

A person with short brown hair is holding a large, gold-framed sign in front of their face. The sign has a black background with white, radiating lines and the text "INSCAPE ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE 2010" in white, bold, sans-serif font. The person is standing in a room with a white wall covered in a perforated metal grid. Various objects are pinned to the grid, including a mobile phone, a pair of sunglasses, a hammer, a keyboard, a red coiled cable, a CD, a violin, a red fuel canister, a computer monitor, a printer, and a typewriter. To the left, there is a dark wooden cabinet with a statue on top, a clock, and a framed picture. In the foreground, there is a brown chair with a blue patterned cushion, a metal cart with a white boot, several green beer bottles, and a large orange trash can filled with crumpled paper. The floor is made of light-colored wood.

**INSCAPE  
ART &  
LITERARY  
MAGAZINE  
2010**

## **IN-SCAPE (N.)**

The essential, distinctive, and revolutionary  
quality of a thing:

“Here is the inscape, the epiphany, the  
moment of truth.”

-Madison Smartt Bell

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Christopher Allan Prewitt

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Marketing  
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Studies Program  
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**Derek Holston**

*Twice as Nice*

Intaglio print modified  
with graphite and thread

**First Place Art Award**

## Initiation by Stacey Greene

There's a story behind the hills. Native to the dead church and the dead leaves and the dead boy in his grave. It says a man comes from the ash heap and falls back a boy. It says that there, acres measure your blisters and green gold measures your soul. It says that when you dig a grave, all you do is dig a grave.

There were four of us. My father, the boy's father, and a strange man whose voice I never heard. The funeral would be at seven o'clock, because that was the time they always went fishing Saturdays. It was unusual, and only four people came, stood like diamonds rescued from a mine. The boy's father was grateful, I guess. But he never really looked up from the dirt. He was a poor man, and we were digging a poor man's grave.

We had three shovels, so we took turns between watching the sunrise and digging. It was an older cemetery, beside a rotting church with a potbelly stove that wasn't used anymore. It was dead, and smelled like mold; when the wind moved across your face it carried fire and brimstone with it. The service was in a building they called the New Haven Church, down the street a few miles, and it smelled like fresh, just unrolled linoleum. The floors were blue carpet, though.

My father woke me up that morning. We lived in a trailer, and there wasn't a door in our home that was not a hanging sheet. Every few months my mother would tear down the solid white ones for just a little while, and exchange them for sheets with yellow flower patterns and swirling lines. No matter how often she took those sheets out back and beat the dust out of them, it clung.

He knocked on the door frame to my room and it was a long time before I realized my eyes were already open. He probably didn't say anything. But a few minutes later I was sitting on the cement block trailer steps, lacing my boots.

The boy's father was not waiting when we got to the old church. It was still dark, and I asked my father to keep the headlights on, but I knew he wouldn't. It must've been the battery, but no – no, I don't think that was it. We waited until our eyes adjusted to the black; there wasn't even a moon or a star. Not even a north star.

Soon a man came on foot with the only lantern we would have. In my mind I named him the silent man. His skin bronzed between the night and the glow of the lantern, and a stinking cigar smoked between his knotted fingers. There was no greeting, no awkward nod. I thought he was mute at first, and when I asked him, my father slapped the back of my head. The silent man shook his head no.

So we stood beside the plot for awhile. I edged my toe onto it; I could tell where it would be by the other graves. And my father lifted his hand like he was going to smack me again, but the silent man stepped onto the plot before he could. So my father's hand hung in the black for a few seconds. I don't think he realized. And all the while the man was just looking down at the plot, circling like a dog, and kneeled there in the dew soaked grass. I think he was getting ready to say something, but he wasn't talking to us.

That was when the Buick pulled up. The boy's father pulled a rusty shovel from the backseat and limped over to us. He looked at the plot first, at the silent man kneeling and looking up at him, and then he shook my father's hand, pulling him into a hug. I think my father said he was sorry, and the boy's father waved his hand at him. He put the first hit into the ground, shoved his boot hard onto the shovel's shoulder, and lifted the soggy dirt. When he threw it to the side, the silent man stood up and grabbed his shovel. My father started in next. I watched the two red skinned men and the bronzed one working against the ground that seemed to have softened. I don't think that my father ever wanted to hand the shovel over to me, but he understood there was no choice. So he just stuck it there in the ground and I took it back up.

I dug a ditch seventy yards long for a pipeline to our trailer once. The dirt was more like gravel, hard rock that crumbled. It did not give to my hits. It wasn't like this.

I tried to watch the fog of my breath. Something about the hole, how it got farther and farther away from us, so slowly. I didn't want to see it anymore. By an hour I was sick of the hole, and the loose dirt piling beside it. It wasn't until we were halfway through that the boy's father handed the shovel to my own father.

We were a tribe, and the passing of the shovel a ritual. It meant: change – inevitability. But for the boy's father, the passing was not supposed to be a ritual yet. But from then on, his hands would be swollen, and reddened like eyes; from then on, he would lean on the shovel and be careful not to fall without it near. For years later I watched as, with that shovel, he dug another grave. But you can't be soft, there are too many soft people, so when my father stole the shovel out of his hands, the boy's father collapsed. His jeans were grass stained at the funeral.

The silent man, he was a machine. Metal arms drove his shovel deep into the earth and pulled roots and worms and beetles and heaved them away from the plot. He was massive and wore a sweat-yellowed shirt. He didn't come in a coat or even a jacket, just that long sleeved T-shirt, stained before I saw him. We all wore stains like a style then; but the silent man wore his stains like a soldier. They were scars. They were beer money, and the mortgage, and fresh water. I could tell that sometimes he'd taken a shower at the



campground down the road from our house. I'd done it once for a month when they turned our water off, because my father refused to take food stamps.

The shovel was taken back, and my father ripped mine from my hands. He was furious. The sun was coming and he was red. He took off the jacket that my mother made him wear and threw it onto the dirt pile. My father was striking Earth harder than the silent man now, while the boy's father stopped every few minutes, wiped the sweat from his forehead back to his short hair, and watched him. There was one time that he leaned into my father, like he wanted to wrestle him or embrace him; either way, it was like he wanted him to stop. My father didn't deserve that fury. His son was right here.

The plot grew darker even though the sun grew brighter. I'd never dug a grave before. People don't do that so much. It's machines - like the silent man.

The boy was young, I guess, because his father looked about like mine. They wear Kentucky ball caps, mustaches, grey stubble, and stretched and rough skin, except my father is tall and thin, and the boy's is short with a limp. They started to talk for the first time when my father hit rock that sounded like a pipe.

The silent man looked up and nodded. The boy's father said, it's just the rock.

Ain't never heard no rock make that noise, my father said.

Well it does here, he said.

Guess it does, my father said. Right funny, though.

Sure is, the boy's father said. The silent man looked up again and nodded.

My father started to dig harder and I thought he was going to cry. He began to look worse than the boy's father, so I tried to take the shovel back out of his hands again. His back was turned to me, and when he felt my hand tugging at the shovel, stuck solid in the easy dirt, he pivoted like a man crazy.

The hit to my nose landed me on the ground and I tasted copper. The men stopped digging. Then the silent man cupped his hand over his eyes, shielding the sun, looking up at the orange sky. I was still laying there on the ground and the boy's father pulled me up by the arm. My father never said anything about it. Not ever.

The shovel was not passed again. After the funeral my father threw it in a fast-food dumpster.



## **Paper Bags** by *Stacey Greene*

She just didn't have the time right. When Granny got home the bag was spilled onto the kitchen linoleum. Smelled like skunk all through the house, even up to the second floor. I told her, I said "You ain't going to fool her this time. She's going to catch you." And sure enough, Granny got her – there with the paper grocery bags still in both her spidery arms. And Granny sat the bags down on the floor beside the spilt green, and looked down at my mama on the floor, and let out the longest, sheerest laugh I ever heard that woman belch. I swear, I could've seen right through the laugh, tunneling down into her throat. I would've pulled out my real Granny, pulled her right from this crazy thing that had just entered the house where my mama sat on the floor.

My mama, she's a real surprise. She's done things, been places, but we ain't peas in a pod, like they say down at the grocer. Because I've never been to no place I wouldn't be ashamed of my Granny seeing me there. Granny tells me it was the pregnancy, with me, that started all of it, but I know better than to think that. It was my father. My mama, she's got her mistakes, even if she tries to hide them in her sock drawer, or in the piano back, but when my Granny asks her, she ain't got no trouble laying it out for us all to hear. And she sure ain't got no trouble weeping before my Granny like she were the Lord himself. That way, I ain't never seen no woman behave so unladylike as ladylike as my mama can.

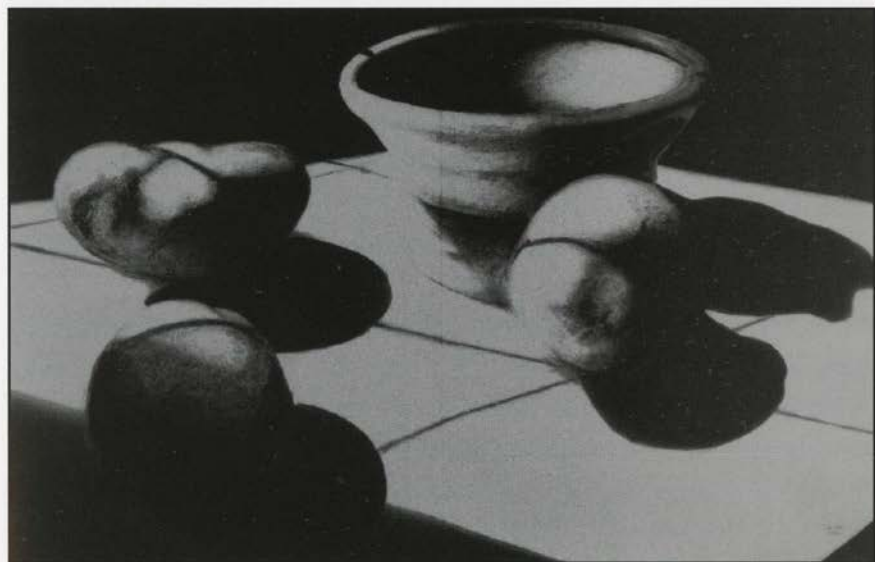
So my Granny, her body was shaking, lifting up and down the hem of her cotton skirt, and I felt like I couldn't move. Until I get the urge to lunge down at that green and grab a handful and put it right in front of my Granny's face, so she can see. Was no way she could've seen though, because she wouldn't be laughing if she could. No sir. So I did, held it to her face, not disrespectful, but like I knew I should.

That was when my Granny stopped, like she choked on the green in my hand, because it was green or because it was green in my hand, I don't know exactly. She stopped and looked at my eyes, then down at my mother's eyes. She said, "You two, you both got your grampy's eyes." And then smacked the green right out of my hand so some of it fell to the floor, and some flew over into mama's hair. Then she pulled her hand back up and ran her bones right across my cheek like it was years before and I wasn't born and it was her very own daughter she was looking at right then.

Only one other time I've been so angry and scared at the same time. That was just outside, by the river behind church, right before they dipped me in that dirty water for baptism. I didn't believe them, not a one, because I knew, even young as I was, that that

dirty water was just more stains to wash out. You can't even eat the fish out of that river. I like to think that's what happened to my mama – got a raw salmon out of the river and it went through her body, sure, but it never really flushed back out. It was in her then, while she sat on the kitchen floor watching my Granny.

Well, my Granny I guess meant to baptize me with the smack of her back hand. (And I can tell you now, it worked better than any dirty river water.) But she never lay a finger on my mama. She skidded her puppy tennis shoes through the green, ignoring that it was there anymore, and grabbed a head of cabbage from one of the paper bags and put it in the fridge. Then she went back for the juice, the lemons, the eggs ...



**Josh Wolfe**  
*Home Cooking*  
Mixed-media drawing

**Second Place Art Award**

## Moonlit Meeting *by Misty Skaggs*

Whiskey wafted into the vast, green garden of Iva's dreams. The tender pink rosebud she had been sniffing began to bloom rapidly, wither just as rapidly, and emit the powerful stink of sour mash. A sunflower spoke to her in the gruff voice of her husband—the wide green leaves shaking her...

"Wake up, woman!"

Once again, she was staring up at a water stained ceiling, lying under a worn-out, home-made quilt. Iva would be turning fifty soon and the last thirty years of her life had been wasted under that same leaky roof.

Orey's cold fingers through her cotton nightshift were stiff with arthritis. That gnarled claw of a hand made Iva imagine Death himself was cutting short her sleep to make ridiculous demands on her time.

"Iva now wake up goddammit. I need you to press my good Sunday shirt for me. I done put the iron on the stove to get hot."

She rubbed at her tired eyes and sighed at the thought of that steaming, heavy hunk of metal waiting for her on the wood stove. Orey lingered over her corn shuck mattress in stiff black slacks. His chest had lost all of its former definition long ago. All of the muscle he'd built over the years hefting bales of hay and following the plow faded with the years. Now he was mottled with liver spots and dotted with scars gained in drunken fist fights. He was pale and skinny and yet somehow flabby all at the same time. His skin hung loosely on his body like the dimpled, naked chicken Iva had plucked for supper last night. A rumpled white mess of a shirt and a wilted bow tie lay draped across her husband's gaunt shoulder. He hadn't worn that shirt for twenty years. It hung up in the back of the closet turning yellow with age. Orey hadn't stepped inside a church house as long as she'd known him.

The red light from the kerosene lamp flickered and reflected specks in his dark, dilated eyes. She imagined those shining specks as stray hunks of brimstone, little pieces of Hell that had escaped to heat up Orey's temper. Iva knew where he was planning on going, dressed in his best.

"Now Orey Hampton, you know there ain't nothing out there in that field waiting on you." As she spoke the words, she was already scooting up in bed and throwing back the covers to face an onslaught of icy air.

"Woman you know I have an appointment to keep. And my business ain't none of your business no ways. What I ought to do is slap you."



Orey's threats of violence would have frightened her years ago. He'd been a powerfully built man then; all broad shoulders and thick muscle, like a bull ox. Now she simply humored the husk that remained, played along with his wild ideas so she could get back to bed for a few hours before time to put breakfast on the table. Orey was a sick old man and Iva was biding her time. They had married when she was just sixteen and he was forty six. She'd taken over raising half-grown children who'd been orphaned by his first young wife and Ida had given birth to three babies of her own. Orey beat her up pretty good and pretty regularly for most of their marriage. But things had changed in recent years. He was growing weaker by the day and his mind had started to slip. Most days he couldn't even get out of bed. Sometimes he blamed the arthritis, other times he laid there on his back speaking passionately to his dead wife,

"My sweet little girl," he would mumble, "I never meant to do no harm. You know I always did look out for me first. And it's a sin darlin' girl. I wish I could meet you up in Heaven. But you know where I'll be. I'll be breathing brimstone ..."

Iva could practically see the dark thing inside Orey—a hungry thing, like a stray dog tearing through muscle and flesh and crunching marrow and bone. At the hospital, they diagnosed a terminal cancer, but Iva's husband refused any treatment from those "goddamned Yankee doctors". She baked them a batch of peanut butter cookies to show her appreciation at the effort, and took her Orey home to die.

Iva slid into her housecoat and the worn blue slippers next to the bed and shuffled toward the kitchen. She had already decided she'd never marry again after the thing inside took him. She had already decided she'd plow up that field out front and plant the biggest, prettiest flower garden you ever saw.

"Of course you don't think nobody's out there Iva. 'Cause you're feeble minded like most females. And 'cause He ain't here to talk to you. He's here to talk to me." Orey bragged as he shuffled behind her.

"I reckon that must be it." Iva yawned at the old man as she pulled out the awkward wooden ironing board and unfolded it with a creak.

"Now you get them things pressed while I shave. And make that collar stiff. A man's got to look his best. A man's just got to look his best when he's talking with important people." With a thirsty swig from a Mason jar, he disappeared to the outhouse.

Iva gazed out the crooked kitchen window into the night. The black scratch of tar paper created a heavy frame around the dirty panes of glass and emphasized the glow of the frosted landscape. A particularly cold gust sent a shiver up her spine as she watched Orey stumble into the toilet. The world in front of her was bathed in blue tinged



light and utterly desolate. Frost clung to wilted cotton plants. Ida hated to see that organic ocean freeze and die. She'd always looked forward to the itch of harvesting season and the alabaster fluff that would escape on the wind. The once white balls were solid, and shining eerily under the full moon.

Crisp November wind swept down from up north somewhere and made its wispy way across their tiny farm. Iva could see it, invisible, but parting the way for something, someone. For a split second, she started to believe Orey's stories. She burnt her hand on the iron and clucked at herself for that superstitious Southern streak.

Tiny tree limbs clicked together, pine trees rustled, wind howled down the winding dirt lane kicking up dust. Half awake and hypnotized, she left the light brown impression of the hot iron on the back of Orey's shirt. In her younger days, Iva would have panicked at this accident. She would've expected a sharp backhand and a cut lip. Now she just sighed out loud to herself: "I reckon Mister Splitfoot won't see it under the jacket no how."

Orey was headed down to the edge of a dead cotton field to talk to the Devil. For years now, he kept the appointment once a month, every night with the full moon, as regular as the Farmer's Almanac. He still had enough sense about him not to mention these nocturnal meetings to the neighbors, but Iva was privy to this information from the beginning, since Orey didn't know how to iron his own shirt.

As if on cue, the outhouse door swung open and Iva's husband shambled out. He threw the Mason jar, now empty, into the cluttered front yard with the rest and made his way toward the house slowly. She ran an iron over the bow tie and picked up the shirt so that her mistake wouldn't show.

"Where's my shirt, woman?" he bellowed.

"Right here. Just hold your arms out here and I'll button you up, tie that tie. Get you looking sharp."

Like a cantankerous child, he did as he was told, mumbling and cursing under his breath the whole time: "Shouldn't have let go of that first damn wife I had me. She made better cornpone and knew her place in this house. And she knew how to use starch the right way."

"Mmmhmmm," Iva hummed. Her finger were shaking as she pushed his shiny shirt buttons through their constrictive holes. "You don't stay out there waitin' too long. You'll catch your death."

Orey's response was a long, flat cackle. He looked straight into her eyes and smiled, slow and deliberate. The fat old mule in the barn began to make a fuss, kicking

and braying. Orey laughed harder and grabbed her wrist with a strength that came out of nowhere.

"Oh I won't be waiting. He's right on time. You heard Him comin' in with the wind. Why don't you say them prayers of yours and get back to bed."

When Orey let go and turned for the door, Iva looked down at the bruise already forming on her wrist. She wondered where the sudden strength he had mustered came from. He couldn't even lace up his own boots yesterday. Now she could see the outline of each of his scrawny fingers swelling up on her skin. Air swept in as Orey went out. Normally, she would settle in to the escape of sleep but Iva stood stock still at the window and watched her husband make his way toward the corner of the over grown cotton field.

Orey stood with his back to Iva. He tipped a worn slouch hat politely to his invisible visitor, his bald old head reflecting in the bright night. Iva struggled to hear what her husband was saying through the cracks around the window sill. In spite of the goose bumps crawling up her spine, Iva leaned forward and pried the window up for a better listen. The one-sided conversation seemed to be going well enough at first. Orey would nod and even laugh, he'd reach out to clap some invisible figure on the back as if he were in the middle of some private, dirty joke. Iva stood transfixed, watching closely, straining to hear. But then the small talk ended and Orey's voice from the cotton field suddenly grew loud, agitated,

"What the hell do you mean right now you sumbitch?"

He removed the hat and threw it into the dirt. He cocked his head as though he were listening to some response. Somewhere in the barn a rooster crowed.

"I know she ain't as young...but I'll give her over if you let me keep on just a little longer."

Iva suddenly thought back to one of those days when Orey was sick in bed –

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry Ruby but he had to have you. My sweet little girl. You too innocent for your own good. A man's got obligations"

Finally, she let the superstition take over and she made her way to the bedroom to grab the Bible from her side of the nightstand. She rushed back to the window and thought about Solomon's Song, a strange little verse in chapter two that had always caught her attention at Sunday school. Over and over she repeated it – "The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land."

"I been good to you. I done my work. I gave you what you wanted every time you asked. I gave you the only thing I ever cared about in the first place you double

crossing bastard! Goddammit, it ain't my time!" Orey shouted louder and louder. It carried perfectly on the wind.

Iva didn't stop. Again and again she whispered, staring at the vine she was sprouting on the windowsill in an old butter dish:

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land ... The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land ... The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land ..."

Orey spun around and looked back at the house. Then he blinked, and she saw the whites of his eyes for a split second as they rolled back in his head. Orey crumpled to the ground like a sack of flour. The wind died down.

Iva turned from the window. She thought for a second, but just a second, that she should walk out to the field and check on Orey. But she knew he was gone, dead. And she decided to leave the gruesome discovery of a mean, wrinkled old man to the boy who delivered the mail in the morning. She shuffled to the bedroom in her blue slippers and slid underneath the covers. Iva dreamed she was sleeping on a bed of honeysuckle and tea roses.



**Justin Howell**

*Of These Gears You Are One*  
Computer generated image

**Third Place Art Award**



## Printed Heroes: A Short Story Cycle

by Ryan Andersons

### Printed Heroes

The plaid skirt moved swiftly about the aisles of boxes filled to the brim with bags and boards of sequential glory. Like a dancer gliding about the deck of a rocking ship, the skirt swayed and bobbed about the aisles, tipping up and leaning to the side, nearly betraying her underside to the ever-watchful audience of one ... but never quite doing so. Ian Saunders leaned back, half in frustration and half in hopes he might catch another glimpse of the young lady as she rounded the Superman back-issues and made her way to his desk. In his thirty years of being a comic book aficionado, he had never once thought a girl would be more interesting than a comic book. However, this particular skirt was definitely testing those waters. If she just leaned a little to the left, maybe Ian would see something ... But alas, she moved to the right sharply and was nearly at the action-figure covered counter as he got to his feet.

"Ya need any help finding anything sweetheart?"

"Um ... no, not really," was the meek reply from glossy lips that barely moved to make a sound. Her eyes were affixed on the issues in the cardboard stands next to the register. At least she knows what she's looking for, Ian mused. The faulty neon light above her head flickered, bouncing the light off the bright green hair pins in her bunned blonde hair to Ian's thick rimmed glasses, making him stumble for a second.

"Well, you just lemme know if you need anything," he bared a nicotine grin, attempting a wink, but closing both eyes. Ian turned away, moderately embarrassed, and the oblivious skirt-clad Caucasian girl returned to looking at the shelves and boxes of comic books, biting her thumb in that purely innocent way that drives a man's mind to thinking dirty things. Ian moved aside his decal-adorned laptop and slumped back into his computer chair, watching the skirt out of the corner of his eye as he keyed up the page he had minimized on the computer. He closed out of his e-mail, something some business lawyer from his parents' "estate" had sent him and the Battle Board was chief of the screen once more. The brightly themed message board lit up the screen, and Ian looked over the site for the topic he was hunting. Shit, too slow, he mentally grumbled as he refreshed the page, finding that the battle he was looking for had already garnered seven more responses while he was chatting up the cutie. He quickly scanned through the replies, looking for what DreadDarkseid had said while he was away. The bastard had yet to reply. Refresh.



Pay-dirt. A three-paragraph response on how Lobo wouldn't lose to Wolverine in a fight without a healing factor. Oh, it was on now.

Through the camera monitor over Ian's shoulder, the girl had made her way to the Most Recent Wall. Here were all the issues that came out this past Wednesday, as well as anything that was in high demand like the issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* with President Obama on the cover. Every retailer in the business knew that was a definite cheap ploy by Marvel to sell issues, but no one could deny how marketable that cover was. Not to mention, it turned out, that the actual story behind the cover was a valid one. Regardless, tempted as she was to take a look at the issue herself, this wasn't what Wendy was looking for. Robbie liked that other book, the X-book that she couldn't place the name of, but if she saw it she'd know. Wendy just had to find it. She avoided a high kick from a cardboard Silk Spectre display and ducked behind it to the X-Men books. A twig carrying a twelve-pack of soda and an arm-full of chips tripped over Wendy's foot as she scoured the covers, not even offering a yelp in response to the twig's clumsy nature.

Jeremy caught the bag of chips like a cat catching a ball of yarn: completely unaware of what was going on, other than something was being thrown at him. With those same cat-like reflexes, he fell back into his seat at the table as Todd hit the floor with a surprisingly loud thud. Ian called from his desk on the other side of the shop to "Shaddup" while Mickey and Chris helped Todd back to his feet, trying as hard as they could to not burst out into laughter at Todd's bout with gravity. Meanwhile, Skellington looked over the table and game map before him to make sure no one's figures were moved by Todd's "earth-shaking" crash, waving his pale white hand over the map, nearly grazing each figure with his smooth, milky fingers. Fortunately, the figures were all pretty much where they had been and Billy Skellington could breathe a sigh of relief. Skelly, as he was more affectionately referred to, relaxed as Todd took his seat once more amongst his friends, brushing a dust bunny from his nape-length curly brown hair, plucking it out and training on it with eyes a lot more curious than disgusted. Skelly looked to Jeremy at the head of the table with an awaiting gaze, and Jeremy unfolded his divider-wall between himself and the five players, signaling the game was about to resume.

The chorus of rigid plastic chair scoot-sounds briefly filled the section of the store, masking the barely audible noise of tape and paper being slapped against the front door. When the chairs quieted, the ripping and slapping noise intensified three-fold, and only then was the silhouette of the girl behind the door frame made abundantly clear and visible to those who'd take a glance that way. Ian's cameras couldn't catch her. Wendy's eyes were focused on their task of finding the book, and the Mid-West Defenders had a

game underway. Ian issued the Defenders another "Shaddup," blaming the noise on them, but Todd motioned to the door. As Ian got to his feet to look where his cameras couldn't, his eyes became the size of grapefruits, his brow furrowed into a rage the likes of which a Robert Crumb drawing would find ridiculous, and he bellowed a seemingly random, animalistic howl in the direction of the door, which caught everyone's attention. The floor shook as Ian ran to his shop's entrance, another surprising feat observed so very few times by the casual and constant patrons of Printed Heroes, yet the effort was for naught. The girl had gone before Ian could reach the door, leaving only a semi-stack of yellow and black printed flyers in her wake.

### Gypsy Rose

Amy had a singing voice like a fairy gargling gravel, and was always trying to cover the front door of the Printed Heroes comic shop with posters for her next slightly-bigger-than-a-coffee-house gig. If Mister Ian could ever catch her, there's not a likely chance the police in this city would even do anything about it. Welcome to Scum-nectady New York, Schenectady to the white-bread. A city that was hopping in the 50's bought, sold and run by General Electric. But when they cut most eighty percent of the jobs, everything shut down to make it the glorious cesspool it is today.

The cops around here were a joke, too. They couldn't find a lost puppy in a toy store, let alone anything significant. Amy could just imagine how they'd react to a crime that was actually worthy of investigating: Three Stooges meets Mister Magoo. Yeah, those fuckers couldn't help Mister Ian if they tried. All the same, it was fun to imagine how that might go down. Amy liked imagining conversations. It was one of her favorite games. She could just picture it now: Mister Ian, in his "who's watching the watchmen?"-tee shirt, two sizes too small, waddling up to report her to the authorities at some big brown desk in the police station, with a dead-eyed cop all decked in their blues.

I'd like to report a crime, he'd say.

What sort of crime? Officer Dead-eye would ask.

There's some girl putting up posters on my door! he'd whine.

Well, did she damage your property at all, Mister Saunders?

Well, no, just covered my doorway with these poorly printed flyers.

Do you have any proof it was even this young lady who put the flyers there?

The cop would ask.

I saw her do it! He'd yell

Can anyone coo-berate your story sir?

And he'd start getting red in face and his glasses would steam and he'd go:

Well, no, I suppose not.

No security footage sir? The officer would ask, devoid of personality.

Well, no. The district won't let me have video cameras outside my store.

And he'd look embarrassed saying that, cause he should be embarrassed.

And why is that?

The neighborhood watch group felt that may prove to be to be too voyeuristic.

Well then Mister Saunders, what proof do you have?

Amy would want to draw a clown face on the cop. Mister Ian would get a moustache drawn on him.

Well Officer, I figure I don't have any proof then.

And then he'd start yelling that squeaky loud yell he does.

GUESS I'LL HAVE TO WAIT FOR THAT LITTLE BITCH TO ACTUALLY BREAK SOMETHING OR STAB ME OR TAKE A DUMP ON MY STOOP TO GET YOU ASSHOLES TO TAKE NOTICE HUH?!

Can't build a case without proof, Mister Saunders. Maybe in the mean time, you should take in one of these shows I've seen posted all over your door. Maybe you'll like the music they make.

And then he'd get squeaky again. ARE YOU SERIOUS? What kind of civil servant are you! Seeing some shitty chick-punk-band is not going to help me conduct my business better!

Monotone cop equals zombie cop. It was just a suggestion, sir. Now if you don't mind, there are other people with complaints waiting to see me.

I'm not surprised! And then Mister Ian would waddle away.

Childish fantasies. Amy could spend hours pretending and predicting scenarios. It had always been one of her favorite games to play as a kid. She prided herself as a good judge of character. As life got shittier, she found herself playing the game more and more to get through the day.

When she wasn't busy tearing up the slightly-bigger-than-coffeehouse-scene, Amy worked at a popular northeastern food chain that specialized in Coffee and Doughnuts. She saw a lot of cops.

It wasn't necessarily a bad job. She had some interesting co-workers, she could keep her earrings in, they didn't care about her hair or her tattoos, and she got tips. Not to mention all the free coffee and donuts she could ever want. The only problem with the job was it wasn't a very creative job. Fast during the mornings, especially Sunday mornings,



and during the five o'clock rush hour, but otherwise it was pretty easy going and tame, which gave her too much time to think.

Most people wouldn't consider time to think a bad thing to have. But when Amy got her brain-train a'rolling, she had a tendency to get lost. Usually not physically lost, but mentally. And not so lost that she couldn't work mind you, but just lost enough that she'd get anxiety from the thoughts she'd have and lose to other thoughts. Amy probably should have been on some sort of medication, but she faked being "normal" enough that people just figured she was on drugs or something.

None of that fit on her MISSING poster. The Missing poster consisted of a few basic lines: Age: 18 Height: 5'7" Approx. Weight: 120 lbs. Hair Color: Purple, Red, White and Green Eye Color: Blue Last Seen: At a pay phone in Schenectady, New York. A witness said she was looking for the number to The Institution.

### The Game

The dice clacked against the cardboard tower, knocking off a ranger perched on the uppermost scaffolding point. The figure fell a good foot from the tower standing pristinely in the center of the hand-drawn map. "And so, Barnibus fell to his death," chortled Hart the Elf.

"Fuck you Hart! You know that doesn't count!"

"Take it easy Lucas, you know Chris was just kidding."

"Dude," Todd said sympathetically, "you know how intense he gets during dragon fights."

"I have stress-intensified asthma Chris! Don't joke like that! I spent months building up Barnibus' stats, and I'm not about to let off-thrown dice determine ..."

"IT'S A GAME LUKE!" Chris emphasized. "And hey, what happened to our hand signals for O.C. conversations?"

"Oh crap."

All-the while that Chris, Lucas and Todd bickered, the Director of the game, Jeremy, had been rolling dice behind his divider. Peering out over the top edge, he eyed Barnibus the Knight, Hart the Elf, Tien the Wizard, Jezebel the Rogue and Gerard the Necromancer as they stood before a Dragon God and a small army of vampires. "That's right boys and girl, you all just wasted an action for in-game convo. Now, Mickey, roll to see if Jezebel can dodge the vampire's lunge."

Mickey grabbed the quarreled-over blue dice, "Thanks a lot Lucas."

Jeremy, Mickey, Lucas, Todd, Chris and Billy had been gathering here at Printed Heroes every weekend for a game like this for the past two years. They each had their own distinct taste in comics, but the thing that brought them all together more than anything was their love of role-playing games, or RPG's for short. It had begun like most long-standing friendships: a happenstance event of meeting at the right time.

Jeremy had been coming to Printed Heroes ever since he could read. His father had first introduced him to the establishment when he was five years old, and bought Jeremy his first comic book, an issue of Batman. When Jeremy was eleven, and given his first allowance, Printed Heroes was the one and only place he wanted to go to spend it. By age thirteen, Jeremy was a regular customer, biking to the shop on the way home from school almost every day. He even had his own box of comics he subscribed to, set up behind Ian's desk where all subscriptions were kept. It just so happened during the first weekend sophomore year of high school, Jeremy encountered Mickey, Chris, Lucas and Todd as they were all picking up their subscriptions at the same time Jeremy was. Out of the three, Mickey was the only one that went to Jeremy's school. Chris and Lucas went to the same school, but Todd went to a private school in the heart of Albany. Chris and Lucas' school was in a town a few minutes outside of Schenectady, and all three were both a bit jealous of Jeremy for getting to go to school with Mickey. None of them would ever admit it, as Jeremy would never admit in those first two years that he felt for Mickey anything more than friendship.

Mickey was not the typical nor stereotypical comic book fan girl. She was a gymnastics enthusiast for starters, though she didn't think the regulations or whatever that meant girls couldn't eat and had to tape down their breasts and all that was worth actually getting into gymnastics, so she settled for cheerleading. But only for the basketball team. When she would go to Printed Heroes to pick up her comics though, one might have never guessed she was into that sort of thing. She would show up in punk-rock skirts, which were various torn fabrics stitched together in a skirt form. She'd pattern and make them herself and wear them specifically to illicit discounts from Ian, the pervy vendor. On top, she'd wear v-cut T-shirts that gave a vague hint at her chest and plaid over-shirts from week to week. Her ebony hair would be braided and pulled back, maybe a few beaded strands hanging over her deep brown eyes and cocoa skin, never really wearing much of any makeup. Maybe some eyeliner now and then. Jeremy had never really paid much attention to the amount of makeup Mickey wore, but he had always felt special or privileged in knowing that he was able to hang out and be around such a beautiful young woman just about every weekend.



Billy, on the other hand hadn't joined up with the group until this year. Billy Skellington, as Ian called him on the first day of encountering Billy at Printed Heroes, transferred to the same high school as Jeremy and Mickey their senior year. Mickey was the one to bring him to the table, and the rest of the group eventually opened up to him before the summer hit. But there aren't too many weeks left in the summer now. By the end, the Mid-West Defenders, as Ian called them, will have disbanded and broken up to different colleges. Or at least that's the hope. Jeremy is still waiting on his acceptance letter, and really needed to get out of the house and into this Director's Dungeon game.

"All right! Another vampire bites the dust thanks to Jezebel's blade!" Mickey squealed.

"Nice hit Jez," said Billy, patting Mickey on the shoulder. Mickey smiled and laughed heartily, offering up a high-five to anyone willing to take it.

"Yeah, I know I'm badass. Now let's see if any of you suckers can get as awesome a kill as me."

"I'm more worried about the dragon," piped in Barnibus. Lucas looked over his character sheet and then to Jeremy, "it is my turn, right?"

"Yes Barnibus, you may take action." Jeremy said in a poorly practiced English accent. Behind his divider, Jeremy could read the stats for his dragon god, and knew there was no way any feat Barnibus had at this moment could one-shot-kill the beast. But if he rolled a natural twenty, it'd take a mighty big chunk out of him. Jeremy smiled to himself and looked around the table as he waited for Lucas to throw his dice. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Todd holding onto a soda can with both hands, trying to open it with his teeth. Chris eyed Jeremy knowingly and smiled. Smiling back, Jeremy said nothing, imagining how great this could turn out. Keeping his eye on Todd, he leaned over to mention to Mickey and Billy to watch Todd. He peered over to address them, and saw that Billy still had his hand on Mickey's shoulder and he'd moved his chair a lot closer to her than it had been before. Mickey didn't seem to mind. A sudden pang of jealousy and uneasiness filled up Jeremy like heartburn.

"NATURAL TWENTY!" Lucas shouted out.

"Oh shi..." cried Todd, as the soda-can exploded in his face. Mickey, Chris and Billy burst out laughing, and Lucas fell backwards out of his chair trying to avoid the splash radius of Todd's mess.

"SHADDUP!" hollered Ian from across the store.

Jeremy still hadn't reacted. His eyes were now locked on Billy's hand. All the chaos of Todd running around bewildered by the blinding soda and Lucas scrambling

to get a safe distance from Todd behind him, Jeremy was focused. He took a breath and looked over at Billy, who was watching and laughing with Mickey. Laughing like he wasn't doing anything wrong. Laughing like he shouldn't be.

"Get some paper towels pronto, Idiot Maximus!" Ian yelled at Todd. Todd scampered off to the bathroom, allowing Lucas to resurface from under the game table.

"So, how much of a hit does the dragon take Jeremy?" Lucas gently, yet with a broad smile, asked.

"Oh, what? You got a natural twenty? Congrats. That's really going to hurt the guy. Let me look ..." Jeremy ducked behind his divider board and tried to think rationally for a second. I have no right to be jealous here. None of us are dating Mickey. I don't own her. I don't have a reason to be this upset. Just because I've been in love with her forever is no reason for me to ... Jeremy stopped. Whoa, wait, I'm in love with her? How could I be in love with her and not know it till right now? What kind of mindfuck do I have going on here? Never mind it. Focus on the game. Lucas just kicked your dragon in the balls, let him know how well he did. Jeremy sat back up, looking only at Lucas. "Okay Barnibus. With a mighty slash of your shining sword, your strike hard and true against the snarling beast. With a mighty thrust, you cut open the dragons' stomach, and knock it back one-hundred feet in the process, causing it to step on and crush a vampire to dust."

"Who's da man?!" Lucas raised his hands for congratulatory high fives, which were reciprocated by Mickey and Billy at the same time.

Just then, a blonde, skirt-wearing young woman with a brown bag in her hand walked up to Billy as he settled from the high-five. She leaned in close to him, and tugged on his shirt. Jeremy, Lucas, Chris and Mickey couldn't hear what she was saying, but Billy wasn't too keen masking his emotions, as he had a horror-stained expression on his face. The young woman let go of his shirt and breezed through the exit. Billy started to get up, grabbing his things and his hoodie.

"Hey, where are you going?" Jeremy asked in a confused, shrill voice.

"I gotta bounce for a bit you guys. Something came up. I'll give you a call a little later though?" Before anyone could get another word in, Billy ran out the door.

"Do you have any idea what that was about?" Lucas asked Mickey.

"Not a single clue."

"Well, damn. What are we going to do now? Can we even make it through this battle without Gerard, Mr. Director?" Lucas queried, looking legitimately nervous.

"I think you guys can pull this out. You did kick my dragon's ass a bit Barnibus," Jeremy replied, his voice obviously more chipper than it had been moments ago. "As soon

as Todd gets back, we'll re-roll for Initiative and get the battle going." Satisfied, Lucas relaxed, just as Mickey stood up.

"Well, if we're going to wait for Todd, can I step out and make a phone call quick?" she asked, pulling her phone from a waist pocket on her skirt.

"Uh, yeah, sure." Jeremy muttered, somewhat distracted looking at Mickey's hip-hugging skirt. Mickey smiled wide and somewhat skipped her way out the door. Jeremy turned and faced Lucas.

"Hey, uh, have you noticed anything going on between Mickey and Billy lately?"

"Are you serious, Jeremy?"

"What?"

"They've been hitting on each other for like, two weeks now. You're just now noticing?" Chris interjected.

That same bubbling uneasiness filled Jeremy's stomach again. "Really...? Two weeks?"

"Yeah dude." Lucas smiled at Chris. "We've got a bet going if Billy'll ask her out first, or if she'll ask Billy out."

"Excuse me," Jeremy pushed away from the table and walked out of the comic shop. Outside, the corner Printer Heroes resided on faced a failed barbershop, and some dilapidated houses that looked as if a giant had shoved them together. Mickey was sitting on the curb with her little blue cell-phone to her ear. Jeremy could hear the dial tone of the phone from where he was standing.

"That thing's gonna make you go deaf at some point," Jeremy said with a grin, walking out and sitting down beside Mickey. She smiled back at him and closed her phone. "No answer?"

"No. It's probably too soon anyway," Mickey replied, kicking a rock on the road. "So, what's up?"

"Oh. Right." Jeremy searched for words. He was finding that his tongue felt like someone had replaced his taste-buds with sand-paper, and his throat was feeling hoarse. He cleared it. "I was just wondering, well... Are you into Billy?"

Mickey's eyes grew wide and she kicked a nearby stone rather hard, a knee jerk reaction. It cracked against a window across the street. Jeremy didn't take his eyes off Mickey. He adjusted his glasses though, as the glare from the sun was making him blink, and brushed a strand of his dirty-blond hair out of his face.

"Well, yeah, I suppose I am," Mickey said quietly. She looked intensely back at Jeremy, searching for some sort of reaction.

"Oh. I see."



"Are you okay, Jeremy?"

"Yeah. Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well..." Mickey broke her gaze and looked to her feet. "I just always had a sneaking suspicion you liked me?"

Jeremy gulped.

"I'd been waiting for a while for you, you know. I wanted to be with you too, but sometimes you'd be so indifferent, only focusing on the games or comics or whatever, that I didn't know."

Jeremy sighed, looking to his feet. That burning sensation turned to daggers, like his body was trying to kick and stab him on the inside.

"So, I let myself feel other stuff. And I think Billy really likes me. I like him. I really hope this isn't going to change our friendship Jer..." Mickey turned to stare at Jeremy again. He still looked to his feet. Mickey reached out her hand and took Jeremy's chin in it, turning him to face her. "Please, I don't want things to change between us," she pleaded.

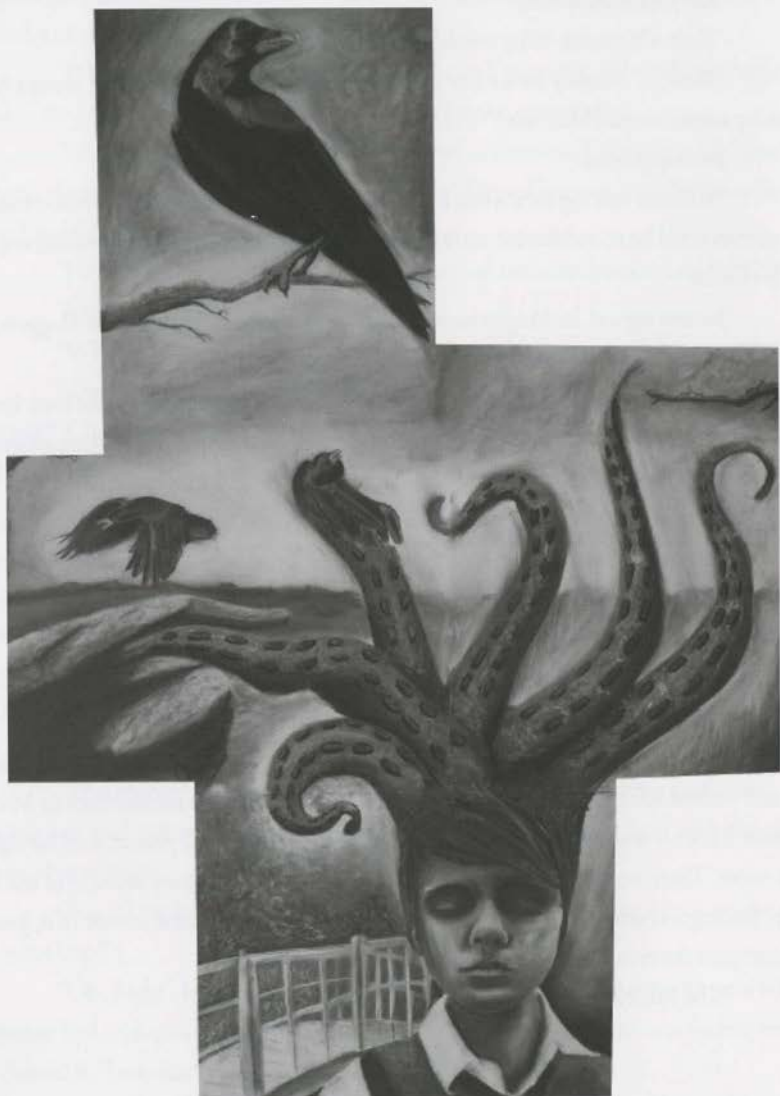
Jeremy chuckled a little, and took Mickey's hand in his. "Don't worry about it Mickey," he smiled. He forced the daggers and the burning down. "I'm just glad to have you in my life."

Mickey smile broadly at Jeremy, and he returned the look. They hugged, until it was interrupted by a buzzing in Mickey's pocket.

"Better answer Billy," Jeremy said. He stood up, smiled a grin that choked back a tear, and walked back towards Printed Heroes. At the doorway, he looked back to Mickey cowered back on the curb, attentive ear to her obnoxiously loud phone, and he sighed once more. There was a crinkled sound coming from where Jeremy stood. He reached down, finding a crumpled paper, and curious at a small design in the corner of it, Jeremy un-crumpled the refuse.

"The Institution," is all it said.





**Jonathan Nickles**  
*Untitled*  
Charcoal drawing  
**Honorable Mention Art Award**

## **The Priest** by *Kimberly Ratliff*

The dripping sink where he washed his hands every morning after urinating reminded him of his penis. The way the sperm dripped out a little on nights when his unrequited erections forced some of the seed from his body. This likeness was subconscious to the old man, however, and he thought little about the denial of his sexual desires, which had long since faded into nothingness, or about his purely perfunctory genitals, which were shriveling as well.

Yes, every morning he urinated first and then he washed his hands in warm water. And then he shaved the coarse hairs from his cheeks and chin. And then he splashed cold water on his face and dried it with a towel that smelled like detergent. And he put on his black pants and black shirt and strapped a little white collar around his neck. And he put on his glasses which had recently been upgraded—or downgraded, depending on how one views old age—to bifocals. And he combed his fluffy grey hair to the side and he slid the black shoes over his black socks and tied them tightly. And he put his black hat on his round head. And he tucked in his shirt and weaved his black belt through the black hoops on his pants and fastened the silver buckle. And he held his Bible and prayed on the edge of his bed for half an hour.

He ate breakfast in the cafeteria with all the other priests. They ate mostly in silence, not out of reverence or thankfulness for the meal, or out of piety, but out of boredom with each other. After dinner he sat in a tiny wooden box and listened to people's sins. "Theft," "Thou shalt not steal," "Adultery," "Thou shalt not commit adultery," "Lies," "Thou shalt not lie," "Bad thoughts," "Thou shalt not think."

When no one needed his confidences in the little box, his mind would wander. There was a blue, stained-glass window with weeping angels which he could just make out through the tiny window in his box. The dingy blue in the window reminded him of his schoolboy uniform, the same shade of glassy blue. The boys would stand by their desks and recite their multiplication tables. And they would emptily sing the songs praising the Union and Stalin in unison. He remembered how one day his friend passed out from hunger after singing and was hospitalized for four weeks.

The weeping angels often reminded him of his mother. Though he only saw her cry on one particular instance, that was the image he most often saw when thinking of her. She ran her fingers through his hair. She smiled at him though her eyes were strangely red inside and around the corners from her crying. Her dark hair was tied in a bun on the back of her head which she slowly undid by removing the pins one at a time and placing them

gingerly on the table before her. Her irises were the same icy blue of the winter sky visible through the window behind her. She kissed his hand and said she was sorry.

When he left the little box, he disrobed and wore a white T-shirt and sweatpants. He played basketball with the other men and boys for a while. He was not a good player, but that did not matter on that particular court. In fact, it did not particularly matter to him personally, either, for he was a holy man and unconcerned with those things. He was unconcerned with most things.

After Mass one Sunday he sat alone in the church at the end of a pew holding his Bible. He heard soft footsteps behind him and turned to see a small child who he recognized from the congregation. The child asked about his "funny accent." "I am from Russia," he answered. The boy was satisfied. He nodded and walked away.

The priest could have said, but did not say, that he was a religious minority in Russia and often found himself at odds in his own homeland against the strictly secular state. He could have said, but did not say, that when he was the boy's age, Russia was the Soviet Union. He could have told him that one night in early December the government's soldiers came to his house. Cloaked in black with big guns and gruff voices, they pulled him and his brother by their arms to the porch. It was winter and they wore nothing but flannel pajama pants and button-down shirts. His feet stuck to the frost on the wooden boards. They were frightened and they held hands as they looked back into the house through the screen door to the long hall where the family stood. The men forced his mother and father, grandparents, and aunts and uncles up along the wall beneath their family photos. They made them face the wall with their hands over their ears. They commanded him and his brother to turn away. His brother began to cry, but the priest only whimpered. They turned away and looked out to the evergreen forest beyond their home. The trees stretched up, scratching the chin of the moon. The cold and the pines smelled like a Christmas he remembered from long ago. He said "Shh ..." to his brother. The gruff voices spoke all at once and he could hear the sobs of his family emitting from the house. There were eight blasts as the soldiers shot the adults in the backs of their heads. He could smell the singed, mechanical smell of the guns mingling with the blood. He held his brother's hand tighter and began to cry.

The gruff voices were silent at first and then they shouted commands which he did not hear but somehow understood. The children packed their things, tip-toeing past the bodies, looking, as they were commanded, straight ahead. Out on the snow, their bare feet left brown little prints in the snow as the blood was lifted from their skin. The soldiers took the children and put them in their trucks and drove them away. The trucks were dark

inside and the two boys held each other closely. He did not wonder why his family had been killed. He only felt immensely scared and sad.

He recalled how his father had bounced him on his knees during breaks from making posters and brochures. He and his mother left these brochures and posters in town-squares when the sun was down and the air was exceedingly bitter. Her face was close to his and she smiled, whispering, "Be very quiet." He could see the wrinkles around her eyes, the creases in her forehead, and the shaking of her hands—all too soon for her age.

In his room that night he took off his shoes and placed them together at the foot of his bed. He removed his socks and trimmed his toenails. He removed his belt and unbuttoned his pants. He removed his shirt and placed his collar on his dresser. He removed his bifocals and placed the pair beside the collar. His shower was quick and warm with brief movements across his body as he had learned long ago it was best to do. He stepped out of the shower and examined his naked belly, his naked legs, and his naked feet. He brushed his aged teeth, or what remained of them from his harsh, Russian childhood. He pulled back the sheets on his bed and sat naked on the edge with his Bible. He prayed for half an hour and then he fell asleep.





**Kelsey Zachry**

*Detachment*

Acrylic paint

## **I Love My Sister** by *Matt Hatfield*

"Dear Santa,

I love my sister Wendy. She's the best. Sometimes she's mean, but I still love her. Dad always says for me to think about her feelings. I try to, but it's really hard. She doesn't always think about mine. But I love her. I really do! One of these days, I bet I'll get to show her!"

Harry Albert, Jr.

Foreman rolled over in his red-striped bed and slammed his alarm clock's snooze button. He badly wished that it was lying to him, that it wasn't actually 5:45 in the morning, but he knew better. The season was at an end. Work had started earlier and earlier. Now, on the final day separating him from a long month of serious hibernation, things would become the most hectic. He could hear the others scrambling out of their beds, throwing on their uniforms. Fourth shift. Was there anything more terrible? More inhuman?

"Gotta be human first," Foreman laughed gruffly.

Twisty poles of red and white greeted Foreman when he stepped outside into the morning flurries. Cold meant nothing to him, he had been raised in it. Some of the others, the "freshlings" they called them, had not adjusted yet and whined about their sore bones. Foreman would chuckle to himself and tell them to get back to work. It was his job to instill order and follow the schedule. If there was ever a slave to the clock, it was certainly the Foreman of the Fourth shift.

Second-Book approached him in the gusts of the white-morning. He was a short fellow with a round stomach and a bushy, brown beard. His beady eyes were watchful and careful, and ever so intelligent. Foreman liked him very much.

"White morning to ya," Sec said happily, "Fourth shift starting already?"

"You know it, Sec," Foreman smiled, "has been and always will. Where are you off to in such a blaming hurry this hour? Thought you book-blokes were evening types."

"Yeah, we are. We certainly are. I wish this was the evening," Sec grumped. "There's some sort of emergency meeting."

"Emergency, huh?" Foreman thought aloud. "I didn't hear anything about it."

Sec looked serious, "it doesn't concern production. It might if things get sticky enough, but we'll see. I doubt the big guy wants to involve the workers in something so cryptic. But then, it's probably just another fence-rider."

"Get plenty of those every year," Foreman breathed against the cold winds, "what's another mean? They always get approved."

"Not always, Foreman," Sec's face looked gray and weird for a moment, "not always."

The two trudged along as others bustled about; bakers began sweetening the morning gales with the promise of breads and bagels, fisherman walked sleepily towards their carved out ice-holes, rods and buckets in hand, and street-freezers walked about, spreading liquid-frost. Foreman thought about liquid-frost. The genius who thought that up had to be rich by now. Since the accepted mode of transportation had been changed to skating and sleds, courtesy of the Big-Guy himself, the frozen streets and roads had become essential for normal life. Liquid-frost was some sort of thick goop that froze instantly when it touched the ground. The street-freezers spread it out and sculpted it into flat, skate-able surfaces. Foreman watched one of the poor working-stiffs lose a hand to the frost once. Yes sir, those guys had it rough.

"But don't we all," he mused.

Sec looked deep in thought. The two walked into the main doors of the Capitol Building, where Foreman's factory production sheets were waiting. Sec would go upstairs and attend his emergency meeting, reserved for the brightest of them all. The Big-Guy ran a smooth operation, for sure. As Foreman drifted through the crowd of out-of-work chaps seeking new jobs and desperate mothers with suckling tykes, he saw a flash of bright red move. It was him. The biggest of them, the strongest of them, the one who had created it all. The man. The myth. The Big-Red-Guy.

Foreman collected his papers and went to the factory. Sec walked upstairs.

A grouchy polaron growled at Foreman as he tossed some old, useless wood out the back doors. Polarons were an unpleasant breed, and the hard-working factory Foreman would have loved very much to see them all deported. They were tall, tough, furry, and hungry. All the time they were hungry. Foreman had heard from Sec that those people from the South called them "yetis." He was unaware of what that meant, but it was no more inviting than the word "polaron." It all meant the same; angry, moody, rude, spiteful... occasionally dangerous.

"Shut your mouth, ya big fur-bag!" Foreman scolded, throwing some old wood at it. The big creature snarled and slowly lumbered away. Ungrateful beasts. The big-guy had taken them in during the Snowstorm of '87. They had proven that it was a bad idea ever since, by eating too many rations and attracting too much attention. It was not an easy



victory, hiding from those people in the South. And the gnarling monsters made it all the more difficult.

Foreman patrolled his factory and was happy with what he saw; productivity. This was the final night of actual production before the Delivery. It had been a hard year, too. New ideas, complicated constructs, things that Foreman did not even understand. This, what was it called? Gamestation? Foreman thought it looked dangerous. But he built it. About four-million of them, to be precise. He cared little for meanings or delegation. No, Foreman hated to ask questions. He preferred to keep his head down, point his stubby finger, and make the others build. That was all. Life wasn't too bad that way.

He was glancing out of his office window, when the phone rang. Not the normal phone. The red and white one. This was serious. Something bad was afoot. Hopefully no one was injured. The last time this phone had rang, Factory six had collapsed, killing over eighty-five. Foreman wiped sweat away from his brow and carefully picked up the receiver.

"Yeah? Factory twelve, Fourth-shift Foreman speaking," he was nervous and his knees were knocking together percussively, "what can I do for you?"

"Foreman? This is Sec," the voice chipped, "I'm at the Conference Hall. We need you over here."

"What, me?" Foreman stumbled.

"Yes, you. The big-guy himself insists that we get an outside party's input. I suggested you. You're up. So come over here, on the double!" Sec's voice became a little more agitated with the last word.

"Alright, alright," Foreman gruffly agreed. He hung-up the phone and took off his key-ring. Foreman threw on his coat and locked his office, keys still in hand. He saw the second-manager, Cane, and yelled at him.

"Cane! Get over here!"

Cane trotted over, his large belly floating along with him. His cheeks were especially rosy and his face was tired and heavy.

"Yeah, boss?" Cane dubiously wondered.

"Going out for awhile. You're gonna have to look after things. Take the keys, keep the production quota above fourteen percent, and keep your head as hard as nails. Here..." Foreman handed Cane the key-ring, "don't lose these. The only ones we've got. No copies."

"But Boss, I don't think I'm..." Cane began, but stopped.



Foreman was already gone. The doors slammed in behind him. Cane stood, nervous and curious. What to do? Oh dear...

"Dear Santa,

I love my dad. He's so cool. Once I got stuck under the kitchen sink, and I thought I'd be there forever and have to eat crud. But dad came and got me out with a wrench. I don't know how. My sister made fun of me. I was so scared. Wendy's mean. But I love my sister. I wish mommy was alive."

Harry Albert, Jr.

Two armored polarons guarded the main-gates of the Capitol Building. Foreman walked towards them with some fear. After the Fourth-shift starts, the Ice-Guard were out, keeping people off the streets and protecting the factories and of course, the Big-Guy. They were different than the average savages out in the cold, hard, unforgiving snow. These were trained killers. And if they did not believe his story, which he was unsure of how to explain, they may take a bite out of him. That would not be so swell.

"Say fellas," Foreman cautiously spoke, but friendly, "how's the weather out here?"

The two menacing beasts growled. Foreman inched backwards. Sec's voice piped up from behind the main gate.

"Oh! Foreman, you're finally here! Come on, come in," Sec greeted.

The gate swung open on oiled, new hinges, and the Ice-Guard stepped away. Foreman sprinted past them, anxious to leave their sight. Sec's beard was frosted over from the cold. The two walked inside.

"What's all this about, Sec?" Foreman demanded, knocking snow off of his boots. "I got a schedule to keep, you know? This our last day of production before the Delivery."

"Forget about it. Factory 12 can deal without its Fourth-shift supervisor for an hour," Sec warmly stated. "Anyway, this is important."

"More important than production?" Foreman asked, frustrated.

"Exceptionally," Sec bluntly retorted.

The two entered the main Conference Hall. Foreman gaped as he saw Books One through Nine sitting politely, and in the center... the Big-Guy. His visage was inspiring to Foreman; he was large, powerful, amazing. A giant, endless beard clung to his worn cheeks, a beard of work, a beard of love. Suspenders strapped his long, red trousers onto

his legs, which were considerably smaller than his torso. His arms were mighty, great, village-building serpents of muscle and strength. He had used them to build the entire operation. He had given them homes. He had taken in the polarons. He was as merciful as he was demanding. And here little Foreman was, looking right into the majestic eyes of the very heart of industry. Foreman's stomach felt weak. Puking soon, maybe.

"Welcome, Fourth-shift Foreman of Factory twelve," Book Four said happily. "I suppose you're wondering why you're here?"

"Yeah," Foreman stuttered in awe, "I mean...yes sir. I do. I mean, I am."

"Relax, my boy," Book Five said kindly, "this is no interrogation. We only want your opinion about something."

Foreman frowned for a moment, "Mine? Why mine? I'm just a craftsman."

"A mind unattached to the matter is a mind of unparalleled justice," Book Eight said, "A mind we need. As you know, we Books are required to solve all of the fence-riders during the year. There are always plenty. Usually it is no difficult task."

"Not until, of course..." Book One hesitated, "until we have something like this."

Sec walked Foreman to a seat. It was warm and relaxing, and Foreman began to loosen up. He sat comfortably. Sec brought a large collection of letters to him and delivered them in a pile on the long, oak table that housed the conference. His eyebrows raised curiously.

"What's all this?" Foreman questioned.

"These are letters from a potentate," Book Six firmly explained, "one of the most troublesome we've had all year. There have been times of joy, times of cheer...and times of hatred. Not violence, you understand, but hatred. And that's twice as dangerous this time of year."

Foreman nodded, still unsure of what this meant.

"What we need from you, Foreman," Book Three gestured, "is your impression. The other books and I have been reviewing this case for a week now. And we just don't know. We may never know. And here's why. Show him, Second Book."

Sec handed Foreman a sliver of torn paper. His capable, worker's eyes recognized the stock; it was construction paper. The text was etched in green crayon. A harmless color, green. It read as follows:

"Dear Santa,

I know you're busy. I've been bugging you so much this year. But I just want to make sure you know what I want for Christmas. I've been so good, me and Wendy haven't fought once! I love my sister. She's mean, but I love her. I gave her my juice yesterday. Can't

you make sure I get my wish this year? I'll be good forever if you do. I promise. I super-promise. My one Christmas wish this year is for ..."

The letter ended. It was ripped on the bottom. Foreman cleared his throat and looked puzzled.

"Where's the rest of it?" he asked.

Sec smiled sheepishly, "Ah, well...unknown. Somehow this particular letter got lost and ended up in the furnace. We figure one of the Ice-Guard spilled a bag of mail."

"Beasts, I tell you," Foreman chuffed out.

"It doesn't really matter," Book Eight snapped, "you see the point of this. Something about that letter is unsettling. It has all of the right words, it seems harmless on the surface. Like all of this potentate's other letters. Just another child's dream. But underneath, hidden in its subtext is something...sinister. At least I think so."

Book Five scratched his head, "We all think so. The real problem is, we don't know for sure. We also don't know the nature of the potentate's request. Normally a fence-rider is pretty easy to guess. A bad kid is a bad kid, you know? And it's hard to make a judgment call based on 'sinister subtext.' So we don't know what to do."

"You want me to, what?" Foreman smirked, delighted. "Decide whether the child is naughty or nice?"

They all looked uncomfortable except for the Big-Guy. He smiled at Foreman. It filled the small manager with something unsuspecting. A form of intimidation. He looked down at his pointy-shoes to escape. Sleigh-bells could be heard from down the hall. The delicious smell of hot-brewing cocoa wafted through the room. Foreman could not tell if these sensations were real or if the Chief, the Big-Red-Guy, was creating them.

"For lack of a better phrase...yes," Book One nervously agreed.

Foreman examined the letters closely for one hour and six minutes. He had trained his eyes for years to find fault in simple devices, to inspect above and below the surface for errors and faults. He was probing deep into these innocent children's letters with his carpenter's gaze, analyzing the structures of them, evaluating their content. Foreman was not a being of complicated emotions. He often told the workers in Factory twelve that, "a wheel's a wheel." He believed in this idea firmly.

Snow was falling harder outside. Frost covered the clouds and the Factories glistened in the winter twilight. Polarons rolled playfully in the snow-beds and shoveleers huffed and puffed, cold steam rising from their broad shoulders.



The Books sat outside of the Conference Hall waiting. Each was small and flimsy, grasping onto their thick hard-covers like shields. All of the Books were denoted a Tome from the Library, an encyclopedia to live by. It was with these same Tomes that they established laws, created order, recorded history, and calculated each year's Delivery estimate. They were fastidious and pretentious, a species obsessed with details. All except for Sec. Before being chosen as Second Book, Sec had been a factory worker. It was this different perspective that allowed Sec to understand Foreman. The decision at hand was not an easy one to make. And should it be the wrong one? There would be dire consequences. The Ice-Fields were nowhere to be banished. Sec worried for his friend.

Factories pulsed with light, heat, and work. Small builders assembled machines, painted them, bolted them fast, and wrapped them in ceremonial paper. The Furnaces deep under the snow burned away excess materials, ruined by the cold, and maintained heat for each small cottage. The Delivery inched closer and closer.

The Books all surrounded Foreman, waiting for his decision. The Big-Guy sat alone, looking into a large, brick fireplace. His pipe-smoke filled the room and he stroked his luxurious beard thoughtfully. Foreman coughed a little, wiped his nose on his sleeve, and stood up.

"Alright," he muttered, "alright then. I think I understand everything."

Sec smiled with satisfaction, "I knew it. I knew we could count on you, Foreman."

"Yeah, sure," Foreman said without pleasure. "This boy, he's fine. I don't see anything deceptive. I don't see any malice. Boys like this keep our production lines hot and our houses strong. We owe them everything in our world, don't we?"

The Big-Guy looked casually over his shoulder, and his cheeks grew red. He smiled a proud, glorious smile, one of wisdom. Foreman continued.

"There's a lot of hate out there these days. I can feel it. We all can. But I don't feel any when I read these letters. I only see a plucky little varmint who loves his sister. Do think we ought to give him what he wants? Grant him his wish? Yes, I do. I certainly do."

The Books all looked to one another, with analytical eyes that judged this decision. The Big-Guy rose from his velvet chair and walked calmly over to Foreman. The floor shook with his every step. His massive, bulging arms swung with power. He placed a rock-hard, work-strong hand on Foreman's small shoulder. He winked. The Books sighed in relief. The Big-Guy left the room, never having said a single word. Foreman gasped out loud, as if a great burden lifted from his body. He wiped his chin, and smiled at Sec.

"How do you guys figure out the child's wish if you don't have it?" Foreman asked.



Sec rubbed his hands together, "we let the Boss handle that. Somehow he knows. He always knows when he gets there. The funny thing is, we let the magic take over, but once it does it's out of our hands. If a kid asked for bear or something, we'd be powerless to stop him."

"Really..." Foreman frowned, suddenly afraid of what he had set in motion.

Then he went back to work. Cane had done alright. The production quota stayed at a nice, comfortable twenty-five percent. Not bad for a freshling.

Sec finished filling out the proper forms; delivery request papers, monthly revenue assessments, and all of that business. The Books recessed to watch the Delivery Ceremony.

Lights hazed through the sheets of delicate snow as the Ceremony began.

The workers all crowded the streets, to watch the Lord, the King, the Big-Guy, mount his trusty steed; a dignified, magnificent horned-deer. It snorted hot-breath, and raised its glowing eyes. They were gone. Skyward. The Delivery had begun.

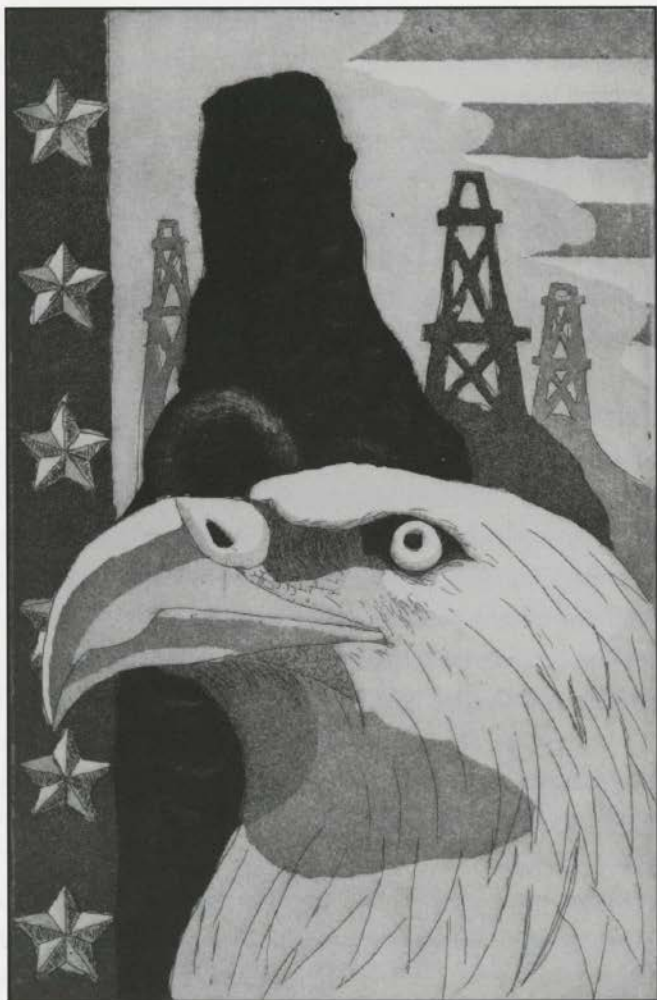
Foreman could not sleep that night. He thought about the world and all of its misery. For years upon years, upon decades, his only purpose in life had been to construct. To fashion. To create. Never once had he been asked to make an ethical decision. Not once. He did not like it. His mind did not take to it. And the Big-Guy...so amazing, so breath-taking...so terrifying. Somehow being in his presence was awful, like a waking nightmare. You were nervous, you were anxious. Even afraid. The King of them all. He rolled over, watching the snow fall. Polarons barked and roared in the night. Foreman shivered. Times were tough all over.

"Christmas only comes once a year," he sighed heavily.

"Dear Santa,

You're the best! I can't believe you granted my wish this year! I'm so happy! My Mom and Dad are sad, but they'll get over it! It was so awesome watching it happen! I hope it's okay that I watched. I couldn't help it. I saw when you went into Wendy's room and put your hand on her head and she kicked and yelled. But then she stopped! And the police don't know what it was, so you don't have to worry about that! That sound, you think it was her neck? It was cool! I love my sister, I really do! But she's so mean! She was mean! Thank you!"

Harry Albert, Jr.



**Patrick White**  
*Put a Boot in Your Ass*  
Aquatint print

## **A Distant Room** by Sean L. Corbin

The atmosphere explodes in a faint gray light, the walls shivering, the door locked yet creaking. My eyes are swimming in salt as they spin across the den. A cold thud at the back of my skull is advancing and receding. I take in the room. The shelves are smoking with dust, the books yellow and tired. It smells like stale potato chips, like a pipe was lit thousands of years ago, just before the door was sealed shut. A frayed baseball rests in a golden plastic stand, a circle standing out in the shadow.

I take a step towards the baseball and then stop. My feet leave prints in the mummified carpet, damp with sweat. I stare at the scarred hide of the ball and hear the ping of aluminum bats, see the stands of overzealous parents. I am back in Little League, and I am here in this room. I am young and old. I taste the bite of sweat and hot dogs. My head spins in circles processing baseline chalk and tobacco flakes. I see the crowds behind the bookcase, cheering through the ball. I see my own parents with their heads together, whispering, my sister chewing licorice, my dog jumping. I can't find my papaw in the throng. I brush my hand across the dry desk but the grime stays still. I rub dirt from the diamond through my twelve-year-old fingers but they stay pristine. The crowd, the books, the chain-link fence, the weathered ball – they all stare though me, a ghost. I feel sweat trickling down my bare spine. I grab the ball from its case and feel electric. I catch a pop fly and feel lightning. The grass is jagged glass and my feet sting. The carpet is lava and my feet burn. This room is a diamond splitting my life into a spinning kaleidoscope.

I stare across the shelves and one book catches my eye. Surrounded by shedding threadbare encyclopedias and worn Bibles, it stands fresh, its black flesh scar-free. I am nineteen again and sitting in American Lit, studying a T.S. Eliot collection. I am thirty-three and breathing smoke in a locked room. The pages feel like silk in my fingers as I caress them in the halogen bright classroom, the dim light of a dirty window. Eliot is my nemesis, the enemy of common sense and understanding. I cannot comprehend the messages of *The Waste Land* at nineteen or thirty-three, only that they are incomprehensible. The only idea of Eliot's I've ever understood is the objective correlative. Separation from my actions, that's what I need. Is that why I'm here? I'm ignoring Carrie's hand reaching for mine as we leave the classroom. The cracked lonely skin of my hands is splitting across my aged knuckles. I have no time to criticize something that's been dead for years, I tell her, and she doesn't know what I'm talking about – Eliot or us. The rooms are humming under lectures and mysteries.



There is an ancient rocking chair in the corner of the room, gray sunlight draped across the armrests. The cushioned back is ripped in three places with stuffing rupturing from the holes. I smell the old farm, the faint drift of cow pastures and dandelions always detectable from my grandparents' porch. I am ten years old and drinking lemonade from a wet glass, staring across the vast hills and hoping to see a coyote that never comes. I want to sit in the chair again but it looks fragile two decades later. The old blue heeler is sitting at my feet, his head resting on my size-four tennis shoes. I remember hearing about his death while at college and crying for hours. He's peaceful now, tired from a long morning of herding cattle at the sound of my papaw's whistle. I never visited his grave. The chair, the chair looks so much smaller now. At ten I am sitting on the edge to touch the ground. I take my chances and have a seat, listening to the aged pinewood grumble and stretch. It will hold.

I am twenty years old now and arguing about chairs with philosophers. About chairs and their shadows, their ideas. The ideal chair. I am sitting in the ideal chair at thirty-three, reminiscing about the fields. I am sitting in the ideal chair at ten, petting my dog and waiting for Papaw to get home. I am fighting my friend Jason about the existence of ideal chairs at twenty, refusing to accept the frivolous arguments of shadows. My fists are clenched and his eyes are wide and I feel the rough baseball scratch my palm, I almost shatter the sweating glass. Jason calls me a shadow of my former self. I call him a cliché and slam the door to my dorm room. The room is spinning in circles, not the shadow of circles.

I roll the old baseball against my fingers. The stitches are stretched enough to tickle the creases in my hand. I recognize it as my home run ball, the only one I ever hit. I am eleven years old and jogging blindly around the bases while my parents scream hallelujah, making sure that everyone can identify our familial connection. I am making sure to touch all the bases after nearly missing first. My teammates are shocked and my coaches are laughing. I see Papaw along the third-base fence. He's smiling the way he always smiles, lopsided with a roll of tobacco in his jaw. I am sitting in this chair wishing I could see that smile again. I am handing Papaw my home run ball after the game. Now I see, at thirty-three, what an honor that was for him.

This is Papaw's study, a distant room, and this is the first time I've ever stepped foot inside. I am eight years old and asking Papaw what is in here, and he tells me that it's his special room, where he goes to relax and "get a little distance from that ol' battle-ax," and I can never go in because it's his room and he has the only key. I am nineteen again and Mamaw is handing me a copy of Eliot's collected poems, telling me to take good care

of one of Papaw's favorite books. I am twelve again, looking for my grandfather from the outfield while a line drive flies over my head. I am twenty and rejecting new ideas in favor of old farm realities. I am ten years old and listening to Papaw's stories as he joins me in the adjacent porch swing. I am thirty-three and rocking in this chair, waiting for the door to open, hoping for a reunion.



**Jessica Rusher**  
*Burning Without*  
Computer generated image



## The Vagabond: A Short Story Cycle

by Charles Maynard

The fire in the can had long since died away, probably sometime in early dawn when the sky was still black and the town was still nestled. A thin trickle of smoke crept up from the rusted metal can and then vanished somewhere between the line of yellowish-grey sky and the soot covered bridge bottom above. It was a cold morning. It was the kind of morning that leaves the entire body feeling as though it were engulfed in whiskey the night before, swallowed, thrown up and left to lie about in sprawling, uncomfortable mess.

The Vagabond was up. He stretched his sinewy arms and looked out from under his bridge onto the town. Drab. The remains of communist Romania, the grey and beige buildings built for utilitarian purposes only, they sat like duplicated monoliths beneath a haze of grey smoke and clouds that lived eternal and unmoving in the city sky. The dew was still upon the grass and the scent of exhaust, grime and urine was continuing the process of distillation in the Vagabond's nose.

He made his way up a small dirt path; slowly he went, for there was no hurry. He noticed the same cracked concrete he had noticed a thousand times before, the same concrete he had noted noticing a thousand times before. Near the top of the path, he looked out onto his bridge. The cars were out though they were few, mostly maxi taxis, taxi cabs and the occasional smoke belching bus. In an hour or so the street would be roaring with motorists intent on being somewhere. It was as if everyone was always late, he thought. The world was late.

In the last few years the city had become utter madness. As more and more people left the country to seek work elsewhere, more money had come in and with it the extravagances that all humans enjoy; new clothes, new cars, TVs, cell phones, and all other manner of new toys. Things had changed a great deal in little time, communism was dead, the west was infiltrating with ideas of democracy and capitalism. The world was moving forward, at least part of it. The Vagabond had never felt part of this movement. After communism collapsed, he too collapsed, unable to keep a job, domestic stress and drinking had encumbered him until his will was broken and the street became his horizon. Youth had left him and the world was moving on.

The Vagabond stood on the curb as still and stoic as the communist apartment blocks that surrounded him. He had done this same routine for years now. Wake up, stretch, climb the hill, notice the cracked concrete, stand on the corner, cross the street and take his place there in the park, in the place that was called Podu Ros.#

It was early morning, early even for the Vagabond. The park was empty and dull, a reflection of the city around it. Dew had covered the grass and what leaves remained on the bushes. The benches were vacant except for two small dogs which sniffed about the base of one. The doughnut stands and pastry shops were just opening. The city was shedding its skin of night.

It smelled of autumn as the smoke from early morning wood fires floated in and culminated in a still air. The Vagabond sat staring at a pastry shop called "Patty France" where he noticed two ladies inside milling about, no doubt preparing their items to sell for the morning work crowd. He noticed the pink and blue writing which carried the name of the shop. How out of place he thought. What bright and happy colors against such a backdrop as this city.

As if rushing waves had come from nowhere, within fifteen minutes of the Vagabond taking his usual place, the doughnut and pastry shops were bustling with activity, the park was filling with people who were on their way to work or school or just coming home from some hellish night shift. The Vagabond watched as the people did the same thing they did every morning; take a pastry, perhaps a coffee, wait for the bus or maxi taxi, sit on a bench and hurriedly consume the bread and the drink before heading out to their daily toil. For the Vagabond, the days of those people appeared just as repetitive and hard and toilsome as his days. No matter what anyone thought, life was an exhausting escapade for anyone who lived it, perhaps more so for some than others.

For the next several hours the Vagabond sat on that bench with his greasy leather hat at his feet. Occasionally he would ask someone passing by for some money. Occasionally they would drop him a coin, occasionally they would curse him. Usually he sat there, sometimes lifting his hat to someone as they passed by. There was a certain art to begging and unfortunately, the Vagabond had never seemed to master it. By noon though, even with his lack of skill, the Vagabond had accumulated a bit of money, enough for the day at least. He decided to retire the hat for the day, removed the money from it and placed it on his head, straightening it as he walked.

He made his way from the park and across the big bridge of Podu Ros which was probably five or six times larger than his own bridge. He turned left immediately after the bridge and found his way into a small grocery shop. He opened the door and went in where he was met immediately with a most screeching voice.

"You have money?" Yelled a fat, middle aged woman behind the counter. Everyone in the store turned to see at whom she was speaking. The Vagabond knew the

normal routine and did not expect this. The fat lady was unfamiliar, apparently new to the shop. For a moment he stood stunned and felt the stares of the crowd in line. A man at the counter was impatient and the fat lady yelled again. "Get out. We don't want you in here. This is a place for people who buy things."

The crowd was still staring. The Vagabond, fumbling, hands in pockets, was still trying to remove the coins he had accumulated.

"Out!" The lady shouted loudly now. The impatient man at the counter had turned and said something, something vulgar. A young girl in the line snickered and nudged the rib of her friend. Chaos engulfed the Vagabond and he felt blood and heat rush into his face. In his mind he cursed them but when he went to speak he stammered stupidly. He felt spit on his lip and wiped it away, forgetting about the coins. The face of the snickering young girl took on a look of forced sickness as she turned her head.

Outside the store the Vagabond felt tears well up inside him. He was familiar with the store and the other lady had always treated him kindly. An instant feeling of deep loss; the store, the lady, the lack of familiarity, it all swept over him like a cold rain. His routine had been broken. Something else had been taken from him. He felt poor.

It took the Vagabond some time to come up with an idea of where to go. The shops made him nervous and so did crowds, at least crowds with which he was unfamiliar. Eventually he decided that he would pick a shop at random, his money would be in hand upon entering and he would show it to the store keeper immediately. He walked for some time, nearly an hour as he built the courage to enter the next shop. All this time, some tiny distant tune played in his head. Far away and faint was the music. It was both strange and familiar and it brought him a sense of comfort as he walked.

The second shop was a little larger than the first, but there were fewer people. The young girl at the counter said nothing as he entered. He took his place in line and stared down at the ground. He shuffled his feet twice and found he was at the counter looking the young girl in the eye.

"I'll have four cigarettes and a bread," said the Vagabond.

The young girl quickly got the items and placed them on the counter.

"One hundred grams of ham."

The young girl retrieved it, wrapped it in a small piece of wax paper and placed it on the counter next to the bread and cigarettes.

"Vodka. Sanuita. A small one."

The girl fetched the vodka.



"That's all," he said.

### *Dog Catchers*

A monumental sense of accomplishment had come upon the Vagabond. He had forgotten all about his encounter with the fat middle aged woman in the first shop. To celebrate, he pulled a large chunk from the warm loaf of bread he had purchased and crammed the entire piece into his mouth. He had not realized his hunger. He walked through a couple of alleys chomping loud and without any thought. Several dogs barked at him from over a fence but he paid no attention. The warmth and the taste of the bread, his accomplishment in the store had helped diminish any fear or self doubt he held. The faint song still played in his head, ever so distant and calm.

The Vagabond came upon a park in an area of town called C.U.G. which used to be an industrial place consisting of many factories and warehouses, most of which had long been abandoned. The park was bordered on its edges by several apartment blocks and upkeep of the place had been maintained quite well. Toward the rear of the park, a small Orthodox Church was under renovation. Several men were near the church talking and pointing. In the center of the place were several children. Two women in their thirties sat nearby paying very little attention to the kids. The women were actively engaged in a conversation that was increasing in volume every second.

The Vagabond made his way to a bench and sat down. He removed the ham from his pocket and took it gently from the wax paper. He sat it beside him. He tore another piece from the loaf of bread which had now completely lost the warmth it contained when he purchased it.

He plopped a small piece of the bread into his mouth and chomped away for a second before biting into the ham. His mouth was now full and he sat with his back comfortably against the dark green bench watching the events in the park. The construction men were still talking and pointing, the children were still playing, the two women were still talking. One of the women was standing now. It all seemed very normal to the Vagabond and he felt as if he were a part of each scene, that he himself was a scene amongst the others.

A disheveled looking man tragically appeared from a set of overgrown bushes to the right of the Vagabond. The rustling of the dry branches had caught his ear and he turned to look. He knew the man although he could not place his name.



**Kelsey Zachry**  
*Temptation*  
Acrylic paint and ink

With all speed, the Vagabond placed the ham back into the wax paper and then into his pocket. He looked back at the approaching man and secured his bread as well placing it beneath his tattered coat.

"Salut," said the man.

"Salut."

"I need some money. I have not eaten in some time," said the man.

The Vagabond noticed the face of the man and his memory clicked. His name was Bosei. The Vagabond had first met Bosei almost a year ago in the park at Podu Ros. He could not help but think that Bosei looked rough now, much older than a year ago. He noticed whelps, big and red, like cherry tomatoes upon Bosei's crumpled face. He noticed Bosei's missing teeth and ran his tongue over his own feeling the holes in his own mouth. Bosei's hair was matted, oily and looked like strips of rags.

"I have no money for you," said the Vagabond.

"I saw you eating food there." Bosei was feral in his movement. "Let me have some."

The Vagabond sat still for a second and looked at Bosei. The young man was beyond rough. His clothes were totally filthy and he was wearing no shoes. He looked like a man covered in all of the dirt and grime and grease and filth of the entire world.

"Here," said the Vagabond handing Bosei a piece of bread.

"I saw you eating meat," said Bosei.

"I have no meat," replied the Vagabond. "All I have is this bread."

Bosei jammed the bread into his mouth. He chewed frantically, barely breathing as his jaws became less and less filled.

"I need some money," said Bosei.

"I have no money for you," replied the Vagabond. "Go away from me."

Bosei smacked the Vagabond hard upon the back of his head. Instantly the Vagabond felt heat well up in him. He remembered the store where he had been embarrassed only a short time ago. His heart fluttered and he stood up.

"What? Look at that!" exclaimed Bosei pointing to a small blue truck that had just arrived.

The Vagabond watched Bosei for a second and then looked at the truck which had pulled up to the far side of the park.

"Dog Catchers," laughed Bosei as a half chewed chunk of bread was spit from between his missing teeth.



The Vagabond did not reply but watched the truck as two men got out and went to the back of the vehicle. They opened the door and one man removed a rifle. The second man was carrying a long stick with a rope at the end which had been tied in a loop.

"Watch this! They shoot those dogs with drugs," said Bosei still laughing, pointing to several dogs which were sniffing about the park. The Vagabond had noticed no dogs since he had been there, not until the truck had arrived. The idea of dog catchers created a tiny sense of joy in him as the memory of the slap to his head faded.

For several minutes the two men from the truck readied and manipulated their equipment. The man with the gun held a small bag and removed something from it walking slowly toward one of the dogs.

Bosei laughed hard. "Stupid bastard dogs, he tricks them with meat!"

The man tossed the meat from the bag toward the dog and aimed his gun. Incredulously the dog sniffed the meat for a second. The man fired the gun which made no more sound than rushing air. A yellow feathered needle struck the dog deep in its neck. The animal collapsed.

"Got him!" yelled Bosei with his stupid toothless grin. "Got that bastard dog. That's how they do that!"

The Vagabond made no reply as he watched. He sat back down keeping his eyes fixed on the man with the gun who was now reloading the weapon. The second man, the one with the stick, came to the fallen dog and wrapped the animal in a pale blue blanket which seemed to be stained with something dark, blotted about in spots. He then lifted the animal up and took it to the truck.

For an hour and a half, Bosei and the Vagabond watched the two dog catchers put down a total of five dogs in the park. Each time a dog went down Bosei seemed to lose his mind with excitement and curses. "That's how they do it!" he would shout. Everything the dog catchers did was followed by a most obvious comment from Bosei.

"Dogs in heaven now!"

"Bastard dogs!"

"Look, that dog tried to trick him!"

"Dogs think they so smart."

"Dogs in heaven now!"

"He got him. Look!"

The Vagabond never spoke but inside he enjoyed the spectacle immensely. The commentary from Bosei was annoying at first but the repetition and ridiculous obviousness of his comments somehow added to the event. Sometimes Bosei would

laugh so hard or talk so fast he would spit everywhere. Other times he would laugh so hard he would cough and then that cough would persist for several minutes on and off while he continued his commentary. It was at these times that the Vagabond felt a pity for the young man. The Vagabond knew it was unlikely that with such a cough he would last another winter. Coughs were a prophetic device of the body for people like Bosei, subtle harbingers of doom. Every now and then Bosei would ask the Vagabond for some money and every time the Vagabond answered by saying he had no money for him. He thought about this, hearing the prophecy of Bosei's cough and how it would most likely mean that Bosei would fade during the horrid winter. Money wouldn't help him though.

After putting the last dog into the blue truck, the two men loaded up the gun and drove away. Bosei made a few nonsense comments that seemed to relate to nothing, asked for some more money and upon being ignored, grew bored of the Vagabond's lack of response and walked off vanishing between two buildings, still talking.

Silence. The park was empty. It was late afternoon now, around four. The Vagabond took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it with a match. He inhaled and held the smoke inside. He closed his eyes and exhaled, slow and methodical in his action. The gentle tune in his head mixed with the smoke and the brisk air and the day became almost perfect. There was perfection in the air at that moment, a single pause between action and movement and life and the Vagabond spent as much time as he could absorbing it.

### *Dogs*

The sun had set behind the monoliths and the grays and beiges of the familiar city had become muted and flat. Shadows spilled down the faces of the great communist giants like blocky rivers of black ink. The entire world appeared monochrome except for the occasional small slit of a window from which cozy warm orange glowed. A feeling of longing had somehow found its way into the heart of the weary Vagabond as he made his way back to his bridge. The warmth of the orange glow from the faceless blocks around him had rekindled a memory of childhood, a late arrival at his own home where his mother waited for him with warm tea. The memory was as distant and faded now as the square, monochromatic mountains which engulfed him.

It was still a good two kilometers back to the bridge. The walk was a winding one through the labyrinth of apartment blocks and alleys. The Vagabond passed through several sections of blocks without seeing a person. He passed courtyards where children had played during communism. Now these spaces were overgrown with thorns and

thicket, no one to care for their upkeep anymore. Rusted playground equipment stood like crippled skeletons, skinless giants twisted and bent. Discarded crates and pallets lay busted, already rummaged for anything of value. He stopped and took several pieces of broken wood, looking over his shoulder at least three times as if he were stealing. After all, it wasn't his. Nothing was.

The Vagabond had acquired the wood he needed. He placed the smaller pieces into his plastic bag. He tried several times with a larger piece of wood but found that fitting it into the bag would be impossible. He discarded it and began to leave when something from behind him caught his ear.

As he turned, he had almost begun to apologize thinking the sound had come from the owner of the block when he noticed, instead of a man standing behind him, it was a dog. There were two more, several meters to the foremost dog's rear. All were emaciated, bony and thin. In their eyes they had the look of death, as though the apocalypse had been loosed upon them. The Vagabond had seen this look before. It was a look of nothing to lose, a look of one final gamble which begat all or nothing. It was a look that seemingly transferred from the eyes of all three animals to the eyes of the Vagabond and within his mind he had no choice but to accept the bet. He had seen men with this same look in their eyes. They had been desperate men.

The lead dog barked a snapping bark. Flashing white teeth streaked the darkness. The two rear dogs followed suit. In their snapping was vile hate contrived from a lifetime of suffering and pain, a lifetime of torment.

The Vagabond winced and dropped his plastic bag of broken wood. His stance became rigid and he felt his heart pulse. Sweat formed on his brow and a cold chill spilled over him. Without taking his eyes from the lead dog he bent his knees and searched as if blind for the big piece of wood he had set down. His fingers scrambled in the warm dirt. The smell of wood fire mixed with freshly cooked sarmale# filled the air.

As if sensing what the Vagabond was attempting to do, the lead dog lunged forward, flying up from the ground and through the air. The Vagabond panicked, forgot about his search and went to step back. His knees and reflexes failed him simultaneously and by the time he could react, the lead dog was upon him.

In a chaotic blitz of black and white flashes, deviled eyes, the growling and the snapping of the dog's jaws, the Vagabond had somehow been able to get his arm in front up, as a sort of shield. Into his flesh he felt the teeth, tiny needles, stinging pain on the bone. Cacophonies of growling anger surrounded him and he realized one of the other beasts had begun to pull at his pant leg.



Another white snap at his face. He managed to keep the snapping head from his face.

More growling, raging drums, a snapping black bark from oblivion.

The music that had once been so faint and distant was now pounding with heavy drums and deep melodies, imposing structures arose from the sound, tombstone like monoliths grew in the mind.

The Vagabond imagined looking down upon the situation. How he scuffled in the dirt in that bizarre vision as three of man's best friends turned upon him. How weak and thin he looked. He noticed his thin pants and his stupid dirty shoes, his all-purpose shirt and the bag of wood pieces that he would have built a fire from. For a moment he felt a tear in his eye as he realized what was happening. He had come upon the altar of death and he was to meet his fate in the same way as if he had lived 10,000 years ago. He was to be some lowly beast's dinner.

Reality overtook the vision as a vice-like set of needles ripped through his shirt sleeve and pierced his forearm. His free arm searched mechanically for the big piece of wood which was hidden somewhere in the night.

As the third dog joined in the scene the Vagabond discovered his bag of wood. His creature of a hand scuttled through the dirt to find the opening of the bag somewhere in that backward darkness.

More needles. More pain. More white snapping. More apocalypse.

The hand had found the bag and was searching maniacally for a substantial stake. The Vagabond could hear his own breathing and the world slowed. The drums pounded in his mind. His head jerked backward. Orange streamers of light from the distant windows passed by in elongated forms, violent streaks. The white of the teeth were paused and stretched. The pain in his arm was infinite.

The hand in the bag had exited gripping a dagger of wood. With all his might the Vagabond rammed the pointed end of that wooden dagger directly into the neck of the dog on his arm. The beast shrieked cowardly and released its grip stunned from the stabbing blow. Something warm and wet splattered the Vagabond's face.

One of the dogs on his legs had released as its leader fell to the side crippled by the neck wound. The other was unaware of what had happened as the Vagabond sat up and jammed the wooden dagger into the ear of the beast. It cried in pain and jumped to the side. Its front legs gave out and the dog fell upon its face, its ass in the air, its stomach heaving.

Hurriedly the Vagabond jumped to his feet. His nerves were frayed and his adrenaline was manic. The uninjured dog had taken several steps back now. The leader

was yelping in agony on its side, kicking in the black dirt. The dog with its ass in the air had stopped breathing and was dead, hunched over as if in heat.

Warm pain shot through the Vagabonds arm and into his shoulder. Bending over, cradling his wounded limb, he picked up the missing large piece of wood. He yelled something unintelligible at the dog as it backed up farther. In a mocking motion, the Vagabond swung the piece of wood wildly and the dog recessed even more.

When the dog was a safe distance, the Vagabond walked to the yelping dog on its side. Raising the wood into the air with one arm he brought it down in a sweeping arc, not once, but five times, until the brains and the skull and the blood of his attacker were bashed out and spread across the battleground in abstract glory.

Death was warm and black, a bizarre shadow, oily and strange. It was a disturbing image, one he associated with chaos and adrenaline and rage, million year old instincts and heart pounding fear. The Vagabond clambered around in a fog of drums, pounding hearts, wet dog and fresh baked sarmale. His head reeled and he collapsed to his knees vomiting.

By the time he returned to his bridge, the Vagabond was exhausted with pain and emotion. His heart was racing and the image of the shadowy beasts, the snapping white teeth and hunger driven eyes were all fresh and real in his mind. Unable to rest, he took the wood from the plastic bag and emptied his pockets. His identification card fell on the ground and moonlight gleamed from the laminated face.

“Gheorge Bogdanescu.”

He read his name aloud. It was a sound he rarely heard and with it came a certain comfort. He stared at the card for a moment. He remembered his mother, the orange glow of lights in his block, the smell of wood fires, Christmas and sarmale. He rinsed his arm off with some water in a metal pan and wrapped the wound in a bundle of rags. The song in the back of his mind continued playing as he lay still on his blanket. The punctures were painful to the touch, they burned. The idea of disease traced a fine and instantaneous line through his mind before he quickly put it aside. Worrying about such things was useless. He downed the tiny bottled of vodka and felt the pain and the dogs and the day drizzle away as he lay motionless under the bridge. Before he knew it, the vodka led him to sleep, and sleep took him away.

## What Happened by Francis Krug

A bell chimed above me as I entered the door of Speedway. The bright lights from the ceiling and coolers reflected off of pastries, drinks, and candy bars while the hum of the machines filled the background. I made my way straight to the cashier.

"Camels, please. One pack."

The bell went off again as a girl entered. I saw her beyond the man taking my money. She was small with shoulder length, black hair. Her solemn face looked around the store as if she had never been in one before. Soon she was standing next to me.

"Salems, please." Her voice was velvet. I felt uncomfortable as we stood together; like I didn't belong. I tried to nod to her while we stood since she was a familiar face. Eventually, I gave up and walked out the door.

I put my headphones in and made the world my music video, watching my feet as I walked. Every step I took was a count to the beat that I recited in my head, "One, one-two. One-two, one, one-two-three, one--"

"What are you doing?" a voice asked behind me. It sounded like a mumble and it wasn't until I stopped, turned around, and took off my earphones that she asked again, looking at my feet.

"Oh, uhh ..." I trailed off, embarrassed, "It's a game I play when I walk. I try to miss the cracks."

"Break your mother's back?"

"Sorta, it's more just a game now to see how consistent I can be."

She looked behind her, the way I—we came, then back to me. "Are you ... winning?"

"It's not very even," I smirked.

"Annette," her hand reached out to me. She looked straight in my eye as we talked, almost as if trying to find a splinter in the back of my head.

"Levi," I replied. Her hand in mine was soft, yet when we shook, she put much more energy into it than I did.

"Nice to meet you," she smiled, then looked past me as her eyebrows furrowed, "Where are you going?"

I could have lied. I could have told her that I was late for something: work, home, homework. But I didn't. There was no reason to. I am a terrible liar. "I really don't know."

"Wanna sit for a minute?"

I looked back and forth, "Right here?"



"Why not?" She then, in one smooth motion, dropped to a cross-legged position right in the middle of the sidewalk. I was not so graceful, but eventually made it to the ground. I took out a cigarette and lit it. She followed suit. Soon, smoke circled around us as we faced each other.

"I've seen you around campus," I said as I exhaled.

"Yeah, I like to walk around a lot. Usually I never notice anyone because I'm in another world."

No words passed between us for quite some time. We just sat there and watched cars go by while clouds formed above our heads.

"You know," Annette started as she stared at the sky, almost as if she was answering some question, "They say that it means something when you can sit in silence with someone and be comfortable."

I raised my eyebrow at her, "Are you comfortable?"

"No. Why do you think I felt the need to talk?" A smile slowly escaped her straight face and we giggled, holding our sides as if we were little kids. It felt good to laugh.

My phone began to chime and I apologized as I looked at the caller ID. Sara. I breathed in as I flipped it open, "Hello?"

"Hey!" Sara answered immediately.

"What's up?" I asked unwillingly.

"I'm in bed. You should come tuck me in."

My whole chest jolted sharply. Goddamn you, I thought to myself and I couldn't figure out if I was referring to her or to me.

"I'll see you in a little bit." She had me. She knew I would come. She hung up knowing I would be there. She knew I couldn't say no.

"Are you okay?" Annette asked as I kept the phone to my ear.

"Yeah," I finally squeak out, "I'm sorry, but I have to go meet someone."

"You don't look very thrilled about it."

I didn't say anything back. I thanked her for the visit and then walked away. She didn't move or anything. She just sat there. I wanted to stop in my tracks and come back to her, as if she had some sort of solution. I could ask her to take me somewhere, anywhere. "Away," I would say to her, and somehow she would know what I meant. We'd go away and I could trace the lines of those energetic hands of hers. All the while she could tell me her favorite color, favorite food, and favorite place to be kissed.

I didn't turn around, though. I didn't even glance back, not once. Soon I was at Sara's door, wondering how long Annette sat on that sidewalk. No need to push the

doorbell. I just had to open the door. It's always the same. I can remember times when I burst through the same door, hardly able to contain myself. Now, I dreaded it, but knew that I still wanted it. I knew that Sara knew that, too.

"Goddamn you," I said through the door to wherever she was waiting for me. I muttered it again, this time to myself when I reached for the doorknob. I barely had the door open and the strong smell of incense wafted out.

"Hello?" I called into the smoky house. The whole place had such a warm light within it; I couldn't help but to want to feel comfortable. It made me want to leave even more.

"Hello-o," she sang to me from somewhere else in the house.

I called out again, this time drawing out everything. She replied with an even smoother, longer tune and then finished with a giggle. My face went flush and my stomach went into knots. It had always felt like the first time, even now.

Slowly, I moved to the stairs and climbed every step with cat-like caution, so I could tell where exactly she was. The sound of her moving in the water echoed past the walls to where I was standing. I felt sick. I turned the corner to find her buried in bubbles. Her hair was not even wet. She had not been there that long.

I knelt down beside the old fashioned, gigantic bathtub and looked at her. All that I could see was her neck and her head; the rest was left to my imagination. I didn't need any, though. I crossed my arms and rested my chin on them at the edge and stared at her.

"Hello, dear." She ran her fingers through my hair and I could hear soapsuds popping as she smeared them on my head with her wet hand. My whole body started to relax and I hated myself for it. Her hand slid back to graze my neck, then slowly her grip tightened to gravitate my lips towards hers. She kissed me, softly for a moment, then passionately. I followed suit. We were never gentle lovers.

Her hand left the back of my neck and I was released, but only for a moment to undress. I slid into the tub to join her as water splashed all over the floor.

"Don't worry about it," she reassured me and slowly floated closer, surrounding me. I felt small kisses trace my collar bone and move up my neck to my ear while my mind mulled over what happened today. My eyes watched the light above us as my conscience fought with my id. That all stopped when her fingers touched my chin and moved my face slowly to meet hers.

"Look at me," she said so soft, so smooth that my eyelids fluttered in response. It was nighttime when I left her house. The water that I spilled getting in was nothing

compared to the mess we made afterwards. Annette had left my mind. Everything had. Sara had a way of doing that to me. No drug could compare to that. I walked back to my own home in the humid air of that summer night, tracing back the conversation we had as we laid in what was left of her bath.

"You've found someone." She didn't ask. She told me as if I didn't know.

"What?"

"Your spirit, it's different." She held me tighter and tighter as she spoke, "You're no longer mine."

I couldn't reassure her of anything. She was right. I thought about telling her about my day, but instead I just laid there against the chilly porcelain of the tub. We stayed there until we both began to shiver and didn't speak another word all night.

I helped her clean up the bathroom and then walked out into the cool night. All the way I wondered if I'd ever see the inside of that house again, or if I'd be able to remember what Sara looked like; waiting for me under bubbles. Upon arriving home, I immediately took a hot shower.

I woke from vivid dreams the next morning. It occurred to me then that I hadn't slept all the way through the night peacefully in weeks. Days began to melt into each other. I became frustrated with the fact that the sun set so suddenly every afternoon. It was as though the purple light in the sky was the only thing that made me aware of what day it was.

Annette was nowhere to be found. I spent every moment walking around and looking over my shoulder to see if she would manifest in the corner of my eye somewhere I forgot to look. But she never showed up. That's when I began to question if she had existed at all.

I found myself at Sara's door again. I was shaking as I pushed the doorbell and waited for her. It was the first time I waited for her to answer since the beginning. I needed something, but I didn't know what it was. It took a couple of moments before I heard footsteps coming closer and the knob turn. She opened the door and sleepy eyes met me.

"Hey," she yawned, which then turned into a smile, "What's up?"

"I..." I realized, then, that I had nothing to say. Soon her hand grabbed mine and led me in. She didn't say a word all the way up to her bedroom.

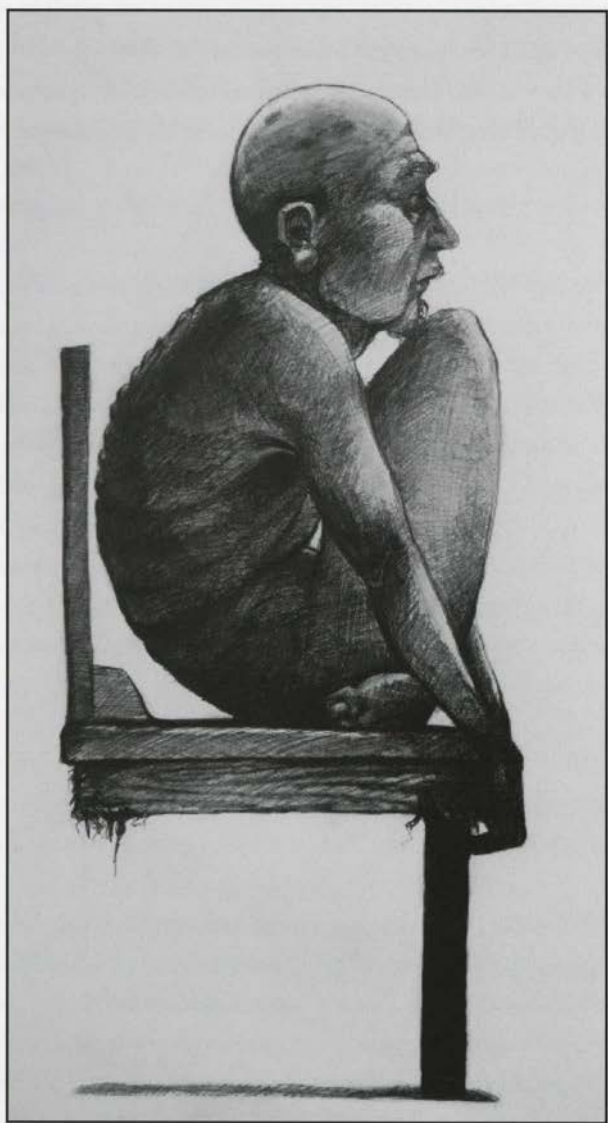
Her head laid on my chest and a sleepy finger trailed my ribs. We didn't talk. We hadn't even touched. We just climbed into bed and I stared off around the room. I knew the room well. It was as familiar as the body she owned whose bare skin now touched mine. I helped her paint and decorated it. It was then that I realized that I could not leave,



not yet. There was still something that bound me to Sara. As I scanned the walls, I noticed that they were now all empty.

“Where are all your pictures?” I finally asked her.

“I took them down.” Her voice vibrated my bones. It was quiet and higher than usual. That was the last thing she said before she fell asleep. I soon followed her.



**Lea Faske**  
*Balance*  
Graphite drawing

## Thug by Nathan Wellman

I couldn't look at Casey's face at the funeral. My wife tried to drag me up there but I wouldn't do it. Literally, she almost ripped my suit sleeve trying to get me to go up there with her. Tears were streaming down her face. I wouldn't do it. The last thing in the world that I wanted was to go up there and look at whatever the embalmer thought Casey was supposed to look like and remark serenely about how "peaceful" he looks. Casey was eight years old. He isn't supposed to look peaceful. He's supposed to be a hyperactive pain in the ass.

Casey. My son. Casey was my son but he's not anymore. Now he's worm food. I threw up in the bathroom.

After that I headed to the front doors, mostly to hide from my wife. She was still hysterical and I wasn't helping. Everybody probably thought that I was dirt. Maybe I am. But I just couldn't go up there with her.

A steady trickle of people were still coming in and signing the register. Am I off base in thinking that there's something smug about those little autographs books? "John Smith was here, and his life is going a lot better than yours." I can't think of a single solitary moment when I would ever enjoy flipping through that book. What am I supposed to do with it?

Some of the people coming in were trying to catch my eye, so I ducked back into the main hall only to run smack into Mrs. Kennedy's sympathetic embrace. She had been Casey's teacher. Me and Casey used to joke that her sharp nose made her look like a Pterodactyl. Looks like she got the last laugh now. She was petting my hand softly, as if I were a cat.

"I'm so sorry," Mrs. Kennedy said. I believed her. I spotted a whole colony of wadded up napkins in her pocket. If I didn't get out of here I would be consoling her pretty soon.

"It took us all by surprise," I agreed. This response was programmed into me by now.

"He was ... so ... young!"

Mrs. Kennedy started to sob magnificently. If I'd been holding an Oscar I would've handed it to her, that's how impressive it was. She was still cradling my hands, so I turned it into a sort of awkward handshake and treated myself to another bathroom break.

This was brutal. I ran some water over my face and tried to recognize my old happy self in the mirror. I couldn't do it. All I saw was a baggy eyed mummy with chapped



lips and red eyes. How was I supposed to look at Casey's face up there when I couldn't even recognize my own? I just wanted all of this to be over.

Mrs. Kennedy was nice enough. At least she hadn't given me any of that "it was his time" shit. I almost punched my father-in-law in the face when he tried to pull that one on me. It was nice of her to swing by and squeeze out a few tears, even though her and Casey hadn't really gotten along.

I still remember that phone call. I'd had to pull the receiver away from my ear.

"Your son has pushed me to my wit's end!" she'd shrieked. "He doesn't respect my authority, and he's absolutely ruthless to some of the other children who are trying to learn. One of you needs to come to the school right now and pick him up for the day. If he doesn't shape up soon ..."

The usual teacher stuff. When I was Casey's age my parents must have gotten a million of those calls. My wife had been the one who drove over and got him. He wound up getting grounded, but I can't remember what it was he'd done. There was one word from that conversation that reached out of my memory and made my heart skip though. That "ruthless" word. What had she meant by that? Wasn't that a little strong for an eight year old kid? I guess it doesn't matter anymore. (But seriously, ruthless?)

The music was starting up outside, and I knew that there would be no mercy for me if I skipped this service. I gave my face one more slap of cold water and headed out into the chapel that had cost us I don't know how many thousands of dollars. More than I'd spent on his birthday and Christmas combined last year. He was going out in style. Probably every single rug-rat in Casey's class were attending with their parents. Everyone who had ever even heard Casey's name was here actually. Only the young sell out their funerals. I guess people like to gawk, like how everybody always slows down when passing a car crash. It makes you feel more alive, as long as none of it's happening to you. Looking at those kids, I wished that they looked a little more upset. Most of them were solemn enough, but nobody was crying. Two girls in the corner were giggling about something.

They'd reserved a seat up front for me next to my wife, though I don't know what I'd done to deserve that punishment. She clutched onto me and wailed like a woman in a straight jacket. I envied her. After she flushed all of this out she was going to be a lot better off, while I would be stuck in this weird denial funk of mine. My wife could shoot through the five stages of grief like most ten year olds can recite the alphabet. After awhile she composed herself a little, and the pastor started to give his service.

"What are we going to do?" my wife said right into my ear. "Oh, honey, our Casey's gone."

"Don't talk like that," I said gently enough. I patted her shoulder, because I thought that's what I was supposed to do.

"Don't talk like that? It's true! This entire funeral is here so we can talk like that! Why don't you say anything?"

I hushed her because she was getting louder than the preacher. When he was done a whole parade of people came to the microphone to tell some amusing antidote about my son. I didn't go up there. I really didn't even listen to what everyone else was saying. I was staring at that miniature coffin. I could see just the tip of his nose peeking out of the coffin. When they told me that they were doing an open casket I almost pissed myself, but I'm told that they did a good job putting him back together. That tip of the nose looked pretty good, anyway.

My aunt sang a church hymn, and I remembered how Casey hated that song. A slippery laugh barked out of me, and I stuffed my knuckle into my mouth to shut myself up. I got a few curious stares, and then they looked away, content that I must be crying. I didn't care what they thought though. As Leslie Gore says, it's my party so I can do whatever the hell I want. I was imagining Casey up there singing "Don't Stop Believing" on a karaoke set. He would have loved that. The rest of the service went by in a daze so strong I thought that some merciful soul must have spiked my diet Pepsi. I just remember my wife begging me to go up there and say goodbye to him when everyone was taking that last tour of the coffin.

"You owe this to him," she said.

"Hell," I scoffed.

"Please go up there with me. I don't want to go up there on my own."

"Your dad will take you."

And he did. It all worked out, so I don't know what the big deal was. But when that lid closed there was something so final about it that it made me want to scream "STOP!" as loudly as I could. But I didn't.

The drive home was quiet. I think that she was mad at me. I was just glad she hadn't wanted to wait around and watch them drop him into the ground. That would have been just as bad as seeing his face for me. When we made it home I grabbed a beer and sat down on the couch. The TV was on but I wasn't watching it. There was probably only a few minutes before the flock arrived with more food than our little refrigerator could hope to handle. My wife walked into the room and stared at me. She looked nice in her clothes. Very tasteful.

"Do you remember when Mrs. Kennedy had you pick up Casey from school a few weeks ago?" I said.

Good God, it had only been a few weeks ago. My wife frowned, obviously not knowing where this was going. Neither did I, really. That "ruthless" word was just still jarring me. She said she remembered.

"What was it that he did that got her so pissed off? Was it just Mrs. Kennedy being a Pterodactyl again?"

Stupid Mrs. Kennedy, with her long beak and soggy tissues. One time Casey had drawn a picture of Mrs. Kennedy flying high above the playground with two helpless children in her talons. I'd put it on the refrigerator.

"No, Casey bullied one of the smaller children," my wife said. "Martin, I think his name was."

"Bullied?" I almost yelled it. Casey, hurting other children? Casey, in a tacky leather jacket with a toothless (ruthless) grin stealing lunch money? Casey... my Casey?

"But it was just a misunderstanding, right?" I stammered. "Casey would never... would he?"

"You know how much trouble he got in all the time. Why does it bother you so much all of a sudden?" she said.

"No son of mine is going to be some thug of a bully!"

My wife smacked me so hard I thought God had hit me. She'd never smacked me before. She was pointing one of her fingers at me, and it was trembling.

"Don't you ... dare ... call him a thug!" she said.

The doorbell rang, but she held the pose for a few more seconds to make sure I got the point. She went to answer the door. I didn't go with her or acknowledge the visitor's presence. How could I explain to her how big of a deal this was? Little Casey, who had reached out for me to pick him up every time I got home, a bully? Surely I'd taught him better than that! I racked my brain for any warning signs, but couldn't find anything. He told me that everybody liked him at school. My little champ.

My wife disappeared upstairs and returned in more casual clothes. She smiled easier in them. Everywhere I looked people were wearing T-shirts and jeans. I was overdressed for my own party. Most of the people were congregating in the kitchen, where an enormous potluck of food was being eagerly attacked. People were smiling tentatively and complimenting Wilma's macaroni and cheese. I heated up a TV dinner and headed back to my chair.



A lot of the kids were eating in the living room since the kitchen had filled up. My presence in the room seemed to suck all their livelihood back into the solemnity of the funeral, and they finished up in silence. One of the kids got done and nudged his friend.

"Come on, Martin. Hurry up!" he said.

Of course I remembered the name and of course I stared at him. He sure was a weenie-looking kid, alright. He was the kind of kid you expected to be really good at physics. A green cast encased his left arm, and I couldn't see Casey's signature on it.

"You're the boy that Casey fought with, aren't you?" I said.

Martin looked really uncomfortable, and I had a feeling that whatever it had been, it hadn't been much of a "fight." He scratched at his cast. I tried to smile a little.

"Sorry," he said.

"No, it's alright!" I assured him. "Boys will be boys, eh?"

"I guess ..."

But all the other kids were trading knowing looks amongst themselves, and my heart sank. My attempt at smiling was getting a lot more forced.

"What kind of things did he do to you all?" I said.

Nobody said anything.

"Did he hurt any of you?"

Still, nothing. But a few of them nodded their heads.

"Did he steal your money?"

Five kids, including Martin, nodded again. This was my son's legacy. I wanted to scream at them that it wasn't Casey's fault. That somehow it was all a big misunderstanding. Instead, I pulled out my wallet. There was two hundred dollars in there.

"Here ... each of you take forty dollars and we'll be square, okay? Go on, take it!"

They looked at the money as though I'd tainted it with anthrax. Some of the other kids looked jealous, but nobody volunteered to take it. What was wrong with these kids? Where was their ambition? Laughter choked me up again, and still I was holding out that money. Some little girl started to cry.

"Please just leave us alone, sir," one boy said. "He wasn't so bad, honest. Put that money away."

I crunched the cash into a fist and stuffed it in my pockets. Stupid kids ... None of them were going to make it in the real world with that attitude. Couldn't they understand that I needed them to help me? Martin looked nothing short of horrified. My hand found his shoulder and patted it.

"How did you break your arm, son?" I asked.

Martin wrenched away from me and for a moment I thought he was going to scream. Instead he just stared at me with pure eyes that absorbed everything about me, from my scary smile down to the black filth sinking its fangs into my tired heart over and over. Martin ran out the front door onto the front yard. In the kitchen, somebody was giggling.

Every eye was on me. You would have thought I was holding a gun. I smiled again and headed upstairs where I could breathe easier.

People finally left, and the next day my wife started talking to me again. I didn't tell her about my talk with Martin, and if any of the kids told their parents I never heard about it. At some point my wife went out to the store, and as soon as she was gone I locked myself in Casey's room. We hadn't cleaned it out yet. I don't know if we ever will. His video game controllers were still lying on the floor, and I remembered the night Casey had got me to play with him.

"Isn't this great, dad?" he had said.

I snooped around the room without really knowing what I was looking for. When I found the switchblade stashed under his mattress it was as if I'd been looking for it all along. The silver handle shined, and I could see my reflection in it. I heard my wife pulling into the driveway and put the knife in my pocket. I closed Casey's door behind me.

Dinner was a quiet affair for us. That empty space at the table was still too loud. It's almost redundant how literally everything reminded us of Casey. His knife was still in my pocket, pressing against my leg. It made me want to cut my heart out.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this," I said.

My chair made a grumbling sound when I scooted away from the table. My wife didn't say anything or try to stop me. She stared at me just like that Martin kid had. I put on my coat and walked out the front door.

I was a scumbag. But I couldn't be in there anymore. I had to go somewhere that didn't know or care that Casey was dead for awhile. There had to be someplace in this world that didn't remind me of him.

So of course my stupid feet led me to the graveyard.

It didn't lock at night or anything, so I walked right in. The headstones looked like little soldiers. None of them tried to stop me though. Casey's headstone was easy to find. I fell to my knees before him, worshipping him.

His eyeballs had popped out. That's what gets me. I think I could have dealt with everything else except that his eyeballs had popped out, just like in the cartoons. That pink vein at the back of them kept them chained to the rest of his pulverized face, and I'd

screamed until my throat was a shredded mess. I'd almost killed the guy who had been driving, but it wasn't his fault, really. I used to speed down that road all the time too. Casey had run right in front of him. Wasn't that the first fucking thing kids learned, to look both ways?

"Oh Casey..." I said, choking up a little. "Why did you pick on that Martin kid?"

My hands had balled up, and loose dirt came up into my fingernails. I started to dig, and dig, and dig some more until I couldn't stop myself. I had to see him. I had to see my son's face and remark serenely about how peaceful he looked. My fingers tore into the earth in a frenzy, and I might have gone all the way down if I hadn't been interrupted.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" someone said.

Everything about him shouted "rent-a-cop." He was a portly man, and he was only armed with a flashlight. Its beam shined in my face, and I tried to close my eyes but still the light baked my lids with a burning white. It hurt, but it was beautiful, too.

"Do you think that angels have scars?" I asked him.

I took off running, and the wind on my face felt like an updraft to send me flying up into the clouds. Running from that guy, I felt like no problem in the world really mattered. Several blocks later I finally looked over my shoulder and realized he wasn't chasing me. That poor guy had been scared shitless.

I slowed to a stop and took out Casey's switchblade. It sprung out, and I fingered the tip. I put the edge against my cheek and let it glide across, leaving a smooth trail of dripping red coming down my face. It wasn't so bad. It was like Casey was touching me one more time. I threw the knife into a nearby dumpster.

It was past ten o'clock when I made it back to my house. My wife looked horrified when she saw my face, and she demanded in a shrill hysteria to know what happened. I held her tight against me and held her face so that she had to look at me.

"Do you still love me?" I said. I needed to know.

My wife's eyes took in that ugly scar, and I saw her not care. She kissed me, and then she kissed it. My blood became lipstick on her lips.

"Of course I still love you."

"I love you too. I'm sorry."

We were both crying like babies. We held each other and kissed again and again. When we were done I still felt like shit, but it was a little better. At eleven we sat in bed and watched the Daily Show like we always used to do, and I laughed for the first time in what felt like ages. I'd forgotten how warm it felt, laughter.

The scar on my face never totally disappeared, but that was okay. It isn't supposed to. When the Daily Show was over my wife turned off the TV and we made love.



## A Phonographic Memory by Jessica Newton

Day six.

"How are you feeling today, Jessica?" the nurse asked with a smile while holding her pen to a clipboard that was cradled in the hook of her arm, anticipating my response. I was sitting in my now favorite chair that I positioned to always face the window. I had a pleasant view of McDonald's, and by this time I was longing for a big cheeseburger and French fries. I was still in my pajamas and robe despite it being the afternoon. I put down my journal and faced her. "How do I feel? I kinda feel like kicking someone's ass today," I laughed. Of course, the nurse didn't find that statement half as amusing. Her lips slightly uncurred as her voice softened and she leaned in, almost whispering, "If you start to have any thoughts of hurting yourself or anyone else, you come and tell me or one of the other nurses at the desk. Ok dear?" She turned and walked out of the room, leaving the door cracked. I turned back to the window and resumed my daily writing. My stomach was growling even though I had just finished my dinner; those two bites of dried fish and mashed potatoes didn't quite hit the spot.

*I guess that means I'm stuck here another day.*

That damn door. Every night I would have to get out of bed at least five times to close my door because the lights from the hallway would wake me up. Though I was never genuinely asleep anyway, just high on Restoril. Still, it annoyed the shit out of me.

Fragments and flashes awaken the neurons that have tried to bury those seven days somewhere deep in my brain, their dendrites and glia smother them like a spider's web. Every now and then a commercial, a picture in a magazine, or a conversation with my mother will shake the netting and open the old wound. The fallen fibers, rusty little needles, scratch the record that spins on the phonograph as it crackles in my ear and echoes the same drunken melody.

Day one. November 15.

It was cold. It was still. It was Thursday. The sun had already hidden behind the trees. It was ashamed of me. I was standing behind the clinic in this cold, still, Thursday evening air with Dr. What's-his-face, waiting. I was carrying my backpack even though

I skipped my classes that day – that week. After a seemingly hour’s time, the patrol car pulled up to the sidewalk. The cops got out. They opened the back doors for us. They looked at me and said something that I can’t remember, probably just to be polite. They were ashamed of me too.

*Great, now they know my face.*

I kept my head down like some busted celebrity as we drove through campus, hoping the paparazzi didn’t snag a photo of my mug, and I kept my head down as we drove through town. When the police are personally escorting you to a particular place, you’re either important or dangerous, and it wasn’t the neighborhood’s business which category I fell under. The patrol car pulled up to the emergency entrance of the hospital. I got out and took in a deep breath of that cold, still, Thursday evening chill, not certain when I would be able to know the fresh air again. I was going in to do some time. Dr. What’s-his-face accompanied me to the main waiting room and registered me while a nurse slapped a wristband on me like handcuffs. It itched my wrist and I tried to shake it off. To the right of me, I saw this girl with who I assumed were her parents. She seemed to be not all there, and she kept staring at me.

*Are you ashamed of me too?*

I turned around and a tall blonde Annie Hall-ish lady stooped over me like a vulture. I was her prey of the day. “I’m Nurse Tall-Lady, the head nurse of the Mental Health Ward. You can come with me now.”

I had never been to the sixth floor of this hospital before. The elevator ride up was, for a lack of better words, weird. Nurse Tall-Lady tried to make small talk with me. “Cold outside, isn’t it?”

*I just willingly signed myself over to psychiatric care. The weather is the least of my concerns, Nurse Tall-Lady.*

“Oh yea, it’s cold out there, but it’s sure warm in this elevator.”

Stepping off the elevator and into no-man’s land, I noticed there was no immediate visible hallway; it was locked away behind steel double-doors. One simply does not walk into the Mental Health Ward. It was a space all its own, as if it was a separate building. Nurse Tall-Lady punched her special code in the keypad next to the doors. The

turning of the lock reverberated down the hallway beyond, signaling to the staff here comes fresh meat. "After you," she ushered, and led me to the front desk, the double doors slamming shut behind us.

*He can't get me if I'm in here.*

All the nurses on duty approached me cautiously, smiling, as if on their guard in the event that I tried to get feisty. They made note of my initial appearance in full detail, from the top of my greased ponytail, my faded sweatshirt, all the way to the tips of my tired Converse sneakers. They confiscated my backpack and searched it. They took my purse and spilled its contents out on the front desk while a nurse wrote down every pencil and used tissue I had on me.

*Please don't open the front pocket. That's where I keep my switchblade and duct tape.*

Having items of questionable intentions on my person might have bought me extra time, which I didn't need. I knew this wasn't going to be an overnight visit, I was damned the second I opened my big mouth to Dr. What's-his-face. While all this was going on, I watched as some patients walked up to the front desk to get their daily medications, and an elderly lady that didn't want to stay in her bed. One of the nurses had to stand guard outside her room at night.

Nurse Tall-Lady asked me what medications, if any, I was currently taking. I had to explain to her about my birth control as if I was speaking some foreign language. "You'll have to excuse me, this is in fact a Catholic hospital," she said. "Are you hungry? I'll go get you a tray." She brought one of those nice hospital trays with everything wrapped up and stuffed neatly under a lid and led me to the recreation room, which resembled the aftermath of a kindergarten art class. "If you want a pop you'll have to get one from the nurse's station. We don't allow caffeinated beverages." I lifted the lid.

*Corn Chowder? I hate corn.*

That was the best damn meal I had all day, rather the only meal I had that day and all week for that matter. I cleaned my plate but was afraid to ask for more, it would have probably run up the bill.

After eating, I decided to explore my new residence. Some of the rooms seemed normal enough, much like a typical hospital room: bed, closet, toilet, wide window that was



welded shut in case I decided to jump out. Other rooms were encased behind steel doors with locks running almost their entire lengths. Only small windows in each door gave glimpses into the hallway, tiny rays of hope beyond the bleak confinements. Those rooms were painted stark white, as bare and lifeless as the hollow shells that had once occupied them.

Thank God for my journal. Had I not remembered to put it in my backpack that morning, I would have been without it. I was surprised they let me keep it along with a pen to write with. I would have thought that they'd be afraid I'd stab myself in the neck, or somebody else. I went back to the wreck-room to do some daily journaling. What am I doing here? I scribbled down – "Jessica, will you come with me? I'm going to show you where your room is." My thoughts left me as I looked up from the pages and saw that tall nurse motioning me to the doorway. We took a walk down the hallway to my humble housing. There were two beds. Someone was already in the room and had claimed their spot.

*It's that girl from the waiting room with the staring problem.*

"It looks like you'll have a roommate. I'll leave the two of you to get acquainted." I didn't stay; I went back to the wreck room to pick up where I left off in my journaling. I heard a set of footsteps that broke my thoughts again. I couldn't scratch a decent passage to save my life that night. A young guy entered the room and began working on a puzzle he had started earlier that day opposite the table where I was sitting. He had a round spot on the side of his head where I could tell it had been shaved away recently. Was it from recent brain surgery or some new hair trend? I never asked him the whole time I knew him.

*He looks like he's my age. What's he in for?*

"Hello. So, what are you in for?" asked Shaved-head Guy, without a proper introduction. "Well I'd kinda like to die," I answered, not looking up from my journal. I thought it might have freaked him out and he would have left me alone, but of course I forgot where I was. I seemed to only pique his interest. "Yea. Let me tell you how I got here," he left his puzzle and sat down beside me. He told me about how he had been shoved around various homeless shelters and that this was about the third time he'd been to this particular ward, and that his insurance wasn't going to cover it anymore. So basically, once he was discharged, he would have no place to go. None of that explained why he

was there. I never knew if he was making up his stories or not, as they often changed. His sincerity seemed genuine. However I didn't care at the time. He had interrupted my writing, which was the only thing that kept me from pitching myself headfirst into one of the wide windows in that wreck room like a little bird that risks his neck in the off chance that he'll make it through.

I heard another set of footsteps; it was my chatty Kathy of a roommate. She kept her distance from Shaved-head Guy and me at first, lingering sluggishly over by the pool table. He said hello to her, but she decided not to return the greeting. I looked at him, he looked at me, and we shrugged her off at first. With my nose buried in my journal, I caught her figure moving toward me out of the corner of my left eye. She had a pool stick in one of her hands. My initial thought was that she was coming over to stick her nose in my journal. She was beginning to piss me off with her gawking and muteness, but I tried to ignore her. Then all at once, I heard a loud hollow crack! The room went dark. A dull throbbing pain shot across my entire skull. I shook my head and realized the source of my blackout.

*That bitch just hit me on the head with a pool stick.*

Needless to say I went to bed that night with a headache and no roommate. In fact I spent the remainder of my stay in the ward all by my lonesome in a room with two beds and nobody to fill the second, or the empty air that lingered there. I needed an ear to catch my rants, one that was more on my level and didn't wear a fancy suit and sit behind a desk, cut off from me like a patron standing behind a cage at a zoo and taking pictures of me as I ate my meals, swam in the man-made lake and participated in a mating ritual. But I knew they were all watching me, every move I made, every shit I took. The doctors were watching, the nurses were watching, God was watching. God was ashamed of me too.



**Derek Holston**  
*Life Vests*  
Digital photograph



## **Every Story Is A Love Story** by *Sosha Pinson*

I first started wondering what love was when my dad stopped coming home regularly at nights.

When he came home was my favorite time of the night. I would see the taillights streaming through the windows and I would run downstairs and stealthily press myself up against the wooden paneling in the corner where the door from the garage opened, below the picture of my father and I, our mouths stretched open in glee, hands up in the air while riding the Tennessee Tornado at Dollywood. We were always thrill seekers. The paneling felt cold against my skin as I sucked in my breath waiting for that door to swing open. There was the thrill of almost having my face smashed in, even though I knew every time that I was small enough to fit in that small space. Then as my dad would close the door I would jump out and grab him screaming like a Comanche. My father would then jump, stop mid-obscenity once he realized that it was only me and then grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder carrying me up the stairs for dinner. Over my dad's shoulder I collected coal dust like an old toy that had been abandoned on a shelf and my skin would have hand prints imprinted like the pictures I used to paint in kindergarten or the prints I'd leave on my mom's white walls after playing outside on the trampoline. The trampoline made my hands and feet black like my dad's entire body when he came home from work and I wanted to be just like him. It was so strange to wield that power over a six and a half foot bear of a man as a small girl though, to be able to scare a man that could easily intimidate others. The power was intoxicating and never got old night after night when I would hear the door of his work truck out in the driveway. I never had to question whether my dad loved me then.

When he slept with his beer at night more than he slept with my mom was when I started noticing a change. He would sit on the sectional couch in one of the reclining chairs directly in front of the television watching football and eating hot sauce sandwiches. He'd sometimes ask me to go upstairs and get him another sandwich, but he would get up himself to his personal refrigerator to get his beer. I sat in the basement with him and his football buddies, doing whatever I could to be close to him. I knew all the rules of football when I was seven years old and at eight years old he took me to an NFL game in Pittsburgh. It wasn't unusual for my dad to drink though. He would chug beers one after another without any change in his personality, but I would smell it on his breath when he told me to come sit on his lap or give him a hug. He would squeeze me really tight after he had been drinking for a while but I was afraid to say anything, afraid to do anything but go to wash my face after coal dust was smeared across my cheek because

his arms didn't reach below my shoulders and so he pressed my upper body against his stomach. I could hear the hot sauce sandwiches and Bud Light digesting in his belly and thought it would be the last sound I heard before I died of suffocation. He always let go, sometimes with tears raining down his face. He'd tell me he loved me and would mumble about when I was a baby as if I would forget the former and remember the latter. I didn't know how to react to my father's tears. My giant bear of a father crying almost in a confession to me. Those were the nights he would fall asleep in a reclined position while the television mumbled in the background drowned by his snores, usually still with a drink in his hand that would spill a little onto his belly with each heave of his breathing. Sometimes I would be wrapped up still in a semi-bear hug. But I would always stay until my mom came downstairs and asked why I wasn't in bed yet.

Soon after, he stopped coming home for weeks at a time. Somehow I knew it would happen. When he did come home, it would be a replay of the crying until I stopped coming downstairs to watch football with him and his friends. When he came home anymore he wasn't covered in coal dust, he had showered and put on cologne to cover up the smells that I normally associated with him. This is when I started locking myself in my room. When I wondered if I loved my dad like I used to, if he loved me like he said he did, or my mom for that matter, or if my mom loved him. If I could love anyone at all. If anyone could love. I stopped telling my relatives I loved them when they would tell me that they loved me. I just started to nod my head and said thanks. I didn't think that an emotion that caused my mother to start crying at night was all that it was hyped up to be. It seemed to cause more harm than good. But we lived in a perfect neighborhood, surrounded by families that always seemed so...normal. I expected that they noticed the weeks when my dad didn't come around, that there was some sort of speculation about where he might be. I never thought that they might have their own problems. The love they had in their families was perfect and I wanted desperately to be a part of their families.

Sleeping became an issue as an adolescent. I was in a constant state of awareness. I couldn't relax. The nights that my dad didn't come home I could hear my mom crying in the next room. I was paralyzed by my awareness. It was something so personal that I didn't think that it would be okay to stay in the bed with her, to let her know that she wasn't alone. I thought it would be embarrassing for us both. Sometimes I thought about it though, and played all the situations in my head. Some nights she would be thankful that I was there and finally fall asleep, others she would tell me where my dad was and why he wasn't there and how much pain she was in, and then in other situations she



would ask me why it took me so long to come to her because I'd heard her every night that she cried. Why did I leave her alone? I was guilty for something that I couldn't control. But being aware that my mom was hurting was even more difficult to bear, so I just stayed awake and looked at the ceiling until my eyes grew adjusted to the darkness and I could pick out messages that were left for me through the rough cryptic stucco.

The nights that my dad did come home after weeks of missing at a time, I found that he would eventually trudge to the bed with my mother. If there was any way that I would have slept these nights, I would not have traded it for anything else in the world. Mid-interpretation of my ceiling stucco messages, I would start to hear moaning and splashing from the next room. My parents had a water bed. If I could have traded innocence or deafness for whatever I had to bargain with I would have those nights. But I was not innocent.

I knew about sex from my older neighbor Lacey, who would be left alone in her large house in the afternoons because her parents were workaholics. It had been this way ever since she was really young. My mom felt sorry for her so she would let me play in the big house with Lacey while she made us lunch, cleaned the house, and watched what was on television much like what my mom would normally do. One day we were exploring her father's abandoned office in the basement of her house when we opened a file cabinet and stumbled upon her dad's porn stash. The magazines of naked women we didn't look through because we thought they were boring and gross. But the movies we would put in the VHS and play on the big screen after we took turns reading the jacket on the video. While the movie would play we would laugh and point at the weirdness of sex. At this point in my life I thought nothing about misogyny, or prostitution. But we somehow knew there was something wrong with watching sex, whether it was the fact that we were young, or that it wasn't ours, or that it was just wrong to be watching sex. So we muted the sound and just watched the bodies bounce and jiggle and imitated the weird faces that the girl would make, laughing to ourselves. We couldn't stop watching though, we were being educated.

But I would have traded all of my previous knowledge if I didn't have to lay in my bed those sleepless nights, hearing the moaning slapping sounds coming from the other room. Maybe it was where me and Lacey would always have the sound turned off that made it feel so wrong to be laying there hearing my parents in the other room. It felt wrong that they were having sex at all, I would think to myself as I remembered the nights my mother would cry from loneliness. I began to wonder if she cried because she missed having sex with my dad, or if she cried because she knew he was having sex with someone else. I tried to close my eyes and block out the sound with pillows, but when I would close my eyes I could see the naked pornographers bouncing, jiggling and making funny



faces on the television screen behind my eyelids. The funny faces didn't seem so funny anymore when they all looked at me through the camera and were my mother with tear stains from the mascara she wore only hours before that dried on her face when she asked my dad where he'd been the night before. I couldn't relax. I couldn't drown out the sounds coming from the next room enough to let my eyes focus on the ceiling and indulge in analyzing abstract strokes in stucco. So I did the only thing left for me to do. I cried. With each moan, splash, or smacking noise I would get louder. I expected them to stop, to realize that I was upset. My stomach would cramp up and I would get queasy. My body convulsed with tears until I was to the point that I was both screaming and swallowing vomit in my mouth. I was afraid to get out of bed, afraid of what I would see. I hated my parents for not making sense, for using each other as scratching posts. I decided that they were not in love and that they did not love me for putting me through this sick torture.

Finally, I felt a hand shaking me and my mom was looking down at me, half covered by a satin robe, asking me what was wrong. I stopped my tantrum and simply told her that I had a bad dream. She told me that it was all okay, that it wasn't real and everything would be fine in the morning. I didn't sleep anymore though. Those nights that they had sex I would cry, but I kept really quiet and cried until my eyes were swollen shut. I stopped looking to my ceiling for answers. I decided that I was going to find someone to love me.



**Anna Claire Griffin**  
*The Poison of Technology*  
Thread, screen, India ink and pen

## My Life as a Horror Aficionado by Craig Wagner

I was lying in bed and squinting at the TV set, trying my best to make out what was happening on the screen. Suddenly, my mom was standing in the hallway just outside my bedroom door. In the faint light cast from the TV, I could see her face – it was not pleased. “What are you doing?” she asked.

I fumbled with my remote and changed the channel as fast as I could, telling her that I couldn’t sleep. I was frantic at first, because, for a few seconds, she just stands. I’m caught, I tell myself and brace myself for a lecture, but, eventually, she turned toward our bathroom. “Well, go to bed,” she said as she shut the door behind her.

At the time, I was in the fifth grade and my family only had the most basic TV package but, for some reason, we were able to halfway get Cinemax. The sound came out perfectly but the picture was distorted; you could see the top left half of the channel in the bottom right hand corner of our TV, and, occasionally, a full image would come in clear for a stretch of a few seconds, but, mostly, everything was a jumbled-up, multicolored mess. Still, every Tuesday night I’d wait until my parents were asleep and watch whatever was on until I was so sleepy that I could barely hold my eyes open.

Looking back on this incident now, there’s little doubt in my mind what my mom probably thought I was jacking off. What else would a young boy watching a scrambled cable channel like Cinemax late at night be doing? But, I wasn’t doing that at all. Nor was I trying to divine porn from all the visual gibberish on my TV set.

Every Tuesday night, Cinemax would show horror movies. Granted these were typically of the direct-to-video sequel variety, but at the time none of that mattered to me. I was devouring horror, and instead of hoping to catch a glimpse of a static-y nipple I was hoping for carnage. Being a youngster, I would have been in just as much hot water for watching this as porn, hence my freak-out at almost getting discovered.

My life as a horror aficionado started many years before this, though, and like most journeys, its beginnings were quite unassuming.

My earliest memory of the genre came courtesy of my Aunt Sonya. Some weekends I would stay with her and my uncle in their apartment. She was a big fan of old, black-and-white horror movies. Stuff like the Edgar Allen Poe adaptations starring Vincent Price, or the Universal horror classics, like *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Wolfman*, and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Of course, I didn’t watch any of these movies. For one, they were on late at night and I was too sleepy by then to stay awake. But mostly, I was just too afraid to watch them. As I lay on her couch, trying to go to sleep, I could hear



the movie playing and that was enough to terrify me. There was something about how the musical score over-exaggerated every single scare with those sharp swells of sound that transformed the simplest things into omens of sheer terror. The apartment creaking or the other tenants moving around in the complex conjured up horrible, phantasmagoric, images in my mind. It also didn't help the she'd leave the door to her room open so the light from her TV set would tinge the whole room in an eerie glow.

Given the fact that I was so petrified by horror movies sight unseen, it doesn't take a stretch of the imagination to believe that when I was four and finally saw actual footage from one that the experience turned me into a cowardly mess for years to come.

At the time, both of my parents had jobs where they worked during the day. I was too young to go to preschool, so my mom had a family friend, Lisa Campbell, baby-sit me during the week. One day, Lisa's niece and nephew, Kayla and Seth, were over at her house. Somehow, they talked Lisa into renting this Stephen King werewolf movie, *Silver Bullet*. I don't remember if it was because I was young and didn't know any better or because I desperately wanted to impress Seth and Kayla, who were older than me, but I didn't leave the room when they started watching the movie. How bad could it have been, right?

To this day, I remember next to nothing about *Silver Bullet*, not because I watched it so many years ago, but because I kept my eyes closed almost the entire time. But, practically as a rule, during the times I actually did watch, something awful would happen on screen. As traumatizing as seeing people being eviscerated was to my four-year-old self, I think what really scared me was the profound things the movie made me realize. The basic story is this, a boy ends up pissing off a werewolf and he spends the rest of the movie trying to save himself and the people he loves. What really got me was that the main character was pretty much a kid himself.

As a child, I had this faint awareness that my youth and innocence protected me from evil. But here you had a kid being targeted by a gigantic, supernatural, killing machine incapable of mercy or compassion. In a weird way, this was the first time I realized that awful things could and do happen to children. To make things worse, none of the grown-ups in town would believe or help him. So, in the end, he's forced to face off against a werewolf on his own. At that age, I thought of my parents as my protectors. Just being near them, I felt a sense of assurance and strength. They were the ones who made the monsters go away. But this kid's parents wouldn't even humor him. In fact, I think one of them might have even gotten shredded in the movie. If this kid's parents failed to protect him and themselves, couldn't the same thing happen with mine? It was a lot to deal with.

Not to mention that werewolf in the movie scared the crap out of me. So, needless to say, I swore off horror movies forever and spent several nights sleeping on the little couch at the foot of my parent's bed – and the next few years being afraid of my own shadow.

Being a scaredy-cat in itself might not seem so bad, but you have to realize that I grew up at a time when it wasn't becoming of a kid to be skittish, because those were the years when that Nickelodeon horror anthology show, *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*, was monstrously popular. So my "Don Knots as Mr. Chicken" act turned me into social pariah. Now, it wasn't like I was being shunned, but I did feel left out a lot of times when my friends would go on and on about the show at lunch or recess. I'd try to deflect this kind of talk by bringing up the latest episodes of *Aladdin* the Animated Series or *Rocko's Modern Life*, and they'd just look at me like I was some booger-eating, preschooler.

In order to feel like I was part of the group, I tried to suck it up a few times and watch an episode. Once, I was at a friend's house and he asked me if I liked the show. Wanting to seem cool, I faked nonchalance and told him "of course." So, we turned to Nick and got ready to watch the newest episode. I figured having my friend's courage to feed off of would have been enough to get me through. Well, I never even made it past the title sequence. For one, the music that played during it was far too ominous and creepy for something on a children's network. Even worse, there was this part when this freaky-ass clown doll is rocking back and forth in a rocking chair. A clown, doll – that's basically combining two equally horrifying things into one. So I bolted, and spent the next thirty minutes sitting in the hallway, outside of my friend's room, waiting for the show to be over.

I believe my story could have ended right there were it not for one puzzling fact; I loved monsters – still do, in fact. Now, I know that might seem kind of contradictory. How can a person love monsters but hate scary movies, right? Well I guess the simplest answer I can give is that most of the monsters I loved weren't scary to me. I was weaned on *Godzilla*, *King Kong*, *Ray Harryhausen* stop motion movies, *Star Wars*, and lots and lots of picture books about dragons. I also watched TV shows like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Power Rangers*, and *X-Men*, all of which were chockfull of monsters, mutants, creatures, and aliens, of all shapes and sizes. Yet, in each of these cases, none of them were really scary.

As my rabid hunger for monsters grew, I began running out of outlets to find them. Eventually I came to realize the potential of one great untapped resource – horror movies. Don't get me wrong, this was obviously my last option. I tried to draw my own monsters, but my artistic talents amounted to stick figures. I looked to videogames, but my lack of anything resembling quick reflexes meant I spent a lot of time dying. Therefore,



I spent a lot of time getting frustrated and throwing down controllers in disgust. Hell, I even tried reading books but, at the time, my patience and mental capacity weren't up to snuff. Plus, only nerds read books (cut to me years later as an English major). What I slowly began noticing, though, was that all my previous exposure to the fantastic had prepared me to take that next step. So, I steeled myself and when I was about ten, I began dabbling in horror.

As with any process which requires physical or mental effort, I started out small; small screen to be precise, because I became a huge fan of *Goosebumps* the series. This was the TV adaptation of the hugely popular R.L. Stine book series of the same name. Of course, as far as horror goes *Goosebumps* was pretty tame, which is probably why I chose it. In fact, it was actually pretty damn laughable at times, but like I said, you've got to start somewhere and this was a somewhere I loved. Oddly enough, the things that scared me about Silver Bullet were some of the things that I loved about *Goosebumps*. Namely, kids dealing with monsters with little to no help from adults. I think the difference here was age. Like all four-year-olds, having my parents watching over me was validating. But at ten, I felt more independent. Seeing kids my age kicking the collective ass of all things evil was empowering.

All my affection aside, *Goosebumps* was very much for kids and, oddly enough, when I was a kid that's the last thing I wanted to be a part of. So eventually, I wanted something more, something grown-up, and even though that kind of thinking typically leads to terrible mental scarring, I went for it anyway.

Now I wouldn't say that I went for it right away, but I took a step in that direction and that step was *MonsterVision*. This was a programming segment on TNT hosted by Joe Bob Briggs (a personal hero of mine), where they'd show two horror movies back to back. What was so awesome about it was they weren't just showing popular stuff. They would play crazy-ass B movies like *Phantasm II*, and *Motel Hell*, stuff that shirked the super glossiness of mainstream cinema in favor of a more down and dirty, balls-out approach. I remember watching the remake of *Night of the Living Dead* (the first zombie movie I'd ever seen) and being so blown away, not so much by the movie itself, but at the fact that these kinds of movies existed.

Of course the big downside was that everything was edited to pieces because it was on basic cable. Even when I was younger, and not as film savvy as I am now, I realized something was up. I'd see some masked lunatic run at someone with a hatchet or a power drill and then it would cut to the next scene. Aside from that being very disjuncting, I felt like I was being left out of something. Adding insult to my injury, at the beginning



of each movie, Joe Bob would do his "Drive-In Totals," where he tallied up all the more salacious bits of the movie. I'd hear him say something like "four severed heads" or "one disembowelment" and my ears would perk up. But, I never got to see any of this, and it was a drag.

Eventually, it got to the point where I had to know what I was missing out on. I wanted to see the heroine get her eyeball gouged out. I wanted to see the comic-relief character get impaled on a pitchfork. I wanted my villain/monster coated in layers of human blood and viscera. As troubling as that sounds, I think it's just part of being a boy. As a male, I love nasty, disgusting, gooey things, and that's what the gore element in horror films has always tapped into for me. It's getting to experience all of the mess without having to do any of the clean-up. In a way, these watered-down movies on *MonsterVision* are what finally inspired me to go all out.

Thanks to my parent's naiveté (they really didn't know what I was watching), I began making trips to Big Blue Video and renting horror movies. As those were the days before the internet, I really had no way of learning much about a particular movie before I watched it. So, I developed a pretty simple, but effective, strategy: pick whichever movie had the coolest looking box art.

During this time, I was watching well known genre entries like *Jaws*, *Gremlins* (it has its scary moments) and *Pumpkinhead*, but my taste was also extended to crappy stuff like the sequels to *Halloween*, the *Child's Play* series and cheesy direct-to-video knock offs like *Critters 3* and the *Puppetmaster* movies. Quality wasn't really my concern. I was in the habit of eating it all up.

Starting out, I'd usually draft one or two of my friends to watch with me, since I was still a bit of a chicken. But, eventually I got to where I could watch them on my own. This was probably a good thing because my insistence on watching so many horror movies probably made a lot of my friends think I was some kind of psychopath or Satanist.

Still, while I considered myself a fan, I never loved a horror movie the way I loved *Star Wars* or *Jurassic Park*. That all changed, though, when I watched *Scream*, which is pretty appropriate since it's a horror movie that's a love letter to other horror movies. For whatever reason, I fell head-over-heels for *Scream*. I remember the first time that I watched it I was floored. I even managed to somehow talk my parents into buying it for me on VHS (probably the first R-rated movie I ever owned). Looking back on it now, I think this whole situation was due more to timing than anything else. Awful nineties fashion aside, I still feel that *Scream* is a movie that holds up today, but it's basically just an above average slasher movie with a lot of wit and in-jokes. I just think that my affection

for horror movies had reached a fever pitch. Plus, it didn't hurt that I developed a massive crush on Neve Campbell, either.

As I began junior high, my taste in movies began to shift. Don't get me wrong, I still watched horror movies, but I was beginning to expand my cinematic mind. I was able to watch all sorts of movies because my parents finally invested in the then crazy fad known as satellite television. Thanks to Pay-Per-View and the Starz movie package, I was in the midst of the largest filmic influx I had experienced in my life. It was magical.

Still, during this relative dry period I did become obsessed with George A. Romero. He's the guy who wrote and directed the original *Night of the Living Dead*, but I didn't see that until years later. The first movie of his I caught was *Creepshow*. This is a movie in the spirit of old E.C. horror comics from the 50s. It was so gory, and so quirky and so, so weird (it featured Stephen King playing a country bumpkin, who touches "meteor shit" and gets transformed into a fungus monster). In other words, it was awesome, and I loved it right away. Part of me wanted to tell all my friends about it but I refrained because I knew that none of them would get it. I had built up a kind of resistance to sharing movies at that point because so many times I'd show someone something I'd like and, when it was over, they'd react with disinterest or disgust. To me, sharing movies I loved with someone was like sharing a part of my soul. To have them throw that back in my face was always kind of devastating, as silly and melodramatic as that sounds.

But the big Romero movie for me, the one I loved more than any other, was *Dawn of the Dead*. I had read about this movie in a gaming magazine years before and told myself that it was something I had to one day see. This was easier said than done though because, while *Dawn* is an undisputed horror classic, I lived in small town, eastern Kentucky, where the local video places didn't really pay attention to stuff like this. They stocked pop culture films, direct to video trash, and new releases almost exclusively. Thankfully, I finally got my chance to see *Dawn* in the fall of 2000.

I was searching through the satellite guide and there it was, in glorious digitized text, on IFC. It was one of those "someone pinch me" moments. At the time, I just couldn't believe an opportunity like this had fallen into my lap. Granted, IFC has probably shown *Dawn* about a couple thousand times since then, but when I was younger that would have never occurred to me. I had to watch it right then because it seemed like my only chance to do so.

Of course, there were still some obstacles in my way. At the time, we only had one satellite receiver and it was in my parent's bedroom. This was a problem because the movie was coming on at something like one am and my parents were going to be



asleep way before then. So, I promised them both that I'd keep the volume at a reasonable level and, thankfully, they acquiesced. Still, the whole time I was watching the movie I had this constant nagging fear that one, or perhaps both, would wake up and see all the degradation happening on the TV screen, and send me to bed. Thank God that didn't happen, though.

As I watched the movie I was transfixed and when it was over – elation! It was one of the rare viewing experiences that connected with me at a much deeper level. That's not to say that I thought *Dawn* was a profound piece of art which offered insight into the human condition. Far from it. It was just a fun, funny, and insane movie. At that point, it was probably the goriest movie I had ever seen. Things happened in it that truly blew my mind. I'd never seen an entire head get demolished by a shotgun blast. I'd never seen someone sink a machete into another person's skull. I'd never seen a crowd of people hunkering over someone, tearing out that person's guts, and eating them. But, more so than the spectacle, it was the low budget-ness of the movie that really made the difference for me. It wasn't an expensive movie and that showed. Yet, it was better than most of the big budget movies that were coming out at that time. For some reason, I latched onto that. Call me crazy, but a movie like *Dawn* really made me believe that anything was possible. Here you had a bunch of people who scrounged a little money together, got some cameras and a ton of grey makeup and fake blood, shot the thing, and ended up making a classic.

After *Dawn*, I continued to watch horror movies, and liked many of them, but just like the time between *MonsterVision* and *Scream*, none of them ever really stood out in my mind. That was until I was fifteen and got the chance to finally see a movie I had been hearing about for years, *The Evil Dead*.

My first exposure to the series was watching the final movie in the trilogy, *Army of Darkness*. I only caught the end of this on USA but it was pretty much Jason and the Argonauts but with a shotgun and lots of goofy, slapstick humor. Therefore, it was absolutely amazing. So, being slightly naive I assumed that all three *Evil Dead* movies were like this, and one Saturday, I bought the entire trilogy on VHS. Unfortunately, my humor-colored perception of the series only extended to the second and third movies. I invited a friend over to watch the movies with me, and we popped in *The Evil Dead* (the first movie in the trilogy) expecting a romp – something we would laugh at and talk about while we watched it.

Actually, we did end up doing a lot of laughing and talking, but it was the nervous kind you use to try and distract yourself. In our case, that something was the movie. Instead of a lark we were getting trees coming to life and violently raping a woman,



which might sound ridiculous but I assure you, it was anything but. Intense is the word I would use. This is a movie where people get hacked to pieces, a demon-posed girl chews off her own hand, and the main hero (Ash, as played by the legendary Bruce Campbell) is more of a coward and an idiot than anything else. In fact, he spends more time getting trapped under shelves and getting splashed in the face with gallons of foul-looking gore than he does doing anything useful.

Granted, all of this stuff looks pretty fake by today's standards, but there was such ferocity and intensity to it that it's still twice as effective as most of the things I've seen nowadays. It also didn't help that I wasn't really prepared for this level of gore at the time. Of course, I had seen *Dawn of the Dead* before this and it was pretty bloody but the blood in that movie was too red. It looked like melted crayons, and believe it or not that made a huge difference. The blood in *The Evil Dead* looked like real blood.

It should be surprising that my friend and I were more than happy once the movie was over. We had planned on watching *Evil Dead II* right afterwards, but we just couldn't do it. We were both so broken – so drained. The next morning I shoved the VHS beneath my bed and vowed never to look at it again. I tried to formulate the best possible lie I could so the people at Disc Jockey would take it back. But as the week wore on, something funny happened. I kept thinking more and more about the movie.

It was like all those scenes of violence were seared into my brain and they kept repeating themselves over and over. So, I eventually resolved to watch the movie again, mostly with the hope of somehow silencing the constant replaying of it in my head. I suppose with that second viewing I was able to take in the movie in more of an objective (i.e. less horrified) mindset and by the time the movie was over I was a complete fan. What's more, I was able to look back at that initial shock of the first viewing and just marvel at my reaction. I mean I hadn't been that affected by a movie like that for a really long time, and that felt so monumental and special to me.

As with anything, you reach a plateau, and for a while I thought *The Evil Dead* was that plateau for me. Don't get me wrong, I remained a horror geek and watched some of my all-time favorites in the post-*Evil Dead* years. But, none of these shook me like *The Evil Dead*. That was, until 2004 when I watched *The Grudge*. I know a lot of people hate this movie, and I can't say that I'm a fan of it either, but watching it was absolutely terrifying. Whether it was because I went to watch it alone, or because the theater was almost empty, I don't know. What I do know is that for the first time since I was a kid, I closed my eyes in a horror movie. I closed my eyes or I looked at my watch and I wanted the movie to be over. Every time a scene would end, I held my breath and hoped that the

next one would be the last or that the credits would pop up. When it finally ended, after my fear abated, I couldn't help feeling a little bit of wonder, as corny as that sounds.

As I'd grown older, I'd become jaded to that kind of fear – the kind of fear I felt at Sonya's apartment, or when watching *Silver Bullet*, or when cowering in my friends hallway waiting for *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* to end. Getting to experience that again was exhilarating. It made me realize that my love for horror went deeper than seeing cool monsters and loads of gore. *The Grudge* took me back to that purest state of watching a horror movie – having the ever-loving crap scared out of me. That's what these movies are all about really, and after seeing recent movies like *Drag Me to Hell* and *Paranormal Activity* and being thoroughly frightened, it's something I'm glad I've been able to hang on to.



**Zachary Potter**  
*Paranoia Homecoming*  
Mixed-media



## **Lady** by Sean L. Corbin

Grass crunches crisply beneath the heels of my tennis shoes, joined by the remaining clusters of leaves from this year's harvest. The air stings my sinuses and my head starts to go numb. There's a trickle of snot beginning to run towards my upper lip. This is when I come alive inside, when my heart starts to race and my mind starts to work overtime and my eyes start to record every detail of every scene of every day. This is when I can wear scarves without strange looks from passers-by, when I throw open my closet or the pile of clothes on the floor and laugh joyfully because everything for the next six months will fit. And I can throw on a sweater and my leather jacket and my purple gloves and my plaid scarf and walk through this vast open field on my family's farm and begin to appreciate the power of nature.

A cold wind slides across the forgotten field, the long dry corpses of grass performing the danse macabre, bowing at my feet. Only during this time of year, the beginning of November, the end of fall, only now will death bow to me. I feel powerful in the middle of this gray patch of land, the only living being in sight. I have survived another murderous autumn, marked the end of one year and the beginning of another, and I am proud to say that I'm still breathing. It is a definitive quality that places me above the land like a god, if only for a short time.

There is a dark dirt square a few yards away from me, littered with the stunted stalks of my family's tobacco. The soil is dry and crisp and drained, and it's obvious that we are at the end of another rotation and will be planting elsewhere next year. We are smart about our work, never allowing ourselves to take too much from one spot, letting the nutrients regenerate for a few years before returning to claim what's ours. I smile as I consider just how generous my farming family is, pull my lit cigarette to my lips, and thank the yellowed stubs of roots for their sacrifice. I think a master should always acknowledge the service of his servants and all that they provide for him. It is hard to displace your own ego for the benefit of another.

I can hear the steady click of the electric fence that encloses the back half of our property. We keep our prized Belgian horses in the paddock, secure and safe with their own pond and grove of trees. The horses are free to dance through the fields, their manes flowing behind them, their muscles rippling against their brown skin. It is a good life for them, a gift from us in thanks for all of the work and prestige they have afforded our family through plowings and parades and high-profile funerals. And the fence is their guardian in our absence, a powerful wall protecting them from the wild dogs and jealous

farmers down U.S. 60 who would wish them harm. It guards them from themselves, too, as the wild stallion spirit lodged deep within their subconscious could one day explode and cause irreparable damage.

Don't we? Don't we have the best interests of these simple creatures in mind? There is no reason, no intelligent thought, that runs through their heads and governs their actions. They're just as likely to run out into a rushing highway as they are to follow our instructions every day without fail. They're just horses – they don't know any better. I wait for a few moments from just across the fence line, and the largest horse, Lady, is suddenly three feet from my face. I can see my reflection in her black baseball-sized eyes. I suddenly feel flush, embarrassed to show myself in these fields. I don't like what I see in her eyes. My body is overindulgence, fat and full of comfort and mocking the fields. My arms are sheltered from the wind in a black leather shell. My feet are housed in thick boots, protected from mud and briars. I am the warm, safe center of this field, so why does the look in Lady's eyes make me so uneasy?

There is a recliner in the living room of our house. Nothing has ever, or will ever, feel as soft and inviting as this recliner. It hugs my frame and makes me drowsy, and if it weren't for the forty-inch television blaring football, I would be unconscious. I close my eyes and lay my head against the gray leather and begin to regulate my breathing like the good little wannabe Buddhist that I am. My inhalations begin to fill me with the entire universe and I feel attached to everything – the dining room table, the television, the recliner. My exhalations rush the world from my lungs, and I separate, floating in an empty void. I am stretched within my own mind, drawn and quartered between all and nothing. I want to lose myself in this void, want to drift away into peace before the time comes to leave this sacred ground and return to the real world of work and school and displaced sleep. Something's nagging at me, though. The look in that horse's eyes, the reflection that cracked my vision of invincibility. I can't explain what happened in that field, and that loss tethers me to the material plane.

My mother and I are forced to take our smoking habits away from the communal areas of the house now because of my nephew, so I'm sitting on the edge of my parents' thick bed and staring through a window into the front yard. The trees at the edge of the road are bending to the will of the wind, and I'm glad I came inside when I did. Then I start to cough, softly at first, and tell myself it's an after-effect of the cold. I keep coughing, more violently now, until I can feel something rising in my throat. I grab a tissue from my mother's dresser and finally spit a wad of phlegm out of my mouth. I take a second to look at it, and notice that it's darker than usual. Typically I cough up a clear,



sometimes yellowish, plasma from my lungs, but this is a dark brown. I grow concerned, wondering how I could have come down with something so quickly. I spent less than an hour outside, with the cold and dead grass and Lady. Then I remember that my cigarette is about to go out.

I have to wash my hands because I don't know what kind of germs came up in my coughing and I'll end up holding the baby again. The water is freezing against my hands and they grow pink beneath the harsh soap. I glance into the mirror in front of me and cringe slightly but noticeably. Who is this person in the glass? The top of my head is almost completely bare, and I can't even imagine what it was like to have a full mane of hair. There's new hair growing, though. I can just start to see it in my nose and ears. I almost get sick. And my cheeks have never looked so fat and swollen. How did I end up looking this way? I can't blame college – I lost fifty pounds during my freshman year. I can't blame depression – I've been happy for almost a year now. It's gluttony, pure and simple. I've gorged myself on beef and ham and potatoes and pizza and chocolate every chance I've had, and today's walk was the first in months. I've become a marshmallow, soft and weak. My chest burns from the cool air in the fields, and burns more for the extra baggage I hauled through them. Throbbing, swollen toes are trying to rip through my shoes. I've sold my health for a couple of candy bars and cheap steaks.

The wind's grown even colder now as I stand at the driver's side of my car, cold to the point of snow. I'm shaking as I struggle to find my car key, but I can't force myself to hurry. I can't help but stare at the field I was walking through a few hours before. The grass is still flat against the ground. The tobacco stalks are still dead. Lady is drinking water from the pond, still enclosed behind the electric fence. Everything is the same and everything is different. I know what I saw in Lady's eyes now. I saw a hint of sadness in being under someone's thumb. I saw a hint of resentment for being forced into manual labor. I saw a hint of defiance, like the horse knew that she could destroy me whenever she wished and was just biding her time. And I saw a hint of my lack of power. The gifts of Mother Nature aren't sacrifices for my appeasement – they're comforters, they're crutches, they're generous scraps from her dinner table. In my own acceptance of deluded power, I've fooled myself into a fantasy of control, but in Lady's eyes I saw how weak I truly am. The fields may die every November, the tobacco may be cut every August, the horses may be pinned up for the winters, but everything will be reborn when spring arrives. Once the weather changes for me, I'm done. That knowledge is almost too difficult to bear. I am now on the other side of the electric fence, dying to break free and scared to death to break free. I am imprisoned by Mother Nature, separated from freedom like Lady, and like Lady I'll simply till the fields until it's time to be put down.



## Interview with Maurice Kilwein Guevara

by Christopher Allan Prewitt

1/15/2010

Upon publication of this issue of *Inscape*, it will have been three years since I had the privilege not only of being in the audience for a poetry reading by Maurice Kilwein Guevara, but also being a participant in a poetry workshop he conducted. Following these activities, he was gracious enough to spend time with me and other students at Alice Lloyd College, answering questions, allowing us to share quips and complaints. These experiences confirmed what one suspects when reading Kilwein Guevara's works: he loves language; he cares about people.

Over the years, Kilwein Guevara's been kind enough to correspond with me when I've had questions about his writing and Latino literature. I feel fortunate in procuring a "private education" in contemporary poetry and Latino literature while I've been completing my MA, especially with regards to my thesis, a collection of poetry that draws influence from Latino poets. To be sure, my development as a writer is owed to Latino literature, and it is owed to Kilwein Guevara.

And it is my honor to present Kilwein Guevara to those not yet familiar with his work. He kindly accepted my offer to interview him. It is a brief but informative interview, as he was working on a novel when I contacted him.

Maurice Kilwein Guevara is the author of four collections of poetry—*Postmortem*, *Poems of the River Spirit*, *Autobiography of So-and-so*, and *POEMA*—a play (*The Last Bridge/El último Puente*), and is credited as a co-screenwriter and actor in the film *To Box Clouds*. His various publications include *Poetry*, *Parnassus*, and *Ploughshares* to name a few. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

**Interviewer:** When I contacted you about doing this interview, you told me that you were in Cuenca, Ecuador on a Fulbright grant—congratulations—working on a novel. This is highly interesting for someone who is, by far, recognized as a poet and a great poet at that, yet Fiction was your MFA's Major Area, and your PhD dissertation was a

collection of short stories. How do you see yourself? Are you a poet who writes fiction, a fiction writer who writes poetry?

**Kilwein Guevara.** Thanks for the kind words about my poems.

I'm back in Wisconsin now after several productive months in Ecuador. You're right I was there to research and to begin drafting a novel. You're also correct that my MFA from Bowling Green and PhD from UWM were both in fiction, although my undergraduate degree in English at the University of Pittsburgh concentrated on poetry. I've also written a play, essays, reviews, journalistic articles, performance scripts, and a few translations. As to how I self-identify in terms of genre, I prefer not to see myself as being a practitioner of only one form. At times I work as a poet and, at other times, as a fiction writer or a playwright. Simply put, I'm a literary writer.

I understand the importance of having depth of knowledge in a particular genre, but I also believe that U.S. literary writers often tend to be overly specialized, which can have a negative effect on the quality of their work. Poets, for example, sometimes have modest ability when it comes to managing larger structural aspects of a collection (architectonics). Novelists, on the other hand, sometimes demonstrate only a limited awareness of the sensory and expressive dynamics available at the sentence level because their focus is so often on dramatic tension and plot.

If I can make an analogy to athletics, I think there's enormous value in literary cross training. Many imaginative and expressive muscles are needed to succeed in any genre. Occasionally reading and writing outside your favorite type of literature can be a very useful exercise.

**Interviewer.** One of the venues, which garners you recognition, is your readings. I can speak firsthand that you're very engaging, and I believe that anyone who watches the video for "Doña Josefina Counsels Doña Concepción Before Entering Sears" on PBS's Poetry Everywhere website would certainly agree. How important is the performance aspect of poetry to you, and how does that affect the way that you write poetry if at all?

**Kilwein Guevara.** As to my live performances, yes, I confess, I'm influenced by bardic traditions (I was a huge fan of William Butler Yeats' and Dylan Thomas's recordings when I was an undergraduate working in the Spoken Arts Department of the Hillman Library at Pitt in the early 1980s). I have always been a fan and student of excellent comedians (including Richard Pryor, Jonathan Winters, Frank Gorshin, Steve Martin, Freddie

Prince, Lily Tomlin, Mario “Cantinflas” Moreno, George Carlin, Bill Cosby, Margaret Cho, Tommy Chong, Cheech Marin) I also followed the performance poetics that became popular in the 1990s, which helped me to learn more about the longer traditions of experimental sound-based poetics, from Kurt Schwitters to Steve McCaffery to Sekou Sundiata to Kate Bornstein. I’m sure my interest in the art of performance is also a reaction against the flaccid, dry, academic, weepy, mumbling, supercilious or stentorian poetry readings that I’ve sometimes endured as an audience member. A successful reading or performance has variety a mix of tones and expressive dynamics. Texts, whether on the page or live, should be engaging. Some lend themselves more to print, some to performance, and some co-exist well in both formats.

**Interviewer:** One thing that I love about your poetry is that it takes a lot of risks—magical, surreal, lyrical are all terms that would, I think, describe your poetry, and what’s wonderful about that is not only the sense of adventure the reader experiences, but also the tone the speaker/narrator employs in these poems so that all of these scenes, be it a grandfather’s body wrapped in a carpet being stolen before his family can bury him (“The Magic Carpet”) or the search for Roberto Clemente’s body in the ocean despite fisherman stating that Clemente changes forms (“New Year’s Day”), are real for the audience. But is there ever a point when writing when you feel that you’ve leaped beyond the audience? And pertaining to reception, what is your take on the alleged opposition of prevailing paradigms in contemporary American poetry between the “Abstract” and the “Accessible”?

**Kilwein Guevara.** I appreciate your observation that I take risks in my writing. I certainly aspire to this—most good writers do. Of my books, I think the recently published *POEMA* takes the most risks linguistically and structurally. Sometimes, honestly, however, I think I’m just playing around the edges. In terms of innovation, I think most writing (whether mainstream or avant-garde) is like this, even very good writing. For example, I’m currently trying to read as much as I can by the Chilean Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003). In Latin America, he is often cited as one of the leaders in the next wave of Spanish language fiction writers who came after *The Boom*. And as able, interesting, and entertaining as Bolaño’s fiction is, there is very little remarkably new about it in terms of novelistic form or thematics. He was playing about the edges as well, even in the later, longer books. *Los detectives salvajes*, for example, doesn’t actually explore new ground in terms of what a novel can do. Nevertheless, even though the middle section was a bit



bloated for me, I was fascinated by several of the main characters and felt that the journey was worth it, even if the art of the novel wasn't meaningfully advanced by this project.

As to your question about abstract vs. accessible, perhaps another way of labeling the two poles would be opacity vs. transparency. I think the distinction exists, but the most interesting writing for me occupies a fluid and dynamic relationship between either extreme.

**Interviewer:** You teach occasional courses in Latina/o Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. What have your goals been in your involvement with Latina/o Studies, and how do you see your literary contributions as it pertains to being Latino?

**Kilwein Guevara:** I developed and taught some of the first courses in U.S. Latina/o literature at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and at UW—Milwaukee. My main reason for doing this had to do with fairness. Literature written by Latinos (women and men) has a dismal history of being represented in our colleges and high schools. Before the 1990s, Latina/o literature generally wasn't part of the curriculum at all. I also wanted to see to it that well-qualified Latino faculty could find an academic home in our universities. For example, when I came to UWM in 2003, less than 1% of our faculty was Latino. (By contrast, the city of Milwaukee was then about 13% Latino.) Fortunately, through activism, the number of Latino faculty is gradually increasing at my university and across the country.

And as far as ethnicity, yes, absolutely, I have drawn heavily from the linguistic, narrative, poetic, and cultural traditions of Latin America (in particular, Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Chile and Argentina). It could simply be my bias or good luck, but every time I'm in Latin America I collect stories like a spelunker stumbling into a stony chamber thick with glowing mushrooms or resting bats. For example, recently in Ecuador, a friend told me about a wake held for a man who owned a gymnasium where boxers trained. At his request, the man's open coffin was set up in the center of the ring. During the hours of the viewing, pairs of boxers sparred with one another, juking, jabbing, dancing, upper-cutting, skipping carefully around the corpse. This is glorious stuff. These are the little seeds that eventually become part of one of my poems or chapters.

But the truth is, probably thanks to my diverse family, I'm fascinated by human cultures the world over.

**Interviewer:** It seems to me that your poetry books are built on a premise. For example, *Postmortem* explores the epigraph “We’re all immigrants to this reality” (Victor Hernández Cruz) as a duality of the two Americas and the hardships immigrants face in new countries--economy, language, customs, and *Autobiography of So-and-so* is an experiment not only in the autobiography as a genre, but also prose poetry as a form. So is it that you start with a premise when you work on a book of poetry?

**Kilwein Guevara:** I don’t think that I start with a premise. Rather, I find the path of each book at some point in the journey of composing it. As Theodore Roethke wrote, “I learn by going where I have to go.” The Spaniard Antonio Machado put it another way:

Caminante no hay camino,  
se hace camino al andar...

(Wayfarer, there is no road,  
you make up the road as you go...)

**Interviewer:** It would be unfortunate not to learn when you realized that you wanted to be a writer. When did that happen?

**Kilwein Guevara:** I would point to and thank my parents as far as my interest in oral story telling and literature goes. I also had enough good teachers from 4th grade to graduate school who fed the fire inside of me to read and write. I remember being maybe three or four years old and my mother cradling my hand in hers as I held a pencil and she helped me to learn how to write my name. I remember this as a magical moment of passing from one realm into another. My father was always reading and writing. He was the first writer in my family. Both of my parents still love reading, and from them I learned to be a word detective, obsessed with etymologies and sound properties, denotations and connotations.

At Pitt, as an undergraduate, I worked in the Hillman Library, and instead of shelving books, I hid in the stacks and read them. If it were a particularly important work, I would desensitize the metal security strip in the spine and take it home on a private, long-term loan. I hereby confess and regret my shady past as a library page. At that time, my love affair with writing was on-again, off-again. At some point in my very early twenties,

however, I realized that there was so much to learn, that I should probably just capitulate and start to write as though my life depended on it. And, in a many way, it has.

**Interviewer:** Here's the dreaded (final) question for any poet: why write poetry? What does poetry offer us?

**Kilwein Guevara:** We write poetry because we want to. Or we don't write poetry because we don't want to. Sometimes, of course, there are factors beyond wanting.

We read and write poetry to be closer to the world; to feel, as e.e. cummings wrote. We write because we hunger to read a poem that doesn't yet exist until we imagine it. A successful poem fills the world with being.





**Jenna Dailey**  
*There Is Time*  
Charcoal and gesso

## Essay at Eagle Lake *by Matthew Vetter*

Morehead, Kentucky

Twice the doe has strayed to the bottom of the hollow,

where chicory and goldenrod grow,  
where tree line meets path,  
and path meets water.

And twice have I met her, and once looked for her.

I have found geese as well.  
I run at them just to see their excited departure.  
I want to watch them fly away from my simple violence.

Of course I stumble and fall.  
I'm afraid I am as my father: impatient for the infinite.

I hunger.

I look for the doe and I look at her long.  
I feed on her soft doe-eyes.

I brush the gnat from my eye.  
as she twitches her ear,  
and stamps her hind leg to shake off the horsefly.

I never stop looking.  
I cannot let go of the strange, bestial embrace of our gaze.  
I fill myself like a tick until I am  
satisfied as if

my blood-gorged body hung  
from the white fur of her belly.

We are in this world together for a moment  
and then she is gone,  
bounding away like she was made for this dream.

I must return, too.  
Of course I recite these lines to myself along the way.  
I do not want to forget them.

These things are valuable to me:  
the doe, the geese, the purple and yellow of the chicory and the goldenrod.

It is because I can use them again and again  
that I emerge from the woods like a madman, a gadabout, a poetaster,  
dirt-drenched and sweating, mumbling, always  
mumbling to myself.



**ars moreheadica** by Sean L. Corbin

as if

one could compact daniel boone national forest  
into a single leaf drifting towards dying grass,  
or distill a mountain's story  
into a twelve-ounce mason jar,  
is the random image of an open container  
in a camry cupholder  
enough to snap the shutter closed?  
is the sight of aged hitchhikers escaping,  
a toddler sucking on green sugar,  
a brown alien mass in a racist nicotine field,  
is the random enough?

and if

i were to force this sloping range  
into twenty square feet of skin  
and give it green eyes and red hair,  
call it a name, something relatable,  
something like anna, something sweet,  
if i could force the creature to walk  
and dance and mutter incoherently,  
could i protect myself from a fate of ice?  
and would it make you understand  
the texture of a tobacco leaf?  
would you even try, would you even  
take it into your fingers  
and feel the gum stick the petals  
of the blossom to your skin?  
would you even try?

what if

i sat here now and told a song  
about a teenager from rowan county

shopping for a prom dress at fayette mall,  
trying to decide if sequins or beads  
would be best for hiding her bulging womb,  
would you sympathize with the boy  
that forgets his silent evening with yeats  
in favor of snuff and spinning wheels?  
would you sympathize?

or if

i could transcribe the music of the atmosphere  
into dots and lines against dots and lines  
for a jazz trio to breathe back like trees,  
if i could mix the right amount  
of bourbon and marlboros and sunsets,  
of stallions and lincolns and pick-up trucks  
and massage it all onto a beige canvas  
what could you call it? could you carry on  
conversations over cold champagne  
and form images from emphysema?  
could you gather any meaning  
from blots of ink against white?  
could you call it art?

but if

this poem ended on a rounded peak,  
exalting the significance of calloused hands  
and the inspiration of a coal-covered diamond,  
if this was to end on a positive charge,  
a spark of appreciation for westerns and attitudes,  
for stone-hard skulls and kaleidoscope autumns,  
could you come to terms with optimism?  
could i? could we believe in a torch  
sprinting words over mountaintops?  
could we come to terms?

**a lecture** by *Sean L. Corbin*

sing to me your cavity smothered songs of woe to try and drag the  
tears from my eyes with your rusted chain tongue,  
tell me through gritted teeth how the county killed your daughter  
with the poor maintenance of mountain trails,  
how your sister fell into one last slumber with a stomach full of  
pills and hands covered in the white powder of medication,  
how once your family land stretched from clearfield to cranston  
before the invocation of eminent domain shoveled you into  
the trailer park,  
fill my ears with curses against big government and politics and  
wal-mart and ashland oil and mountaintop removal,  
and say fuck taxes and to hell with liberals and goddamn all the  
socialist communist fascist bastards in ties and air  
conditioning,  
condemn the man for shoving you into briars in the name of  
progress and growth and the greater good and future  
generations,  
blame big business for the holes in your teeth and oh the highway  
robbery of insurance companies picking at your carcass like  
a magpie,  
and big brother is here trying to take control for supreme power  
satellite surveillance and social security numbers and  
universal health care,  
ignore my smirk and pretend i don't recognize contradictions and  
repeat to me the story of your plastic knee from vietnam,  
explain your field injury during the seventies the tobacco field  
injury and how a good war story always works on loose  
women,  
and scream holler shout to the security cameras in the fervor of  
frustration with being pushed around by the powers that be,  
be sure to blame the spics and niggers pushing you out of work for  
the rolls of pennies and piles of dimes you scatter from  
your pockets in lieu of green,  
no work not one job for a hard working man with two good hands



and one good knee fucking immigrants all there is  
mickey d's and you're too good for grease,  
and i'll need to speak up when you place your order yeah it's a  
shame i can't remember you it's just the poison of my  
generation,  
but don't stop talking and teaching my punk ass self as i turn to  
slip the plastic bottle from the shelf and total the damages,  
just keep lecturing on and counting your change and holding your  
chin to the stars as i push your solutions into a discreet bag

**Waiting** by *Lisa Sorrels-Warmbrodt*

Steely gray skies  
Staring drowsily, apathetically  
At the querulous trees  
Bony and frigid  
Hunched impatiently  
In their thin brown suits  
Gripping to each other  
In muted whiskey-voices  
Glancing over their brittle shoulders  
Just in case Spring is nearby  
Listening.

**Far from Whitaker Street:**  
**An Excerpt from *American Apocalypse***  
*by Journey McAndrews*

*From Mary O'Brien's poem "On Whitaker Street"*

I saw god  
standing in Times Square  
wearing a trench coat  
exposing his limp cock  
to passersby

I thought of the pregnant holes  
on Whitaker Street  
the one's I leapt over  
"wider than the ditch"  
back home in the God fearing South

I remembered the lectures  
given by those  
damned philosophers  
who tried to trick me into believing  
there was nothing  
to believe in  
when I knew  
the chair was real  
because my ass  
wasn't on the floor

I looked back through  
those thundering hours of my youth  
when the Amerikan parade  
filled my small town mentality  
and a worn Bible

gathered coffee stains  
on my mother's kitchen table

I saw this new Amerika  
not through my childhood eyes  
or my small town preacher's eyes  
or my father's political blindness  
or my mother's mute indifference  
or the history books  
they carefully edited for us  
in high school

I stood at the Statue of Liberty's  
enormous feet  
and I knew why Whitman sang  
Amerika's body electric  
where else would such  
opulence be passed off  
as unalienable Rights

I got back on  
that long train of abuses  
and rode through  
the heart of Manhattan  
past where the World Trade Center  
once stood  
as a marker of our greatness  
now in ruins  
as all greatness is destined to become

I silently saluted as we passed by  
a faded red white and blue  
flapping tirelessly  
in the wind  
at Ground Zero



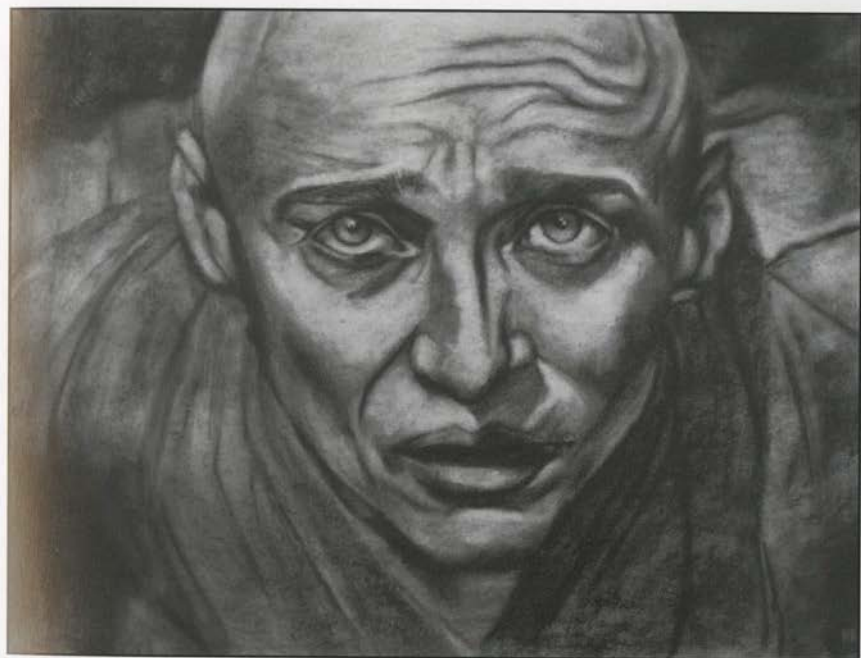
the Amerikan ethos echoed  
in my mind  
parts of the story  
were more believable than others  
truth, justice, honor  
these words rolled off my tongue  
and collapsed  
in a heap of smoke and flames  
I clinched my fists tighter  
holding onto  
truths that are self-evident  
as the train made its way back  
to Times Square  
where I saw god  
standing in a piss stained trench coat  
grinning like a fool

**Sacrament for the Living** by *Journey McAndrews*

On the fire's edge  
her image emerges  
the shape of a young girl  
with her face  
turned up  
like, a teacup  
smoke becomes  
her limbs  
we wrap ears of corn  
in tinfoil and place them  
beneath, the embers  
of her bones

Stirring the potful of stew  
she warms with her flesh  
her eyes evaporate  
into the night sky  
becoming stars  
that glow for us  
while we dine  
by the campfire  
she is with us  
now, like she was  
before her death  
you always wanted a son  
until you cradled her  
in your arms the first time  
then, you only wanted  
her

I think I taste her  
in the warm hunks of meat  
and the crusty bread  
and the red wine  
we drink and eat of her  
as we once did our Lord and Savior  
at Sunday morning mass



**Natasha Reader**  
*The Fountain*  
Charcoal drawing



## **Human Meat** by Kimberly Ratliff

Human is a rare meat which, when baked,  
More rapidly fills with worms.

They're microwaving themselves in  
Electric coffins.

Or they prefer a slow-bake  
Outside, wrapped in tasty cloth blanket.

Nice and crisp, like fast food  
For worms. Left on a

Warming tray until finely  
Garnished with earth and

Sucked of fluid while  
Hair grows longer and skin tightens.

(Oh, what a dream! Tight skin,  
Long hair—youth returned!)

Consumed from the inside-out  
And the outside-in.

Old women, cowhide tough  
Skin soaked in oils and make-up

Just wait and bake.  
But they don't bake pies like their

Grandmothers baked pies. They won't  
Die white and grey, or soft and pink,

Rosy blood dancing with blue veins.  
They are calloused by a life-giving star.

Like cows rubbing against an electric fence;  
Like birds trapped in plastic rings.

### **Old Kentucky Hole** *by Kimberly Ratliff*

From earthen wombs,  
cleft like strawberry bottoms on the vine,  
I crawled and writhed  
like her other children  
to my breath.

I grew in the cool shadow  
of hugging hills,  
forests false like teeth,  
brittle and old,  
sowed by hand.

Mountains rotting us from the inside,

it was a world black with coal  
as black as plague,  
and as light with God  
as the sun, or an abyss,  
depending on one's raising.

There were shoeless feet,  
candy messes, lifeless beer cans  
along the highway,  
Children who one day  
never came to school again.

And the parents who never told why.

Moonshiners or Ministers  
filled tubs with shine  
or bible school ice cubes;  
either way,  
artless choirs sang down the day.

**Backslid** by *Sosha Pinson*

I am rooted here  
but I have fallen, holding onto the ghost  
of a belief that something could save me.

I've slipped between the cracks  
into the yellowed pages of hymnals  
bled ink in lines, notes, keys of songs  
ignored for recycled melodies and harmonies  
My place is tattooed into the spine of hands outstretched in  
fellowship  
and my soul reverberated with each clap to a divine rhythm  
it echoes in my brain as a treacherous reminder:  
I have fallen to silence in compliance  
of these people who are so boastful in their lack of faith  
their questions  
of the existence of God

while I'm trapped in the molded pews  
of the decayed memories of my own truth



## **Vagina** by *Stacey Greene*

The first time I saw one  
it was my father at the Chinese restaurant  
biting off the small end of an oyster  
with a fork and knife.

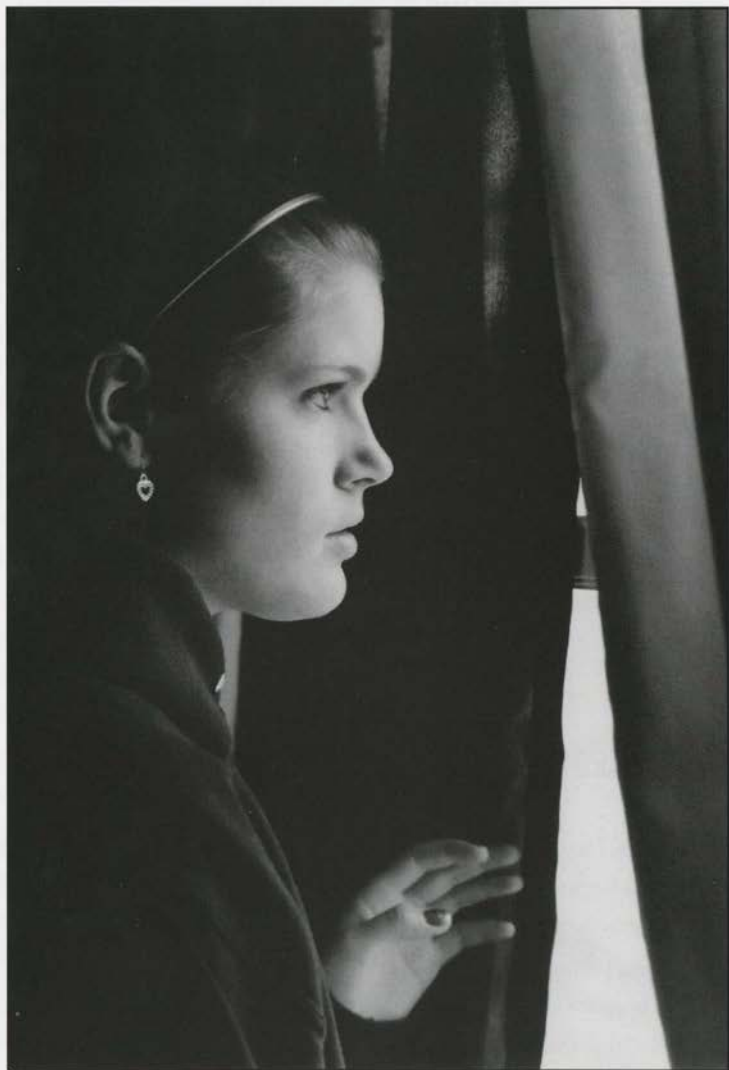
It was on his breath for hours,  
and my mother would not kiss  
until he washed it out.

The last time, he had pocketed  
oyster shells and brought them  
to my mother like our cat  
leaves mice on our doorstep.

## **Lake Michigan** by *Christopher Allan Prewitt*

With a swollen hand I awoke. Nothing spoke to me short of the infant cardinals chirping on a branch outside the master bathroom's window that morning. I truly feared that I had become sacrosanct to the point that my palm would have been Lake Michigan had I wept in it and not into my pillow.

I must busy myself, I said, climbing out the bedroom window, mindful of the swollen hand. To think that if a neighbor, a doctor no less, had not been stirred by my shouting and chucking bricks at the nest of infant cardinals, he might not have observed that overnight, by the looks of it, a spider had laid eggs in my hand. And who wants to imagine uncountable infants hatching over the surface of Lake Michigan?



**Rachael King**

*Bethany*

Black and white photograph

## **Thirty Minutes in Hell** by *Christopher Allan Prewitt*

-With respect to Bill Wiese, who went twenty-three

Chips from the plaster ceiling cannot easily  
be plucked from one's blue jeans. However,  
postal workers still have reasons  
to lick our stamps, for what can be plucked  
from the blue jeans shall be mailed,  
God willing, not to that place

reserved for banana peels browning,  
or the knotted tails of kittens  
forced on the clothesline to paw out  
their whiskers, as blood rushed to their heads  
at the velocity that Robert Mapplethorpe  
re-imagined Jesus Christ or children. Instead,

at last, we can love one another as we love  
ourselves. What could be more explicit  
than sharing chips from the ceiling to address one's love?  
After all, we have all in our reclining in the tub  
stared at the ceiling in order to make out the profile  
of the Everly Brothers, whose songs have taken us to the tongue

of someone that we did not love, because she had already  
died, and no one had the heart to tell her  
that because her heart, like the wax in her ears, had  
hardened, her rotting teeth were the closest  
to the golden streets of Heaven that she would ever get. But  
as the Everly Brothers once sang, all one has to do is dream.



## **A Swirl** by *Kevin Lee Murphy*

outside a dark stock

had some cooper discovered the exit wound of his creative process

it all could've been

not quite avoided away

longed into the non-existences in memory unbidden.

The fray and lopsided internalization becomes the last refuge of a

too saned man to sand down the ideals of principle not

opened to your path;

some drummed ascent proven a loped nadir radiating out

creeped clingings to a stone falling.

I destroy being found

## **Penultimate before the static** by *Kevin Lee Murphy*

The drake is kind

and I laugh at my projections

Its spinnerel gaze

looms outside

A separation to endure

if the leaves

would ever fall

Meanings are split

An ifrit's semen chokes  
and my wish is now fulfilled

\*\*\*

The spinneret looks in a mirror  
sees  
and is hypnotized

it now requires outside intervention  
and dreams of acquiring inertia

### **Untitled** *by Shilo Adams*

Starry visions of intelligent dalliances permeate my vision  
Causing a guttural, nearly obnoxious laugh to escape from my thin  
lips

Burnt sienna and pale cerulean tones invade my dreams and turn  
What was once monochromatic into something visually pleasing  
and intoxicating

Slight scents of sensuous sea water fill up my nose with delicious  
memories

Ah, they taste like moonlight and lyrical come-ons and fulfilled  
promises

They taste like gasoline and Donna Summer and the thumping  
rhythms of your chest

They taste like uncertainty and knowledge and cheap Italian food

Virtuous trombone players and their counterpart flautists produce  
music in my mind

Elegant, ornate, almost haughty compositions that seep with sorrow  
and preen with polish

Sunlight and breakfast bars invade my consciousness with a tender  
sigh

The sign for the interstate is coming up fast and I giggle as it goes  
shooting by the vehicle

The radio sends shockwaves through the sturdy vehicle with each  
pound of the bassline

Rattling its collective cage with the force of a sonic boom

Pleading eyes, confusing body language, secure delusions

Shallow lighting engulfs what used to be a white-hot ray of  
protection

Turning the radio up in order to drown out ultraviolet lies and  
radioactive death

Ah, it sounds like delirium and warning declarations and intense  
peace

It sounds like gushing water and candy wrappers and laugh tracks

It sounds like stunning clarifications and garbage trucks and silence

*-Shilo Adams*





**Ashleigh Mullins**

*Battle Monster*

Watercolor

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Shilo Adams** is an avid blogger and a native of Letcher County, Kentucky. Adams is a senior Criminology major with a minor in Psychology who will graduate in May. He has been on the Dean's List for the past 7 semesters. He is currently working on a novel and a cycle of poems about southeastern Kentucky.

**Ryan Andersons** is an Art and English double-major from Burnt Hills, New York. He landed one of his poems in the 2008 edition of *Inscape*, and is now trying his hand at some short fiction. Currently, Ryan is developing a graphic novel and maintains a writing and art blog at <http://ryanspublicpersona.blogspot.com>.

**Sean L. Corbin** is a survivor of Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, majoring in Creative Writing with a minor in Studio Art. He is currently working on several poetry and short story cycles, and is the head of The Writers Network at MSU. Sean was also the co-recipient of the MSU 2008-2009 Outstanding Student in Creative Writing award.

**Jenna Dailey** is a Senior at Morehead State University completing her area of concentration in Art. This is the first time her work has been published. Dailey's main area of interest is photography, but she appreciates all forms of art and aspires to be well versed in all disciplines.

**Lea Faske** is an Art major with a soon-to-be minor in Creative Writing at Morehead State University. Her work, both visual and written, were previously published in the 2009 edition of *Inscape*. Her visual work also was displayed in the 2009 Mount Sterling Center for the Arts' *Juried Student Art Exhibit*. Recognized by MSU's Department of Art and Design, Faske received an Outstanding Freshman Art Award last year. Currently, her art approaches deeper and more hidden aspects of humanity.

**Stacey Greene** is a proud Appalachian and member of MSU's BFA program. She is also co-editor of the 2010 issue of *Inscape*, and is currently assisting her mentor Crystal Wilkinson in the publication of an anthology. MSU has previously recognized her as an outstanding student in creative writing. Her current projects include a collection of poetry and a short story cycle.

**Anna Claire Griffin** is currently completing her third year as an Art Education major at Morehead State University. She presented two of her pieces in the 2009 Mount Sterling Center for the Arts' *Juried Student Art Exhibit*, and published a work in the 2007 issue of *Inscape*, for which she won an Honorable Mention Art Award. Griffin's current projects focus on textiles. She is currently trying to incorporate fabric and thread with her drawings and paintings.

**Maurice Kilwein Guevara** is the author of four collections of poetry—*Postmortem*, *Poems of the River Spirit*, *Autobiography of So-and-so*, and *POEMA*—a play (*The Last Bridge/El último Puente*), and is credited as a co-screenwriter and actor in the film *To Box Clouds*. His various publications include *Poetry*, *Parnassus*, and *Ploughshares*. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

**Matt Hatfield** is an English Major, with an interest in screen-writing and stage-plays. Matt has had several works produced, including one act plays, ten-minute scenes and a full-length murder mystery. He is currently working with another writer on a short-story anthology, which is horror-themed.

**Derek Holston** is an Art major focusing on graphic design and minoring in Spanish at Morehead State University. He presented his work at the 2009 Mount Sterling Center for the Arts' *Juried Student Art Exhibit*, and was published in *Inscape* in both the 2008 and 2009 issues. Holston's current projects include images of wartime, repetition and creepy illustrations.

**Justin Howell** is an Art major at Morehead State University. His current art projects focus on human relationships and emotions connected with them. The visual style of Howell's work is inspired by Asian and American Pop art and urban vinyl illustration.

**Rachael King** is a junior Art Education major at Morehead State University from northern Kentucky. She presented her work in the *Sophomore Art Exhibit* last spring and it was also showcased in the Mount Sterling Center for the Arts' *Juried Student Art Exhibit* in 2008. In 2009, King received the Outstanding Sophomore Art Student Award. Her current work consists mostly of class assignments, but she likes to experiment with different drawing and photography techniques during her free time.



**Francis Krug** is a Philosophy major and Creative Writing minor. He has been published previously in *Inscape* and was one of the former facilitators of Coffee House. He plans to graduate in the spring of 2010 with a BA in Philosophy and hopes to pursue a career in Massage Therapy while furthering his writing career. Francis is originally from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota.

**Journey McAndrews** is a freelance writer and poet currently residing in Kentucky on a farm where she grows flowers, berries, and vegetables. The author is presently working on a novel, poetry, and creative non-fiction. Her literary influences are William Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and postmodern theories. McAndrews just concluded a study on the life of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Eastern religions, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience* ideologies.

**Charles Maynard** is studying Creative Writing and is currently a junior at MSU. He has previously been published in *Inscape*. He is not a robot...

**Ashleigh Mullins** is currently pursuing an area of concentration in Art at Morehead State University. Her work was exhibited in the Lexington Art League's annual *Open* exhibit in 2009, as well as the *Reverse Ekphrasis Project*. Mullins' current work is an exploration of her neuroses and personal iconography through self-portraiture.

**Kevin Lee Murphy** is a native of Nicholasville, Kentucky. He is an English major with a minor in Creative Writing.

**Jessica Newton** is a full-time Psychology Major and part-time writer at MSU.

**Jonathan Nickles** is an Art major with a focus in graphic design at Morehead State University. He presented his work at the 2009 Mount Sterling Center for the Arts' *Juried Student Art Exhibit*, where he was awarded Second Place in the Digital Art category. Nickles received both the Outstanding Freshman and Outstanding Sophomore Art Awards from MSU's Department of Art and Design. His work encompasses numerous themes, many based around mythology, philosophy and metaphysics.

**Sosha Pinson** is a junior at Morehead pursuing a Creative Writing major with a minor in Psychology. She is twenty years old and from Pike County, Kentucky. She mediates



Coffee House at the Honors House and participates in the student-ran Writers Network. One of her poems has been previously published in *Inscape*. She is currently being held hostage by her muse, writing in order to survive.

**Zachary Potter** is an Art major focusing in drawing and painting at Morehead State University. He has exhibited work in galleries across Kentucky, including annually at Pikeville College from 2003 to 2005, receiving an Honorable Mention Award in 2003. Additionally, Potter has presented pieces at MSU's Strider Gallery for the *Visual Arts Guild Exhibit* and the Rowan County Arts Center in 2009. He is currently working on his first Solo Exhibit scheduled for October 2010.

**Christopher Allan Prewitt** is a lifelong resident of Southeastern Kentucky. A multiple time recipient of the Billie & Curtis Owens prize in poetry, Prewitt's publications include *Inscape*, *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, and *Suss*.

**Kimberly Ratliff**, originally from Allen, KY in Floyd County, is a senior History major and English minor. She received an honorable mention from the Sarabande Publishing Company Student Poetry Competition.

**Natasha Reader** is an Art major and a Senior at Morehead State University. She presented her work in the 2009 Mount Sterling Center for the Arts' *Juried Student Art Exhibit* and the 2009 MSU *Sophomore Art Exhibit*. Reader is currently working on projects involving the human form and emotion.

**Jessica Rusher** is an Art major focusing in graphic design at Morehead State University. She received an Art Leadership Scholarship from MSU for her high school art portfolio. Rusher's current art projects focus on concept art and illustrations involving fantasy themes.

**Misty Skaggs** was born and raised in Elliott County, Kentucky and has spent the majority of her life in the foothills of Eastern Kentucky. She has been previously published in *Inscape* magazine (prose and poetry) and had a poem featured in *Limestone Literary Journal*. Misty was also the winner of the Judy Rogers Award for fiction. She is a major in Creative Writing at MSU and plans to continue to work towards her MFA.

**Lisa Sorrels-Warmbrodt** is a Sociology major, with an AAS in Criminal Justice. Her work has been published in *Inscape*, *OUSC's Envoi*, and ACTC's online site *Voices*. She considers her writing as a way of reflecting on her life's experiences; a tool for understanding, accepting, and letting go.

**Matthew Vetter** is a graduate student at Morehead State. You can link to more of his poems at [matthewvetter.wordpress.com/new-forthcoming](http://matthewvetter.wordpress.com/new-forthcoming) or read the web log he shares with poet Jill Kelly Koren at [2poets.blogspot.com](http://2poets.blogspot.com).

**Craig Wagner** is a Graduate student at Morehead State University working toward a Master's Degree in English. His work has been published in *Inscape* where he received an Editor's Choice Award in 2009. His current work includes a short-story cycle set in Eastern Kentucky.

**Nathan Weaver** graduated from Morehead State University in December of 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, focusing in graphic design. In addition to having his design work selected for the cover of the 2009 edition of *Inscape*, Weaver's art work was published within the same issue, receiving the First Place Art Award. More recently, Weaver was awarded First Place in the Digital Art category at the Mount Sterling Center for the Arts' *Juried Student Art Exhibit*. He is currently in the process of applying to graduate schools and working as an artist on the side. He enjoys exploring the outdoors and architecture, building things, playing with his dogs, and listening to and making music.

**Nathan Wellman** has attended MSU for about three years and was recently accepted into the BFA program. He previously had a short story published in the British magazine *Morpheus Tales*, and poetry in two issues of *Children, Churches, and Daddies*. Also, his full length play will be performed at MSU in March, produced by Theta Alpha Phi.

**Patrick White** graduated from the University of Kentucky with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2008, and he is currently completing his Master of Arts degree requirements at Morehead State University. Born in 1985 in Cincinnati, Ohio, White moved to Louisville at a young age, and has spent most of his life in Kentucky. Creating works of art for schools and businesses, he hopes to continue to do so as he finishes his education.

**Josh Wolfe** is currently a Junior at Morehead State University focusing on graphic design. He has always enjoyed creating all kinds of art ranging from drawing and painting to computer art. Although this is the first time Wolfe has entered an *Inscape* competition, his work was published previously in *Teen Ink Literary Magazine* and he has received numerous awards for exhibited work throughout his career. Wolfe's current projects focus on the body and the human form, as well as watercolor landscapes from around the region.

**Kelsey Zachry** is an Art Education major at Morehead State University. In addition to presenting her work in the 2010 *Reverse Ekphrasis Project*, she received an Art Leadership Scholarship. Zachry's current work reflects on the human condition and the emotions that go with it.



*Inscape* is a Morehead State University publication with a long history of cutting edge visual and literary art. Media and genres of work range from prose, poetry, short story, long narrative, non-fiction and creative essays to photography, printmaking, drawing, painting, sculpture & digital art.

The Department of English offers MSU students the opportunity to submit work for publication. Students may submit poetry, fiction, non-fiction or drama. The works are reviewed by a panel and top selections are included in *Inscape*.

The Department of Art and Design offers students two opportunities to have their work juried for publication. For every issue, jurors review the competitive pool of submissions for both the cover design and the visual artwork published within *Inscape*. Their selections help form a unique and diverse issue of *Inscape*.

For specific guidelines and submission dates, visit  
**[www.moreheadstate.edu/inscape](http://www.moreheadstate.edu/inscape)**.





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