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# *Tulsa* **Review**

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## **Masthead**

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Contact us

Tulsa Review, c/o Tulsa Community College

Communications Division, Rm. NE-2389

3727 E. Apache

Tulsa, OK 74115

[tulsaccreview@gmail.com](mailto:tulsaccreview@gmail.com)

Sloan Davis is an Associate Professor of English at Tulsa Community College. He received his BA in English from the State University of New York at Albany, an MA in Literature from the University of Tulsa, where he was a Parriott Fellow, and an MFA in Creative Writing from Wichita State, where he received an MFA Fellow in Fiction. He has had fiction and poetry published in Barnstorm, The Wisconsin Review, The Aroostook Review and other literary journals. He travels often: especially to Ireland.

Bri'ann Piguet is currently attending TCC for an associate of arts in English. She has won the John Philip Sousa Band Award® for outstanding dedication and superior musicianship, and was the president of the National Honor Society in her senior year of high school. She has also written for *The Webster Weekly* as a staff writer while attending Daniel Webster High School, where she graduated in 2013 with honors. Bri'ann is also a published poet and writer through the TCC Metro Campus Writing Center's Rain Poetry Project and the *Tulsa Review*.

Lilly White is currently attending TCC to study Digital Arts and will transfer to University of Arkansas to pursue a degree in Graphic Design this fall 2018 and then obtain her MFA in Design. She is also a board member of the Student Art Association at TCC. She found her love of design and publication through working for her local newspaper, her high school newspaper and yearbook. She also is passionate about Design in Marketing, she studied Marketing for 4 years at Meade County Vocational School and was an active officer of both DECA and FBLA.

Frostie Uhles is a full-time mommy, a part-time student, and a nighttime writer. She's a member of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society and is working toward a Master's in Creative Writing. Words are her passion.

As an English major, Emily Forrest has always enjoyed reading. Partial to classic novels written by women, she wrote her own in high school. Emily enjoys dabbling in poetry, writing academically, and endeavors to bring back the art of letter writing. She plans on graduating from Tulsa Community College in December 2018 and hopes to attend the University of Oklahoma the following fall to pursue a Bachelor's in English, focusing on women and literature.

Laurel Ruskoski graduated from Union High School in 2017 and is now majoring in English at Tcc pursuant to a career in writing and editing because of a lifelong love of the written word. She wanted to become an editor for the Tulsa Review to gain experience in the field of editing.

Hayden Klein is a Fashion/Editorial Photographer and Cinematographer currently based out of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Hayden's photography has been published in fashion publications across the country and he currently shoots for various modeling agencies around the state.

# Table of Contents

---

Poetry Contest Winners pg 5-11

Art Contest Winners pg 12-15

Prose Contest Winners pg 16-33

Prose Submissions pg 34-57

Poetry Submissions pg 58-76

# *Poetry Contest Winners*

## Secrets

This house, with its door  
like the gaping  
maw of something that can't wait to  
swallow you whole and  
chew the bones,  
has decimated my childhood.  
It's been so long I can't  
remember how many times  
I've stuffed myself into  
the crawlspaces  
between other people's teeth-  
or how many pieces I've lost doing it.

I am carving sneer-soaked apologies  
from my chest and putting  
them in frames  
that match the shapes my  
mother's mouth makes  
when she's angry. This is the same  
mouth that tears into my throat  
and guts my ego out on the kitchen  
floor. This is the same mouth that

kisses me goodnight  
and tells me that God  
will always love me.  
Sometimes when I can't  
take it anymore  
I wretch bouts of poetry  
into the bathroom sink  
then dissect them on the back  
porch with my fathers  
pocket knife.

I haven't found what  
I'm looking for yet-  
I've only found metaphors  
and a fear of  
never being good enough that looks  
exactly like my mother and  
a tendency to avoid  
difficult things that has  
hands like my fathers.

Emma Wells -- 1st Place  
Poetry Winner

“Midnight Psalmist”

She is Jazz.

She is the sexy rasp

Under the tongue;

The bass strings thump

Hung lowly over in

Dimly lit rooms.

Her walk is the boom

And the clap

And the boom

And in every room she's in

She paints an atmosphere

That hugs your ears

And you can hear

The fire-lit midnight

Psalmist sound her songs

In the night

While the saxophone

Halls its triplets, in harmony,

Above the sky.



She is Jazz.

A timeless mold

Cast

To show me that

There is so much more

To Love

Than I believed before.

Her speech is smooth

Like a winery's groove

To quick Blues music

While we are are moved

Sipping the sweet juice

Of the fresh fruit

Thar falls from her lips.

She talks with her hips.

And with her sway so sly

And language so clear

She'd have you dancing

If she called you near.

She is Jazz.

She's a classy glass

Of my favorite kind of tea.

And when she dances with me

I all but lose my feet.

She's a little off beat

And ... energetic at times;

A wild child

Whose polyrhythmic schemes

And scattin' off what she means

Take no mind

To those whose minds

Just can't keep up.

She's a tuned temple

Full of sounds and symbols

That catch the ear

And the tongue

And it all feels so sweet.

She is my favorite song.

And I love to keep her

On repeat.

Cornelius Johnson -- 2nd Place  
Poetry Winner

~End

## The Girl is a Gun

I crack my neck and it  
sounds like a gunshot  
There must be gun  
powder in my veins  
And bullets in my bones  
I am a weapon held in the  
hands of a pacifist brain  
I open my mouth and ammuni-  
tion ricochets between my teeth  
Close my lips  
Cease fire  
Put out the flames inside myself  
People would like to use  
me for my power  
But they do not want the ringing  
in their ears that is left behind  
Or the blood on their hands  
in the aftermath  
Switch on the safety  
I am too much  
Do not touch me I might go off  
I am too much

Put down your weapons  
I am too much.

Madison Watson -- 3rd Place  
Poetry Winner

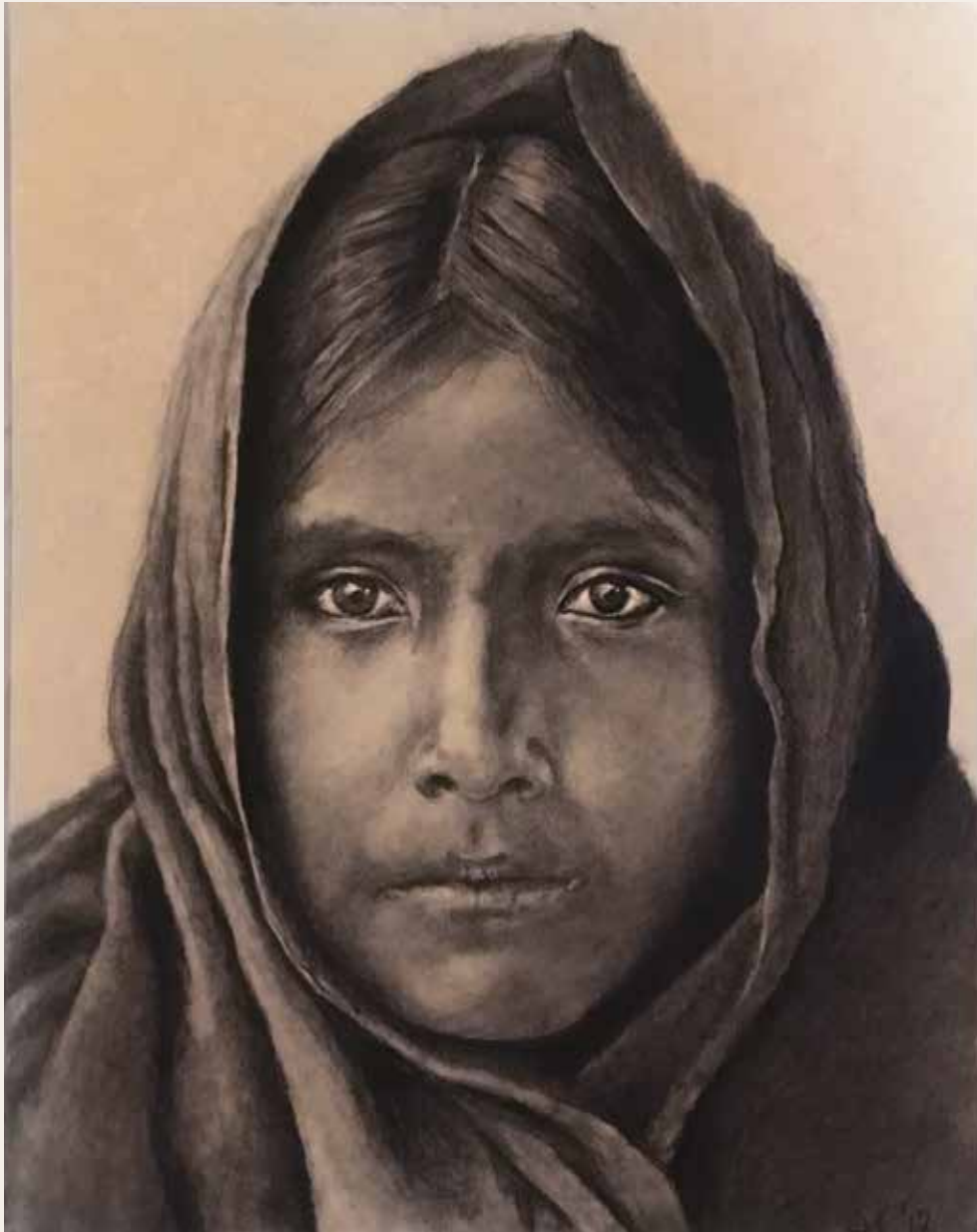
# *Art Contest Winners*



Jordan Sears -- 1st Place Art Winner



Roger Beard -- 2nd Place Art Wnner



Cara Ho -- 3rd Place Art Winner

## *Prose Contest Winners*



## My Sin, My Vow.

I had just walked home from school. I lived in a singlewide manufactured home with my mom and our small trailer park was close to my high school. Salinas wasn't a huge city but my mom could find work here. I dropped my books and papers on the folding table we used as a kitchen table, kicked off my shoes, and stuck my head in the refrigerator, looking for a snack. Nothing good.

I went outside to kick back on the lawn chair on our little patio, and read my homework assignment. The fog was starting to roll in early, so I put on my sweatshirt. I heard the car horn before I saw the car, that old blue Chevy. I watched Bev try to park but she stopped halfway on my little patch of grass called a lawn, and half in the trailer park street, I knew she was drunk or high. Bev and Nicki in the front seat, they just sat, engine running in front of my mom's trailer, I could see the smoke coming out the windows of the Malibu.

Bev was 18, a senior, she had her own car and she was so pretty; her long dark brown hair hung to her waist, the boys watched her walk by and they liked her. Bev picked me to be in her inner circle. I was a skinny 14-year-old freshman and Nicki was in the eighth grade. I darkened my blonde hair to match Bev's dark brown color. Nicki lived across the street from Bev and every morning she would watch Bev come outside, then Nicki changed her clothes to match whatever color Bev was wearing.

Still in stocking feet, I walked to the car, stuck my head in the passenger window, "What's up? Que pasa." I smiled.

"Hey, come on," Nicki said. "We need to talk, something going down."

"I have some guys I want you two to meet," Bev said. She leaned over Nicki, "You can make some fast money. Good money."

"Cool," I said. "I'm in. You know I need it."

"Hurry," Bev said.

I ran back inside, put on my shoes and left a note for my mom. I was moving fast. I didn't want my mom coming home and stopping me. It was already 4:10 and she got off work at 4:00. My note read "Mom. I am with Bev and Nicki. I will be home later. Love you."

Bev was explaining as she drove. She had a friend that we needed to go meet.

I barely listened, I was thinking about making some money.

“Zoe look,” Bev said, snapping my attention back. “I know you, you’ve always been good at pretending, you know acting. I’ve seen you bull-shit your way into so many places. I’m good at forging people’s signatures, but you pretend better. Hell, I’ve been signing as my dad for years. If we work this right we’ll will make some money today. Plus, you are crazy enough to do this.”

“I know this guy, Jorge, he’s sort of a butt-head but not too bad,” Bev said. “He is up for some small stuff, anyway he’s got some woman public defender. When he was meeting with her, he stole her wallet. Jorge has her paycheck right now and he is looking for someone to get it cashed fast. He will split the money with us.”

“What the hell!” Nicki had a look of fear in her eyes.

“Are you kidding me? He stole from his public defender! Hell. He is going down!” My palms were suddenly sweaty and my throat went dry.

“Trust me,” Bev calmly said. “She has no clue. Jorge just did this less than an hour ago. He said she still had to meet with a bunch more guys after him. So if we move fast the money is ours.”

“How did you find out?” I asked. I didn’t back down from anything, but I didn’t want to go to jail. My stomach felt like I had swallowed a rock.

“I was at the courthouse dropping off something for my dad,” Bev said. “Jorge saw me in the parking lot and he used to date my friend from last year. He knows me. I think he is super cute. Anyway, he came running up to me and told me. I told him he was insane, but I knew some girls that would do this. I was talking about you two. You’re not going to let me down are you?”

“If your dad finds out he will kill you Bev,” Nicki said. “Someday he’s going arrest you.”

“What my dad doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” Bev said. “Shut-up, about my dad. Are you in or not? We gotta decide fast. Jorge is looking for anyone who can do this job. He said the paycheck was for over \$2,000.00.”

It had been 90 minutes since Jorge stole the wallet, time was at a premium, we pulled around the back of the courthouse, two guys that I didn’t know got in the back seat with me. Bev and Jorge were doing most of the talking.

“See Jorge,” Bev said. “I told you I knew someone who could pull this off. This Nicki and Zoe, they are crazy enough and good enough to do this. Zoe can bull-shit her way into anyplace.” Jorge sat next to me, he was the shorter of the two, muscled chest and arms, he had a goatee, chiseled jaw,

pretty brown eyes and obviously the plan maker.

"So you pretty young things can keep your mouths shut?" Jorge said. He looked at me and smiled. "How old are you?" Jorge stroked my hair and slid his hand down my neck softly. I guessed he was around 24 -25 or so.

"I don't snitch", I softly said. Now I felt like I swallowed many rocks. The hair on the back of my neck was standing up.

Mike, the taller of the two, thinner than Jorge, his eyes were as dull as dry dirt. He didn't say much, he wasn't as good looking as Jorge, and his skin was sort of yellow; that is bad for a Mexican guy. I knew he was a junkie. I figured these guys were bad news but Bev wanted me to do this, and my mom and me could use the money.

"Well?" Jorge said. "Hurry up man, I don't got all day. This has to happen now, before she finishes her last meet! I wasn't sure you would really show back up so fast so I started lining up someone else just in case you didn't show." He was holding up his cell phone in front of Bev as he spoke. "I should be hearing from them any minute..."

"I'm in!" I said. I blurted it out so fast I startled myself. Then I started acting again, Bev was right, playing the confident was easy: don't talk too much and flirt. Bev didn't understand how or why I had so much street smarts. Those reasons I kept to myself because I would have to dig up too much emotion

"Yea, I young, I'm a minor, so that will be to my advantage if I get caught." Now I put my face close to his and my finger pressed gently on his lips. "But I won't get caught and I don't snitch."

Jorge smiled. "Cool." He kept looking at me.

"Let's see the check," Nicki said. "How much money are you talking about? If Zoe is gonna pull this off, we need everything you got."

Jorge handed the wallet to Nicki. Bev opened it up and started pulling out all of the papers, working fast. Jorge kept watching me. Bev decided which documents I would use. Bev found the woman's signature on a card and Bev had me practice it a few times, focusing on the down-strokes and the top loops in the letters. That way I could sign the check in front of the store clerk. She gave me more tips on matching certain letters. She really was good at forging. Then Bev looked at the check for more details. That's when she realized the actual amount.

"Jorge, this check is for \$1200.00 not \$2,000.00," Bev said. "You ass, you lied!"

"Close enough," Jorge gave a little laugh. "Just do it."

The plan was made. Bev, Nicki and I would go into Perts, its an old grocery store, Perts. I would act like I was the public defender, buying food on the way home from work. Cash the check, and we would split the check. Half of the money the two guys would take, then the other half we three girls would split.

Amazingly this worked. I picked out food that my mom would like because I planned to take the food to her after we were done. The grocery clerk was just a kid from the high school, working after school and didn't care that I didn't have a photo ID, I showed a library card and Social Security card as my ID. I made up some lie to explain it, satisfied as long as I signed the back of the check in front of him, all was cool. I walked out with two bags of food and the balance of the paycheck in cash.

Jorge and Mike were standing outside of Bev's car in the parking lot. I handed the cash to Jorge, as I put the groceries in the trunk of the car. Jorge counted the cash. Handed some money to Bev, gave Bev a quick kiss, then turned and walked off. Jorge was done is less than a minute. As we got back into Bev's car, Nicki grabbed the cash and started counting out the money.

"Hell!" Nicki said. "They took more than half. There is only \$300.00 dollars here! That son-of-a-bitch Jorge lied to us." Nicki threw the money down on the seat, scattering the bills.

"So where is all this big money?" I said. "I risked a lot for just a \$100.00 bucks! Junkie!"

"I can't believe he lied to me," Bev was surprised. "He even asked me out for a date before we went into the store. I thought he was cute and I said yes to the date! I feel like an idiot. What an asshole."

"I'm sorry Zoe," Bev said. Bev had picked up all of the \$20.00 bills. "I got you into this. I'll take less." Bev handed me \$140.00, she handed Nicki \$80.00 and she kept \$80.00. "I know his girlfriend and I'm gonna call her and tell her he is cheating on her. Bastard."

"He ripped us off, but we shouldn't have trusted a junkie" I said. "if we go tell someone to help us get revenge on Jorge, they're just gonna laugh at us for being so stupid." I sat in the back seat and hung my head. I thought I was going to throw-up.

"Face it. We can't tell anyone," I said. "We are screwed."

"We were so stupid," Nicki said. "I thought Jorge was cute and that he liked us. We can't tell people that junkies ripped us off! Let's just go and take

the food to Zoe's mom and figure out how to explain the groceries."

As Bev drove and I sat in silence in the back seat. Nicki and Bev were talking and making plans for a party. We had money now and we could buy beer, tequila, and pot.

My mind wondered. My mom and I live alone and if she had her paycheck stolen we would not eat. I wondered if the public defender had any kids she needed to feed, what if she had to pay rent. I hoped she had a husband that worked and helped her. I tried to remember her name, the public defender. I just took her money, her paycheck and I couldn't remember her name or anything else about her. Just an hour ago I was memorizing her name, her birthday, her address. Now my mind was blank. I just made someone cry.

A salty tear, then another slid down my face. I wiped them quickly. I wanted to go home, but I did not say a word.

I dropped off the groceries on the kitchen table at my house, and my mom was not too happy with me. "Where have you been?" she said. "Where did you get these? Tell me, how did you pay for this!"

"I made some money working for Nicki's dad doing yard work," I lied. "I didn't tell you. I'm sorry. You know we need this food. Dad hasn't given you any money for months." I hated lying to my mom, but I feared her wrath. I also gave her \$60.00 dollars cash.

"Here is what is left," I said. "You know he always overpays me. Nicki's dad is nice." I lied again, now my stomach was in knots, but I pulled it off, I was the great pretender. I turned to leave again, Nicki and Bev were waiting for me in the car.

"Where are you going now?" my mom said. "You do not need to be running around. You need to stay home. You let them lead you around by your nose."

"I know mom, but I gotta go," I said. "I promise to not be out late. Just another hour." I kissed her on the cheek and left.

"How did it go," Nicki asked. "What did you tell her?"

"I lied," I said. "I told her that I had been doing yard work for your dad and he overpaid me on purpose so I bought the food and I gave her \$60.00. I wanted to give it all to her but she wouldn't have believed that! I'm not real sure she believed what I said anyway."

"Yea, Zoe," Bev said. "I knew you could pull it off." She laughed as we drove down the foggy road.

I laughed too I wanted to hide how guilty I felt. My mom had taught me values that she thought were important: not to steal, to be honest to people and to make the best out of bad situations. All my life my mother was at the receiving end of cruel treatment from my dad. She never allowed my dad to change her and become what he was. She was a strong Cherokee Indian woman. My mom was the example of a Christian woman and I had let her down. I had failed and I felt terrible. I silently vowed to never do this again.

I have carried this guilt for many years. I never did anything like that again and I never told my family members.

Inez Estes -- 1st Place Prose Winner



## Junction Elegiac

*To confess wrong without losing rightness:  
 Charity I have had sometimes,  
 I cannot make it flow thru.  
 A little light, like a rushlight  
 to lead back to splendour.  
 -Canto CXVI*

It had to be done. Nerissa stood before me, disbelief foremost on her face. My wife. My best friend. We had come to the precipice. No more vacillation or equivocation. To remain loyal to her would be a betrayal of the self. I could wear no more masks, not tamp down my feelings another day. Though I had come to realize I was practicing a two decade deception, her feelings for me were genuine. She would love me til the end of her days. I would be that spike in her flesh, that ghost in the corners of her vision. She would remember me in all we did and the places we frequented. No—she deserved better than that. It had to be a clean break. Then she could heal, move on. I had to earn her hatred, obliterate all possibility of redemption. A cruelty. A kindness. I only hoped the latter was greater.

It began as an act, and I played the role well. I summoned her upstairs to talk with immaculate calm, but as the argument erupted and deepened into vitriol I found myself not acting but feeling. All the slights and failings of the last twenty years came to light, the barbs digging deeper into me with each new hurt dredged up. Soon true contempt flashed in me as I made my final declaration of intent:

“I’m leaving you.”

“No,” She said, and then again, as if repeating it could make it happen.

“No.” She was trembling like a mouse—like she always did when we fought. It used to make me want to hold her, quiet her, soothe everything away. But now? Now it just made me angrier. Still, I couldn’t show it. I was above that. A long breath steadied my voice and steeled me. “It’s a very simple thing. I’ve grown disinterested.” I was impressed at the smoothness and dispassion I managed to muster. She reared up like a cobra.

“You promised—”

“Anyone can promise anything.”

She was beautiful, once, when we wed, a night that seemed a thousand years distant. We were magnificent then, she a vision in white and I all stately in black. When I parted her veil and kissed her, I thought my heart had swollen so great it must burst. We danced until the night had burned itself past its last embers and rosy day threatened the windows, and as I swirled her round and round we were immortal. There was no world around, only we two. No hurt could ever touch us, no sickness and no sorrow could ever part us.

She was beautiful, once, but her fine features had been turned coarse by the hard years we endured together, her slender waist thickened by age. That which remained to her seemed a mockery now, twisted upon itself in anger, rendered unbearably ugly. I couldn't look at this beast I was once so foolish to call my wife. As I turned away, out of the corner of my eye I saw her rush forward all at once to strike me, embrace me, push me. As she did, her nightgown, the French patterned silk one that I had bought her in happier times, fell open. I couldn't afford it then, not really, but the way she smiled when she opened the box made it all worth it. I had looked into her laughing eyes and known that we could endure the declining wages, the layoffs, the house repairs, the broken-down engines. As long as we had each other, nothing else would matter.

I caught her wrist, turned her away as gently as I could manage. "You're embarrassing yourself," I chided, folding my arms before me. I wanted no more than to be elsewhere. Still, she remained a bitter specter who refused to be exorcised. "I have nothing more to say to you." With a great sob, she threw herself on the bed, ripping at the pillows in a frenzy, repeating herself. "You can't—you can't—" I couldn't help but sneer. She was always like this, when she didn't get her way, but it was tolerable when sugared by the charms that had first won me to her. Yet I couldn't forgive it now. I didn't want to watch this childish display another moment, so I left her there, closed the door gently behind me.

Descending the steps, I first felt a short surge of relief. And then guilt, anger, shame, all in a massive, crushing wave. Disgust followed hard on its heels. How could I have acted like that? All that high-minded sententiousness about necessary cruelty seemed false and ridiculous now. What right had I to prize my happiness above hers? She had done nothing to deserve it. From what black well did I draw up all I said? Were these my true feelings all along? Was even my platonic affection for her another self-deception?

Outside, the planet was in order. It seemed strange, a betrayal.



What right had the universe to continue in its paces when turmoil hung on my heart like iron and disorder reigned in me? A Virginia wind stirred my hair, warm and briny, touched by the sea. The severance I had dreamed of for months was now mine. It should have been an accomplishment, but I had achieved nothing aside from hurting a woman guilty of nothing more than loving me with her whole being. Twenty years I had poured into her, the bright and the bitter. Now, ripped away, there was a great hole howling in my chest. For all our faults, we were the rock we built our lives on. Now that had crumbled. What was I left with? The shadow of a shadow. A pale wax image.

In spite of it all, a sardonic smile wormed its way onto my face. That which I most desired brought me no satisfaction. I do not know if it was hope or fear that propelled me, but I looked behind to find the doorway empty. I had come out only to clear my head, but that refusal to follow after me was a declaration. I resolved myself to exile. The cars in the driveway crouched like oiled panthers. They were twins, sleek black, Mr. Ford's latest. Another of Alex's extravagant gifts. He spent his money with a breathtaking ease that bordered on an effortless arrogance, but I tried not to begrudge him it. He had brought them by to crown the occasion of my naming as Poet Laureate, and Nerissa pretended not to notice his hand creeping dangerously low on my back as we embraced in parting. In the headlights I saw eyes watching me with hunger. They would have to find another morsel. Sparing the house one last look, dampness misted the corners of my vision. I wiped it away angrily and walked, to nowhere and everywhere.

The sun scorched my back. Eventually I found myself in town, though everything in between passed in a gauzy near-narcotic blur. The Greeks had it wrong; the river Styx flows not into Tartarus but onto main street. Charon takes the lampposts as oars to part and stir the endless river of walkers, and those neon signs are guideposts for the damned. The lights flickered in one like a faint heartbeat, and I was the moth moon-eyed before the flame, hungry for shelter. I ducked into a diner, at once a comfort and an act of surrender.

Delving in my pocket, I came up with a crumpled fifty, enough to make me anointed king in this land of the dispirited and dispassionate. I could see it all around me, stories clear in the eyes of the beaten-down heads sunk low over half-empty cups and half-eaten omelets. Those in whom dreams had died ages ago, for whom love was a fanciful idea, who lived their lives on autopilot, who headed south or west or north and came back empty handed and haunted, those who consume, work, spend, die, are buried in silence.

. A nightly funeral feast for those alive in body but dead in spirit. And I the greatest wretch among them.

The booth squealed beneath me as I slid into an open seat, cassock-black vinyl stiff-backed as a judge, unyielding as justice. Cracks spider-webbed its surface like varicose veins, coupled with stains that could not be washed out, standing as sole testament to the lives that had left them behind.

The waitress, when she came, was one of those who lived her life on the wrong side of the tracks and stared bitterly at the unattainable inches away. Resentment soaked her like laundry water. It pooled in her eyes, dripped from her mouth. Suffering had etched early lines into her face, crowding her eyes and the downturned crease edging on her lips. Her lipstick was a smear of red on faded canvas, Christ's blood in the garden, agony against olives. It was almost beatific. Bazzi would have painted her once, transfixed with arrows, eyes upturned to Heaven in spiritual climax as her life spooled out of her.

Though she tried, no force on earth could stamp out all the bitterness in her as we passed the customary initial pleasantries. I ordered toast, an egg, and a cup of coffee. When it came out the mug was chipped and the liquid inside looked more like tar. The toast floated in a thin slick of grease, and the egg was droopy, anemic yellow. I pushed it around listlessly and stared at the table. Encased in glass were advertisements thirty years out of date. I wondered absently if any of them were still in business. If any of them still lived.

An ad for the jeweler down the street dredged up Nerissa's face. How bright her eyes were when we first met, on the beach in Mexico. How I lost myself in them. I was too young to have a name for love, but it washed over me like waves. Every chance I had to slip my parents and kick up sand with her I took. She loved such baubles. Did I ever really love her? Or did I only convince myself I had? My eyes drifted back to the plate. I couldn't stomach it in the fullest of appetites, and I wasn't hungry now. Not for food and not for drink. Something else.

I left it behind, untouched, with the fifty beside it. All the money in the world couldn't soothe my heart, and I had no need of it where I was going. The rain whispered softly as I made my way up to the front, and I felt it mist against my face as I stepped outside, the glass door closing behind me with a self-satisfied click. I hardly noticed it as I lowered my head and walked on.

Highgate Hall lords itself above the rest of the city, as its inhabitants do above mortal men. These spires kiss the stars and scrape the feet of God.

On each side, smaller homes cringe and cower about it like lepers. The great iron gate is as much a barrier as a symbol of exile. It says we are apart, we will not be troubled. The gardens behind it are elegantly manicured but strangely sterile, the flowers and fruits in bloom too perfect. No matter how often I visited it I still felt as one diseased among the pure. I had known Alex since grade school, and always his house had seemed incongruous to him. It should play home to one of those great old men, stern and powerful, dignified in bearing, stiff-backed in Italian suits, white of beard. Yet even deep into our forties, Alex still looked half a boy, dressed in ill-fitting jeans, drank cheap beer, and carried himself like a savage. It was for this I loved him, and this that irritated me.

It was in the expansive parlor, barefoot, the carpet from Istanbul plush beneath my toes, suffuse with light from the great windows, that he first kissed me, and it was in his father's oak-paneled library, under his grandfather's painted eyes, that I deepened our acquaintance in the biblical sense, first joined him to myself. I can remember the smell still: old books, leather, sweat, the whiskey on his breath, our cologne mixed together into something heavy and intoxicating-- honey, tobacco, incense, agarwood. It was greater and more significant than it had ever been when we were boys, fumbling with each other's belts after mass, between classes. It woke something in me, and ever after there was an electric crackle between us. In the late afternoon sun, as he slept pressed against me with his face a mask of satisfaction, I ran my fingers over the fine hair that thatched his belly and knew I was lost. The language of my body said for me what I did not have the words or courage to speak aloud.

Though we hadn't spoken in a year by Nerissa's demand I still had a spare key, and the gate swung open with that half-whispered oiled whine it always had. The cobblestone path was immaculate as ever, and it seemed my boots fell heavily on it for a mile before I reached the facade. On my first visit here I found it imposing, and even now there was something unsettling about those great columns, unbroken white. The feet of something unspeakable. I could imagine myself at a Bacchan portico, inside the dancers swirling, mouths stained with blood and wine.

It was here his mother had greeted me with a smile that did not reach her eyes and a coterie of servants, decades prior, the first time my father broke my arm and tossed me out and I ran to Alex for sanctuary. I could never forget her gaze. Her eyes flayed my skin bare, dug into my soul, and under

them I was an insect, pinned and wriggling. In her old-fashioned dress and perfect hair she may as well have been robed in iron. And in her eyes was the judgment of heaven – for daring to be as I am, for presuming to come here, for corrupting her son. All this went unsaid. The look was enough. Subjected to it I felt the weight of my mediocrity, of my parents' middling occupations, of the cars we drove from breakdown to breakdown, the hole in the roof we never had the money to patch. Three hundred years of good breeding and seven generations of prosperity lent her the gravity and certainty of a deity. Though I became a more and more frequent visitor her estimation of me never improved. And so, I was caught between my father's hands and her eyes, uncertain which was worse. She made it clear to me again and again that she bore my intrusion into her carefully cultivated world only for Alex's sake.

It was here too I had sat with Alex and his sisters and a pitcher of lemonade on a hundred summer days, the sun on our backs and the future limitless in front of us. The cold old bitch was dead, now, and his sisters had all married and gone, taken husbands and raised their whelps. There was only Alex left, Alex who unlike me was wise enough to stay a lifelong bachelor. I felt sweat prick my scalp as I raised a hand to the heavy lion-headed knocker.

It took time for him to get to the door, time enough for me to consider leaving twice. I had settled on the notion and was pivoted halfway on my foot when it opened. Turning back, it was like that year had been a day. A giant grin lay brave and true on his face, heartbreaking in its honesty as he swept me up in a bear hug. I felt as small as frightened as when we were young, and I looked to him to be protected from my tormentors. It would have been so easy to collapse against his warmth, into the strength of his arms, and sob into his shoulder. But I didn't. I couldn't let myself. I only let it linger a moment longer than necessary and extricated myself.

"So," He began in his bluff baritone. "The bitch finally let you go?"

I was surprised at the instant anger I felt, defensive on her behalf. "Don't. That woman doesn't deserve a bad word."

He looked surprised for a moment, then snorted. "What, in love with her again?"

"Don't—damnit, Alex." I folded my arms against my chest. "She's had enough. What I did to her, what I said to her—it was enough. Leave it alone."

"Whatever you did, she deserved it."

"She didn't. But the alternative wasn't any kinder." I wasn't certain which of

us I was trying to justify it to. “We were living a farce, and—”

He laughed, good humored. “And she thought she was in a romance.”

“Something like that. But you shouldn’t be so flippant about it.”

Derision curled his lip. “Where’s all this coming from?

You weren’t so ready to lift a sword in defense of her

honor when you were trading her bed for mine.”

“I’ve been scourging myself for that tenfold. You don’t need to remind me.”

The irritation must have flashed in my eyes, because he

sighed and settled down. “What the fuck am I saying?

I’m sorry. I’ve just been—it’s been lonely here.”

The simple truth of what I said next swelled in me. “I missed

you too. It’s been too long. I shouldn’t have —”

“You shouldn’t have,” He agreed. “But you’re here now.

Everything’s alright again. I’m glad you’re back. Real

glad. Come in. You want something to drink?”

“Brandy,” I answered as I followed him inside. All was as it had been years ago—the same paintings on the walls, the same pictures on the mantel.

Even one of him and I, in our graduation gowns. His mother had wanted me out of the photograph, but he was firm. He pressed an elegant cut crystal glass into my hand and refilled it every time it threatened to go empty. It, as with everything in the house, was of the finest quality, and I could feel the complex flavors swirling on my tongue, warmth settling on me as we slid into reminiscence. The better portion of the school year we spent in detention together in eighth grade. Getting ludicrously drunk on our first beers in Prague. Our vagrant months in Dusseldorf. The cigarette-laced days working as models for half-lunatic artists in Berlin. Watching the ships come in to Tangiers as we sat on the docks in a haze of opium, sipping mint tea.

His voice became a constant, pleasant hum as the evening wore on, lulling me into half-listening. It was always so easy with him.

Regret tempered my contentment. I should never have let that week deepen into a month, then a year. Eventually we shifted to espresso, and it was only halfway through my cup that I realized the topic had changed. Alex’s eyes were fixed on me, intent. As I turned my face



towards his, he seemed to repeat what I hadn't caught. "What are we?" A laugh bubbled up out of me, half hysterical. "You couldn't wait a day?" "I've waited twenty years." He shook his head, pressing on, and repeated himself, firmer. "What are we?"

"I think you know," I returned, gently.

"I don't know." He set his jaw stubbornly. "Yeah, we fucked. A lot. But what's that? A few minutes of grunting and sweating, then it's over. It's nothing. Did it mean something?"

My answer came quick, almost unbidden. "It meant something."

"Then what? What did it mean?" He was leaning towards me, his gaze holding me in place. "Do you love me, Sebastian?"

Did I? Could I? It would have been so easy to say yes, to wake up with him the next morning, and every morning to come. But half my hair was grey. I would be forty-eight in the fall. Was it too late to start a new life? Too late to wash out all the pain I had caused? Could I ever be healed? I weighed my words carefully, thought of Nerissa and looked at Alex in front of me. The past behind, the future before. One word. That was all I said. All that needed to be said. All that could be said.

"Yes."

Let those I love try to forgive what I have made.

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement.*

*-Burnt Norton*

John Powell -- 2nd Place Prose  
Winner

## A Man Changed My Life for the Better

I was in love. Everything was perfect. I had my best friend and my true love in one person. I had everything. That's what he told me. He told me how wonderful I had it, and, you know what? I believed him. I always listened to him well. I always did as I was told. I only spoke when spoken to.

Until I didn't.

I saw the news stories, the online articles, the Facebook posts of people running away, of people escaping their relationships.

Relationships like ours.

He told me those women were wrong. They were leaving the men who truly loved them. They were stupid and vile and no one will ever want a woman who acts like them. I believed him.

Until I didn't.

It took just one night. One argument. One last blow to make me realize I needed to escape. I needed to run away. I needed to be one of the women who was finally free of the pain and suffering of being with a man like him.

I left.

I was free for almost a year. I started to make friends and have happy moments that were truly really happy. Then I got one text. The life I had just begun to embrace was pushed away.

"I'm sorry."

I believed him. I forgave him.

Then my scars burned. And my head hurt. And my heart raced. And I couldn't take it anymore. My phone dropped. My body fell beneath me and I collapsed. I couldn't cry. I couldn't speak. I could see his hand. His arm. His muscles hurling them towards my body. My sides hurt.

All I could hear was his voice, and I heard the words I heard so many times,

"I'm sorry."

I hadn't told anyone. I didn't let anyone know what happened, and I didn't ask for help until after that moment. That moment I was laying on the ground helpless by his words alone.

That man changed my life for the better. I now know how I should be treated.

Like a human.

Sophia Gilstrap -- 3rd Place Prose  
Winner



# *Prose Submissions*

Question: What does it feel like to lose someone you love?

Answer: Like loving for a long time. Like teeth filed sharp for a long time. A lump in your throat you can't swallow down. Choking on your own breath every time you try to talk about it. Laughing for a long time then no laughter at all. Pressed flowers inside an old textbook. Wilted rose petals and dandelion fluff stuck to the elbows of my sweaters. Dirt on my hands from digging my fingers in the dirt. Foggy rides home. Bright skies and dark eyes, laying in the damp grass for what feels like months because I can't seem to make myself get up. Wishes on birthday candles, on Christmas, on 11:11, on falling stars that just turn out to be airplanes. Wishes that never work but that I keep wishing anyways. Feeling like you're drowning, shaking fingers tucked around coffee mugs. Hopefulness. Anger. Betrayal, denial, apathy. Always apathy. Always at the end. Always the worst part. Cathedral music. In one ear and out the other. "Oh, I'm so sorry for your loss" stop talking about it already, you're bringing everybody down. "You take as much time as you need" you should be over this by now. Slammed doors and tight-lipped smiles. Feeling so alone at times it just makes sense. Therapy, therapy, therapy. Orderlies in white coats and paper mache smiles. Fractured egos and mommas not the perfect person you thought she was, little girl. Feeling abandoned. Alone. A hurt that quiets down but never really leaves you. Loving for a long time, always loving. Slowly. Healing slowly but healing. Learning what it feels like to smile again, to laugh again and mean it. Going out with friends,

going out with family, being able to be in the same room as people again. Some days I still feel like folding in on myself, crumpling up like a paper swan that just missed the right fold. But I'm learning. But I'm growing. But I'm learning the meaning of catharsis and how it applies to me. But I'm learning how to love flowers again and now everything seems just a little bit brighter. But I'm healing. I'm healing.

By - Emma Wells



Artwork by: Roger Beard

#### 4 O'clock Final

Through the darkness, my eyes followed the morning dew clinging to the thin jacket of a stranger. The light from the lamp posts emitted a halo as he passed under them, blurring the night. The man hurried along, head down and cautious; it was 4 am, after all. The sun had yet to rise, and everything was tinted blue.

It wasn't long until he disappeared behind a building and out of sight. I was alone again.

For over an hour, I've sat here and stared at the moon, waiting. For what, I did not know, however, the moon had made its way toward the horizon, becoming dull and faint. It gazed tiredly into the atmosphere, ready to fall. It looked out of place, hanging in the sky with nothing to anchor it, and I began to wonder why people consider it beautiful. Many love songs are written because of the moon's allure, yet I have to understand why. It is nothing but a ball of dust floating in outer space.

Yes, it is the brightest light in the darkness, yet lifeless. At times, it is absent to illuminate the night, nor is the light it's own. At an age where neon signs ablaze, it is the only guide.

There was a time where the night sky was anything but dark. Along with the moon, the stars shone. They were more beautiful than anything, threading space together. Now everything is black.

Searching for the stars, I found myself staring into brown eyes. The smell of coffee and old books filled my nostrils. In tattered jeans to my left, sat a smile I had forgotten.

It was her; an old friend.

I remember when she told me that stars burned endlessly, shining just so their light will eventually be seen. That they are always there, no matter how light or dark the sky.



She didn't know she was also like that.

We were both students when I met her. She had brown ringlets that grazed her shoulder and brown eyes that weren't the prettiest but warm enough to look into. We met in the dark, bumping into each other falling into a heap. She looked at me and laughed. It was one of those that laugh so full of life that I couldn't help but join in.

After that night, we became familiar and inseparable. Our time together consisted of long walks near roaring waters and whispers through quilted blankets. She was fond of books and coffee; liked soft music and old things, but more so she loved the stars.

We would spend nights looking up at the sky until the sun rose to paint and I was entranced by her and what she saw in the world. She became more than just an accident. In her compassion, I found my brilliance. She guided me through the night with hands like the wind to help me capture my dreams.

She was beautiful. At times, she shone so brightly that I forgot about the night. But like the phases of the moon, the joy that we felt in that short time began to wane.

Her brown eyes that I grew accustomed to was losing its warmth, and she lost that laughter I never found in anyone else. She ripped herself from me when I saw what she drew on her skin: vivid lines that are as deeply embedded in my memory as her skin. I no longer saw her after that. I was scared and confused. The girl I cherished and adored was gone.

I tried to light a candle for us to find a way, but It wasn't bright enough. I tried becoming the moon, but I was bound to the Earth. That light that shone brightly began to diminish. Even through tears and blood nothing blazed like the soul I once saw. The void could not be filled. Little by little, the stars began disappearing until all the stars had been ripped from her skies.

Alas, I reached out to grabbed her hand once more. Her voice, a mingle of sadness and love, sang the moon goodbye. The lights in her eyes faded and, in the distance, a star collapsed.

All became black.

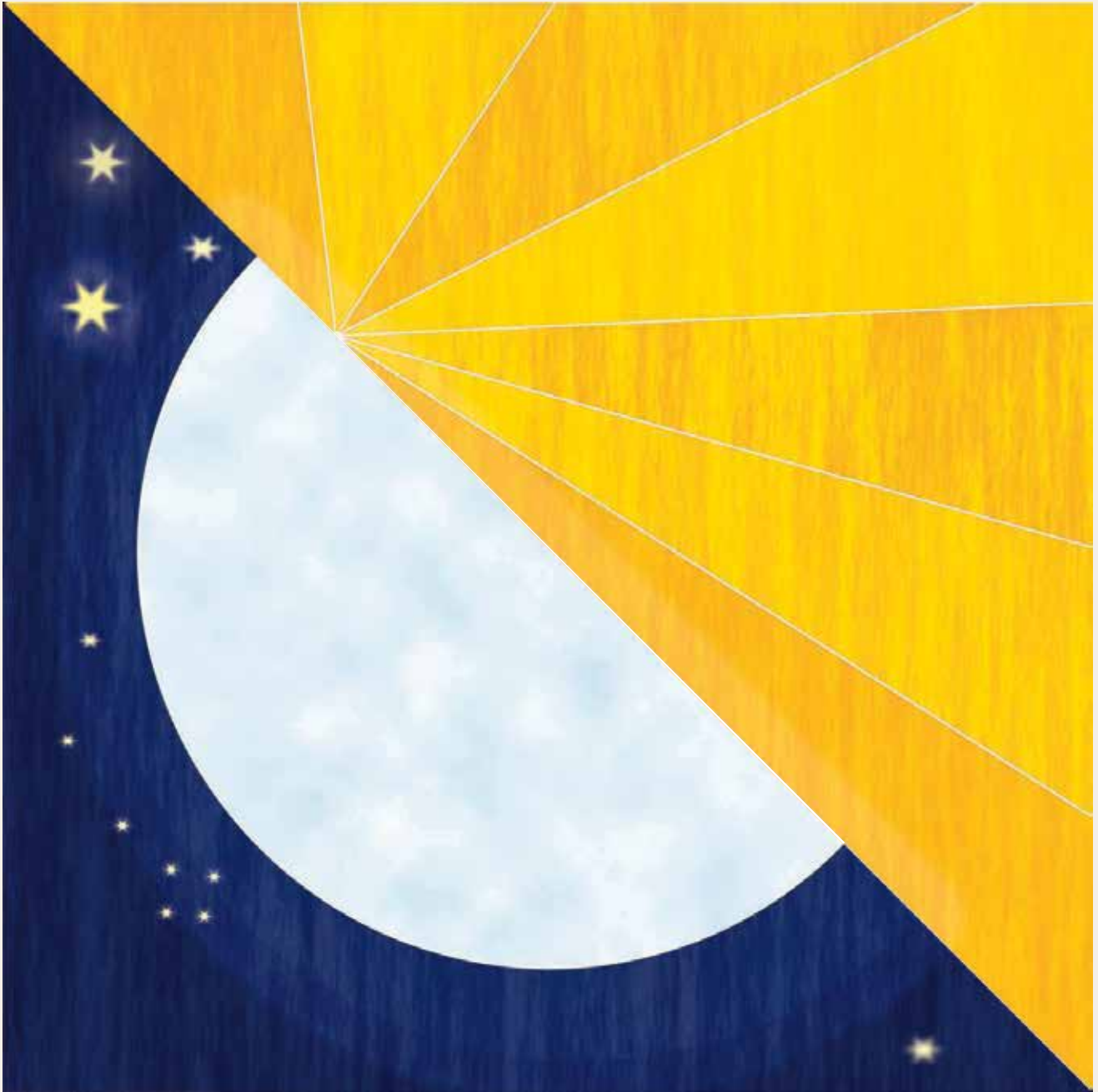
Seasons have changed, and here I am still looking at the sky. The moon tried illuminating the darkness by itself, but everything is changing. I am walking the paths we once took in different shoes, the river roaring in my ear.

Time has passed as always and leaving me behind. I too must go. But it's alright, my friend. They are back, not as bright as before, but the stars have returned. They are slowly growing back to life, accompanying the lonely satellite to sleep.

Soon the clock will hit 5:00. With the birds, I will welcome the dawn. The scarlet morning will wash away the darkness, but I will never forget you.

Friends are like stars, after all.

By - Lena Yang



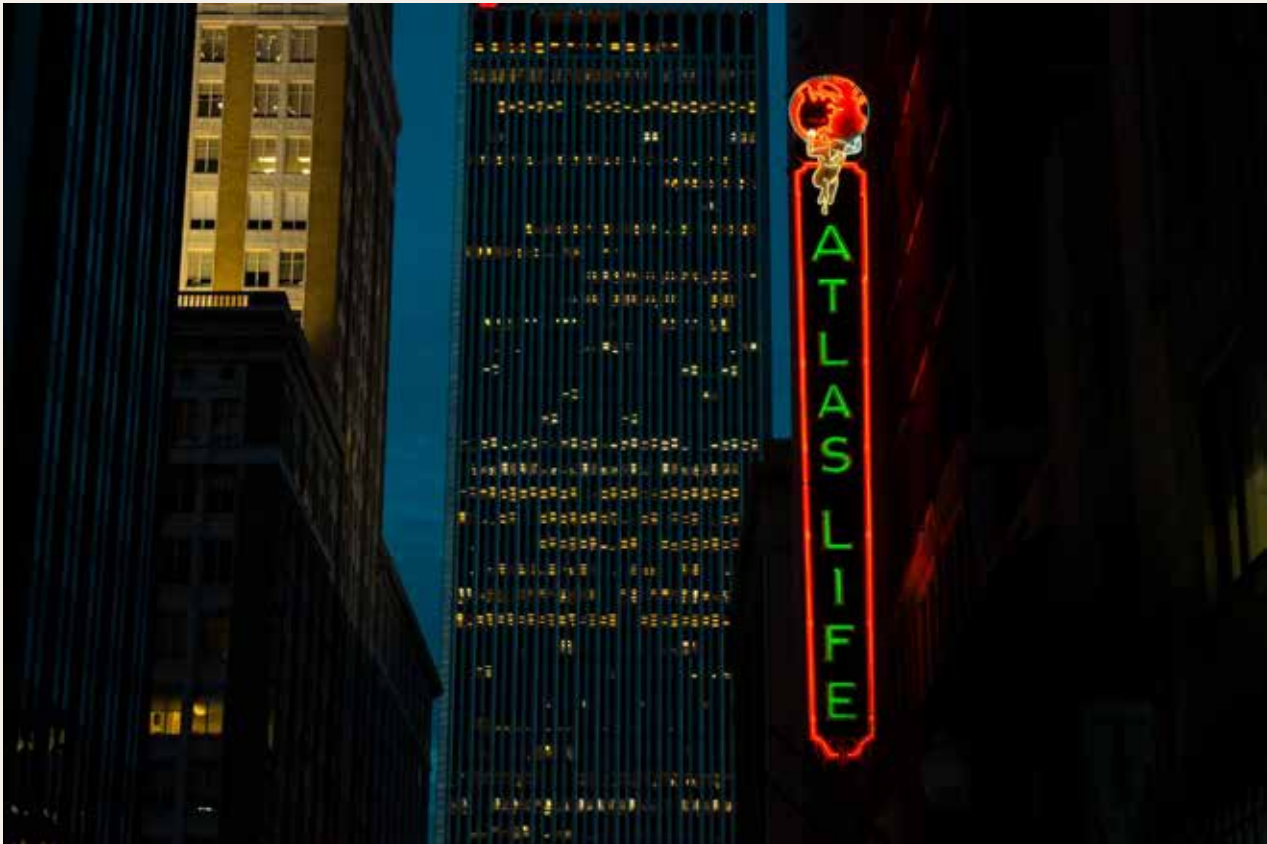
Artwork by: Debbie Rowland



## View from a Window

Outside, the cars pass by in irregular rows. It doesn't matter whether they're going home or to the office, to meet lovers or friends, out to eat or out to shop. All that matters is that they are going. The roads are arteries that flow between us all. This is our modern medicine – acrylic and oil the balm for all mortal wounds. So long as I drive I remain, and with a full tank the world lies spread open before me. By night the lights all meld into a low buzzing blur behind, and until the sun presents itself I am untouchable. The road winds on ahead forever.

By - John Powell



Artwork by: Aly Zetah



Artwork by: Cara Ho



Artwork by: Jordan Sears

## Sleeping Between the Bears

It was their first day together since the judge ordered them apart. Royce had picked him up around eleven from the boy's grandfather's in East Tulsa, then pulled into a McDonald's drive-thru on the highway south for lunch. But Denny would not eat. The boy wasn't shy about his aversion to being here, and Royce, deciding the boy had seen enough punishment lately, let him do as he pleased. Royce balanced his own cheeseburgers on a thigh as he guided the pickup down the road, glancing every so often in the side mirror at the small aluminum camper bouncing behind them.

The land here before the foothills of the Arkansas Ouachitas was still flat, but beginning now to run occasionally into shallow brown hills of prairie grass or rough inclines where the granite pushed a few feet up from the earth. When he had finished the burgers, Royce lit a cigarette, opened his window, and rested an arm on the rubber sill. The hot wind moved the hair on his forearm in rapid little circles; it was not yet June, but the temperature was already in the nineties. He looked across the cab at Denny, who sat cupping his chin in his fist, reading an Incredible Hulk pulled from a stack of comic books in his backpack.

"Want to roll your window down?" Royce asked. "It's a real heater today." Denny had dressed himself in a T-shirt, hiking shorts and a pair of hiking boots Royce had bought him especially for the trip. He rolled the window crank and the cross draft whipped through the cab.

"Hey!" Royce raised his voice above the wind. "I spent nearly every Memorial Day out here when I was a kid. Did you know that?"

"No," Denny said, gazing out the window. He was a chubby nine-year-old, with pale skin and thin, sandy hair in need of a cut.

"Sure did. Your granddad—my dad, not your Big Pop—was stationed at an airfield outside Muskogee, back down the road from here. I think it's a landfill or something now. He brought your uncles and me down here on the weekends to hike and fish all over the Ouachita River. It was really tranquil."

"What's tranquil?" Denny said.

"It means peaceful," Royce said. Then, having said the word, he realized the oddness of it. The fishing pool itself was tranquil to him, if only because the old man didn't actually occupy Royce's memory of it—he'd simply left

the boys there to souse himself in privacy further down the creek—and the pool was what Royce wanted Denny to see. But peace wasn't a concept he often applied to dealings with the old man. His father had sought it, maybe, with a poor compass, one that stranded him in a rough country of rage and violence long before he could arrive at anything like peace. When he died, he'd passed on no real material inheritance to Royce, but how surely he'd passed on his two greatest sins: a weakness for drink and that same devilish temper. Both had guided Royce the night at Big Pop's—two and half years ago, when Denny was six—guided him to jail, guided him away from Aileen, guided him away from their son.

The pickup's engine balked, and Royce shoved at the stick until the gear caught and it evened out again. "It was really uninhabited back then," he said. "No one around but the bass and the bears."

Denny brushed the hair from his eyes. "Actual bears?"

The kid was finally being a good sport. Royce exhaled smoke through his nostrils and threw the last of his cigarette out the window. "Sure as candy. Wild bears, not like in the zoo. This whole country used to be filled with bears, before the mountain men killed them to make room for the pioneers. Black Bears, Plains Grizzlies. From way north in Canada all the way down here, and west into New Mexico. Can you imagine that? Bears in the desert?"

"I guess not," Denny said.

Royce took another cigarette from a pack above the sun visor, checking the camper again in the rearview. He had worked hard to pay for it, holding down a job mining limestone long enough to save the money, and he had worked hard to make something new of himself in the last year, too. If Aileen could see him now, she wouldn't know him. The thought of his ex-wife brought a hollow, anxious feeling; she and her mother had been killed in a pickup accident just two weeks before, leaving only Royce standing between the boy and orphanhood. He felt the responsibility of that hang on him like a lead weight. But he was determined to show the boy something special on this trip into the Ouachitas, something that might heal the wound between them.

"The Indians, though, they lived in harmony with the bears," Royce said, bringing a lighter up to his cigarette. The wind snuffed the flame before it caught. "They thought the bear came from heaven to guard the



woods. And the Great Spirit gave the bear all the fish he could eat as payment. But the bear's spirit was kept safe in heaven, you see, which makes the bear magic. You can still see his spirit in the stars. What the white man calls the Big Dipper, the Indians called the Bear."

"I know the Big Dipper," Denny said.

"Then you've seen the Bear, if you've seen the Big Dipper." Royce fought again to light his cigarette against the wind, with no luck. "Bet you didn't know you were looking at a bear's spirit, did you?"

"I guess not," Denny said. "I'd want to see an actual bear. I would live in harmony with it."

"I bet you would," Royce said. He shook the lighter in his fist. "Well, buck this piece. Hey, want to hold the wheel for me?"

"Me?" Denny said.

"You, sure."

"How?"

"Like this." Royce guided Denny's hand onto the steering wheel. "That's it. Just keep us straight in between the lines."

Denny's fingers gripped the wheel, and he lifted his head high to see over the dash and beyond the hood of the truck. Royce looked away from the road and leaned below the window, making his fist into an O around the tip of his cigarette and the lighter. Just as the flame caught the truck jolted up hard beneath him, knocking the lit cigarette from his mouth onto the seat, where it lodged right beneath Royce's crotch. He jerked upright and saw they were on the shoulder, the strong wind of the exposed highway pushing them into the ditch. He cried out, fingers scrambling beneath him for the cigarette, until his thumb came down squarely on top of it and sent a sharp bolt of pain shooting up his arm.

"Left!" Royce shouted.

Denny jerked the wheel hard. The camper began to jack-knife, tires squealing like some furious bird flying behind them. In the corner of his vision, Royce caught its shape disappearing from the rearview as it swung out and around on the ball hitch. His fingers, finally, latched onto the unlit end of the cigarette as his other hand found the wheel, and he steered them back into the lane a second before the truck left the pavement on the opposite side of the highway.

Then Denny started to cry.

Royce's spirit fell. "It's all right now," he said, and patted the boy on top of his foot. He felt like a fool, believing he could pull off this trip. "I'm sorry," he said. "Let's forget that, okay? Let's just forget that happened, okay Denny?"

They drove for a long time in the wind without talking. Royce stared out the big windshield of the truck as larger hills came up in the distance. Soon, he turned the truck east onto the forest highway and the road began to rise. There was a smell like smoke in the air from someone burning brush nearby, and beneath that the green, bittersweet scent of pines coming in thick alongside the road.

The campsite sat snug inside an elbow of the Ouachita River. It was hidden at the end of a long, rutted dirt road, isolated enough that no other Memorial Day vacationers were in sight. A trailhead led out from the far corner, disappearing between the river and the trees climbing the short slope of the hillside. Royce pulled the camper onto a patch of dead grass near a blackened fire pit, and then he and the boy stepped from the truck. He found himself surprisingly pleased the spot had remained as secret as it had been so many years before; it seemed exactly the same, but for absence of the old man's pickup, parked where his own was now. Stretching his legs after the drive, the enthusiasm Royce had lost on the highway began to return somewhat. He had imagined Denny's first entry into the woods since Big Pop called to suggest the trip, a few days after Royce had heard about Aileen's accident. Big Pop was a decent man to think of the boy and his father. Royce tried to rouse a good mood in himself again.

"This is just about what the first mountain men saw when they arrived," he said, gesturing in a circle to the woods around them. He watched as Denny examined the surrounding trees. "Yep. No highways, no office buildings. Just about like this."

Smiling uncertainly, Royce checked the supplies in his pack and replaced the comic books from Denny's pack with a new raincoat and a water bottle. He led the boy to the edge of the camp and helped him choose a long, straight branch for use as a walking stick. Then Royce pulled from his pocket a small silver bell, which hung from a length of red string.

"To let the gentleman of the local bear consortium know we're stepping out for the afternoon," Royce said, tying the bell tightly to the top of the stick.



make some noise so you don't surprise them. 'Don't get up, gentlemen, we're only passing through.'"

"I don't want to go," Denny said, staring at his feet.

"What do you mean you don't want to go?" Royce said.

"I don't. I'm tired."

"You should have eaten something," Royce said, adjusting Denny's backpack for him. "Come on now. Want to see a bear, don't you? Sure. Stand up straight now."

Denny straightened. Royce looked him over and nodded to himself, then shouldered his own pack. They started up the trail, Royce leading the way, the little bell ringing brightly above Denny's head.

Even beside the river, the hot afternoon air was stifling. The trail led up over the low hills, following their crests above the water, and Denny worked to keep up with Royce's pace along the path. Stopping here and there, Royce pointed out slingworm nests in the branches of the trees, or pulled Denny close to him, his finger stretched from the boy's nose, sighting a cottonmouth lazing in a streak of sunlight across the trail ahead of them. Denny looked on, leaning against the walking stick like a subway rider against a pole. After they had walked a good distance, the grade of the hills leveled out and they came to a clearing where to one side of the trail a large, smooth boulder jutted out from the trees. Royce stopped once more, bent over at the waist, and slapped his thighs with satisfaction. He smiled at the boy.

Denny sat down on the boulder, his expression dull. His hair, wet with perspiration, splayed messily across his forehead.

Royce studied him. "A glacier carried that very rock you're sitting on, you know," he said. "It took maybe ten thousand years to move that rock just about one foot. Can you believe that?"

Denny kicked at a thumb-sized stone packed into the hard dirt at his feet. Royce stopped smiling and stared down to the river below.

"Now you know what I almost forgot?" Royce said. "I can't believe I almost forgot it, but there I go. I almost forgot to show you the best trick a mountain man can ever know."

Denny freed the stone from the dirt and rolled it around with the toe of his boot.

"Now what did I do with it?" Royce flashed Denny a nervous grin and pat-

patted his hands across his shirt's breast pockets, watching the boy's face. "Hold on, now, hold on. I know it's around here some place."

He reached into the front pocket of his jeans and pulled his hand back, closed tight. He waved his fist through the air with a flourish, like a magician finishing a trick. Then Royce opened his palm toward Denny. Sitting in it were two nickels.

"Now I know what you're thinking. What can a mountain man do with two nickels, right? I'll show you. You have to be very quiet, but I'll show you. Can you be very quiet?"

Denny kicked the stone to the far side of the trail.

"Come on, Denny," Royce said.

The boy settled himself against the rock. Royce took a nickel in each hand and, crouching next to Denny, peered out from the clearing as if he were searching for something among the trees. He began to saw the edge of one nickel across the surface of the other. As he did, he scanned the woods in a slow circle around them. Finally, his eyes fixed on a thick copse of ferns at the clearing's edge.

"Look," Royce whispered.

Denny followed his gaze. At the foot of the ferns, two red squirrels poked their heads cautiously from the underbrush. After a half-minute more of the sound, a third squirrel appeared a few feet away.

"It's a decoy," Royce whispered. "Back when the mountain men hunted squirrel meat. They called it squawk hunting. That sound is just exactly like the sound other squirrels make cutting nuts. And here they come inviting themselves to dinner, you see?" At the sound of Royce's voice the squirrels darted back into the brush and were gone. He set the nickels proudly on a flat section of the rock beside the boy. "Want to try it?"

"No," Denny said. He leaned forward and put his hands on his knees.

Royce realized his lips were moving soundlessly, as he thought of something to say. They felt like two motors idling without words to push them into gear. He pursed them.

"All right," Royce said. "But say 'no thank you.'"

"Okay," Denny said.

"Say it. Say it now. Say 'no thank you.'"

Denny stared at Royce. Royce glared down at him, jaw set forward.

Denny stood up and took a step backward, holding the walking stick between his own body and Royce's. The little bell clinked softly against the wood.

"I just don't want to—"

"Just say it, goddamn it. Work with me here, goddamn it."

Denny's fingers clinched the stick. For a moment, a confused expression flashed over his face and he looked to Royce as if he were about to ask a question. Then his eyes grew large and his lips curled away from his teeth. He raised the stick above his head and brought it down hard across the top of the big rock. He brought it down over and over again, as if he were trying to break the stone itself, until the stick splintered in two. The bell broke free of the string and sailed into the brush below them on the hillside. When he was done, the tears mixed with the sweat on his face and he did not look at Royce. Instead, Denny turned and ran back down the trail, fists pumping, backpack swinging side-to-side behind him. Royce, silent, watched him go. Then he looked once up the trail toward the fishing pool, and followed.

But the boy was gone. Walking a hundred yards or so, Royce came to a fork in the trail and felt a sudden panic; he knew the way by heart—the northern branch led to their camp, but the southern wound directly away from it, following the riverbank—and he didn't know if Denny would remember the way back having walked it only once. Royce didn't know, in fact, if the boy intended to go back to camp at all. They had walked a good mile or so into the woods. He stood at the fork listening to the rush of whitewater in the valley below, then stepped quickly down the southern trail toward it. It was a dangerous sound and a comforting one. Both at once.

And then he was thinking about floating in the pool.

There were four of them in all, the brothers. The pool was given to Royce, the oldest, in a kind of system the old man had developed. The rest were tied further down the Ouachita according to age. He used lengths of manila rope—one end attached to the trunk of a tree high above the steep side of the creek bank, the other to the ankle of each boy and above their gaiters—tied in a complicated overhand knot that was nearly impossible to undo once the fibers had swelled with water. When he returned to free them after nightfall, unsteady on his feet, he had to cut the knot in half

with the long blade of his pocketknife. The system kept them separated, silent, and stationed where the old man could find them again.

Royce felt only numbness at this part of the memory—what he knew some would call cruelty, or that harder word, which was more difficult to reconcile with his feelings: abuse. But another part of the memory was good: on those hot evenings, when the fishing was done and the sun had set but the old man hadn't yet returned, Royce learned to position himself with his tied ankle closest to shore—and to float for hours on his back in the shallow water. And when the stars came out, reflecting in the pool's still surface, it was as if he were floating in the stars themselves. Lying there in complete stillness, except perhaps for the fish, if any had come in, whipping in the basket at his side. The fish tied to Royce, Royce tied to the shore.

He came to the Ouachita's bank and waded into the water past his knees, until he could see a half-mile down its bank in both directions. There was no trace of the boy, which, unless Denny had fallen in, was a good sign. Royce crawled back up the trail, toward the northern fork, and camp.

That sensation of stillness in the pool had terrified and exhilarated him. At twelve, Royce had thought it was perhaps how death would feel, when it came. And yes, sometimes, especially in the drinking days, he had wished for that feeling to take him, permanently. But despite his self-destructions, that had not happened. He was not the dead parent now. That was Aileen.

The last time he saw her had been the night at Big Pop's. Aileen had packed Denny into the hatchback of the yellow Datsun and abandoned their little trailer, and Royce, forever. Royce, nearly too loaded to track her taillights, followed her to her father's house. As she pulled into Pop's driveway, Royce took the truck headlong into the lawn, trying to cut her off from the front door. When the pickup vaulted the curb, his head connected with the doorframe; Royce sat for a moment in the cab, dazed, blood running into his eye from a deep gash on the bridge of his nose.

After that, the memory was only fragments: bluish exhaust drifting through the headlights as they lit the front windows of the house....Aileen scrambling from the Datsun, pulling Denny by the hand as they dashed toward the porch...Royce's own hand grabbing for the pistol behind the

seat...and then the reports, which had, mercifully, resulted in harm to no one. Big Pop rushing at him from the porch, the taste of grass and earth in Royce's mouth as the big man held him down.

Then, waking in the cell the next morning, a sick feeling inside of him that was not just the hangover. It was the knowledge that everything had gone irrevocably wrong.

But he had really been chasing Denny. True, the drunken, wrathful part of him—his father's part—wanted to deny her winning the boy. But something else only wanted to keep Denny from disappearing. It was the better part of him, Royce hoped; the same part that was chasing Denny down the trail now, the part trying to figure a way free of the situation in which he had tied himself, this time, starting that night at Big Pop's. Because was there a possibility anyone else would free him? No. There was no possibility of that. This was the true cruelty, Royce thought, the correct definition of abuse: you can be corrupted by another person, as his father had corrupted him, but you are alone in setting yourself right again. The world can hurt you, but you must heal yourself. It seemed to him as if a stitch had been skipped somewhere, a mistake in the laws of human experience.

He wanted a drink. He wanted to fight against it all. And he wanted to set things right with himself and Denny. But those actions did not—could not—exist together.

Royce realized he was nearly running down the trail toward camp. With the back of his wrist he wiped his brow, damp with perspiration. He was caught between the ruin of the past and the setting right, and he did not know how to get the rest of way there. He felt the familiar terror of floating in the pool, and, with no one to cut him loose, he thought he might feel it forever.

The sun had almost set as Royce pushed through the last brambles at the trailhead. Looking around the site and finding it empty, he thought for a moment Denny had become lost in the woods somewhere, that he would have to search for the boy in the dark. Then a flash of movement above the camper caught his eye—and there was Denny, sitting on top of it. The last sunlight turned the aluminum roof a deep orange all around him.

Royce set his backpack against one of the camper's tires and climbed the little ladder to the roof. He raised his head slowly over the lip and



found Denny sitting cross-legged, watching him. There were dried, dirty tracks on his cheeks from the tears. Royce pulled himself the rest of the way up and crawled awkwardly across the surface to Denny.

He had no idea what to say to make the boy okay. He was afraid any word might start him crying again. But he couldn't let him be disrespectful, no matter how great his suffering was over losing Aileen and his grandmother, couldn't let him have that power.

They would never get anywhere, if he did. At last Royce said, cautiously, "You can't run off from me like that, do you hear?"

Denny, picking at the lace of a hiking boot, said nothing. But he didn't start crying, either.

Royce kept going. "It's a hard place I've put us into, and an even harder place for you, right now," he said. "I'm sorry for it. But that's where we are. I'd like to run away myself, I suppose. But it's only going to make things harder if we do that. So we're stuck with each other. Do you understand me?"

This time Denny nodded. "Yes," he said.

"As long as I don't run away from you, you can't run away from me, either," Royce said. "Is that a deal?"

Denny brushed his hair from his eyes and looked up at Royce. "All right," he said.

Royce breathed a sigh of relief. "All right," he said. "Well, this was some kind of an idea. Some kind of an idea, sure." He shook his head and slapped at some mud from the wet cuff of his pant leg. "You okay?"

Denny shrugged his shoulders. "I sat up here awhile. This place is... tranquil."

Royce laughed. "Okay. Tranquil. Sure." He stretched his palms flat onto the roof.

"Let's just—hell, I don't know. I just don't know." He scratched his chin.

"Do you want me to take you back to Big Pop's?"

Denny thought for a moment. "No, I don't."

Royce was thankful for that. "How about dinner?"

Denny leaned over the lip of the camper. Then he looked up at the sky, which was darkening quickly now. "Can we eat up here?" he said.

"Where?" Royce said. "On the roof?"

"I don't want to see a bear anymore, if one comes."

"You scared?"

"A little," Denny said. "We can't see the stars inside the camper, anyway. We could sleep up here, for tonight. We could sleep in the camper tomorrow."

"All right," Royce said. He climbed back down the ladder and collected their sleeping bags from the camper, then took some bread, apples and cheese from his backpack. He passed everything up to Denny, then climbed up again and unrolled the sleeping bags side-by-side. He took out his pocketknife and started slicing the apples and cheese, and gave the slices to the boy.

Between bites, Denny looked up at the sky again. "How can a bear live with his body down here and his spirit up there?" he said.

"Well, I don't know," Royce said, finishing the slicing and folding away his pocketknife. He put his arms behind him and leaned back, surveying the woods. "Maybe we'll get an idea tonight. We'll be sleeping somewhere between, up here on the roof."

Denny thought for a moment, holding an apple slice to the corner of his mouth. Then he said, "That's good to think about. It's nice to think about us being up here, like that. Don't you like thinking of it like that?"

"Sure," Royce said. But he suddenly realized he was very tired of thinking about everything, in general. He closed his eyes and tried to make himself think of nothing at all, feeling only the cold, hard shell of the camper beneath his legs and the palms of his hands. It lasted just a moment, but in that moment Royce felt as if nothing bad was certain. Not for him, and not for Denny. He felt as if everything could be okay. He opened his eyes again. "Sure," he repeated. "Let's just think about that. Let's not think about anything else, for tonight."

"All right," Denny said.

After dinner, they lay with their backs flat on the roof, staring up at the night sky. The first stars faded in from the east above the river, and then the Bear came out. When it did, Denny, his stomach full, had already rolled over onto his arm and fallen asleep. Royce lay still, listening to him



breathe, smelling the scent of the boy's body next to him. He raised an index finger in the air and traced, once, something like a bear into the lines of the constellation, then closed his eyes, too.

By - Josh Parish



Artwork by: Aly Zetah

# *Poetry Submissions*

Rise.

Swallow the sunlight  
and let its shine  
reek out of your skin

tenderly  
dropping the hints  
of how strong  
your bones have become

By - Yashi Srivastava



Artwork by: Cornelius Johnson

## Narcissus Pseudonarcissus

Ensconced in terra firma,  
awaiting the tilt and light  
that can render November's  
defeat.

Their dormancy appears  
eternal, unable to be roused  
by change in season or by  
apocalypse.

Yet, malachite fingers erupt  
over the penetrable crust  
surveying then settling like  
nomads.

They lapse into earthly songs  
writhing to wind and rain  
to empower their fleeting  
nature.

The golden daffodils arrive  
in the space you chose for them.  
We know the sentiments they  
bear.

The unsightly bulbs interred  
with your wavering soul, so when  
your body ceased, you'd still  
exist.

By - Maria Harris



Artwork by: Audrey McCormick



“Violin”

I hum and dance, as I strum the violin  
Wielding the bow, the thoughts creep in  
They hide in between  
They remain unseen  
So, I serenade the world into oblivion

By - Alvin Broadnax

A Heartfelt Haiku

My heart beats quickly  
No ear can hear it quiver  
Still, they know my fear

By - Sydney Pittsinger



Artwork by: Carson Rhodes

## Talking to the Moon

His ribs have been  
pried open and  
his heart scooped out and  
swallowed whole  
but it's still beating somewhere inside his  
hollowed out chest.  
He has bruises on top of his bruises;  
bruises like craters.  
Footprints left behind  
in those  
sunken in places, those  
hollowed out bones, those-

Silver hands, silver lips,  
silver heart.  
Loving like the dark,  
soft places of the earth  
where nobody's ever been.  
Loving like he's not  
already dead, like he's not  
already made out of  
dead things, like he's not  
already dying.

When he cries he glows and I feel so...  
wrong.

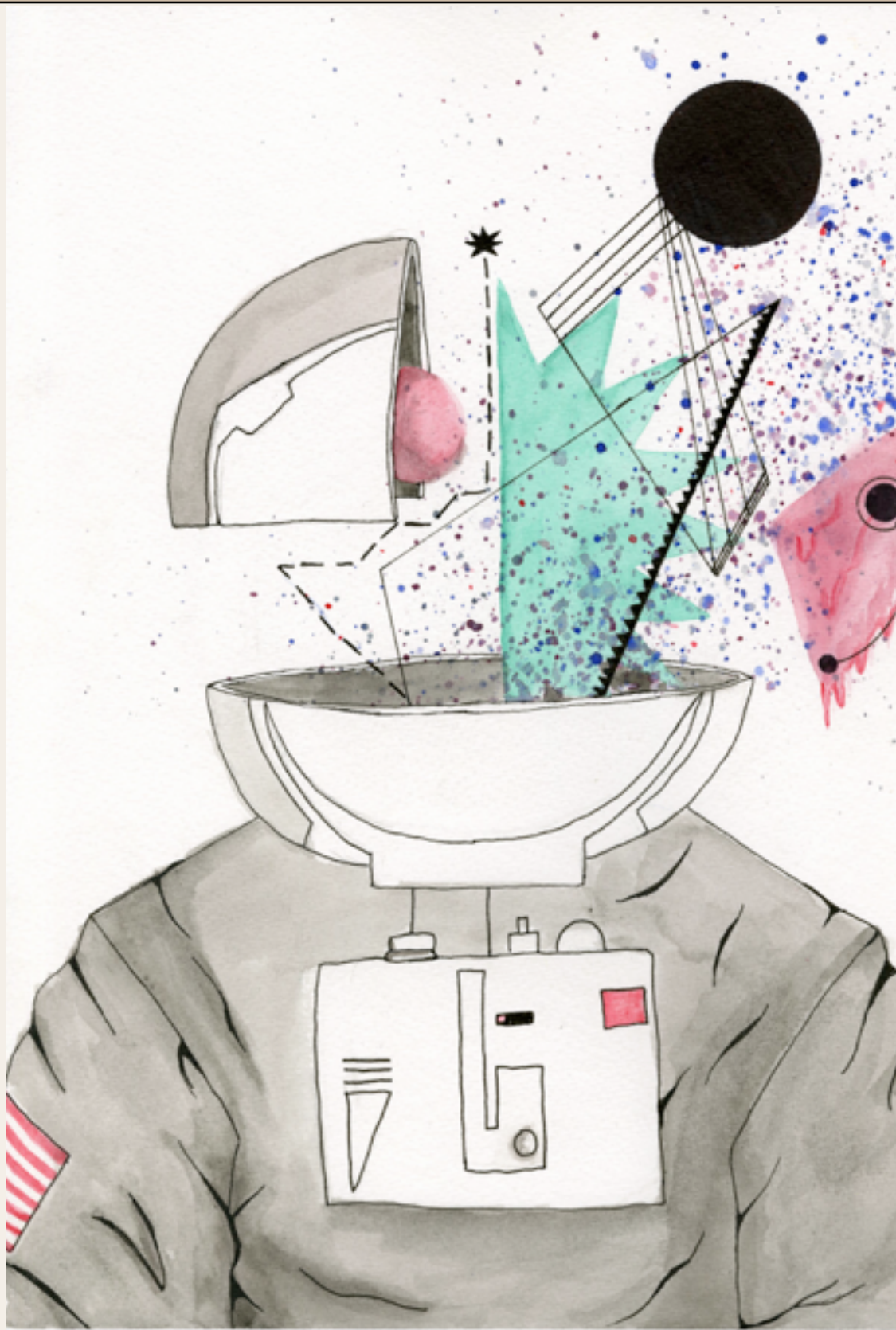
I feel wrong and ugly for thinking  
that he's so pretty when he cries  
but oh, he is.

I want to kiss the crumbling  
from his jaw.

I want to kiss the aching  
from his fingers.  
He is my lover,  
my friend,  
my little tin soldier.

He tries to touch the Earth  
like he belongs here  
and I don't have the heart to tell him  
that he doesn't.

By - Emma Wells



Artwork by: Audrey McCormick

Dust shift and hawk cry—  
Dull arches of reddened clay,  
like claws on the plain.

By - Cimarron



## Forgive Me

“Forgive me,  
but I am out of practice.  
You see,  
I’ve forgotten what it’s like  
to have a hand to hold,  
or arms to be surrounded by.  
I’ve forgotten what it’s like  
to have lips pressed against mine,  
or what it means to be open with someone.  
I’ve forgotten what it’s like to feel;  
This heart pounding, palm sweating,  
head spinning feeling  
that is both old and new.  
Old because about three years ago  
I swore I felt it then,  
but that love wasn’t really love.  
It was manipulation and frustration,  
tears and anger, no ——— it was rage.  
Rage as sharp as the blade  
I used on my skin  
because his words really did  
cut deep.  
Out of the darkness I picked myself up,  
dusted myself off,  
and grew.  
Like a bird released from its cage  
I spread my wings and was made new.  
So forgive me if I seem distant,  
as if I don’t want this,  
but I’ve only just begun  
repairing myself.”

By - Megan Stevenson



Artwork by: Piper Hopkins

## Understanding

“We have both been hurt.

Bruised and broken,

Shaken and shattered,

Worn and left weary.

But oh how beautiful it is,

This silent promise

We have made,

To never break

But to build.”

By - Megan Stevenson



Artwork by: Roger Beard

Loafing in the Garden  
Hungry in the spring I sit  
Here, amongst the flowers.

Winter and you:  
a distant memory.

By - John Powell

## Weaponless Battle

### Stage 1

In preparation for surgery,  
Your sculpted profile points toward  
The brightly lighted ceiling of the operating room.  
I bend at the waist to hear your steady breath.  
I am reminded of Della Quercia in Lucca  
And his deceased Illaria del Carretto  
Who rests on a smooth stone couch.  
She faces the muted frescoes painted in the tondo.  
Before you are pushed away from me,  
I feel the cool serenity of your folded hands  
Over your feminine abdomen.  
Hers were posed identically, but in death.  
Delicately chiseled in marble.

### Stage 2

Flat in repose in the darkness of chemo,  
Your immobility is heavy.  
You must shuffle to move.  
You must lean on me  
As I will one day lean on you.  
So unlike the celebratory Cumbian swivel of youthful hips  
On your twenty-first in Havana.

I must help you grasp a mug.  
Not at all the angled, bent back fingers of my classical Cambodian dancer.  
You must call for me to come.  
But I am not far.

### Stage 3

You are targeted precisely with a tattoo by the radiologist  
Which allows him to become a daily marksman, a skilled archer  
Who carefully aims this brutal blast at the tiny blue dot  
Which was carefully injected to mark the spot of entry.  
A deep bull's eye.

### Stage 4

With radiation I think of a tanner preparing hides.  
Your alabaster skin which once sprang back  
From an affectionate pinch or a longed-for caress,  
Now feels nothing.  
In evolutionary terms,  
You are closer to a tiny gecko or prehistoric gator  
Which proudly flaunts a patterned, impenetrable skin.  
A dark skin which was seared by an unforgiving heat.

Pamela Chew





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