I hit howl.

Deafening in the small space, a high, eerie call flooded through the apartment, sounding like loneliness and vast, unbridgeable voids. As the call lowered and wound down, I pressed the button again, and again. I hit snarl, and bark, and yelp, the wolf making a crazy and vibrant racket; it felt like a dam had broken, pouring out the sound of the wolf's soul. I pressed howl one last time, savoring the wild, chilling notes, and as they died away there was a beautiful silence. Finally I pressed stand-by, knelt to pick up the wolf's limp body, and left.

The sun was already admitting defeat and slipping under the horizon as I drove up into the foothills of the Rockies. I was headed west on 70, against a flood of headlights going back into Denver. After about an hour and a half, I turned south, and traffic dwindled to almost non-existent; only the occasional car broke the dark monotony of the road. Passed through Leadville and turned west. The moon rose; it was three-quarters full, washing trees and road in cold light, leaving black shadows in between. When I was in the general area I had picked out on the map, I slowed and turned onto a gravelled pull-off spot. Getting out of the car, I inhaled the cold, clean air; it smelled like nobody had ever breathed it before me. It was delicious, but my face and hands were already freezing. Walked around and opened the back passenger door, looked at the wolf's fierce beauty one last time. Stroked the thick fur between its ears. I walked back down the road a little way, picking up a fist-sized rock from the frozen ground. Laid the remote on a big stone. Raised my rock up high, brought it down on the remote as hard as I could.

Plastic cracked and shattered, flying through the air. I smashed the rock down two, three, four times, buttons and shards of plastic showering the frozen ground. Looked up when the wolf surged out of the car, powerful hind legs propelling it forward in an awesome leap. It hit the ground and kept on going, running for all it was worth, for its freedom, for its life. In five long strides it disappeared into the trees, though I could hear it for a few seconds longer before that faded too.

Then I was alone in the winter night. I took a deep, deep breath, savoring the biting freshness of the air. Getting back in the car, I fumbled out my cell phone and dialled a number. "Hey, Robin, sorry to call so late, but... could I come stay with you for a while? I want to move down there and need a few weeks to get my feet under me. This Colorado winter and the city are too much; I'm done. I can't wait to get to Florida. ...You're sure it's okay? Thanks, it's a huge thing you're doing for me. I'll see you in a few days. ...Yeah, I'm just gonna pack a few things tonight and get on the road. There's nothing really holding me here, and I need a change. ...I know I've been saying that for a while, I guess I finally just got kickstarted to do it. ...Okay, see you soon. Love you."

I hung up and looked at the dark woods one more time. As my numb fingers struggled to put the keys in the ignition, a long, clear howl carried through the thin air. I smiled, started the engine, and pulled out onto the road. I didn't look back; I was too busy looking ahead.



FINAL 04
Madigan

Hometown

Catherine Morris - Poetry

All of me are pieces
Of a teeny, tiny town
Too afraid of changing
Of letting others down
My heart stands in the middle
A living, breathing Town Square
My mind stands beside it
Presiding as acting Mayor
An antique shop stands on the corner
Filled with boxes of dusty dreams
A music store and a Baby Grand
With brilliant keys that gleam
A book store, where my imagination
Can run wild between the rows
A coffee shop, on rainy days
Where my soul takes the time to grow

My veins are little side streets
My lungs, the General Store
While folks stand at my Arm's gates
Waiting for a tour
My Town has grown in population
I've let each new shop set up keep
With its own little Shopkeeper
And the broom he uses to sweep
But just now it's afraid of changing
Resists it with all its might
It doesn't want this disappearing
To have it drift away from sight
My sensible brain stands guard
And whispers what it will
It says that life is always rushing by
With no way to make time stand still

A Story I Told Us Once

Matthew Paysour - Fiction

We could die happily.

As happily as dying could be, at least.

We could die happily, considering.

We could have our gravestones side-by-side, one-next-to-the-other, and mine could say

“HERE LIES [ME], HAPPILY FOR ETERNITY”

and yours could say

“HERE LIES [YOU], FOR ETERNITY (how long is eternity, must I spend it all beside him)”

and we could know that it is not particularly funny anyway, but our families and our friends would laugh because it is so undeniably us, and our families and our friends could visit our lifeless bodies and smile through their tears that fall one-two-three down their cheeks because of our deadness. They could know that we never wanted more than pleasant company and they could just pick the nearby graveyard dandelions so that our new granite headstones could effloresce with life among abundant death, and they could

love the dandelions for being abundantly nearby because they know if they spend any of their hard-earned dollars on pretty plants just for our sake, so help us God, if we were alive, we would fight them. We could look at each other underneath the Earth and be glad that others see that we have life when we should be lifeless and that our friends look at our bodies replaced by inorganic speckled grey stone and still they do not cry, but their faces twist themselves in distorted bowline knots but still there is a smile, like mothers do at weddings or graduations or important birthdays. We could like to think that we're good at inventing and thinking and creating even when we're dead too, even though honestly we weren't that good at inventing and thinking and creating when we were alive.

We could be alive happily too, though, we could be old together, with giant plastic glasses frames like the ones we could have had when we were younger, except for now we could actually need them for seeing and they could make our mostly greenish-brownish eyes HUGE in a way that could still make us laugh when we wake up beside each other and place them on our faces and turn to say, good morning to you again. We could eat our plain steel-cut oatmeal and fiber supplements, and then we could pop our plentiful pills for diseases of the elderly, and we could look at the container

S M T W T F S and then we could look at each other and say, please pass the smtwtfS (with mouthfuls of oatmeal, for added obscuring of any possible vowel sounds), as if it were ordinary or possible to speak a word with no vowels, as if the container's name and identity were reduced only to its labels imprinted on the surface.

We could stop being an accountant and an administrative assistant when we're old (because our children are middle-aged now like we were once, and because money is only paper with faces of dead men on it anyway) and we could start being our hobbies.

We could sit outside on our modest-sized oaken deck and listen all day to the birds tweedle-oo and wee-hah-woo, and this could inspire me to make stories again and this could inspire you to build peculiarly-shaped birdhouses and paint again, paint them with your own thoughts. My stories might not hold together well because I never could quite get a handle on that *je ne sais quois* that makes characters and fiction and sentences interesting (or at least that's what they told me in my twenties), and your birdhouses might not hold together well because neatness and measuring and calculation (not to mention super-glue) were never really things that you believed in.

But we could be okay with it.

We could abandon the lifeless, instead having vivacity and verve. We could finally have time to travel, fly on planes or in helicopters or on hang-gliders (well, you could finally have time for flying on hang-gliders, you know I'm afraid of heights, and hang-gliders) and we could take a giant cruise boat to New Zealand, and we could play shuffleboard for hours on it and be friendly and loving with our fellow cruisers so that former strangers at departure time say "goodbye Grandmom and Grandpop" to us when it is time to dock, even though we are not really their grandmom and grandpop. Our children and our grandchildren could laugh at us for being such a stereotype of old people, and we could say with shrugged shoulders that stereotypes exist because everyone does these things, and everyone does these things because they're fun, and that's the point of everything, isn't it?

We could forget that that's the point of everything, at some point. We could forget to have fun in middle age, because most people do. You could go to stay with your mother for a week or two or three to "figure things out," and I could watch you drive away in our two-door Mazda, and I could be all alone. There could be our white picket

fence in between your car and me, and you could accelerate down the street, appearing and disappearing and appearing and disappearing between the posts. I could wonder if I need to go after you, or if I need to wait, if you need the space. I could decide correctly. Eventually. I could wonder if the white picket fence was the problem. It probably wouldn't be.

I could tell you that we're not like them, that our togetherness won't fall apart like both of our parents' togetherness did. Because we're different, because we're so undeniably us. You could say, what if we're not? You could say what happened to ? what happened to evenings not watching late night television in inattentive silence? what happened to reading books about adventures aloud to each other, when you would try to voice-act the characters as the author intended and I would try to give them all geographically inappropriate accents until we had stitches in our stomachs and forgot what the story was ever about? You could say, what happened? Please? I could say I don't know. I could say maybe it's because our children are grown, and because we don't like our jobs (we call them "jobs" because it's too sad to call them "careers," though they are "careers"), and we are no longer so full of life and purpose, our shoes are treading, in essence, on a Nebraska interstate highway where it looks like every step is taking you neither forward nor backward nor in any particular direction. You could say that that makes sense maybe if you think hard enough, but that my metaphor is struggling to work simply and sensibly.

But before that, of course, we could buy an off-white house with a green door and with a white picket fence, after our two-bedroom apartment in Chicago started shrinking when our family started growing, after our second child that we named Lucy started existing. We could be happy—or we could be distracted, depending on when you

ask us—and we could still have a picket fence then. We could become an accountant and an administrative assistant because Jack had been existing for 10 years already, and his stomach would soon be requiring more things to put inside of it, as growing boys often require, and providing as such would require money that we did not have. We could make money. We could complain about fluorescent offices, white paper and black pens, ordinary paper clip-shaped paper clips, and how breathtakingly annoyingly hilariously stupid people are. We could still remember to have fun. We could ask how Jack is doing at soccer practice and we could hear Jack's soccer coach tell us that Jack is, uh, the best on the whole entire peewee team at discovering white-painted beetles in the field's center circle in the midst of a match, and we could hear Lucy say her first word "smile," which could make us smile because even though many many other parents have had their child learn to speak and be generally normal, we could be proud that we somehow haven't screwed that up yet for Lucy, or for Jack.

We could also feel that uncomplicated joy of normalcy when Lucy is first born, or when Jack is first born. We could be surprised, because procreation is perhaps the easiest, and most frequent, (and most fun) of all potential human accomplishment, but still it could make us so proud when each of them leaves your body for the hospital bed, the nurse's hands, then our hands, later to become better, larger, brillianter versions of us. I could make a face that first time (because blood always made me weak in the knees), a face that could somehow make you laugh as you push a pumpkin-sized and Jack-shaped bundle of living and breathing humanity out of you in a gross sort of way.

We could have life before those moments, though, even if we forget it entirely later down the road, even if we forget the purposes we once had, our "Welcome to _____" road signs, our reasons for early twenties anxiousness of

tomorrow and the day after and the year after. We could be full as much of life as we are of lifeless, because with each personal success, each personal creation, comes personal failure. I could write stories for The New Yorker or for no-name-someplace-biannual-literary-reviews or for anything, really anything, and I could receive letter after letter in the mail, each starting with a thank you for your submission, but... , a we regret to inform you that..., or the like, and maybe I could frame them just so that I could know that someone is reading my words. You could show off your paintings to white walls, to heavy air, to me at empty art shows, and you could hang your paintings on our bare brick Chicago apartment walls so that at least our friends will have to look at them, and tell you that the watercolors are inspiring, when really their hesitating tongues tell us that they mean that they don't exactly get all of the swirliness, but that they're inspired that you try. That we try. And we could be happy, because maybe that was our purpose then, to create for ourselves, and we could also know that life, if there is any at all, comes from different sources through the course of a single life, even if we do not know that right then.

Well, I would know that. Because I have learned it now. You may not know that yet. I do not know.

You are sitting in a garden when I am, for now, nothing but a passerby. You are by the chrysanthemums, daisies, lilies. Of all the pretty plants around you, you have decided instead to twiddle a dandelion between your index and middle finger. I do not know you, but I could know you. I would like to know you.

There is a moment, often, when a barrier is shattered, taking only one word or

sentence or thought to cross the threshold from complete strangerdom to familiarity. It does not matter what is said because at that moment, your thoughts have escaped, and your mind has been heard by another mind, connected as a glowing diameter between two beings, a diameter with potential to fade into nothing again and be forgotten with frightening immediacy, but also with potential to glow ever brighter until the connection is so strong that it radiates a more frightening but more terrific energy. The mere possibility of it leaves one lustfully fantasizing the ordinary as extraordinary, surrendering to the delicious inevitability of ordinariness, so long as it can be shared with the other half of this lifeful energy. That could be you. I will shatter a barrier.

“Dandelions are pretty flowers, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Considering that they’re weeds.”

Lucky

Karyn Williams - Poetry

It's a random road trip, because we can
Finding a way to the promise land
Singing songs at the tops of our lungs
And one decision to have you tag along
A destination and a complete surprise
To eventually being able to call you mine
Boardwalk laughter, beach playground fun
Sand star sketches, and a cold one
Finding Neptune, sea shell delights
You're the meaning of falling in love in a night
A weekend home, a hibachi disaster
A Ruby Tuesday save, and a waitresses' laughter
Baking cupcakes, and competition icing
Both of them turning out so nicely
You're the high when I'm feeling low
A sweet symphony of the voice I know
A stolen kiss and a Lucky brand
God showed me a beautiful man

Chopped

Ellie-Anne Daniel - Creative Non-Fiction

I'll never forget the elated look on the stylist's face when I assured her that, yes, I wanted all of my long hair cut off. When I walked in, I had not made an appointment, so she had no clue she was going to get to perform such a transforming haircut that day, she took before and after pictures and was more than excited to tell about donating my hair to locks for love. After I sat down in the chair, she put my hair into a ponytail and immediately chopped it off so I wouldn't have time to get nervous and retract my request. My first reaction was the weirdest combination of elation and regret I can remember ever having and before I knew it, she continued the haircut and it kept getting better and better until all of my regret was gone and replaced with a hint of fear. Once the cutting was complete, the stylist excitedly asked if she could style my new haircut free of charge because she loved it so much and wanted to demonstrate the new potential that it held. By the time I left the parlor, I had short, slightly curled up, wavy hair, and the ponytail that I once called mine had been signed away to charity. My new beginning had begun.

Later that day, I was scheduled on my volunteer team at church to be the producer's assistant, so I didn't have time to debut my haircut to my family or anyone, I was headed straight to Fredericksburg. When everyone on the volunteer team either loved

and complimented my haircut or didn't even mention that anything was different, I knew I had chosen the right church for life. During the service, my family attended and saw me on stage, knowing that's the position I should be in but wondering where I could've been because that surely was not their Ellie. I sought them out after the service and our family friends and my siblings loved it but my parents were more hesitant with remarks such as, "Wow, that sure is short!" and, "What a bold choice, Ellie!" I knew they were not going to be my biggest fans. I continued to try to show them how happy this haircut made me, I was still the same Ellie they've always known, I had simply become a more clear version of myself, but to no avail. After church, we all went out to dinner with our friends and my parents kept glancing over at me a bit worriedly, waiting for me to see what a terrible decision I had made, why would I pay someone to take all of my gorgeous hair away? They couldn't see from my point of view. As the waiter was splitting up the checks, my parents motioned toward my friend who also has short hair and I only to hear the waiter say, "The boys are with you?" I was sure my dad was reaching his breaking point, but he simply responded, "No, those are my girls, but yes, they are with us," I was proud of him.

Once we had been home for a while, my mom informed me that they knew they had no control over how I cut my hair or how I dress, but if I wanted to have my hair short and wear men's clothes, they were not going to support it financially. At the time, I had a heavy course load with school, so I could not easily afford to cover these expenses via a job or anything, I was living off of my Christmas money and whatever I could save from my gas allowance. Over the next few days, weeks, and months, both of my parents begged me to at least grow my hair to shoulder length, a bob would be cute, and they'd happily pay to keep it cut at that length. The only upside I could think of was that it seemed that this cause had taken over the hopes that they had for putting me

back in girl's clothing.

One night when I got home from school, my mom sat me down to tell me that my dad came to her in tears because he had searched the term "dyke haircut" on google images. She asked if I had ever looked at the results for this search, and truthfully I had not, I never thought to search that and at the time I saw dyke as a very hurtful word. After showing me the image results, I agreed with her that my haircut did indeed fall into that category, but had she ever thought to use different search terms? The answer was as I thought, of course she hadn't, both of my parents are very set in their ways and refuse to look at anything from a viewpoint that opposes their own most of the time. I requested that she search "pixie cut" instead, but she and my father said that wasn't the point that they were trying to make, they just wanted me to see that I fall under these terrible search terms and therefore I need to change.

My sister, once the enemy phase ended when she left for college, has always been my best friend and my biggest supporter in everything that I dream of and hope to accomplish. If my sister had been at home and easily accessible to mediate my parents and I, this entire situation would've been infinitely simpler. Instead, she was at college, then she moved to Thailand for a year, so our best communications with her were through text and an occasional voice message. I sent her pictures of my new haircut and she loved it and tried to convince my parents to at least not hate it. Being the oldest of three children and my father's first daughter, she has always had a special ability to tug at his heart, so after a couple months of tugging, my father finally began to accept my short hair. However, this was only the very beginning of an everlasting process that I did not know I had entered.

After I thought my father had accepted my short hair and exhausted all re-

sources that may back up his position on the topic, I came home to find a print out of the Army hair regulations hanging on the fridge. There were two pictures displayed: one was a girl with shoulder length hair, and the other was a girl with long hair tied up in a bun. I was sure that his next step was to kick me out of Junior ROTC, as he was not only my father, but also my Senior Army Instructor. My immediate response was to look up the regulations myself only to find that he had excluded the first picture: a girl with short hair like my own, the only thing I couldn't go shorter than was a number two with clippers, I was in the clear. When I brought this up with my father, he said that our battalion went by an older standard than the one I had found which was dated from 2010, so I'd still have to grow out my hair if I wanted to stay in the program and keep my leadership positions. This news nearly broke me, I thought he had won, he always has to win, and he has always been in charge of everything that I do.

A few weeks later, the girl who had been chosen as battalion commander came to school with the exact same haircut that I had and my father froze. His partnering instructor had no problem with our short haircuts as they were in accordance with Army regulation, so my father had lost his ground to have me grow my hair back out.

Once I turned eighteen, my parents knew that there was truly no leverage they had over me that they would actually put into use. They love me more than to not do what they can in helping me pay for college, or allowing me to use a car to get to school and work. While my father did threaten to take my car away because he knew I wasn't telling him about my sexuality, none of that was ever actually put into motion, and not too long after that, I was done hiding who I was from my parents anyways. We made a silent arrangement to just not mention the topic and I didn't have a girlfriend at

the time, so I didn't have to risk mentioning anyone in front of my parents, and they just avoided asking.

This process taught me a ton about myself and my parents and how different we are from each other. I see the nature vs. nurture argument from an entirely different aspect now and there is no clear answer, it's just full of blurred lines. A huge part of who I am is due to the family that I was born into and how they raised me, but another part is my intuition and simply how I was born. At no point in time did I choose to prefer men's clothing, I've just always been that way, and the same goes for my sexuality, I never wanted to be gay, when I first thought that maybe I was I hated the thought. For years I rejected the thought and tried my best to do everything I could to be straight and have a boyfriend and fit in with my family and how I was raised, being gay is a sin and a choice that is wrong. Since then I've learned to own who I am and own insults that others find to use against me. Earlier I mentioned that I saw the word dyke as hurtful at that time because I had not yet realised how I could own these insults. Now I see dyke merely as descriptive and even complimentary while keeping in mind that others could still be at the stage where it's hurtful, so I still don't use it, but I also don't mind it. Everything in life is a learning process and very few things are set in stone.



RUSTOLEUM DREAMS
John Pettitt

Friendly's

Gina Edwards - Fiction

After church, Easter Sunday. I am with my young daughters, ages four and seven. We are in our Sunday best. Me in a yellow dress, the girls in pink and white with 'shiny shoes.'

I like the church, but... I am a new "single mom". Separated from my husband, two wonderful innocent girls to protect. Who would protect me now? I am trying so hard, but it is so hard.

Stopping at Friendly's Restaurant after church service. A once-monthly treat, saved for. My girls look so cute, so eager for the treat. I think we must glow in enjoyment of the spring day and the anticipation of this treat.

We're walking across the parking lot, when a man approaches. Unkempt, but clean. Smiling, yet hesitant. About my age. "Excuse me, miss," he says.

We all three turn, smiling. Who is this gentleman? The girls, in their infinite, child-like wisdom, move slightly behind me. Flanking, but letting me lead. Protective and vulnerable at the same time. I notice how the breeze ruffles their skirts and their hair, and how the sun sparkles off their white patent leather shoes.

“Hi!” I say, “Can I help you?”

“Could you spare \$5? You look like a nice lady. I’m really hungry.”

I know, I know... the bar down the street, a bar around the corner. But it’s such a lovely day. Spring blue sky, warm yellow sun, pussy willows. Surely he didn’t come from one of the bars.

“I don’t have anything that small,” I replied. “But you’re welcome to join us. It’s our treat Sunday. We’ll treat you, too.” I’m walking toward the door, expecting that he will follow. He does.

“Are you sure?” said with hope and trepidation in his voice.

“Yes. I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t sure.”

“I shouldn’t, really.” The door opens and we walk in. “I didn’t go to church or anything today. I’m not...”

“Don’t be silly. You seem nice, it’s a gorgeous day, you’re hungry and we just invited you to lunch.” The girls are smiling, giggling. So sweet, so darling. They know how I am.

In the door, the four of the us. I tell the waitress that we want a table for four. She knows me, sort of. Knows my story, remembers our other ‘fourth’. She smiles at the girls then at me. Then she looks up at the man. Then at me. She’s cautious. She knows him too, it seems. Her look wonders whether I know what type of man he is. I know, but I’m hopeful she’s wrong, and he’s wrong too.

The waitress grabs menus and we all follow. My girls first, almost dancing to the

booth; the stranger and I behind. We turn the corner into the dining area.

Into the wall of Sunday Best church-goers, all gathered at Friendly's

It seems, it seems, it seems as if every head turns eyes on us. Smiling, smiling, at girl, girl. Smiling, at woman. Then, still smiling but fading, at the man.

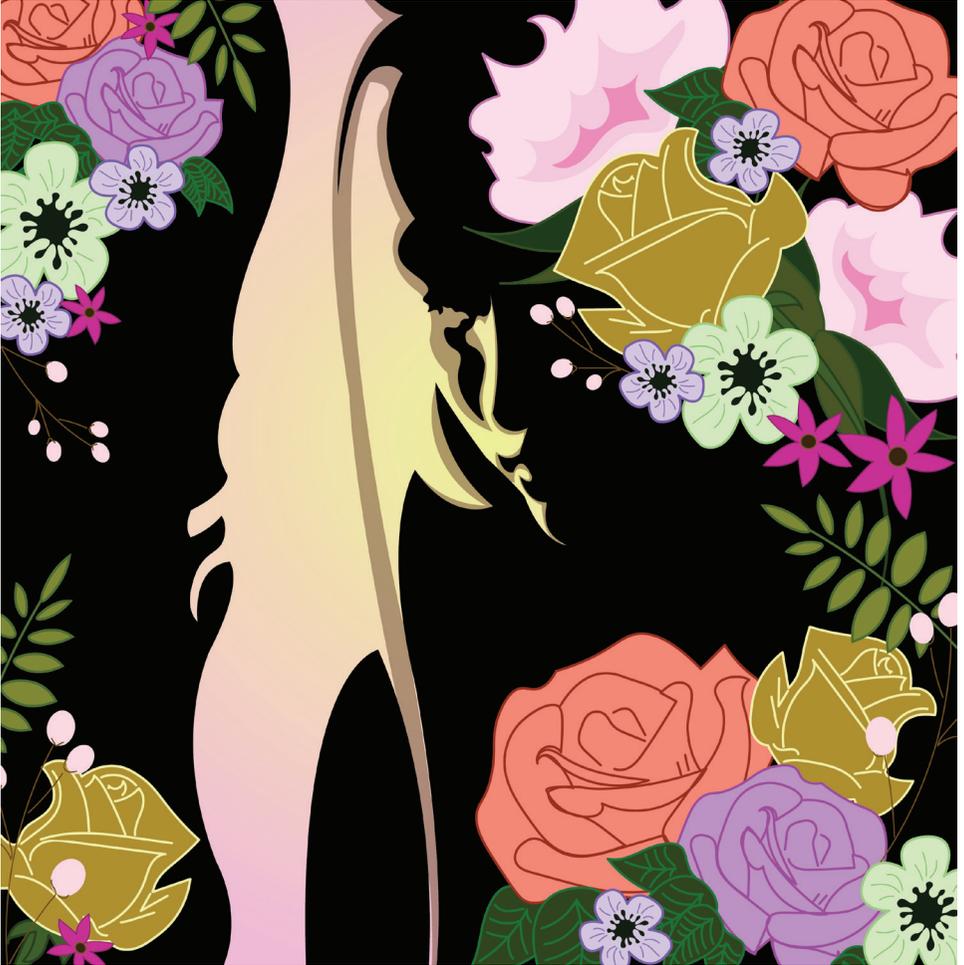
He stutters to a stop, hope fading, shuffles and begins to turn. "I'm not dressed right," says he.

"But it's only Friendly's," I reply, reaching out.

"No. You stay with your pretty girls, and have your Sunday treat. Thank you... thanks..."

And he turns and walks out of the door into the bright Easter Sunday morning.

I turn back to the dining room. Ashamed – for me and for all of them.



HIGH CONTRAST PROFILE
Catelyn Kelsey

Bygone Love

Annette Cashatt - Poetry

Running under city lights

Through buildings that tower then fold like Made in China, Dollar Store cups

Their ashes will forever be buried in the mud and sand

50, 100, 200 years

But you draw your legacy in the sky

100,000 million billion years

The Star heaved, cried, finally sighed so many eons ago

Bequeathed you the dust straight from her heart

Your imprint in our cosmos will always last

Every tale of old dragons, sprites, floating cities, cracked chests of gold

Deer scrambling through the weeds

Fire in the water

(Big boys don't cry)

Even the mother star dims beside you

For a mind so brilliant

And your heart: a goblet of chipped ice, drenched in honey
But burning deep in the core
So sensitive and warm
It melts and puddles so easily when
Another human caresses it
For love is never visionless
It sees more, not less
For love is never lost
It wanders like a clumsy kitten, until it romps back
For love is never forgotten
It sometimes is displaced by a dark, sticky, and suspicious substance
(Quickly burn whatever slime that is)

For the kindest thing it says is
Please stay, sweetie
Yet the most generous thing it says is
Keep flying still in the cosmos

Or so it once was

Three Layers

Cameron Stewart - Fiction

She watched through Jackson's eyes as a man melted before her. She felt the cloth on his shoulder through Jackson's hand, which was extended in a gesture of comfort. She listened to the soft sobs through Jackson's ears, and felt a rising pity through the combined focus of Jackson's senses.

But Cath was not Jackson. She was at this point a neutral observer. She didn't even know the crying man's name, or how he was related to Jackson. She didn't know anything about Jackson aside from his name. It was now her name, in his guise.

"I don't know what's gotten over me, Jackson," the man said, rubbing at his eyes with the palms of his hands. "I'm sorry. I think I'm falling apart."

"It's okay. I'm here." Though they were Cath's words, they came in Jackson's voice. She hadn't actually heard Jackson speak yet, as she hadn't been given a chance to do so.

"I must sound so stupid. But I swear, this job is getting to me. It's going to tear me apart. I swear, I'm losing it! All of this overtime. And the things they make me do... What choice do I have?"

"It'll be all right," Cath said, though now she was using Jackson's eyes to scan

the room.

She had her own job to do, after all. She ignored the blubbering mess in Jackson's grasp, and took in the setting. They were in a small living room, decorated by a couch, a table, and a wall-mounted television. There wasn't a single tool that she could use.

"There should be a kitchen to your right," said Mike, her observer, nothing but a voice in her head.

"I feel like a slave. I can't get out of this."

The intensity was overwhelming. Cath drew Jackson's eyes off the doorway and back to the man. He had fallen into a new fit of tears, but his words echoed in Cath's mind. All she knew about this man had come from a few minutes of his complaints. But she had never heard a statement that had struck so true. It was painful, knowing what she would have to do next.

"The kitchen, Cath."

She couldn't ignore Mike for long. The man's tears were subsiding, and he reached out to give Jackson a hug. Cath couldn't bring herself to resist.

"It'll be okay. This will all go away," she said through Jackson.

Cath patted the man on the back with Jackson's hand. She could feel Mike's eyes on her, and she knew that she had to act soon. Cath released the man, who leaned back on the couch sniffing.

"I'm going to get you something to drink. You stay here and relax."

Cath rose, and walked around the couch to the kitchen doorway. She went directly to the cabinet top by the stove, where she found a knife block. Cath drew out a large butcher knife, and paused as she spotted Jackson's reflection in the blade.

It was rare for her to ever see the pin body's face. She stared at Jackson, his scrunched features reflecting her troubled expression as she controlled his body. Yet another slave, though he didn't know it. He would soon find himself standing over his friend's dead body.

"Let's get moving Cath. We've got quite a list today."

There was a twinge of annoyance to Mike's tone. Cath shook with anticipation. She crossed back to the living room and stopped in the doorway. The man was still on the couch, facing away from her and still far too emotional to be fully aware of his surroundings. Cath came up behind him slowly, Jackson's feet moving silently across the carpeted floor. She raised the knife.

Here's an escape, she thought. At least for you.

Cath opened her eyes in the dim light of the machine—her coffin, perfectly fitted to her body save for a slight air pocket in front of her torso. Though she quickly returned to her body's normal senses, there was a phantom sensation of the blood that covered Jackson's hands. Her thoughts lingered on Jackson as the machine cooled down, its functions turning off. Now Jackson would be discovering that he was a murderer. He wouldn't remember doing the deed, but the police would come and pin it on him. Jackson had indeed physically caused the murder, though it had been through Cath's will.

"Good job," Mike said, his boredom sounding through his transmission. "Go ahead and take a short break. I'll load up the next target."

The coffin split open, and its two doors rolled back. Cath stepped into the steel-paneled room, which was empty beyond the machine. Dim and cavernous, the room was only lit by a handful of lights lining the base of the walls. More light trickled in from the main room, and Cath followed it as if in a daze. For a moment, her head was filled with a tapping sound.

“Mike, your headset is still on.”

The sound vanished. Cath paused in the center of the main room. A simple bed lay behind her against the back wall, and beside that was a small bookcase. There was even a couch and TV, with a handful of select films sitting on the stand beneath it. This was her cell.

Cath had long become disinterested in those material distractions. She went to the opposite end of the room, where the wall was taken up by a thick steel door and a tiny reinforced window. Cath’s eyes went automatically to the window, and traced the familiar sight of the trees outside, sloping along the gradual hill in front of the complex, forming a forefront to a lush scene of distant mountains.

It was visual hope.

Cath’s mind drifted back to her last kill. Often, she had found herself lamenting the fates of the pins, but now she didn’t think about Jackson. She thought of the target, his crying, the raw emotion that she was not allowed to show. Emotion was weakness; the man had proven that old adage by his complete lack of self-defense. But Cath still felt emotions. No matter what Mike tried. And that last target had tapped something powerful.

She was a slave.

There was no way out.

Well, actually, she did one way to escape.

A few birds moved out in the trees, nothing but tiny blurred shapes from Cath's vantage point. Widespread woodlands. Wildlife. Even the flight. It all played into the illusion of freedom. But Cath knew that it was truly hopeless and empty.

"All right, I've got the next target loaded. She killed her husband apparently. His brother's paying for this. The wife's at her mother's house... so we've got an easy pin set up."

There was an unsaid part of Mike's transmission of course, but Cath didn't budge. She didn't want to get back into the machine. She continued to stare at the false symbols of freedom, but her eyes were glazed. Cath was a slave. There would be one way to escape.

"Let's go ahead and get ready for launch."

There was no other way out.

"Cath, we need to hurry up."

She had freed the crying man.

"Cath, move it!"

There would be one way to escape.

Cath blinked and raised her hands in reflex as a metal panel slid down over the window. She turned and stared directly at a camera mounted to the ceiling. She willed

her anger to burn through and into Mike.

“If you don’t move your ass right now, you know what I’m going to do.”

Cath looked away from the camera, and closed her eyes tightly. She heard Mike’s swearing ring through her head, and then a loud click came from the room. Immediately, Cath could tell that the lights had gone out. Without thinking, she began to shake. She couldn’t help it. Her heart was pounding faster than when she had been contemplating suicide.

Cath opened her eyes, but couldn’t see a thing. Dread filled her, shooting down to her bones. It felt like the needles, the shocks, the cutting of the surgeons’ knives. The dark always brought her back to her days of ‘programming’. Cath shrank down, shivering violently.

And then the actual pain came, from the system wired to her insides.

A jolt rose up from her spine, mildly hot at first. It was merely uncomfortable. But then it intensified, and Cath seized up in agony. A whimper escaped her lips, even as she tried her hardest to remain silent. Tears strewed from the corners of her eyes.

“You know I don’t like this either. Just do your job Cath!”

She couldn’t take it anymore. Cath let out a cry, and collapsed onto her side. “Stop!” she finally screamed.

The pain vanished. The lights came back on. Cath was left breathing heavily on the floor, with fresh tears pouring sideways along her face. These tears had nothing to do with the pain. She had been so very afraid.

She would never be able to end her own life.

Six hours later, Mike took off his headset and set it gently on the computer desk. He made sure it was switched off, and then let out a long sigh. He stared at his dual monitors with a mixture of disgust and aggravation. His eyes lingered on the camera screen that showed Cath lying on her bed, placed into an automated sleep.

“Nobody... and I mean nobody... could be more hardheaded,” Mike said, fueled by his aggravation. The disgust was quieter, more painful, and reserved for himself.

“Tough day?” Julia said, as she set her bag down on the desk.

“The worst,” Mike said. “Maybe you could switch to day shift some time and see what it’s like.”

“Oh ho, no thanks. I’ve seen enough at inspections.”

Mike snorted. “That’s when she’s on her best behavior.”

He stood up and stretched, and then stepped out of the way to give Julia room to sit. He grabbed the empty drink cans and littered food wrappings from the desk. His self-hatred was rising, but his anger was stronger.

“Do you have any plans tonight?” Julia said, rearranging the various windows on the computer screens to her liking.

Mike scowled at her alterations to his setup, and then he registered her question and snorted again. “Yeah, right. If I did go somewhere, I’d probably end up breaking company protocol.”

Julia laughed, but it was very short and it seemed forced. Mike gave a very insin-

cere smile, but couldn't bring himself to keep it. What he had said was very close to the truth. He stood there for a moment, to what amounted to an awkward silence.

Mike was still dwelling on that uncomfortable truth when Julia said, "Well, have a good night anyway."

"Yeah," he said. Mike snapped back to the present. "Yeah. You too. I'll see you in the morning."

Mike gathered up his things and went out into the driveway. He looked back at the tech base, which looked like a small house from the outside. He was fuming, and pointlessly gripped his hands tightly closed as fists. Realizing this made him angrier. Anger made the self-hatred even stronger.

He thought back to a particular target from earlier in the day, some guy who had said, "I feel like a slave. I can't get out of this." That sentence had stuck with him the whole day, haunted him, but it wasn't until now that he realized why.

Mike was a slave. Once he had taken this job – no, probably once they had offered him this job – Mike had become expendable. If he did anything to disrupt the company, anything that would put it at stake, he would be a dead man. That included quitting. And his higher-ups had made that abundantly clear.

"There is no way out," he said to the empty driveway. "And there's absolutely nothing to do about it."

Calm

Elizabeth Angeley - Poetry

Calm is the gentle breeze hitting the ocean

Making the wave move gracefully along the sand

Pricking it until it settles down into a smooth surface

Waiting for the storm to come

To repeat what it has always done



FINAL PROJECT
Julia Grammer

A Grocery Store Visit

Abbigail Traaseth - Fiction

Mom keeps grabbing oranges. She picks one up, looks at it closely, squeezes it gently, holds it to her nose, and then puts it back. She does it again. I don't know what she's looking for, but it must be important. She's probably looking for the best one. I want to help, I want to look and squeeze and smell. I want to help her find the best.

I like oranges. I like how they look when they're round and full, and then how they're different when mom opens them up and I see inside. Soft, juicy little crescents. That's the shape of the moon when it isn't full but it isn't half either, a crescent. It's the inside of the orange that tastes good. I tried the outside once, but that was something else. Not sweet. Mom told me not to eat it, and I guess that's because it's no good. My favorite part is how the name is the color. Grapes aren't purples, and strawberries aren't reds. Carrots aren't oranges either, but that's probably because 'oranges' was already taken. I learned the color before I learned the fruit, and I was confused about how two things could share a name, but then I was okay. It's like how there are two Paiges in my class. They're not the same Paige, but they share.

I like the grocery store. That's where we are now. There are so many colors and shapes and smells. I like the fruits and vegetables part the best, all piled up on tables

around us. I don't like the taste of the green ones on the wall, but I like it when it rains on them. It's like they're trying to trick the vegetables and make them think that they're still outside, but they're actually waiting to be bought and eaten. I don't know why anyone likes to eat those.

I like the people in grocery stores, too. I like the ones who are looking at oranges, like my mom. I like the ones who make the oranges appear, who ask us if we're okay and if we need any help. They always smile at me. Mom always says no to the help, but I want to know how they always have more oranges. I've seen them make the piles tall again after people have taken them, so I know they have more hiding somewhere. I wonder how many oranges are in the store.

I want to help mom. I reach out to grab the orange that's closest to me, but I'm sitting in the cart, which makes things hard to reach. I have to stretch a bit, but I don't mind. I almost get to the best orange when mom takes my wrist and puts it back by my side. She says, "don't touch." She doesn't look at me.

My Father's Hands

Gina Edwards - Poetry

I remember my father's hands, so impossibly enormous as my three-year-old self sobbed in pain and fear at the splinter in my hand.

Sobs rising to screams of terror (nononononono!) at the idea of those huge hands removing said beam. Those hands being thrown up (frustration? resignation? surrender?) as his voice asks my mother to perform the surgery.

I remember my father's hands gently cradling and comforting me after the offending speck was removed and sweetly, tenderly, wiping my tear streaked face.

How could I have feared those hands?

I remember my father's hands as he deftly wielded tools through the years – hammer, saw, paint brush – always so precise and knowing in their movements.

Fingers long, hands strong and sure. Saving broken toys, building his boat, repairing plumbing, electrical, woodwork.

I remember my father's hands as he taught me to paint a room, bait a hook (yuck!) and cast my rod.

Helping me reel in my first catch (a huge sunny from the dock!) and later catches, bigger catches too!

I remember my father's hands as he scaled, gutted and filleted the fish we'd caught. Silver

scales flying, sparkling as they catch sunlight.

A slice through the head and the gut, head and entrails in the bucket to be buried in the garden. Messy work, but somehow his hands stayed clean. No wasted motions, no wasted fish.

I remember my father's hands the day we realized my brother was not a boy, but a man. Playful rough-housing escalating into something more primal.

My father's hand swelling from the sprained thumb.

I remember my father's hands teaching me a "proper" handshake. Not crushing, not limp, but firm and dry.

"A handshake is a contract. You can tell a lot about a person by his handshake." My father's handshake was firm and honest.

I remember my father's hands reaching to grab the steering wheel when I was first learning to drive, saving me from straying over the center line.

Steady hands, despite the gasp and grunt of surprise that issued from him.

I remember my father's hands, one placed over mine, as we walked down the aisle. Later, gently lifting the veil to kiss me – was that a slight tremor?

I remember my father's hands, older now, cradling my new-born daughter. Gentle and strong. I knew that she, like me, would always be safe there.

And later, with my second daughter, the preemie. So tiny. His hands so huge beside her, but only those hands brave enough, besides mine, to hold her.

I remember my father's hands, older still. A stronger tremble in them as the sickness sapped his strength.

But still determined to DO: to bait the hook, fix the toy, hold the child. The days of scaling and cleaning fish are done now, though.

I remember my father's hands after the surgery, as he lay dying. Holding mine and squeezing rhythmically, almost hypnotically, "I love you," because he couldn't speak.
I remember my father's hands, folded carefully with a rosary laced in his fingers.
Impossibly large hands.
How could they be so still? Unable to wipe away my tears? (nononononono!)
I miss my father's hands...



COLLAGE
Hadley McLain

Chasing the Darkness as Fools

Aerial Perkins-Goode - Poetry

your body weighed on me

like regret secreted under wrinkle sheets casing your futon

your hands outlining the curves of my figure

as if my soul was nestled between my inner thighs

I promise, you will never find a home there

you are everything and nothing I ever wanted

but here we are chasing the darkness as fools

clumsy falling into our own insecurities

night became dense

I was drowning

never did you reach out for me

console me

told me I was worth more

than lock doors and Netflix

I hated you for that, still do

I saw the heart in you that night

bruised, broken

empty from past experiences

your eyes traced mine

looking for the same tragedies

there, you will make your home

Stupid

Christopher Alan Henderson
Creative Non-Fiction

How stupid are you? Be honest with yourself and think about it. We can only learn and grow as human beings from making mistakes. In life, the really stupid mistakes that you make are memories that permanently scar themselves into your memory bank. Hopefully, it is a learned lesson that can carry itself with you; an invisible friend that never leaves your side and always watches your back. Looking back at my life, I will forever remember an event that was plain and simple; something stupid I did that almost was the death of me.

I lived outside of Washington, D.C. in a middle-class suburban neighborhood in Virginia that was indeed a glorious kingdom through the naive eyes of ten year-old boy. A group of trusted friends and myself would tromp and explore across several square miles of wooded backyards, paved side-walk streets, and small islands of forests that for some reason or another survived the imprint of the real estate developer's wrath. As far as we knew, there wasn't an area that my gang hadn't violated until we discovered the "Mouth of Hell."

The "Mouth of Hell" was just that; an underground passageway that twists and descends into the depths of Satan's den. Ancient primal inscriptions, adorned just inside

the dark and foreboding tunnel, warned us of a fate that, if dared, will only be rewarded with being forever damned to pain and suffering. Of course, spray painted entrances to large storm water drains can capture the imagination quite well. My friends and I had a new place to hang out.

The tunnel of this storm water drain truly looked like a throat. It was perfectly circled, single-toned, and gray in color. It was a concrete tunnel extending so far into the distance that even if one used flashlights to stab into the vanishing point, it always gobbled up the light; engorging itself until the light turned to a midnight of nothingness. On the floor of the tunnel there was a shit-brown algae that always had a running flow of water laying on top of it. It looked like a slick gross tongue that happily travels in marriage down an esophagus; a trickling tongue wide enough that it forced us to split our legs into waddling-like penguins. Slowly, it consumed us down its lengthy throat. With each waddled journey, it fueled our growing courage to see more.

That day there were only two of us out, traveling in a course-less expedition. It was another boring and listless summer afternoon in our kingdom. As we rode our bicycles near the entrance to the "Mouth of Hell," thick gobs of rain began to spit down on Erik and me. A quick thoughtless decision was made to wait out the beginning summer downpour inside the large storm water drain. Stupid. Erik insisted on taking his ten speed bike into the tunnel because it was a new bike and he didn't want it to get wet. Stupid. We stood inside the tunnel and the thunderous downpour began. We had a moment to get out but we ignored common sense. Stupid. That trickling slick gross tongue began to widen and rise as if someone had turned on the faucet to a bathtub. Water began to spew out and rise very rapidly. Erik, in a blink of an eye, was swept away along with his bike; jettisoned out as if someone had turned on a garden hose full blast. Very, very Stupid. Watching this occur in front of me terrorized me and filled me with

instinctual fear.

I sat upon a small perch that was a landing for the ladder leading up to the manhole cover. From the very short height of the ladder, I quickly found the cap to the manhole cover was welded shut. It was probably sealed closed for safety reasons from kids entering the “Mouth of Hell.” No one considered the need for a person to get out. The grey vomitus water was rapidly rising. My mind exploded. Facing death can only be described as converting to a primal state of mind. Every sense ignites into a heightened awareness of needing to survive that cannot be controlled. The water level began to greedily lick at my small perch searching for another morsel to eat. I jumped in.

The “Mouth of Hell” puked me out in the most violent expulsion I have ever felt. I sunk under its wretched bile; somersaulting, tumbling, and spinning in a ballet of chaotic depth. I was frantically clawing and reaching out before me, trying to grasp at anything that may stop this aquatic nightmare. As quickly as I was removed from the tunnel of the storm drain, I was slammed against the large boulders that rested along the creek’s banks. I clung to its side, dazed for a moment, as if my whole body was slapped by a huge hand. Both arms and legs screamed back to life. I scampered and clamored over the rocks. Desperately fighting my way out of the gravitational pull of the storm drains flood, I reached the peak of safety.

Erik was alive. He had laid on top of his ten-speed bicycle like a raft and rode out nature’s deadly water slide. He too was slammed up against the rocky bank of the creek bed and climbed out. He escaped with a nasty gash on his knee and a bent bicycle wheel. I lost my eye glasses. As I started to worry about how I was going to explain my lost glasses to my mother, Erik and I picked ourselves up. Battered and bruised, we slowly hobbled homewards. I had met the acquaintance of yet another lifelong invisible friend. So I ask again, how stupid are you?

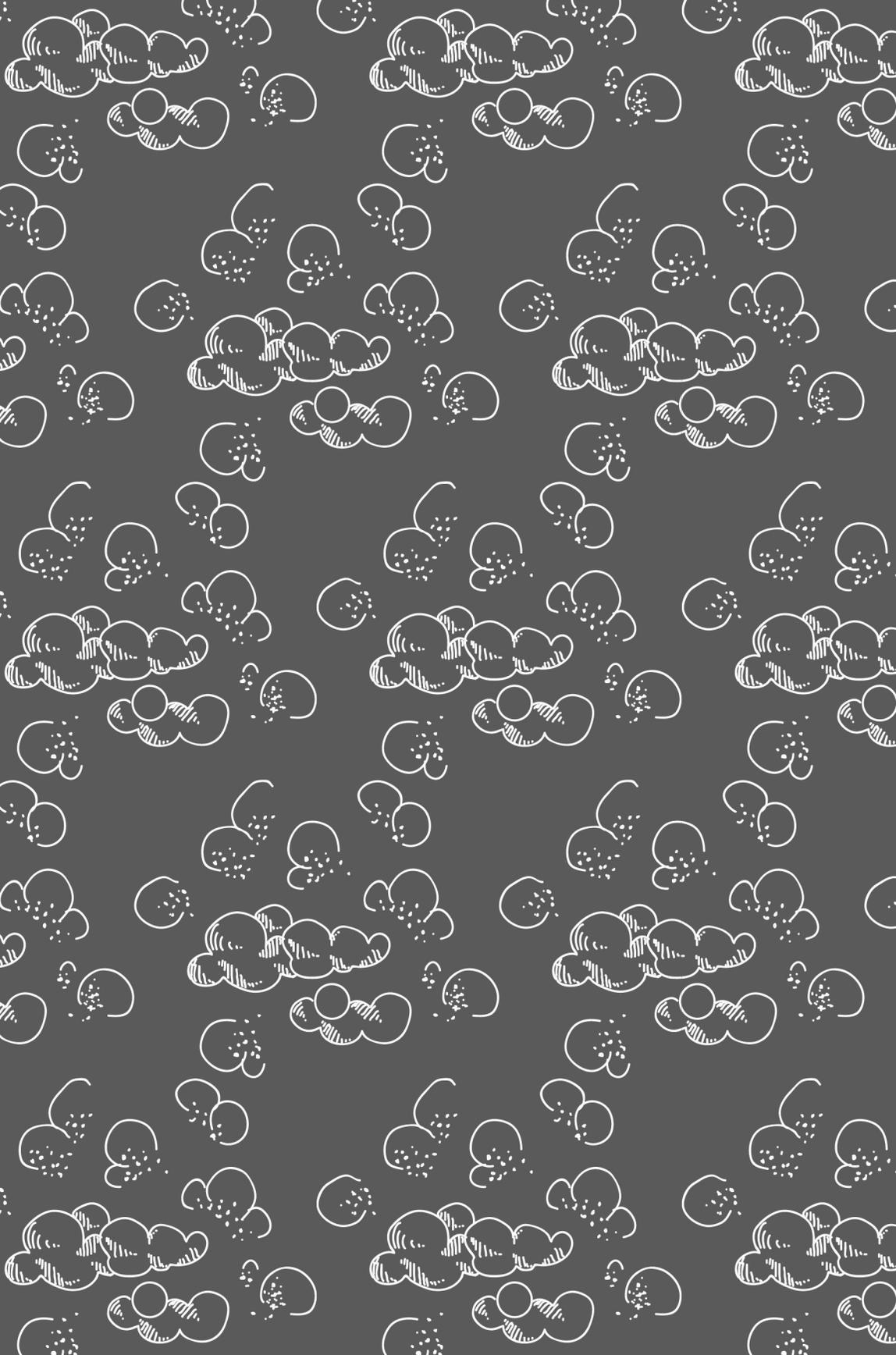


ICE STEAM
Nathalie Ando

Forest of Ash

Skye Scott - Poetry

The
trees stand
tall, their leaves blocking
out the rushing wind and roaring rain.
Their strong trunks and stout branches protect me
from the facade of the world. The dirt is cool under my toes,
settles into the ground with my weight. The moss is a soft rug for my feet,
wet with the morning dew. I have been here many times. Miles inside this expansive forest.
I am hidden here from the destruction of the outside world. The pollution, the smoke. These can not reach me,
or so I thought. I failed to see the evil gleam in your beautiful eyes. I did not
question your curiosity
When I brought you here.
Looking back, I see I should have.
Perhaps I could have saved
The singing birds,
The swaying leaves,
The sweet breeze.
This lovely place.
This place that you turned
To char and ash.
This place that you leapt through
Wielding destructive fire.
I can no longer escape devastation. It has consumed me.



The Fall Line

A narrow zone that marks the geological boundary between an upland region and a plain, distinguished by the occurrence of falls and rapids where rivers and streams cross it.

