

The Purple Patch



The Purple Patch

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Σ Τ Δ
Sigma Tau Delta

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The Purple Patch

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

As the editor of this year's *Purple Patch*, I am thrilled to present the thirteenth volume to you, the reader. This project began the day the last issue was published. We attempted to piece together the pain, the struggle, and the reward that life often dumps before our feet. This year's *Patch* is filled with an attitude that challenges current thought. That is why this volume begins with an image of Hunter S. Thompson provided by Jessica Wise, which sets the tone. This volume makes plenty of noise, whether it is issues of gun control, women's rights, or civil rights. We need to once again step out on the edge of the canyon of life and scream. We need to let our voices be heard by all, let our voice soar; let go of this apathetic attitude and continue to give our future this gift of creative and critical ideas. It is our duty to go beyond the classroom.

I'm indebted to the editorial staff, who provided me with help in every facet of this issue. Flannery Crump, from her hobbit hole in Illinois, made our logistical challenge seem neighborly, and Lorin Blackburn provided her guiding eye to the poetry and selection process. Plus, I would like to thank Dr. Eimers for her much needed guidance. Now that I'm closing this volume on my end, I open it for you to enjoy, and question. I ask of you, the reader, only one thing, and that is to be in dialogue with these stories, poems, photographs, and portraits because you, the reader, will forever carry it to the next level of discourse.

Sincerely,

Robert Pannell



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Hunter S. by Jessica Wise

THE WOMAN-SHAPED TREE

by Flannery Crump

When Esterina discovered the tree, she felt as though the tympany of thunder that rang above heralded a moment of significance beyond her conception. She felt her basket of olives loose in her hand, so she placed it upon the ground before she dropped it. She stepped closer to the tree.

The bark was rough and peeling, but moulded into sensuous curves. In fact, the trunk was unmistakably grown into the form of a naked woman. Hips, arms, breasts—there was no denying it. The legs reached down and branched out into roots, which delved deep and gripped the dark earth like toes; the arms rose and split, dividing and blossoming out into branches laden with soft dusky-green leaves. Flowers dotted the canopy of the tree—exotic-looking, with pearly-white petals that grew long and lolled about in the breeze.

Warm drops of rain began to fall from the ruffled sky, soaking Esterina's thick, dark hair and causing it to cling to her brown face. She paid it no heed, only took another step closer to the tree. She reached out her hand. The bark was warm to the touch—but then so was everything that summer afternoon. Surely it was not so unusual that the tree would have imbibed the warm air, was it? And the breeze that stirred the cloudy sky, surely it was that same breeze that made the branches shiver above her head, scattering voluptuous white petals about her. Esterina knew deep in her bones that this was no ordinary tree, and she determined to keep the knowledge to herself. Surely if others found it, it would be deemed an evil omen and destroyed—and Esterina suddenly felt that this was the last thing she wanted.

Finally, tearing her eyes from the lovely tree, Esterina picked up



her basket and stepped back upon the winding path that lead out of the grove and back to her home.

* * *

Esterina stumbled down the path, tears blinding her to the rocks and roots that scraped and stubbed against her feet. She clutched with one hand at her belly, which was already beginning to swell with the evidence of her shame. The sun was fleeing the sky, staining the earth with a vivid bloody glow, and Esterina prayed to the gods that she would be able to find her way in the gathering dark.

Her mind was going around in endless, painful circles, and each time she remembered what had happened, fresh tears flowed hotly down her cheeks. She had been cast out of her parents' home because of it, she had been threatened with stoning, she had been subject to degradation, humiliation, endless pain. And it had all begun when her older brother and his wife had celebrated the birth of their new child. The household had been bursting with joyous guests—primarily distant family and friends. Esterina had been as happy as anyone, and took part in the festivities with delight. One night, she had gone out to draw water from the well, and her cousin Acanthus was there before her, drinking deeply from a hide flask. They had known each other since they were children, and she was good friends with his wife. She greeted him pleasantly and began to draw up the bucket from the depths of the well. He did not answer her, but merely stared at her, his eyes squint with intention. A shiver of warning ran up Esterina's spine, and she tried to draw the water up more quickly. But before she could reach the rising bucket, Esterina felt Acanthus grip her arm with enough force to bruise. He wrenched her away from the well. She cried out, asked him why he did this, but he was silent as he dragged her into the shadow of the livestock barn. He pushed her, pulled her—it felt like he would wrench her bones from their

housings. The pressure of his hand over her mouth felt like it would crush her teeth to powder. He left her there, crumpled to the ground, weeping in shock and disgust.

When her belly began to swell, her family confronted her, demanding an explanation. She gave the only defense that she could, but the family would not have shame brought upon her cousin. They cast her out, to fend for herself and the bastard child she would soon bear. At first, she had no idea where she would go or what she would do, but suddenly—as a distant storm unleashed a faint clap of thunder—she realized where she must go.

Esterina staggered into the grove, eyes groping for the sight of the unmistakable tree. She searched for hours and was about to give in to despair at last—when suddenly she came around a bend and saw it, just as she had seen it before. The tree almost seemed to beckon to her this time, the limbs swaying heavily, laden with a vivid fruit. Esterina collapsed at the foot of the tree, letting the roots cradle her weary body. She tried to regain her breath as she gazed above her head into the canopy of the tree. The dangling fruit instantly caught her eye, the deep red calling to something deep in her bowels. One particular branch seemed to hang lower even as she sat, drooping down to within the reach of her arm. She stretched out her hand and touched the red offering—even without pulling upon it, the fruit dropped heavily into her palm. She brought it gently to her breast and let her eyes drink the redness.

Without another thought, Esterina brought the fruit to her lips and took a dripping, salty-sweet bite. The storm in the sky was coming on more quickly, and the sun had all but disappeared from the sky. As darkness gathered around Esterina, she felt the life within her belly begin to stir. Rain began to fall, wind began to shake the branches above her head. Her belly gave a wrench that left Esterina

gasping. Soon, the storm was raging about her, the thunder and howling wind masking her screams of pain as she braced herself against the trunk of the tree and felt the life inside leaving her.

The next morning, Esterina woke and was shocked to find that not only was she alive, but there was no evidence upon the ground of her labors during the night. The roots of the tree seemed to have absorbed all. Gone also was the emotional weight she had been carrying—she felt freed, forgiving, and at peace. Staggering onto legs almost too weak to support her, Esterina stared at the tree and its powerful fruit with a mixture of horror and awe.

After a few moments, Esterina dropped to her knees and gently bowed before the tree, giving a silent message of gratitude and respect. Then she stood up and walked back home.

* * *

Esterina strode down the dusty footpath towards the grove, her boots striking the earth with anxious yet confident force. She knew better which direction she was going this time, but it was still a blessing to have the moonlight beaming down upon the land, lighting her way. A chill but gentle wind was blowing, and she wrapped her heavy shawl closer about her.

Esterina, upon her return to her home town, took up a residence on the opposite side from her family. Even when they would meet at the market, they would mutually ignore each other. It pained Esterina to be cut off from her family in this way, but she felt strong enough to begin a new life. The rest of the community regarded her isolation from her kin with a sensitivity that encouraged her—she felt no unspoken condemnation from anyone, and it was therefore easy for her to find work. She began working for a widow who suffered from joint pains and who needed assistance to clean her house and cook her meals. Esterina threw herself into the work with determination

and joy, and she grew to love the old woman.

The widow had a large family who often came to visit her, and Esterina felt a refreshing acceptance and kinship from them. It was bittersweet—she still longed for the family she had known her whole life, but she knew she could never go back, and she loved the widow's family. In particular, there was one cousin, a young man, who would often come to visit the old woman and talk with her. Sometimes he would do the more strenuous chores that Esterina was unable to do, such as fixing the roof and bringing in nets of fish that he caught on his boat.

As time passed, the young man's visits became more frequent, even when there seemed to be no work for him to do. He would help Esterina scrub the floors, haul water from the well, and chop wood for the stove. She learned that his name was Catarino. One day, while helping Esterina chop vegetables for supper, Catarino paused for a long time, set down his knife, and asked her, quite politely, if he might kiss her. She was so surprised that he would ask, rather than simply take what he wanted; her surprise instantly gave way to a rising joy, and she whirled around to press her lips to his.

Time passed, and love blossomed between Esterina and Catarino, its petals spreading wider each day, bringing them a happiness that seemed never-ending. The widow noticed their affection, and encouraged the match with winks and chuckles. Soon, they decided to marry.

Esterina and Catarino married in the springtime. She wore a sunshine-colored veil and the entire town (even Esterina's family, although only briefly and solemnly) came to celebrate with them. The feasting and dancing lasted long into the night, and the newlyweds were more happy than they could ever remember being.

The new couple lived with the widow, but she took ill and died

after the first month, despite all their efforts to care for her. But she passed with a gentle smile on her face, and they discovered with surprise that she had bequeathed her house to them. They lived in the house with pride and honored the widow's memory. Only one thing seemed destined to taint their happiness.

After many months of marriage, Esterina began to have fears. She went to the local midwife and was heartbroken to have her fears confirmed: she could never bear children. She tearfully broke the news to Catarino. He was as saddened as she, but he held her close and said nothing.

It wasn't until one day when she was harvesting the figs from a tree in their garden that Esterina realized what she needed to do. She set out for the grove that night in secret, saying nothing to her husband.

With the light of the moon to guide her, Esterina followed the path to the mysterious woman-shaped tree and stood before it. Its trunk seemed even more sensual in the moonlight, and its dusky leaves shook with a musical whisper. She could see the heavy fruit—almost black in the dark—swaying and glinting, calling to her. With determination and hope, she reached up and plucked one of the fruit from a low-hanging branch that seemed to droop down to meet her. This time, before taking a bite, she got on her knees and bowed to the tree. Her heart was in her throat as she bit into the flesh of the fruit, feeling the juice running down her chin. She ate the fruit down to its small, dark pit, and then placed the pit by the roots of the tree. The roots were warm, and she touched them lingeringly. Then, with one last bow of reverence, she turned and went back home in the moonlight.

* * *

The next morning, Esterina could not rise from her bed for the

pains that wracked her body. Catarino was sick with worry and brought a doctor; the doctor could not explain her condition, but advocated rest and tea. Esterina was touched by the care that her husband took of her all day, but she felt guilty for keeping such a secret from him—for she knew why the pains had come.

The next day, Esterina was much improved, and felt well enough to rise from her bed. But she experienced a shocking bout of intense nausea as she worked on supper that night, and had to run to the pot to empty her stomach. This illness continued, usually prompted by certain smells. She knew this sickness already, although she would not have expected it so soon. She quelled her alarm by putting her trust in the tree. After a few weeks, she went to the midwife, who was shocked to pronounce Esterina pregnant, declaring it a miracle and praying over her for many minutes.

When Esterina shared the joyful news with her husband, he was so shocked and her guilt was so great that she knew she must tell him how it had happened. That night, they both went to the tree and bowed to it.

When the child was born, the labour was hard, but with the help of the midwife Esterina birthed a baby girl with eyes as black as her mother's. They named her Cleodora, and she was loved by all the town.

* * *

Esterina tottered slowly along the path, leaning heavily on her stick. Every part of her ached—it was a longer journey than she had made in quite a long time. But she knew that it was right and fitting, so she continued. Her hair, still thick and beautiful, was now ashy white and tied up atop her head. Her limbs had withered and her skin had become like soft leather. She could feel her body slowing, preparing, and she knew it was her time.

Esterina had lived a long and wonderful life. Her husband was devoted and loving to her as long as he lived, and their Cleo had grown up to be a beautiful and capable woman. After Cleodora had come three others—two boys, Petros and Iasonas, and one more girl, Marieta. These children had been conceived in the natural way, but each time Esterina had learned of their life stirring within her, she had made a pilgrimage to the tree and given thanks. Esterina had seen her children married, and had received ten loving grandchildren. The townspeople were very generous and loving to her and her family, and they never felt out of place or unwanted. Every day of her life Esterina was thankful and happy. There had been good times and bad, but throughout it all, Esterina trusted in herself and in the goodwill she felt that life had for her.

Catarino had died an old man, of an illness that he contracted from cutting himself on a fishing hook. But despite the sickness and fever, he was able to smile and kiss his wife before the breath left him. Esterina missed him dearly every day, but she carried on and lived by herself for many years after his passing. When she became weak, her children and grandchildren cared for her. But she had long known that her time would come, and she had a plan.

It took Esterina much longer to reach the tree than it ever had before, and although she had set out at midnight, the sky was already becoming soft and pale in the east. At last, her tired and gnarled feet brought her to the roots of the woman-shaped tree. It looked exactly as it had in her youth. She bowed as low as her creaky bones would allow, and she slowly sat down in the cradle of the welcoming roots. She instantly felt the pain and weariness leave her as she settled comfortably. One of the branches swung low, as deliberately as it had the first time she had come to the tree in her time of need.

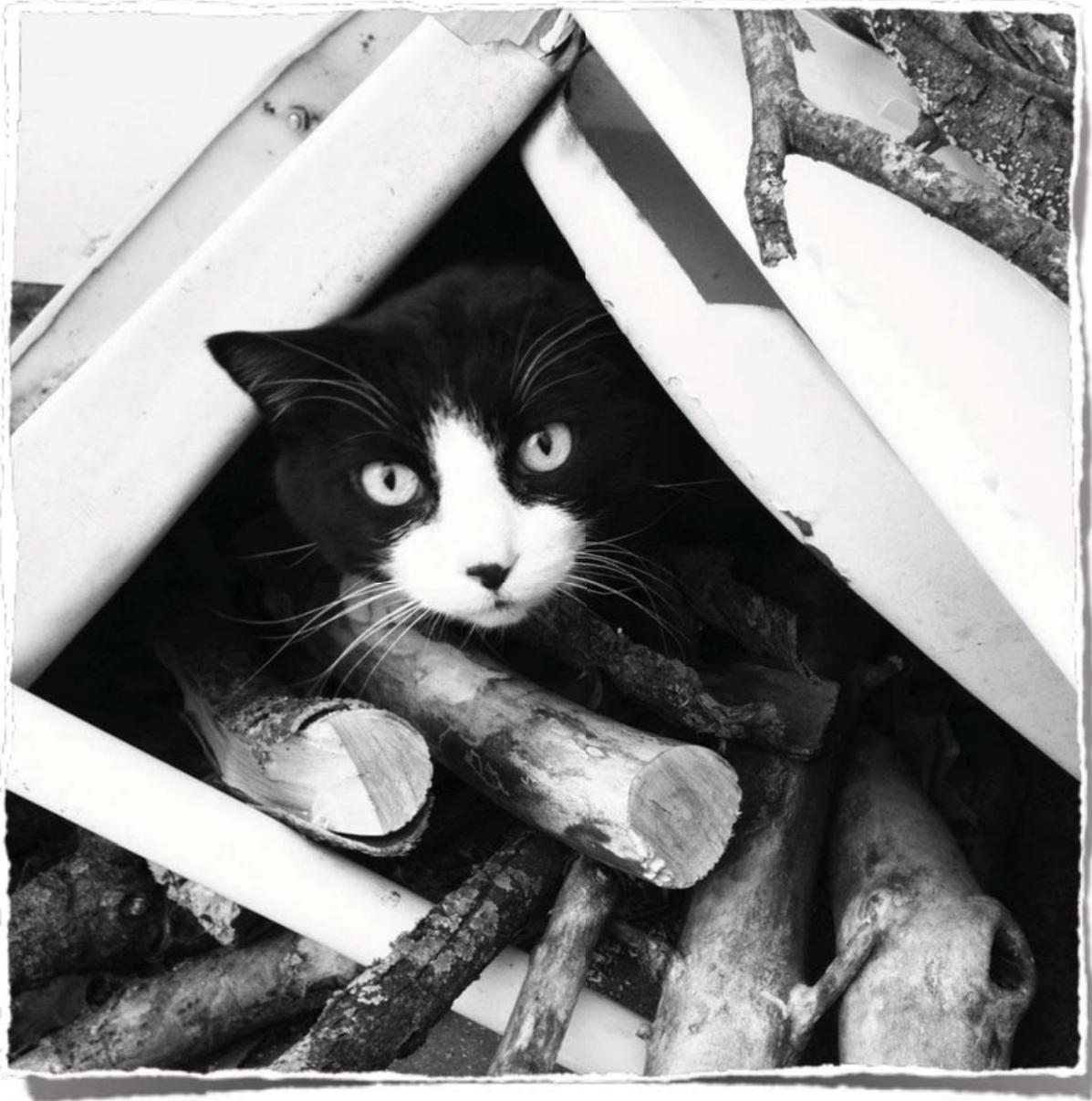
As soon as she took the first bite, Esterina felt at peace. By the



time she finished the fruit, she was blissful. She felt as well as she had as a young woman. She placed her hand gratefully upon the warm roots and gave silent thanks. As she looked back over her life, she felt nothing but satisfaction and joy. She knew she had made the right choices.

Esterina lay quiet, and watched the horizon as a warm pink suffused the sky, heralding the arrival of the sun—the last of Esterina's life. She smiled, and looked up at the tree. She was surprised, but not jarringly so, to see that the knot that served as the head of the tree-woman was looking down at her—and there were eyes. Eyes as piercing and bright as sunlight shining through a young green leaf. The eyes seemed warm and welcoming, and they imparted an understanding to Esterina that she had felt the tremblings of with the thunder that had accompanied her first sight of the tree. The knowledge made her complete, and with her last breath passing over her smiling lips, Esterina whispered,

“Daphne.”



Tuxedo in Black and White

by Heather Malan

Books

by Brett Edward Clause

The men and women who created the idea of sending a progress report to a student's home should be locked away forever. I remember dreading the days that Marshall High School sent those death warrants to my home. I would walk into my house and get blind-sided by my parents saying that I was “not raised this way” and that I was “smart and just needed to try harder.” Miraculously, I crawled my way through four years and graduated in 2010. The summer that followed changed my life forever.

Before going on my family's annual vacation to Florida, I visited my local Barnes & Noble and purchased their brand of e-reader, the Nook. That is where my love of books—and more importantly, of learning—began. The first book I read was *Priceless: How I Went Undercover to Rescue the World's Stolen Treasures* by Robert K. Wittman. It was a wonderful non-fiction book about the author's career with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and his journey as the founding member of the Art Crimes Division, which hunts down pieces of art that are stolen from galleries or private collections. I remember sitting on the sandy beach whizzing through this book like it was nothing. I had no idea a non-fiction book could be so interesting! After the long drive back to Missouri, I went straight to my public library and applied for a library card to check out more books. Ever since then I have been devouring any book I can, even two or three at a time, in my quest for knowledge.

As my fluency, vocabulary, and writing skills grew, to my astonishment so did my grades, and in the Spring of 2010 I received a letter from MVC stating that I had made the Dean's list. I couldn't



believe it. The kid who had once used his textbooks as a pillow in high school was now obtaining a 4.0 GPA. I sometimes want to go back and shake some sense into my high school self: tell him to stop procrastinating and explore the world around him and to get informed. I know this is impossible, but I have found the next best thing: becoming an educator.

If I can't go back and help myself, then I will make sure that every child I come across knows the importance of learning and exploring new ideas, whether it is reading a book, watching a documentary, or listening to a lecture. As I read I gain a deeper understanding of the world around me, but more importantly who I am at the deepest levels. What are my morals and values, what is my belief on God, how do I see the economy and politics? All of these are things that students will need to function in society once they leave the hallowed halls of high school. I hope one day I can be the teacher who changes someone's life forever, just like reading did for me.

Happiness is a Warm Gun

by Robert Pannell

The boy whispered in your ear.

“Who you gonna vote for?”

“Dukakis.”

“What? Shit, he gonna take yo guns 'way,” the boy said.

“Really?” you replied.

“Yep. He gonna come round h'ear and take all our guns 'way, that's what my daddy says.”

Another spoke up. “He come to my door, my daddy said he'd shoot his ass off.”

Were they really going to take my guns? You didn't know what to think. I just asked for a Red Ryder for Christmas. All I wanted was that gun. What about D—'s guns? He can't go deer hunting next week.

“Yep. My daddy said just you wait, every goddam nigger in town gonna be breaking in our houses.”

The teacher called, “Line up, class.”

I can't vote for that Bush, you thought. Man, what can I do? Silently, you worked over the choice.

As you approached the make-shift voting booth, you didn't know what to mark. Sweat began to bead. *Dang it, If I vote for him? It's a secret ballot, nobody will ever know. But he's gonna take my gun and D—'s. I want that gun. I can shoot squirrels and rabbits, old cans off the fence post. Heck, I can even shoot those bottles I found down by the creek. They'll bust with those bee-bees. No one will ever know... it's secret.*

“Come now. Everyone gets a chance,” said Mrs. D—.

You made the mark.

“Now fold the piece of paper and place it in the slot of the box.”

You kept watching the clock. Lunch came, recess. They were

going to make the announcement at 2:50. The teacher finished up the book she was reading.

“Now, class, Mr. B— is going make the announcement any time. After that we can grab our bags and line up at the door. Remember: blues to bus line and reds to the pick-up line.”

The intercom. “Students, we have our final tally: 163 to 79. You have elected...”

You didn't want to tell your mom. What's going to happen? Mom said all he cares about is money and the rich.

* * * *

“Woh boy!”

“What the fuck are you thinking?!”

“You don't ever point a gun at something unless you mean to shoot it—even if the safety is on.”

You look down, and the safety is off. You didn't turn it back after the last shot. That was the 30/30. You scanned it across his face. One small tug at the trigger and you would have had to run back to the house to tell your mom and your sister you shot his face. You would be screaming hysterically as you ran. Blood, his on you. The nightmare it would've been. He wouldn't be shot in the shoulder or leg, but point blank in the face. What a mess. No kiss goodbye. What would your life have been like from that moment on? No time when you shot that snapping turtle in the pond; it was on videotape. You were wearing your Patriots shirt before the Patriots were the Patriots. No time when your step-dad said, “come on let's go sight that in.” No time when he would take you fishing at the lake, camp out and roast hot dogs till they were black, casting top water at dawn.

You were great. Sharp shooter at twelve. You could split a sunflower from fifty – shit, sometimes seventy-five. That ten-pointer he shot with that 300 magnum, plum blew it on its front. It's on his

wall. Not much tracking there. That 300 magnum would lift the leaves off the ground when you shot it. You could hear the tin rattle on the barn a mile in the noonday distance. Shoulder never felt that way before. You'd rather shoot a 10 gauge anyway. What kind of mess would a ten gauge make? Slug?

* * * *

School.

“Did you hear?”

“No. What?”

“Fucking Jason. Last night him and David were over at Julie's. They went out coon hunting and came back and they were fucking around with David's twelve gauge and Jason was sitting in the lawn chair and David fucking pointed at Jason's stomach and bam fucking blew his guts all over Julie's parents' driveway.”

“Totally fucked up.”

“Jason didn't make it.”

What the Fuck? You knew Jason, and David was on your baseball team. His mom? What is going to happen to David?

“David's all fucked up. He could get man-slaughter, seven years or some shit.”

“Jason was good, they had pressure on his mid-section. He was talking and everything. As soon as they pulled him off that chair – or what was left of the chair – he began to fade. Someone called his mom and sister; they watched the whole thing.”

* * * *

You used to rabbit hunt when the snow covered the place. There was this time you shot that rabbit with the gun on your hip; you didn't even aim. You'd detached the head with your foot and thrown it in your jacket pouch.

* * * *

New Year's Day.

Your dad come running down the steps. He runs to your arms, hugs—holds you?

“It's Chase.”

“What's the matter?”

“Chase. I don't ever want that to happen to you.”

“What the fuck is a matter?”

“Chase, he's dead. His mom found him. Oh I don't want....”

Not Dad. “They said she rolled him over and he was still trying to breathe, gasping. It was his mother's gun. A small gun: 22mm. Weird. I guess Jenni told him to fuck off. They took the mattress out, did you see it?”

The funeral. His mother just kept crying; she didn't know who you even were. She was just out of it. You cried. He was your best friend growing up. He came to invite you to play. Show'd you stuff. Trashed B—'s bike—had that Jerry Rice card. Probably still there. His mom still lives there. Then it was Chris.

“They had a pact. They agreed to kill themselves. They knew. That's why.”

You knew that wasn't why. They just didn't make a pact and decide what day they were going to shoot themselves. That is the dumbest shit ever. They were in the house with a gun. Sounded like a good idea.

“Nobody feels sorry for you when shoot yourself, that's unfair.”

“They didn't care about the way other people feel.”

“They are not the ones who have to live with it. Suicide is the easy way out.”

These are things you hear.

* * * *

Sixteen. You saw Brian's father pull up. Get out of his truck. He

already knew. Ambulance and people huddled out on street. The cleaners were there that same evening. How could they do a job like that? You couldn't sleep. It was right next door. He was just a year older than you were. You guys played catch, him without a glove. He liked Copenhagen, and said you all spit too much.

They went to Brian's house after school. He had a new gun.

“Scott said he was cleaning it. Just sitting there in the living room, had it between his legs. Said it was unloaded. Said there was brains everywhere. Don't know how the cleaners got the stains out. They said his dad wouldn't let them take him out. Said it went right through his chin.”

* * * *

You don't know about happiness. But you always heard that happiness is a warm gun. The Beatles had that song on *The White Album*. John was thinking about something else. But he wasn't thinking about that when he was shot.

You think about how hard it is to count the number of people shot, killed, and lost by the gun. It is a touching argument. You graduated in 1999. That year. You remember that kid crawling out the window, blood all over. Steve thought it would be funny to wear a trench coat to school. Then Kyle. He said he was going to shoot us at graduation. He cried and apologized. But he didn't get to walk.

This has got to change it. The setting. The kids, teachers. You have a son. He is five. What could you have done for him? He would be scared. Looking for his protector. Innocent. American exceptionalism —we do have a right to bear arms. 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. Forty-two years after that, 1.2 million American have lost their lives to firearms. In the history of the United States of America, in all wars including the Revolutionary War, we have lost a total of 659,000



American lives in combat. In one-fifth of the time, we have lost double that. Let freedom ring. America has four times as many people killed per year by firearms than the next twenty-one richest countries in the world. Where is the war zone? Is it not Kabul? Is it not Baghdad? Is it not Bengahzi? Is it not Jerusalem? It is Chicago. It is Washington D.C. It is Tucson. It is Portland, Columbine, Aurora, Blacksburg, and Newtown. It is in the houses of those families and friends who have lost those lives. Not for a cause. Not for a Constitutional right. Where does it state in the Constitution that we have a right to lose loved ones to arms?

This is just one story about the way firearms have changed a life. What about the 300 million others?

--January 2013



The Night We Were Up

by Joshua Tag

There's nothing like stars
On a cool summer night
The instant is ours
And wonder seems right.

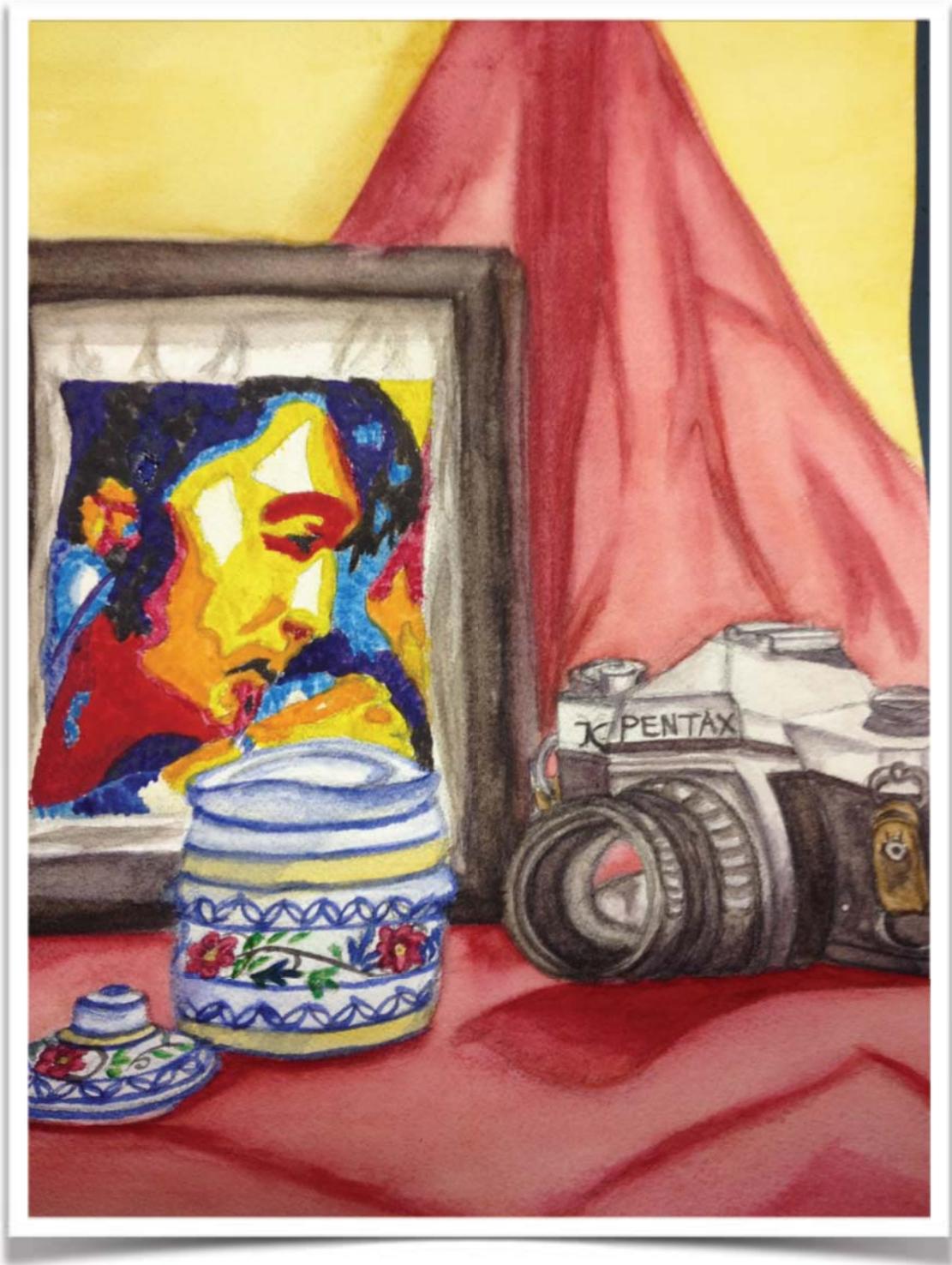
The crickets are playing
Their constant old tune
Beckoning us, saying
'Dance up with the moon.'

The wind starts to hurry
The leaves beat the air
Caught up in the flurry
We float and don't care.

With wordless invites
Our hands meet and twirl
Watching small, soft lights
Just me and this girl.

The moon climbs with us
Silhouettes as we fly
Gently waltzing and thus
We're entrancing the sky.

At last we sink low
And alight on a tree
That night, as you know
The stars set us free.



Heritage Still Life by Loren Conner

Dark Dummies Don't Float

by Timothy Johnson

Nigger Jim, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is one of literature's most overrated and neglected characters. Jim had the potential to be, but is not, as Ralph Ellison claims, a "symbol of humanity" (49). Nor is he a man "to be envied" (Ellison 49). Such comments stem more from early Jim, not Jim as a whole. As a whole, Jim is nearly non-existent in the narrative. When he happens to be, he is so stereotypical that one wishes him gone. Twain even tries to seal Jim's cracks with sentiment and brushes on a layer of sentimental varnish. But it fails to help. Thus, it is not difficult to see through the transparent film that Jim is a thin, ill-wrought, and misused character.

Excluding Jim's speech, there is not an ounce of complexity in his character. He is the same from beginning to end: the stereotypical, superstitious, childlike slave. And this is a shame because he is given a fair introduction before Twain's pen writes him into oblivion. When first sighted, Jim sits in the frame of a kitchen door with a light behind him; he is confined, yet visible. However, the ones who see him, Tom and Huck, are shrouded in darkness and yet Jim is aware of a lurking presence. And when he asks "Who dah?" and ventures close enough to stumble upon one of the boys, Huck becomes fraught with an itchy body, a precursor to his troubled conscience (Twain 104). Subtly, Twain paints an image that is meant to be a major motif throughout the book--the contrasting image of racial and human proximity and separation--until it becomes neglected and waterlogged to such an extent that it drowns in the lazy flood of the Mississippi.

Jim's character is easy to describe: he is lazy, superstitious,

docile, clever, and humble. Minus the cleverness, that makes for a pretty acceptable slave. But his cleverness never gets him very far, unless one counts the monetary benefit of fooling other “niggers” with his witch-tales and talking hair-balls. The problem is that this cleverness never extends further. It never enlightens his existence, nor aids in his plight. Despite him humorously learning Huck “bout [King] Sollermun,” whom he knows “by de back,” Jim never uses his ostensible wit to evaluate his condition (148). Jim is a runaway slave unaware that he is one.

In fact, Jim never receives the opportunity to be aware. The more Twain writes and the more the narrative floats onward, the more Jim is personally diminished. No, one needn't expect Twain to cast him in the Freddy Douglass mold, apostrophizing tearfully on his cursed condition; but one should at least expect Twain to care about his creation. Instead Twain does nearly everything in his power to work against him by negating his personality, stripping away his original purpose, and sentimentalizing him into passivity.

I will start with the latter. By the time the reader reaches the end and ponders the portrayal of Jim, he or she is left with either one or two responses: Jim is either a sentimental savage or a tender mammy, perhaps both. In chapter XXXI, when Huck is feeling “low-down and ornery” again, his remembrance of Jim is precise: “[Jim] would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me” (240). And by the end of the story we know what he means. After Jim denies his freedom to help shot-wounded Tom, he offers his final service to Huck. Like an overprotective mother who harbors a hurtful secret, Jim reveals to Huck that his father, “pap” Finn, was the dead man in “de house dat was float'n down de river” (286). But Huck doesn't reply, and thinks, instead, of Tom. One wonders if he even heard him. The information by this point is

irrelevant and weak.

Before this secret Jim bore another, a secret that sentimentally covered his deepest crack. This is the one, if not the only, time that we actually learn about Jim. The secret at once confirms his present passivity and savage past. While up “mourning and moaning” for his “po ‘little [daughter] ‘Lizabeth,” Jim tells how he had given her an angry slap “dat sont her a-sprawlin” because she wouldn't shut a door he had told her to shut (204). Soon after, he learned that she was “plumb deaf and dumb” and he pleaded the Lord for forgiveness (205). And the Lord gave it by removing Jim from any subsequent anger and activity. He reserves his energy for tears and tidying up the wigwam.

And Twain doesn't hesitate to use this passivity to his cruel advantage, namely, to negate Jim and restrict him in tighter chains, keeping him from attaining a real identity. For one thing, in order for the raft to travel in the daytime, Jim has to “lay all day in the wigwam tied with [a] rope” (205). However, when that “got mighty heavy and tiresome to him,” the duke disguises him as “old King Lear and a drowned A-rab all in one” (205, 234). Not much of a difference, just less rope and more sweat. Another thing is the fact that Jim's movement is not only prohibited by being a slave in hostile territories, but by being subjected to the river's flow. The river forces him to travel in one direction--the slave-happy South, where he is to be properly humiliated (a matter I will return to shortly). Thus, Twain prevents Jim from ever being more than one-dimensional through denial and opposition.

And it is not hard to know why Twain does so--by this point Jim simply has no purpose. Originally, Jim's purpose was to reach Cairo, then travel north to a free state. There “he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he

would buy his wife [...] and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them" (162). But after Cairo is missed on the misty river, Jim no longer has a goal. Only one other time does he even mention his family, which is when he tells of having slapped his daughter. Afterward, they are not a concern. Sadly, Huck doesn't have a goal either, but his range of activity increases the likelihood of finding one. Jim, on the other hand, must stick to the raft and suffer neglect.

To return to the subject of Jim's humiliating journey to the South, it is best to say that if Twain is given an inch, he'll "take an ell." Being a humorist and satirist, this is unavoidable. But there are times when even they must, as the dastardly duke reminds us, "preserve the unities" (190). This, however, Twain ignores. And despite any possible disagreement with my assessment of Jim hitherto, the truth is apparent when we read the final episode. There Jim is flattened into stereotypical nonsense. When Tom devises his elaborate means of freeing Jim, a plan that will take a couple weeks, Jim docilely accepts because Tom "was white [...] and knowed better than him" (261). As the plan becomes more ridiculous--less about freedom and more about ridicule--all that Jim can say is, "I never knowed b'fo' 't was so much bother and trouble to be a prisoner" (269). How can Jim forget he has been one his whole life? How can he forget that his earlier escape was fostered by such conditions? But Twain is unconcerned with consistency by this point. To make amends, Tom gives Jim forty dollars for patiently enduring his sadism, which Jim, gushing with glee, attributes to his "hairy breas" (286). And that is Jim's final gasp before being drowned in the waters of obscurity.

Because of Twain's cruel and clumsy treatment of Jim, I believe Jim would have served better in an episode. Then, if Huck was forced

in a position to aid him, he could still function as a lesson and a conscience-riler. Instead, Jim hangs like a bloated and ignored Jiminy Cricket around Huck's hick neck. In other words, Huck never recognizes Jim for being more than a "nigger." His final opinion is that Jim is "white inside," which really means nothing when compared to the amount of cruelty he witnesses white people commit throughout the story (276).

In itself this comment is enough to prove that Huck learned nothing from being with Jim; and Ellison's earlier claim that Jim symbolizes humanity doesn't hold water. A character can't symbolize what he is not--a human being. The lack of a true personality and consciousness in Jim enables the reader to regard him as little as Huck does. Uneasily, we can forget about Jim and follow Huckleberry in escaping the matter altogether. A conscience, as Huck says, "ain't no good, nohow" (250).

Thus, in the end, I realize that I was wrong about Jim's aforementioned introduction. Twain wasn't suggesting any figurative racial inversion with the lighted slave and the night-hidden white boys; he was foreshadowing his artistic inadequacy, his inability to emphasize Jim with more than a feeble artificial light, and his failure to usher Tom and Huck from the darkness of ignorance.



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Light by Russell Howes

On a Promise Made to Lidia

by Molly Parsons

I remember the last thing she said to me. Each of those simple words ripped every fiber of hope from inside me and seemed to stay firmly where I could remember them. The world was destined to be messed up, of course - but better to have been that way than face this feeling of loss. I had worked everything out. I would take care of both of them when I had to.

“I lost that thing, and I’m leaving here.”

Those eight words felt like giant stones that constantly fell in rhythmic patterns, retelling me that somehow I had failed. The promise of a family and a future had been mine. All the questions began to form, even as I forbade them to. It all was too thick to try and deal with alone.

Not wanting to feel like I was by myself, I went and picked up my friend Jack. He would be quiet and let me suffer until it got better. Slowly it all got lighter, and then things got fuzzy. I enjoyed it, and started to rationalize things. This new plan was probably better for me anyway.

What had I been thinking? I wasn’t ready to settle down. As a matter of fact, I was sick of the Bitch. Jack encouraged me to call Scarlet. That wasn’t her true name, but it was what I could remember of her. After a few minutes of coaxing, he won out and she was coming.

~

I don’t remember much after that.

~

The next morning I felt my whole body. It was numb, but everything felt like it weighed three times more than it usually did.

Every fiber of me also felt drained. I could not even process the concept of trying to get out of bed. I smiled. What would it take for this feeling to just continue? Scarlet was long gone. She had an old habit of doing that from before.

I liked this feeling. I realized just barely I was relishing in it, and I didn't want to let it go. I rolled my head over to the side saw that Jack wasn't gone yet. With what energy I had left I grabbed for him, and that was all I remember. No, I recall a woman. Somewhere right before everything fell into the black, she screamed. It was a high-pitched, piercing scream. Why that reached through the clouds I'm not sure.

~

When I woke up again I was sure that I wasn't supposed to be here. Things were white and seemed to glow with a soft light. I looked down. I definitely wasn't where I was supposed to be. Up ahead of me was a child. Perhaps it was a little girl? I was guessing because I was too far away but I saw long dark hair draping down her back. As I got closer she looked in my direction and I stopped. It was her. A younger, slightly altered, different version of her, but something deep down drew me to her. Then she spoke.

"Hello, Daddy." Her voice was so soft. "Did she get rid of you too?"

"Who . . . who are you?" The words escaped my lips before I could realize I formed the thought. This couldn't be. This little girl was at least five years old. This didn't make sense. However, it didn't need to make sense. Nothing had to make sense anymore.

"She hated us. I could tell. Once you created me, her every thought was how to run away. I'm glad I never really met her." The little girl was talking to the sky more than actually to me.

"You? There's no way you could be mine."

“Both. Yours and hers. I was going to be, anyway. Until she decided that I wasn’t worth it. Mommy poisoned me out of her, and Daddy, you tried to poison yourself. Why did you do it, Daddy? Was the thought of me coming that hard?”

“No,” the word left me in a whisper. “I wanted you. I was getting ready for when things were going to happen.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“That’s right. They told me. You cried when Mommy said that I was lost. She was wrong about what I could be. I wouldn’t have been bad. Good things would have happened if I would have been born.” She looked at me then. Then I realized it: the little girl looked like her, but her eyes were my eyes. She was mine. “Daddy, did you really love her?”

“Yes. I will always love a part of her. Or I loved who she could have been with me.” I stepped closer.

“Sit down, Daddy.” She motioned for me. “They won’t let me keep you much longer. Daddy? Could you love again? They told me that maybe we both won’t have to stay here; it all depends on what you answer.”

I had to try to think about that one. Could I love? That was a very big word. I looked at the child sitting next to me. I felt connected to her. I believed what I felt for her was something along those lines of love. I was compelled to protect her. To do whatever I could to make things better for her. With that acknowledgement, I knew I could care for another person, maybe more than one in that way.

“Yes.” I barely heard the word.

“What did you say, Daddy?” she asked, taking my hand.

I looked down at her hand on mine.

“Yes, Lidia. It might take some work, but I think I could love again.” As I said them I knew that the words were true. They felt

good.

“Lidia? Is that what you would have called me, Daddy? Was Lidia going to be my name?”

“I always wanted a daughter, and yes, I would have asked her to consider the name Lidia. I just never got a chance.”

She started staring at the sky again. In a way it seemed that she was pondering the idea of the name. I guess in her situation it would have been different. Having never truly come into the world, what would it have been like to exist—not truly having a name and having the knowledge that she had not been wanted by her mother? I ran the child’s words through my head again: “Mommy poisoned me out of her.” To exist with the idea that her mother had discarded her . . . It would have been dreadful. The hatred I felt added a new layer to the shell that I was forming against the Bitch.

“Daddy? Daddy, they said they would let you go back but you have to never do something like this again.”

I hadn’t realized she had said anything. “What?”

“Daddy, they will send you back to live your life but no more poison. I want brothers and sisters, but Mommy is truly wicked. Daddy, she is bad and there could be more like me.”

“I . . . I’m not sure what to say.”

“Promise to be open to good, Daddy. Please, for me? For your Lidia, no more poison and try to love again.”

“I will, I swear.”

Then she was gone.

I heard something. There was a voice calling my name. It was a voice that I had not heard in a very long time. I’m sure I smiled before I realized I was back in my body. In a place where things were normal and the world seemed to follow normal rules such as gravity and motion. With that thought completed I realized I could open my eyes

and see the face that belonged with that voice.

When I opened my eyes, there she was. Concern flooded her face. It struck me more than I thought it would. I felt it was my duty to keep that concern from ever coming back to her face again.

"It's been too long for you to be so worried about me, Claire," I told her.

"You're an idiot." She raised her hand as if she was going to slap me. I probably deserved it after realizing I was in a hospital bed with tubes running every which direction. Claire must have decided against striking me and awkwardly put her hand back at her side.

"How long has it been?" I wasn't sure whether I was asking her about my stay in the hospital or the last time we had seen each other.

"Tina called me two days ago, after you had been here for four. I guess she remembered how close we had been and thought you were a goner."

"Nope, just a good case of alcohol poisoning, would be my guess."

I just barely caught the change in her face before she said, "Who's Lidia?"

The question caught me off guard.

"Why are you asking me that?" was the only answer I could come up with.

"You kept saying her name."

"Oh. It was the name I was going to give my daughter. My ex miscarried and took off. So yeah . . . And, well, you can see my reaction to the whole mess."

She didn't say anything for a while. Eventually a nurse came in and fiddled with the machines, seeming unimpressed that I was awake. The nurse left as quickly as possible. I didn't question it, though. My attention was elsewhere.

"You changed a lot," was how she broke the silence.

“You haven’t changed at all.”

It was true, and if I was lying it was because she was so much more beautiful now. I couldn’t help myself as my hand reached for her. She responded by sitting on the edge of my bed.

“I am a mess,” I confessed. “My life is a mess, I’ll admit it. However, I made a promise to someone very recently that I would try and find something good in my life again. I know this is a lot to ask, especially since we haven’t seen each other in a very long time, but please will you consider helping me? Claire, will you show me what it’s like to be good again?” Deep down I expected her to refuse.

“I’ll help you. Not because of what we had. That’s in the past. I’ve been here three days waiting for the nerve to walk away. It never came.”

“You said two earlier.”

“I lied.” She blushed a little. It looked very good on her.

“You never lie.”

“I’ve changed too. Anyway after day two I came to the conclusion I would stick around as long as I could help you.”

~

Help me she did. Claire stayed for sixty-seven glorious years. She helped me see the world again. This time it wasn’t the dark, evil place I had come from, but a new, good place full of light and love. I never told her the full truth about what I had dreamed, or you could say experienced, in that coma when I talked to Lidia. Still, the world was gentle and kind again because of Claire.

I did keep my promise to Lidia. Claire and I gave my first daughter, I always thought of her that way, one sister and three brothers. Lidia, wherever she was, got the chance to watch her fourteen nieces and nephews grow up. I often thought about what Lidia had said about her mother producing more children like her.

Over the years I did hear that the Bitch drank three other children away before her ally in her freedom became her downfall. The story that I finally sorted out through the rumors was that the poison mixed with a cigarette was her murderer.

I kept one other promise to Lidia. I never touched "the poison" again. The one time in the hospital was enough. The look on that little girl's face was enough to keep me from going near the stuff again. I had put one of my children through the idea that she had lost a parent to "the poison" and I wasn't going to do that to another one. Claire and I never talked about what happened in the hospital again once I had completely demonstrated that I did want to change.

For those who might wonder, I did see Lidia again. I unwillingly left Claire and my family in my sleep. Lidia met me when I arrived. She looked too young this time. Only in her thirties when her real age should have been somewhere in the sixties. I laughed at myself as I did the math in my head. If the girl I had talked to the last time looked five when she would have been a newborn then it was perfectly all right that she had not aged like I would expect.

"Hello, Father," she greeted me.

"I've been much better since last time," I told her.

"I know." She smiled. Although they were in no way related, her smile reminded me of Claire's. "They let me watch you grow up."

"I'm pretty sure it should have been the other way around."

"In the normal world, it might be. Our relationship isn't normal. Come for a walk with me, Father?"

"A short one sounds good. I have some waiting of my own to do."

"She is going to make you wait for a very long time."

"That sounds perfect." I knew Claire was strong. She would follow me here when the time came. "We have some catching up to do either way."

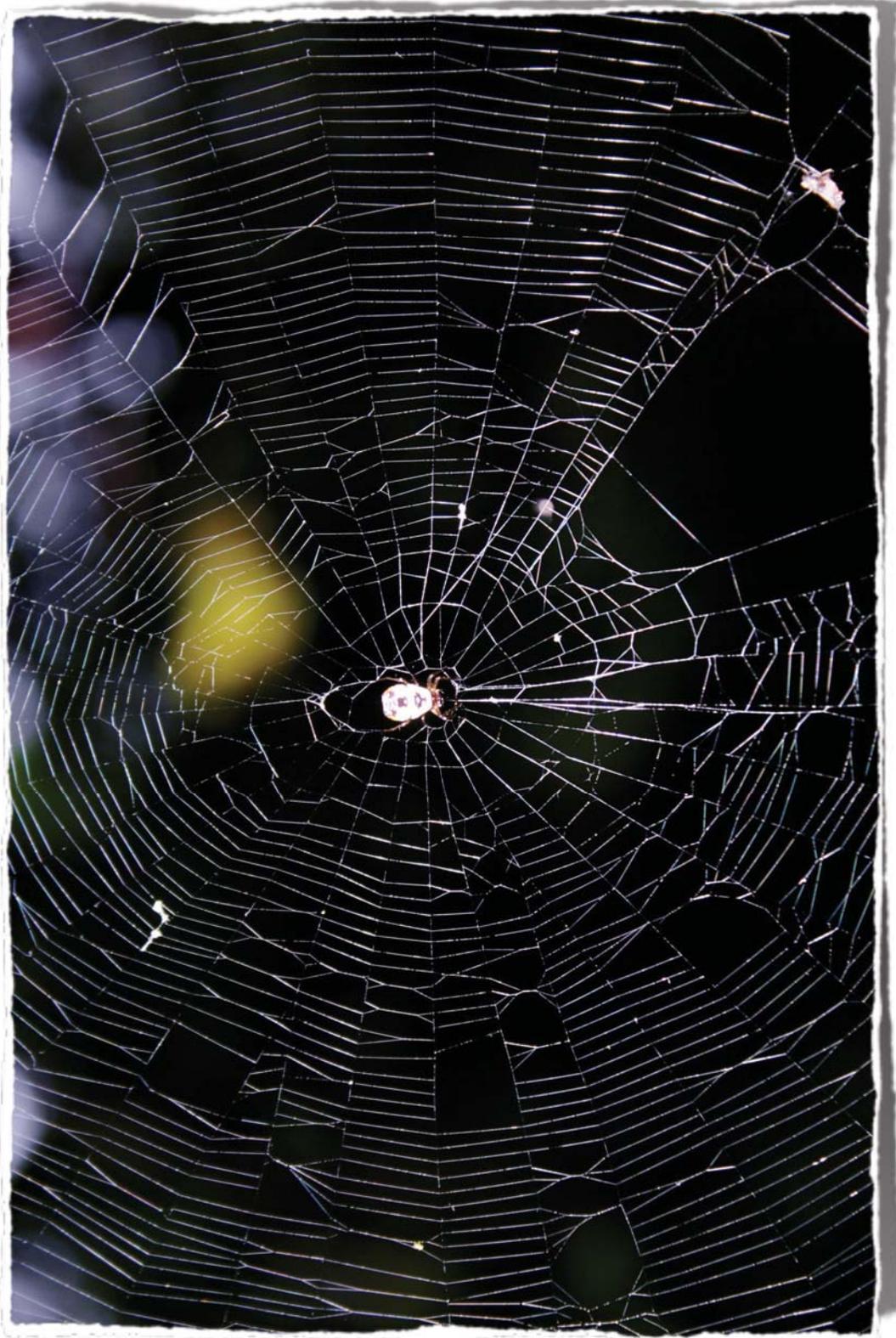


“Well, look just there. That is our bench, where we first met – we can talk more there. This time we can discuss happier things.”

“Happy sounds perfect.”

With that final sentence I came home to Lidia and kept my final promise.

Web Designer by Carly Eades



Reborn

by Christina Bautista

Silence and darkness was all that surrounded me. I felt cold and uneasy. My stomach clenched and my mouth was dry. I knew my fate, and I was ready. It was the matter of waiting that scared me. When? When would it happen? I wasn't sure. I just wanted it to be over.

I sat there listening to my own heavy breathing. My body began to tremble in fear. I was scared, terrified of what was to happen. When were they coming? Would it hurt? A thousand questions flooded my mind, drowning out any outside sound. The hairs on my arms stood and I felt chills run throughout my body: that was a sign that they were close. This would finally be over.

Footsteps echoed down the halls. I listened carefully, hoping to hear any word they spoke. Nothing. The sound grew closer, coming to a sudden stop. I shut my eyes tight and held my breath. The sound of a creaking door opening echoed in the empty room. They made their way towards me, and then grabbed me tightly by the arm and dragged me out. Eyes still shut, I felt tears gently running down my cheek. Dear God, please help me.

"Come now, darling. It won't be so bad. It'll be over before you know it." The man's voice teased me. I wanted to growl, but I was afraid I would cry instead. If I was going out, I was going out strong.

They threw me on top of what felt like a cold metal table. My hands and feet were tied down and my clothes ripped from my body. I felt the cool metal touch my bare flesh and shivered. These creatures were cruel. My hatred for them grew more and more with each passing second. Funny . . . Soon I would hate myself.

I lay there for what felt like years. I had finally gotten the courage to open my eyes and knew it was a big mistake. There,

hovering above me was a pale and angelic looking man. His eyes were black and piercing, lips stained with blood, cheeks high and sharp, hair long and black as a raven's feather. It framed his smooth and gorgeous face. These were angelic demons, cursed with beauty and craving for blood. I saw the hunger burning deep within those dark eyes. He gave me a smirk and I looked away.

Within seconds I smelled a familiar scent: burning sage. Three men with black cloaks walked into the room. Their hoods were on, shadowing over their faces. I watched carefully as one man stood out in particular. He was obviously in charge of this ritual, for wherever he went the others followed. With a goblet in his hand and a dagger in the other, he made his way over to me.

Chanting soon began to fill the room. The man looked down at me with thirst in his eyes. "I never thought I would perform a ritual on an elemental before. But with you as one of us, we will rule the night." His lips traced over my neck and I flinched. "Blood as sweet as wine. You will be one of our best," he whispered. "Your gift is with fire, is it not? With fire burning in your heart and our blood coursing through your body, you will be unstoppable."

I was being turned to fight with these creatures; to fight alongside these monsters and take over the night. The thought made me feel shaken and I began to softly cry.

"It's okay. You won't remember a thing once it's over. It'll be like you were reborn into a new body and given a new life." I didn't want a new life; I wanted to live this one. I didn't want to become a monster!

A sharp pain came from my left wrist. It was quickly followed by the feeling of a warm liquid dripping down my arm, creating a small puddle around it. I didn't need to look to know that my wrist had been sliced. All of their eyes bulged out as they watched the man capture my blood in the goblet.

“Tonight is the night we gain another. A soul strong and fierce with fire burning deep within her heart! Here is thy blood! Drink, my children, for we must become one.” His lips touched the goblet and I heard the sound of my blood make its way down his throat. The cup was passed around; my stomach turned at this horrible sight.

“Now, my child, you must taste the blood of ours. Become one with us, and feel the powers burst through your body. Let the forces unravel as you slowly become reborn.” The man took the dagger and dragged it across his own wrist. He hissed as the blade cut through his flesh, revealing a dark, almost black liquid. He pressed it against my lips, slightly tilting my head so the blood could drip down my throat. The taste was bittersweet, something I could barely keep down.

I felt a warm glow slowly coursing its way throughout my body. It was followed by a numbing sensation. I was scared, unsure as to what was happening to me. My eyes darted around the room, searching for some kind of help, some kind of answer. There was none.

The man stared down at me with a strange grin. He looked straight into my eyes, watching as I pleaded for help. Suddenly, I felt a strange feeling inside me. It felt as if something was building deep within the core of my body. Then a sharp pain came from my stomach. I felt as if I were being ripped in half. The feeling went throughout every inch of my body - muscles tearing and reconstructing, flesh burning and then suddenly frozen, eyes blurry and then sharp vision. Everything was changing. I was changing.

I screamed as loud as I could. The pain was too much to bear. Why? Why did it have to end this way? I tried to rip my way out of the restraints just to attempt to stop this pain. It hurt. I felt as if I were going to die. But wasn't I?



“Please, make it stop!” They did nothing but stand and watch, watch me as I changed into them. My body trembled so hard that the table shook. My fighting slowly came to a halt to the point where I just lay there, accepting my fate. There was no use fighting, no use in trying to stop any of this. It was too late – too late to escape this hell.

The pain began to fade, along with my screams. I lay there panting and drenched in sweat. They all looked down at me, wide eyed. A sudden shock went through me, launching my body a few inches in the air. Everything went black and my mind cleared. Completely.

Who was I? Why couldn't I remember? My name. . . It started with an. . . E? No, an A. Maybe. . . ? No. I. . . Why couldn't I remember anything? Where was I? What was I?

“Hello, Echo. Welcome to our world.”

The Bridge

By Lorin Blackburn

Dedicated to the one who thought there was nothing left.

Standing on the ledge between life and death,

My mind running on the altitude of my immediate absence of the life
once lived,

running from something, running from everything.

Pain. Sorrow. Regret.

All swirling together in the dark grey puddle that has now become my
life.

Am I dreaming or is this it, is this the end of the misery?

One step back and nothing changes, one step forward and it all ends
or does it just begin?

Overlooking the leaping waves that embrace this stronghold,

Afraid to cross those waves but no railing to hold onto,

The thoughts of time start pounding from inside me.

Time with him. Time before he died. A happier time.

A time actually spent Alive.

There is nothing else to do,

Nothing else to say,

This is IT.

Fate pushes the wind to wrap around me,

Suffocating me with the choice,

To live, or to DIE.

With nothing to look forward to,

no sun in horizon and love all too lost,

there is nothing to do but fall into the dark abyss below.



Falling into a better life, a new beginning, with you.

Falling, FALLING, FALLING,
expecting to crash into the deep.

Nothing comes.

Still falling,
no longer breathing but still alive,
surrounded by white light,
landing in his arms,
feeling reunited love,
relieved by his embrace,
overwhelmed with happiness,
a warmth goes through me.

I blink.

It's gone. Shoved back to reality.

Searching for that time again, searching for that warmth.

Feeling no other choice, not being able to stop the pain.

finally just breaking down, finally pushing all the fighting aside.

There is no reason to stay alive.

Over the ledge, and back again.

The choice has been made.

No rail, no regrets, finally no PAIN.

Peace

by Mary Correia

Peace is a delicate rarity that arrives in different shapes,
something that no man makes.

When the sun is setting over warm fields of greens,
when the leaves are browning and are reflecting my inner dreams
I find comfort there, in and around those scenes
A touch of love from above that lingers in the trees.



Fungus Among Us by Carly Eades

The Truth

by Raymond Banks

A lie is much different than telling the truth.
It's like being put on the stand with no evidence or proof.
Life is a circle and it feels like I'm running through loops.
A heartbroken man with an exterior smile.
Faking until I make it only lasts for a while.
Who is the real me who wants to be set free?
Being revealed to the world is quite the mystery.
It's me I have to find without being left behind.
The world loves its own with no love for me.
I look up to the man who gave his life on a tree.
My praise is something more than a scream and shouts.
For at that moment of time it's my only way out.
Escaping all my pains and shame of rejection.
Hoping in my heart my life turns a new direction.
Maybe life's a play and I forgot my role.
Lost in the confusion of lies history told.
Living in a world where I'm dared to be bold.
When women are objects and repeatedly sold.
Should I dry up like a grape or explode?
Party, party, party, everybody's getting wasted.
Friends getting mad cause I won't taste it.
In the morning it will only be a regret.
My soul is much more than taking on a bet.
Living in sin comes with a price.
I counted up the cost and I won't live twice.
My debts have been paid and only Jesus I owe.
But he gave me free life and into the world I go.
The way I live my life is for God to see.
You can judge me all you want but I've been set free.



Love Birds by Cassandra Johnson



Demons

by Sydney Robb

Inner demons plague my mind,
My brain seems to agree,
For it makes me overanalyze
To very high degrees.

These putrid monsters fly around,
This vacancy in my head
To twist and turn the words I hear,
The words that you have said:

“He does,” I think. “He loves me so
He cares about my heart.”
“Oh no,” they say. “How do you know
From so very far apart?”

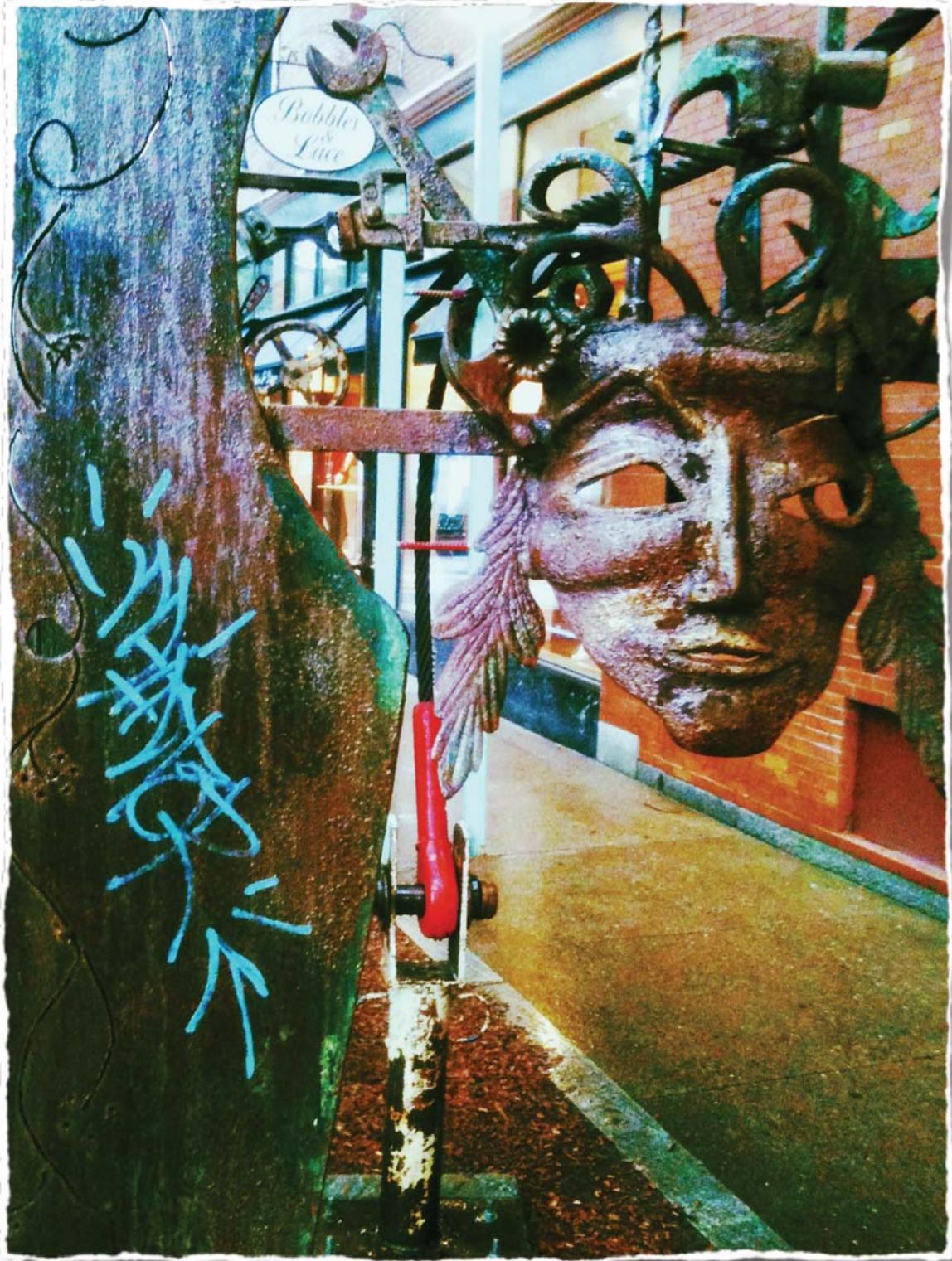
“Shame! Shame on you! you little girl
You of all should realize
Just because it’s said to be truth
Doesn’t mean it can’t be lies!”

“I’ll never give you peace of mind
The demon in your brain
Your past is doomed to shadow you
Your memories are stained.”



“Your happiness might stay awhile
But you must remember this:
I’m stronger than you and waiting
To give my darkened kiss.”

These inner demons plague my mind
Haunting how I see
The only one who can fight them off
Is their weapon over me.



Mask by Jessica Gagne

Cocaine and Bourbon

by Georgia A. Andrei

After the breakup I struggled with the idea of being alone. As most people do in tough situations, I took pity on myself. The last few months of our relationship had been rigid--they were stricken with distrust and jealousy. Personal insecurities slowly bled into our days, leaving us bickering and in tears. When the fighting finally came to a head, Lucia drove into town and made the decision to take the next step in putting "us" behind her. I remember sitting on the couch looking at the cold gray sky, trying to keep my composure. I knew I couldn't look at her, as much as my heart begged me to. Several tears crept out and rolled down my cheeks. It was time: Lucia and I packed up and parted ways for good. She headed back to Beaumont and I raced to the aid of my sister. To this very day, I know no deeper sadness than that very moment in which we stared at each other in passing on the freeway. For two years we had convinced each other we would undoubtedly be together forever. Things change, and after that day so did I.

No matter what the situation, there is always a circumstance where no single person can pick you up from where you have fallen. My weeks after that cold January day were spent in the dark with alcohol. I felt abandoned on all levels. Deeply rooted feelings from my past began to surface, and like a cinder block I started my journey to the bottom of the ocean. Valentine's Day had come and I was sure there was a chance we would once again be together. I gathered several gifts and was determined to see her that very night. I was trapped at work until 10:00 pm, and when my shift was over I jumped in my car and headed towards Beaumont (an hour and a half drive from Houston). When I pulled into her driveway, the house was dark and no cars were out. My mind raced with where she could be. She

had assured me there was no one else for her at the moment. I immediately grew hysterical, as I tried her phone and call after call she forwarded. I was exhausted and heartbroken. Fifty-two call attempts later I wiped my swollen eyes and headed back home. I was sure all of my prior suspicions of infidelity had been confirmed. What else did I have to live for? Everything was nonexistent and nothing seemed to matter. There was no tomorrow, just a right now. Eight hydrocodone pills and six bourbon shots later I was knocked out. I remember crying so hard I couldn't breathe. I wanted nothing more than for the heartache to end. The next day I woke up in pain from the nausea. I attempted to make it through the day as if it were just any other Thursday. My day was filled with many trips to the bathroom. No food or water would go down, and as much as I didn't want to, I had to call Lucia and let her know what I had done. By 9 pm that same night Lucia's best friend was driving me to the emergency room. The embarrassment was almost intolerable but it was a decision I had made and was now forced to face. Later that night Lucia came into town and relieved her friend of the burden I had become. I thought quietly about how the chance of us ever recovering was now lost.

Fast forward. It is now sometime in early March-at this point I'm a full-blown alcoholic with no sense of right or wrong. School was out of the question at this time, and a job just seemed too inconvenient to keep. I filled the emptiness in my heart with drugs and alcohol. I spent nearly every night going out and hunting for the "new" Lucia. One by one the girls fell away and little by little I began to self-destruct. Without question, I had an addiction, but I managed to convince myself and everyone else otherwise. June and July are two months I vaguely remember. Lucia and I attempted communication a few times but I had given up on having a heart. I was determined to drink any feelings I had away. I spent many nights

alone drinking; I had no other feeling than the tears that rolled down my cheeks. Everything around me began to crumble. Instead of facing the facts, I downed more liquor and did more drugs. By September I managed to find a job that would help feed my addiction. I became a bartender: this meant free access to alcohol and unlimited late nights with little to no judgment. The people who had begun to worry about me let the feeling subside in exchange for free drinks. My first night out of bar training was spent at the pub directly across from mine. I drank heavily in an attempt to impress a set of girls that I couldn't seem to catch the attention of. Two hours later I stumbled to the truck my dad had trusted me to borrow. The drive home was roughly fifteen minutes-within ten I was arrested. I had hit something and managed to get a flat tire. As luck would have it, the cop was an ex-girlfriend of my father's. The cop called a friend and had me picked up without even writing me a warning. This stunt led to my father vanishing from my life. I was labeled a loser who couldn't be trusted. I had taken the final step in becoming my mother. The same woman who avoided raising me in exchange for drinking, the woman my dad warned us not to be ever since we were old enough to understand.

For three days after the arrest I was sober. This already seemed like an eternity. I kept telling myself I didn't have a problem, yet I itched for a drink. It was the only thing that had become stable for me. The bottle wouldn't tell me to stop or give me harsh looks when I didn't. Instead of being the adult I should've been, I decided to glorify my substance abuse. My whole life I had looked down on those who did drugs. I never understood why someone would want to ruin the only thing they knew they could keep, yet here I was making drinking a contest. Bulleit Bourbon was now my best friend and I was quickly losing everything I had worked so hard for. The house I once owned was sold and the car I cherished was gone. Still, there was always a bottle in my hand and a shot to be poured. With each shot I felt a little

bit of myself slip away. Bulleit and I hung out every night, we seemed invincible together. My downward spiral would not end. I had disappointed my entire family and everyone that believed and trusted in me.

Mid-November I randomly applied to a few a schools. A small liberal arts school was crazy enough to accept me and offer me an athletic scholarship. It was time to start righting some wrongs. When I arrived in Missouri I was 112 lbs, eating once a day-and my body consisted of ninety percent alcohol. The first few days without my drinking buddies were painful and I was on the verge of quitting. I was only one day in and I was crying like a baby. At the time I saw it as anxiety; I refused to realize it was the withdrawal process taking over. To keep from further disappointing everyone, I took it day by day. Some days were more difficult to get through than others and for a little while I refused to leave my dorm. I can't decide whether or not it was a form of protection against the world or just the deep sadness of being away from all that I had known. Less than two months later I sit in my classes happier than I have been in over a year. I am beginning to feel fulfilled and slowly recover. I have managed to maintain A's in every class and even participate in a small friend group.

Quitting something can be easy, but changing a lifestyle cannot. One year ago today I would have been face down in a pillow, black-out drunk. Life is most definitely about decisions, which one I will make and how I will handle others. I look back on the past year every day and wonder how it is I got so fortunate. Never again will I live this horror with my old friend, Mr. Bulleit.

