



2019
THREADS

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Threads is a journal of student writing and art published by the English, Foreign Languages and English as a Second Language Department at Hudson Valley Community College Troy, New York.

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“The Great Hills” by Akbar Reid

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**Be bold.
Be a Viking.**

Message from the Editors

We would like to thank all the students who submitted their work to Threads this year. We received many quality submissions, and we continue to read with pleasure the enthusiasm and creativity each submission presents. Of course, all pieces have merit, and we would like to publish everything submitted, but the limitations of space will simply not allow it.

It is important to note that Threads reflects works that are not necessarily perfect in their format and composition, but exhibit insight, creativity, social awareness, and a unique perspective. These works—of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and visual art—reflect the range of experience, culture, and imagination of the Hudson Valley Community College student. The editors relish the opportunity to travel and explore the territory each new issue stakes out.

Every year we are extremely pleased to highlight the exceptional work of the students at Hudson Valley Community College. Please plan your submission for next year.

Please submit your work to Threads electronically. Visit us at <http://clubs.hvcc.edu/threads> for more information.

Happy reading!

– Threads editors

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La Piazza

Leno Sorriento

I twisted the glass knob and let the low pressured water splash onto my face. The brisk water was refreshing after a hot summer's day. I stepped out of the tub onto the marble floor and finished freshening up. I threw on the finer clothes I had brought in my suit case and sprayed myself with a little cologne. I was eager to be on my way and become a part of the evening entertainment. My excitement increased as I started to stroll down the street. My heart beat was steady and there was a warm feeling in my chest. I was ready to celebrate, even though nothing had been accomplished.

The road stretched out like a Hollywood red carpet replaced by cobblestone and pockets of soft yellow light showering from green posts. I passed other celebrities along the way. We greeted each other with optimistic salutes and warm friendly faces. Looking out toward the horizon, I could see the sky tucked behind the silhouette of the rolling mountain side. The moon was getting ready to pop out from the dark covers to join the party, while throwing out the star shaped confetti in a silent spectacle.

I finished my walk down the runway and the air grew sweeter as the altitude carried me higher to my destination. I began to hear the speckled conversation and wild screams of children from inside. In front of me was a large brick soccer stadium. The stadium lights were dim, but the energy of the players radiated their own light. Dozens of kids zipped back and forth from goal posts made of stair railings and tree trunks. Yelling, laughing, and cheering each other on, the trance their excitement created was contagious. Parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles all fill the benches around the mini gladiator arena like spectators in the bleachers. They reminisce about their prime years and talk about the fond memories they created in their youth. Their train of thought was partitioned by boys fetching the ball that rolled under their seat.

Older teens nestled up in the shadows of the far corners of the plaza to gossip and smoke cigarettes. They don't want to be heard using colorful language and seen indulging in front of their elders. Everyone was well

dressed for a grand night out at the heart of the little Italian village. The girls wore their summer skirts, adorned and powdered up. Boys wore slacks, button down shirts, and their hair was purposefully pushed to the side of their heads.

A small café stood hugged between more brick and concrete buildings at another corner of the plaza. It was the scene of a New York City jazz club, lit with decorative strings of mellow orange lights and full of men playing cards and drinking. The voices among the conversations were raspy and gritty because of the smoke filled lungs that pushed the air. The smell of the fresh mountains no longer floated on the air but was replaced with the guilty pleasures of coffee, warm pastries, and tobacco. Instead of smooth jazz, people gathered together to sing the beautiful melodies of the Neapolitan folk songs. No matter where I looked everyone found different ways to laugh and celebrate.

Lateral of the plaza stood the old Duke's palace. Staring at its massive stone walls and brilliant black iron gate beneath a magnificent arch, I now entered a royal ball. I imagined the Duke standing behind one of the weathered window frames watching his guests.

The children no longer played soccer but danced elegantly. The trees turned into the tall columns of the ball room and the repeated brick patterns to polished marble. It was visual history and had no better place to be displayed than where the town's soul survived through the years. A history everyone that comes here is connected to. Drinking from the ancient stone fountain, the water is cold and refreshing, numbing the teeth of the consumer. The kid soccer stars, the rebellious teens and the wise seniors are sharing in on la piazza's vitality that springs forth from the ground into this mighty grail. So strong the cork textured trees bottle up the clear colored wine in the ground, keeping the people from getting too drunk off its invigorating force.

When the numbers grow slim, the plaza loses its animated touch, turning into nothing but a picture frame. It was time I started to trudge back home on the empty moonlit streets. I climbed into bed and the warm humid air captured my attention again. I fell asleep to the sound of howling dogs and the occasional breeze to my face, as I recalled the exciting adventure that was brought to me from a small cradle created among the tall Apennines.

Noire Documentary

Malik Johnson

Expectations of a young black man
How do I show I am not the same?
I can only do what I can

Thanks to the thirteenth, bondage is a ban
But how do I stay out of chains?
Expectations of a young black man

Others tried, they all ran
Am I the one to blame?
I can only do what I can

To prosper in life, that is the plan
Is that right in the brain?
Expectations of a young black man

I feel victim to this hate, I know I am
Can I even claim?
I can only do what I can

This American dream may all be a scam
Should I even feel shame?
Expectations of a young black man

I can only do what I can

Fear: After "Tamed"

by Kyle Pergolino

Harold Scott

Even brave men and women still know the dread
Of the enemy's attack; the thump of mortars,
The whistle of those awful rockets.
Even while reassuring the younger ones
That everything will be alright
One never knows if that is actually the truth.
The night I walked across that patio
Just outside the building we occupied
As office space. He worked in the area with me.
He was a Navy guy. He was going home in a couple weeks.
One, two, three, four, FIVE. Each boom louder
And closer than the one before. I guess he didn't notice.
I had just been standing there, on that patio, had just walked inside.
I was even in PT gear, workout clothes, no body armor.
The last explosion shook the entire place.
Debris fell; dust filled the air, inside and out.
I guess he just didn't notice those shells "walking" in.
Maybe the Navy doesn't teach you that stuff.
Dammit, there was a bunker twenty feet away.
His legs were gone at the knees.
The division surgeon was on duty.
She saved his life, I am told.
I never saw him again.
The dread; should that have been me?
Why wasn't that me?
Was I really supposed to come home?
The never-ending dread, where is home?

We are dreams

Elijah Lacy

We are dreams
dreams only those with my complexion can grasp but specks of my
complexity.

For we are dreams that all of our predecessors had at night waiting
wantonly for some change.

We are dreams, that every black boy and girl had hoped for when they
grew up living in that soft, white cage.

For we are dreams that no cotton or common white man can say unto us
we don't have dreams when our dreams are so vivid that even colorblind
can't deny that even shackles are breakin'.

We are dreams
For those that can't have any because some people just hate to see
another color make it,
well that ain't stop us,
For We took action with our own hands and freedom is what we got.

We planted the seeds of our future and this is what it wrought.

We fought for our sons and daughters to live life worth living and now
we have it.

For we are dreams that all my people worked hard for day and night
slaving over
commodity, whipped for their honesty, striped of their dreams.

We are dreams
very manifestation of their cracked hands, bloody back and colly greens.

We are dreams Dr. Martin Luther King would have, we are dreams.

Cold War

Elijah Lacy

In the cold dark night, a mother sat in a chair in front of the door with
a bare expression, solemnly awaiting her son's arrival with pistol in hand

Death like any war has come across her family

First was the father, bravely paving the road to which many akin will
follow, little unbeknownst to him was that his family would follow suit
especially his little boy, he'd used to say to his kids, "Hey, when I get
back, how about we go get some ice cream from the store, that sound
good." The father died of mortar strike debris, caught in the misfire of
fellow comrades, April 26th 1953

The second, a spry young daughter with hope enough to shine brightest
during the darkest of times, she held the torch that was used for all to see
the paved road, especially her little brother, she used to say to him "you
take care of the house now, and don't stress mom to much okay, she's
doing her best to take care of you so you gotta do the same." She died
whilst nursing the wounded who then betrayed her warm light with
forceful abandon, later shot in the head as to not speak of the wrongs
that have been dealt to her, June 18th 1958

The third, the son whose will and faith neither faltered nor wavered
during the test of time, he was to follow the path his father paved
and guided by his sister's light to victory if not survival, he was the
follower of a righteous course, a being of unforgettable conscience and
understanding

He'd always say to his mom, "Don't fret over this I'll come back, I
promise," while she was pouring out her eyes just for him to stay.
Though shortly after his arrival with his squadron flying over enemy
territory, their plane was struck down by missile barrage. He never came
home, November 11th 1962

And while the mother shuddered in tears and pain in the cold dark
night, she slowly raised her pistol to the side of her head waiting for the
door to open, just to see her son's face once more. When it finally did
open, all she saw was her family, standing there waiting for her to join
them, so she pulled the trigger. Died December 1st 1982.

It was a cold war.

Who Does Not Kill You Makes You Stronger

Hawraa Badawi

In 1991, my country (Iraq) lost the second Gulf war against the states of the International Alliance; however, The United Nations imposed economic sanctions on Iraq. As a result, the Iraqi government imposed economic austerity on the Iraqi people. Unemployment spread, the food become expensive, and the crimes rate rose.

Before that, Iraqi people had been suffering from the remnants of war. Many people lost their beloved, many had their homes destroyed. My family and I suffered from the same circumstances. We struggled to stay alive. This experience taught me to be grateful for what I have and how to appreciate living in peace.

The first year of the economic sanctions was the easiest year in this area because the Iraqi people and my family had food stored. They had stored it before to prepare for the second Gulf War, and they kept it. So, they used their saved food. Although the job opportunities decreased gradually, the consumables' prices became expensive, and the government imposed high taxes, but I continued living a normal life, like, studying in college in Baghdad and paying the college's cost, but in the second year of economic sanctions, the difficulties began!

The second year of the economic sanctions opened the window to a series of challenges and difficulties. This began when I was forced to leave studying in college because the Iraqi government sold the student accommodation, and I didn't have enough money to live in Baghdad, and pay my college's cost. So, I went back to my hometown, Karbala, which was a peaceful, religious city. It had two holy shrines with wonderful Islamic design, which had golden domes shining as a shining sun in the clear sky.

But, when I entered Karbala, I was shocked. Because I saw most of the buildings were destroyed. The dead bodies were in the streets, the blood was painted on the buildings' walls, and the effects of burning and bombing were everywhere, so Karbala looked like a death city. And when I entered my house, I saw all my house furniture was sparse, all cupboards were opened. The clothes were on the ground, the antiques were stolen, in addition to that, the water tank was bombed. So my

house looked like it was hit by an earthquake! But at the same time, I was grateful because all my family members were alive.

In the first couple weeks, I was depressed and shocked. Therefore, I needed the time to recover from the shock. So I spent the weeks praying to God, reading books, and at the same time, I spent all the days sleeping in my room. But in the end, I recognized nothing changes in my life if I didn't change it.

One day, when I woke up in the morning, I just opened my eyes. I felt I had a huge energy to change my life, so I decided to find my project, and so on. My family and I worked together to fix our house to be a sewing lab. Every member in my family had a job.

For example, my mom was a procurement officer, and she bought the fabric and sewing tools. I was the fashion designer, and cut the fabric. My three sisters sewed the clothes, and my father was a marketing officer.

Initially, we found difficulty to sell our products, but gradually, we got good earnings, and our sewing lab became famous. When we had products we couldn't sell there, I changed them to other designs and added to them accessories like embroidery or lace. So we didn't throw anything away; everything had a value, even the small cloth. We converted them to strapless pots and we sold them. Moreover, we hired a dozen workers to help us, and we bought a new big building to use it as a sewing lab. As a result, we became rich and we lived our dream. But, we still lived in our family house, and after we moderated it, bought new modern furniture.

Today, after more than twenty years of working hard and struggling, I feel I am strongest, and I have the power to go ahead, and develop my life, to get my goal, to serve humanity, and to be a calling for peace in the world. In conclusion, I taught to use what I have to reach my goal, and nothing is impossible if I have the determination. Furthermore, I learned to appreciate living in peace.

Free as a Bird

Matthew Sheldon

look at that blue bird up in the sky
just watching him float makes me ask why
what gives him the right to flutter his Wings
to just fly around and bring in the spring
he lives a life so careless and free
I betcha he thinks that he's better than me
he has nobody telling him what he can do
so what gives him the right to fly and be blue
to live his way is something I want
but to just sit here and watch just feels like a taunt
give me a chance that's all that I ask
to live a life free of hard tasks
now I know this seems lazy but my tale won't be tall
if given the chance it would be taken by all
to see him so free just fills me with rage
but I guess you can tell by reading this page
and so still a shall write if you still care
for that blue bird still flying up in the air
I Want to Be Free that's all I can say
even to fly for only one day

i, a jewess

Sophinnian Rich

i want to stop pretending i am safe
the only certain thing in life is death
it would be quicker to not delay it
allow myself to decide my last breath
every window every pane of glass
so quickly broken with no symmetry
this systematic violence has no place
in natures grand kingdom of majesty
this would not be the life in which to stay
if anyone had ever thought to ask
should i wish to see the light of day
if its exposure meant fearing the past
i share the same sun with my enemies
they feel the same warmth gently on their skin
before they come with guns and knives and things
to paint their righteous sunset with our blood
i have never once felt like a child
the closest i will feel to this is now
the evils i have witnessed now seem mild
knowing my people's end is in their vow
what did i do? do we deserve this fate
since i'm stuck here i want to stay alive
its getting harder even more so of late
but damn me 'cause i know i'll never die.

Quiet Paths

Joanna Pennings

Threads 2019

He left. It was a Thursday afternoon, and he left.

There was a silence in the house - the kind of silence that rings in your ears for hours or years. It was as if all time had simply forgotten to tick. The wind blew the leaves but I felt no air across my face. The sun warmed the flowers, but I could not find heat. He left me.

We visited his graveside yesterday morning as the green was just returning to the earth. The dirt pathway was slightly damp and my old tennis shoes sunk in the soil. I knew that I was supposed to be crying. I've been supposed to be crying for the past three months, but for some reason I can't bring myself to tears.

Don't get me wrong I miss him so much it feels like all the oxygen has left my lungs, but I can't cry. The tears just seem old, worn out. Instead, I walked in silence next to my mother, and laid white lilies by the stone said to represent my father. I had looked at all the gravestones each inscribed with separate epitaphs, monuments to those who will never see them. Flowers both intentional and wild decorated the sea of grey and green.

Pale butterflies arrived with the morning paying homage to the long past and keeping the flowers company. These winged creatures flew through and around tombstones. Every so often, one would land on the stone poised, graceful, and at peace. Their white wings reflected the sun. I watched as they stirred the silent air, as the only animals in the garden still breathing.

"The old has passed away, behold the new has come. - 2 Corinthians 5:17," was the inscription on his tombstone. My father was never one for living in the past; especially, when it came to his own. He had lived a less than upright life as a child. He had a history and arrest records that he would never share with me. This was ultimately why he ended up

sick. The abuse finally caught up, but it caught up with the wrong man. The old had passed away, but the new was paying the fine. He said his faith is what gave him strength. I didn't understand. It takes strength to maintain faith. To hope in what isn't there takes more strength than I possessed. I could not hold the same faith when I had been drained of all the power in my bones. He said his faith gave him strength. He was a force to complement the sun. He died a strong man.

We drove home in silence that day. We've done everything in silence since. I had to mow the lawn all on my own, set one less place at the dinner table, and plan a funeral. I didn't understand how he held us all up while he was sick. While he was at his worst, we relied on him most. Now he is gone, now our foundation is gone.

Now I stand on my own. Where is my strength? Where is my faith? Where is my father? He left me behind to walk on quiet paths and envy butterflies and flowers for their lack of sorrow.

We left his graveside yesterday. There was a white butterfly perched on my father's stone as I turned my back to the past. We walked back down the rocky road to the car. My father was not one to look back, but perhaps this is how we differ. I turned to get one last view of the field, of his memorial, of the sun and flowers.

"The new has come," whether you want it or not. Now I understand where faith stands, I am emptied of all strength. I am left with nothing but a blind faith in the new. It will come with wings, it will take and it will change. The new will come. My father had faith that the new was good, even when facing death. I will hope the new is good, even as facing life.

Judge, Jury, and Executioner

Joanna Pennings

“Do you have anything to confess, son?” The question felt tired, a mere obligation for the poor soul I saw in front of me. I had not driven a half hour in the pouring rain just to receive the same answer I had for three months. No, this inmate was of special interest to me. I had claimed I saw a change in him and that it was my duty to teach him about the faith before he was gone forever. In truth, he had shown no interest in repentance or ever even confessed to a sin. That was not uncommon with this section of the prison. Most priests did not enjoy these visits. They were a burden on one’s inner being. So when I offered to take over the ministry, I was not met with much opposition. I did this for one simple reason; the man, he was innocent. I knew he was.

“Haven’t done anything wrong, Father.” He stared at me with eyes sunk so deep into his head I wasn’t sure if he could really see me.

“All have sinned. Jesus himself said that hating one’s brother is the same as murder.”

“Not me. I hate no one.” Through the pane of glass that separated us, I could see his eyes roll towards the guards. “I haven’t murdered anyone either,” he added for good measure.

I just nodded. In prison, it was safe to assume someone was listening in. On death row, I knew they were.

“Every time I’m here, it’s the same response. Aren’t you afraid for your soul?” The words were urgent, but I felt none of the urgency.

“No one else seems to be concerned. Why should I? Anyway Father, I don’t think it’s my soul you should be concerned about.” He was right. The air in this prison had been laced with sin, and those that stayed too long, who breathed its poison, became infected. I tried to ignore the glances of the guards. It had become apparent by my third visit to the same man that I was an unwelcome guest. My title did offer me some protection, but I wondered how long before that ran out.

“Have you spoken with your lawyers again? What did they say?” The boy had a small team of lawyers working pro bono, but it wasn’t much.

“I called them a few days ago, but they said there wasn’t much they could do. The DNA evidence was pretty damning. It’s all false you know, every bit of it. I’m just hoping for the appeal.”

“I’m sure they are doing all they can.” I left him that day, just as I had every other, with an invitation to return whenever I pleased and the despondent smile of a once cocky man. The rain outside continued with a vengeance. My small foreign car felt as though it could be blown away any minute. I wasn’t sure that would be such a bad thing. My troubles and I would be gone with just a rainstorm to mourn us. Instead, I pulled safety into my driveway and got ready for bed.

I lay in bed that night with sleep far from me. My thoughts began to search, as in a desert, for something to relieve my thirst. There was nothing, no solace in my mind. I said my prayers, searching for solace in my God. I would return to this prison once a week until the boy was free or one of us was dead.

I had told no one else in the parish of my agonizing thoughts. I could not. It was wrong for them to see me struggle. I was supposed to be a pillar of strength for them. But my strength was waning. My dilemma was not one that could be solved. I had decided, decades ago, that I was a priest and that was the oath I stood by. It was what I was called upon to do by an authority higher than me.

These thoughts had been following me for months since that day in the confessional. The man had confided to me his sin. He shared those terrible words that haunted the thick church air. On a routine day, he sat across from me. A partition blocked his face, but his voice made me shudder. I could never forget that voice, the cigarette stained tone that whispered tainted words.

A murderer, he committed murder, again and again and again. What do I do with murder? I left the church that day with a weight on my shoulders that I could not shake. I was obligated to never share what I heard in confession. My vows were to protect sinners seeking forgiveness. Where did this leave me? I am now a barrier to justice, and there was nothing I could do about it.

It was two weeks after that day I read news story. A young man, 24 years of age, was imprisoned for the serial murders of five rich lawyers. Their wealth had not yet been found. I knew this story by heart. It had

“...The air in this prison had been laced with sin, and those that stayed too long, who breathed its poison, became infected...”

been running through my head every night, stopping my sleep and my breath. He had incriminated himself. They had proof. My heartbeat slowed; justice had prevailed.

I went to visit the man in prison. I just wanted to see the man behind the dark voice. A partition of glass separated us, but I could see his face clearly. He looked up at me with arrogant eyes, studying my movements.

“What brings you here, Father?” The voice drowned out all other noise. It was light, and sure, and it was wrong. This was not the same voice I had heard in confession. This was not the same man. I suddenly lost the ability to speak. I sat across from this man, fully aware that he was innocent and fully aware that I could do nothing about it.

“Is everything alright, old man?” His words dug deep into my skin. With a nod I fled. Not a word left my lips. He was so young.

After that day I had chosen to go back, to help the boy as much as possible. The duty of care was laid on my shoulders. I embraced it as my penance.

It had been four months since the first visit, and I walked through the same gates I had every Monday. The hurricane of autumn swept the fallen leaves through the air. The trees stood empty, having lost their crowns. They now braced for the winter chill. I pulled my coat up around my throat. As I made my way through the halls of the prison, the air became cooler. Today was the last day I would see him. Today the chair would separate this man’s soul from his body. Today I would choose to let him die.

I approached the visitation room, my steps keeping time with my heartbeat. Behind the glass stood an apparition. His hands were clenched in fists; his head raised as he watched me approach. The once cocky smile had melted, and I could see a stubborn animosity lingering in his grey eyes. They had already drained the life from him, today they would simply finish the job. I took a seat in front of the man placing my Bible as a barrier between us. My right hand gestured for him to sit as well, and he obeyed.

“Got anything to confess, Father?” His tone offered a warmth foreign to this place. We both laughed without bothering to smile.

“No, not today. I don’t have long, it is scheduled soon. Today I am here for a last rite of sorts. Now, you didn’t want me to bring communion for you, but you can’t stop me from praying.” He just nodded and I raised one hand up to the glass. He did the same. The words fell with my tears and continued to fall until they led him away. Finally, I wiped my eyes, said goodbye to the air. I looked up at my reflection in the glass. May God have mercy on my soul.

Missing Pieces

Carly Davis

I met my dad for the second time when I was in my late teens. The first time being a day after I was born into this world. I'm not at all conscious of the first few years of my life, and my memories start around the time my father decided that he didn't want to be a father anymore – so that would be around age five. Five years of my life with a father I have little to no recollection of. I can count on one hand the amount of pictures I have of him. If they were pieces to a puzzle my end result would be incomplete.

The day my father left wasn't huge or dramatic, the way you see things play out in movies. There was no running out of the house after him crying with sad music playing in the background – there was no argument. I just remember it being a day like any other; the sun rose over our house the way it always did. My brother and I got up – washed our faces and brushed our teeth, my mom went into the kitchen to make breakfast, and then my dad got up for work. I was in the living room at this point, playing on the piano I knew I wasn't supposed to touch, listening to the sound it made with every press of a key. I jumped up when my dad came walking into the living room, thinking that I was about to get into trouble, but he didn't yell at me. Instead, he kissed me on the forehead, and walked out the front door to go to work, seemingly at ease with the fact that he would never return.

With the passing of time my father stopped being my father, and as I thought about him, I thought about him as just a man that I used to know. Years distorted my memory of him until I could barely recall what his voice sounded like. Bits and pieces, that's what I remember; the dozens of presents he'd get us for Christmas, the Halloween candy, trips to the park. Nothing spectacular, and fragmented in such a way that some days I'd think that I made some of it up. My mother didn't make his departure spectacular either, she simply moved on. And with that, so did my brother and I. A huge part of me is grateful that my mom chose not to linger over his absence. She didn't shut down – she never felt sorry for herself, and if she did, she never showed it.

Eventually my brother and I became young adults. We barely ever thought about our father, and we never talked about him. There was no need for us to acknowledge someone who chose not to acknowledge our existence a long time ago. The court system brought us back together; it had nothing to do with him suddenly wanting to know us. Years of unpaid child support, and the threat of jail. I met my dad for the second time in a court waiting room, and I couldn't find words. Not because I

“...This man that was once my father is just a man. A man who is married, who had a whole life after us....”

was speechless, but because there was nothing that I felt needed to be said. He made his choice; I didn't need to know why. He did most of the talking, but never truly said anything. This man that was once my father is just a man. A man who is married, who had a whole life after us. He's not my father – at least that's not what I choose to call him. He did nothing to earn that title, and so for now, I call him by his first name. In an alternate universe he never left in the first place, and the hard times that we endured never happened, our mom never met guys who abused her, and we celebrate two parents every year instead of just one. In an alternate universe there's a home with pictures that hang on walls of a husband, a wife, and their two children. Childhood moments that transcend further than just the park, and presents on Christmas day. We get phone calls all the time now, along with birthday presents in the mail from an Alabama address, but that's as far as our relationship goes, and I'm okay with that. We learned early on that anything more than a few phone calls feels a bit contrived, so we choose not to upset the balance of things. We take it one day at a time – careful not to move too fast. Meticulous gestures to show that we're willing to find the remaining pieces of the puzzle we once started. Maybe one day it'll all come together to form a complete picture.

Bittersweet Birthday

Sian Myers

My Grammy lit the candles with her shaky hands. One by one each glowed with a yellow and white tint. My girlfriend sat next to me holding my hand in her lap as the rest of my family gathered around the table. The little ones leaned on the table close to the cake, ready to blow the candles out with me.

“Okay, are you ready everyone,” my Grammy said as she pushes the classic goodies into the center of the floral tablecloth covered table. The kids jump with joy as the adults run into the room, grabbing a seat as fast as they can.

“Happy Birthday to you!”

I gaze around the room, emotionless. Smiles spread across almost everyone’s face especially the kids, who stare at the ice cream sitting behind the vanilla sheet cake. I look out the window and the crisp snow is falling. I can’t believe I was born in this harsh weather; ice slicked roads and heaping piles of snow line the sidewalks. I catch my cousin’s gaze, and she smiles at me with her once yellow teeth. I smile back.

“Happy Birthday to you!”

My mom and dad stand behind my aunt with the curly hair and loudly laugh, holding each other and smiling. My thoughts go to the past two years. What would happen if those times I didn’t make it? Would they still celebrate my birthday? As my mom looks at the hypnotizing candles and sang quietly, my dad looks at me and smiles, glad I made it too. My eyes start to burn and become washed up with tears. We are very similar, and I know he loves me so much. His strength has always passed through with just simple looks, never words. That’s how we communicated.

“Happy Birthday dear Sian!”

My ugly, dreary aunt looks at me and smiles, which is rare. She holds one of her kids on her lap, bouncing her leg up and down. Would she have cared? What would she have done if I was gone? She sings loudly as if she is in church, looks at me, and continues to smile.

“Happy Birthday to you!” I blow out the candles all in one single breath. Everyone cheers, claps, and is ready to dig into the cake.

“Are you one, are you two-” The girls yell at me as I take the knife to cut the cake. I let them keep going until they hit 18, and they both come up to me and hug me. My hands are just as shaky as my grandmother’s. My girlfriend takes my hand and uses hers to help mine cut small enough pieces to all go around. One by one each piece is cut and passed around to every family member. I have the most delicious ice cream in the world: coffee. I watch as everyone eats, and, for the first time, I feel relieved the hard times are over.

My Mirrors

Wisteria Andrews

The only company I have is the girl in the mirror
And she's not much company
She doesn't laugh at my jokes like you do
Her eyes don't sparkle like yours do
Often times she's silent, because she has nothing to say
If you can't handle the girl in the mirror
If you can't handle the awkward and distant me
With regret pooling in my eyes as I ready myself
For another midnight meltdown
Then you don't deserve the other side of me
The side that gets bruised but conceals it with a smile
You don't deserve the smile I give when I don't feel like smiling
You don't deserve the effort I put into making every day better than the last
One way or another,
We must all face our mirrors
She isn't ideal, but she's a part of me
Everyone who wants to be in my life must accept that.

All For You

Wisteria Andrews

I still hand you everything I have
My bones are begging me to withdraw
To stop
Heal myself for a change
But my heart refuses
I will always hand you everything I have
Even when you smack it to the ground
And laugh in my face.



"Thrice-traitor" by Emma Hall



"Graveyard Shift" by Sean Madey



“Bird of Peace” by Akbar Reid



“Color Dust” by Drake Haydock



“Hebron, West Bank” by Michael Groissl



“The Giant Metal Cage Ball” by Romeela Narjis



“Penny Jar” by Romeela Narjis

Puzzle

Kemar McPherson

There’s life in a puzzle,
It has its complications,
I hope mine doesn’t crumble,

Sometimes it makes a fumble,
The timing is valuable,
There’s life in a puzzle,

I better myself as an individual,
It’s considered to be destructible,
I hope mine doesn’t crumble,

My mom prays for me,
My dad has faith in me,
There’s life in a puzzle,

My brother worships me,
My sister guides me,
I hope mine doesn’t crumble,

My family looks out for me,
They greatly appreciate me,
There’s life in a puzzle,
I hope mine doesn’t crumble.

Haunted

Tara Surdam

Leather bound memories. Inhale. I close my eyes, lose myself in the smell of mahogany. I can smell patchouli oil. I can smell a dark stormy sea cresting on the obscurity in the distance. I can feel the foam spray me from the bow of the vessel. I can feel the cold salty air sting my lungs and set fire to the oxygen through my trachea... Exhale.

No air.

I open my eyes, to see our love refracting across shards of glass. In a moment, I see it all in every scintillating diamond that bounces up from the ground. They're so beautiful.

The cold tile is the only thing keeping me here, lucid; the will to keep breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Hallow, shallow, my lungs have given up, I could give up. Cracking, angelic bursts of glass, shattering my home, crumbling my mind. Time moves again.

I can feel myself slipping. I'm falling into the sound of a bright acoustic resonance. I'm lost.

I'm frozen in this moment. Devastated. All I can feel are salt stains between my cheek, raw with fire and the barren stone beneath me. Haunted by the lost soul of future's past. Looking into moments of us, my conscious darts across each shard of glass. I'm sprinting. Suddenly, I'm ripped inside out; every bone shattered, the smell of hair burning, skin crisping, organs twisting without remorse. Then it was over. There was no seething pain, no cold, no love, no air, just eyes. Bright, white magnificent eyes. The man I loved once lived there, but no one was home, just cold snow and ice entrapping me with their stare. Muffled sounds in the background.

"I ept que nelse," a sailor's devastated cry from across the sea, but only some syllables could travel across the current to me.

Again, I'm cascading across shards of glass, dodging daggers and tripping into the past. Tumbling down the hill of bits of glass. I brace myself for the pain. Nothing, that I expected, I'm gliding down sand. Warm, buttery soft, beige white sand, cresting between my toes. I'm sand surfing down to the shore. Warm guava nectar tantalizes my

tongue. My skin illuminating in the sun. The sun wraps me like a blanket and the sea greets me like an old friend. I take my board and press it against my navel, diving deep through the reef. Laughter inside of oxygen bubbles dancing across my face as they float up to the surface of the ocean. The light, it's beautiful. The cosmic palette of a true artist's brush painted this moment for us to enjoy. Inhale. Ocean air. White-Blue eyes meet mine. Exhale. The wave starts to break. He grins knowing the wave is about to tumble us 25 feet below, but we can't break our gaze. Just a moment longer, no one, not the ocean or the sky can take this moment away from me.

The sea moves me towards the sky, then attacks me from behind as it wrestles us to the ocean floor. Reef. Needles, pinning me like an acupuncturist. Smooth silk gliding across my back, and rock passing me along to the shore. There's something interlaced that won't let go of my body. Inhale. Exhale. Ocean water spews up from deep within my diaphragm. Focus. White-Blue eyes. The warmest taste of love I've ever had.

"You're i..ne, h oh fool." Muffled again. The moment is gone. He's already swept away by the current. Desolation. Nothing. Running. Emaciated. Starving. Stumbling. Where am I? How did I get here?

I've never seen light bend, in such a way. It's incredible. I'm in awe by the prism's allure. Something so beautiful. So simple. But so breathtaking. I have to... just once... I reach out to touch the light, but I am pricked by the glass needle. Disguised by its beauty, with such brilliant clarity, my nose fills with the smell of the ocean, my lungs fill with salty mist. I'm drowning. Peacefully. My eyes burst open under the water. Again, that prism dances, not just in the light but in the deepest part of the ocean. Mesmerizing me with its dance. Teasing me with his trance. I start to fall into a deep silent calm slumber...

Bombs. I can feel their deep vibrato within my soul. Inhale. I see prisms. Light bending and exploding. Fireworks. White-Blue eyes lit up by the show, reaching into my soul. I can smell the smoke and embers from the grass. Feeling his uniform crisp and untethered against my body. Metals pulsating from your heart against mine.

Sweet

Jandayi James

White-Blue infinity.

Whispers I can barely make out. I close my eyes to focus on your voice.
Inhale.

Exhale.

Cold barren tile floor. The sound of resonance getting louder but
dissipating into voices.

Then, all at once. The screaming sounds of glass's heartbreak -halt.
Don't let yourself feel the void. You're just starving for the truth.
"I slept with someone else." "You're insane, but so beautiful." "I will love
you, until the day I die." Harmonize into the most devastating moment
of my life.

In that moment as I lay on the bathroom floor, clinging to our memories
in our leather-bound book, we made right after our honeymoon, I saw
my glass of Casamigos hit the floor; my life, shatter. I saw every moment,
every significant gaze he's ever given me, in each broken piece of glass
as it bounced across the tile. Nothing has ever been the same. He was my
first love, my deepest love, my best friend, and the worst kind of death
I have ever had to mourn. I can remember these pivotal memories that
ignited the fire that disintegrated our relationship. The first recollection,
seeing my ex-husband's icy blue eyes, as the confession of adultery
manifested, the moment when I truly believe I witnessed the love
fleeting from his eyes. The second memory, running down the dunes in
Hawaii, swimming through the ocean with my surfboard, meeting his
gaze for the first time, getting pummeled by the ocean all the way down
to the floor, and feeling his embrace as he swam me back to shore, and
whispering how beautiful he thought I was. Finally, the last memory,
Fourth of July. The moment, fireworks should have been deafening,
but were silent when he held me in his arms after coming home from
graduation from the US Marine Corps. He held me close against his
perfect uniform and dedicated the rest of his life to me with a proposal.
That last memory was the first time in my entire life that I've ever felt
safe, loved, and without fear. The moments on the bathroom floor, felt
like someone carving those memories out from my heart, leaving me
hollow and afraid—haunted.

You tell me sweets not realizing what it takes to love a girl like me.

It is not all sweet when it comes to loving a girl like me.

I have shown up for love, never has it returned the favor.

Too much time has been wasted.

Energy served out in uniform motion, never getting a force strong
enough to reciprocate it back.

Silly of me to think that it might add to my value. That it could help to
complete me.

But I was mistaken.

To have given so much and gotten so little in return.

It's my fault I'm empty.

I never set boundaries. I never gave expectations.

I wondered for too long how love could have been so selfish.

Not to realize it was draining me.

Depleting me of my glory.

But it's in my destructing nature to care too much.

To weather storm after storm.

Even the sturdy over time begin to diminish.

Look, at what is left of me. Tell me what's left.

What do you see that you can still take?

My soul is on zero.

And here you stand telling me sweets.

Not knowing it is not at all sweet to love a girl like me.

I despise her—I despise me

Ornella Spencer

It is no secret that bullying is prominent in today's society. Our youth face constant criticism and chastisement simply because their peers think they do not fit into a certain socially constructed reality. In response to this, teenagers are mentally affected by verbal abuse and this often leads to low self-esteem

"Why does your face look like that?" A random girl at school came up to me one day and asked; a hint of humor sparking in her eyes. I noticed a group of girls chuckling a few feet away—her friends I presumed. Insecurity immediately befell me. I gaped at her, not knowing how to respond. "Well? Do you plan to answer?"

My head fell as I tightened my grip on the books I held to my chest. "I..." I tried to say something when I was cut off.

"Do you have AIDS?" she continued. Tears pricked my eyes as I looked up at her, humiliation stamped on my face and she burst into a fit of laughter along with the other girls. I ran instantly. Across the auditorium and into the bathroom I ran, fast and without any sense of direction as the tears escaped my eyes. My books had fallen along the way, but I didn't care. The only focus I had in that minute was to get as far away from them as possible. I spent the rest of that day in a bathroom cubicle, and I cried endless tears. My heart faced its first death that day.

"Hannah stop being ridiculous and take off the sweater!" My sister and I were about to head out to do some shopping.

"You wear that thing everywhere you go! Why are hiding the style of the blouse? It's a tank top for a reason!" She knew why. It was bad enough I couldn't bag my face but if I could at least cover the blemishes on my chest and back why not do just that?

"Right. You can say that because your skin doesn't look like mine." I sighed and sat on the edge of my bed. She sat beside me.

"Hannah the only person that sees your blemishes is you...and that's because you know they are there. Your skin doesn't look as bad as you think." A slight smile played at my lips as a little of my insecurities dissipated.

"Ok." I responded. I got up, took the sweater off and stood in front of the mirror. I stood at different angles examining myself and a rush of discomfort attacked me. I wasn't pleased with my reflection. I mean, the clothes were fine, but the person wearing them, so not fine. The blemishes were all I could see. I closed my eyes, summoned the little bravery I did not have and repeated in my head, "My skin is not as bad as I think it is, my skin is not as bad as I think it is."

"Ok, I'm ready."

We headed out. The day went on okay, I guess. We visited numerous stores and bought a few items. I caught a few judgmental stares, but

"... I ran, fast and without any sense of direction as the tears escaped my eyes. My books had fallen along the way, but I didn't care...."

I tried my best to not let them affect me. I was okay; I was fine until he passed me; a boy who seemed around my age. He basically glided past me, ensuring his body made no contact with mine; disgust in his eyes. Noticing his obvious actions, I stood still and watched him as he continued walking and fell out of my sight. My tears were instantaneous and completely surprising to my sister who was oblivious to what took place. This was the day my heart faced its second death.

It was 'Community Fun Day' and everyone was all geared up and ready for the beach. It was summer and the humidity in Jamaica was at its peak. This time of year, called for sunglasses, minimal clothing, and iced beverages. I was "convinced" by my mother to tag along with the family to the local beach where everyone would be. Frankly, she forced me to go, but who was I to argue her perception of the definition of convince. We arrived at around noon, and the beach was already packed with

Outgrowing the Rain

Kylee Christiansen

people. Music was blaring, women were sunbathing, and men were playing soccer.

“Let’s go to the changing room,” my sister said while walking away. I didn’t bring a change of clothes for obvious reasons, but I reluctantly followed her lead as we made our way through the crowd. “Here, put this on.” My sister threw a piece of clothing at me. It was a bathing suit.

“Nope. I think I’ll pass.” I threw it back.

We were in that changing room for at least twenty minutes arguing back and forth until I finally caved. She told me to meet her at the gazebo as soon as I was done, and I nodded in agreement. When I stepped out, I walked briskly across the sand through the wave of people. Then I heard some boys whistling, and I walked even faster. I felt so vulnerable and strange.

Then someone shouted, “If I were you, I wouldn’t wear a bathing suit much less leave the house!” I instantly froze. I was in complete and utter mental shock to the point where I could not even cry. This was the day my heart faced its third death.

I was ashamed of the girl in the mirror. When she stared back at me, I could see the sadness in her eyes. I couldn’t help but judge her. I couldn’t help but pity her. The scars, the blemishes that spread over her face, her chest and her upper back, they made her unworthy. I despised her—I despised me. They made me feel like I did not belong and caused me to underestimate my capabilities. Verbal Abuse is often over-looked and difficult to identify because it does not leave physical scars, but my story is a living testament that it does cause low self-esteem.

The presence of pain and the harsh wind as the rain was leaking through the cracked window. I remember noticing the way the fierce storm poured in; it hugged my face. I used it as an excuse to awaken his alcohol induced sleep, so he’d leave. He raped me, and he left more discomfort and soreness in my body and soul. His grievous and heinous actions struck me like lightening which left scars that burned of blackness.

A few months go by and I thought he impregnated me, and I was terrified by that because of who he was to me. His monstrous shadows lurked behind burning trees while my body was exploited and distorted. Courage began to prevail over hesitation. And that day I could feel my anxiety turn into victorious risk-free butterflies in every part of my body. I knew I needed to tell someone. The treacherous truth had to be told.

I didn’t know what was going to happen next, it was like the cliffhanger inside a novel. I just knew in that moment I needed to be heard and I longed for the security. And she was my world, my girlfriend at the time. She was the kind of the person who gave extraordinary kindness. She loved me universally and I trusted her. I told her everything.

Half an hour later. and we are speeding down Broadway to the nearest pharmacy to buy some pregnancy tests. I had to be sure and I was paranoid in purgatory. The heavy bricks in my stomach were piling up. But six tests later and all tested negative. The relief was consolatory. She listened for hours and grasped the story and she handled it better than my thoughts planned she would. She was there for me. So, I decided I was going to confide in my best friend Maggie. The comfort felt like thousands of blankets wrapped around me. I didn’t feel as alone any more, years of the over burned weight flew off like a flock of birds. I knew I wasn’t handling this alone. The millstones were long and crucifying, but I crossed them, and I crossed them with power.

But no number of showers could ever cleanse him off me. He stayed on my skin like a bad rash, and the ointment I relied on wasn't enough. Even though I am healing, healing comes with time and care, and soon

"...But no number of showers could ever cleanse him off me. He stayed on my skin like a bad rash, and the ointment I relied on wasn't enough."

enough I'll get there. For so long I constantly froze like a deer in the road and I'd shut my eyes as my body laid like a statue. But I broke free and my body is my universe and palace. I stride with heaps of forlorn rotten roses and I carry on in the garden.

A few days later the burden pain was insufferable, and I felt the need for some professional advocacy, and I had to start somewhere. So, I picked up my phone and I called for help as my lips spilled the unbearable. I was heard.

Monday afternoon, I was in class and I was pulled out. I was told a social worker was here to speak with me. I didn't know what was going on nor did I know what to expect. When I walked into the room, I saw my principals, my guidance counselor, my special education teacher, and the social worker. We chatted about my mother and my life at home, it felt like hours. She hesitated with question and voice she asked me "so what happens when your father comes into your room at night." The pain ignited into flames as ash crumbled from a Phoenix's burst, I am in repair and I no longer hurt.

How Will I Know

Brittney TeBordo

How will I know I've done enough
I've given all of my time
When they're at peace, asleep in their beds

When they're faced with a challenge
Will they rise up or back down
How will I know I've done enough

They see someone different from them, left out
Will they sit with them and welcome them in
When they're at peace, asleep in their beds

When the dark clouds move in as they always do
Will they use an umbrella or drown in the sorrow
How will I know I've done enough

When they doubt themselves or think they're unworthy
They must know all they have inside
When they're at peace, asleep in their beds

When life beats them down, will they crumble
Or take the punch, stay grounded, and win
How will I know I've done enough
When they're at peace, asleep in their beds

A Bus Out of Tennessee

Carly Davis

We leave early in the morning, when the sky is still dark, before the birds wake up, and before he catches us. Momma says it's better this way, that by the time daddy gets home from his hunting trip, we'll be long gone.

She tells me I should be excited, that it will just be us girls from now on. I'm scared to believe her. It's not the first time she's told me this. Momma has always wanted love from Daddy, but Daddy never had any love to give to anyone.

I walk around the house, my footsteps making a dull thud on the rotted wood floor. I won't miss anything about this place. It's always been too hot here in the summer and cold enough in the winter. We use fans during the scorching hot months. We don't have air conditioning. Air conditioners are too expensive according to Daddy. In the winter, we heat the house with wood from the back porch and sleep in the living room near the fireplace. Momma sleeps on the worn-down sofa while daddy and I sleep on blankets piled on top of the floor and pretend not to notice the mice scurrying along the walls.

Momma tells me to pack some food for our trip. I go into the kitchen, ignoring the lonely pink balloons floating along the ceiling, and the upturned kitchen table. I step on broken glass and shattered dishes, the result of a dinner gone wrong. There's food thrown across the floor, and what's left of a birthday cake splattered on the walls. I empty the cabinets and fridge, grabbing whatever I can find and stuffing it into a plain white shopping bag. I carry it around with me until it's time to go.

Making sure she isn't forgetting anything, Momma runs around in a pair of old sweatpants. Truth is, we're forgetting everything but the important stuff. My room is still filled with things I'll never see again, including the necklace Daddy gave me as a birthday gift. He told me it belonged to my grandmother and that I needed to take care of it. I didn't even want it. When Daddy comes home, he'll find it safe and sound on my nightstand. Momma didn't get me a gift yet. She told me my gift would come later. I wonder what it will be. I follow her out onto the screened back porch and watch as she kneels on the floor. Daddy

didn't trust banks and kept all his money tied up in cash beneath a loose floorboard. He'd soon come to realize that he couldn't trust Momma either. I watch as she brings out a small tin box and opens it, revealing three large wads of cash.

I take a step closer, my eyes never leaving the money. "How much you think it is?"

"Enough."

Momma closes the now empty box and puts it back where she found it, replacing the floorboard. Once Daddy realizes that we're gone, he'll head straight for the back porch. My hand comes up to touch my swollen left cheek. I don't want to picture what his reaction will be. I just want to go. Momma and I bring the large suitcase out to the car. Between the two of us, it's all the belongings we can take. The early morning air freezes my bones, and the air stabs me like a knife. It's been record-breaking cold in Alabama these last few weeks.

We back out of the driveway and head down the street, passing Roger's house. Roger is Daddy's old drinking buddy and probably the closest thing to scum I've ever seen. Momma lights a cigarette as we drive. I watch her look into the rearview mirror, almost like she's afraid she'll see Daddy's old pickup truck following behind us. She relaxes a bit when we get on the freeway, but she's still tense. I turn the radio on, but she turns it back off.

"Not now. I don't wanna hear nothing."

I sit back and cross my arms over my chest, cringing with every truck that passes us, convinced that Daddy will show up and try to run us off the road.

"I didn't steal it, you know?"

I stare out of the passenger side window. There's nothing but freeway and woods on either side of us for miles. Momma reaches out and taps

my shoulder.

“Hey, you listening to me?”

“What?” I turn and look at her. She steals a glance in my direction, her right eye punched black by daddy’s fist, her lip split right down the middle. I couldn’t stop him from beating on Momma. When I tried, he turned and slapped me with the back of his hand, sending white-hot pain through my cheek and up toward my temple. My eye felt like it was going to explode in its socket. Momma tried to get to me, but Daddy pushed her hard into the kitchen table, causing our dinner to fly everywhere. I watched through my good eye as my birthday cake hit the wall and slid down to the floor.

“I said I didn’t steal it – the money – it was mine.” She throws her cigarette out of the window.

“More than half of it anyway.”

“Where’d you get that kind of money?”

“The casino. Your daddy laid claim to it before I could even get the money in my hand good.” She lets out a bitter laugh before lighting another cigarette. “Filthy bastard.”

I look down and trace the four-inch raised scar that goes up my wrist, deep and intentional.

“We’ll park this no good car somewhere and get on a bus.”

“Where we gonna go?”

“Anywhere we want.” She smiles at me, the cut in her lip splitting painfully. “I’mma do right by you. Ain’t no going back this time.”

She glances down at my wrist for a moment too long and then takes a long puff of her cigarette, shaking her head. “You’re gonna have a future. You ain’t gonna end up like me. Pregnant at fifteen. Doing everything

Simon says just to survive.”

“What if he finds us?”

Momma takes two more puffs of her cigarette, throws that one out the window and then peers at me through the cloud of smoke. Momma only ever smokes like this when she’s nervous. “He won’t. Your daddy is a stupid man. Got a brain the size of a pea.” She laughs loud, stepping on the gas. “Yes, ma’am, old Simon never was good at putting two and two together.”

“You’re gonna have a future. You ain’t gonna end up like me. Pregnant at fifteen. Doing everything Simon says just to survive.”

We drive until we’re out of Alabama and into Tennessee. Momma pulls into a motel right off the highway before noon. She pays in cash for only a few hours. We shower and sit on the bed, eating the food I brought from the house while watching episodes of Golden Girls on the old TV. Momma brushes my hair and then puts a warm cloth on my still throbbing cheek.

“It was the first time he ever hit me.”

Momma gets up and walks over to the mirror by the door. “It would’ve only gotten worse.” She looks at herself in the mirror. “Just look at me.”

“Is that why we left this time?”

Momma touches the purple area under her eye. "What are you going on about?"

I lie on my back, looking up at the ceiling. "What made this time different from all the others?"

"Every battered woman has enough at some point, little girl. Some just realize it quicker than others."

We fall asleep for a few hours and around nine o'clock, Momma wakes me up and tells me that we should get on the road again. I sit up in bed and look around the dimly lit room. I feel groggy. My cheek hurts less, but the pain isn't completely gone. I slip my feet into my sneakers and follow Momma out of the room. It's cold, and the heater in the car stopped working just as we pulled into the motel parking lot. I slip into the backseat and wrap myself in the old blanket Momma always keeps in here, and drift back into a dreamless sleep.

We drive into a Chattanooga bus station not two hours later. Momma parks the car and then goes into the glove compartment, putting her papers into her purse. She takes out a screwdriver next.

"Why do we need that?"

Momma looks at me and then opens her door. "I ain't taking any chances."

We get out and I watch her go around the car and kneel. She unscrews the license plates, first from the back of the car and then the front, shoving them into her purse. I look around to make sure no one is watching, but we're alone out here as far as I can see. We grab our things out of the car and head into the bus station, not stopping until we get to the ticket booth.

"Where to?" The big woman behind the glass asks the question as if she's asked it a million times and couldn't care less if she were speaking to two women or two animals. Momma stares down at me, her face looking even younger than thirty in this light.

"You choose."

I look up at the sign behind the ticket lady's head. "Anywhere we want, right?"

"Anywhere."

I point to the longest spelled city on the board. "Indianapolis."

By twelve in the morning Momma and I are on a bus out of Tennessee toward Indiana. I settle back into my seat and breathe out.

"So why Indianapolis?"

I shrug my shoulders, staring out of the window. "I like the way the name sounds."

Momma brushes my hair behind my left ear. I keep my eyes focused out the window, fighting to stay awake.

"Hey, you?"

I look over at Momma and she's smiling at me. "What is it, Momma?"

"Happy Birthday."

Regarding Notebooks

Katherine Schultz

I've never had a notebook,
Not one I managed to keep anyway.
I'll spend my money, hoping to gain
Some form of understanding, but
The pages crinkle and age, blank.
When I saw my first therapist,
She thought it would be good for me.
She thought that the words I failed to articulate
Might be better expressed with a pen.
She was wrong.

How do I describe a monsoon,
One that is both seasonal and constant?
One compiled of so many emotions,
Shifting constantly, that by the time
I manage to identify it, it's gone.
How do I describe sudden emotions
That leave you grasping in the
Aftermath? Grasping for something
Solid and steadying, something to
Reassure you that it's over and you're still there.
I'll yell and grumble at my family,
But in minutes, I won't even know
Why I felt the need to do so.
They will ask me what was wrong,
What had happened, but even I don't know.
So no, I do not keep notebooks,
But God I wish I could.
I wish I could write about the monotony
Of my day and the inexplicable feelings they create.

I wish I had something to burn.

The Desert

Chelsea Conger

I see her standing in the median as I wait at a red light; cars flowing by her in a steady stream on the other side. A book bag sits at her feet, airy snow collecting on its ridges. I lean over toward the passenger side and reach into my purse; rolling down my window as an indication for her to come towards me. She doesn't move. Waving her over, I look into her eyes. She is young, but her teeth are a blackened fence barely holding in the tongue that tells me "thank you."

"I'm trying to find a job", she says apologetically, "But can't find anything that pays by the day. I can't wait a week for a paycheck".

In my mind, I can hear my boyfriend's voice; she will just spend it on drugs.

An addict's life is a ceaseless tundra. Constant is the cycle of getting drugs to be well enough to ensure their fix for the next day. Addiction is attrition of the spirit; it wears the user down until only the carcass remains. For the addict, death is simply a completion by the body of what the soul has already done. Occasionally, though, a shrub of hope breaks through the cracked earth. I cling to these moments of light. Droplets of compassion, which were neither earned nor deserved, would be what gave me the libation to escape the desert.

I move urgently. My makeshift residency consists of five stairs on the interior, and the rooftop, of a three-story apartment building in South Brooklyn. My hours ensure I rarely run into the tenants as I make my way down the staircases to the street. The air is thick with humidity from the August weather, and sweat begins to bead on my forehead as I walk the two long blocks to the bodega. My hands quiver as I put quarters into the phone.

"Hello"

"Hey, it's me. I need six bags. I'm at Ocean Parkway and Neptune. How long?"

“Yo, it’s gonna be an hour.”

“An hour! Are you serious? Look man, try to make it faster if you can.” I reply. “I’m already mad sick.” I lie.

I am always hungry. Sometimes, I beg for dollars by a Russian market a few blocks away. There, they sell two oranges for a dollar. I feel degraded asking for money, and only the urging of my desperate stomach can make me do it. I am told I don’t deserve their money.

“You should get a job” they tell me. “Where is your money?”

They are right, but I am pathetic in the moment and the castigating stings. I need help I think, please help me.

Separating my money for the dealer, I see I have fifty cents left. I enter the bodega, and, digging through the freezer, I select an orange icee. I feel the familiar tingle of the clerk’s gaze; insuring I don’t steal anything. I won’t. Exiting the store, I settle on a shady stoop nearby. I look out at the people passing; thinking, how unaware they are of the world operating parallel to their own. I avert my eyes, focusing downward. Carefully using the flat wooden tool to scrape at the surface of my orange icee. Dully, I hear a voice from outside my thoughts.

“Are you hungry?” it says. I look up. She is small in frame and about a decade older than my twenty-two years. She smiles.

“No. I’m fine” I reply instinctually. I want her to go away. I want to be hidden.

“What do you want to eat?” It seems a strange way to respond, but in a brief unguarded moment I answer honestly.

“A sandwich”.

“What type of meat? Mayo? How about something to drink?”

“What type of meat? Mayo? How about something to drink?”

Attentively, she mentally notes the answers to all the questions she asks. Her care is startling in its foreignness. She hurries over to the bodega. I sit contemplating the moment, and I am angry at my openness. She returns, handing me a small black bag. The first bite is bliss. The cold fizz of cola feels luxurious.

“Thank you” I tell her.

“Listen, here’s my number.” she reaches out and hands me a scrap of paper, “I’ve been where you are now. Give me a call when you’re ready to stop”.

Blankly I look at her. I laugh internally; an inside joke with myself that I’m waiting for the dealer now.

I’ll never stop, I think.

Soon after begins a phase of tremendous violence. I work for the main dealer in my neighborhood. Staying in a run-down house with a few other workers. When customers call, I put together their order and meet them on the street. The punishment for non-adherence to the rules is severe; I follow them. It’s funny the loyalty that violence incites.

We had been working out of a high rise, but when the owner died after a heavy-handed beating; we had to change locations. I was the one who stayed and lied to the police.

One night, Andy, who looks after the run-down building where I stay, comes by and asks for a bag of heroin. Andy’s drug of choice is crack, but like most addicts, he occasionally uses other drugs. I pour a small amount of tan powder into a metal cap, add water, then mix it, before drawing it into the syringe.

As soon as I push the plunger in, Andy closes his eyes and coos, “That’s good”.

“Do me now,” another runner, Mia, says.

Mia’s arms are a collage of old and new bruises and thick scars from years of drugs use. As I wrap the rubber tourniquet around her bicep and take the needle from her hand, she speaks, “Andy, stop playing”.

I follow Mia’s gaze to Andy’s slouching figure. I don’t know if it’s the stillness of his chest, or the pallor of his skin, but I know he’s gone. Uselessly, I attempt to administer Narcan. It is of little consequence.

I stay in the house for many hours- with the body- waiting for the coroner. The police cover him with a sheet. The same police I had met in another apartment, with another body, just two months before.

As I wrap the rubber tourniquet around her bicep and take the needle from her hand, she speaks, “Andy, stop playing”.

It’s daylight now. Mia and I have already cleared the house of evidence before calling 911. We have to protect our boss. An overdose on his supply puts the business at risk. Answering the police’s questions, I obscure the truth and my responsibility.

“He came over to party and I guess he did too much. He brought the stuff.” I tell them.

“I remember you from over on West 5th” The officer says to me. “You need to change your life”. Fear sweeps over me. I had lied then- said the girl had died from an overdose. I worried this second death would call that into question. The police know Andy; know he isn’t a heroin addict. I know they suspect I’m lying about the circumstances. However, as the hours wear on, the officers become friendly. They ask me about my interests. We speak about art.

“You aren’t like these people around you, you know? Them, they’re a lost cause.”

After Andy’s death, the officers would stop and talk to me when they saw me on the street and ask me how I was doing; checking in, the way my parents should have.

The addict is the lowest sect of our communities; looked down upon and judged, because addicts don’t even know how to help themselves. Addiction is a disease, but it is also a symptom of a wider sickness of our society. A blockage of compassion by the world, and an inability by the addict to receive love, even from those willing to give it. Glimmers of human connection, which collectively would heal the internal conditions which had led to my using, eventually allowed me to escape the desolation of my own addiction. Because of the compassion of those who gave to me when I earned nothing, my spirit was revived. It is humanity that saves the addict’s life, and for those people who helped me, I am grateful.

The Last Red Rose

Erica Quick

The red petals draws your attention,
But you feel the tension.
You're free to go beyond,
The owner of this garden is gone.

With the little life left among the flowers,
Needing water for hours.
It was more than just neglect, but abused.
With each fruit you walk by, bruised.

Stumbling upon the last red rose,
You froze.
How can beauty be able to survive in chaos?
But there's no doubt she's lost.

But you can't resist her beauty,
Something about it is so soothing.
You see that she's played the game,
He loves me, He loves me not.

With only four petals that lie below,
You know.
He loved her not,
And with that thought.

She'll bloom,
Because her days of doom.
From being ripped apart,
Are over.



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