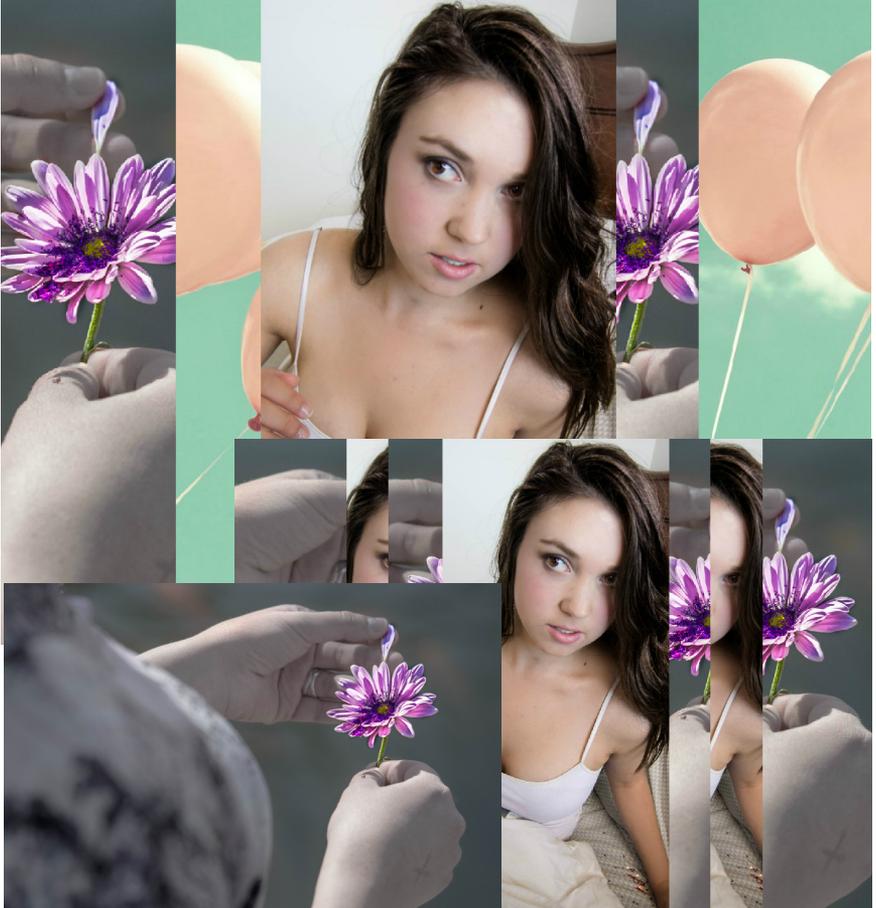


# The Kiln Project: Oneiric



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*Sunday in Paris*  
By Emily Higginbotham

## Remembrance

By Devon McDaniel

Oh, the joys of waking up. For some, it is the smell of freshly brewed coffee, the sun peeking through the curtains, or the dog licking your face, happy to see you. For Elena Burnham, however, waking up was the screams of her almost one-year-old baby after a night of troublesome sleep. She could never manage to remember her nightmares, but she could feel their effect the following mornings. Her husband, Ben, moaned beside her, mumbling something about “her turn” or whatnot.

Elena basically rolled out of bed, slipped her glasses on, and ripped off the bedside calendar. Tuesday, again, except one week later. She doubted this September day would be any different than all of the other days in New York, although she did have a rather important meeting that morning. Groaning, she ambled to the nursery.

Shh, shh, shh, Elena whispered as she cradled little Catherine in her arms. She had never loved someone so much. She started to hum her own mother’s lullaby, and the baby started to drink from her bottle. In that moment, Elena could see Catherine going to her first day of school, sheepishly confessing to starting puberty, getting her first boyfriend with freckles and braces, dressing up for the Junior Prom, graduating high school and college, then getting married to a wonderful man like her father. As tired as she was, Elena treasured these small moments, knowing that Catherine would be grown up before she could blink.

“You should probably go shower, dear,” a deep voice behind her said. Ben wrapped his arms around his wife from behind, bending down to kiss her neck. Even with her morning stench, she was beauty and grace. She was also going to be late for work pretty soon.

“Five more minutes,” Elena said sweetly, turning into her husband. He was her rock, and she knew that their lips would always fit together perfectly. She used to wonder if her life was too good to be true, but Elena had grown accustomed to the life that she had somehow attained.

\*

The World Trade Center was bustling on that Tuesday morning. However, it was in fact bustling on every Tuesday morning and every other morning for that matter. Elena fiddled for her ID while trying to juggle two other bags other than her purse. She had spent her entire commute studying the material for the various meetings being held that day, trying to decide which to focus her energy on.

“Mrs. Burnham, could you sign these real quick?” Elena’s intern handed her a pen accompanied by few papers, likely the recommendations she had written a few days earlier.

“What’s the date?” Elena hadn’t noticed on the calendar earlier, which was unusual somehow. Working in the World Trade Center had its

perks, and one of them was always knowing the date and time down to the minute.

Glancing at her calendar, the intern replied hesitantly, “The 12th, I’m pretty sure. No, it’s the 11th, sorry, and it looks like you’re on the 94th floor first today. The meeting starts a quarter ‘til nine.”

“Thank you, I’m headed up there right now.” With that, Elena joined the group of people waiting the elevators.

Another perk to working in the World Trade Center happened to be the view, which Elena thoroughly enjoyed every day. She had made it a life goal a few years back to be more consumed with the little blessings in life, and so far, her life had been a little happier every day.

“Elena, how nice to see you again,” a scruffy voice said to her right. Turning, Elena greeted a rather stout man named Timothy Garner. He was the sort that had never seen a treadmill but only because he had poured his heart and soul into his work. Elena found a certain respect for that.

Other members of the committee trickled into the room as well—Hines Fairwell, a lanky businessman from Philadelphia; Georgia Procter, a tightly-wound attorney from Manhattan; Louis Bergmann, a grandfatherly man from Staten Island; and so on. It had always amazed Elena how many different personalities could work together and accomplish a goal. Looking around the room, almost everyone had bags under their eyes, but not a single one seemed genuinely unhappy.

After a few minutes, the chair of the committee strode in and, to no one’s surprise, instigated the agenda immediately with a loud, “I commend this meeting to begin at oh-eight forty-six, September 11, 2001.”

\*

The screams of the baby awoke Elena Burnham. She felt a gentle nudge from her husband, mumbling something about it being her turn. Trying to recover from the troublesome sleep she had been experiencing lately, she let her eyes adjust to the light. Elena could never manage to remember her nightmares, only that they were something straight from Hell itself. In some sense, she found comfort in not knowing, however sometimes, she wished she knew what exactly was so rudely interrupting her peaceful slumber.

Elena basically rolled out of bed, slipped her glasses on, and ripped off the bedside calendar. Tuesday, again, except one week later. She doubted this September day would be any different than all of the other days in New York, although she did have a rather important meeting that morning. Groaning, she ambled to the nursery.

*Burnt Out**By Anna Girgenti*

There's a light switch in my mouth  
that you can flip with your tongue

    You used to  
        do that  
all the time  
        to make my body glow  
            fluorescent

against the heavens,  
but

since you left  
the switch is broken  
        in the night I

    run my tongue over  
the inside of my cheek  
        and blow a fuse

somewhere within my transparent  
lungs

    I cough up sparks on my pillow,  
gasp at the  
shards of a light bulb  
    caught in my  
throat.

*Finding Our Faith Again**By Emily Higginbotham*

Most nights I lie in bed wondering about how we got here, to this uncertain point in our lives. I go back through the years, thinking about how much has changed. I used to pray at night, asking for my family's wellbeing and safety to remain intact. Now I wonder if there's anyone listening. All that has happened in the last couple of years, it's hard to think that anyone is looking out for our wellbeing. Most days, it seems like half of my life didn't even happen. It is morphed in my memory, fuzzy and disfigured. Drifting off to sleep, I tried to remember how we got *here*...

\*\*\*

1999

I lay my head on my father's arm during Sunday mass. I feel the rough wool of his stitched blazer against my cheek, tracing it with my pudgy finger until I reach his hand. I study his meaty, callused hand next to my pink and sweaty palm. He closed my hand in his, holding it still, atop his leg. I gaze up at the paintings covering the gothic arched ceiling, admiring the shimmery gold halos surrounding the angels and saints above us, protecting us. The earthy smoke of the incense wafts through the air and burns the inside of my button nose. The cold, hard pew creaks beneath me as I squirm during Father Hoefler's homily. The choir sings and my father shares his hymnal with me, tracing his finger along the words, I follow along with every word.

\*\*\*

2003

We walk down the middle aisle, looking for an open seat. I don't like it when my dad makes us sit in the front. I pull on my itchy tights and adjust my sweater, feeling the gaze of every pair of eyes that look our way. I spend the first and second readings peering around the church to see if any of my friends are here. I had wanted to stay home today and finish the new episode of Scooby Doo, but my dad said we could go roller blading if I went to mass.

A boy I like, Joe walks in with his family. His long, black curly hair flops just a bit as he sauntered down the aisle. My eyes followed him as he found his seat, but he doesn't notice me staring. I daydreamed about him asking me to the all-school dance. My father nudges me when he sees me slumped over in my seat; he points to the gospel reading but I am uninterested in following along with him.

The priest asks us to join him in the sign of peace. *Finally*, I think, it is almost over. I want to play outside. My father kisses me on the forehead and says *Peace be with you, Sweetheart*. I give him a small smile and wipe his kiss off while he isn't looking.

It draws to a close as the choir sings... *and he will raise you up,*

*on eagle's wings...* I look up at my father: his eyes are glassy, tinged with a crayon pink and he is wiping the corner of his eyes, sniffing. I immediately look away. I hide my face, my cheeks are burning and my stomach turns to stone in my belly. I look to see if Joe has seen. I inch away from my father.

\*\*\*

2006

I sit sunken in a different pew, in a different church. There is no fancy art here. No shimmery gold saints protecting us from above. No tabernacle. No body and blood. Nothing is beautiful here.

My father does not sit next me; instead, Grandma Shirley is beside me, her arm around my shoulder, showing me comfort I had never seen in her before.

My father is standing at the altar. He is holding *her hand* in his now. He smiles at her, she smiles back. They vow that they *do*. They vow in sickness and in health, in good times and bad.

I watch from the pew, blinking away my tears. My grandma takes my hand in hers. I shiver at the contrast of her frigid grasp and the boiling blood beneath my skin. She is not angry that I am crying. She does not tell me to stop. She consoles me as best she can.

*I know it's a lot of change, Emily, I know. But, it's going to be okay,* she says.

*It's all going to be okay.*

\*\*\*

2010

I lie in bed, constantly checking the time. My dad knocks on my door: *Time to go!* he says.

I lay a blue, flower-patterned dress on my bed. It's nice, I should wear it. But I throw it on the floor. I grab some jeans, throw on a sweatshirt. *My Sunday best*, I think as I look in the mirror.

I walk down the stairs, my brother is waiting in the kitchen and my dad is already in the car.

*Ready?* I ask. He's wearing dark jeans and the brown polo he got for Christmas. He looks nicer than I do.

*At least he's taking us to lunch afterward,* my brother says as we close the front door behind us. I check the time again and count the minutes until the priest will release us, sending us to *go in peace and to love and serve the Lord.*

\*\*\*

2012

No knock comes to my door. I am not summoned. I am not bribed. It's a secular Sunday, a godless afternoon. I don't even consider getting out of bed.

\*\*\*

2013

My frosty window reveals that my father's car is still in the driveway—no desire to venture into the insufferable cold world today.

It's been four days since I had to tell him. Four days since I had to break his heart: I had to tell him that I saw her with *him*.

I walked into D&J's café for breakfast. We used to go to D&J's in

grade school when we had an early dismissal; it was across the street from our church.

I walked in and she was there: sitting with her hands stretched across the table, fingers intertwined with the man across from her. But he does not look much like a man. His hands are not meaty and callused. They were not the hands that I traced during mass. They were not the hands that brushed away the tears brought on by the song that played at my parent's wedding. They were not the hands that knocked on my door on Sunday mornings. I do not recognize those hands.

The wooden staircase in the house they had bought together, the house my dad said he would die in, creaked as tip-toed my way down. My father is in his blue flannel pajama pants and green, tattered William & Mary sweatshirt; his face rough and unshaven, his hair matted down: he gives me a sad smile. He doesn't say anything about going to mass. He doesn't say anything about *her* or *him*. He doesn't say anything about the vows they made, the vows she broke... *in good times and bad*. He says all he can, the only normal thing he can think of.

*Waffles?* he asks.

I tell him, *it's going to be okay.*

*It's all going to be okay.*

\*\*\*

2014

It's Sunday, *finally*: My father drives for 96 miles from the Land of Lincoln to pick me up from my dorm.

*Hey, Senorita Emilita! How've you been?* He's wearing the gray Chicago Bears sweatshirt I bought him three Christmases ago. He gives me a smile that finally touches his eyes and I let out a deep exhale, the anxiety that had been settled like lead in my chest, is finally away.

We drive along; the crisp autumn breeze trickling through my cracked window on the passenger side tickles my face. He asks me about my school work, my roommate. I tell him midterms are coming up and I'm a little bit nervous, but he's sure that I'll do well.

We pull up to the bar in Maplewood, soon we'll be regulars. *You ready?* he asks as we hop out of his gold Toyota. *Ready for a victory!* I holler back.

The bar is brimming with boisterous fans, forcing us to squeeze by their beer bellies to get to a table. Its kick off time: the Bears vs. the Vikings.

*The defense needs to make big plays and Cutler needs to get his head out of his ass if they want any kind of chance at making the playoffs,* he says and I nod along, agreeing with this proclamation he has made pretty much every Sunday.

The game goes on: we cheer, we laugh, we scream, we chomp on our chicken wings and slurp down our sodas.

We exchange jokes about the Vikings fans, pouting behind us. He chuckles, puts his hand on my shoulder, bringing with it the same sense of security that I used to know.

Maybe this is our new religion, maybe *here* is not such a bad place to

be.

\*\*\*

*The American Dream**By Brenda Suhan*

The grass may be greener on the other side  
 but I'm still on the white picket fence  
 that we built ourselves with ply,  
 a wall to the world useless for our defense.

Deciding between you  
 and them,  
 between our crumbling foundation  
 and a long road ahead,  
 between resentment and  
 regret,  
 this is where I sit,  
 on the fence.

*Weight**By Natalie D'Alessandro*

I will inherently blame you for the weight of the  
 Earth. Her covetous hands pulling, wanting so wholeheartedly to be  
 the exception. Drunken slurs, too soon forgotten. The dimness of  
 the glowing light on illuminated, endless August nights of hoping  
 and smoking. Our bodies blocking the light, casting masses of  
 dark into the yard. Smoke filling our lungs. Marlboro Gold  
 tucked on just kissed lips. Falling from them into the  
 cracks of the wooden deck, where we fell together, but  
 were not exceptional, subjected to cracks below, darkness where  
 wooden boards protected us once, but fell out of favor.

*Ethel: b. 1992*

By Braden Spratt

He watches her eyes flutter open.

“Would you stop looking at me like that, asshole?”

He asks her what he was looking at her like.

“What do you mean like what? You know how you were looking at me.”

He tells her she looks at him the same way.

“No, I absolutely was not. You should be so lucky. It’s weird knowing you were looking at me right before I woke up.”

He tells her he counted five creases in her eyelids before she woke up.

“Five? You counted the creases on my eyelids? That’s some very serious pussy shit right there, sir.”

He apologizes for his pussy shit.

“Consider yourself forgiven. But you have to listen to this story. You’ll appreciate it. Yesterday I was jogging in Central Park. No, don’t interrupt me. If you interrupt me again I’ll put my shirt on and you won’t see these for a while.”

He’s silent.

“I thought so. Anyway, I’m walking through Central Park and I see this leggy woman walking through the park with a friend, and this guy comes out from a bush while they’re taking a selfie. At first I’m thinking she’s was getting attacked. Then I see her get excited. Then, I saw him get down on one knee. And the friend is videotaping the whole thing. Then, right as he is saying ‘Will you marry me?’ a wad of dirt flies in and hits him in the face. They didn’t know what to do. The woman turned. Her emotions hit a brick wall and bounced back in the opposite direction.

He begins to say something.

“What did I say about interrupting? Hand me my shirt.”

He does so, slowly. She asks if she has to put it back on.

“Yes, I have to follow through. If I don’t follow through you can’t learn. So, the woman turns and kneeling there this large black woman, her hair is all greasy and spiraled into springs, obviously homeless. She’s wearing a tattered pink tutu and has dead flowers tied in the knots of her hair. Apparently, she’s been sitting off to the left side of the path throwing a brick of mud at people when they walk by her. The leggy fiancé yelled at the woman with the dead flowers in her hair. ‘Fucking pyscho, this was my moment,’ and shit like that. She yelled a bit more while the man dusted himself off and the lady that had thrown the mud just laughed like she was seeing Louie C.K. do his standup or something.”

He asks why she is laughing.

“It’s funny.”

He asks her if she is a sadist.

“I’m not a sadist; I just appreciate it when things don’t go right. It’s like when I was younger and I would see a spider web. I’d take a stick and pull out a few of the strings until it made a large hole or part of the web collapsed.

He shows sympathy for the many spiders that have lost homes.

“Don’t feel bad for them, it was an improvement on nature.”

He asks again if she is a sadist. He smiles

“Well, if I’m a sadist, then I suppose you’d need some punishing right?”

He becomes excited and begins to fuck her. He finishes after her.

“If you keep this up I might want to see you again.”

He says he’d be okay with it.

“Of course you’re okay with it, you’re a man.”

He warns her of the dangers of putting gender constraints on him.

He likes the way her face moves from confused to pissed to mischievous in a fluid moment. He tells her she has a pretty face.

“Wait, trigger words. That reminds me too much of my Aunt Margaret.”

He asks to know why Margaret makes her uncomfortable.

“Let me tell you about this bitch. She was a living absurdity. She was married to my mom’s eldest brother, Elijah. She wasn’t that old but I always felt like she was playing Ping-Pong with death when I saw her. She had this offensively hideous cheetah print dress with a matching shoulder-padded zebra print jacket. You think that’s crazy? She had a hat with plastic fruit on it that she would wear with it. She’d waddle over to me at the synagogue, pinch my cheeks, and say ‘What a lovely shayna punim.’ That’s ‘pretty face’ in Yiddish for you Gentiles. She caked herself with purple lipstick that cracked into lines when she smiled and she’d leave a big print on my cheek. She wore this perfume that smelled like what I would imagine the flowers in the homeless woman’s hair smelled like, and this powder-blue eye shadow that matched her nail polish and made her look like a sex-doll with frostbite. I still believe that I enter the beginning stages of shock when it comes to mind.”

He doesn’t believe she was as bad as all that. He says, in fact, that she sounds somewhat sexy.

“No, she was worse than what I can describe. She actually lost a foot to diabetes. Right after she lost a husband, a son, and a cat.”

He asks if the cat died of feline diabetes.

“No, the cat got ran over by a car.”

He sympathizes for Margaret.

“Don’t be sorry, she’s dead now so she can’t worry about it.”

He asks how she died.

“Also ran over by a car.”

He asks to hear her other two favorite moments.

“You’re being awfully interrogative for a guy I met last night and had some casual sex with.”

He tells her he has an inquisitive nature.

“Okay, well, I’ll indulge you. The second favorite moment was when I found out I had been accepted to NYU. And the last one, is, of course, that amazing lay I had from that sexy guy I met when we ran into each other last

night, stumbling around drunk in Washington Square Park.”

He laughs but asks her to take it seriously.

“What makes you think I wasn’t being serious.”

He tells her that he has an inkling. He is excited again and has sex with her. When finished, he adjust himself to make room for her head on his chest.

“My favorite moment I can remember is the moment my granny gave me the necklace I’m wearing right now. It was on my sixteenth birthday. Well, me and my twin brother’s sixteen birthday. We had Granny out of the nursing home for the day. She called me into a private room right after we’d cut that cake. I brought a piece of red velvet with me to snack on. This was in the time when Granny started tending to have fewer lucent days that she did ‘days off,’ and would go on long speeches about how someone had stolen three coins out of her Silver Dollar collection or the time the boy that had lived on the other side of town had kissed her without asking her, and you never knew how long her stories would go.

“The first thing she did was lean in and give me a kiss on my forehead. Her lips were so dry if I hadn’t seen it I would have believed it was just two pieces of crinkled paper. Then she took my hand. Her hands were so hold and there was so much extra skin on them. I still look at my hands and see flashes of what they’ll be like in ten, twenty, thirty years, bloated and arthritic with purple and blue accents. Would you still want me if I had hand like that?”

He assures her that he would.

“Her hands were so cold I didn’t even notice that she’d placed something in them until she moved her hands away. I remember looking down and seeing puddle of silver and knowing that it was an important moment. I stretched out the chain and held it in front of my eyes. A single pink pearl hung on the silver chain. I know this is stupid but my first thought was about geometry. I wanted to take a moment to appreciate how perfectly round the pearl was. It started in some oyster in the Pacific as a collection of sand and ended up on this chain, which currently rests amidst the hairs of your chest.”

He laughs.

“It was a moment I knew was coming but still hadn’t been prepared for. All of the women in my family have a necklace identical to this one. Do you want to hear the story of it?”

He does.

“This necklace didn’t just come from the sea. It came through time. Granny was born in what was once Czechoslovakia in 1927. She had five brothers and three sisters. All of them were killed in the Holocaust except her and her little sister Rachel. Rachel is in Israel, now, living on a Kibbutz as far as I know.

“Her dad worked in town at the city hall and was well-known throughout the small town. When the Nazis took over the Sudetenland in 1938 her town fell under their jurisdiction. One day they were told to package all their things and get ready for a move. Her dad had heard rumors about the Nazis and decided they had to do something. He took all of his kids into the woods and they worked together to dig a big hole. My grandma de-

scribed this to me 100 times. They took the family heirlooms from the house, wrapped them in sheets, and buried them in that ditch--the family menorah, jewelry, everything. The last thing they put in was a large wooden box that held the family china. Inside, there were two sets of china that he’d received as a wedding gift from his uncle who was in banking. One set had thin blue vines running like a web of veins around the tablets of the Ten Commandments, which was sitting in the middle of each plate, side plate, and bowl. The other set had a red vines doing the same. There was a full set of silver with gold accents on the bottom of each utensil.

“In the end, the war took the family and extinguished all but Ethel and Rachel.”

He conveys his sympathy.

“Don’t sympathize too much, they’re all dead. Sometimes things don’t work out right.”

He feels a light wetness on his chest.

“After the war, she came to America. She found a job working in a textile factory, where she met my grandpa. When she was fifty years old she told my grandpa Baruch that she had to go back. He told her she was insane and she told him that she was probably right. She then went on to tell him if he didn’t help her make it there she would drive him insane with her.” He laughs.

“They saved up. In 1980, she made it back to Hungary. My uncle Elijah, Margaret’s husband, went with her. She was afraid to fly so they had to sail across.

“The area had changed since my granny had been there but she walked right to the spot. She made my uncle dig, and dig, and dig. He thought she was insane too and she thought he was a whiner. She promised him the whole was deep. They’d had to make sure it was deep so no one else would find it. My uncle would talk about her drilling him to dig faster and harder at every family gathering until he die. Then Granny began to cry. She said, ‘I heard the tap of the shovel against metal and I felt my family. I heard the laughs, songs, and chants of the Chanukahs of years and years gone by when he unsheathed the silver menorah.’ It was all there—including this necklace. They bought three suitcases and traveled back across the Atlantic. Granny took the long strand of pink pearls that had belonged to her mother and put them around her neck.

“I’m named after her—Ethel.”

He tells her it is a pretty name. He tells her it is the prettiest name he has heard in a long, long, time.

“They brought it all back here. I remember most of it. I would get to use the china on my birthday and we would gather around the menorah on Chanukah together. I felt like all of Granny’s brothers and sisters inhabited the various artifacts brought back here.”

He asks if he could see the menorah sometime. He tells her it sounds too beautiful not to see.

“You couldn’t find most of it now. Only God knows where it is. My cousin Carmen went off the deep end a couple of years ago. She had a heroin addiction, a marijuana addiction, a sex addiction, and evidently an addiction addiction. She stole most of it. She did it right in front of her too. Granny

had just started slipping in her dementia. She thought it was her little sister moving things around to clean up because the rabbi was coming over. Carmen told her she was right. She probably would have tried to take the necklace if Granny hadn't been wearing it. Only the necklace and two bowls survived the ransacking. It was after that we moved Granny into the home and Carmen into the psych ward. Granny decided to unstring the pearls and make a necklace for each of the women on the family to have."

He moves his hand in soft strokes across her hair, and feels her breath on his chest. Her breathing has begun to match his.

"Sorry, yeah, that was a bit bleak wasn't it? I meant to stop sooner. I meant to just tell you about my necklace. When she gave it to me she smiled. I think it says something that she could smile. I feel like I'm carrying them with me. All of it is inside. It came out of the ditch and it made it here. I think that's really something."

They lay there for an amount of time that does not matter outside of the aspect of them spending it together. He tells her it is probably many different somethings—each of them as important and wonderful as the last. He feels her smile against his chest.

## *Still Life*

*By Brenda Suhan*

"For she was the maker of the song she sang."

– "The Idea of Order at Key West" by Wallace Stevens

You traveled to that moment every morning before you opened your eyes: the sterile white room, your own animalistic sobs, and the way his grey eyes drooped beneath the weight of his brows.

"Dammit, Faith, come on!" Chelsea said, shaking your shoulder. "We're late for Psych again!"

You rolled over, accustomed to – sometimes even endeared by – Chelsea's brazenness after living with her the last couple of years. You rubbed your shoulders as you pulled yourself up from the bed, slid into your loosest pair of skinny jeans, and threw on a baggy grey sweater.

As you lagged behind Chelsea on the way to Jones Lecture Hall, you shifted your eyes to the dilapidated church down the street. It had always reminded you of your childhood home, with its crumbling dull brown stone, uneven roof, and cobblestone walkway shadowed by weeds competing for space out of every crack. Your mother had thought the little cottage on Lake Michigan had "character," but your father had always hated it. Your mother had kept the cottage after the divorce, probably out of spite more than anything, and she had sold it only after you left for college. You missed the way things used to be when you had all lived in that cottage together. You had always thought that someday you would raise a family in that house, too. One time last September, you had snuck into that abandoned church, in a futile attempt to regain that youthful hope.

Your eyes blinked in confusion as they caught sight of the tattered black and red Trailblazers sweatshirt you had worn to bed for nearly three years in your left peripheral view. Your heart sank into that hole deep in your ribs that you had longed to forget. You felt the tremor starting from your ears and tumbling down to your toes. Chelsea had always described him as "a horse with blinders on," and sure enough, he was staring intently at his phone.

"What the hell is Grayson doing here? The point of graduating is that you *leave*," Chelsea said, pulling me closer as we neared him. "Get a job, loser," she muttered once he had passed us.

"I don't know," you mused. You allowed yourself one swift backward glance, but besides the sweatshirt, nothing there was recognizable.

You went through the ritual of your day: Psych, Poetry, a turkey sandwich with an organic apple at the Feng Shui Café, British Lit, Art History, nap, feed the ducks at Kayak Park, a burger and fries at Mary's Pub, study, shower, write, bed. This is how you had spent your days since August 13th of last year – 1 year, 2 months, and 10 days ago. Occasionally you would

agree to have some wine and watch an Indie film with Chelsea and her friends, or browse the galleries of Alberta, but mostly, you preferred to stick to your schedule.

That night after Mary's, you accompanied Chelsea to the art museum for one of her projects. You brought your poetry along, hoping to get some inspiration for your next assignment: "Emotion through Imagery." Chelsea sat down in front of a nude Roman sculpture and started scribbling away, while you wandered around, trying to find a good spot to concentrate.

As you browsed the walls of mythological and religious and political art, a pointillism painting caught your eye. *Le Bec du Hoc, Grandcamp*, read the plaque to the right. You looked at the vast expanse of languid blues and greens. The isolated cliff emerged out of the water with a strength that seemed capable of enduring even the most violent of storms. You sat down on the leather bench ten feet away and jotted a few lines. Then you stood up and leaned in as close to the painting as you could without setting off a security alarm, squinting your eyes in concentration to see every tiny dot of blue.

"You can kinda lose yourself in this one right here, can't you?"

Your pen flipped out of your hand and echoed against the marble floor. You turned to see your Art History professor, a man with white, wispy hair dressed in overly ironed tan trousers and a muddy green polo shuffle up beside you. You smiled politely in his direction and bent down to pick up your pen.

"Sure would be nice to be able to sit up on that rock, just looking out at everything. Not a care in the world. No one to worry about but yourself." Professor McKinley sighed and plunged his wrinkled hands into his pockets.

"I worry about my kids all the time. Oh, they're grown now," he said, pulling his right hand out of his pocket and waving it in the air as if to dismiss any confusion about his age. "But they're still making mistakes. My girl's in a rehab facility. Can't seem to protect her anymore."

"She's still around, though, isn't she?" you said, staring blankly at the canvas.

"Very true." He nodded his head and then gestured toward the canvas with an arthritic finger. "You know, you have to step back if you really want to see the full picture in all its beauty."

"I know that."

"I'm just saying, one point doesn't really add up to much on its own."

"I know."

"You'd just appreciate it more if you stepped back a bit. You'd see it so much more clearly." He took a step backward and nodded at the painting, the same nod he reserved for the most insightful answers in lecture.

You pinched your lips together and closed your eyes for just a moment, then turned and strode out of the room.

Chelsea appeared from the archway to the left.

"Hey! I got all the notes I needed," she said, disrupting the still air with a wave of her notebook. "You wanna stay and work some more?"

"No, that's okay. I think I'll focus better back in the room."

Early the next morning after making the final tweaks to your poem, you nudged the door shut so as not to wake Chelsea and slid underneath the sheets, your nightmares tucking you in for bed – bloody hospital beds, tear-

soaked pillows, and sweat-soaked gowns. You couldn't decide if they were torture or therapy, these images that swam through your mind every night. Only five hours until your 9 a.m. You'd be okay.

"BRING HER BACK!" you heard your mouth say, but you opened your eyes to find yourself lying on top of a bare white mattress, the navy sheets rippling over the edge of the bed.

"Jesus, Faith! What the hell!" Chelsea's head jolted up from her pillow.

"Sorry, bad dream I guess."

"Again? This talking in your sleep shit is getting ridiculous. We both need sleep," Chelsea said. Her green eyes softened in the streams of city light piercing through the blinds.

"Sorry."

You saw her eyebrows furrow. Her face was etched in thought, as if she was about to say something particularly insightful. And then her face relaxed.

"It's fine, I just have an exam tomorrow." She rolled over toward the wall. "Night."

"Night, Chelsea."

You awoke at 8:40 and went through the ritual of your day: Psych, Poetry, a turkey sandwich with an organic apple at the Feng Shui Café, British Lit, Art History, nap, feed the ducks at Kayak Park, a burger and fries at Mary's Pub, study, shower, write, bed. You awaited your nocturnal haunting; only sleep didn't come. The hours passed, and you stared out the window, watching the sun creep over the geometric Portland skyline. You imagined taking a pair of scissors, cutting out the entire city, and then gluing it back in its place against the sky again. Your alarm chimed on schedule at 8:40, but you hit snooze. You could watch the sun curve from east to west all day. And that's what you did, admiring the way the sun grazed the tops of the buildings in its predictable arc. You didn't care that you were missing the lecture on Freud or the works of Sylvia Plath, or the bland turkey sandwich, or the biography of Jane Austen, or the brushstrokes of Monet. You didn't care that the ducks would waddle around the shore missing your predictable breadcrumbs. You just didn't care. You could watch the sun curve from east to west till you died. When Chelsea returned from class, you told her it was just a bad cold. She raised an eyebrow. She knew.

You managed to get out of bed and go to class the next day, though still in an oneiric haze. It was Friday, and by the time you walked into your Art History class that afternoon, you could hear exchanged whispers throughout campus of the parties happening that night. But you – you were satisfied just sitting in your usual spot in the second row by the window where the beams of sunlight half blinded you as you listened to Professor McKinley's soft voice drown out your thoughts.

You watched as Professor McKinley drew and labeled two intersecting circles on the chalkboard.

"Art," he said, pointing with the chalk to the word he wrote above the first circle, "and mental illness." The chalk echoed against the board as he tapped the spot between the words and the second circle.

"Van Gogh created some grand masterpieces, even through his

struggle with depression. Some pretty remarkable stuff,” Professor McKinley said. “My question for you all is, what purpose might his art have served, if any? Was it just for him? For politics? Or for others, as well?”

Not one person in the room of fifty spoke. You looked around the room and then tilted your arm upward. Professor McKinley smiled widely and nodded in your direction.

“Yes, Ms. Alexander, what do you think?”

“Well, doesn’t it make sense? I mean, obviously he’s searching for some meaning. His work gives him a way to escape reality, or maybe even to dwell on it sometimes. It’s a kind of coping mechanism.”

“Very good.” He plunged his left hand into his pocket and rocked back on his heels. “That could very well be a possibility. And what might this say about van Gogh as an artist?”

“I mean, some of the best poets, authors, and painters struggled with illness and addiction. They were outcasts of their time, and their art was where they belonged. For them, it was a way of keeping order and exerting control over their lives.”

“Exactly. Wonderful insight, Ms. Alexander. Thank you,” he said, nodded and flashing a crooked smile your way. He pulled out a pair of bifocals from his chest pocket and looked down at his watch. “Well on that note, we will continue with van Gogh on Monday. Don’t forget – your synthesis papers are due promptly at the beginning of class on Monday. Have a great weekend everyone.” You could’ve sworn he looked in your direction, his face etched with the same lines as Chelsea’s when you awoke from your nightmare earlier that week.

You slung your leather bag over one shoulder before the rest of class had packed away their notebooks and pens, and headed west away from campus. You approached the corner of 5th and Jackson and pushed open the rotting, creaky door of Mullin’s Café, where you and Chelsea met weekly for coffee.

“The usual, Faith?”

“Yeah, thanks,” you said to the barista as you walked toward the fireplace where Chelsea was sitting, already sipping her latte.

“Feeling better?” she asked as you sat down.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” you said with a half-hearted smile.

“Made it before you even walked in. White caramel mocha with soy, extra foam. Or maybe I should rename it the ‘Faith Special,’” said the barista. She winked and slid the mug between you and Chelsea, her pale tattooed arm creating a barricade between Chelsea’s eyes and yours.

You took a sip from the nearly overflowing mug, concentrating on the white foam inching toward the tip of your nose. You felt the intensity of Chelsea’s green-eyed gaze. You made that sip last as long as possible.

“I’ve seen you like this before,” Chelsea said as you looked up from the mug. “I’m sure you remember that time. Honestly, Faith, I’m worried.”

“You don’t have to worry, I’m doing fine. Really.” You slowly took a gulp.

“Dammit, Faith – you’re not doing fine!” Chelsea said, slamming her mug down so that drops flew out onto the table. Her voice dropped as she said, “You weren’t the only one who lost something that day, you know.”

You stared past Chelsea’s shoulder toward the door. The sun made a halo just above the trees now.

Chelsea leaned in closer toward you across the table, her split ends absorbing the drops of coffee on the table. “I think you need to go back to Dr. Morris. You were doing so much better and then after Grayson and you . . . well, you just stopped going.” She reached across the table and squeezed your hand. You’d be okay.

“Can we talk about this later? I completely forgot I have an online assignment for lit due at 7.” You retracted your hand from beneath hers, stood up, swung your bag over your shoulder, and pushed through the door before she could answer, leaving your half empty mug on the table still exhaling wisps of steam.

You wandered around the side streets of campus, hands tucked into your sweatshirt pouch, protected from the autumn breeze. You decided to visit the ducks before the sun’s final light was lost. All of them were huddled against the wind in pairs. You would see them floating down the river together, side by side, every time you came to the park. This time you noticed one duck, a female, nestled near the bridge. Beside her were five ducklings no more than the size of a man’s palm. Your thoughts ebbed and flowed with the river as you watched the baby ducks bob up and down.

“What about . . . Frida!” Chelsea’s eyes had glowed in the way they always did when she got excited.

“Frida? If we’re going for painters, at least go with Georgia,” you had said, laughing.

“Frida was such a badass! A little crazy, but a badass,” said Chelsea, swiveling back and forth in the 1950s-style red barstool next to you.

“I like Silvia,” you had said.

“Pshh! Speaking of crazy!”

You had rolled your eyes. “Ok, then. How about Virginia? That’s one of my favorites.”

“I like Maya better.”

“Chelsea, this is important. I only have a few weeks left, and I’m not even close to making a decision.”

“I know! That’s why we need to think of some powerful, influential women here! Now come on, think.”

“Alright, how about Chelsea then?”

Chelsea collapsed onto the bar cackling as you struggled to swallow your chocolate milkshake between bursts of laughter.

You wiped your hand under your eye to catch a tear, but it slipped from your eyelash and plopped into the black water below. You’d be okay. You dropped a few pieces of stale bread over the bridge near the mother duck and then turned back toward campus. You returned to your room only when you were certain Chelsea was already in bed and slipped into a restless sleep.

When you awoke at noon the next day, Chelsea was nowhere to be found. You noticed a pink Post-It on your desk:

Faith –

At lunch and a movie with my mom. Keep your head up & call me if you need

to talk. Bought you this yesterday at a bookstore downtown.

Love,  
C

You stuck the note on the edge of the bookshelf above your desk and picked up the book: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. You opened the scuffed cover gingerly and scanned the index, smiling as your finger reached the words you were searching for. There it was, your favorite: “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Sitting down at your desk, you flipped through the yellowing pages.

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
She measured to the hour its solitude.  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

You dog eared the page, slid the book onto your top shelf between Sexton and Wheeler Wilcox, and turned toward the window, peering between the blinds. The sun seemed unreachable today, wrapped up in wisps of fog like the bandaged arm you had “accidentally” sliced with the slip of a paring knife several months earlier. You opened your closet door to pick out something to wear, weighing the chances of being caught in the rain on your way to get lunch. Looking for your green rain jacket, you rifled through your hangers one by one. You dragged out your dad’s old beat-up footlocker from the back of the closet and started digging through scarves and old sweatshirts – and then you froze. Beneath the jacket folded neatly in quarters rested the tiny pink blanket Grayson’s mom had knitted.

You felt the tremor starting from your ears and tumbling down to your toes. You snatched the blanket, heavy in your hands. Stared at it. Five seconds. Ten seconds. Fifteen. You forced the jammed window open. Punched out the bottom of the screen. Flung the blanket out the hole. Tumbling down into the parking lot. Down. Down. Down. The fog concealed it now. But you knew it was still there, below your window. Your chest heaved. The room faded around you. As if the fog had seeped through the window, invading. You allowed your body to be dragged down on the bed. Down. You sheltered yourself from the world. A cocoon of Egyptian cotton. You’d be okay.

The shallow light soon dimmed to blackness. You heard the clink of the lock opening outside the cocoon. You pretended you were sleeping. You heard the puckering of Chelsea’s lips as she put on her signature red lipstick. Heard the zip of her signature leather boots. Heard her keys scrape across the surface of the dresser as she swiped her wallet. Click. The door closed. You emerged and watched the moon cast a spotlight on the train of giggling

girls from your window. They hung onto the arm of some guy they had just met. Stumbled from party to party. An empty feeling flooded your chest. You crawled down off your bed. Down. Down. Down. You walked toward the stairwell at the end of the hall. One two three four five six seven. Next flight of stairs. Up. Up. Up. You walked up to the 9th floor. Turned left. You knew you’d find the emergency stairs. You wouldn’t set off an alarm as you opened the door. You walked up the stairs and out a second door. The chilly wind blew your hair behind you. The tremor started from your ears and tumbled down to your toes. A gust of wind pushed you backward. It said, “Stop!” But you couldn’t. Chelsea wasn’t here to hold you back this time. You paused at the west edge of the building and gazed down at the parking lot. A pink square wrestled with the wind. It snagged on the branch of a young ash. Beneath the glow of the orange streetlight. These were the only things you saw.

You traveled to that moment once again. The sterile white room. Your own animalistic sobs. The way his grey eyes drooped beneath the weight of his brows. 1 year. 2 months. 14 days. You were there again. Pushing through tears as you clenched Grayson’s shaking hand. Watching as the doctor held the small, fragile body. Blue fingers and toes hanging limply over his arms. He carried it out of sight. Seeing Grayson turn away so you wouldn’t see his face. Seeing your sweat soaked hand let go of his. Clutching your chest as you attempted to breathe. Seeing Chelsea’s panicked expression as the door swung open. And now. Now directly below the toes of your slippers you saw the pink blanket. You saw the dog-eared corner of “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The torn, yellowing page crumpled in your right fist. You saw your feet leave the brick. You saw a beam of moonlight reach down. Tried and failed to lift you back up as your eyes shut. Up. No, down. Down. Down. You saw a stillbirth. And then a still life. And now, a still death.

*Watersnakes**By Anna Girgenti*

Ten years old with war paint on your face  
 bright red feathers in your headdress,  
 You held a toy gun, a boy and arrow.  
 In my hand- a sharp stone  
 together,  
     brother and sister or  
 Indian chief and his princess,  
     hand in hand  
 We found them in the backyard  
     on rocks by the lake  
 Slithering from their watery home,  
     stretched out and baking  
             in the July sun,  
 four feet of gray scales  
     We shot them  
             one by one.  
 We gripped them by the necks  
     and took them to the flames  
 You tied knots with their flesh,  
     laid them at bonfire stakes.  
 Strapped to sticks and peeling,  
     our captives  
     dead.  
 With a flume of smoke,  
     they were raptured  
 resurrected.  
 We sang chants  
     and danced in circles  
     and when we walked barefoot  
 into the lake's edge,  
 You said to me  
     Now we can go swimming together  
             every day and forever.  
 Happy with blood on our hands,  
 We thought the water snakes  
 were gone.

*Five Little Letters**By Brenda Suhan*

“Were you raped?”

R-A-P-E-D.  
 The five little letters  
 in the question  
 I fixated on.

I gawked at the therapist,  
 thinking,  
*This session will*  
*H-A-U-N-T me forever.*

Why couldn't those  
 five little letters be  
 L-O-V-E-D  
 instead?

Confused,  
 all I could manage to respond was,

“M-A-Y-B-E.”

## Real

By Molly Carroll

He doesn't remember when he first saw her. Frankly, she appeared just like any of his other characters. Talented artist and average high school student Nicholas Barnard was staring into space one Wednesday free period and he just saw her. He was imagining walking around in a forest, but it was foggy with morning dew. He came to see the edge of the forest and walked toward the clearing of spindly trees, but he didn't make it before he heard—

"Nicholas?"

Bolt. Awake. Now. Brain. On. "What?"

Mr. Callahan, the history teacher, sighed. "I asked, what did Brown vs. Board of Education rule?"

Nicholas searched his brain for an answer, but his brain was still foggy and filled with quickly-fading trees. "Desegregation... something?" he spit out.

"Correct. Desegregation of public schools." Mr. Callahan seemed to admire Nicholas' ability to daydream and still know the answer. Nicholas supposed it just came naturally with a high IQ. Like sitting alone at lunch.

Nicholas hated when people yelled at him to stop staring into space/ stop daydreaming/ pay attention/et cetera. He was just one of those people, one of those who liked to "check out" of the real world. No one around him seemed to understand that.

During free period, Nicholas worked on calculus, but there was the forest with the spindly trees. He imagined it again. It really was beautiful with the fog. He could do whatever he wanted here, like make a dinosaur come to the forest and tear it down. But he enjoyed its current peace. He walked to the forest clearing and saw he was standing on a plateau. In the valley below was a ghost town. *How interesting!* he thought. Nicholas decided to climb down the small plateau and investigate this new creation.

As he was walking, a girl with long black hair and dragon wings zoomed above his head, not bothering to notice him. *It's Shadow Dragon!* he thought to himself. One of the superheroes he had drawn in his notebooks at school. But... this wasn't Los Angeles. Shadow Dragon lives in L. A. because that's where he imagines her to live. Oh well. He guessed she had just crossed his mind for a moment.

Nicholas looked around the ghost town. There was a convenience store, and a restaurant, and some apartments. Every building was dilapidated in some form.

Nicholas heard footsteps — soft, slow footsteps. In their direction stood a teenage girl. She had light brown hair tied up in a bun, and she was wearing one of those late 1800s dresses. The dress was purple with little details and very pretty. So was she... but he had never seen her before. How could a new character take him by surprise? What *was* this pl—

"Nicholas! Come *on*, I need help with the dishes," his mother nagged. Apparently supper was over. Nicholas had eaten but barely spoke. Usually he could keep on a conversation with his parents and sister, but not after that.

After supper Nicholas headed up to his room to read the new issues he pulled this week. Or at least, that's what he told his family. He *really* had to go back to that place he had been imagining. It sounded strange, musing about his daydreams as if he was traveling to them. He almost felt like a scientist on the verge of a new discovery. He just had to experiment.

Nicholas lay on his bed and closed his eyes. Instantly he was back in the ghost town. The broken buildings seemed so vivid to him this time. The world in his head was creating itself around him. *What? What am I thinking? I'm going crazy!* he thought as he explored the streets. Running. He heard running behind the corner coffee shop. Nicholas' heart began to beat faster and faster as his nerves went haywire. But he had to find out and he rounded the corner of the coffee shop and the running stopped. The girl faced him dead on.

They stared at each other for a few seconds. It seemed as though the girl was examining him much more closely than he was examining her. She had soft blue-gray eyes and her hair was still in a bun. She had the same purple dress on and dainty black laced boots.

"...Hello."

*What?* Nicholas screamed to himself. His eyes widened in utter shock. *She's talking to me. She's talking to me. A girl in my head is talking to me.* "Hi." He waved awkwardly.

The girl spoke up again. "Who are you, and why do you look so peculiar?" She pointed to his clothing and face. She had an accent of some sort. Like in movies.

"You're asking... How did you... What..." Nicholas stuttered. He stared at the ground and held his head between his hands. He'd always known he was a little crazy, for enjoying reading or being introverted perhaps, but this took the cake. Next stop, insane asylum.

But he had to stay here, stay daydreaming. This was important — he was a scientist here, remember? Oh no. The girl was coming closer.

She put her hand on her heart, as if in introduction. "My name is Emily. You seem a bit frightened by all this, and I am too," her large eyes stared into his. "But I am also curious. Am I making this up? Of course I am, of course I am!" She did seem frazzled in her speech.

Suddenly Nicholas felt protective of the frightened girl. "It's okay. I'm thinking the exact same thing. Which means we are making this up. Or, I am."

Emily shook her head. "I wouldn't be so sure. Have you met the others?"

Nicholas stared at her in utter disbelief and said nothing. Emily walked past him and approached an old house near the coffee shop. It looked Victorian. Perhaps Emily felt at home there. Nicholas hit himself on the head for thinking about her as if she wasn't a character, and followed her invitation inside.

Somebody was playing guitar in the darkly lit living room. "Hello there, Emily!" the player exclaimed. He stopped strumming and looked up

at Emily and her new companion. He was a man in about his late thirties, thinning dark hair and thick glasses, with a huge smile on his face sitting in a rocking chair.

"I found one," said Emily. She gestured to Nicholas. "Tell us your name?"

"Nicholas." Nicholas was breathing quite heavily and nervously at this point. He was wringing his hands and they were beginning to get clammy.

"Hi, Nicholas! Welcome—

—then we take the derivative of  $x$  to the fourth, which gets us..."

"Fucking DAMNIT!" Nicholas swore only partially under his breath. Some of his nearby Calculus classmates jumped, others stared. He started sweating. People were staring. He was in class. He had somehow tuned back in to life, despite the continuous daydream. Now how was he supposed to continue his meeting with Emily and the guitar guy?

*You made them up, you dumbass. They'll be in the same place you left off, just like every other story you've made up,* Nicholas told himself. He started taking notes to attempt to calm himself down. Despite this setback, he had to get back.

After an anxiety-filled day of school, Nicholas could finally retreat to his bedroom. During that school day all he had done was doodle pictures of Emily so he would remember her.

He walked straight past the forest, into the town, into the house. He breathed a sigh of relief. Guitar guy was still there, but he didn't notice Nicholas. He was talking to a small group of children sitting on the floor facing him.

"WHAT?" Nicholas yelled. "I mean... I'm sorry." The children stared at him and the guitar guy smiled.

"You're new here. Why don't you join us? Perhaps you'll come to find it's not so scary," he said in a rather patronizing tone.

Nicholas gingerly took a seat next to a little boy who was about five. He didn't notice Nicholas but was staring at the guitar guy intensely, like he was staring into space.

"Oh, and you can call me Rob," said the guitar guy. He began to strum and sing:

*Come on and play with us, everyone, here  
It's not a place you have to fear.  
I found it one day and you have found too  
That here you can do what you want to do.  
You may find it gives you a reason to smile  
But remember to go back once in a while.*

Rob winked at Nicholas and continued to strum a rhythm. "Emily is upstairs if you'd like to see her." Bewildered by the haunting song, Nicholas slowly got up and went to the staircase. He heard the children chime in to Rob's strumming.

"Play another one, Rob!"

"We love you, Rob."

"I don't want to go back."

Nicholas arrived up the stairs and saw an open door to a study.

Inside, Emily sat at a desk, writing with a quill. She wore a red dress today. Nicholas knocked at the door.

"Come in!" said Emily cheerfully.

"What are you writing?" asked Nicholas.

"Oh, I love to write. I am just musing on some questions I have been pondering as of late." She took the parchment she had been writing on and showed him proudly. In beautiful calligraphy were the questions:

*What is the only world humans have other than the real one?*

*Where do we go when we die?*

*What if it's the same?*

"Emily..." Nicholas put his hand on her shoulder.

Emily looked at the floor. "I don't want to go back. Ever, ever again."

He was beginning to figure it out. This place was a place where you go when you're not in the real world. The source. The source of all daydreams. The dream world. And just a few days ago Nicholas had become conscious of all the other dreamers. But now, the girl with a porcelain face wanted to destroy herself.

Nicholas sat down on a plush chair across from the desk. "Emily... do you want to die?"

"Let me tell you something, Nicholas. I was born into a high class family in New York, and in the real world, my only purpose is to marry a rich man. I want to be a writer. I make up stories, just like you do! We all do. That's how we got here. I know you know now."

Nicholas was at a loss for words. Here he was, and he lived in Ohio. Yet...

Suddenly Emily took his hands into hers. "The only place in the whole world I can write in peace is here. When I'm not daydreaming, I'm being primped and polished by my mother for the next outing. I hate it! I hate it so much." Emily's voice began to falter in sobs and she hung her head.

"Emily... Don't do that... Don't..." but her image and the room faded away as Nicholas leapt back into reality. He was in his bedroom and it was dark. He looked at his watch on the nightstand: 3am. He guessed he was night dreaming this time.

The following day Nicholas found himself in the counselor's office. He wasn't sure why he was there, only that he hadn't talked to anyone much and he felt he needed to get something out.

"I... I think I have a friend who is considering committing suicide," Nicholas told the counselor.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas. And who is that?" asked Dr. Carlson, a blonde, kind woman of about forty.

"Her name is Emily."

"I see. Does she go to school here?"

"No."

"Where does she live?"

Nicholas paused. He knew this would be a bad answer, but he was so downtrodden. "She lives in my head." He put his head in his hands in defeat. Dr. Carlson wrote a note on her notepad.

Nicholas sat in his bedroom with the door closed. He had only one thought in his mind, and to a normal person it wouldn't make much sense: he

wanted to go home. He had become addicted to the ghost town and the forest and the house and Emily and Rob and the guitar, and now he thought of that place as home. But they all did too, and this brooding wasn't going to get him anywhere.

Nicholas opened the door to Fantasy Comics and the little bell rang. "Hey, Nicholas! It's been a while!" said Carl, the manager. Nicholas waved and greeted him warmly. Here was a place he felt he belonged in the *real* world, thought Nicholas. Comic book nerds always had their heads in the clouds, right? This wasn't serious, not at all. "Looking for anything in particular?" asked Carl.

"Not necessarily, beyond a little advice," said Nicholas. He leaned his elbows on the shop counter.

"What's up?"

"You stare into space and think about stuff a lot, right? You know, like having an imaginative nature."

"Yeah, but I'm a bit more extroverted and in tune with the world than some of the people I know. Hence my being a comic store manager. You kind of have to be a people person to sell stuff," replied Carl. "My brother is a prime example of who you're talking about though. He's a computer programmer but he works from home. Doesn't talk much, but when he does it's actually pretty fascinating."

"Do you think I could talk to him? There's just been something nagging me about being a dreamer, so to speak."

Carl frowned. "I would like to say yes, but he really is shy. Tell you what, I'll talk to him about it, say you need some advice, and see if he'll come out of his shell for a bit."

Nicholas smiled. Perhaps he was getting somewhere. "Thanks a lot, Carl. I appreciate it."

Nicholas' mother was sitting on the couch staring at the wall when he got home. He walked over to her and asked if anything was wrong.

"I just got off the phone with your school counselor, Nicholas. I thought something might be up, but it's worse than I thought. Come here, honey." She reached her arms out to hug him, looking like she was about to cry.

Nicholas hugged his mother for the sole reason that it seemed she needed it more than he did. "Mom... Everything's fine. It's just... You wouldn't understand."

"I know you shut yourself in your room up there but I don't know what you *do*. It scares me," she explained. "And this talk about what's in your head... Are you hearing voices? Please tell me, sweetie."

"No Mom... I'm not hearing voices." Nicholas was unsure if interacting with people beyond one's own space and time counted as "hearing voices" but he was going to give himself the benefit of the doubt. He seemed to have calmed his mother down and, as soon as he could, retreated to his bedroom. He stared at his doodles of Emily and the ghost town.

"You've been very kind to me, Nicholas," said Emily. "You're the first boy my age I've encountered here, and you are very much like me, especially since you are here." Nicholas and Emily sat in her study. Emily was staring out the window at the foggy forest beyond. She sounded wistful. "I want to be

with you always."

Nicholas sighed and pondered her remark. "But we can't always be together, Emily. We live in different times and places."

Emily smiled and looked back at him. "Who says we have to live?"

"Emily..." Nicholas reached out to her to take her hand, but she stood up from her desk chair.

"Goodbye, Nicholas. I'll see you soon." To his horror, Emily took a shaking hand to her throat, as if she was holding something, like a dagger. "I'll never have to go back," she whispered.

"NO! EMILY!" Nicholas screamed as she sliced her throat with the invisible dagger. The only explanation was her suicide in the real world. Emily collapsed on the floor, but there was no Carroll 11 blood. "No... no no no..." Nicholas knelt down. Her body was slowly becoming transparent and fading away. He didn't understand. "ROB!"

Nicholas raced down the stairs and found Rob outside the house on the porch swing. He explained through hot tears, "Emily just killed herself. In her own world. Then she, she faded..."

"Oh. Well, I better get my guitar out!" Rob smiled. "It's time!"

Nicholas wanted to punch Rob. But he didn't, since Rob wouldn't feel it anyway and there could be something he wasn't getting. Rob raced into the house and came back with the guitar. "Come on, follow me!" he motioned to Nicholas.

Rob led Nicholas to the town square. Nicholas had never been there before. There were a lot of people he'd never seen, and they all looked like ghosts, but they weren't. They were just really pale and wore dark clothing and they all looked like they were from different time periods. He thought he saw someone who looked like Leo Tolstoy, with a long beard.

Throughout the murmuring of the crowd Nicholas figured out everyone was looking toward the forest on the plateau, the same forest that Nicholas had first been to when he imagined this place. He heard a slight gasp from a woman near him and he looked up as well.

Emily emerged from the forest in a radiant, ethereal glow. It was like she was carrying the fog with her as she descended from the plateau and walked toward the town. She was not wearing her usual nineteenth century garb, instead, she wore a flowing gray-white tunic and white lilies in her long, unkempt hair, like a goddess. Her face was serene and she did not notice Nicholas as she joined the communion of the dead waiting for her in the town square.

Nicholas woke up with tears streaming down his face. He sat up on his bed and suddenly he noticed his parents across the room from him. They, and a strange man he had never seen before, were silent as if they had just finished a conversation he was not supposed to hear.

"Nicholas, my name is Dr. Larici. I have been talking with your parents and I'm here to help you. I understand you're going through a tough time right now. Can you tell me anything about what you've been experiencing?" said the stranger.

So, shaking, Nicholas told them a brief and edited version of what had happened. He was daydreaming, he discovered the source of his dreams, and his friend killed herself in the process, which is why he was upset. He

even showed them his best portrait of Emily, one he colored with his best colored pencils. The whole time Dr. Larici scribbled on his notepad and occasionally showed his notes to Nicholas' parents.

"I know you think I made this up. I'm hallucinating. I'm daydreaming. But it's real, I tell you, I know it's real! She really did die, I was there!" Nicholas screamed in a wavering voice. Dr. Larici muttered something to Nicholas' mother, who nodded and turned to her son.

"We just want to see you happy again, Nicholas, and not in so much pain. I hear you yelling sometimes... The doctor is going to prescribe something for you. You won't suffer any longer."

"I'm not! I haven't been happier—"

"What are you say—"

"Shut UP!"

Nicholas couldn't take it anymore so he got up and left his room, taking the portrait with him. *Of course they think I'm hearing voices and am schizophrenic or something*, he thought. He collected his nerves and headed to the one place he might get an answer.

"Carl. Carl!" Nicholas raced into Fantasy Comics and slammed the paper with Emily's portrait on the counter. "Look at this. Do you know this girl?" he asked in a grave tone.

"Dude. She looks like one of those really old photographs. Did you draw that? That's really good, man! You should—"

"I don't care. What about your brother? He's an introvert. We all know each other. I need you to find out if he knows her."

"Nicholas, what is wrong with you? Are you okay?" asked Carl, staring at Nicholas' flustered face. "Use logic here. My brother would not know this girl. He would have to be really old and he's only like twenty-seven."

Nicholas fell silent for a few moments. "You have to give this to him. I need to know or it's going to kill me."

"I'll tell you what. He wrote this program to aggregate databases of graveyards. He's kind of a morbid guy that way. Anyway, I'll ask him if he can find this girl's name. What is it?"

"Emily."

"Emily...?"

"I don't know."

"Then I can't make any promises."

Nicholas' parents burst in to the comic shop as if they had run down the street. His mother breathed a sigh of relief. Dr. Larici followed moments after. "Nicholas... we're going to need to take you to the hospital for some tests."

Days later, Nicholas received an email from someone named thewelcomer@saran.net. He was out of the hospital, finally, and had had some peace of mind, if he dared to admit it. Emily's death was fading away like a memory. Maybe it was just a dream. Nicholas opened the email from a stranger.

Inside was a short note and two attachments.

"Nicholas,

I thank you for what you have done for me. Since I found out you exist, I have gone back to this world for the first time in years. The first file attached is what you gave me and the second, a gift to you. I

hope you remember to go back once in a while.

— R"

The first attachment was a scan of his portrait of Emily.

The second attachment was what looked like a satellite photo of a gravestone on which was drawn an arrow pointing to a name. Underneath were latitude and longitude coordinates, but Nicholas didn't have to look them up to guess where it was. He read the thinly carved name on the solitary stone:

Emily Von Brandt.

Her voice echoed in his head, and he realized he had drifted into a daydream while staring at his computer. "Nicholas!"

He stared at her. "What?"

"I loved the drawing. Rob showed me."

"I know."

"You two are from the same time. So lucky."

Nicholas laughed, but then frowned. "You didn't have to give up."

Emily paused for a moment. "...You're right."

Nicholas was not expecting that answer. But she continued, "I get to write all I want here. But for whom? Only for us folk. For you, it's only the beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"Of making the connections. The connections between the living. The land of the dead is nothing without the imagination of the living. And..."

"And what?" Nicholas asked as she trailed off.

"And saving people's lives." Nicholas heard a familiar guitar sound coming from the porch swing outside.

*Change of Season**By Anna Girgenti*

Lay at the bottom of the sledding hill  
 in my backyard  
     with the rain  
 soaking through your shirt  
     and freezing,

Eyes froze shut as dad lifts me up,  
 hurls me from his shoulders into the deep  
 end of our swimming pool like something  
 taken or received,  
 a cannonball—  
 Caterwaul: to utter long-drawn, wailing cries,  
 especially in the night.

Two shadows dance in the rain  
 to show their good faith  
 and to help keep  
     the peace.  
 Father and I,  
 Fledgling: a young bird just able to fly

Leman: a sweetheart or lover  
 on sweltering summer days  
 or slamming car door  
     one January night.

But  
 bearded characters stay bearded,  
     and he never flinched  
 intradermal: within the layers of the skin,  
 carved into my  
 cranium and  
 tightening around  
 my throat— begging to save  
 whatever is left of the little girl in a  
     snow white costume  
     laying at the bottom of the sledding hill,  
 White quartz split into  
 innumerable  
 fragments.

*The Wolf and I**By Anna Girgenti*

The wolf meets me every Sunday  
     under a lamp post,  
 midnight  
 we take off our shoes and  
     run across this  
 abandoned city.  
 He undresses me,  
 “animals don’t wear clothes.”  
 I wrap myself around his  
 wasteland soul.

    The wolf holds a knife to my throat.  
     I shave his fur to kiss his scars.  
 Monday morning I wake  
 to find these  
 bruises spilled on my milk white skin  
 these bruises  
 swirl under a thin ice  
     hidden galaxy—  
 windows to the universe inside of me.

“Maybe”,  
     but no,  
 dreams don’t leave  
 marks like  
 these.  
 Last night,  
     the wolf picked me up in his mouth  
     and carried me to the highest rooftop.  
 I am foaming at all openings, I swear  
 I am  
 awake now  
 When you love a dirty thing  
 he eats you from the inside out, Child  
 he will show you  
 what you taste like.

## *Contention*

*By Brenda Suhan*

Sitting up at night I adore your cowlick  
 persisting in a life like a caged  
 animal is what I call you when I hear about that  
 girl you're the love of my life you  
 say the worst things to me at the best  
 times like these I remember why I  
 love how you never bother to call when you're  
 late at night I feel your heart  
 beat me down when I can no longer stand.

Stuck between a rock and a hard  
 place my hand next to your  
 elbow my way through the chaos  
 tangling up my fingers through your  
 hair stands up on my arms when you  
 lie on top of me thawing my blood  
 pulsing through my veins in a blind  
 rage so passionate I can't uncoil myself from your comforting  
 embrace of demons that begin to suffocate my soul.

## *What To Do When The Astroid Comes*

*By Andrew Southern*

The asteroid was hurling toward Earth. Every small, insignificant person looked up at the sky or at the news and knew the end was near. The countdown to extermination rang through the air like wedding bells in a church. They had succumbed to the unfortunate result of time. An asteroid. Some took a moment to reflect on the countless times throughout their short lives that the end was thought to be near. There was the nuclear war scare of 2020, the flooding crisis of '35 and (of course) the Third World War. All, however, had been false scares, if you will. All had been benign compared to this giant, hurling horror moving toward Earth at an alarming rate. They had taken solace in the fact that this was truly, undeniably the end. No more false scares. They were no longer afraid. The looting stopped soon after the announcement. All that was left was to decide how one would spend their final moments. How will they celebrate their lives?

For Johnny Segal, an accountant from Manhattan, deciding how he would spend his final moments was simple. You see, Johnny Segal was somewhat of a paranoid individual. He feared just about everything that may eventually pose a threat: Bees, potholes, even angry ex girlfriends. So, as a result, he had meticulously planned out how he would enjoy his final moments should Armageddon arrive. He thought through every moment of his life to a T, and how it ended was going to be no different. The moment it was announced that the collective governments' of the world had failed to neutralize the threat, Johnny gathered his "last day kit" (as he called it) from the largest drawer in his work desk and made his way briskly from his work office on the 55th floor of a Manhattan high rise to his favorite place in the world: his home office. A surprising spot to adore in the sort of way Johnny adored it; usually this sort of adoration was reserved for grand parks or great cities or even monuments. Johnny Segal, however, was happy with the smallest of things. He ran through the streets of a now manic Manhattan and finally arrived at home. Johnny locked the door behind him and arrived in his office. He was not scared. He felt at peace knowing that he would no longer be forced to worry about bills or work or annoying neighbors. Somehow the knowledge that from that moment on until the last breath he took nothing would matter brought him an overwhelming feeling of relief. It was as if this final moment was a sort of celebration for himself. He was celebrating making it this long in life without throwing himself off a bridge. He placed his "last day kit" on the desk and opened it. A photo of his deceased wife and children, a glass and a fifth of Jack Daniels Whiskey. Nothing grandiose or dramatic. It was the little things for Johnny. He carefully placed the photo on the desk after clearing it off completely. Johnny then placed the fifth of whiskey and the glass on the desk. The countdown still rang through the air reverberating in his head. He didn't mind anymore, though. He poured himself a

tall glass of whiskey. No need for a two finger rule or arbitrary measurements like shots anymore. He poured as much as he liked. Johnny clinked his glass against the photo and took a long, fulfilling sip. His eyes now moved from his family to the window in front of him. You see, the office was not his favorite place for any other reason other than the view out the window. He could see the entire city before him. The sun was no longer visible as he could see the hurling asteroid from his window, as well. It blocked his view of the sun which didn't bother him much. He sipped silently to himself and watched. He watched the hysteria of the streets below hush to a sort of collective moment of acceptance. There was no reason to be scared anymore. A smile danced across Johnny's face as the asteroid grew larger and larger until...

Samantha Rosemary, however, celebrated her final moments in a much different way. As Johnny Segal made his way out of his work office towards his home, Samantha was rushing to the home of her lover, Ronald Smith. The moment she had heard the announcement blare out of her iPhone 15's emergency alarm system she knew she wanted to be nowhere but in her lover's arms. As the mass hysteria took over the streets of Manhattan, Samantha moved calmly but with a fast pace. She knew she must remain above the barbaric state of many of her fellow men and women. She had been raised to be a proper lady, after all. That's not to say that she always followed those teachings, but in this moment she felt her mother's teachings fit. So, she continued down the sidewalks as people around her looted, fought and mated in the streets. She knew where she had to be and was forced to turn down several handsome gentlemen callers eager for one last moment of ecstasy along her way. Unlike Johnny Segal (who at this moment passed swiftly by her on his way home) Samantha Rosemary had never thought about the end before. She hated to think of death as it depressed her and seemed to only detract from the experience of living. She hadn't thought about this moment once in her life despite the constant threats of its arrival in the past. She always remained focused on the present. This is why it surprised her when she so certainly knew what she wanted to be doing in her final moments. Without a single bit of planning or foresight, she knew she wanted to be in Ronald Smith's arms. This is why she felt overjoyed with happiness when she finally arrived home. She had walked nearly 20 blocks to get there. She walked inside just as the moment of hushed acceptance fell upon the crowds in the street and knew she would have only a few moments to be with her lover before it was over. A few moments was enough for Samantha. She ran inside as the asteroid drew closer and hollered with all of her might for her lover to come to her and embrace her one last time. Ronald Smith, however, was nowhere to be found. Samantha checked every room before accepting this to be fact. Tears immediately ran down her face as she wondered where he was spending his final moments. She also wept for herself. She wished she had made this moment more meaningful. She fell to the floor and wished she hadn't wasted her final moments of life on such a futile pursuit. As she wept, the asteroid drew closer and closer until...

Moments after the announcement had been made and Johnny Segal had packed his "last day kit" and Samantha had began her journey home, Ronald Smith left his home. Yes, he knew very well that Samantha Rosemary would be on her way there, but he had other plans for his last breath. He had

other plans for what would be the last thing he saw. Of course he felt much anguish due to the knowledge that he would be deserting Samantha and denying her one final embrace, but when Armageddon arrives every person must think for themselves. He knew he had no time to pine over her any longer. This moment would be his and his only and he wouldn't let her take it away. So, with a heavy heart, he ran from his home to which Samantha was en route, and went instead to Washington Square Park in East Village. You see, Ronald did not love Samantha in the same sort of way she loved him. It was true that he enjoyed her company and very much enjoyed making love to her, but he knew that he couldn't see himself being stuck in that home which he dreaded so much with a woman whose company merely contented him for his last moment. No, Ronald had other plans. The countdown rang in his ears in much the same way as they did in Johnny's at this very moment as he arrived at his destination. His chosen burial sight. He looked around at the hysterical men and women around him as they let out all of their inner anguish, anger and confusion on one another. He saw a couple making love on a bench, an old man hugging a wild pigeon, two children crying as their parents beat one another, letting out years of pent up aggression on one another. There were no longer any rules. Ronald Smith continued to search the park desperately for one person in particular. He knew there was a strong chance that she would not be there, contrary to Samantha's incorrect belief that Ronald would certainly be at home. Ronald, however, was willing to take the chance. Unlike Samantha, he would still find peace in the knowledge that who he thought to be his true lover did not feel the same way about him. He continued to search for her hoping that she had the same thought as him. This was where they had always planned to meet if they ever built up the guts to leave their respective spouses. He desperately hoped that this was they day they did just that. It was just then that he saw her. She was nearly naked, lying motionless in the grass. A man stood over her motionless body, disrobing himself. Ronald sprinted to her rescue and punched the man so hard, with a fist filled with a life's worth of passion, that he died instantly. The bone in his nose had launched up into his brain. Ronald fell to his lover's side. She had left her husband for him. She did love him. The moment of hushed acceptance fell upon the crowd just then as Ronald curled up next to his beloved. She was dead. She would never know that he chose her. His moment, much like Samantha's, had been taken away from him. He did not find peace like he thought he would. He only found anger. He clutched her body and shouted her name: Jordan Johnson. He shouted and shouted as the asteroid drew closer and closer, until...

Jordan Johnson was a simple woman. She was completely content with a simple life with simple things and simple outcomes. So, it's no surprise that when the announcement had been made and the countdown had begun that she chose a simple way to end her life. Just as Johnny Segal was fleeing his work office and Samantha was running home to Ronald and Ronald was running to her, she chose the nearest bench and took a seat. She had no need to run. She just so happened to be in Washington Square Park taking a walk at the time. Oddly enough, Ronald Smith hadn't even crossed her mind. She just wanted to spend her last moments sitting with herself and looking at the sky. She wanted to see the Asteroid as it crashed into the place she

called home and die with that last, final image in her head. A sort of absolute image. The image of it all ending clearly and definitely right before her eyes. She stared and relaxed in reflective bliss for only a few moments before the hysteria set in. People screaming, crying, looting. A loud scream is what first drew her attention away from the sky and toward the people around her. It had come from a young woman who was being beaten by her husband right in front of her own children. The sight horrified her and she tore her eyes away and back to the sky. Jordan thought that if she could keep herself aimed upward, she could avoid the hysteric mass around her. She did not want their chaos to ruin her final peaceful moment. It did. A man grabbed her from behind --he was able to sneak up on her on account of her staring at the sky-- and threw her to the ground. She screamed and pleaded with the man to let her be and to let her mourn the loss of her own life, of all of their lives, in her own way. The man wouldn't listen. He began to kick her and beat her with a branch he found under an old tree. As she lay on the ground, her clothes being ripped from her body, she looked to her side to see equally brutal chaos all around her. People didn't know what to do with themselves. This news had left them in such confusion that they broke into mass hysteria. She closed her eyes as the man did to her what he set out to do. Tears streamed down her face. This was the only time she thought of Ronald. She wished that it was him instead of this brutish man. She wished he was there to stop the man, but Ronald was still two blocks away. The man finished and gave her one final smack to the head with the branch. The last thing she heard before passing would be the loud countdown. The same one that Ronald heard and that Johnny heard. The same one that Samantha heard as she arrived at home to an empty house. The same one every one heard. It was then that Ronald spotted her corpse and had his final moments.

As Samantha wept and Ronald screamed, Johnny smiled to himself. He was one of the few who was able to truly find peace in the way that they all wished they had. It seems that one must have already lost everything and everyone important in his life to truly find peace in the end, for Samantha and Ronald and Jordan all lost something in their final moments. They all continued to lose right up until the end. Johnny, however, celebrated making it through that pain already. He smiled. As he smiled, the asteroid outside of his window grew larger and larger and larger until...

They all finally found peace at last.

## OUT

By Braden Spratt

I'm out tonight.  
 I'm out With the chilling sidewalk beneath me and a frigid sky above me and  
 a rags draped on me.  
 With a world that never stops to say "hi" moving around me and a fucked  
 soul within me.  
 With: a Used Body and a Fractured Mind and a Drained Heart and Blue Toes  
 and Achy Bones No Home No One No Home No Choice and No Shower No  
 Home No Pride No Place No Peace No Home  
 The only possession I keep is hope. And a sick feeling whispers in my brain  
 and tells me  
 I'm out tonight.

-Sophie Anne Wiczorek

*Wasn't there a rock there yesterday? I'm pretty sure there was, what asshole would move that rock? It'd been there for a week. Three more steps and I should pass the tar patch that looks like that jumpy animal from Australia. What were those fucking things called? He wondered to himself if it has an infant inside its pouch. Did the jackoff that laid that do it on purpose or was it an accident, or maybe... the government had placed the kangaroo there to distract him. He kept his eyes on the ground because there are cameras everywhere, and if I don't keep my eyes down they might get my picture, and if they do that they might be able to clone me. Goose pimples began spreading over the course of his skin and he began to rub his hands over his arms to try and flatten the painful pin pricks because it's so fucking cold out. A series of soft thumps resonated in his ears and he saw a large stone skittering for about four feet on the cracked asphalt in front of him; obviously, someone moved it there to make me kick it on his way to The Bridge. He picked up the stone and placed it in his right pocket with an unused bus ticket because they could try to take it from me for good. He moved his hands over the rough areas and appreciated the smooth and pushed down the sharp spots. He felt no pain; feeling had left his hands. He gripped the stone in his pocket. It was just large enough that it did not allow his thumb and middle finger to touch. It was just small enough that it didn't cause any unseemly bump or hinder him.*

A jogger dressed in neons rounded the corner of the block ahead of him and faced him. The chord from her headphones bounced in rhythm with her pony-tail, which shook like the pompoms his little sister had waved at the football games when they were little and his sister had smiled and hugged him and laughed when she saw him and hadn't been afraid to talk to him. Jogger wore sunglasses even though it was cloudy out and kept her head locked forward. Jogger's neon orange jacket disturbed him. He tried to keep his eyes pointed to the ground but it kept drawing them to it like a moth to a

*mother fucking flame.* Jogger kept a crisp cadence. Her head remained locked. He stopped moving. The flame kept getting closer and he realized *this isn't fucking fair. The flame doesn't move to the moth.* His eyes became hollow orbs and his pupils dilated as a stock of epinephrine was released from the adrenal glands just above the kidneys and into his bloodstream. *It's cheating. Flames don't move to the moth. I'm not a moth! I'm not a moth! I'm not a moth!* "I'M NOT A MOTH, YOU CUNT!" He took a step toward Jogger and raised his wings. If asked, Jogger would have agreed he wasn't a moth. She didn't see a moth lunge at her--she saw a man that had more in common with an untamed pitbull than an average passerby. Jogger received her own stock of adrenaline and the tempo of her beats along the asphalt increased to a rapid staccato. Within moments Jogger had turned the next corner. She'd left behind a swirl of breath in the winter air that mixed with his and formed a romantic image that someone with the time to think about romantic images probably would have found very meaningful. He gave it no thought. He continued to The Bridge.

He hated going to The Bridge. Brooklyn sat across the water and Manhattan screamed behind him. Scores of people milled about him in cheap flannel, baggy sweats, and WalMart gloves that had been handed to them the night before by some soft-breasted lesbian in her mid fifties with short white hair wearing a chunky scarf and a heavy ash coat she'd had for twenty years because it was reliable and she didn't "have a need for a new one with so many people out there that had so much less." She would roll down the window of the Prius (she owned because fuel efficiency and protecting the environment were passions of hers--second only to helping those "abandoned by our community" and Downton Abbey) and coo lightly in a voice that wanted to sound like it had compassion, "Excuse me, I'm \_\_\_\_\_ with the Winter Warriors. Are you out tonight?" If You said "yes" she'd get out of the car and shake You's hand and You would almost think she was greeting a friend she'd bumped into at the Starbucks You'd gotten kicked out of the week before. Then she'd ask if You wanted a ride. You would proly say no (but if You said yes she'd take You to a gym at the elementary school where You attended as a child and have thirty beds in six rows of five, or five rows of six depending on how you look at it, where You could pass the night without worrying about the cold but instead worrying if the person in the bunk next to You is going to steal the garbage bag of items You had managed to scrape together) and then get asked if You needed blankets or clothes. You would get to touch the blankets and see which texture You preferred. You would have to decide if the fuzzy puce gloves went well with his or her skin tone and had a mature enough look, or if You should instead try the sleeker black ones because they had a classic look that wouldn't go out of style.

"Hey, Charlie. Fucking cold, isn't it?" a voice called and brought him back. He turned and saw her. He twisted his head away and quickened his pace forward.

"Charlie, slow down!"

Charlie slowed down but he didn't turn his head. She was carrying the same blue backpack she had carried in high school with glittery pink letters SWA monogrammed on the back pocket. A small grey mutt followed Sophie as she walked, led by a thin rope. When Charlie met Sophie for the

first time a few days ago he couldn't help thinking about touching the poppies blooming on her cheeks *and I bet it would feel so good to slide--* "Hey, Sophie," he said as she approached his side.

She grabbed his left arm and put it around her shoulder and slid her right arm around his waist. They walked in rhythm and became a single unit in the scores of people that waited for the food truck to arrive. She smelled like the girlslocker room when they changed after volleyball practice and he'd accidentally walked in and immediately been pelted by towels and screams. She ignited a sensation in him to write a verse of poetry, but she made him think *roses. No, dumb fuck. Roses are too used, she looks like dawn on Easter morning. Or her smile feels like a clear fall day and someone's getting married.* But nothing seemed good enough. "Think, fucktard."

"Huh?"

*Stay by me.* "Nothing, just, maybe we shouldn't walk around together."

"Stick by me, Charlie. I could use a man around here. Too many cocksuckers with 'fuck me' eyes on them. But no one messes with Charlie."

"That Charlie's a fucking maniac." said the man sitting, leaning closer to an unidentifiable form under a cocoon of blankets, scarves and jackets. He watched Charlie walk with the girl by his side. "He got fired from Home Depot two years before for not being able to carry packages over fifty pounds and because his eyes can't open much more than a crack. Everyone knows he's the craziest motherfucker out here," he pointed at Charlie and leaned even closer. The cocoon gave no response. "Shit, my balls have been clenched up against me non stop for a week. But yeah, that crazy shit will stand yelling at a wall for an hour and convince himself that the grocer at Walgreens has secretly taken his fingerprint so she can place them at the site of a bank robbery. One day I was talking to him, just shooting the shit. Scariest damn conversation of my life. He kept his hands tangled in his hair the entire time and kept moaning on about the systematic killing of the propitarians by the borswazin or something. I figure they're from whatever batshit universe his mind lives in. Well he kept yelling about it then started punching the curb until his knuckles went bloody. Then he fell asleep. He didn't lie down. He didn't even close his eyes. I could see they were bloodshot and yellowed through the slits like he had been giving a personal screening of Hell. He was just gone. Fucking crazy, but it looks like the new girl doesn't know it yet. She chose the wrong protector." He looked over, the cocoon didn't move. "Hey, better get up, looks like the foods here." The cocoon stayed.

The collective moved suddenly into a singular mass as a large white van pulled in with the words BROOKLYN BRIDGE FOOD PROJECT.

A man stepped out of the van wearing a \$109 dollar North Face jacket. The light bounced off his hair which was like wheat, being blown in the wind and then frozen in time, always bending but never breaking. The clouds had moved and the sun had reached the time of day when it begins to put a hazy yellow line around the border of each profile. "Everyone, get lined up quick. Sorry we're late. We gotta get everyone through before the sun starts to set. Let's go!"

Four like-haired boys between the ages of thirteen and nineteen got out of the van with boxes full of paper bags that contained a PB&J, a Capri

Sun, and a small non recyclable bag of Bite-Size Oreos. Two long plastic tables materialized and moments later an assembly line of beneficence was established. There was a station for food, a station for bus tickets, and a station for handing out clothing. Charlie took his place in line with Sophie still on his arm. When she turned his chest pressed into his. *...not big but I bet they're warm and could give a fill up my palm.* The line milled down quickly and soon Sophie was at the first station.

"Hello, I don't think I've seen you here before," the man said as he handed her a bag.

"Yeah, I'm fresh in off the bus."

"Where are you from?"

"I came up from Atlanta."

"Why come up here?"

*Why the hell is he asking so many questions?*

"I thought people might like my work better up here. I write and draw. People weren't too welcoming down there."

"Are you out tonight?"

"In a couple ways."

The man squinted.

"Yes, I'll be out tonight"

"Who's holding up the line?!" Yelled a former nurse, ten people back.

*Who the fuck is talking to her like that?*

"It'll be mighty cold tonight"

"Isn't it every night?"

*Why does she keep talking to him? Is he undercover?*

"Fucking move!" called out a veteran, eight people back.

"DON'T YELL AT HER!"

The crowd under the bridge went quiet. Sophie looked at Charlie appreciatively.

"If you want to go in stick around, we can drive you to Providence House."

"Nah, I've been in one of those places before. I'll take my chances out here."

The line began to move and the cars continued to hum above them. "Charlie, good to see you again. Here you go." He handed him a baggie of food.

"Thank you."

"Actually, this is my final project to be an Eagle Scout," Charlie overheard the boy half his age telling Sophie. "We've been doing it all winter."

"That's so cool."

*No one does something for nothing.*

"I actually have one of my pieces in my bag, if you'd like to read it." She slid her backpack down her shoulder. The young scout's eyes traveled from her shoulder to her breast to her hips. Charlie saw him wanting to *rip off her shirt and plow her there on the table. Right in front of him. He gets her and everything else. No, fuck, no, no NO NO NO.* Charlie took the edge of the table and lifted it in the same motion a barbell curl is performed. Twenty-eight scarves, thirty-six hats, and forty-nine pairs of miscellaneous sized mittens fell to the floor as the young man took three terrified steps back and

Charlie took three enraged steps toward him and grabbed the two fistfuls of his \$80 Eddie Bauer slim-fit winter jacket with the detachable hood.

"Charlie!"

"Charlie, step back. Let go, Charlie. Drew, get out your phone. Call the police."

"Charlie, let go."

*"Charlie. We'll have you tonight. Your ass is ours."*

Charlie let out a yell and pushed the young man into the van. Then he turned and ran. Sophie followed, pulling the mutt along behind her. They ran along Pearl Street and kept heading south until they were passing Wall Street and running by the waterfront on the piers. Sophie dropped the leash but the small mutt followed closely behind.

"Charlie slow down. Stop for a second."

He turned and looked at her and saw that *you're glowing. And when I see you glow I feel like I'm glowing.* He stepped closer to her until there was only a foot between them, then turned and walked to a bench overlooking the river. She followed and sat next to him. The mutt barked quietly and sniffed at their heels. They sat in silence until the sun had set and then they sat for a couple hours more. Their faces shone with light that reflected off the icy water which reflected the light of the dead moon that was in turn reflecting light from an indifferent sun.

"Charlie, I'm worried for you, I'm afraid *you might never know how I feel.*"

"Can you say that again?"

*"I think I love you. And I'm afraid you might not always be in control. We should try and find-"* she was cut off as Charlie grabbed her head and pulled his mouth onto hers. *Her mouth locked into his and he felt her respond to his touch while she tried to push him off of her. Their chests had created a cage for her arms and she could only shove weakly away from him. She pulled her head back and he followed her and continued to kiss her passionately as the city melted away around them.* He pulled back and smiled at her.

"Stop! Charlie, let me *keep you with me. I'll put my hand on top of yours as it rests on the gear shift in our car. We'll STOP! HELP!*" He tried to kiss her again and she threw her head forward into his and heard a small crack that could have been a twig snapping in half but was his nose breaking.

He look a step back, stunned. "You too?"

She turned to run and he grabbed her arm and pulled her back into him. He understood the consequences of this choice when he felt her left heel dig into his left foot. He still had a tight hold around her chest as she struggled and the mutt yipped at his heels. He reached into his pocket with his other hand and grabbed the rock. He brought it down directly over her right ear. She stopped struggling.

He carried Sophie over to a bench and laid her down, faced away from the street. *This is my fault I let her close they're all in it together no one can be close I should move on.* The mutt followed him for a block before he kicked it. It yelped sharply as it ran down an alley and away from him. He walked along the pier and rubbed the ticket in his pocket.

*Loss of Value**By Wolfgang Gaidis*

The bumblebee used to love the flowers.  
 Their smells and tastes gave him power.  
 He'd buzz on and on, here to there,  
 Carrying honey, and pollen to share.

He'd get drunk off nothing but the fumes,  
 The colors of petals like silk from looms.  
 The nectar sweeter than even his honey,  
 Gold and pure, bright as if sunny.

A warmth of love filled head and soul,  
 His mind and heart forever stole.  
 Or so he thought, until one day  
 When a toxic pollen flowed his way.

The flowers were no longer sweet.  
 The nectar once golden, now tar and peat.  
 The pedals that once had been so clear,  
 Now, not ever, could he go near.

The bumblebee no longer buzzed,  
 And all his being lost what it was.  
 An essence pure as honeyed gold,  
 Had once and for all been forced to fold.

Saddened and lost forevermore,  
 He shuddered cold down to his core.  
 That toxic pollen did not go away.  
 And the bee remains silent, to this day.

*The Final Reflection**By Anna Girgenti*

Dear Father,

I fell in love with a man who refuses to see  
 a ray of light  
 from the fire you set in me,  
 but he smells the smoke and wrinkles his nose.  
 Ask him about me, he becomes a salesman in the department store  
 on sixth and Michigan describing the last piece of lingerie  
 “sexy and cheap”  
 “last of its kind”  
 “get it before it’s gone”

19 years now, and I have not been  
 called  
 “beautiful” by a salesman

Women  
 in our family do not wait on the top shelf,  
 collect dust in the folds of their lace,  
 taken down on the weekends  
 shaken out, washed, and  
 refolded  
 maybe hung on pink hangers with ribbons  
 someone  
 will like it enough to buy it

Women—  
 to the horror of the store manager,  
 fell from the shelf and  
 sprouted limbs

Father,  
 Think of me sweating under sheets,  
 morning light  
 14th story window  
 my body, what’s left of it, dead on top of his,  
 just a  
 frayed piece of silk resting on his hip.

He yawns, reaches down into my throat until his fingers  
 brush against my ribs and he smiles, “does that tickle?”

Father,  
 I find your face in the shape of the bruises

all over me,  
 there you are on my neck and  
 between my thighs,  
 collarbone kisses  
 like butterfly footprints from forehead to groin

Muffled screams, I try to  
 pull his arm from my mouth  
 so that I can speak,

but his fingers now wrap around  
 a single rib inside of me, and  
 it snaps

Father,  
 he pulls this thing out of me  
 by the mouth, my mouth  
 doorway to Eden

pits of the ocean shake with thunder  
 earth cracks from the inside  
 hands of God  
 reach down into the lingerie store and  
 down onto my blood-soaked bed by the window  
 and down into my aching  
 body

and this man says, "it was mine from the start"  
 shakes the fist that holds my rib and  
 the door shuts behind him

out of the garden of lace  
 apple-red,  
 dry core,  
 Your daughter.

## *The Fifth Dream*

*By Alyssa Morrison*

I'm almost afraid to tell you this one. You're definitely going to tell me I'm crazy, which, by now, I guess I can't pretend isn't true. I dreamed I was sitting in my living room. It was getting dark outside. There was a storm coming, I could sense it. The sky was turning gray as the clouds rolled in, and the leaves were getting swept up in little whirlwinds in the gutter. The living room was getting dark, but I didn't care. I didn't turn on any lights. I knew they wouldn't work. Everyone was gone. In my dream, I was the last person in the world. I don't know where everyone else went. It's not like the streets were littered with vestiges of the apocalypse, they were just empty. I was enjoying being alone, and I was going to enjoy this storm.

When it was too dark in my living room, I had been sitting facing my fire place, I got up and went to the front door. The storm door was cold when I touched it, and my handprint was in the negative space of the condensation when I pulled my hand away. Suddenly, I realized that I shouldn't be watching the storm from inside. Then I wouldn't see it very well. I opened the door and stepped outside, barefoot. There was no trash or broken bottles on the street to hurt me. The wind was chilly, but a good, refreshing chilly, and it didn't feel as strong to me as it looked to be to the leaves. The air smelt and tasted fresher than it ever had before. In the distance, I could hear the rumbling of thunder, but it hadn't started raining above me yet. It smelled like rain, though, the best and purest rain smell ever. I was just standing in the street, waiting for the storm to come when I realized, I would be the only witness to it. When it was all over, I would be the only one who had seen it, and been able to process its significance and power. Nature was putting on a little show, just for me.

Then I saw someone. I don't remember whether it was a man or a woman, but it was definitely an adult. It was wandering, bemused, down the street, and then it saw me. The thunder was closer now, and the rain was going to start any minute, so when it saw me, it came toward me. It wasn't running, it wasn't in a hurry, but it was walking quickly, like it hadn't seen another person in a while, and was excited to see me.

I was disappointed. I had hoped that I really was the only one left. I didn't want to share the storm with anyone, so when it got to me and reached out to shake my hand I grabbed its head and I started to squeeze. It wasn't like a movie. I didn't get superhuman strength and break its skull. I just squeezed its temples with my thumbs until its eyes rolled back in its head. That, I remember vividly. Strange, isn't it, what you choose to remember? I couldn't tell you whether this person was a man or a woman, but I distinctly remember the satisfaction for seeing its eyes flutter and spin upward, just the whites and the veins and the arteries visible. But I couldn't stop there, no. The storm was coming and I had to know it was dead, so I dug my thumb-

nails into its skin. The blood didn't spurt when I broke the skin, so I pushed deeper, until I could be sure I had hit an artery. I hit its skull and never got any impressive streams of blood, so it must have been dead already.

My hands looked strange, with blood covering just my thumbs, but the rain would wash that away, so I let it fall. I turned around so I wouldn't have to look at it, and there was a lightning flash and a thunderclap right overhead, and then the rains came, like a spectacular breach in the firmament. I was the only one watching this storm, the only one who could see it. It was mine and I had made it so.

And I know, now, that that's wrong, and that was a crazy person dream, but in the dream it felt so good.

## *An Indifference*

*By Charlie Garavaglia*

There could be such power in my words—it could crackle from my fingertips as I strike the keyboard, shaking the very foundations of this new world order we've created for ourselves: waking the tired, the half-asleep, those who close their eyes to all but their electronic days; the people who shout into megaphones pointed backwards to hear the ringing of their own voice in their ears.

I could do it. I could change it.

But I don't.

I stand apart, lucidly mute, indifferent. The electricity from my fingers dampens and dissipates into yet another dopamine chase of digital highs and lights of red, blue, and green.

Later, much later, as the high fades and fatigue replaces, I go to bed, with vague thoughts of incompleteness crowding just beyond my perception.

My head lies upon the pillow—the current is almost gone now, barely enough for a statically charged emotion—and my neurons ready themselves for their electrochemical dance, chaotic and cleansing and devoid of meaning.

And yet and yet and yet and yet—I can't help but think:  
They dream of what may have been.