

WM



# Editor's Note

I was given the idea for this book by an English teacher—back when we used to have them—before the Great Ignorance, and after the Last Great War changed everything. She handed me this concept on her death bed, made me promise to keep it going, never stop—to keep it secret, keep it safe—just as she had.

That is who we are: the Keepers.

The keepers of art.  
The keepers of dreams.  
The keepers of verse.  
The keepers of stories.  
The keepers of belief.

The keepers of what the eye sees from under hood, under surveillance.  
The keepers of what the eye senses in low light, under suspicion.

The keepers of what the heart feels when told otherwise.  
The keepers of what the mind remembers when little is left to know.

The keepers of what the hand reaches for when so much is so far away...

...and a good story is all that is needed to ease the ache of despair...

We keep to salvage creativity, to safeguard imagination, to confer expression, to stow our most sensitive mind-whispers for the next group of aesthetic dreamers—the next keepers—who need self-expression like sustenance to thrive.

Just as we did...

Just as you might need it now...

So, please, take...

Read. Share. Feel. Write.

And share again. Keep it going...keep it safe...



## A Special Thank You!

The staff of In the Write Mind would like to thank Jodi Greene and the Office of Student Life for their unwavering support throughout the entire publication process of this issue. We would also like to thank Hannah Anthony from Get Memorable for her time and creative energy (including the logged miles) in bringing the vision behind this theme to vivid life. Thank you, Berry Davis, for taking the time to photograph our submissions. Special thanks to Kathy Morse for updating our web page and bettering our submissions process for the future.

And most importantly, thank you, submitters, for sharing your art, thoughts and feelings with us, and the rest of the campus; it is your courage and willingness to express yourself that keeps magazines like this going.

## Call for Submissions

### Written

Maximum 6 Submissions

Prose: 3,000 words (digital copy required)

Please limit submissions to one per file

**IMPORTANT:** All work must be original.

We **DO NOT** accept any previously-published works.



### Visual

Maximum 6 Submissions

Photography: High-quality and resolution (Minimum 300 dpi)

Artwork/Paintings: High-resolution picture with appropriate lighting or scanned in .pdf or .tiff format

Digital Media: .pdf or .tiff format

Dance/Music or other performance art: QR code

**\*Note:** We can help you obtain high-quality photos of your art.

Just let us know in the description field on our submission form!

How to submit (any one of these):

- 1) Visit our web page: [www.cf.edu/inthewritemind](http://www.cf.edu/inthewritemind)  
(enter submission info. & attach your files);
- 2) Drop submission form & hard copy of your work in one of our campus submission boxes (library or student lounges); or
- 3) Hand-deliver to a staff member, or to Melissa Alling, faculty advisor in C3-208.

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When it all changed...





"Looking Glass"  
By Cassandra Brennan



# Writ Large with Fingers on Hearts

Foggy the mirrors, swiped—away with our messages  
Woke up too late for coffee, motley, the way we like it  
Too much love to be any good for either one of us

She's running bare down long hallways, chasing vestiges  
Fallen stars spiking out of the sand, shredding heels to shit  
Dangling, ignorant ends over balconies, red—away with our messages

Pushing clouds aside to better see the galaxies,  
beside a full moon, to take fleeting moments, like paper, and rip—  
Cause it was too much love to be any good for either one of us

In jars, like fireflies, with radiant cinders and charades,  
on tap, hot tongues on skin, cooler when blown: the inside largely writ  
Now is swallowed quickly, upsetting stomach—away with our messages

Hotel beds lathered in sheets; damp, cloying attitudes  
Locked elbows, shaking knees; fallow corners we can now sit,  
With too much love to be any good for either one of us

In exile now, drinking coffee, black—with some (extra) additives;  
A small series of red footprints, feminine; they exit with little bits  
of aspect, gradually withdrawing—away with our precious messages;  
They brought too much love—to be any good—for either one of us.

By James Blevins



# Those Who Watch Over Us

The sun peeked through the trees as morning slowly stirred.

A bus full of teenagers drove down the road towards school.

One kid sat alone in the very back of the bus; quietly, he stared out the window, watching the morning sun filter through the passing trees.

His name is Joshua, but his best friend Austin always called him Josh. Josh was a complete outcast. Everyone saw him differently than Austin, so he remained quiet with no expression on his face, watching the trees and the sun from the back of the bus.

A paper ball whizzed through the air, hitting Josh in the forehead. Josh turned from the window, looking towards the front of the bus, eyeing for the culprit. The sun's bright rays revealed Josh's left eye—bruised a vivid purple. The paper ball rested on his lap. Josh reached down, opened the ball, and began reading silently what was written on it.

You killed Austin was written over and over again with little mutilated stick figures drawn into the margins.

Josh's eyes started to glisten with tears. He crumpled the paper back into its ball, returned his gaze to the window. A memory of his best friend erupted in his head.

---

He and Austin were walking out behind the football stadium one evening. It was dark, not much could be seen. It was quiet; no one was around.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Austin had said.

"Right behind ya," Josh had said.

Suddenly, a group of jocks emerged from the shadows, surrounding Austin and Josh. The menacing group of kids began whaling on them with bats and other blunt objects.

The last thing Josh remembered, before blacking out, was watching the jocks repeatedly kicking Austin in the ribs as his body lay limp on the green grass of the football field.

---

The bus came to a slow stop outside the school, opening its doors with a hiss. The sound snapped Josh out of his memory. All the kids got up from their seats at once and trickled from the bus at an even pace. Josh sat in his seat there for a moment, lost in thought, before getting up and walking off the bus, all the while avoiding eye contact with the bus driver.

As he left the bus ramp, Josh propped up the hood of his sweatshirt in an attempt to hide his face, and made his way through the crowd of school kids milling about the front entrance of the building. They bumped his shoulders and whispered his name under their breath in vulgar tones.



Josh entered an empty bathroom and proceeded to the handicap stall. Taking off his backpack, Josh looked at his reflection in the mirror over the sink, then, abruptly, he punched the mirror, shattering his image. Despite the shards of glass, Josh continued to punch at the mirror. He punched the tile set behind it, trying to numb his inner pain with physical, outer pain.

He stopped after a few more punches; his knuckles were swollen and cut, covered with blood.

Josh paced back and forth in the stall, breathing heavily as tears poured down his cheeks. Wiping them away, he slammed his back up against the wall, grabbed his backpack and bunched the fabric to his mouth so he could scream into it.

Slowly dropping the bag back to the floor, Josh unzipped the largest pocket open. Digging into the bag, he pulled out a gun—a Glock nine-millimeter. More tears joined the previous streams still flowing down his cheeks. Josh pulled a clip from his bag, a clip that contained one bullet. At the bottom of his backpack was a picture of Josh and Austin.

He loaded the clip, racked the slide and pointed the barrel to the side of his head.

"I'm sorry. It was entirely my fault," Josh whispered through racking tears.

Josh closed his wet eyes and pulled the trigger.

**CLICK.**

For a moment, the silence in the empty bathroom became all encompassing, then, after a time, Josh opened his eyes, looked down at the picture of himself with Austin, it was lying abandoned on the bathroom floor next to pieces of bloody glass.

His mind stretched back to remember...

---

Josh had been lying on a gurney; out of the corner of his eye, he could see his best friend being put into a body bag.

"Austin...", he mumbled.

It was almost like he had blinked and suddenly he was in a hospital room with multiple tubes plugged into him. An x-ray of his left arm was projected on a white screen to the right of his bed. His head hurt something fierce and everything felt fuzzy as he attempted to bring his hands up to his temples; only his right arm obeyed, the left remained affixed to his side, wrapped in gauze.

Josh's father was asleep in a nearby chair. Multiple nurses streaked past the open door of his hospital room. He looked down at the various IV needles inserted into his arms, noticed the small clip attached to his right pointer finger. Josh knew that was meant to monitor his heart rate.

Confused, Josh mumbled, "Where's Austin?"

The question woke up his dad in the chair; he immediately jumped up and approached the bed.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"Dad, where's Austin?"



"He's not here, you need to calm down."

"No, I need to know if he's okay. I need to see him." Josh tried to sit up but the pain of his injuries forced him back down.

Josh started pulling the cords from his body. By removing the heart monitor, Josh inadvertently set off a series of alarms. Nurses poured into the room and began strapping Josh back down to the bed. Josh continued to struggle, yelling out.

"Let me go! I need to see him! Where's Austin!? Tell me where Austin is!"

Josh flailed his arms violently, trying to get loose, trying to find Austin.

His dad jumped in front of the nurses, backing them off. He grabbed Josh by the shoulders, hugged him to his chest. Josh began to cry, mashing his tears into the heavy fabric of his father's shirt.

"Please don't say it!" Josh pleaded.

"He's gone, Josh; he's gone."

The nurses stood silent, watching the sad spectacle. Josh's dad began to cry, joining his son.

"He's in a better place, son."

---

The bathroom door suddenly swung open and a teacher yelled into the hollow space.

"Joshua? Are you in here? Are you okay?"

A knock rang across the stall Josh was sitting in.

Josh's tears overflowed; the sheer amount of tears and sadness, he felt, might never end, might never cease to flow. He whimpered with every breath he took.

Josh rested the gun on the floor next to the picture of himself and Austin, and then curled into a ball amongst the glittering shards of glass.

## By Tyler Schultz



"Dark Sunset" By Amber Witty



My words are novenas all wrapped up in lines:  
From barroom brawls, her mouth bursting with broken pens,  
Harbored every now and again—Oh God, its morning

Without you here, the barriers shielded in vines,  
Alas, brought conviction to carry on; rollups and sins  
My words are novenas all wrapped up in lines

See my weeping? She knows—it's bitter but kind,  
To be sun-burnt upholstery like newly seared skin,  
Embraced to a chin—Oh God, its morning

Oh God, It's Morning  
By James Blevins

There is skill, I know, to care so but not mind;  
It's the silent contour of polished glass—a lens  
My words are novenas wrapped up in lines

Shredded heart, per chance, you might guise and find;  
With or without it, my bed pieces will fend  
over one remote bed—Oh God, its morning

In the throes of a noble drunk—a boring, bitch-whine,  
Printed on skin, on napkins, if only to pretend  
my words are novenas wrapped up in lines.  
Too late, Sweet Muse of mine—it's already morning.



## *How People with Higher-Functioning Autism Are Not Free*

*"Your odd demeanor is driving away customers, I have to let you go," says the boss.*

*I was twenty years old. I had only held that job for two months. It was a weekend job working at a computer repair store. I worked very hard and didn't need all the training the other employees did. I even thought I had a nice demeanor around customers and other co-workers.*

*So why did I have to be let go by the boss? This isn't the first time this has happened to me.*

*In fact, it's the furthest I have ever been in the working world. Every job I applied for before ended afterwards with, "Sorry, your odd demeanor and temperament would make it hard to handle working here." That was the word-for-word response I got from a Winn-Dixie manager, just after I applied for a job bagging groceries. I didn't even get to an interview, I just handed the application to the manager. He didn't even look at it. How could he judge?*

*I got a similar response to almost every job I tried to get in my adult life. I have an idea why they judge me: I feel strongly that it has to do with my Autism, specifically, my higher-functioning Autism, also known as Asperger's syndrome.*

*I have been looking and applying for jobs since I was sixteen years old, which is around the same time my parents let me get a job. My goal was to work part-time during the school year, then work full-time during the summer. I wanted to be on my own by the time I was eighteen, as well as have a reliable mode of transportation for college. After college, I wanted to make my way up the workplace ladder; that or even start my own business one day. However, over the last eight years, I have only had one job: the job mentioned earlier.*

*Employees would comment on how my hand-flapping and odd demeanor would weird customers out. I have only once made it as far as the interview, just to be told I'm too rude and arrogant to work there.*

*Now if I was just mentally-handicapped (or even had a more severe form of Autism) I would have an easier time finding work, mainly due to government incentives that workplaces are provided for hiring someone with more profound mental and physical disabilities. Not to mention, that hiring people with severe disabilities can do wonders for a company's public relations.*

*Nonetheless, with higher-functioning Autism, you are between a rock and a hard place.*

*You're not disabled enough for government workplace assistance and public relations benefits; however, you are still discriminated against in regards to your actual disabilities.*

*In 2011, under much reluctance, I applied for SSI (Supplemental Security Income)—a government handout for people with disabilities. It only pays between six-hundred and seven-hundred dollars a month, but it helps me until I figure something else out. In the meantime, I have worked with vocational rehabilitation; I also started attending college classes: hoping that a good education might make employers overlook my disability.*

*Prior to 2012 (when I started getting SSI benefits), I was living with my girlfriend's parents. Pretty much all of my expenses have been incurred by them. I was only able to help out around the house, giving what little financial relief I could. I still live with them, at least now I can help out by taking care of my expenses better.*

*The following is an excerpt from a famous literary work that I feel summarizes how I feel:*

*"I think it is agreed by all parties that this prodigious number of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom a very great additional grievance; and therefore, whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the commonwealth would deserve so well of the public as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation."*

*This was a paragraph from the essay "A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift. It was written back in the eighteenth century. This essay was a satire against people who were against helping the poor, basically saying: to take care of the problem with the poor "the rich must use the poor as meat." This paragraph could be applied to the issue of employing people with higher-functioning Autism as well—none of which wish to live in poverty or rely on handouts.*

*"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." That was an excerpt from Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a letter he wrote following an arrest during a civil rights demonstration. This demonstration was a reaction against legalized discrimination that black people saw in the American South in the 1960s (and before): such as businesses refusing to hire people based solely on race. The letter talked about how "it was now or never" regarding civil rights. It also shared that the church leaders criticizing King's demonstration were a part of the problem; they wished to maintain the status-quo.*

*What does this have to do with Autism?*

*Clearly the discrimination I face doesn't match the severity of Jim Crow segregation in the American South that Dr. King was forced to endure; however, the discrimination I have endured trying to find work is still despicable. Why should I have to rely on other people's handouts just to survive? Maybe I want a job just like everyone else. Maybe I'd like to have the freedom to work hard and plan accordingly.*

*Maybe I'd like a shot at the American Dream.*

*That is something a handout just can't give you.*

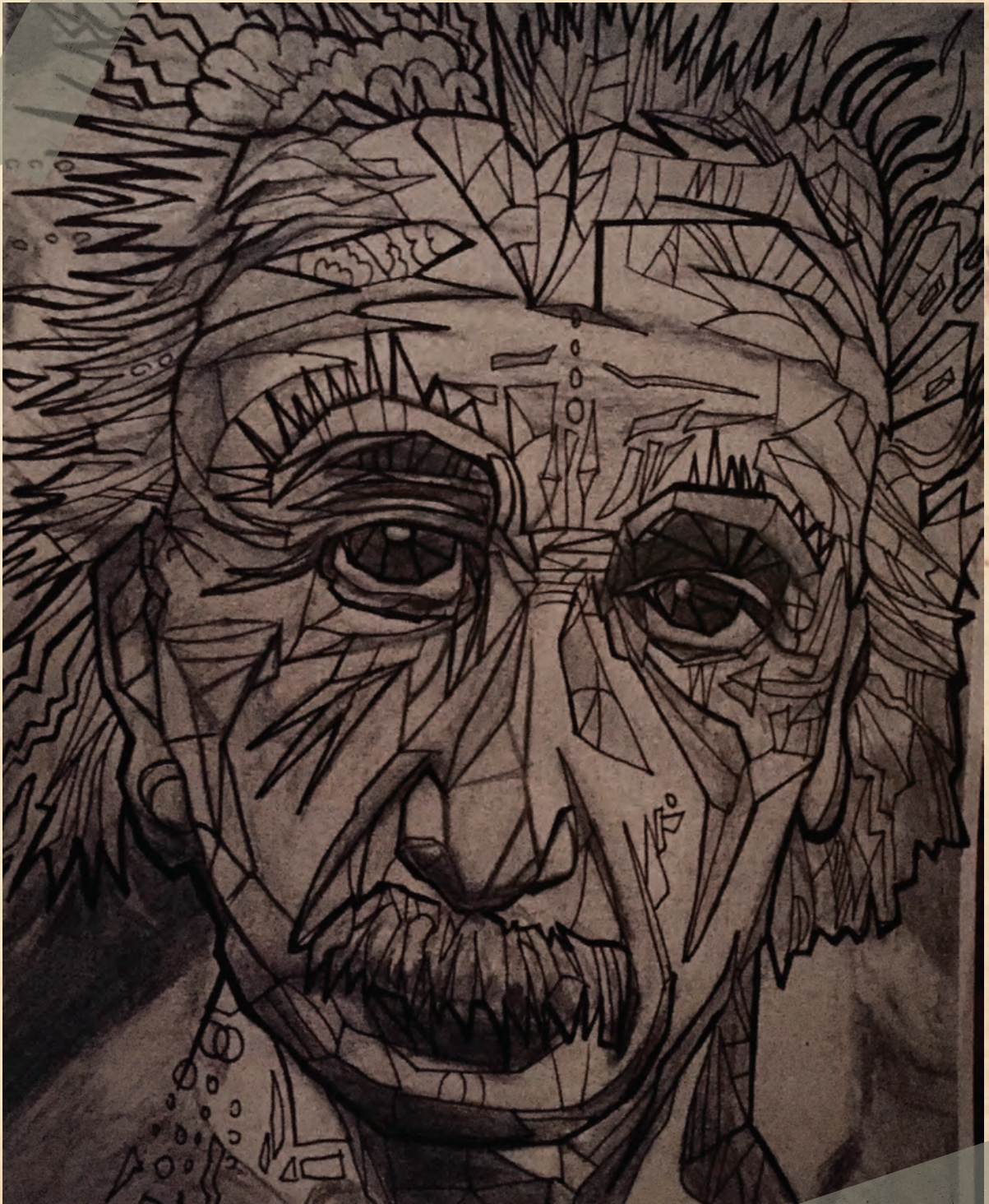
*Employment discrimination against Autistic people is putting their life at the mercy of others, which isn't American in any sense of the word.*

*In conclusion, the only way people with higher-functioning Autism will be free would be to curb workplace discrimination. Discrimination will never be eradicated; however, the less discrimination is always better. Not all people with Autism are lower-functioning, or, even worse, institutionalized; some are highly-intelligent, higher-functional and could live rich and fulfilling lives while simultaneously being a benefit to society as a whole, not a burden.*

*People just need to get rid of the whole "Rain Man" stigma in regards to Autism. A popular movie character is not the face of everyone with Autism.*

**By Edward Dees**





"Fractal Einstein" By Ryan Andrew Neumann



# The Ache from Long Distance

Gazing down at her cell phone, Sarah focused on the text onscreen: the white light illuminated her face as she sat on her bed. Once again, she felt the longing consume her, causing her chest to tighten.

She struggled to keep the tears back: a futile attempt as her eyes began to glisten regardless of her efforts. This had become a regular occurrence of late and it was becoming exceedingly hard to avoid this new routine. Refusing to tear her eyes away from the screen, she read the text over and over, savoring the few short words:

I love you. Sweet dreams.

Then finally, she eased her eyes shut, releasing the warm tears hidden there. She needed sleep, but how could she possibly sleep now? Her heavy heart would get in the way of slumber; depressing thoughts would linger at the periphery, a near-constant.

And yet, she shouldn't feel so much gloom—no, gloom wasn't the right word, not really, but it will have to do—; she felt so alone is what it was. So unhappy, so miserable. All of those feelings, and more, mingled within; she had no word to properly describe it, only the clichéd words came immediately to mind. But the fact remained: there was no real reason for her to feel the way she did.

Sarah still loved him, and he, in return, loved her. They had been together for five years, though it was fated that they would have to move away from each other eventually, so the two of them could go to college. The vast distance set between them was fated to strain their relationship as well.

It's a temporary situation, she told herself before immersing in the fond memories the two of them shared: the late-night cuddles, the evening movies—so many different flashes of their time together pulled at her emotional strings, making it difficult to push the pain of his absence aside. Honestly, she thought she would have gotten used to it by now, since the move had happened over eight months ago.

Rubbing at her watery-green eyes, Sarah leaned back into the pillows; her long brown hair splayed out around her head. It was bedtime. She set her phone on a nearby nightstand, tossed herself over on her side, away from the nightstand, and the phone it held.

Lately, it had been hard for her to get through the day because she couldn't stop thinking about their issues. Sarah didn't mean to dwell on them, but she hadn't realized that it would be this hard to readjust to life without him. She tucked her knees close to her chest and tried to push the negative thoughts away by straightening her legs abruptly down towards the foot of her bed.

Things weren't as bad as they seemed, she thought. Deep down, she knew she would see him eventually. After all, she was saving up to visit him during spring break.

Just remember, Sarah: this is only temporary, she told herself again, firmly.

It didn't help the ache in her chest, the longing that lived there, but she repeated this mantra to herself nonetheless; she finally found the strength to close her wet, but drying, eyes for the night.



She dearly missed his scent, the warmth of his skin when he lay curled up against her body. Fatigue seeped into her as she continued to reminisce over their more tender moments together. Her thoughts began to stray towards nonsensical things, making her determination to concentrate on him harder and harder to maintain as she eventually lost her train of thought. She was able to put herself to sleep after a while; her feelings drifting off into unconsciousness.

Morning came with sharp light shining in through her window. She was stirred from a blissful state, opened her eyes and sat up in her bed. Silently, Sarah cursed herself for not relishing the dream she had been having a bit longer; it was so much better than the reality she now found herself awake in.

Glancing at her cell phone, she decided to check the funds for her intended trip to visit him on spring break. She had thought about checking her bank account last night before falling asleep, affirming that the possibility of seeing him was secure, thus lifting her spirits, but sleep had paradoxically wiggled in and taken over before she had had a chance to do so. She figured the idea of that money safely secured in her bank account would allow her to better focus on more important tasks during the day.

She leaned forward and grabbed the phone from the nightstand. Without further delay, she logged into her account and quickly followed the prompts to her account page. When the numbers displayed, Sarah's stomach lurched violently in surprise. There was less money in there than she remembered. In a sudden panic, she scrolled through the statement as anxiety bubbled close to the surface.

Where did it all go?

The moment she saw the series of withdrawals over the last week, her question was coldly answered.

"Right, I took out cash to pay the rent this month. Now I'm going to have to work extra hours at the restaurant to get it all back," she complained in a whiny tone.

After putting aside her phone, the feelings from the night before came rushing back with force. Her eyes began to water all over again, followed by trembling lips.

She needed to keep herself together and think positively. It was going to be difficult for her to replenish her funds, but sitting around moping about it wouldn't help a thing. If things were going to work out, she needed to get up and fight off this spell of depression.

No more wallowing in tears.

Wiping away the wetness ringed her eyes, Sarah forced a smile.

"Besides, it's only temporary," she whispered in a shaky breath.

By Andrea Senkokura





# A Man's Best Friend

"Come on, Ace," My Human said while patting his knee.

It was a Saturday morning, and it was time for our daily ride down over to the local QuickMart. My Human went into the store to get a newspaper, eggs, and milk for his breakfast. He would sometimes get me some canned food if I had run out from the day before.

My Human opened the car door for me, and I jumped onto the sticky leather seats. The car engine roared to life, and my car window was lowered for me to enjoy the crisp breeze. I stuck my head out the window and watched the cars race by.

When we made it to the store, My Human patted me on the head and softly said, "I'll be right back, old man."

I smiled back at him with my butter-colored teeth, and I wagged my tail contentedly.

I sat with my ears perked up, and I watched other humans walk by; they all come in different shapes and sizes, and they were all on some sort of mission to get to a unique destination.

I figured I should take a nap before My Human came back; I usually did that so I would have my energy for breakfast. I nestled my head into the warm leather of the seat cushion, closed my eyes and drifted into a dark sleep.

---

I began to hear unlocking noises, but I didn't pay it any mind because I figured it was just My Human. The car engine suddenly revved and pulled out of the parking lot of QuickMart. The purring of nearby engines made me feel at ease, and I felt almost peaceful.

All of a sudden, I heard a strange voice say into a cell phone, "Where you at?"

I knew at that moment that My Human was no longer behind the wheel. I sat up with my ears pointing high and starred at the human driving the vehicle. He made eye contact with me and swerved off the road.

I sank my teeth into his skin, ripping away at his flesh. He screamed in anguish at the sight of my jaws locked onto his bloody-mass of an arm.

I lost my grip just as the car began to flip over and over. We landed in a nearby ditch. I crawled out of the obliterated car on all four of my paws, seemingly undamaged. My nose led me to the stranger who had stolen My Human's car. His body had been flung out of the windshield a few feet away from the wreck. I knew he was no longer alive.

I whimpered in the direction of a nearby forest, in hope of being able to find My Human again.

At that moment, I didn't know what my next move was; after all, I was just a retired police dog. I had done my time in the force, and I just wanted to relax with My Human who had retired from the force as well.

The rustling of leaves came from all around me. I was lost to say the least. Everywhere I turned was a tree that looked exactly like a previous one I had passed. I felt as if I had been running in circles through this forest.

Why did he have to steal My Human's car?

I hope My Human was okay.

How was he supposed to get home?

As more questions fluttered through my head, my pace grew more frantic to a point where I was sprinting as fast as my legs would carry me. My heartbeat quickened, but I was not going to give up until I found My Human again.

I panted to catch my breath, my tongue lolling along the side of my jaw; soon, I couldn't stop myself from lying down in the middle of nowhere. I propped myself against a convenient tree; my course fur scratching against the bark.

I rested my head between my front paws and looked into the sky.

I will find you, My Human. I promise, I will find you.

---

After a few hours of walking through the woods, I stumbled across a road that I didn't recognize. My Human never drove me down this way, I assumed. I pointed my nose towards the sky to try and get a whiff of My Human in the breeze. No such luck.

Cars drove by me.

Drivers watched me from their passing windows.

I heard a few people mutter, "Aw, that poor little German Shepherd dog..."

I also heard a few say, "He must be lost; I hope he finds his way home."

One car in particular stopped about a block in front of where I was headed. A small red-headed woman came flying out from the driving-side door.

"Come here, old guy," she coaxed, using a fancy dog treat.

I walked her way with caution. I had nothing to lose at this point—I figured—so I gobbled the treat up from her hand. She tugged at my collar to peek at my identification while I chewed; looking to see where I was from and who owned me.

"Paul Smithers..."

The woman pondered over the name to see if she recognized it from anywhere, but she didn't think she did.

"Well, I'll take you home with me for now, old guy."

She invited me into her cozy Cadillac, which was way more deluxe than My Human's old car. As I found out later, her house was even more amazing: she had two stories, a swimming pool—but somehow, none of this really seemed to intrigue me; I just wanted to make sure My Human was home and safe.

She rang up loads of different people, and she had long conversations with all of them. The only words I could make out were "dog," "lost," "help," and "find."

"Well," the woman said finally, staring down at me. "Looks like you're going to be spending the night with me for today, but I promise, we will find your owner tomorrow, alright?"

I wagged my tail with excitement upon hearing those words.

"That's the spirit!" She said with a bright expression. "Now, come on, let's get you tucked in for bed."

She walked me over to an elegant, frilly dog bed that would be mine temporarily for the night. Tomorrow we'd find My Human.

I slowly drifted off to sleep; my body fully ready for a night's rest after the journey that was my day.

---

During the middle of the night, a phone call rang out, waking me and the woman from sleep. She tossed her covers off her body, scooted into her slippers and shuffled down the hall to answer the ringing telephone.

"Hello...?" she answered groggily. "Oh my goodness, Paul! You won't believe—"

She paused for a moment and shot a smile in my general direction. She gave me a thumbs up, and I knew that I would soon be reunited with My Human. I wanted to be with him now, in fact, so I ran towards the front door in preparation for leaving. I let out a huge bark.



"He has been looking for you, that's for sure," she chuckled down at me. "I know he will be glad to see you."

I walked around frantically; my tail beat on one of the adjacent walls near the front door with exasperation.

She spoke into the phone.

"Well, we will both see you tomorrow, alright?"

Tomorrow? Why tomorrow? Why not now?

I needed to see My Human right now.

I barked at the door again until she hung up the phone and propped open the door for me.

I bolted out the door like greased lightning, running straight down her long driveway.

That was when a pair of lights crested a hill to the right of the woman's driveway entrance, headed in my direction. I froze, for just a moment, and I felt all of my excitement and anticipation leave my body in a rush. I went numb and cold all over. All I could hear in the background was the woman screaming—then crying. The only recognizable voice was of the red-haired woman who had saved me.

I heard her yell out from the house, "Paul, he's been hit! You have to come now! He's been hit!"

She shouted an address at him. I knew he would write it down, just as he did everything. He had a blue notepad next to his phone that he used to jot down all important bits of information received over the phone, especially addresses. I had watched him use it many times beyond count.

My moments felt like months, stretched out, but I didn't feel any pain, strange as that is. All I felt was heat slowly leaving my body. A cool breeze settling over me.

A car pulled up, and My Human came running out from the front seat. He was yelling my name over and over.

"Ace!" he screeched in agony. "How could I have done this to you?"

He hadn't done a thing; it was just a part of our routine. I raised my head to look into his eyes, and a tear from his face landed onto my grey-haired snout. He buried his face into my shoulder and let out a cry that I had never heard come from him before.

"I've let you down, old man..." My Human choked on his words. "I'm so sorry I did this to you."

I licked his face with my long, pink tongue; he grinned back at me through his tears.

"You silly boy," he laughed despite himself, through clenched teeth.

All I could think about were the memories we had shared together, and I knew he was thinking about the same exact things. We went through police investigations and raids together—the normal routines of everyday partners—for years. He wasn't just my partner on the police force, he was my best friend.

He was My Human.

I would never forget all the times we shared, no matter where I was in this world. I was grateful that I had even been able to experience a mere part of a lifetime with a human like him.

"I'll always remember you, my Ace-boy," he whispered. "I love you..."

And with that, I let go. I knew I had made My Human happy, and I have always really wanted that.

Although I could never speak his language, I think he knew what I said when he looked into my eyes.

I'll always remember you too, My Human—and, I love you too...

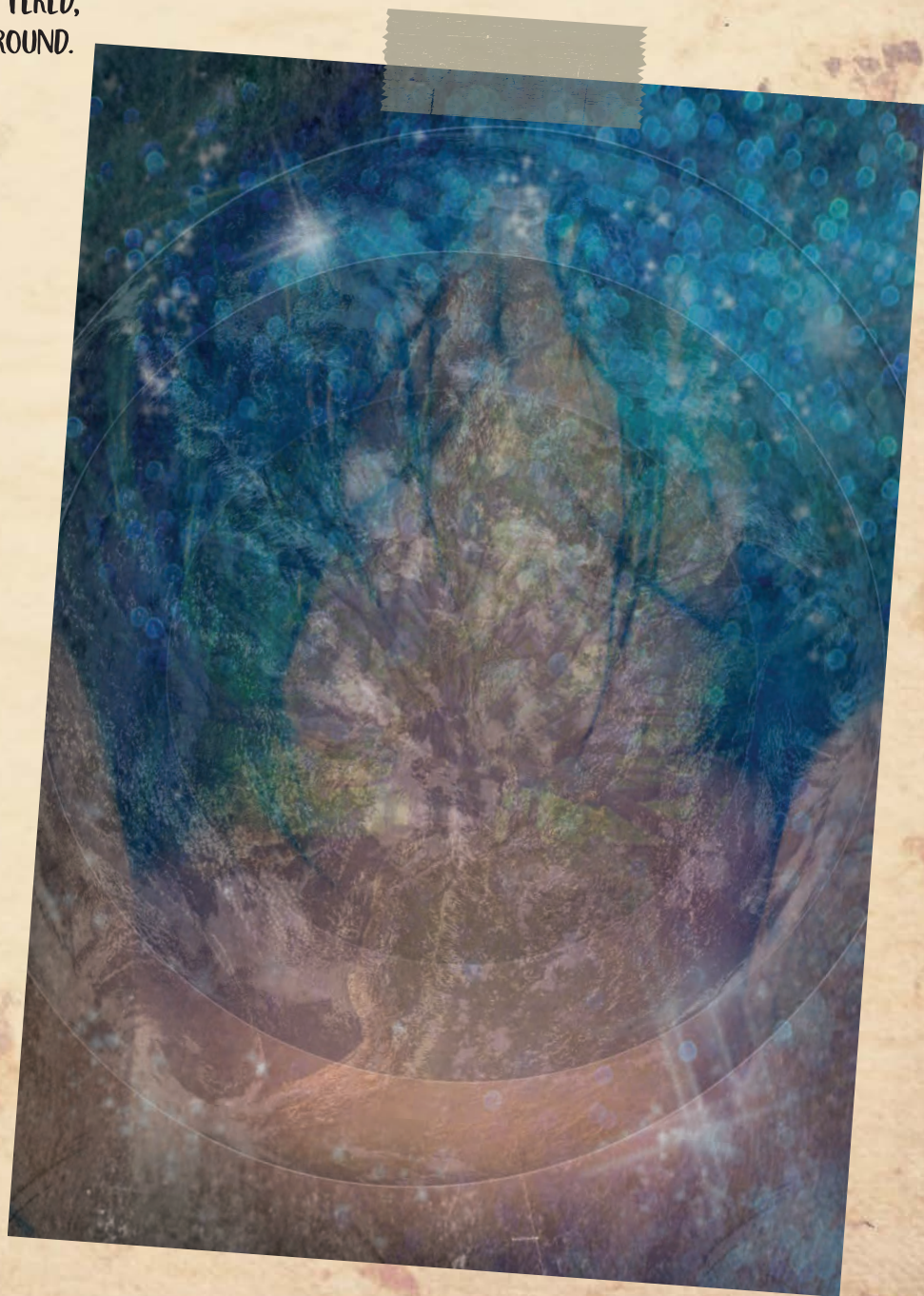
By Emily Kelley

SOLITUDE'S TWILIGHT - BY ALEX BOUTWELL

VENEER OF PERFECTION, PAINTED ON  
SPLINTERED GLASS, CASTING FRAGMENTED  
REFLECTIONS, SHADOWS ON THE WALL,  
WATCHING, WHILE I LAY DYING, LAY CRYING,  
FADING, WHILE I'M BLEEDING OUT,  
REACHING OUT-SOUL SCATTERED,  
PUZZLE PIECES ON THE GROUND.

"Mother  
of the  
Cosmos"

By  
Bethany  
Miner





## Where the Chips Fall in a Man

The stack of papers—school work, essays, and poems—were arranged, more or less, as I had them placed previously, before the fight. Not precisely, but my son's efforts to recreate their placement, someone who knew how particular I was about such things, chipped my heart.

I picked up a lone piece of paper from the pile—a poem I had written recently.

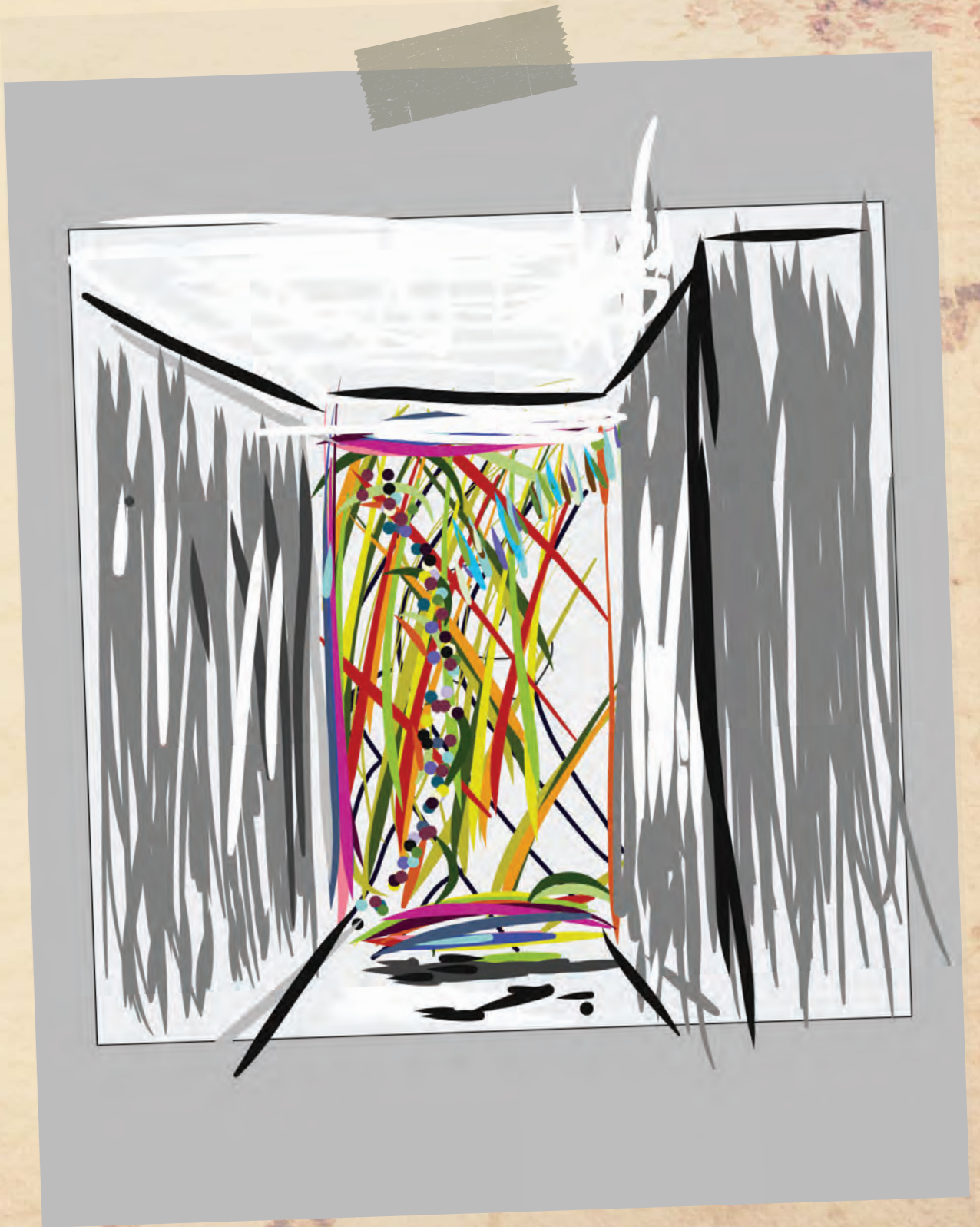
A smudge of my father's blood fused some of my words to the page.

A small chip of my heart fell to the floor of wherever those bits collect in a person, joining the many others in a vast collection of my most earnest mistakes.

By James Blevins



"Hitch" By James Blevins



22 "Please Let Me Out" By Cassandra Brennan



# The Omega

Kill. Kill them. Kill them all: the rudimentary principles of basic training.  
We started with running: run to there, and then run back to here. Repeat.  
Through the rain, through the snow, through the shit, past the dead, over the  
clinging.

Don't stop running. Don't stop killing. To stop one is to stop both.  
To stop both is to die.

Through the rain, through the snow, through the shit, past the dead, over the  
clinging.

Through the rain, through the snow, through the shit, past the dead, over the  
clinging.

Through the rain, through the snow, through the shit, past the dead, over the  
clinging.

Just like that: every hour of every day of all three years.

It's kind of funny that way: three years.

Three years.

Three years to die in three minutes.

Thirty years led to three more, leading to the last three.

Optimism, excitement, opportunity: they all bleed into terror.

Literally, as you lie there, terrified, shitting yourself as the blood pools out,  
you begin to think:

First, it's the whys: Why me? Why now? Why all of this?

Second, it's the hows: How did this happen? How did I let this happen? How  
could I have stopped this?

Lastly, it's the self-recognition: that detestable sense of peace, that  
disgusting sense of dread.

I'm dying. Nothing I do now will change that.

So you let go, you lose all sense of the world, the people, the things; you float  
away and smile. The infinite nightmare is over...  
Until you wake up—limp and cold in a hospital bed:  
Your bliss...  
Your peace...  
Your serenity...  
It's all shit, and you know it.  
You're a soldier; soldier's die.  
You're born to train, trained to kill, and kill until dead—except, you didn't.  
Some egregiously young medic brought you back.  
Now you're here: alive.  
"But soldiers live to die!"  
You scream and shout—pushed out front with the other ghosts.  
You go home.  
You see them.  
Their happy faces are mute to you.  
Their tears of joy are worthless.  
You live for one purpose:  
"Purpose."  
That word bounces around your brain 24/7.  
"Purpose."  
It grinds your jaw.  
"Purpose."  
It puts you on a knife's edge.  
Bahbum. Bahbum. Bahbum.  
You feel the beat like it's a drum.  
Horn's shouting; men screaming; blood dancing—it's familiar.  
It's a god-damned symphony.  
You wake up, but the edge is there.  
Your purpose,  
Your self-worth,  
Your ever-present dream  
To kill.



It is considered the greatest taboo of humanity—

To kill,

To wrought destruction,

To wade knee-deep in the river of blood,

To cast the shadow through the valley of death.

To kill

Is to live

Is to kill.

You are elite within the elite—unchained, unleashed, unbound; a puppet with  
no strings—

To kill

To kill

To kill

It's all you know: an apex, an alpha, a king among the living and Champion  
among the dead—the pinnacle, the god, the ever-present disgrace.

To kill them

To kill them

To kill them

You know.

They found you: stripped of humanity, packaged away from the rest, taught  
the truth:

To kill is to live.

They robbed you of death.

You grant them the pleasure.

You are one-above-all

You are the god-point: the pinnacle cross-roads of evolution.

You are,

Omega.

By Ben Miller

"You can leave  
whenever you want"



By James Blevins

Singing Brothers

By Amber Smoot

i hear soft, quiet  
voices, and wish  
i could steal  
their words

a soft music that  
fills the soul  
with happiness  
and peace

a feeling that  
has long since  
been missing  
from my life

a music and song  
that can fill this  
world with the  
truth of our Lord-

may you travel far  
and spread a great  
word to this lost  
and dying world

a soft music that  
fills the soul  
with happiness  
and peace.



He gave me the task  
of not letting it die...



# No Longer a Little Girl, No Longer Jaded, No Longer Confined by Fear

Once: I was a little girl.

Flowers in hand, mind in space.

A healthy glow of confidence surrounded me;

I wore it proudly like a cape of victory.

I crashed into the world

With a solid crown, and tender of heart.

The collision shredded my cape; its pieces, my innocence, forever lost.

With exposed wounds on unintended pink flesh, I stood—no longer a little girl.

Then: I was a jaded youth.

Fists balled, sullen of face.

A shroud of gloom engulfed me.

The darkness clung to the fabric of my defeat.

I wilted to the earth, with heavy head and bleeding core.

The sun gleams, warm, on my tattered soul,

Spreading the heat of my faith through wanting veins.

With open arms I embraced the light, and dissipated my sadness—no longer jaded.

Now: I am Woman.

Planet in palm, dreams in place.

A vivid glow of knowledge seeps beneath the stitching of my scars;

A quiet display of resilience.

I rise from the fire of opposition

With a deep awareness and unrestricted spirit.

The anguish of the past no longer haunts my atmosphere.

With vast opportunities laid out before me, I soar onward—no longer confined by fear.

By Bethany Miner





"Ataiūd" By Bethany Rodriguez

# Strangers

Her mother always told her not to talk to strangers, just like any good parent should. She would say, "They'll take you away in their van and do bad things to you." As the girl grew older, the phrase never changed, it was always about the van and the bad things that happened in them. When the girl grew some sense with age, she would respond with, "Strangers don't always drive vans." And later still, "In fact, everyone I don't know is a stranger. So you're saying everybody wants to do bad things to me? I don't think that's correct." The mother stopped using that argument after a certain point.

Over time, as technology has grown, we have achieved the ability to talk to strangers from all across the world.

And that is exactly what the girl did every day. She was an avid member of an online chatroom. She sat in front of her computer for hours on end, chatting away with people who could be next door for all she knew, or on the other side of the planet.

Her username was "LittleKittyVampire." Kitty had been the girl's old nickname in high school and she thought it would be cute if a kitten was a little vampire. There were plenty of other members in her online chatroom with crazy usernames as well. It helped to define them in a sense. There was a "Maniac Mark"; he was the funny one in the group with a very dark sense of humor. "Undead4Ever" was the reasonable one who often had very eloquent messages with a high amount of wit to them; he was a bit annoying because of that. She couldn't forget "TheAnimeFreak," he was exactly what you would think he was: a guy obsessed with anime. And of course, there was "Keeper of Secrets"—the host of the chatroom. There were others, but these four members were the ones she had come to know and enjoyed talking to the most.

Most days, after waking up, she would get dressed and look at herself in the mirror to see if she looked presentable (despite not going outside that much). A bit later, she would eat breakfast downstairs with her mother, who often had a story to tell to make things interesting. Then, she would go back upstairs, turn on her computer, and disappear into a chatroom.

This particular day started like any other.

*TheAnimeFreak:* Hey, did you guys hear about that rumor spreading around?

*Maniac Mark:* The rumor that you're a smooth womanizer? Because we all know that's not true.

*TheAnimeFreak:* No, you jerk! The rumor about that "chatroom killer." The guy who goes into chatrooms with the name "Unknown1," then, one of the chatroom members would just disappear, and later, turn out to be dead!

*Keeper of Secrets:* I'm pretty sure it's just a rumor, Freak. And besides, it's not like we give out our personal information, like where we live, so there's nothing to worry about.

*LittleKittyVampire:* Yeah, guys, Keeper is right. It's just a silly rumor; you know how those go.

*TheAnimeFreak:* What if he is some kind of professional hacker that can find your information in the chatrooms?



*Undead4Ever:* We live in many different countries, do we not? Well, if it is just one person, they can only live in one country as well. Even if they are some kind of super-hacker of sorts, they'll have to buy a plane ticket to come and find us. It all sounds very unreasonable and pricey to me, so there shouldn't be anything to worry about.

*TheAnimeFreak:* Yeah, whatever.

*Maniac Mark:* I can't believe I'm thanking Undead for putting Freak in his place, but thank you.

Nice one, bro.

A new user has joined the chat: *Unknown1*

At that moment, the girl felt her body stiffen a bit at her keyboard. She usually didn't see "silly rumors" enter her chatrooms. She was pretty sure the others were also feeling the same way, because none of them responded in the room for a good few minutes.

Nevertheless, this girl was a rational thinker. She had a strong firewall on her system as well. An antivirus that guaranteed identity protection. And, Undead had made some great points. So, she calmed herself down and decided to respond first.

*LittleKittyVampire:* Hello there! Welcome to the chatroom.

*Unknown1:* Thank you for the warm introduction, miss. People rarely greet me with kind words these days. It must be because of the screenname.

*TheAnimeFreak:* Of course it's because of the name! You've heard the rumors, right? This has to be some kind of joke!

*Unknown1:* The rumor of this "chatroom killer"? Well, I can assure you all right now of something to ease your tension.

*Maniac Mark:* Then spit it out already, no need to be dramatic, pal.

*Unknown1:* That rumor is indeed about me. And I think there is plenty to be dramatic about, Mark. A good kill needs to develop to make it satisfying.

*Maniac Mark:* Real funny, pal. So what, you're gonna sneak up on us after getting us all scared like little pigs? Then just stab us in the backs?

*TheAnimeFreak:* Mark, don't antagonize him. This whole thing is really creeping me out.

*Keeper of Secrets:* Sir, I'll advise you to stop this, or I will kick you out of this chatroom. No need to try and scare other users.

*Unknown1:* Alright, I get the point. But, I will be back tomorrow. Good day to you all.

*Unknown1* has left the chat.

*TheAnimeFreak:* I was right! Suck it! Still, that really shook me up. I'm shaking right now.

*Maniac Mark:* Undead, where were you on that one?

*Undead4Ever:* He was quite scary, acting like some sort of serial killer.

*LittleKittyVampire:* He was pretty creepy.

*Keeper of Secrets:* I blocked his IP address, so he won't be back tomorrow.

A window popped up on the screen, showing that Keeper of Secrets was requesting a private chat with LittleKittyVampire. The girl clicked "accept." She read the messages from Keeper, saying that the person who was just in the chat lived in the same state as her. He advised her to be careful. She told him she would, then closed the private chat window. This unsettled the girl just a bit. Keeper was not usually this cautious, so she felt that she should follow his advice.

The day continued to go by like any other after that, the girl resumed talking online with her friends about many different topics; as they usually did. Once it had gotten late, she bid everyone a goodnight and logged out. She shut down her computer. Her room grew darker when the light from her computer monitor went out. She went to reach for her lamp, but as she did, her phone blinked on, illuminating the night stand it was resting on. The phone beeped again with a sound familiar to her: the received-message tone. She examined the screen. The messages were from an unknown number. She was curious at first, then became frightened in the blink of an eye. When she put the password into her phone, it beeped a few more times as the unknown number continued to text her.

Unknown: Your friends were pretty fun, but I'm more interested in you.

Unknown: You have a nice looking house, but it doesn't have very effective locks.

Unknown: The kitchen is really nice too, but I'm much more interested in your room.

Unknown: It's so sad that your mother is asleep already.

The next beep came from both her phone and outside of her shut bedroom door. She was pretty sure she had locked it.

Unknown: Knock knock.

The next sound was of her lock being picked.

The door opened, revealing an adult man with short black hair and a sinister expression on his face. He had on a trench coat that nearly draped to the floor. In one hand he held the phone he had been texting her with; his other hand was gripping a large kitchen knife. The girl recognized it as one belonging to her downstairs kitchen.

He began to move closer, pure joy spread out on his face.

The face of a mad serial killer.

"I wonder where I'll stab you first," he said. "Maybe I'll cut your pretty long hair and keep it as a trophy. Next I could cut off a hand. I'll have to make sure you stay quiet, though, don't want to attract too much attention before the fun is done. I want this to last awhile. No interruptions."

There were several emotions the girl felt course through her slight body.

However, it was not what you would expect. It wasn't fear she felt.



*She had a grin on her face.*

*When the man had entered the chatroom earlier that day, her body did not freeze out of fear, but out of excitement, and she had had to calm herself down, calm down her hunger with careful, rational thoughts. Now, she could finally let the excitement course through her completely.*

*Her meal had finally arrived; it was standing in front of her.*

*She had not had a good, fresh bite in a long while, as she didn't like to hurt innocent people. Her mother always told her not to talk to strangers because she might reveal herself, and they would want to study her like she was some kind of animal. Or maybe they'd just flat out kill her. So she remained hidden, disguised as a regular human. But now she was an adult—full grown.*

*And she was ready to feed.*

*Her grin revealed her fangs as they grew down past the lower lip. They only grew out like that when she was hungry. Her eyes glowed a deep red in the darkness of her room.*

*The man's expression changed quickly. The sick-joy expression on his face slid off, replaced with stupefied fear. He looked to be suddenly regretting his decision to be the "next big serial killer."*

*Unfortunately for him, he couldn't regret it fast enough, as the girl had already lunged at him, burying her fangs into his neck.*

*He should have known better than to talk to strangers.*

*By Shaun Cable*



## With My Grabbing Soul

To the end of my love, for the one, that said, "Not to worry."

"I'll be home."

To the end of pain, to the one that caused me to go insane:

"I'll be home."

To the end of wonder, where loves stands:

"I'll be home."

To the end of this realm, where I stand sitting at home:

"I'll be home."

To the wit's end of this thing, that seems to go, but never return:

"I might be gone."

To light, to stand alone,  
Alone, but not afraid,  
Of the end

"I might be gone."

The end of this realm, is gone,  
End, and let my heart be,  
Turn and walk to my destiny

"I might be gone."

I've seen the last of: "Not to worry,  
I will be home."

"I've gone on."

I've seen my last of the swing that takes and never returns:

"I'm already gone."

"See ya."

By Cassandra Brennan

"Octopussy"

By Cassandra Brennan





"Evidence of a Wish" By Lisa Marie Isaac

*Loss*

*By the midnight star,  
i shed a tear*

*For those i loved,  
and those i never knew*

*i miss the days of our  
shared laughter*

*And the ones i  
had hoped to share*

*This is my last farewell  
for you*

*By the midnight star,  
i shed a tear*

*For those i loved,  
and those i never knew.*

*By Amber Smoot*



## My Dream

A nice summer breeze...the waves crashing against the shore...the smell of the sea salt...the wind on my face...the feel of your lips as we share a sweet, sensual kiss. Then seconds later—gone. I see your face everywhere around me: your deep brown eyes, glowing by the golden haze of the setting sun; a dream is a wish, you want so bad to come true. Will it come true? Will you hold me in your arms and whisper sweet nothings in my ear? I dream of you so often, it's like we've known each other forever—like we're old best friends. So I keep waiting, waiting for the day—one day: My dream will come true, it will become my life—forever with you.

By Cody Alcorn

*"Golden Glow" By Alex Boutwell*





# Ode to an Open-Bar Wedding

By James Blevins

I'm pounding piano keys, drunkenly,  
near the open bar of a wedding  
And you'll survive me; all that clanging,  
a good trace of us on its breath...  
Still, no one will answer your prayers,  
no, not until you take off that dress

So Marry! Marry!—marry well—  
the purse you ferried,  
to the dirt, something like searing feet  
came trampling out  
you carved a name for yourself,  
in the shoulder of a canvas you lovingly held

The ache is amorous delight,  
married on a Sunday,  
the polymath of epicures—  
drinks forever now on her

Mary, your ocean is blue like your brother—  
the tang of fresh cut flowers  
Sometimes, I treat my book like a lover—  
hold it tender till it recovers

I'll remember that open-bar wedding—  
the piano, and its clanging  
The white of your canvas just beginning;  
the red of my book—  
a tome long-bleeding—  
well-worth the lettering

Like pried-apart ribs,  
it's the gift that keeps on giving  
A liquored breath—  
a wish to have ruddy hands,  
to watch her married coolly on a Sunday,  
while the piano pounds along to the conjugal mob.



"F.T.B." By Alex Boutwell

Tired of it all

Drowning in the lies, the deceit

So far down, I can't see the truth, the light

I know your games

I taught you most of them, yet still, I play

Play at something I don't think I can win

But I'm done

Done at playing

Done at losing

Done at being deceived

This is my callout, my final move

My move for the door, for freedom

You refused to listen, to see, to believe

So I'll leave you, leave you with the silence of my cries

Leave you with the truth you wouldn't see

Leave you with the love you wouldn't believe

All you'll have left is the memory of what was, the dream of  
what could have been

When you realize, and realize you will, that I was the  
best thing for you, you will

Mourn for what you lost-it's gone forever.

In The End

By Alex Boutwell



# "Barbara" By Bethany Miner



## American Beauty

From the first moment I saw the house, I knew it was mine.

I felt it call to my heart.

I loved the five acres of land surrounded by dense wood; its long dirt driveway that curved through the tall cypress, oak, and pine trees. The trees made it feel secret, as if it was a unique place hid away from the rest of the world.

My favorite part by far was the little garden surrounded by white bricks in the front of the house; its half-moon shape fit right up against the tin-roofed front porch. The whole garden was covered in juniper, crab grass, and weeds, but the potential was there.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed in the background, there was one red rose, and it was absolutely stunning. It was so tall that it rested on the roof of the porch; its stems were a thick vibrant green with massive sharp thorns. The flower itself was a vivid shade of red, so bright that in the sunlight it looked to be glowing.

I cupped both of my palms around the large petals and leaned in to inhale the sweet aroma of earth, sunshine and rain. The petals seemed to endlessly swirl around, forming layers of natural beauty. In fact, I researched the rose and found the type growing in my garden was actually called American Beauty.

During the first few weeks of moving into my new home, I would take coffee breaks from unpacking on the front porch and look at the rose. It helped to calm me somehow. It gave me strength by example: despite not having adequate soil being surrounded by weeds, the rose still thrived. As I stared at the flower pushing up through what was practically sand, I realized why I felt so connected to it.

The American Beauty rose was elegant, poised, and resilient—just like my grandmother.

My grandma and grandpa were married in Lowell, Michigan in 1949. By 1953, they had two toddlers—and my grandpa had contracted polio. He had been the sole breadwinner of the family and was now unable to walk let alone work. My grandma only had a high school education, so she worked from home to make money. She was self-taught at most everything she did, such as decorating wedding cakes and arranging flowers for people to place on graves using coffee cans and Plaster-of-Paris. Eventually, she picked up a paper route at night so she could still take care of the household during the day.

Once the kids were older, and in school, she started driving a school bus. She quickly learned that transportation wasn't available for handicapped children to travel to their special education programs. These programs were located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which was the closest big city from the small town of Lowell (about thirty minutes away).

My grandmother was appalled by this.

She put together a transport system with her old Suburban and drove the kids back and forth herself. She fought alongside her community to get federal funding for the transportation of handicapped children. When it passed, she drove the special education bus herself, just as she had always done: the very bus she had fought so hard to get for the kids who needed it most.

Later, she worked for both Eastern and Western University, training bus drivers in transporting special-needs children. She eventually became a public speaker, traveling the United States fighting for special-needs children's rights and education programs. During this time, she somehow managed to raise three children, take care of the household, and assist her husband in his physical therapy.

Just like the American Beauty rose, my grandmother blooms in adversity.

She is the elegant rose that is soft and sweet but strong with thorns and deep with roots—despite the grade of soil her seed was planted in; she still blossomed into something amazing.

Although I have filled my garden with numerous different types of roses, the red American Beauty is still my favorite and the one I most care for. It inspired such a profound feeling of admiration for the wonderful woman that I call grandma.

Over the years, I have seen many buds bloom and fade from this one rose. In many ways that is like the legacy that my grandmother left: a path for great women to follow behind her, to rise up and face the sun.

By Bethany Miner





When she left this in  
my hands she made  
it clear to protect it  
with my life...

# Two Pairs of Wings

"I'm home."

The voice entered the room as the door to a small apartment creaked slowly open: a young woman walked through the entrance, looking to be in her twenties, with bright, long red hair. She had piercing brown eyes, a mature face, and an attractive form; yet still, she possessed an air of fatigue. She had a look in her eyes that told the world "I just want to collapse on the couch." She was wearing her work uniform, having just gotten off work waitressing at a local diner a few blocks from where she lived.

The apartment was quite small; it was both neat and dirty. It was nothing to really remark on, as it didn't leave much of an impression.

On the couch sat a young man with glasses and short white hair; he also appeared to be in his twenties. He, just as the woman, wore an expression showcasing maturity, but he also had a calculating slant to his eyes. He was slender. He wore a plain white shirt and black nondescript pants, but while wearing them, he looked quite classy. In his hands was a book, a book that the woman did not care for.

It's probably some pretentious nonsense or some crap like that, she thought.

"I see you finished your shift," the man said without looking away from his book. "Or did they just make you stay late because you slacked off?"

"I don't need your crap right now, Matthew. I'm not in the mood. Geez, I just want to fall on the couch and watch some shows with hot guys in them."

"Right, just keep the volume down, Dara. I don't want it to get in the way of my reading."

"I can make it as loud as I want. I bought the damn thing!"

At first glance, the two of them seemed like normal roommates sharing an apartment—old friends, perhaps. While they certainly were old, much older than they looked, the two of them were also quite a bit more than they appeared on first glance.

Dara was a demon, and Matthew was an angel.

They were both part of a peace-treaty experiment between Lucifer and God. They wanted to test just how well their respective disciples could get along in a regular environment. Dara and Matthew were the "lucky" ones chosen for this honor. They had been living in the human world for well over a year now, sharing an apartment. The good news was that they hadn't killed each other yet—or anyone else (yet)—for that matter.

Dara slumped onto the couch; her usually flirty, lively self was rundown by human jobs and the necessity of money; she didn't even have the energy to really complain about it like she usually did. This put Matthew off a bit, but he wouldn't complain. The quieter for him to read his precious book, which made him happy. However, after a few minutes of silent laziness shared by the two roommates, Dara once again found the energy to talk, breaking into Matthew's reading cocoon.

"Why do you read so much crap?" Dara asked. "What has reading ever done for either of our species? I get why humans do it, but you can just, like, read their minds or learn about it from your father. Why bother?"



"Because, I want to and I like to." Matthew responded, still with his nose buried in the pages of the book. "We all have our likes and dislikes, Dara. Now be quiet."

"You are no freaking fun, you know that? Sheesh, it's like talking to a rule book that has even less of a sense of humor. Whatever, time to watch my shows."

The incoming noise from the television managed to set the usually calm Matthew off his hinge. He took his bookmark and placed it firmly between the pages he was currently reading, then put the book down on the coffee table.

"You need to stop watching so much TV," Matthew argued. "You know how much it costs? And it's not like you even keep up with the bills. I do!"

"Really now, because I'm the one who paid the electric bill the last two months. Not to mention our water bill. So, don't you bring your crap here and say I don't help out. Just because I'm the demon, doesn't mean you can think of me as something below you.

"You...you angelic prick!" Dara snapped.

The two of them quarreled like this pretty often, screaming insults and claims of laziness back and forth for hours at a time. Regardless, they continued to live together, because despite the fights, it never got any worse than empty, forced words tossed back and forth. They were only bickering. Angels and devils are flawed things, just like humans.

After their "fight," the two roommates sat in renewed silence, each doing their own respective activity to say entertained. Both of them, despite not wanting to admit it, enjoyed the other's company. It was a complex relationship of fighting and smiles, but somehow, it worked. A few times, it had almost reached the level of friendship, with fleeting moments of possible romance and passion. These moments usually ended with Dara punching Matthew in the stomach when he "let his guard down," or something along those lines. Something always ended up spoiling the mood. The two of them would be right back to bickering the very next day.

However, this day was different.

Their shared romantic moment did not end so abruptly with a punch to the gut or some other mood breaker this time. The moment persisted, oddly enough. It may have only lasted as a contained moment, in and of itself, and would never lead to anything. (And it didn't; it ended, more or less, as soon as it began.) But, despite its inevitable expiration, their moment did last for forty-seven minutes. Which, by itself, was quite a remarkable thing.

The two of them laughed and the night continued as if nothing had happened. Dara watched her favorite television programs while Matthew finished his book. Both of them were content in this; the bickering of earlier now forgotten.

Their lives were interesting and different from the hundreds of slow and monotonous years they had experienced working their previous day jobs. So, as it turned out, they were surprisingly happy with the change.

None of which stopped Dara from doing some more complaining.

"The boss was such an asshole today," she started. "He made us work our butts off, and complained when we found ourselves to be exhausted. Makes me have more respect for humans who do this all the time; some for their entire lives. Even I got tired, so that means the boss puts us through too much

work! I almost wanted to punch the guy."

Dara grabbed a breath before continuing.

"Still, the cute guy I work with put up a bit of a sweat helping me move a few things around. So I guess that's a plus. I almost wanted to ask him over for dinner."

"He probably would've declined," Matthew said. "The things you think will happen are seldom the things that actually happen; they are often two very different situations. Remember what happened with the neighbor we had?"

"Oh, shut up! It's not like you're any good with women. And I don't count, by the way."

"I don't try, whereas you do. So, I've made my point."

Dara pouted in defeat. She always acted a bit like a child when it came to losing. This brought a smirk to Matthew's face. He enjoyed watching her pout, but not in a cruel way. He just knew she was being deliberately immature. After a bit more pouting like a little girl, Dara laughed, despite herself, and Matthew joined her, despite himself.

They made such an odd couple.

The flirtatious and lively demon roomed up with the rule-bound and oh-so-serious angel.

Two pairs of wings under one roof, surrounded by a world of humans.

A world ruled by logic and money. A world where their kind were characters in stories—some considered fiction.

But sometimes, truth is stranger than fiction.

**By Shaun Cable**



# Friend

Stay hopeful, my  
dear and loving  
friend

I'll stay to  
encourage you  
till the end

No matter what  
happens, I'll  
stay with you

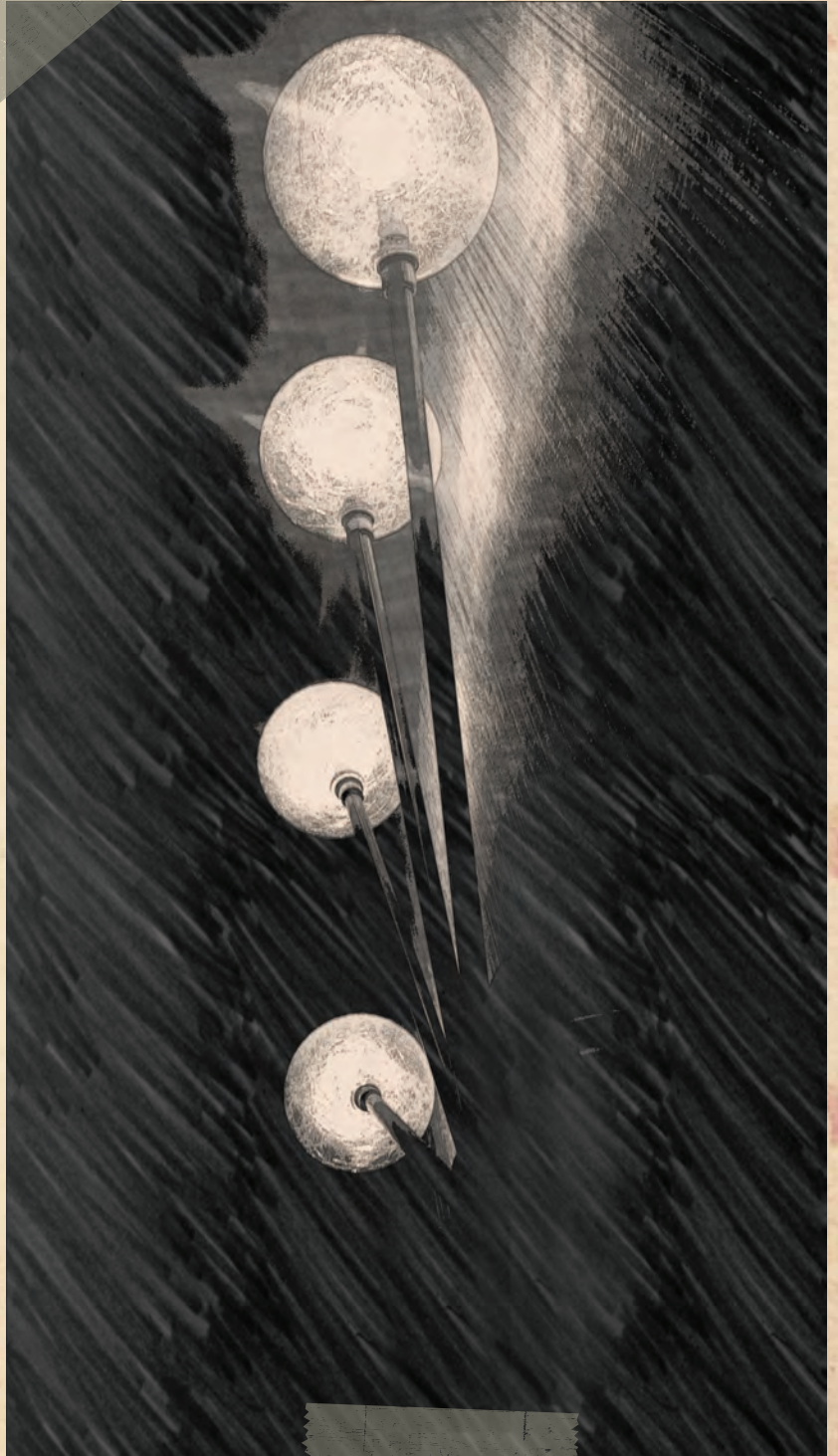
You say you  
have nothing, but  
you have love

You say you  
are done, yet you  
keep fighting on

Fight for me,  
as I fight  
for you.

By Amber Smoot

# "Light in the Darkness"



By Bethany Miner

# Baggage Claim

We all have baggage. Some of us have a little and some of us have a lot, but we all have it. Many of us hear the word "baggage" and assume the colloquial meaning, which is where you carry the hardships and issues from a previous relationship into a new one. And though that is correct, many do not realize that we carry around our baggage every single day, in all areas of our lives.

I feel as though I was born fearful and wary of everything. As a child, I never wanted to dive in first and think of consequences later like the other kids. Even at a young age, I liked to weigh out my options or just run away from the situation completely. Only now, many years later, do I realize that what I was dealing with was anxiety.

My personal baggage that I carry around, day to day, is the shame I feel for suffering from anxiety. I know it's not something that one chooses to have, and many factors like genetics and environment play a part in it. Still, the shame continues to weigh me down.

As we age and go through more experiences in life, we just easily acquire more bags. Why does fear of making mistakes or, worse yet, repeating the same mistakes follow us around? Why does the regret of all the words we did not say or the things we did not do just seem to get heavier and heavier?

No one wants to keep carrying these bags around. I wish I could just leave them on that conveyer belt at the airport, and hope the employees just throw them out when no one comes to claim them.

I know that I am not the only person who has let their personal baggage hold them back from experiencing something good. I recently met a man who is not only kind and honest but incredibly handsome. My baggage had me questioning his motives.

Why was he interested in me?

What does he see in me?

How long will this last before he gets bored of me?

Then I had to ask: why was I questioning something good happening to me? There has to be something wrong with a person who does not believe good things or good people should be entering his or her life. Or that God will just say "Sike!" and take everything away.

The incomparable and beautiful Erykah Badu sang "bag lady you gone hurt your back, dragging all them bags like that..."

We all know Erykah wasn't just talking about fixing our posture or refraining from spending money on a chiropractor; she was trying to tell us to learn to let go of the things we cannot control—the things that happened to us in the past. Letting the past wrongdoings done to me or mistakes that I have made scare me away from my own brighter, and hopefully happier, future has to end.

Some bags are nice; they have zippers, buckles and rhinestones. Some bags are big enough to put our junk into them (like an umbrella for when it rains, despite never seeming to be there when it's needed); others are small so we can fit only our credit cards and iPhones into them. All of the aforementioned bags are great, but the ones that weigh down our hearts and minds, and stop us from enjoying life, giving us apprehension about the future, those bags have to go. We can claim those bags as ours, and then, gracefully, put them in storage—we can then move on.

By Aaliyah Andrews-Jackson



## *The Transformation of Duke Reyndant*

*Throughout the warzone, it was time.  
Duke Reyndant knew too well.  
His sins damned him, his life resigned  
and hurled him straight to hell.*

*His veins and flesh gushed crimson life,  
he saw his days, ruthless—  
Filled with jealousy, strife,  
selfishness and hubris.*

*A fleshy blade appeared at hand,  
its power apparent,  
In ways he failed to understand,  
bonding sword and Reyndant.*

*The Duke, reduced to a vessel,  
mind no longer his own—  
And taking his place? A devil!  
—vowing to seize the throne.*

*Galbanath, the woeful great-sword,  
set upon a grim path,  
Corrupted the spiteful young lord,  
unleashing wicked wrath.*

*By Kelby Martin*

## Fruitless Journey

As I hang from the noose,  
I ponder: Why I am here?  
What are my mistakes?  
Where are my children?  
Where is my Wife?

Through darkness she comes,  
Climbing the silent crags,  
Crossing the frozen sea,  
Swimming in Night's twilight,  
Bearing his blade

As I hang from the noose,  
I wonder: Do I deserve my fate?  
Have my children forgotten me?  
Has my wife found another to sell her heart to?  
Maybe I should simply sleep...

As she pushes forth  
Past temptation and distraction,  
Through the Scythe of Doubt;  
She rushes to him  
Bearing his blade

As I lay hanging,  
I see my wife  
Running to me,  
With love in her eyes  
Bearing my blade

I wondered in those moments:  
What we would we be like today?  
Alive and happy?  
Understanding and joined?  
Any of these would have been possible,  
If she had remembered  
That my blade  
Was unsharpened...

By William Merritt



# Erika and the Kingdom of Life

Erika forgot to wash the dishes when coming home from school again.

*CRACK!*

The belt's leather band thrashed one cheek—her skin screamed—an ugly reminder joined the many previous reminders across the sensitive skin of her body. Severity aside, punishment always followed every mistake. Erika always found herself the victim to Mother's unrelenting wrath.

While at school waiting for the buses, she would see her friends getting picked up by their parents in perfect minivans filled with smiling suburban families.

Why was her life so different?

Like a misbehaving dog, her mother found it deserving to kick her out of the house for the day after the dishwashing incident.

"And don't even think about coming back until dark, ya hear?!" her mother sneered, shoving Erika forcibly outside.

Jade-colored bangs hid her face. The schoolchildren laughed at her unusual hair color and began chanting "freak" at her from afar. Her mother's eyes showed disgust from the front porch of their house, resulting in Erika's longing for the presence of her father all the more.

None of that matters now, she thought, sparing one last look at the facade of her so-called "home."

I'll run away, she thought.

Her journey began. She started by traversing down the many labyrinthine paths that populated the nearby forest. For as long as she could remember, Erika felt a special connection with nature, appreciating it differently from those who preferred civilization.

She escaped into fantasy feeling every facet of nature around her. The redwood trees were like walls neighboring majestic valleys; birds chirped harmonious melodies in the air; time itself seemed to stand still as Erika walked the forest paths. The silence was permeated only by the aural embodiment of life itself, chattering amongst the dangling limbs—and Erika's own thoughts were misty, a part of the world she travelled through; her senses provided the proof and she was certain: The land was alive with every new step she took.

Eventually, she halted her advance into the woodland and lay on the grass below a vine-ridden concrete wall; an ancient relic from ages past. Letting out a contented sigh, she gave herself to the forest's majesty; she let the sounds of the surrounding ecosystem fill her head.

At her feet lay the shore of a modest pond—fireflies danced along the surface. The sun shone onto the grotto, shining on her special sanctuary. To Erika, this was home...not that concrete prison she had fled. Here, she could reach out and speak to the spirits of the forest—her body and soul becoming one with the Earth.

Through closed eyelids, a feeling of fur suddenly pressed up against Erika's dangling hand, rousing her. A young fox bravely wandered up to the tree that she had previously been day-dreaming under; his tail flicking about inquisitively.

"Hi, again," Erika smiled down at the fox. "I brought you a snack." She revealed a pack of crackers in her pocket. "We'll share it, alright?" She fed the first one to the fox; the cracker disappearing from her hand in mere seconds.

"Okay, fine! Have an—"

She fell silent as a rumbling growl unexpectedly echoed throughout the wood in ominous tones.

A coyote tore rapidly from the bushes, gnashing its teeth at Erika, saliva dripping from its mouth in foamy tendrils.

You poor thing..., she said in her head, unable to vocalize the thought.

Paralyzed with fear, she felt sympathy for the feral coyote; nonetheless, Erika considered her escape options. The young fox gathered itself before lunging at the coyote, sinking its sharp teeth into the coyote's side. It wasn't enough; the coyote shook the fox off with ease. Lips were now pulled back, almost as if imitating a wicked grin, the coyote growled, readying itself for one last series of pounces: first the fox, then Erika's throat.

"LOOK OUT!" A voice rang from above. The apparition waved her wand and commanded: "Kitsune, guardian of the Caldislan Forest! Protect this girl!"

From seemingly nowhere, leaped a new fox, three times the size of the child; it confronted the smaller fox, clawed its hip, then delivering a swift and lethal bite to the neck.

The coyote screamed in agony before falling quickly silent.

Erika looked at the scene of violence from behind shaking hands.

She was suddenly alone.

That was Verde, the Goddess herself, she thought, breathing rapidly. A Goddess of Nature had come to my aid!

Erika's heart soared.

The fox nuzzled her arm, pulling Erika from her thoughts. She returned the gesture with a warm smile and pat on the head. Her gaze shifted downward to a small parchment hanging around the Fox's neck.

What's this? She wondered, opening the parchment.

It read:

"Dear Erika,

If you are reading this, then my old friend still has his magic! I am Cecil, from the Verdain Shrine. I have sent this message to you, acknowledging your plight and offering you a way to salvation.

The Goddess spoke to me in a dream the other night about you, and when I woke, I immediately began arrangements.

Stop by anytime to talk more. It is my duty, and Verde's will, to bless you with an absolution.

Goddess Bless,  
Sage Cecil Baelsar"

Dusk began to swallow the orange sunset: it was time to head home.

No more living in fear. Courage filled Erika's heart.

I'm not alone. I will fight.

By Kelby Martin



"Enchanted Spring" By Alex Boutwell



"Coming Home"  
By  
Cassandra  
Brennan

To Noah  
By Kelly Lanzarone

You were along; I wasn't there  
At night your silence met despair  
The hungry shadows clawed their way  
into your soul and pierced your pain

A boy you were—forever lost:  
taking each risk—no mind to cost  
Lonely, till I fell into you  
The boy I met now twenty-two

Afraid I was to give my all,  
to go all in—only to fall  
Parted ways, the sky still blue,  
over the boy now twenty-two

Thereafter, searching for your sound  
For you, my dear, emptiness found  
Your father said he woke to see  
your body hanging from a tree

My many tears fell into  
a stream of regret—shining through,  
I cried, I cried my heart for you  
That boy who died at twenty-two

You're free now and the pain is gone,  
so go now, darling, sing your song  
Don't look back on the morning dew,  
my boy that died at twenty-two



Be Mine (For White Tiger)  
By Cody Alcorn

His eyes,  
Deep and vibrant,  
Aglow with the intensity of a thousand suns.

His smile,  
Warm and bright,  
Shining with joy and content.

His lips,  
Pink and full,  
Poised for a kiss.  
(Poison spread thinly like the sweet slick of his tongue.)

What would I do,  
What would I give,  
To receive those luscious lips?

His big strong arms  
Held out for a hug.  
A beautiful embrace,  
I wish could last forever.

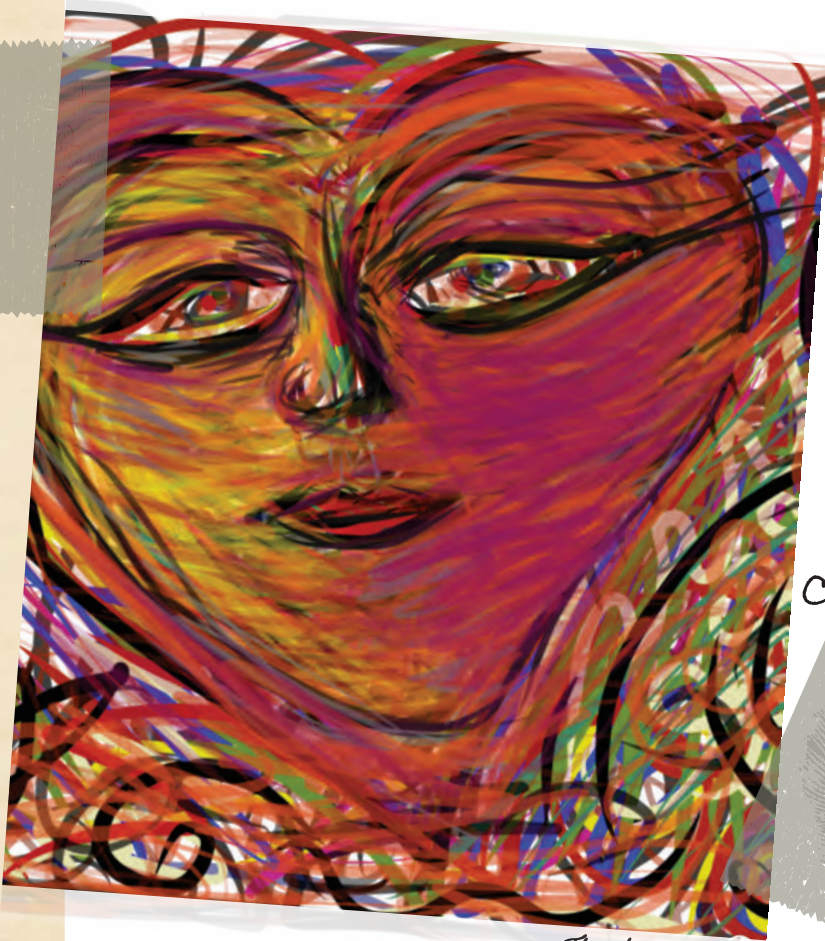
(Whatever could I do,  
For you to be mine?)

If you would be mine,  
I would fight the fiercest storms;  
I would climb the highest mountain peak,  
And swim the deepest ocean depths.

I would die a million horrible deaths,  
If only you would be mine.

Be mine...

Mine for today...  
Mine for tomorrow...  
Mine for eternity...  
Just... Be Mine.



*"The Heart Feels  
and Knows What  
the Brain Thinks"*  
By  
Cassandra Brennan

*The love remains,  
Forever still,  
For those of you,  
You bring beauty to the cold and sullen dirt.*

*The Cards of Life*  
By Stephanie Templeton

*Although your time was cut short,  
A new species of flower blooms in our hearts,  
Resembling your everlasting will:*

*Breathtaking, bittersweet, shimmering within,  
Our haunted memories—*

*Someday we shall meet again,  
By the soft glow of a new moon;  
Someday we shall meet again, Someday soon.*



"Sin City" by Alex Boutwell



"Sun Gaze"  
By  
Cassandra  
Brennan

Being left with  
this responsibility  
has left me wandering...







*"Subliminal Messages"*  
By Cassandra Brennan



## Ever Hear a Dogwood Scream?

"Your great-granddaddy and me lived in the small town of Dogwood, Illinois—you probably ain't never heard of it, seeing's as they tore it down to rebuild the very city ya'll live in now. Hell, you kids probably don't even know what a dogwood is, such a damn shame too..." Gramma laughed quietly to herself, shaking her head softly. "Cairo was s'pose to be bigger and better. You know, bring in more money, more people, everybody always wanting more, and I guess in a way that's exactly what they got, thriving as it is now..."

Gramma sat back in her rocking chair and took slow, steady breaths, as if she were pulling the memories from deep within the recesses of her mind.

"The price that we townfolk paid was too high, though..."

Gramma's eyes started glistening.

The year was 1787, and the only thing separating my daddy's cottage and the Mississippi River was about a mile of lush green woods that stretched for hundreds of miles along the river banks. There were large oaks and maples that would give us sweet syrup and an endless supply of acorns to pelt the neighbor's horrible, fat cat; the sassafras would turn into a mixture of golden yellows, and bright oranges in the fall. Then there were the dogwoods that would just burst into pure whites and bright pinks in the spring; they were my favorites. I could spend hours underneath them, just watching the clouds go by. What a sight to see, took my breath away every time—still does.

I had just gotten home from school when I overheard my daddy and some other man arguing back and forth through the screen door on the front porch, something about steamboats and how for a small price they would bring more people and more business to Dogwood.

"You have a week to be out of this house and off this property, Mr. Rutter! You should be grateful for that!" the unknown man said with such finality that it shut my daddy right up.

The loud clacking of the man's shiny black shoes filled the living room as he stormed towards the front door, and I quickly hid behind a small table on the porch as the screen door opened, slamming back violently against its hinges, as the unknown man, who I could now see was the mayor of the town, Mr. Sullivan himself, left the porch. He never paid anybody a visit in Dogwood unless it was to deliver bad news.

I galped, my heart sinking.

I waited until Mr. Sullivan was out of sight before entering the home; I found my daddy with his head held in his hands at the dinner table.

"Daddy, what was that man doin' here?" I asked quietly. My daddy lifted his head and smiled brightly.

"Baby Girl, I didn't hear ya come in! How was school?" my daddy exclaimed, tears still wet on his face.

"School was fine, Daddy, but what did Mr. Sullivan want?"

"Oh, nothing, Baby, just came by to ask if we could relocate for a short while, so that he can renovate." My daddy said matter-of-factly with a smile. "In about a week, we're gonna head up to your pappy's place for a while."

"Up to pappy's place? But daddy, that's all the way up in Evansville! What about school and all my friends?"

"I know, Baby Girl, but like I said it's only temporary. We'll get you enrolled at another school and you'll make new friends, I promise. Now go on an' start figurin' what you wanna bring with ya." My daddy's voice took on a tone of finality, just like Mr. Sullivan's voice had in the living room. So, turning, I stomped off to my bedroom to start packing for the long trip ahead of us.

The next week was a blur, people coming in and out of our home, surveying the land, my friends coming by, hoping to convince me to stay, but I wasn't gonna leave my daddy alone, I was all he had left.

Before long, the week had come and gone, and we were readying ourselves to set out. I had just tossed my last bag into the back of our carriage, when I smelled something burning, turning around I saw dark ribbons of smoke billowing into the air.



"Daddy, what's that?" I shouted.

My daddy walked nonchalantly to the carriage, his face a mask of pain. "Ain't nothin', Baby Girl, now hop on up in the carriage and lets hit the road."

"But Daddy, it's coming from our woods!" I cried out as a blaze of fire shot above the tree line. "They burning our trees! They burning all the maples and dogwoods!"

Tears spurt from my eyes as I started running for the woods, but my daddy scooped me up quickly in his powerful arms, halting my progress.

"Daddy, you gotta stop them!" I objected, hitting his chest. "They killing all our trees, please stop them, Daddy, please!"

But my pleas were falling on deaf ears. My daddy just held me as I cried—tears glistened in his own red-rimmed eyes. After a while, the eeriest of sounds filled the air; it echoed through me like a siren's call, piercing through the cacophony of fire, like the high-pitched whine of a dying dog's last breath.

That was the first time I'd ever heard a dogwood scream, and I'd never forget it.

By Chanda Kauffman-Harley



*"For the Sake of Progress"*  
By Alex Boulwell

Words  
By Amber Smoot

i hear people talk  
all day, but they don't  
know the words they say

it's like being on  
autopilot: same routine,  
day after day

so when you're one of  
the few who fly a  
different route, it's hard

hard to fight the  
numbness working to  
envelope your brain

a numbness that will  
make you like them:  
a robot, unhuman,  
unfeeling

the few of us  
who will stand and  
think a different way.

we are a new race  
a new generation and  
we have a new freedom

so those still standing,  
please, don't fall, for  
you are the salvation  
of us all.

*Carpe Diem*

By Alex Boulwell  
Dedicated to Cindy Shear

Today is your birthday  
Today, you are constantly on my mind  
Yesterday we were student and teacher  
Yesterday, what a passage of time

Today is your birthday  
Today, I long for my friend  
Yesterday we bonded over King and Tolkien  
Yesterday, we let the other in

Today is your birthday  
Today, I remember the past  
Yesterday we thought would be longer  
Yesterday, wasn't meant to last

Today is your birthday  
Today, I still have regret  
Yesterday I should have stood up  
Yesterday, I will never forget

Today was your birthday  
Today, you were constantly on my mind  
Yesterday I didn't have the words  
Yesterday, when you left us behind





*"Death Grows the Fruit of Life" By Ryan Andrew Neumann*



# Estuary

## I. The Storm

Crested wave caressing gritty sand.  
Reflecting sky and cloud.  
Return to its beginning.  
Foot descends the rich, black muck:  
Tide flows and ebbs.  
To inch back up the man-made slope.  
An expanse of beach is reflecting sun-shimmering water.  
A cloud's smoky rays of white, insist on terra firma bound:  
Thunderous head in the east:  
Black and gray, is not quite silver-lining.  
Intensified rumbles to the south:  
The first bolt of fire to descend.  
Seawater turns to foam at edge.  
Puffs break off and blow across the concrete ledge.

## II. Early Morning

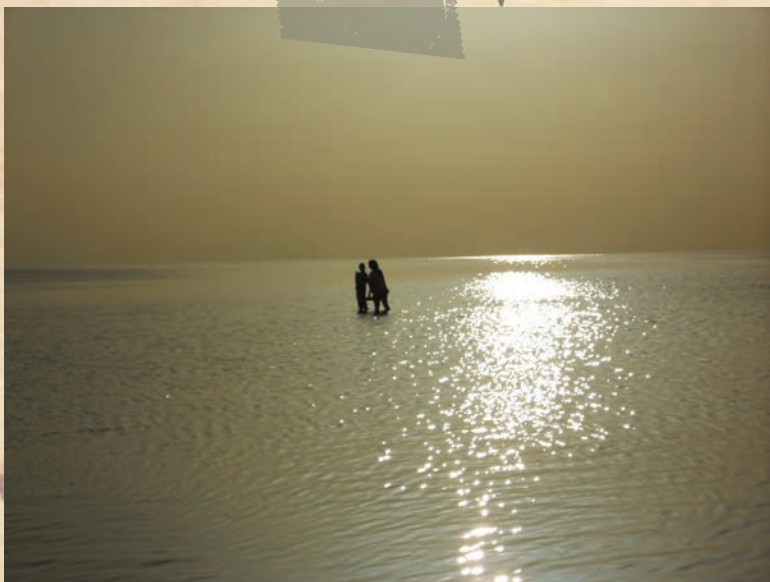
At first light, blue meets blue:  
One fluid, one gas: on horizon, meld together—  
Absent wind:  
An emerging dorsal fin, then disappears.  
Palms begin their flutter.  
Ripples spot the surface.  
Turning tide lapping at my feet.  
Flat calm now gone.  
A fire of yellow ascends the day.  
From here to there: translucent pale-green, then blue, the sea:  
Searcher of blues, with crabbing net, claws extended in defense.  
Floating puffs of white to the east: foreshadow mid-morning relief—  
Tide turns.





III. Gulls

Dive bombers, acrobat: loud with chirps and squawks  
Lite on mounds of sticks and grass  
With bugs and worms for fledgling beaks.



IV. Dusk

And then, it happens.  
It took all day:  
It westward dips to the horizon.  
It is bold and glaring  
With a promise  
Of  
Tomorrow!

By Dorothy Bobst

I desire to be warm as red paint, spread on dying wood:  
Behind my best friend's house, on a barn, in Ohio, something like 1985,  
On a rock road, by an adjoining church parking lot, where I learned to ride my bike.  
The dialogues I had back then with God have followed me all of my life.  
My father, he held me high over his powerful arms then, and I didn't mind.  
My mother, she tucked me in and read me stories till I dreamed of writing my own.

With ruddy eyes, I'd stare out from the wood of the shed;  
I'd stretch my red lips into a smile, watch the trees finally release,  
With a touch of regret ingrained, the snow above my head.  
Knowing full well the fleetingness of these moments,  
And the time spent wishing I could grip longer—  
But I don't waste that time holding my wooden breath.

I'd befriend the rocks that skinned my knees,  
Behind my best friend's house,  
In Ohio, as I am spread, like warm, red paint  
on the dying wood of a barn,  
that had probably been there for decades before I first fell;  
Watching all the five-year olds like me, breaking in our knees, bleeding on the white rocks—  
Twin wheels spinning lazily in wind shear off timber skin,  
Whirling struts sharing in the light-motes off holy glass;  
A bike waiting to be pulled up from the ground; a gust emits,  
like that of unseen hands, ushering the boy along back home.

Ode to a Rock Road in Ohio  
By James Blevins

"Between Spring  
& Sublime"  
Lisa Marie Isaac





## World War III Part Two

### Chapter Two: Dreams and Nightmares

John stood outside his house smoking a cigarette.

Taking a deep breath, he looked up at the stars in the sky. He stood there in silence, occasionally flicking ash off the cherry; he brought the cigarette up to his mouth, inhaled deeply, to the filter.

He exhaled a dark cloud from his mouth.

"I'm sorry, Dad," John said quietly.

Looking down at his feet, he felt almost ashamed.

"I'm sorry your son didn't make anything of himself."

Tears filled his eyes.

He took another long puff off the cigarette, then threw it on the ground. He stomped on it, twisting his foot, making sure it was good and out.

"I love you."

John turned and walked back inside.

Shutting the door securely and silently behind him, John took his coat off and hung it up on a coatrack adjacent to the front door; a leg was missing at the bottom, tilting the coatrack like The Leaning Tower of Pisa or so John liked to think. He managed to hang the heavy coat without tipping the thing over.

Everyone in the house was fast asleep; all the lights were off. The moon's light seeped through the windows and cracks of the house, just enough for John to see his way. He made a beeline to the kitchen sink. He ran the cold water. To his left he opened up a cupboard filled with glass cups and pulled out the shortest one. He placed the glass under the tap to fill it up about halfway then shut the faucet off; John chugged from the glass like a fish out of water. He gently set it down on the counter, walked over to his bedroom door.

Just as he was about to enter, John his daughter's door slightly open.

Tip-toeing to the crack offered by the open door, John peeked inside to see his daughter sprawled out over her bed, wearing pink pajamas on top of a bedspread festooned in even more pink. She was six years old and the cutest daughter he could ask for. With blonde locks the color of gold, off-set brown eyes matching his own.

John waddled in, making sure not to wake her, pulled a kicked blanket from the carpet to cover her backup; he placed a small kiss on her forehead. He waddled out of the room, shutting the door gently as he left.

Making his way down the hall, John finally entered his bedroom; his wife awake on the bed, watching TV. This surprised him; he thought he was the only soul awake in the house.

"I thought you were asleep." John said softly to his wife, putting his thought to tongue, while crawling into bed beside her.

"Dorothy called me," his wife said in a worried tone. "Said I needed to turn on the news."

"Everything okay?"

"I don't know. She didn't tell me anything else. Just to watch. She didn't sound happy."

A "breaking news" bulletin suddenly popped up on the TV screen, catching both of their attentions. It swiped right, along the bottom of the screen; a news anchor stood in the center of the screen, above the bulletin, with a look of dread etched on his face.

"We Americans might be soon facing the greatest challenge of our nation's storied history, as tonight

marks one of the biggest changes in world history," the anchor said. "Adolf Hitler spoke just a few minutes ago on the radio, admitting his existence while instituting his dominance over the world. Chaos is spreading all over. We have no idea what—"

The news channel went flicked off to dead air, black on the screen. Soon the TV displayed colorful bars and a loud buzzing sound began emitting from the television's speakers.

John and his wife lay there in dumb silence for a moment. Then John got up quickly and started packing clothes immediately into a large suitcase he pulled out from under the bed. Throwing whatever he could into additional duffel bags.

A wolf howled off in the distance, catching John's attention.

"Damn wolves!" He shouted.

"Keep packing and get Julie ready," John said turning to his wife. "We need to leave now."

John headed out the front door of the house.

Outside, everything was in flames: trees, rooftops, and some poor soul's front lawn. Off in the distance, he could see a wolf hightailing through the forest, dodging limbs and hopping over fallen trees. John followed it. After a while, he came to a slow stop at the edge of a cliff, below lay a hundred-foot drop. John could see off into the distance—a once beautiful city was strewn out before him. The same city he grew up in was now inhabited by deranged lunatics. Gun shots echoed in the chill air, followed shortly by screams.

It almost felt like hell had come to life.

A twig snapped behind him.

John turned around to see the wolf creeping slowly towards his back, its pearly-white teeth glistening in the moonlight. A cold chill ran down John's spine. He tried to back up but his foot was already close to the rocky edge; his sudden movement sent some stray pebbles a hundred feet down to the valley floor.

John raised his arms in surrender.

The wolf took that moment to leap at John, pushing his chest with its forepaws. John went flying backwards, his arms pin wheeling, as he fell down the cliff.

Right before he hit the ground, John woke up panting in his bed.

For a moment, he just lay there in silence.

Slowly, he got up and looked over at his clock. It read 5:53 AM.

Stripping the covers off his body, he stood up and stretched his arms out wide over his head in a Y. He turned on the light in his room, walked over to the sink, turned on the warm water. He cupped his hands and ran them under the water, splashed his face, waking up his eyes, bringing himself to full alert. He did it once more then turned off the water, shook his hands and reached for a towel.

His door opened and a soldier entered with John's uniform. The soldier spread the uniform on John's bed, then exited the room.

John saw a note attached to the uniform front.

He walked over to the bed, peeled the note off to read.

Dear John,

I hope you had a wonderful first night. Your first challenge starts today. I know you will succeed. These clothes should protect you from the flames, but I don't want to spoil anything.

Good luck, Hitler



### Chapter Three: Trial and Error

A man wearing black sweatpants and a white t-shirt was placed in a small, tight room—big enough to walk in and wide enough to stretch out his arms.

"Raise your arms." A voice demanded over a loud speaker.

The man raised his hands and stood unsteadily for a moment. Unexpectedly, a liquid smelling of gasoline fell from sprinklers built into the ceiling. The man was completely drenched. A nearby door opened, leading into a huge, dark room beyond.

"Proceed." The loud speaker spoke again.

The man walked into the dark room. The door shut behind him and for a moment he stood in utter darkness. It was quiet until something began to move. One by one, layers of huge circular rings spewed fire out of spouts and started rotating around a thin wire. The wire stretched out to about twenty-five feet in length, and led to a door on the other side of the room.

"You have two minutes to get to the other end." The loudspeaker croaked.

"Begin!"

Numbers started to count down on a digital board set above the death rings.

The man balanced himself on the razor thin wire; it began to slice into his feet as he walked. The clock was counting down and the fire around him got closer as he moved forward across the room.

The clock had five seconds left as he reached the middle of the wire. When the clock hit zero, the man stood there balancing himself, looking at the door. The circular death rings of fire stopped as florescent lights started to light up, one by one, allowing the man to see the bottom of the room. Below him, the man saw hundreds of burnt bodies cut in half.

Without warning, blood shot out of a small hole in the man's forehead. The man's feet slipped off the wire, his stomach landed flat on the razor, splitting him in half as he fell. He joined the many eviscerated bodies below.

"Send in the next one."

John was next in line.

The light above the door went from red to green and slid open.

John walked into the small room; the door closed behind him. A red X was in the middle of the bleak room, multiple holes dotted along the ceiling.

"Please stand on the X and raise your arms."

John took three steps and stood over the X; he raised his hands horizontally, as if he was about to be patted down.

"Close your eyes."

Nervous about what was fixing to happen, John closed his eyes and held his breath. For a moment it was quiet, and then out of nowhere he was drenched. As he tried to take in a deep breath, the thick smell of gas gagged him. Wiping the gasoline from his eyes, he tried to see but his eyes burned like someone had placed lighters directly into his irises.

The door in front of John slid open. He barged through it, gasping for air.

He entered the huge, dark room, sucking in as much air he could fit into his lungs; suddenly, layers of O-rings started to spit fire, lighting up the room. They began their rotation around the wire.

John got his air flow back on track and stood in shock on the platform.

On the other side of the wire was a door that led out, John presumed. He looked up at the digital clock. Two minutes sat frozen on the board.

"You have two minutes to get out. Your time starts now." The loudspeaker intoned.

John walked over to the thin wire and delicately placed his foot on it, almost losing his balance immediately.

"Damnit." John muttered under his breath.

He took a step back and looked at the whole picture of his situation, noticing a trail that led to an exit, but flames were profusely spitting out in front of it, blocking his escape.

John looked down at his hand and noticed it wasn't burning. He walked over to the edge of the platform, where flames shot out the side; he looked at his hand one last time before shoving it fully into the fire. He held it there for a moment, feeling a little warmth but, surprisingly, no pain.

Quickly looking up at the clock, John saw he had a minute left to figure a way out of the room. He looked down past the flames to see fire engulfing a platform below.

He thought back to his dream, when he stood on the ledge of the mountain; the wolf had pushed him off the cliff. That gave John an idea. It made him think to take a leap of faith. To trust his instincts.

John took a step back, took in a deep breath, and jumped off the wire. He landed with a thud on the lower platform. Flames ate at him from all sides but nothing was causing him serious harm. It only felt warm as he looked up at the clock to see thirty seconds remained.

John darted down the cat walk to a door. Catching his attention was a blazing orange and red door handle.

Charging full speed, John yelled, and in one motion, he grabbed the door handle and twisted it, pushing the door wide. Collapsing as he entered the room, John fell down as soldiers applauded his performance, and a medic made her way, bustling past the soldiers, towards him. She started wrapping his hand in gauze.

The door behind him slammed shut startling him for a second. The soldiers turned their attention to a nearby window, watching as the next person braved the room John had only recently left.

John stopped the medic to see how the next person would do.

A man entered and took a few steps across the wire before slipping; the string sliced the person's foot, cut off the right side of his face as he fell down to join the other dead souls waiting below for their next victim.

"Don't take this for granted," The medic said, catching his attention. The medic grabbed his hand and began to wrap it again. "You have a gift."

She pulled out a marker and drew a small cross on the outside of John's bandage, over the back of his hand, before covering it with another layer of gauze.

"We need you."

By Tyler Schultz



"Bliss" By Cassandra Brennan



# My Love By Cody Alcorn

Thoughts of you,  
Fill my consciousness—  
Seeded in my dreams,  
And everywhere I turn,  
Memories flow,  
Like a river through my head.

The pain cuts so deep  
Like a knife to my heart.  
You're the one,  
Please don't leave,  
Say you'll stay,  
Say you'll be mine,  
And I can be yours.

I'd be anything,  
Anything and everything,  
For you—I would.  
I care for you,  
I love you,  
Please don't go.

Your arms around my body,  
Velvet to the touch.  
Your eyes,  
Like molten chocolate:  
Tenderness, intensity, kindness, and affection;  
I could stare for hours,  
Lost in those eyes.

Am I special to you?  
Or just another guy?  
Can you replace me that easily?  
Or am I held close to your heart?

Heartbreak and heartache:  
You cause me so much anguish,  
I can barely stand it.  
I've never felt this way.  
You do to me,  
What no one else can do.

The mere mention of your name  
Makes me smile, ear to ear;  
You have a wonderful way of making me laugh—  
And beautiful ways of making me cry.

You mean everything to me,  
You're all I've ever wanted.  
But you don't even see me, why?  
I'd be everything for you,  
Everything I could.

I'll wait here,  
Forever if I have to,  
And hope you finally see me—  
My Love.



# "Reflective Sun" By Amber Willy



*Having a negative view on most things may put a damper on how I write at times, but it's also an influence. Death is something I'm always curious about and, sadly, always thinking about. I figured a haiku might be a great way to express at least a bit of my feelings on the subject in a few powerful words, and, maybe, help me to get the emotions out of my system and onto paper. Honestly, ever since I wrote this poem, I've been able to relax and I haven't thought about death nearly as much as I used to.*

**Mourning  
By  
Daniel Duvall**

**Strangers surrounding;  
Tears plummet from the heavens—  
Mourning a loved one.**



"Sun  
Palm"  
By  
Bethany  
Mines



ODE TO A VISIONARY  
BY  
KELBY MARTIN

IN MEMORY OF MR. SATORU IWATA—  
REST IN PEACE AND THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING YOU HAVE DONE.  
DECEMBER 6TH, 1959—JULY 11TH, 2015

I REMEMBER THAT FATEFUL DAY,  
WHEN I WAS BUT A CHILD:  
THE SCREEN FLASHED VIVIDLY AND YOU INVITED ME  
TO EMBARK ON AN EXCITING AND PERILOUS ADVENTURE—LIKE NO OTHER.

THE YEARS PASSED AND I GREW OLDER, REMAINING THE SAME CHILD WITHIN.  
STILL, YOU CONTINUED TO SHOW ME MARVEL AFTER MARVEL.  
AND EVEN WHEN YOU FAILED TO TELL YOUR TALL-TALES LIKE THE ERA  
THAT CAME BEFORE,  
YOU WOULD STILL GIVE ME A HUMBLE AND RESPECTFUL BOW, SAYING:  
“PLEASE UNDERSTAND,” IN YOUR BEST EFFORT AT ENGLISH.

OLDER AND, PERHAPS, WISER, I KNEW:  
YOU AND YOUR COHORTS HAD PAINTED A FANTASTICAL PLAYGROUND FOR US AS  
CHILDREN,  
FIGHTING THE TWO-HEADED CHIMERA THAT IS CREATIVITY AND TIME.  
EVEN THEN, YOU INVITED US INTO YOUR WORLD, ASKED US TO LEAVE OUR  
TROUBLES BEHIND;  
AND IN THOSE BRIEF MOMENTS OF SERENITY, YOU MADE ME  
YOUNG, ONCE AGAIN.

TIME MARCHED ON, DESPITE EVERYONE’S WISHES.  
YOU GREW VERY ILL—WEAKENING WITH EACH DAY; YOU WERE DETERMINED TO  
KEEP THE MAGIC  
EXACTLY AS IT WAS SO MANY AGES AGO.  
BUT, IN THE END, EVERYONE MEETS THEIR MAKER.

AND NOW, AT YOUR MEMORIAL, I STAND WITH OTHERS LIKE ME:  
WE ARE BROTHERS AND SISTERS;  
JOINED NOT BY BLOOD, BUT BY SPIRIT.

WHILE I MOURN, I WILL REMEMBER THOSE MANY JOURNEYS OF YORE,  
ADVENTURES FROM A SIMPLER TIME.  
IF YOU COULD SPEAK TO US, YOU WOULD LET US KNOW THAT EVERYTHING  
WILL BE OKAY.

YOU DON’T NEED TO BOW OR APOLOGIZE ANY LONGER, MY FRIEND.

WE UNDERSTAND.

"Perspective  
is Key"  
By  
Dharma  
Murphy





The bar wavered around Clay in bold, neon colors; it oscillated to the acoustic slush coming off a nearby stage. Long, perverse contrails of smoke curled about the cherry of his cigarette—rising to mask his tired, drunk face.

In front of him: a dirty, white picnic table was placed, littered with debris—dead glass-soldiers in reverie; smeared ash in the grain; a pack of cigarettes lonely, gasping in a puddle of condensation; a green lighter next to a notebook and pen with three words written on top of a solitary page—“possibly the truth”—and nothing else.

Clay was sitting outside on a chilly patio behind an Irish pub, an awning was spread overhead, wooden trellises in the place of walls. A portly, bearded man was playing an acoustic guitar from a small stage set at the far back of the scene; sweat glistening on his ruddy cheeks, lit by several long strands of red and green Christmas lights strung over and behind the modest setup.

Over the slush, words began to stream in a private river within Clay's head; he began to write them down in the form of a poem, joining the three words already placed there.

It was then that a heavy hand came thundering down on Clay's left shoulder, forcing his right-hand—the one holding the pen and writing a fever—to shirk off the page, leaving a blue streak, like a cut, across the white paper. The hand was rough: a digger's hand. Its forearm was corded in muscle and ended past the elbow where a blue denim shirt began. Clay looked up into the eyes of heartbreak and saw his reflection nestled inside.

The man was deeply tanned, thick of neck and chest, with dirty jeans over dirty boots. His hair, a sun-stained blonde, was cut close to the skull.

A deep sadness welled abysmal in the core of this man, giving off heat.

The man quickly used his other muscled forearm, with a sudden, feral yelp of anguish, like a dog, to clear off Clay's table, smashing bottle after bottle onto the rocky patio floor.

The notepad went airborne, along with the cigarettes and lighter, careening off the small rocks on the ground; the notepad settled below a patron's hovering right heel. Clay stared at his words on the floor from a far; the pen still grasped in his right hand. A cigarette dangled from his pale, pink lips. His eyes raised from the distant notepad, found the man's rage, no more than three feet from his eyelashes.



Sweat poured from the man's jowls and down the open part of his denim shirt, causing his chest to glisten in the twinkling Christmas lights. He paced back and forth in front of Clay's now barren table.

Clay sat immobile, watching this theater play out—something about this man struck him as familiar.

"Her hands...my hands," the man started with wounded inflection. "Pressed into skin, as soft, like pillows are soft."

The words struck Clay like a slap. Of course, he recognized them. Screaming, the man continued to recite.

"Smearing fingerprints, like paint, on each other—with heat: that weeping hollow inside us—; but I can fill it, if you let me."

A vacuum seemed to be set between them. Clay only heard the man's words, and light, delicate sounds between the lines, like microscopic punctuation points, from time to time.

"I can fill it, if you let me." He repeated.

Finger bled into the man's voice, laced with muscles bunching under denim-skin.

"With tangles of sweet intentions and fingers, lost in your hair, in your face, in your lips: where I long to be lost—that is where you'll find me, always, when you want me found."

The man's voice mingled with the substance of Clay's inner-thoughts...

.....

Somewhere above the earth, a hearth warm enough for all beings hums along contentedly, cracking good-naturedly; it looks down, this fireplace, and smiles tenderly on all the poets, the heartbroken, and the weaker of the loved; those left dotted amongst the cracks on the surface of the planet. It smiles and nods its approval of their good work. It dips hands into a cup, insisting to all that what is cupped is pure for all to drink—a basin for all to be held within its embrace.

Free to all...

.....

"Wet between what I've said and what I need: you hold me harder than I can perceive."

The man's voice/his words pull Clay from a metaphysical reverie he can't explain. He stares earnestly into the man's fury. He knows what will come next from the man's clenched teeth.

But somehow, I feel you there.

"But somehow..."

"I feel you there... at the nexus of me. Like the beat of a shared heart, hitched to all that is meaningful and true. Do say, sweet girl, of whom I love, is it just me, with my tempered eyes of bark, that feels what is braced between us?"

"Our hearts placed to hearth is warmth. Our mouths pressed to together is love."

The pub began to give off a perceivable resonance to Clay's ears, as if two poets were speaking at once: one in whispers, the other in hurt shouts.

The man paced and stomped in rain dance circles, and recited Clay's poetry at him, like machine gun fire, relentless.



Cigarette smoke was there; the smell of broken, spilt beer bounced about in his nostrils. Spittle decorated his glasses. A mist of spit, poetry and glimpses into a not-too-distant past rained down—too painful to take all of its weight.

Something else added its weight to Clay's dream state—something remembered. . .

Somewhere, a man sits in a booth at a smoky, red bar—a very old man with a story to tell. Clay was there and he heard this old man have his say. The old man told a tale of the day he found his wife dead, at home, by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Many decades ago, the old man was accustomed to storing guns in his house; he loved guns. Every kind of gun was poetry for this poor, weathered man. His wife, she had taken one of his .45s, early morning, Valentine's Day, and put a hollow-point round into her heart. She timed it perfectly; twenty minutes, as she knew, before her husband arrived home from his job. He found her, as if asleep, on the couch. Her blood was gray in the low-light of dawn.

The old man had suggested a toast to Clay, eagerly raising his glass.

"To the bending." The old man said.

"To the what?" Clay had asked.

"Always drink to the bending," the old man continued. "The bending we all endure, but never break.

"Always drink to the bending."

So they did. Glasses touched and a toast was made.

Clay looked at the jealous man. The man of whose wife he had slept with, wrote a poem about, and distributed around town in a zine of his own making called For All the Bending.

They locked eyes. Locked in what had come to be shared and disseminated between them. Carnal knowledge has that particular kind of residue to it, as both men knew. The angry man had made his point.

The earth seemed to take another turn before Clay came to realize he was sitting on the back patio of the pub all by himself. His cigarette a mere nub in his mouth, close enough to singe the skin of his lips.

He tossed the butt in the rocks, landing beside his now discarded notepad. The small cherry of the dying cigarette lit the lone page on display. Several more words now lay illuminated, beside a blue cut of ink:

"possibly the truth—

pitched wholly into the dark void of evening

now beer-stained and ashen within separate wet circles;

my words would be given time to breathe,

just out of sight, in the periphery, but close enough to count amongst the moisture of leaves."

Rising from the chair, Clay walked to the main bar housed off the back patio, took a seat on an empty stool and lit another cigarette. The bartender walked over to Clay, leaned across the bar top, taking his patron in as if for the first time.

"What the hell was that all about?" he asked.

Clay took a long deep drag from his cigarette, exhaled violently.

"I slept with his wife, and then wrote a poem about her."

"Wow, man."

The bartender went under the bar, retrieved some whiskey and two empty shot glasses. He poured an inch in both and handed one to Clay before titling the other back in a single motion down his yawning throat.

"Was it worth it?" The bartender asked after returning the empty shot glass to the bar top—inlaid with little shamrocks in see-through Lucite.

Clay threw back his own shot, trembled for a second as the drink shook his foundation. Dragged his smoke again and looked at the bartender with dead-on eyes, after placing his drained glass precisely over a four-leaf clover.

"Of course."

The bartender stared Clay down, discerning something off about his given response.

"I was talking about the girl."

Never parting from the bartender's eyes, Clay smiled, looking both serious and playful at the same time—but honest—yes, very possibly honest.

"I was talking about the poem."



By James Blevins





*"Home Sweet"  
By Cassandra Brennan*

Things are getting worse.

I can't let this be forgotten...





War  
By Amber Smoot

sitting by a  
monument tower  
for those that fell  
before us

still we regret the lives  
that were lost, never to  
be heard from  
again

do we recognize names?  
—of course not, for we  
are nothing but hardened  
core

and still  
we will push on,  
for there is still a fight,  
a fight to be won.

for we have learned  
to hold a cold heart—  
in this time of misery  
and war



By Amy Shumway

## *Sleepless*

*By Andrea Senkokura*

*Many a sleepless night,  
cause me to be reckless,  
so I ask myself, will I sleep tonight?*

*Dreams give me a fright,  
which leaves me breathless.  
Many a sleepless night.*

*I don't feel quite right.  
Deprivation leaves me careless,  
so I ask myself, will I sleep tonight?*

*Night after night, head feeling light,  
so I become senseless.  
Many a sleepless night.*

*I just feel so uptight,  
and the fatigue is relentless.  
so I ask myself, will I sleep tonight?*

*I am desperate to fight—  
break the helplessness.  
no more; many a sleepless night.  
so I ask myself, will I sleep tonight?*

## *American Dream* *By Amber Smoot*

*If you could be  
any person you  
wanted to be,  
who would that  
person be?*

*Would you be the  
single mother of  
three, with no food  
on the table?*

*Would you be the  
wife of a drunken husband,  
sitting at home,  
waiting to be  
beat again?*

*Would you be the  
father who never  
sees his kids, because  
work keeps him away?*

*Would you be the  
man who just got  
fired, and now can't  
tell his wife?*

*Of course not,  
but this is  
what we call the  
American Dream.*

*We don't see our  
families. We get beat.  
We're poor, and  
We're scared.*



*Open My World*  
*By Cassandra Brennan*

*World,*  
*let me walk with family safely,*  
*to see the outer side of life.*

*(I have had some great times.)*

*And I know that there are more to be,*  
*but open my world to better and greater things,*  
*love of all things.*

*(There will only be good for us.)*  
*(There will only be best of us.)*

*See you through the great times*  
*and make them better.*  
*Open my world to the top,*  
*so we may see the way of means.*

*The only thing that I ask is*  
*to bring me some that I can share.*  
*My love can give that same love back,*  
*open my world by heart.*

*See us flourish with great heart,*  
*soul rich with generosity, kindness,*  
*and the power to see.*



*"Tree Of Life"*

*By Cassandra Brennan 83*

# Angels of Eden By Kelby Martin

I.

Xandius Alexander had been living within the bowels of unconsciousness for the past two-hundred years. Or had it been one-hundred and sixty-seven?

He had lost count.

He felt stuck in a purgatory that was hypnopompia, and try as he might, he couldn't shut his brain off, not even for sleep.

It wouldn't have mattered. A sudden radiant luminescence turned all that was dark into a blinding light. His eyes shot wide-open. His body adjusted to the world suddenly brought to life around him.

Gusts of cold air rushed across his face, ruffling his short hair.

A timer chirped in his ear, followed by a computerized voice that whispered, "Stasis time expired" before shutting down. Alexander slowly clambered from his pod; every joint in his body cracking in protest from his lengthy rest.

Just how long has it been, exactly? He wondered while exploring the cramped room; it was littered with research tools of some kind and sterilization chemicals.

A dull growl broke the silence, Alexander clutched his stomach. He knew both the sound and the feeling that accompanied it all too well.

Whoa, I'm starving.

He sneaked up to the nearest door. It slid open instantaneously upon his approach, causing Alexander to step back in surprise.

A woman's face met his; she gasped. She stared at him for a brief few seconds before squealing into an earpiece.

"Security!" she screamed. "Intruder in the R&D labs!"

Alexander thrust himself past her, running blindly down various corridors. Behind him came the stomping of footsteps growing louder each second. He exited the facility, entering an enormous plaza full of people tending to their daily commute. Desperately, Alexander attempted to escape his pursuers; but to his misfortune, a beastly guard hurled his weight onto him from behind, sending Alexander heavily to the ground.

Two other men grabbed Alexander by his shoulders, picked him up off the ground and began dragging him the across the plaza and into a tall building that towered over the city.

Alexander was now a prisoner. The pale faces of the surrounding pedestrians gawked at him as the large men lugged him across the threshold of the building. A few hushed whispers reached Alexander's ears.

"A San Francisco-Mecha-Aviation jumpsuit? Dated 2672? It's 3044!"

"Has this kid been living under a rock for the past couple of centuries? Like, seriously."

Others politely remained silent.

Eventually, Alexander was thrown bodily to the floor of a large oval room, close to the top of the enormous structure it seemed.

A female voice purred. "Thank you. You are dismissed."

The armored men left. Alexander was now alone with the strange woman. He was astonished; the surrounding windows showed not blue skies, as he had earlier observed, but stars and nebulas, as far as the eye could see.

It was space out there.

"I've heard a lot about you in the archives. Welcome back, Xandius Alexander," she said, sizing him up. "Hopefully you're not stasis-sick."

"Who-who are you?" Alexander stammered.

"I am General of the Army and Pilot of Eden. My name is Emilia Suzaku. Welcome to humanity's last bastion."



## II.

"What do you mean, 'last bastion'!? What happened to Earth?"

Alexander's mind struggled to comprehend this new information and strange new world that surrounded him.

Suzaku sighed.

"Earth is just a barren wasteland now, a breeding ground for the Gestalt—a parasitic alien race we have been fighting for the past one-hundred and fifty years. You are aboard the spacecraft Eden. A ship supporting a population of 300,000 men, women and children—home of the last survivors of Earth."

Alexander could feel her fiery resolve with every word she uttered. Suzaku turned away.

"We...we walk the border of death every day."

"So, why am I back all of a sudden, General Suzaku?" he asked.

She gazed deeply into Alexander's eyes. "You were the greatest pilot of the old world—and by some miracle—you're here in our presence. We need you."

"Is your memory intact? Basic Aegis-Rig operations have hardly changed much over the years; you might even catch a new pilot orientation if you hurry!"

"Yeah, my memory's fine, but this is too crazy. It's been a real long time. Shouldn't I at least—"

Alexander was interrupted as a screeching siren assaulted his eardrums. A muffled voice emitted from a nearby holographic terminal next to the general.

"General Suzaku! We have a Gestalt Meteor on a direct collision course with Eden! Impact ETA: one hour."

Suzaku cursed.

Alexander shook his head. "Wait, wait, wait, a what!?" He stammered.

"A Gestalt Meteor: it's the second-largest species of Gestalt—massive and powerful, but very unintelligent—hideous, even." Suzaku informed him, and then turned back to the terminal. "Deploy the attack team. I'm sending Alexander with them."

"Alexander!?" the hologram retorted. "B-but General, he's not—"

"Do as I say, Commander!" Suzaku ordered.

The transmission terminated.

"Head to the docking bay," Suzaku said, turning to Alexander. "My assistant by the door will direct you. Quickly! There isn't much time!"

"I just woke up!" Alexander countered. "You expect me to just rush out into a battle for you? I hardly know where the hell I am!"

Suzaku looked to the floor in guilt.

"I...I understand how you must be feeling, Alexander. But you were a prodigy in your time. Nobody has achieved what you have at your age—not then, not since, not now. Please, Alexander, please help us. I'll explain everything later. I promise."

He hesitated before speaking.

"Fine...I'm taking your word. You'll provide me with answers when all of this is said and done."

Suzaku nodded her assent.

Alexander returned her nod.

He ran from the room, rushing to the docking bay with the assistant guiding his progress; crimson lights flashed along to the screeching alarms as they ran hurriedly past them.

## III.

"Fire team Egrigori: Nozomi Kobayashi, Jean Delacroix, Xandius Alexander, Jack Krauser—report to Docking Bay E!" An overhead speaker blared.

Alexander approached the other three members of his team, talking amongst themselves, readying their gear for deployment. One member was a woman, the other two were men—all three seemed to be in their early twenties.

The taller of the two men grunted. "Hey, you're that new kid! I'm Jack. What kinda ridiculous name's Xandius' anyway?" A scar ran alongside his face, next to his eye. "You sure choose a helluva time to wake up."

"Aw, c'mon, Jack," the short man said. "Stop being so uptight with the kid; we'll be fine. It's just like the simulation, right? No one likes a sourpuss!" He chuckled at his joke and elbowed Jack in the side. Jack seemed less than pleased at the ribbing.

The woman standing alongside them both bowed politely in Alexander's direction. She spoke with a buttery-soft voice, "Hello, my name is Nozomi." She smiled invitingly. "It is a real pleasure to make your acquaintance, Alexander-san. Let's get out there and do our best!"

The above intercom announced the start of the mission and everyone set off to board their Aegis-Rigs. The humanoid machines were sleek and lightweight; they could both deal heavy firepower and achieve incredible speed. While entering, Alexander noticed the words "Aeronautic Gestalt Extermination and Life Preservation Squadron" embroidered along the vehicle's left shoulder.

He strapped himself into the cockpit.

In a matter of moments, the squad of fifty men and women had become bullets, shooting out from the hanger like lead through the muzzle of a gun.

A voice crackled in Alexander's earpiece as he soared through space.

"This is command. Gestalt Meteor 47 is three clicks northeast of Eden, velocity is steadily increasing. Twenty-five minutes till impact."

Another voice commanded, "Assume triple-file line formation! Let's go, Angels!"

The Squadron flew through the stars, leaving behind an azure-colored trail; their Aegis-Rig jets propelled them towards the oncoming menace of the Gestalt.

The Angels approached a grotesque mass of pulsating organic matter, kilometers large in diameter, rivaling even the most colossal of meteorites.

"Command, this is Squad leader—GM 47 is classified as Class A!" The squad leader stammered upon his report, choking from fear. "Alright, everyone, turn on your G-Core visors, get ready your Weiss Particle cannons! High-Frequency swords need to be on standby!"

Jean chimed in on the radio.

"Hey! Alex—I know you don't know anything about these guys, but basically, all you need to know is, we need to destroy all eight cores inside of it—as you can see if you look through your G-Core visor."

But, just as everyone readied themselves into battle position for a pincer attack, a sack on the meteor's summit opened, and hundreds of lookalike Aegis-Rigs, covered in bloody Gestalt tissue, scattered into the air after the Squadron.

"Oh my God—" Alexander gasped. "They're like a swarm of locusts!"

"Shit! A Trojan Horse!" One pilot swore over the com. A swarm eradicated his rig from space. Others quickly succumbed to the flames.

"This is Egrigori team!" Jack barked. "Squad leader is down! Everyone scatter and take out the little ones! Alpha and Beta team, focus on taking out GM 47 itself."

Command didn't like those orders.

"Krauser, you are not in charge here!"

Alexander kicked his rig into high gear, guiding it through the chaos and fighting of countless little skirmishes with enemies. He managed to defeat many with a swift grace that most pilots could only dream of matching. Alexander flew circles around his assailants, overwhelming each with lightning-paced attacks and dizzying aerodynamic maneuvers; he fought several at once while other pilots struggled with only one Gestalt rig.

The attackers began to close in on Alexander and the remaining Angels still in the fight.

Lights on Alexander's HUD began to blaze a dark, alarming red.

"GM 47 will impact Eden in ten minutes!" Command cried over the com. "We are losing troops too fast; this is life or death!"



Alexander watched as Alpha and Beta squads were maulled in mere seconds by the Gestalt; the battlefield slowly became a display of vicious carnage. Pained screams filled his earpiece.

"Jack—I'm going in." Alexander shouted.

"You're crazy!" Jack responded.

"I've got an idea. Give me some cover!"

Alexander spiraled through his enemies, slaughtering Gestalt rig after rig, zeroing in on the meteor. He loaded his Weiss Particle cannon, aimed it carefully.

Just a well-timed shot with my scatter ammunition should do it, he thought.

Right before Alexander could pull the trigger...

WHAM!

He was struck right in the arm and head by a hard object. The sudden force slammed his head sideways into the cockpit, leaving him senseless.

"Alexander has suffered a concussion!" The commander bellowed in exasperation. "Vital signs are negative!"

But there was nothing Suzaku could do; her stomach dropped from the horror of what had befallen her Angels.

#### IV.

Dammit...c mon, Suzaku thought, Show me the Alexander Family's hidden power...

For a brief moment, everyone fell mute on Eden's mission control deck. It was if all the morale had escaped from the hearts of every man and woman stationed there in a single second.

And then, Alexander's life signs on the large mission screen changed from red to yellow.

"Alexander has been revived!" yelled a mission tech. "Unbelievable, General!"

Blood was pouring down his face. Alexander cocked his head back and punched the throttle to its limit, unleashing an adrenaline-fueled roar.

Alexander screamed with fury.

Diving head-first into the meteor, grazing Eden at this point, Alexander's thrusters were pushed to maximum power. He unsheathed his High-Frequency sword, extended it outward, and pierced the beast's flesh, deep into one of the eight cores; then he moved on to another, until each core was full of holes.

The creature's pulsating ceased abruptly, then exploded into an unrecognizable cluster of gore.

A maroon Legis-Rig emerged from the cluster missing an arm. Through blurry vision, Alexander read the on-screen prompt:

[WARNING: INTERNAL OXYGEN SUPPLY DAMAGED. THRUSTERS OVERHEATED—SYSTEMS SHUTTING DOWN.]

Alexander lay back, stared out into the abyss of space as he levitated. His suit was still an older model; no back-up oxygen was built-in if the original supply was damaged during battle. He could feel his lungs beginning to collapse.

Just before all was lost...

[EXTERNAL SUPPLY CONNECTED.]

Alexander opened his eyes and read the on-screen prompt. He glanced out the window and saw Nozomi's suit tethered to his while she feed him oxygen from her supply.

"Whoa!" Nozomi exclaimed. "It appears I made it in time! Let's go home, Alexander."

The com filled with statements of both congratulations and remembrances for the casualties. Suzaku watched all of this from the mission control deck, catching her breath.

"Incredible!" She stammered, awestruck before regaining what remained of her composure. "This is the last heir of the fabled Alexander Family?"

She could barely contain her excitement.

"Well done, everyone!" Suzaku continued. "Mission complete! Alexander: as soon as you dock, get checked out in the medical wing."

Then, she announced over the radio with joy, despite knowing the next battle was looming near.

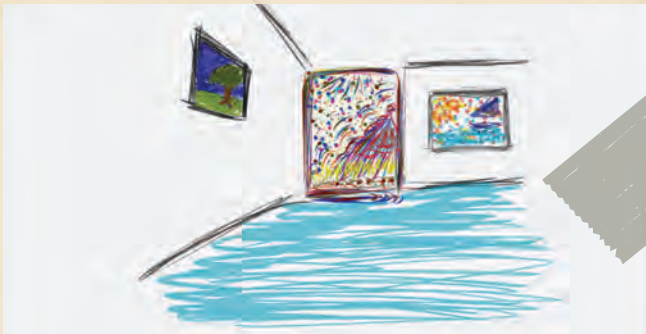
"And Alexander...welcome to the Angels of Eden."

“Balance”

By

Cassandra

Brennan



“Beach”

By

Lisa Marie

Isaac





# Spiders Don't Write Poetry

"We're here for only a short while," Amy Geller said out loud, sketch pad on lap, pencil poised over blank page. "Then it's back to the spider."

A pause. Her breath a plume of freezing vapors, emitted percussively as she spoke.

"But as far as I know," she continued with added emphasis, "spiders don't write poems."

"Neither do you." Michael said with good humor in his voice, perched just above and behind Amy on a small ledge, looking out on the ice shelf as lazy bergs travelled through their own private channels of chilled slush. In the short distance, just across this channel, a vast, white frozen expanse for miles upon miles was laid before them.

The morning air was crisp but bearable; both explorers bundled tightly in warm gear.

Amy looked over her shoulder at Michael Fitzsimmons, smiled with mirth in her eyes, matching his own, before returning her regard to the shelf.

"I might write poetry, you know," she said. "You don't honestly know that I don't."

"Well, if you do, I've never read any of it," Michael said with a huff, settling his weight more evenly on the ledge. A few clumps of snow fell down to the off-white patchy hoarfrost where Amy sat, ten-feet below his dangling boots; her pencil a blur on the page as she began to sketch.

"I prefer to let my drawings do the talking for me," Amy said without looking up.

"Where did you hear that?" Michael asked.

"Hear what?"

"That bit you just said about the spider."

Amy's pencil danced across the white of the page. From Michael's vantage point, the sketch pad was almost lost in all the white snow surrounding it. As her drawing of the horizon took shape, it seemingly brought substance to the pad in her hand, materializing it out of thin air as she drew. Light and dark arcs of lead working together to make the vista come to life.

"An artist said it in a documentary I saw last week," she said, still not looking up, except to check her subject with quick glances. "They were at the edge of the world, and he was there to draw the landscape for the expedition's record, something like that. They were from Iceland."

"But what was he talking about, with the spider? God, I hate spiders. Surely they weren't finding too many of them out there," Michael said. "I can't imagine they'd find much besides the odd penguin or polar bear."

"You'd be surprised what kind of wildlife exists in the harshest of places," Amy said, "There were these pure white rabbits in the film that looked to be a pretty big deal."

"White rabbits?" Michael asked incredulously.

"Yup."

"Were they late? For a very important date?"

Amy laughed.

"Actually, they looked very statuesque. Not in too much of a hurry to go anywhere."

"Makes sense. It being as cold as it is. I'd be sitting there just like I am here."

"They were beautiful. With black eyes. I wish I could have been there to draw them."

"Nothing like them here?" Michael asked. "In Alaska?"

"Not that I know of. I wish. I'd draw them if there were."

Amy's head hovered low over her labor—the drawing near to its completion.

The previously white page was now covered in every shade of subtle grey and black—a landscape brought to bear with nothing but pencil and a keen eye for aesthetic nuances, but Amy wasn't satisfied; she could only see the ways in which she hadn't gotten the image right.

After a deep inhalation, full to the gills with chilled air, Amy blew the eraser shavings and chips of abandoned lead from the page. She looked over it, vexed. The wind played coyly with two orphan ringlets of blonde hair, framing her face, poking out from her purple beanie.

"So, what did he mean, this Iceland guy? About the spiders?" Michael asked somewhat impatiently.

"Quit dancing around the subject, Picasso."

He rose from the ground trailing tufts of snow from pant legs and rear end.

Amy got up too, folded her sketch pad closed, and stared out at the horizon.

"I'm not sure why he said spiders," she said in a solemn tone. "I think it might have been the first creature to come to mind, maybe, though I couldn't even begin to guess why. I found it to be somewhat poetic."

"What he was referring to, though, about us only being here for a short while, is true," she continued.

"That being about humans. He was suggesting, I think, that when we're all gone from this earth, the planet will be given to what is left behind, and . . ."

A pause.

"And what's left behind, well . . . it won't be us, so . . ."

Silence rushed to fill the small gap in conversation trailing Amy's words. The wind picked up on the idea, whistling through the breach emotively.

"And spiders don't write poetry," Michael said, ending the hush.

Michael looked out over the small swatch of Alaska placed before them like a tableau of desolation and splendor—a mixture of the dead and the thriving. Amy, standing just below him, sketch pad clutched tightly to her chest, reveled in the same view.

"I don't know," Amy finally said. "Maybe not in ways that we can read."

She looked forlornly down at her meager portfolio of art for several seconds, before raising her eyes back to the glittering vista. The sun far from its apex in the sky.

"Maybe they don't need words," she mused. "Not like we do."

"I, personally, could do without spiders," Michael said. "And I like poetry."

"Well, I happen to like spiders, and I'm not so sure they can't write poetry." She smiled up at him.

Michael playfully kicked powdery snow from the ledge down onto Amy's covered head. She yelped from the cold, scrambled to get away from the shower of hoarfrost like chilled dust sprinkled over her.

A few lone crumbs of ice kissed the edges of her portfolio, curling the paper.

"Whatever you say, Picasso." Michael said, good-naturedly.

The two of them made fresh, exultant tracks through the slush, following the slight suggestion of a path to their waiting car, and a promise of warmth.



# Hero

By Tyler Schultz

The debris settled. And what was once giant buildings looking down on us from the sky, now lay crumbled under our feet. Everything was quiet. Many people lay dead under piles of cement and rocks.

Across the way, I could make out the outline of a figure as it made its way towards me.

My powers were completely drained and the only option left to me was to fly away. But as I looked around, I couldn't see anyone alive. No one had survived the impact. The idea of all these people dying for nothing appalled me. Anger grew inside me as I looked back over to the shadowy figure; he was about two car lengths away from me, standing silently. I couldn't make out what he looked like but he was about as tall and slim as me.

My arms became engulfed in flames as I grew more and more angry. My powers felt like they were recovering quickly.

"Do you see what you did?" I said trying to stall. "You did all this! You killed all these people—and for what!?" Tears filled my eyes.

Suddenly, the shadowy figure started to laugh. He slowly raised his head. The laugh grew louder. His eyes met mine. I could see all the rage built inside his bloodshot eyes, glowing behind his yellow irises.

"You think I did this because of you?" He said tauntingly. "That's funny. I did this because I wanted to. There was no purpose."

His words sent chills down my spine.

"These people don't deserve to live," he continued. "Just like you!"

The shadowy man sprang into action.

He lunged at me, palmed my face before slamming the back of my head down into the pavement. I was finally able to put my hands under his chest and blast him off me and into the sky.

Dazed a little, I got to my feet and ran away at supersonic speed; it might seem fast but the shadowy man was able to fly at the same speed, it seemed, as he hovered along above me, so I couldn't escape. Swooping down he blasted a couple beams of light at me from each palm. Dodging the best I could I jumped up and latched on to his waist, bringing him back down to ground level.

Flipping him around in the air so his back faced the pavement, we skid to a stop and I began to wail his face with my fist. After the fifth hit, he tried to counter, bouncing my fist off his hand, but I quickly adjusted and grabbed him by the collar of his cape. I ripped him from the pavement and, like a rainbow, swung him up and over and back into the pavement as hard as I could, before using my force power to "hulk smash" him even further down into street.

Giving it everything I got, I grabbed him with my force power and lifted him a couple feet in the air. I slammed him back down into the concrete and threw him into a nearby collapsed building.

For a moment, I stood there waiting for more, breathing heavily. It was silent again and my powers started to slowly dissipate. The flames on my arms went out and I felt even weaker than before.

Collapsing to one knee I tried to gain back my strength but I couldn't. If he was going to fight, I was going to die. I made my way to the building, following the crater path his body had made when I threw him.

As I entered the hole, he busted through some rubble. His chest pierced by a broken pipe.

Was this it, had I finally beat him?

Suddenly a loud gasp of air came from within his mouth as he tried to maneuver but couldn't. He looked over at me and smiled before his eyes rolled back and his eyelids fluttered rapidly.

His whole body went limp, and I collapsed to my back, watching.

I closed my eyes and...

"Hey Nick! Get up its time for school!"

An adult voice shouted.

Nick looked up from his journal. He had been writing furiously. He looked up at the time. The clock read 7:30. Quickly, he set his pencil down on top of his journal and ran over to his closet to put some clothes on.

In a couple minutes, he was ready for school. He wore his favorite hoodie and jeans.

Grabbing his journal and pencil from off his desk, Nick made his way out of the house and down to the bus stop.

Ready for another day of school



**James Blevins**  
**Editor in Chief**



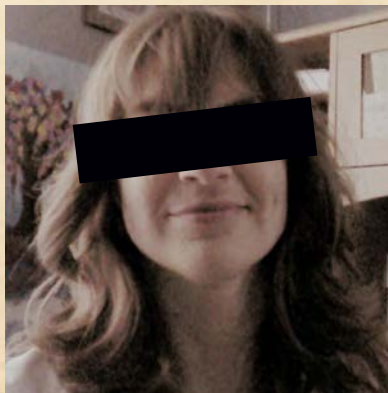
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