

the SLIGGO
Journal
of Arts & Letters

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Poetry

Frisco Fat

by Livia Abramoff

Winner of the 2015 Ventura Valdez English Poetry Contest

No one ever took a tomato juice bath.
No skunks, no possums,
Except when they're dead.
My mother a liar,
And I, a down stench.
I've hung up the future,
To star in a war.

Sat—between me and myself.
Still—as a figure, a shelf.
I perform, I'm leisure—in the right clasp.
I twirl, I titter—I purge out shelled men.

The bile in waves of frantic flit days.
Arm over, sprawled out, but balanced in hand:
There are one enough gamines and shimmering heads.

I whip my eyes 'round,
Plant my palms in the sand,
As if he could see me,
Let them lunge—let them bend.
The ground paints my palm print,
My knees buckle and land,
When I regain my grounding, I lift up my head.
An allowance—my eyes clear,
I open my lips: here I am, crooned,
Strung and kept—to his lungs in the sand.

I watch for composure,
At his face: a baby's laugh.
I thumb down the likeness,
To suck the sting back.

Like a beached blonde child, who's avoided the land,
To let my pulse fall: I'll breathe slowly, I'll breathe hardly,

And I'll tick where I've been.

But I wake up—Sat strung
In a surrounded red tub
My lungs are alive
And swollen with pride
My fists pound out ripples,
“I wanted to die.”

Olit ESP
by Charles Deutsch



Sons of Son

by Jonathan Avila

I drop bombs that blow
through the rings of sunflowers,
turning each petal into a memory,
I track forward reliving the momentous
occasion when my optics tick back the clock

once in a while, I awake in sweat and tears,
for some reason picking at my ears, only to find sand

the more I search my chest begins to pound
as the sound of humming birds synchronized in
orbit absorb my attention, only to be blind sided
by an offensive lineman

It zips and zaps, etching my helmet's symbol into my forehead
tethering my body to a sorry ass spick that couldn't stand on
his feet when a team needed a brother

I feel as if my memories are nothing
but pin needles of the truth to façade the pain
from days when sunflowers died on
summer days and the sun showed no life for a son

no need for a father they said no need for a mother
to attend your first trombone recital because idle
moments compared to keeping a roof over my head trumps
a young boy's first memories of life

I drop bombs that blow through rings of sunflowers
turning each petal into a memory
only to be left with seeds of sunflowers

Confession

by Alex Barringer

I want to be like the peony
Self-absorbed and on my own
No outer recourse
No intercourse—
I'm tired of the whole routine
The Repetition
Comfortable in naked skin
Yet
I fear the end
The lack of meaning
The task of cleaning
The unfelt feelings
No
I want to be unsullied
Unattached
Unruled by my hormones
Able to truly see
And be in the sunlight
Unfettered
Among the other animals
And the breeze
And then one day
I'll die as I bloom
I'll die.
What better life?

The needle

by Alex Barringer

the needle. C o l d. demanding. S o c I o p a t h I c. unrelenting.
i n v I s I b l e scars. d I s t r u s t your own s k I n, protecting. distrust
every t h I n g . this N E E D L E that breaks into your skin and is p u s h e d
I N by Y O U. satisfying some masochistic goal tearing your self-respect.

the needle . b r e a k s. into. the. soul. breaks the barrier. the will. breaks.
morals have been captured. yet you don't know. P A R A L Y Z E D. a brain
that trusts your decision paralyzed. self deceit. justification. disillusionment.
delusions. d r u g – I n d u c e d.

the needle. is like religion — without a bible. demonic. has taken over. a
p a r t of me, the P R I D E of me. i discovered the secret — when i was
sixteen. a p o r t a l w o m b you CAN'T ESCAPE once you've been
through...

the needle. i'm so u n c l e a n. self-destructive. i could n e v e r
come clean.you're your own greatest enemy. your soul is sick from weaning.
you broke your s o u l A G A I N...(n u m b e d) ... you MURDERED your
only friend. this remote death gives me life (deluded). the end.

My thoughts keep me up at night

by Patrice Belton

Honorable Mention 2015 Ventura Valdez English Poetry Contest

The words unspoken in my mind every day
what I could have said, what I should have said,
lay in the treasure chest behind my tongue.

They whisper at the foot of my bed
burn through the holes in my skin
and travel through the shadows

swaying left and right, back and forth
in between my dreams and my nightmares
devouring their beliefs that lead nowhere
to the deposition that they seek

My thoughts
take form into arguments, when discussed
form into good or bad, when told
form into the hero or the protagonist, when personified

Fully formed
the abstract existing in surrealism
the human in between the angels and the demons
lurking at midnight and shining in the brightest of daylight
neither black or white, but gray, and never boring

Abeyance

by Grace Cavalieri

Reckoning of days ago—

Reliable memory—

There's no one to see it anyway. What am I afraid of—

When we leave our remembering— where will it go—

The waking image, the unspeakable, the vexed, the shimmer—

All that a marriage was—

A breeze carrying the prefiguring water of insight

Out to the sea, out to the sea, Dear Drift,

I don't remember how I knew the deepening love,

Subjectivity of expression, the desolation of the prairie rabbit

Until the horizon and the ocean became one and then the sky

And the ocean turned pink. And speaking of anger if

The ocean were not calm we would not have seen it coming

In our slow moving boat.

Wilted Rose
by Tiffani Gomez



Tripe

by Grace Cavalieri

My Aunt Mamie bought it from the Italian store,
A block of papier-mâché-meat, wavy too,
Then she plopped it on the board and got the weapons out,
Here's to the art of disintegration,
She starts with this,
The flesh dismembered from its skin,
A knife cut down horizontal lines,
Leaving strips of weeping meat,
"The lining of a cow's stomach,"
My father said, with bright anticipation.
"Florence is famous for this,"
From the city of saints and golden domes,
This wiggling mass, now
Laid in disarray, pieces,
Splayed across the table,
Scored three times across,
With blades, sharp, then salt,
Rubbed onto flesh,
From outside she brought in herbs,
Torn from limb, which ripped from earth lay,
Broken by their branches, near the vine,
In this way she made an odd and pleased,
Ritual from what was lost or killed,
To feed our leisured meal,
And slowly in the pot, tomatoes,
Cut and slipped of time,
The stuff moved to steam, sublime,
Flavor somehow like all else saved
By change to change again, better than it was
Before its end, mutilated images,
Streaming together now. Cooked 5 hours.
TRIPE.

Work Calendar

by Teri Ellen Cross Davis

As easy as I swipe the dry eraser
the board is clean, white— gone is the day
your dad died. February spills in, fills
candy hearts with sayings replacing
the Christmas card you will never send him,
the presents you will never give or receive again.

You approach this Christmas slow. The roads to you,
once familiar to me, I travel on slowly now,
your grief a black ice. How I wish for snow

to bury your hurt clean
and take the bite out of the air.

Sixteen

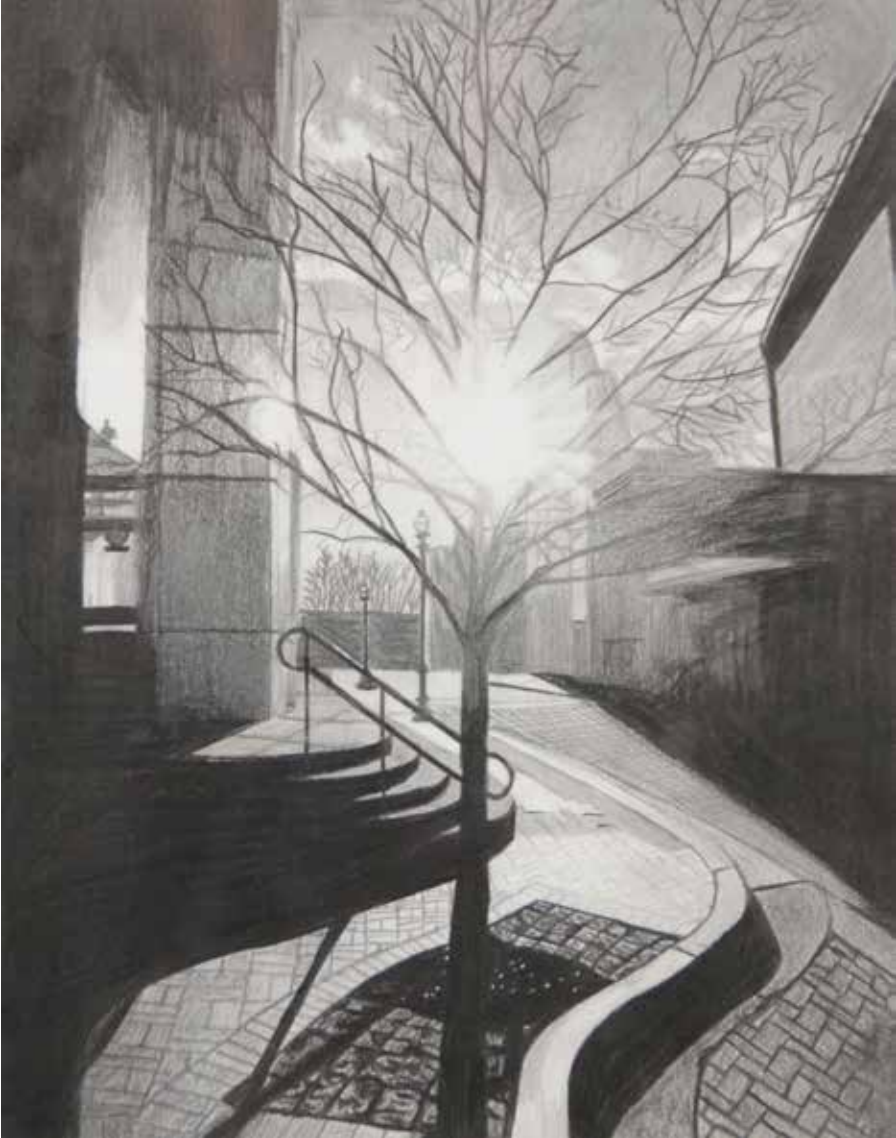
by Teri Ellen Cross Davis

I was green.
A tendril reaching
for the weak sun
of early spring.
I wanted laughter,
a male's gaze
to frame a love
worth believing,
but I was wet
still forming.
So the bustle
continued, faces
passing. I thought
my want a curing
a purity that would
redeem me. I was foolish
in this and all things.

after [poets are bad for the economy] by Mark Saba
by Anya Higman

living off the beat, too often frowned upon
finish school, get a job, a wife, a house, a kid
maybe that's not for you
save your money, see the world, come back and save again
maybe that's for you
or don't come back, stay a while, stray from the beaten path
don't be a gear in the machine
your purpose to feed the economy
you have a lifetime to build a life that's hard to get away from
don't settle down and follow suit just because that's what's expected
explore your world and take your time
enjoy your precious freedom

A Sunset's Evening
by Betzaida Nolasco



After the Fire, Bone

by Richard Lorr

Looking at this piece of bone, not quite the purest white:
Striated, odorless, fire cleansed. In its fragile hollows,
Tiny streaks, light vanilla stains where her hearty
Marrow might have been, the urgent music of her youth.

Bone should be hard, should endure, but draw too close to
Touch this mute, bitter piece of life, and seeming solid bone
Becomes soft talcum, formless, like some deep memories that
Once recalled change their content, colors, shapes and speech.

Softer than the sand on ocean fronts where she took her
Family, teaching her sons the love of pulsing waves, the
Acrid smell of salt, her bones then as now not strong enough
To change our angry, mad rivalries, our unsheathed fists.

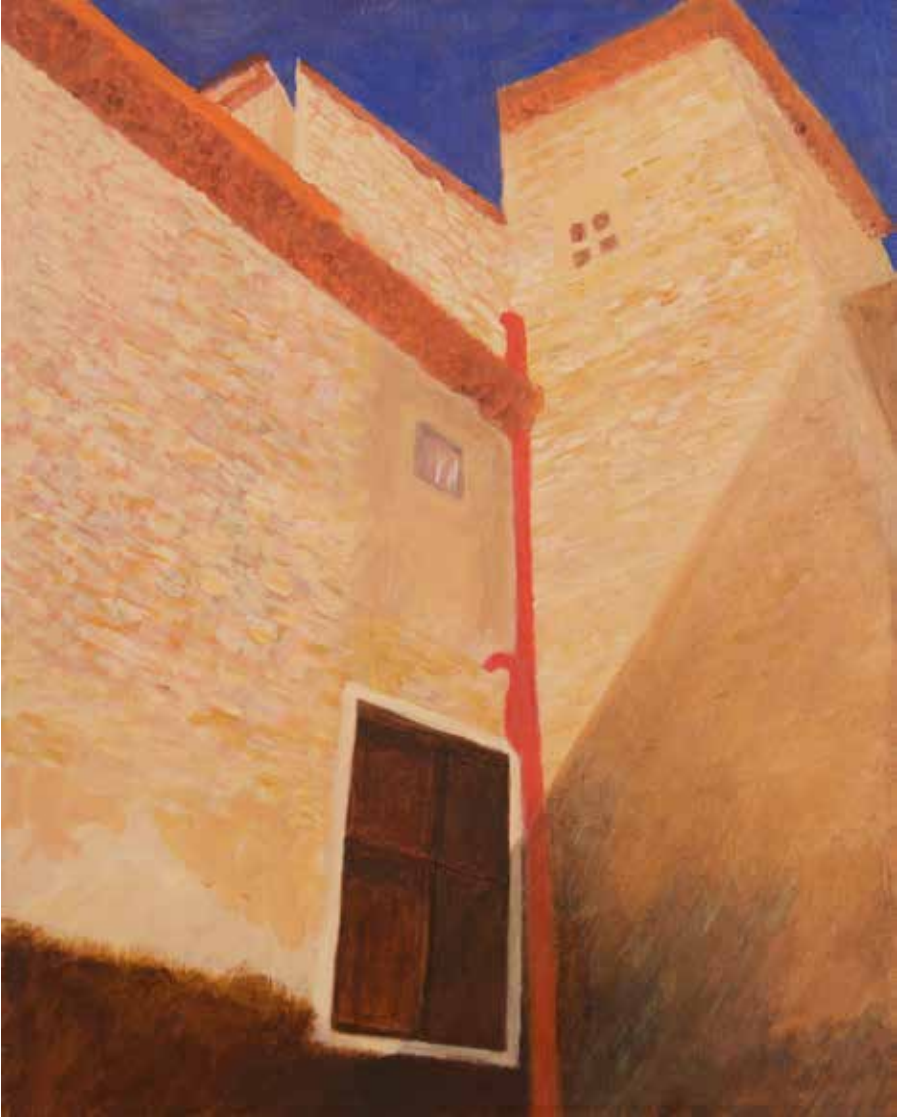
And now, I go to my only brother, the one with white grizzled hair,
And softly say, good that you are here, softly rest my hand on his
Arm, fearing the loss of my memories, of my right to rage,
Fearing that, under my gentle touch, he too will turn to dust.

Generations Ago

by Richard Lorr

Long ago loose in a field like untethered dogs, they
Long ago paused in a sea of sweet smelling mud like
Long ago butterfat, flooding under their toes, not far
From the high hemlocks, rooted like taciturn priests
Long-guarding their own profit and personal prayers.
Long ago, they dreamt of mothers dressed in warm
Flannels holding their children like treasured dolls
Instead of martinis and bourbons and dry red wine.
Long ago in the slurry, naked and pale, in the bright
Long ago sun, itching and burning, they rolled over
The hardest stones into the unstoppable flow of their
Lives. Long ago too, they started to dream of blistered
Black feet, long ago children standing in seas of foul
Smelling dirt, photos of black men rope hung or tarred,
Napalm flames, orange plumes eating the skin. Long
Ago, had sex in the dark and then in the day, took
Their long ago drugs, flew out of windows crashing
Their bones. Long ago chanted Hell No, We Won't,
Long stood their ground or fled the country away,
Rode buses of change long ago South, marched their
Marches, and blew themselves up into leaders, the
Hopeful, the dead. Sometimes caught, empowered or
Jailed, sometimes put into comas by proud medical men.
And almost as long ago, so quick was the change, went
Back to school, took jobs of authority, children and wives,
And long worked at hoeing and plowing their own chosen
Fields until aged, like herbs on the sill and dried by the sun,
Started to dream of being wild children again, of playing
Like dogs in the sweet pudding mud, while much of the
World was long ago baked by the hottest of suns into syrian rubble and blood.

Un Vieux Bâtiment à Privas
by Richard Lorr



death

by Osee Obaonrin

we all suffer from the same affliction
it conjugates our brains
our thoughts shift from one another
so as not to think of our new other
there is a silence that we share
it penetrates our soul so deep
we cry to break it
it saturates the darkness
of our sleep
our conversations
dialogues
personal monologues
lectures
and seminars
it touches everything but our thoughts
we zoom
all together
in all different directions
we web away from each other
but we know
where our center lies
and we wonder if it lies
does life lie
are we a lie
what truths do we hold to be self-evident
our sense of self has been
pulverized
so we hug
just trying to hold everything together
maybe mold something half as good
or just as good as what we thought we were
and as we all suffer from the same affliction
we heal differently

differently in time
differently alone
differently together
but we've learned a new word
in the vocabulary of life
a term that is not a question
but an inevitable
and we've learned its true
definition:
it is not a statement of being,
but rather an affliction of the living
an inanimate suffering

this is us

by Osee Obaonrin

it is for the lives of the leaders of our loved ones
we are here

it is beautiful out there
we are here

lime stoned bricks of time pave nothing
but a loss to nature

the moon
every night is large beyond the mountains

undeniably

you wish you were there
we are here
the tags all over the lines of red
screaming know me
hear me
know your injustices
and love me

you wish you were them
we are us

those who get up each day eager for the news
willing

those who don't need afternoon naps
to feel part whole

and have always
and will always
love what they love

you wish you were them
we are us

you wish you were them we are us
the people who can share glances of amusement
with strangers on the metro
about the men drunkenly dancing to the hate
or the love music in their heart
and those people who know
those moments will not be
the warmest connection of their day

you desperately wish
pray
you were them

wish you were in their state of mind

but we are here
and we are us

and to break from the family of the dark and twisted
is far too difficult
and far too enjoyable

that is what we say
and what we choose to believe

Zombies

by Osee Ohaonrin

you lost so much time
and there's not enough to come
to claim
the memories of what
you've lost

fatigue can do things to you
blur things for you

you saw them speak to you
and the water of their words
flowed down your robes
your senses wearing rain boots
the emptiness of a mind
filling in your mind
over brimming into your movements
your brain has forgotten
to regulate your movements
and so your eyes
stare blank
and your legs
move methodically

you could be a zombie
but your brain is working too hard
and you wish
that a zombie would
eat your brain

Salvaje Amanecer

Winner of the 2015 Ventura Valdez Spanish Poetry Contest

by René Pedraza del Prado

Despierto sin haber dormido
Sombra larga de una luna negra
Arrastro mi alma casi muerta
Masticada y escupida amargura
Asesinado por los traidores de la luz
A esta hora llegan arrepentidas
Las misericordias dulces de tu perdón
Y se fugan como palomas sin alas
Huyendo el grito verde del vidrio roto
En mi espejo cristalino poblado de fantasmas

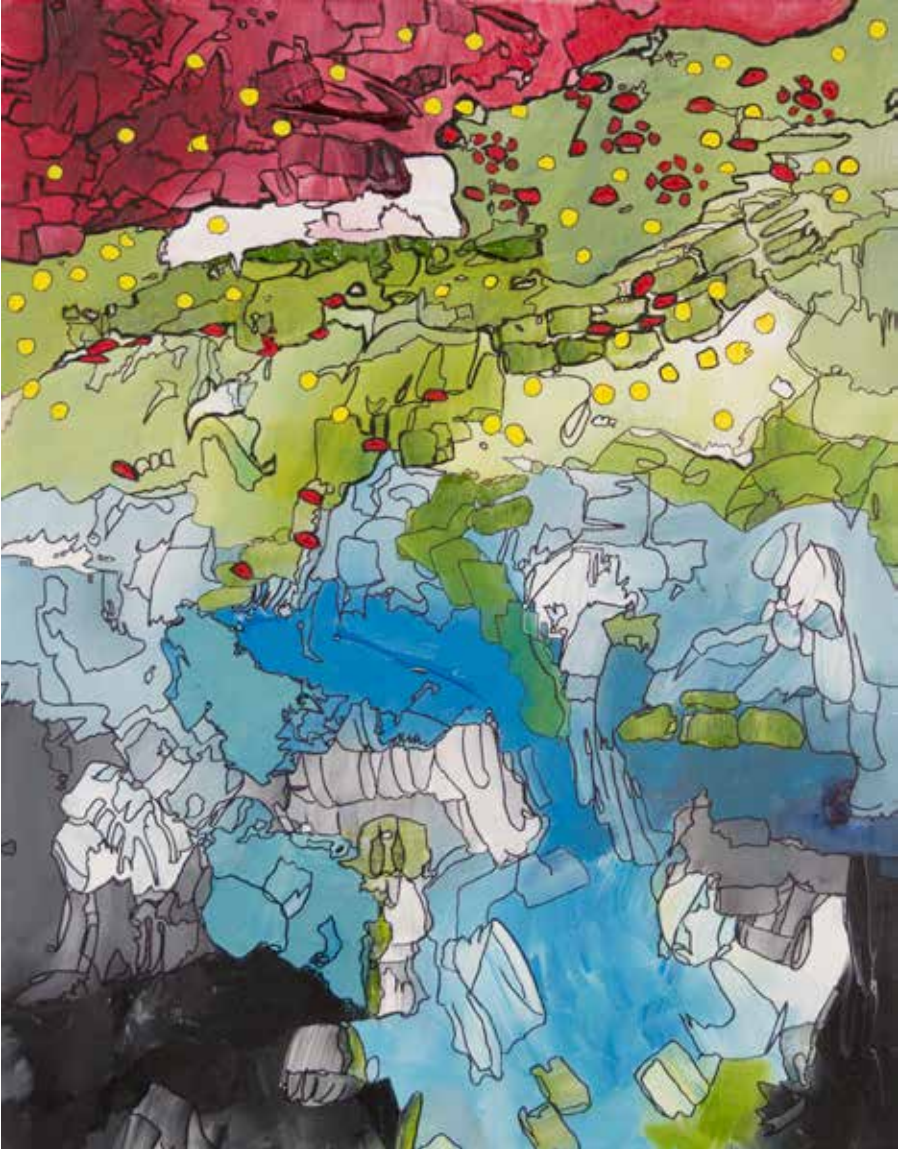
No me reconozco ya en el reflejo
Arrastrando voy con mil cadenas de plata
Y mi sombra oscura que murmura
Innumerables olas de lamentos ahogados
Soy una triste maleta vacía que nunca llega

Un telegrama amarillo con el tiempo aparece
Anunciando mi barco hundido de muertos marinos
Abandonados al fondo de un mar de lagrimas
Olvidados como las tumbas antiguas de sus padres
Cabezas descalabradas en sus ataúdes húmedos

He perdido mi nube azul de alegría
Y dentro del jardín de mis esperanzas
Han marchitado todas las flores verdes
Y ya me enfunda un hierro frío y nevado adentro
Del sepulcro final donde duermen mis espadas vencidas

Abstract Landscape

by Mariette Klein



The Catamaran

Buffalo Bay, Madison, Connecticut

by Kim Roberts

We pushed the light craft down the crescent beach,
leaving double ruts in the heavy sand.

The neighbor boy steadied with outstretched hands
while my niece and I devised a makeshift perch
and blinding circles of gold hovered and spun,
flung out from the open palms of the noonday sun.

We skipped across the water's grey-lipped edge;
the neighbor boy tacked ably into the wind,
pulling the halyard, tucking the rudder line
to make the wavelets leap. With our clothing drenched,
we flew on the crest of the sparkle of the bay
as easily as clouds meringued the sky.

The Left Hand

by Kim Roberts

1.

They say the light near the ocean
pulls the vividness of color out
better than inland light.

Wet air vibrates.

I've heard it spoken of
almost like music. I don't know:

I just like the wind,
and those stunted pitch pines,
the only things that seem
to grow in sand.

When I had all the English ivy
removed from a tree trunk
in my front yard,
the tree immediately burst into bloom
as if in gratitude or relief.

I just wanted the damn ivy gone.
I didn't know it was a Rose of Sharon,
or that blossoms were possible.

The pickle man
at the Montauk Farmer's Market
has 14 different varieties:
I always want the half-sour,
with its decisive crunch.
The half-sour must be eaten fresh,
because you can't stop a pickle
in the arc of its pickling.

As they say in some parts, *Bob's your uncle*,
meaning that's all there is to say.

The rufus-sided towhee
says, *Drink your tea*.

The barred owl asks,
Who cooks for you?

The pickle man says, *A pint
or a quart?* I'll take
the larger size, please.

2.

Above our heads cumulus clouds sail
with a slow, steady grandeur
like dowagers of the Hamptons
making their appointments,
or brigs in full sail
heading out to open water.

Perhaps you'll think me muddled
like Eric the Red,
who was evicted from Iceland,
where the land is green,
and settled in Greenland,
where the land is icy,
with 700 followers
in the year 985.
They built two towns:
the Eastern Settlement,
which was in the South,
and the Western Settlement
in the North.

The left hand rarely knows
what the right hand needs.
But I believe some things
should remain hidden:
left hand, dark hand. Hand of God.

Peering through Primaries

by Janet Berry



Cat in an Empty Bedroom

after Wislawa Szymborska

by Susan Scheid

Don't ask me to explain how the energy of this house crackles
or how the people give off the musky scent of memory.

Boxes upturned, clothing in piles, he hasn't left yet,
papers everywhere, and dinner on the couch.
The order of things has been turned upside down.

I am a cat.
I notice.

I see stillness come in during the darkness
and move through the house.
I hear it pause in his room just long enough.
I expect it to take up residence here
as soon as he leaves.

He seems altered as well, has a crackle to him.
I think he sees the stillness coming,
knows its effect in each room.
But he will forget all this.

I will hold this memory for him.
I will stay at the edge of the bed
keeping his place here safe.

After all, I am a cat.
I know how to sit with stillness.

Day of the Dead

by Susan Scheid

Skulls we make of sugar
taste sweet upon our tongues.
Death is bitter still.

We huddle in threes
to mourn lost brothers/sisters.
We sing spirits skyward.

Row after row of bone
bleached by sun and heat.
Earth honors your life.

We dance from memory,
ancestors appear to join.
Now we become gods.

The Day of the Dead.
The profane and the sacred.
Walk into lightness.

Ese Amor Distinto

Honorable Mention, 2015 Ventura Valdez Spanish Poetry Contest

by Adriel Vega

Sólo pienso en ti día y noche
Te amo te adoro
Te extraño
Habla conmigo
Aunque sea un Segundo
Sólo quiero oír tu voz
Siempre dulce y suave
Ver tus ojos tan preciosos
Que son como el sol y la luna
Ambos dándome luz
Esa sonrisa de ángel
Tus labios dulces y ricos
Quiero más
Quiero más de ti
Tu voz tus ojos tus labios
Te amo de adoro
Te extraño mucho

Tangerine Dream
by Joann Everly Tell



Fiction

On Paper Wings

by Waringa Hunja

Nate,

My History teacher has given us an assignment that is, frankly, insane. We have to pick an invention that “changed the way we live our lives” and write a letter to the inventor explaining how. So I think he wanted us to write to the Pilgrims or Steve Jobs or something and say thanks for America/iPods. The girl next to me is doing Eli Whitney. Everyone is doing a famous dead guy basically. But I’m doing you. Nate Pearson. Inventor of the paper airplane. I mean, I know you didn’t come up with the idea but you perfected them. And you may not be famous, but you are dead. And when you die, age 14, at school, in the middle of a Spanish test, dead and famous are pretty much the same thing.

And you did change the way I lived my life. But it doesn’t really matter because I think when I’m done, I’m going to print this out and ceremoniously flush it down the toilet.

It’s pretty f**ked up that you’re dead. (The stars aren’t because I’ve turned into a total prude, by the way; technically this is a homework assignment and I don’t want Mr. H to send me to the guidance counselor. Hi, Mr. H!) It really sucks every day. But I gotta say, you’re kind of lucky. Cause you got to skip high school, I mean. Every day of ninth grade was horrible because I kept imagining what it would be like if you were there. And tenth grade was worse because I didn’t even have Lyall. I guess you wouldn’t know about that. Or maybe you do? Maybe you can see everything that ever happened to me and this letter is totally redundant. But I’m going to pretend you can’t because that’s kind of disgusting.

Lyall and I aren’t friends anymore. I know, it’s really weird. I don’t remember why we aren’t friends but I’ve still got a tiny scar on my finger from when you became my blood brothers. Remember? My mom wouldn’t let me hang out with you for a week after cause she thought you two “would squash what little femininity I [had]” even though I told her it was my idea. But this all happened after the paper airplane thing so I should probably rewind a bit.

This part is really for Mr. H’s benefit because obviously, Nate, you were there. So you can skip forward a bit if you’d like. Or you can take a stroll down memory lane (although that’s probably all you do in Heaven. (Assuming you’re in heaven. (Just kidding.))).

The whole paper airplane thing started in third grade. Nobody knows who started it but overnight, they became the only acceptable way to pass notes. They were unavoidable; I came home one afternoon holding my notebooks because my backpack was full of them. There was no end to the variations: notebook vs printer paper, fold the wings first or last, crease both ways, fold the tail up, tip out or down. Everyone had their own style that made theirs fly farther or straighter or higher. But of course, because they were fun, they got banned. First from classrooms, then the cafeteria. Recess was a thirty-minute sanctuary of paper-folding. We'd all sit in rows on the mulch, silently folding sheet after sheet like tiny monks practicing a new form of meditation. It was demented. Then, someone had an idea. We never found out who but I personally suspect Spencer Long. (He was held back a year so he could throw the farthest and his mom was heavily into crafts so sometimes he would make his airplanes out of card stock. Card stock!) Whoever came up with the idea, it was perfect: a Battle Royale between the different factions of airplane design. Through a classwide census, the categories were narrowed down to Speed, Distance, Height, and Consistency. That last one was controversial. The thinking was that every kid couldn't come up with their own design but everybody wanted to participate so you could be recruited to help a designer construct their planes. In a process that, even now, strikes me as absurdly democratic, each designer presented a model of their airplane to the group and the non-designers chose which one they wanted to work on.

You were a skinny kid, Nate. Tall and thin with bones poking out everywhere. When you got up to present your airplane, I thought you might fall apart like a cartoon skeleton. But you stood up straight and announced: "My airplane is the best. I only need two people because the process is too complicated to explain to a whole group. If you want to win, come talk to me after school."

The second you finished, you had me. I wanted to win; not just for the candy prize and the fame, but because I knew I wasn't smart. Not like you were. And if I helped you win, you'd owe me.

I can't remember what I said to you that day. I just remember standing in front of you, shivering in my pink Tweety Bird t-shirt and waiting for your answer. And you shook my hand and said "welcome to the team" and it was like the world expanded before me.

We decided to start folding the next afternoon at your house. I didn't know who the other member of our little trio was until I walked through your door and saw Lyall Casey sitting on your couch. I was shocked. The Lyall Caseys of the class didn't talk to kids like me and, no offense, Nate, but according to the rules of third grade, he should have ignored you completely. But there he was, sipping your mom's lemonade out of a glass and looking totally at home. I used to think that's what being popular meant: feeling comfortable

Door

by Charles Loren Johnson



even when you shouldn't. And I'm not sure I was wrong.

We'd both brought a thick stack of printer paper to fold but the stack you'd put out on the coffee table was easily a hundred sheets. "For mistakes," you explained and proceeded to teach us your method. Your small hands were quick to fold and quick to correct; at one point you rapped me on the knuckles with a ruler and I almost cried. We only managed to fold ten that passed your inspection but by the time I got home, my cheeks ached from smiling.

We won the competition. That's not really the important part but I guess it's relevant to the assignment. We won by a landslide, by a combination of talent and sheer dumb luck. One team's captain accidentally sat on their planes (Marcia Levy [the very same one who sits in the back corner of History class, Mr. H] who still hasn't learned to control her dandruff, Nate. Some things never change.). Joshua Graham (I don't think you had him, Mr. H, he's not really Honors World History compatible, if you get what I mean [he's dumb]) stuck his planes in his lunchbox and they got drenched in milk (see.). The other teams just weren't good enough. So we won and each kid gave us a piece of candy and we didn't have to get our own milk at lunchtime for a whole month.

So, that was the beginning. The first way you changed my life, Nate: you showed me I could be the best at something.

(At this point, I should probably get the research portion of this assignment out of the way. According to Wikipedia [isn't this the truest form of academic honesty, Mr. H], the first paper airplanes were folded in Ancient China. Some other fans of paper airplanes: Leonardo da Vinci [showoff] and the Wright Brothers [overachievers]. So I guess they played a part in this story too but, again, I'm trying to steer this ship away from really old dead white guys.)

For the second way, we have to fast forward a few years. Fifth grade. By this time, the whole airplane phase was completely over. Every once in a while, they'd come back in style and the hallways would be a flurry, a snow-storm, a whirlwind of them. But for us, they never really stopped being fascinating. I don't remember how to do our special signal anymore; it kills me that I don't remember, but I can see it when I close my eyes- that special fold that meant 'for your eyes only' back when 'your' meant the three-headed monster that was LyallDennyNate by that point. I hadn't really had friends like you before. I asked my dad if I could marry both of you, you know. So we could be together forever.

Anyway, fifth grade. Our whole grade was obsessed with pairing off. For me, the bathroom was an exercise in dodging girls asking me which one of you was my boyfriend. I remember one afternoon in mid-November when

Caroline Mathews (moved to Oklahoma two years ago) and Marcia Levy (supporting character of my childhood, apparently) cornered me against a sink asking about the two of you. By the time I escaped, the back of my sweater was drenched with hot water that left my skin red and sore for days.

I don't think I ever told you that, Nate. But it does help explain why I was so upset when a paper airplane landed on my desk a few days later and before I could open it, you shook your head and pointed at the writing on the wing. 'Caroline M.' was scrawled across the paper. I looked back up at you and you gestured impatiently for me to pass the paper one desk over. My stomach clenched like I'd drunk a bucket of ice water. I dropped it on Caroline's desk and watched her unfold the note, her sausage fingers fumbling to flatten the paper out. She mouthed the words as she read so I couldn't escape your message: Will you be my girlfriend?

My eyes watered. My knees shook. My face burned.

I went and cried in the bathroom. I told everyone that I had a stomach bug so I could avoid school for the next two days.

The second way: that paper airplane forced me to face a truth I had hidden in a padlocked box at the very center of me- I was in love with you.

The third way mostly concerns the third member of our triangle: Lyall. (In order for you to fully understand this story, Mr. H, you have to understand a few things about Lyall Casey.)

1. He's Welsh. Well, half-Welsh but that half really counts. His mom, Cheryl, met Lyall Sr. on a year abroad at the University of Cardiff and after graduation, she moved back there and married him. They had Lyall and Alis (she tries to hide it in social situations but yes, Alis Casey is Lyall's twin) and lived happily in the lush suburbs of Cardiff for a few years until Mrs. Casey got an opportunity back home that she couldn't pass up and the whole family was transplanted here to Hartford, Connecticut. Now, the relevance of these facts is this: when Lyall moved here in third grade, he was clearly playing by a foreign set of rules. It's a safe assumption that kids in Wales are way nicer than kids here because tall, bronze haired, star center forward Lyall Casey just did not understand the rights and responsibilities of being popular. He spoke to people he shouldn't have; as I mentioned earlier, he worked with Nate and I on our airplane construction when he obviously should've opted out of construction and joined the rest of the popular kids on the judging panel. It is thanks to this essential foreignness that Lyall started speaking to me and Nate and it's thanks to his relentless politeness that he kept talking to us after we'd won. And it was starblind madness that forced the three of us to become best friends.
2. Best friends is a ridiculous oversimplification. It was more than that. There are some friends you grow up with, who you meet when you're

practically zygotes and have the faintest mist of a personality. They're the ones you skinned your knees with and who helped you choose your first screenname. You knew each other's home phone numbers by heart and they were astonished when you showed up to school one day in an actual bra instead of a white cotton undershirt. You grew around each other like trees planted too close together, creating a personality that was entirely a reaction to theirs. Every new like or dislike required a consensus or a rebuttal. These are the friends that create you. Best friends, indeed.

3. Our little triangle was nothing new. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Athos, Porthos, Aramis. Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup. In any three-person friendship group, each person plays certain roles. There's the one in charge who makes the plans (I know you hated it, Nate, but that was you to the core), the one who'll walk into any room first. And there's the one who keeps the peace. I guess you could say 'the nicest' if you were in the mood to be overly simplistic. The one who people outside the group like the most. That was Lyall. And I was just along for the ride.
4. The last thing you need to know, Mr. H, is that Lyall's father was his everything.

Lyall Casey, Sr. had a heart attack when we were 12. Went out for a jog and keeled over in the middle of the street. Died instantly. That was the worst thing that had happened to me at the point; not just that my best friend's dad died but that I had no idea what to do. Lyall cried for days. This horrendous crying where he'd switch from silently letting tears pour down his face to wailing and screaming until he ran out of breath. Nate and I were dumbfounded. How do you console the consoler? He had always been the most stable one; Nate and I needed him to keep us in check. And now he was completely unreachable.

Your funeral was a lot like Mr. Casey's, Nate. I haven't been to many but I think they're all basically the same. (Did you know I sang? I sang for you and it was the hardest thing I've ever done and I haven't been able to sing another note. Lyall helped carry your coffin and I think he's carried it every day since.)

The sense of helplessness never goes away.

I don't know which one of us had the idea, but I'm pretty convinced it was you, Nate. Either way, we broke open our piggy banks and biked to Kinko's and made three hundred copies of Mr. Casey's memorial program. And we took them to Lyall's house and sat with him and folded in silence. It was days before he picked up his first sheet but that first plane he made...it was better than one of yours. And I knew it would take a while, but we'd get our friend back.

The third way that a paper airplane changed my life, Mr. H: people

die. It's what we do. And it's okay to grieve; it's important to grieve. But eventually you gotta fold that next airplane and let it soar.

Nate, thanks for everything.

Love always,
Denver Shaw

Nate,

Mr. Haybrew sent me to the guidance counselor. He said he wanted to meet with me to 'discuss my assignment' but really he ambushed me with Mrs. Powers. It was thoroughly uncomfortable. At one point, he left the room and Mrs. Powers started throwing around words like 'catharsis' and 'closure' and I almost passed out. She wants me to write you another letter. Apparently, the first one was helpful in "exploring the tangled roots of our relationship" but I can only gain closure from acknowledging my life without you. Also, she suspects that I left out a lot from my first letter because I knew someone else would read it.

She's not wrong.

I lied about a couple things in that letter. First of all, I wrote that I realized I was in love with you in fifth grade. Really, I think I knew from that speech you made in front of the whole class in third grade. You seemed so confident. I didn't have many friends back then and I was used to being a silent observer. A chronicler of the human condition, you might say. So maybe you seemed confident but I saw your knees knocking together underneath your khakis, so hard I was sure they'd leave bruises. And I saw your left hand, clenched in your pocket, that tiny fist the only thing that kept you from burrowing in the sandbox. I think I fell in love with you then.

The other thing I lied about was when I said I didn't remember why Lyall and I aren't friends anymore. Of course I remember. Lyall and I aren't friends because you had a secret and he helped you keep it and I can't ever forgive you for that.

She wanted me to show you that my life has continued without you because "that's what you would've wanted" and she's probably right.

Some Things You Would Know About Me If You Were Alive:

1. I drank my first beer and it was disgusting and then I drank my second beer and it wasn't so bad. You would like beer, I think. The fancy small-label kind that's brewed in personalized batches in some guy's apartment in Brooklyn.
2. I'm the varsity swim team captain. It sounds way more exciting than it is and it doesn't even sound that exciting. Mostly I watch other people swim and I tell them they could do better and then I swim and nobody tells me

Purple Eye
by Andrew Wilkinson



- anything because they're scared of me.
3. I lost my virginity (last winter break; Charlie Hollis; a few minutes). It was fine. We did it a couple more times but mostly it was boring and kind of sad so we stopped.
 4. I got my learner's permit and I think my mom's going to let me have the Honda.
 5. Once you hit junior year, and especially second semester junior year, the only thing anyone wants to talk to you about is college. But I think we would've worked on our applications together so you should know that I think I'm going to apply Early Decision to Columbia. We always talked about moving south after graduation, to a place where it never snows, but I don't hate the snow so much now.
 6. I watched Lyall punch a kid in a parking lot and get suspended last spring. It was only a couple months after our fight but our friendship seemed like the distant past. I wish I had told him I was worried about him but I was still mad so I didn't. I think he was still mad too. I heard that he punched the guy cause he called Lyall gay like it was an insult and I think you would've been proud of him if that's true. But Lyall's pretty angry all the time now so maybe the kid just bumped him in the hallway or something.

-Denver

Nate,

I showed Mrs. Powers my second letter and she said I needed to write you another one and she didn't want to read it but I had to be totally and completely honest with you. So.

Honestly, I'm so mad at you.

Honestly, I'm so mad that I don't get to be mad at you.

Honestly, I'm so mad that I can't be mad at you because you're dead so it really doesn't matter.

It's like a nightmare. What do you do if your best friend dies and your whole world splinters and just when you're gathering all the pieces again, your other best friend breaks them even smaller and scatters them like seeds.

Did you think he was going to keep your secret forever? Lyall's bad at keeping secrets in an ideal situation and this was pretty much the worst situation possible. He told you when he kissed me, didn't he? He said he wouldn't, but I don't believe for a second that he didn't. You must've known that he kissed me and I kissed him back. But you also must've known that I loved you. You were a lot of things, Nate, but you weren't an idiot.

Can't you see what a mess I was? I was in love with you and you gave me nothing and there was this kid who was too good for me who wanted to

kiss me. What was I supposed to do? What would you have done? I'm starting to think I didn't know you at all.

I guess you know that Lyall told me. In his defense, he didn't tell me for two years after you died. Two years he was friends with me, my only friend, and he looked me in the eyes and we talked about how much we missed you and he told me he loved me and he didn't tell me that he knew something about you that I didn't. So I guess it's not really in his defense at all.

How did he tell me? (I'm still presuming that you're not an all-seeing ghost.) It just kind of slipped out. In his defense, for real this time, I think after you died I spent a lot of time thinking about myself. My grief was selfish and I fed it constantly. Why me? Why did my friend have to die? What was I going to do? And on and on. And I guess Lyall kind of picked up on that. And I guess I made him feel like how he felt wasn't as real or sad or important as how I felt. I guess.

And I was talking about how I was sad that other people wouldn't get to know you or something (listen, losing someone makes people weird. Also, give me a break, I was 16.) Lyall snapped. I've never seen him so angry.

"You act like you're the only one who knew him," he said.

"Well, I think I probably knew him the best," I said.

"You didn't know everything," he said, and I watched him realize what he said and swallow a heavy brick of guilt. He looked at me and I could see him fighting to keep your secret and I could see him failing.

You kissed him. Nate, you kissed him and you didn't tell me. You kissed him and you specifically told him not to tell me. You kissed him and you didn't tell me and then you died and, Nate, that won't ever be okay.

Were you gay? Are you? I guess you'd still be gay even if you're dead.

I know there are a billion reasons why you could have kissed him.

I know it doesn't automatically mean that you're gay or even bi or anything really. Maybe it was just a kiss. Maybe you just kissed him because you wanted to kiss him and that's all. And maybe not. I'll never know. But I wonder all the time.

Did you like Lyall? Did you love him? Or did you just want to kiss him so much in that moment that you couldn't help yourself. He said he didn't know how to react so he just left your house and then he came back the next day and apologized and you said "don't worry about it" and everything was fine. What did you do for that brief window when you thought he hated you? You must've been scared. But Lyall's a good guy, Nate. He couldn't hate you. I hope you know how much he loved you.

I was so mad when he told me. Nate, I swear, I could've killed him. I hated him for lying and I hated him for telling me and I hated him for proving to me that he isn't perfect. I hated you for lying and I hated you for never telling me and I hated you for knowing that I loved you and kissing my best

friend and I hated you the most for dying. God, I hated you for dying. But you weren't there to be yelled at so I yelled at Lyall. I called him a liar and a coward and an asshole and I told him I never wanted to speak to him again and (I'm sorry, Nate. You would've hated me for this most of all) I called him a faggot.

I didn't say it because I have anything against gay people. God, I hope you know that. I didn't say it because I thought Lyall was gay and I hope you know that too. I said it because I was stupid and I was angry and I said it because I wanted him to be angry because you can't pick a fight with someone who doesn't fight back. There's really no excuse and I'll regret it long after the sun implodes and the earth is ice and every record of human existence is particles of ash. I will never not be sorry. But I hope you can forgive me.

I'm so sorry. I'm sorry that you felt like you couldn't tell me or that you didn't want to tell me or that you were embarrassed or that I'd be mad. I'm sorry that I made you feel like not telling me was the best option. I'm sorry I broke me and Lyall. You would've hated that, especially now that you're gone. I'm sorry that I said 'faggot' and I'm even sorrier that I used a derogatory word for being gay as an insult. Whether or not you're gay, you would've hated that I did something so idiotic.

It doesn't really matter to me whether or not you're gay. It doesn't matter at all because you're dead. You'll never get to grow up and figure out who you are and live a real, brutal, full life because you're dead. And that's the irreparable tragedy of my life.

I think you would've been a good person. I think about this constantly, and I think you would've been a great person. I've attached something that I think you'd like to see.

Here's the truth: you were my great love and I will miss you for the rest of my life.

You loved me but you weren't in love with me and I understand that now. Being mad at you didn't make you any more or less dead, it just made me angry. So this is me, letting go.

It'll never be OK that you're dead. But I think it's time to let my airplane fly, you know.

Love always,
Denny

Futures I Have Imagined for Nate Pearson, A Partial List- Operating Under the Assumption that Heart Conditions (Specifically, Cardiac Arrhythmias (More Specifically, Ventricular Fibrillation)) that Result In Sudden Cardiac Death Are Obsolete:

1. You're born without a ticking time bomb in your chest and your life proceeds as normally as is humanly possible. Your future is a montage of beige carpet and data analysis and a woman named Annie who describes herself as homemaker.
2. Aged 14, you come to the realization that you are, in fact, gay, but you're scared because life's hard enough without people hating you for being who you are. We all move away for college; we stay friends and Lyall and I try dating long distance for a while. It doesn't work. After college, you and I reunite and confess our deep and constant love for each other. We get married and you pretend to be someone you're not until you die.
3. Aged 14, you kiss Lyall and realize that you're not really interested in doing it again. Lyall and I date comfortably for a few years before we break up (amicably) and you and I reunite and confess our deep and constant love for each other. We get married and live happily forever.
4. Aged 14, you come to the realization that you are, in fact, gay, and you know you shouldn't hide who you are so you live as your true self and you date a string of smart, attractive (rich) guys in college before getting married to the love of your life and moving to somewhere glamorous. You regularly say things like "We keep a delightful pied à terre in the city" and "We normally summer on our island off the coast of Greece but it was overrun by stray dogs so we had to stay in our villa in Tuscany. The vineyard wasn't even in bloom."
5. You come out and your parents are scared and disappointed so they kick you out of the house and you and I move to San Francisco and rent the biggest townhouse we can find and fill it with gay kids who've been kicked out of their houses and it's like they're the Lost Boys and I'm Wendy and we become a true family and I don't know, Lyall becomes a senator or something.
6. At some point, you realize that human sexuality is really a wide spectrum of fluctuating desires and the need to define yourself as a specific subset is a social construct that adds nothing to your life experience so you proceed to date people you're attracted to, regardless of gender. The you in this future is an artist whose groundbreaking paintings sell for millions of dollars. Lyall and I get married and pop out a bunch of kids and you're their Uncle Nate who buys them ponies and gives them lectures about the inefficiencies of capitalism.
7. Sometimes I have this dream where you're sitting in an armchair and you're bouncing a kid on your lap and I don't know if it's our kid or your kid or my kid or Lyall's kid or what but you're just so happy. I look at you and I know that you're old and your life isn't perfect; you've got a knee that tells you when it's going to rain and you were fired from your dream job for smoking pot and you have a couple friends who died of cancer;

your life isn't perfect but it's long. And full. And wide. Like it should be.

Lyall,

I wrote these for Nate.

The thing is, he's dead.

But we're not.

I'm sorry.

Love always,

Denny

Painting (untitled)
by Carlisa Martin



Mr. Plumhoff and His Mini

by Marcia Marroquin

Mr. Plutor: bony, thin skin, six inches tall, and of the square-nailed Mini's. He prides himself on how well he uses his garden shovel to scoop away the dirt under my own nails, but I prefer him for his impeccable use of his rounded teeth to scrape the soil and pebbles that get trapped in the soles of my oxfords.

Though my much loved subordinate is the engine for my luxurious life, I remain in the shadow for his conquest to become one of us: the Pillars. We hold up this country – the Land of the Free. We hold the wealth that Mini's and animals of the like are unable to handle. Why, they would be crushed under the weight! Such was the unfortunate fate of my former subordinate: Mr. Trickle. Oh, how I miss the services of my beloved Mr. Trickle. He made the grave mistake of finding his way into my well-filled safe, but even just one piece of my overbearing wealth was too much for his toothpick figure to support, and so the life of Mr. Trickle came to an end.

However, Mr. Trickle, being a round-nailed Mini, wasn't a loss of great men, not even at the level of the Mini's. Just like one is able to pick a grape off a vine, Mr. Plutor was picked by me like the sweetest grape of them all. My, his pride swelled!

From day one to the present, he enthusiastically cleans the lint within my belly button, the wax within my ears (I think he even uses it for candle wax), the layers of plaque on my teeth, and the greenery that finds its way into my nose. My, I don't have to lift a single finger! I was, am, and always will be perfectly intact merely for the aesthetic pleasure much loved and seen among the pillars, and much desired and envied by the Mini's whether they are square-nailed, or round-nailed. Poor round-nailed Mini's, for them the effort toward effortless beauty is nothing more than wishful thinking.

We Pillars have smooth-edged, pearlsh glowing nails. We are nothing like those minute Mini's.

I must admit though, I am fond of Mr. Plutor. He keeps me kept up. He is the prodigy of the perfect Mini. The thing I most like about him is his sense of indignity. He has no complaints when told to do the previously mentioned jobs. For me, he will do whatever it takes to please. For his family, he will do whatever it takes to nourish and house. For himself, he will believe any remotely logical idea for continuing to labor among the filth, fluids, phlegm, and blood my body produces.

Oh, please do not feel sorry for the Mini's! That is, after all, what these Mini's have been bred to do. They love it. And what isn't there to love, for a Mini, about the occupation Mr. Plutor so proudly fulfills? Why, working for a Pillar like myself is more than he ever bargained for! Most other Mini's are what we call decomposers. They clean streets, bathrooms, sewers, and alleyways by ingesting the odious organisms, microbes, and contents held within these places. No, these occupations aren't the best paying occupations. But everyone must begin somewhere, right?

Today feels different than most days. The dog is quiet. The walls look like they're bending under the weight of two levels and much wood and brick. It's an unusually breezy, cool, and dark evening of October. I am having a late read of the *The Daily Pillar* when Mr. Plutor comes into my office just down the hall from where he was meant to be decomposing the crumbs and spilt droplets of wine on the floor from the dinner party I held a few hours ago. As usual, he enters through the seven inch Mini-door built into my seven foot Pillar door, and slowly makes his way toward where I am sitting. He stops at a spot halfway between the door and my desk.

He says: "Mr. Plumhoff, may I have a moment of your time? I just, please, need to speak to you regarding, well..."

I do not look up at Mr. Plutor. Today's top story in *The Daily Pillar* asks for every ounce of my attention.

"Mr. Plumhoff?"

"Come, take a seat." I have a three inch, single person sofa on my desk. Built just for a Mini.

I can hear Mr. Plutor's huffs and puffs as he labors his way up the ladder on the side of my desk. He walks over to the Mini sofa, and slowly takes a seat as he looks back as if expecting someone to pull it away.

"Thank you, Mr. Plumhoff." He takes his hat off. "I think it's best if we just get into this. I have been experiencing much trouble lately, sir. I believe with your kindness and generosity, I most certainly will not have to be further troubled by the lack of food in my house, or a complaining wife, or whiny children, or even the tax collectors that stalk the perimeters of my home and the other end of every other phone call I receive. I think, Mr. Plumhoff, I think I've even caught my one hundred and forty eighth sickness to date. I know, a much smaller number than most Mini's, but if my condition further deteriorates, well, it's very possible it could end me. What will--"

"Mr. Plutor, are we going to 'just get into it' anytime soon?" How curious. I haven't seen him like this before.

"I need an increase sir!" He jumped to his feet as he said this.

This isn't the first time Mr. Plutor has asked for an increase. He has done so before when his wife was unable to work. I can only conclude, from the jobs he was willing to do at the time, that his wages were barely sufficing

the compensation requested by doctors and clinics. The children she beared several years ago required microscopic attention.

This is how it is for most Mini's, from what I have heard. During gestation, the Mini's must go through a period of Contribution. During Contribution, they must give their strongest, most exponentially multiplying cells to a Pillar fetus, thus aiding the Pillar during gestation. Does it harm the Mini? Why of course not! It is an act of kindness that progresses the life of Pillars you see. Pillars are born and bred by other Pillars. These Pillar fetuses, you see, are simply reaping the rewards of their ancestors who were able to produce the fruits of their labor in abundance. It is a duty of all Pillars to continue the legacy of their predecessors, and what better way to do that? Caring for a Pillars health is top priority here. Much different from the atrocious clinics I experienced during my tenure at King's College many years ago.

Continuing what is currently happening, I slowly rise from my seat after Mr. Plutor asks me this. I walk over to the bookshelf lining one of my walls, and sift through the books to find the one I'm looking for. Oh! My legs, they're quite stiff. Why, when's the last time I used them? I cannot remember. Ah! There it is! I pull it out of the place it has been tucked into for quite some time, and wipe the dust off the cover. The words on the front read: "Legalities Establishing the Illusion of the Mini Peoples' Progress." I look through the table of contents and see what I'm looking for: Limitation of Wages. Page 436. I turn over to this page, and as I glance over the dense paragraphs, I find just what I'm looking for.

"Ahem, Mr. Plumbhoff?"

"I'm afraid that it is not possible at this time, Mr. Plutor." Oh, I had forgotten he was still standing there. Just as I expected, Mr. Plutor has maximized his allowable earnings. He doesn't know this. He wouldn't know this.

"What do you mean? Each month I am given tasks more tiresome and 'hands-on', if you want to be vague. Please, Mr. Plumbhoff, do not take this as a complaint, I do love my occupation. I do love working for you, and I know my occupation has the potential to thrust me into life as a Pillar one day, but the rewards..."

I place the hefty book back in its slot. When I turn around and see Mr. Plutor, I notice the layer of moisture drenching every inch of his skin.

"Mr. Plutor, I think you fail to see the true rewards of your work. Don't you see the potential power that comes with each day you delve in my filth? I'm sure you've heard before that good things come to those who wait. For now, your occupation is held within a dam. Mr. Plutor, one day the walls of that dam will develop a crack. This crack will branch its way up the wall, and the thing about this crack is its sneakiness, and unexpectedness. You don't know it's there until the wall bursts, and the true force of the water held within is finally felt by those in its way. Everyone will know the power this water has!

You know what this water is? The water is your occupation! And just like the water sweeps all the houses and people and trees away, your occupation will sweep up and accumulate so much wealth, you'll be swimming in it!"

He stares up at me. Hat on heart, hand on hat.

"Mr. Plumhoff! Remarkable how you are able to keep up such morale even after your years of hard work and labor! And again, I am reminded of how the Pillars have been able to stay in their much respectable and desired places in society. Remind me, again, Mr. Plumhoff, how are you able to keep up such righteous, colorful morale?"

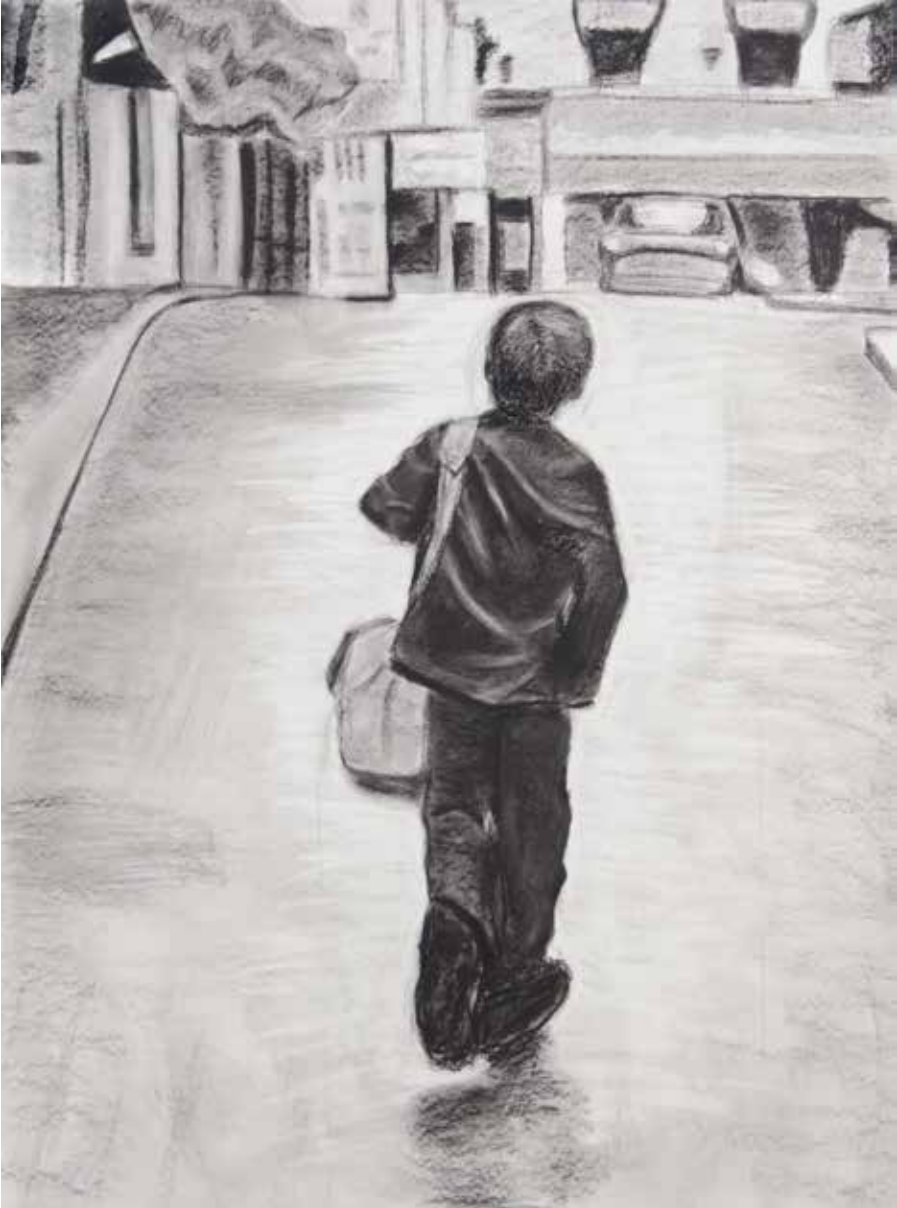
I am here to continue the legacy of the Plumhoffs. Born into the Plumhoff family as a fifth generation Pillar, I diverged from the business of pet etiquette, founded by my great, great, great grandfather and delved into the art of calligraphy, where I traveled to and fro the islands of Asia and the cobblestones of Europe. I wrote invitations, letters, and memos on behalf of the King and Queen of Switzerland that were to be sent to leaders, law makers, and faces of continents and countries from every crevice and corner of the world. For years I filled this tiresome occupation, and I went on to teach calligraphy to the students of King's College in England. Prestigious? Why yes, it was, thank you. But this did not come easy.

You see, from the very beginning, my occupation in calligraphy was tiresome and demanding. It all started with the odious fountain pen that would leak and stain my beautiful pearlsh nails. I would spend entire nights scrubbing away at the stubborn ink, only to end up with paper thin nails. They would bend and crack, and the next day I would have to be pampered by the servants of the Queen. Jolly and gentle people these servants were, more than happy to massage my hands and restore my pearlsh nails to their proper form. They would present me with varieties of foods, but they never stopped bringing these foods out! They'd insist that I eat that cheese with this bread, that wine with this fruit, that pastry with this jam; the combinations of food were infinite! How is it acceptable for one person to be exposed to such extravagant presentations of food and not be able to eat it all? Why, this was a sign of mockery, or a teaser of sorts, and I did not allow them to question me when I demanded they throw it out!

As great and remarkably talented personal calligrapher of the Swiss royal family, I was granted the right to attend the parties and balls held by the royal family. Mini's were rarely seen at these occasions, and when roguishness led them there, they were swept up by the cleaning crew as they were normally trampled on, much like one might accidentally step on a cockroach or a wad of gum. Moving on, preparation for these parties were not in my favor either. The tuxedos fitted for me were not of the highest quality, that is, they were so soft and smooth that I felt like I was wearing nothing! How is one supposed to keep his peace of mind when he is feeling exposed in a room full of thou-

Boy on Street

by Bree Douthitt



sands of Pillars? The fibers of these tuxedos came from mills in Italy, Spain, and France, but dare I say that they may as well have come from the hay in my horses' pastures! The skin soothing material of my tuxedo bothered me just as much as the scratchy, rash-causing hay, that I used it in replacement of wood in my personal fireplace every time I attended a party or a ball.

Dare I begin to talk about the gifts I received from the people I met at these occasions? To most attendees, I was known as the much loved and sought after personal calligrapher of the Swiss family, and for the amount of gifts I received, I cannot help but think they were trying to steal me away so I can be their own personal calligrapher. However, I was gifted with several cars, jewelry, and trinkets ranging in the hundreds of thousands in price. Fools! Their taste in these items was dreadful, and the amount they'd spend on them was humorous. Oh, it wasn't easy keeping such items in my room, or in my garage. They were an eyesore, they really were, and if I sold them, then the purchasers would think I had the poor taste in buying these items in the first place. They may not have known any better than the people that bought them for me in the first place, but I was on the verge of hiring a therapist after the end of my occupation as a personal calligrapher.

Oh, if I told Mr. Plutor the truth of how hard I have really worked to become a Pillar in the art of calligraphy, he may just collapse on the spot, and become one with cockroaches and rats the cleaning crew sometimes finds in my home. I won't tell him those horrible hardships I've overcome in my occupation as a personal calligrapher, as that does not help one's morale stay high.

"Mr. Plutor, my morale throughout my occupation has stayed at a high because I continue to look at the wonderful fruits I continue to bear. You see this desk you are standing on? This desk did not come easy. It was built as a custom desk, made from the finest wood from the finest trees found in the finest countries. This desk was made by Pillars and for Pillars. If you think that is not worth working for, then maybe you are not a potential Pillar."

"Why of course I am! Every Mini in reality is a potential Pillar, Mr. Plumhoff." His eyebrows point down as he says this. Have I offended him? "It's a matter of working hard enough, am I correct, or not?"

"Yes, you are correct. If you work hard enough, and you make wise decisions, then you too can become a Pillar." Yes, this is the generic pep talk often given to Mini's by Pillars.

The truth is though, that becoming a pillar is often by the stroke of luck. In fact, it is all and absolutely by the stroke of luck for Mini's in our day. As I have read in "Legalities for Establishing the Illusion of the Mini Peoples' Progress," there are four fruits that are chosen in secret each year by the Pillar leaders of the country. These fruits have the ability to transform a Mini into a Pillar, and from there, a new family of Pillars arises and they have the ability to start a business, go to a top school, or quite frankly, do whatever they wish to

do. The Mini's do not know this though. It is all disguised by the concept of hard work.

“Mr. Plumhoff, my current occupation as your personal subordinate has most certainly come with its rewards, and I have even gained a respectable high status among the Mini's themselves. Though, I do not let the round-nailed Mini's within my group, they aren't the friendliest of folk.”

Ah, yes, the round-nailed Mini's. They are the bottom of the barrel. They are the decomposers. It is most certainly true that they are not the friendliest of folk. I do not know much about them, as I have not been cursed with extensive exposure to them, but they are the ugliest, most bitter organisms that I have ever heard of. But who wants to know about them, when the problems that I faced in my occupation as a calligrapher, I was barely able to handle? I am feeling naked just by thinking about those damned tuxedos.

“Well that is a step forward, Mr. Plutor. You see, you will become a Mini of higher status as time passes. Before you know it, you could be 6 feet tall, standing high and mighty with the Pillars like myself. And perhaps, Mr. Plutor, our children, and our children's children will be standing tall, side by side.” I smile at him. The thought of us being on the same level is laughable, and I am on the verge of chuckling. I will not give myself away though.

“Ah, yes. Those days I can see bright and clear in the near future, sir. Speaking of children: Plumhoff II, how does he do?”

Plumhoff II: my dearest, first born Pillar of a child. He is not named Plumhoff II for sharing the first name as I do (which I will not disclose), but for the rotund and well-nourished body he has that would be equal to two of me. I am a proud father, certainly. Having a son of great width and girth shows how successful Contribution was for him. And the position he fills is chairman of the pet etiquette business my great, great, great grandfather founded.

Plumhoff II has invested himself into the business, overseeing the laboring Mini's in his mansion meant exclusively for the training and etiquette of tigers, lions, dolphins, and large tortoises. I have often gone there to visit him, and I am flabbergasted by the torture he makes himself go through! While Mini's train these pets, they are often bitten or ripped apart by these animals. And what does Plumhoff II do while this is happening? He eats and watches the animals tear up these Mini's. I would never be able to do these two things at once, for such sights would bring severe loss of appetite or complete sickness and eyesore to me! As he lays on his soft leather sofa, verbally disciplining a Mini here, watching a Mini get torn up there, he is also exposed to the glaring varieties of food available on a long table, laid before him. He did what I could not, however, and this is what makes me proud. He has adjusted his body to be able to consume all those foods, and savor every bit of flavor that hits his tongue. He isn't a victim of the food like I was. He overcame it, and

is now able to take it all in. This is what hard work brings! It brings better life for your descendants, and my hardships during my occupation as a personal calligrapher have showed themselves to pay off.

“Thank you for asking, Mr. Plutor.” I get up from my seat and walk over to the wall opposite my bookshelf. Hanging on it is a framed picture of my son, Plumhoff II. I take it off its hinge and look at it. A hint of a grin shows on my face, “He is in his mansion for pet etiquette right now. I imagine he is under a lot of stress. He has always run the business well, however. He is a Pillar of course. He was made for that.”

“Yes, certainly he was. People of your lineage have always been successful with the business of pet etiquette. And as always, I am glad to hear of your son doing well.”

I can hear Mr. Plutor pacing on my desk. His footsteps sound like someone repeatedly placing a ceramic mug on my desk. What an annoying sound.

“Please, do take a seat, Mr. Plutor.”

“I don’t usually get like this sir. I apologize for any interruptions I have caused tonight. Though, it is probably too late by now. Nonetheless, I hope you accept my apology.”

“Well, you are here now. There could have been worse times to interrupt me, but when we are done, all I have to do is continue reading from where I left off.” This is probably one of the worst times he could have interrupted me. I highly value my precious reading time, especially if it is *The Daily Pillar*. “Do you need a drink, Mr. Plutor? Perhaps a cold glass of water?”

“That would do, sir, thank you.”

I hang the picture of Plumhoff II back on the wall. I glance over to where Mr. Plutor is standing, and he is staring off into a corner of my office.

I exit the room, and continue down the corridor. I walk down my favorite part of my home: the grand wooden stairs. These two sets of stairs spiral around each other like the structure of DNA merely for the visual appeal.

It’s unusual of me to get something for Mr. Plutor, especially because he is the one that works for me. But the state in which he is in right now is strangely compelling me to aid him in some way. I think I just find his sweat on my desk bothersome and tainting, but I also want to resume my late reading session.

I cannot remember where I normally place my glass Mini cups for Mr. Plutor. I look around every cabinet and drawer, behind and between the plates, cups, and utensils, but these little glass cups will be hard to find.

After much searching, the Mini cups are found under the sink cabinet. Of course they are! It’s easier for Mr. Plutor to reach them at this height. As I bend down to get them, I feel some stiffness in my back too, and a little pain.

When's the last time I had to bend down to get something? I cannot remember.

Filling up these cups is causing me very much trouble. The water runs down from the faucet in such force and abundance that the Mini cups overflow and the water runs all over my hand. How are Mini's able to live like this? Goodness, if filling a cup is such a task, how does anyone get anything done? Then again, I am not meant for such menial work. And Mini's are.

After too much effort, I have managed to get the right amount of water in these Mini cups. I balance the Mini cups, one in each hand, but the stiffness of my hands helps. Not having to lift your fingers daily certainly helps with having statuesque balance.

I walk down the corridor and it leads me to my office. I place the cups on my desk, but Mr. Plutor is nowhere to be seen.

"Ahem, Mr. Plutor? I do not see you in here." I know he is in here. "Mr. Plutor? I have brought you some water. I did take a while, I know, but they make things so complicated with the water pressure in this house, the diameter of the faucet, the amount of water that spills out. And those Mini cups, how did you expect me to find them where they were?" I wait for about ten seconds, expecting a response. The silence does not comfort me. Where the devil is this Mini?

Well this is rude. I, a Pillar, go and get water for a Mini. Pillars do not get anything for Mini's. Hospitality comes from Mini's only. And the one time I break this rule, the Mini wants to disappear, therefore, reject my hospitality? Who does Mr. Plutor think he is?

I glance over at the bookshelf and walk along, scanning it with my eyes. I do not see him in there. Suddenly, I hear a thump. It's muffled by something, but the sound is coming from inside my office. I slowly walk back toward my desk, and peer over behind it. The door of my safe is opened a little bit.

The hateful, sneaky little bastard! He has worked up the nerve to get into my safe after all I have provided him with?

The safe door slowly opens. Very slowly. I hear his huffs and puffs as he pushes the heavy door open. I'll let him struggle a little bit before he comes face to face with the grave mistake he has made. After a long minute, he emerges from the safe carrying a stack of my wealth. He notices me standing in front of my desk, but he smirks, and continues walking. He make his way around my desk.

"Mr. Plutor, you are welcome to break into my safe and take a decimal percentage of my wealth. May I please ask, before you leave, how I can improve the security of my safe? You see that money that you so strongly hold above your head? I've put great effort into earning it."

"Mr. Plumhoff," he huffs, "that thing you call... effort," he puffs,

“you are welcome to stick it into one of your great Pillar orifices.”

I laugh, and I walk over to my bookshelf. I pick the heftiest book, and throw it onto Mr. Plutor. Much like the life of Mr. Trickle ended, Mr. Plutor’s unfortunate life comes to an unfortunate end.

Oh! But now there is a stain on my beautiful rug!

Hang Fire

by Adam Payton

The pistol must have jammed. That was the last thought Nathan Travers had before the bullet entered his chest.

He opened his eyes to find himself adrift in open waters. No light pierced through the darkness all around him. He tried to swim, but his limbs were heavy and the waves unyielding. Instinctively, he struggled to hold his breath. After much struggling, his head finally broke the surface, and he was able to see to it.

Raised in front of him was a set of high iron gates rising into a vast black storm. A thick endless wall of cracked gray stone extended from the Gate on either side. He found himself moved in its direction by some invisible force. Nathan never thought himself a particularly good man, but as he trudged his way out of the waters washing him ashore, he couldn't help but notice that this didn't look like Heaven.

On every side of him, other people were making their way out of the ocean. To his left, an older lady rushed past him to embrace another woman already waiting on the shore. The crowd passed the crying pair, and, as if of one mind, approached the Gate. With nowhere else to go, Nathan followed.

At the Gate, a winged creature of frightening beauty was there to greet them. It gave a knowing and haughty look as it assessed the fresh wave of humanity that approached. It took Nathan a moment to break through his fascination enough to approach.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Travers. Right on time. Here is your ticket.”

Nathan held his ground before he could be pushed aside. “Excuse me, I think there's been a mistake. I never did anything for me to be here.”

It smiled at him. It was the kind of smile that told Nathan that it got this sort of thing all the time. The kind of smile that truly got on his nerves. There wasn't much else that Nathan disliked as much as being dismissed. Still, he pushed through his frustration. There wasn't much use in yelling right now anyway.

“Listen, I... I go to church,” he lied. “Have gone to church. I donate to charity. There's a kid in Africa who eats because of me, for god's sake. I can prove it to you,” he insisted. “What do you need me to do?”

“Mr. Travers, it's too late for that now. You should have thought of all of this before you died. Everyone that achieved Salvation lived their lives in the name of the Almighty, so you really have no excuse left. Now if that's all,

Cotton Candy and Orange Sorbet

by Janet Berry



please wait with the rest of the damned until Judgment Day?”

Again, it offered his ticket to him, a small rectangular slip of paper. Nathan gingerly accepted the ticket, where it seeped into his being and ceased to be seen.

“What happens on Judgment Day?”

He received no answer but a shove from behind. He slowly moved towards the others to wait for the Gate to open. Personally, he couldn't see what the rush was. As the angel had said, they were all damned to burn here.

He didn't travel far, not at first. As he looked around his new home, he just knew he had to find some way to escape. Perhaps he should pray. If nothing else, it would be a good time to start.

No, he corrected himself. He should have started yesterday.

Despite how crowded it was, Nathan felt nothing but despair from this gray and endless field, the entire land darkened by the storm that raged just out of sight. Flowers laid here once, before the herds moved in. Now it was a sterile place, as centuries of moving masses have stolen whatever beauty once was. Even God's last gift to them has been ruined by this place.

It was the sea of inhabitants that truly disturbed him. Countless numbers of them stood, knelt or paced in every direction. They had all of the expected human features, but each one shared the same hollow face. They stared at him without seeing. Shadows of men, gazing at nothing with empty eyes.

The reality of where he was stuck began to set in. He tried to force himself to overcome the rising dread, but to no effect. Panic crawled down his throat and through his chest. He clawed at his skin, almost as if to prove to himself that he existed in this place, that this body was, in fact, real.

He had to get out of here.

Weeks seemed to pass as he wandered this desolate wasteland. A few faces popped up among the masses, all huddled together for company, but he never stayed. He saw no hope of lasting satisfaction for anyone in this place. Instead, he searched for that one stone that remained unturned. There had to be something here that could lead to a possible escape. And yet, above all else, he never entered the water. Its very presence seemed to repel him.

“You look lost.”

Nathan quickly found the owner of the voice: a small, dark haired woman leaning against another one of the faceless men. She spread her arm wide and announced, “Welcome to the In-Between.”

He looked around as though to reacclimate himself, now that this place had a name. “This isn't Hell?”

She gestured at the large wall running alongside the Gate, hanging over everything. "That's Hell right there. This is just the waiting room."

The woman invited him to sit down, which he unhurriedly did.

"I'm Nathan." He leaned forward to offer his hand, as he so often did in life.

Rather than accept his handshake, the girl occupied herself with her hair. "What's happening there, Nathan?"

He lowered his hand, mildly disappointed. "Not much. I'm still trying to adjust to all of this." He paused a moment to settle in, before asking her name.

"Call me Alice."

"It's nice to meet you, Alice."

She ignored his pleasantries, and instead asked, "So how do you enjoy being dead so far?"

Nathan sighed in displeasure, and let himself reflect on his current situation. Slowly, deliberately, he answered. "I'd really rather not stay any longer than I have to. I don't like this place. It feels wrong."

"Don't let it get to you," she said. "You get used to it."

"What about them?" Nathan gestured at the empty creature being used as a lawn chair.

"You get used to them too."

Nathan said nothing to that. There wasn't anything to say. He couldn't quite get a grasp on this woman he found himself across from. Alice sat there as if she was perfectly content with her lot in death, but Nathan couldn't believe that. She seemed far too aware of the way things are to have accepted them herself.

"How'd you die?" Alice asked it in such a way that could only have been motivated by mere curiosity. Nathan thought right back to the gun that almost didn't fire. Perhaps it never did. Perhaps he was still safe at home after all.

"Business partner and I had a disagreement."

"Ah, you're a businessman." She smiled humorlessly. "Well that explains why you ended up down here."

"Junior Executive," he corrected.

Alice waved him off dismissively. "It doesn't matter what title you give yourself. I know your type."

Nathan couldn't find it in himself to disagree all that strongly. He questioned whether it was considered rude to ask her in return, but figured that it couldn't matter if she had already done so. "What about you?"

"Me? I'm not anything."

"No, I mean, how did you die?"

Alice stopped as if trying to remember. "Overdose. Lousy way to go,

Love Dance
by John Guernsey



you know?”

Nathan didn't know anything about that, but he nodded in sympathy nonetheless.

The two were quiet as they busied themselves with simply observing their surroundings. Alice had by now managed to dislodge her hand from her hair. She seemed to find something interesting to watch in the distance. The figure she rested upon started to move now. Nathan watched as it clawed limply at the dirt, as if looking for something long gone.

“What exactly are they?”

Alice refocused on Nathan, then followed his sightline to the creature she leaned against. “You talkin’ about the Shades?”

“Is that what they’re called?” If nothing else, it was a fitting name for the wretches that swarmed these fields.

“More the name we came up with. We had to call them something, the damned things are everywhere. No one knows quite how it happens.”

“They’re people, aren’t they?” Nathan asked, dreading her answer. He received only a single nod in return. “Does everyone end up like them?”

“Oldest ones here are only a few hundred years dead. The rest are left as these guys.” She cuffed the unresponsive Shade on the head to emphasize the point.

“So eventually, we’ll all just peter out of existence.” He’d expected as much, but the concept still depressed him.

It seemed to strike Alice differently, as her face scrunched together in thought. “Why is everyone always against petering out of existence? Petering’s fine. Let me peter. You know who else’ll peter out of existence? Grandparents, surrounded by their family. I’ll take that over some blaze of glory any day.”

“Yeah, well I think it’s a little late for that.”

Another lull developed in the conversation. Perhaps it was this world’s utter lack of anything to do or see, but Nathan couldn’t think of a single new topic. Alice seemed to be contemplating something, as she leaned forward to gaze at Nathan with interest. She was the one to break their silence.

“So given the chance, would you do something to change all this?”

“Of course I would,” Nathan replied. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well,” she said slowly, “if you’re really interested, I know some people who’re doing just that. I’m meeting up with some fellows about it later. They say Joel’s gonna be there.”

“Who’s Joel?” he asked.

“A leader of the people down here in the underworld. Calls himself a freethinker, talks about escaping. You should come with.”

“Sounds like fun. I’ll be there.”

“Awesome.” She leaned back, but Nathan was left with even more questions. What kind of meeting was it? What did they expect of him? Per-

haps he should offer to bring snacks.

“When is it?” he asked, if only for something to say.

Alice gave a smile in reply, as though enjoying some small inside joke. “Who knows?”

Nathan decided to stick around near Alice until the meeting. Unfortunately, it was difficult for him to determine how long they had waited without a need for sleep nor any sun in the sky. They chatted amicably about their lives before death and the things they missed.

He didn't know what clued her in, but suddenly Alice stood up and together they followed along the Wall to a small remote beach. The confining ocean stretched out before them. Nathan was used to sand being hot, but the storm overhead gave it an unnatural chill. Joel seemed to have chosen an area isolated away from the majority of Shades. Instead, there were only a few dozen. Perhaps even the Shades could feel the water's presence.

“Remember, if any angels show up, just book it.”

There were far more people gathered together here than he had seen so far. Nathan took the opportunity to really take in who the others that were down here with him were. Most seemed older than he was, having probably lived their lives to old age. Not a child was in sight.

“Do you think bin Laden's around here somewhere?” Nathan joked.

“Who's that?” Alice asked, giving Nathan pause. By the look on her face, he could tell her confusion was genuine. He reminded himself just how long some people had been waiting down here.

Before he could respond, a man stepped up onto a dune of sand, elevating himself above the crowd. A quick word from Alice told him that this man was Joel.

Joel was a rather small man, but as he stood surefooted above them all, face set in a deep grimace, Nathan found himself not wanting to cross him. Joel raised his hand to quiet the voices that had begun to rise. When he spoke, a vaguely southern accent tinted his words.

“When I first arrived in this In-Between, I thought it to be a fitting punishment. But eternity is too long, and a hundred years ... is but a drop in the bucket. I know now where my sins lie. It's in letting others take what I know is mine!”

The crowd roared a cheer, Alice the loudest. Once the boom had settled, Nathan murmured to the girl, “I thought you weren't looking for a blaze of glory.”

“That's different. We're not going to die. We'll be reborn.”

Somehow, Nathan didn't see such a difference.

“We are damned,” Joel continued. “Unwanted. Our mere existence burdens the angels, so instead they twist us into those things. They curse us with that horrible demise.”

Nathan instinctively looked over at one of the few Shades around, who seemed to make eye contact with unblinking eyes. Despite all that he thought, he'd couldn't help not wanting to share in their fate simply from the pull of a trigger.

“And what of those in Heaven? Do they help us or hold us in their thoughts? What sick satisfaction they must feel to know that they will receive anything they could desire while we're left here to rot. What makes them more deserving?”

A woman standing off to the side seemed to rise up at that, yelling over the crowd. “Please! We will be allowed to join them in Salvation if we pay penance for our sins. We just have to show patience!”

A heavy set man near the front raised his voice, loud and angry. “You expect me to wait that long? My wife is up there waiting for me. I have to see her, and you're not going to stop me!”

The crowd roared their approval. When the woman spoke again, her desperation was nearly palpable. She turned to her listening audience, plea clearly heard in her voice. “Please, you must-”

Joel cut her off with a swift assertion of control. “They do this to control us! Separate us. Strip us of everything we have. They are the enemy, and will show us no such mercy. We're gonna have to do the same. Pretty soon, we're gonna take back what's ours!”

The crowd cheered again, louder this time. Joel seemed to find this satisfactory, for he waved to the crowd and descended from his stage. Alice yelled for Joel's attention as Nathan stood silent in thought. Joel casually nodded over in their direction, but continued on without stopping to chat.

Once Joel was out of sight, Alice turned back to Nathan, a flushed and expectant look on her face. In the light of her glow, Nathan could admit to himself that Alice was actually quite attractive. “So?”

He answered slowly. “I'm not sure. Making enemies of angels..”

It must've been the wrong answer, for Alice's exuberance seemed to drain away, replaced by disappointment. “C'mon Nathan, that kind of 'heavenly love' doesn't exist in this place.”

“I know, but the idea just sits wrong with me.”

“Do you want to go to Hell then?” she demanded.

Again, Nathan held off on answering before he actually knew what to say. There was only one answer, though. “I'd like to avoid it if I could. What with the torture and all.”

She looped her arm with his. “Then let's go.”

The plan was in place. Everything had to go perfectly.

The large group of thirty damned hid out of view of the receiving angel, who Nathan had spoken with only once before on that first day. They stood hidden by the curve in the Wall, stood shoulder to shoulder. Nathan was wedged between Alice and a short bearded fellow he hadn't met. The man was muttering small prayers under his breath, doubtlessly asking whoever was listening for forgiveness.

"Quiet!" another man whispered. "You might warn them."

Alice nudged his arm, getting his attention. "I just wanted to say that I'm glad you're here with me. You're a good guy Nathan."

"Where's this coming from?"

She nudged him again, playfully this time. "Get bent, Travers. I was just wishing you luck."

"Do you think we'll need it?"

"Don't worry," she assured him. "Joel will get us out of here."

Soon enough, the signal was given, and as one, they all charged. In truth, the gatekeeper was the least of their problems. It was all beauty, no beast. Nathan's group only needed to reach it in time. It was the rest of the angels, and the power they wielded, that were the true threats to their plan.

Luckily, it never saw them. It was too busy damning another lost soul with one of those cursed tickets. The large man from the meeting was the first to reach it.

A hand fell upon the angel, then another. It tried to struggle and smite them down, but was never given the chance. More of them came now, swarming over the holy being. It wore no smile as it was torn down from its throne.

"Malik, please!" it cried.

A rock to the side of the head silenced it, but the damage was done.

With a quick word from Joel, the crowd moved towards the ocean, right near the spot the new arrivals appear. As the place they had all entered, the front of the Gate was chosen because it was the only guaranteed way in. With any luck, it was also a way out. The few newcomers standing nearby startled, confused by this strange turn of events. Without their tickets, they fled freely into the field.

Nathan was the first to reach the beach, and was thus among those closest to the water. Joel stepped up next to him, but gave him a strange look of distaste.

"New guy! Get in the back."

In all of their time coming up with the plan, this was the first time their leader had addressed him directly. Nathan was embarrassed to admit that it surprised him.

"What does it matter? We're a team, right?"

Joel looked like he was ready to say something, but restrained himself.

Torso

by Miyoung Lee



“I don’t have time for your nonsense. Just do as you’re told.”

When Nathan didn’t move, Joel grabbed his arm, physically dragging him from his spot, before turning back to organize his troops. A silent and disbelieving frustration flew through him, and for just a moment, Nathan thought of disobeying the man, even if it meant ruining their chance of escape.

It was only Alice calling him over that stopped that for sure. He took his time returning to her, despite the seriousness of their situation. Ignoring her confusion, Nathan got in his place behind her.

As he placed his hands on her back, she turned her head to him, a questioning look about her.

“What did you do?”

His anger momentarily redirected, Nathan indignantly asked, “Why are you blaming me?”

She shrugged dismissively, as if she neither accused him nor cared enough to. Reigning in his frustration, Nathan focused back on the task at hand.

Side by side, all of the escapees lined up on the edge of the ocean. They were joined now by others who had decided to take advantage of the chance to escape, nearly doubling their numbers. Alone, they could do nothing to move any farther. The waters prevented it. The chink in the armor was the ocean’s dependence on willpower. Joel had explained everything they needed to know. You couldn’t move through the water yourself, but you could be moved by another. It was on this hope that their plan hitched.

By pushing on the back of those in front of you, and pulling on those behind, the gathered line of humans could effectively inchworm across the ocean. Together, a united wall of men and women advanced into the waters. With Alice as his shield, the phalanx marched ever onwards.

Before he knew it, the ocean was already up to his chest. Nathan glanced down at the water, where he chanced upon his reflection. Who was that staring back at him? The cheeks were too sunken, the eyes vacant and unassuming. It took him a moment to realize. Somehow, he didn’t recognize his own face. That had to be impossible, though. Surely the water must have been twisting his image.

The tide seemed to change now. Water rushed under their feet, drawn to a source just out of sight. Most still seemed to need each other’s help, but they were making an easier time of it. Still, they were too slow. The gatekeeper’s cry for help had drawn them. Help had arrived.

A line of angels stood on the open water, waiting for the rebelling humans to approach. Near one of the angels was an immaculately carved stone crate. Ancient holy symbols lined the outside of it, safely sealing inside whatever rested within. There in the middle, with its hand resting on the crate, stood an angel far exceeding the others. The frightened whispers of those

around him let Nathan know that this was Malik, archangel of hell.

Where the gatekeeper was beautiful, Malik was imposing. Black wings of fire grew from its back, nearly blinding the crowd. Waves crashed under its feet, but it danced upon the surface, as though even the world itself was beneath its power. There was no compassion or compromise to be seen in its stern and stony gaze.

It spoke. "Joel McComas, take your men, turn back and wait until Judgment Day."

Joel's voice called out from the front, yelling only a single word. "Never!"

Without so much as a flinch or trace of pity, Malik reached down and opened up the crate, which let out a dark and sinister glow. Even as the angel reached inside, Joel urged his rebellion forward, himself at the forefront.

The hellfire manifested in Malik's outstretched hand, and within a blink of the eye, Joel's form went up in flames. He fell to the water in a shriek of utter agony. Through the ocean it burned him, body and soul. It was but a small glimpse of what awaited them all beyond the Gate.

At the sight of the flames, the tightly knit group unraveled. The majority of them fled, self-preservation kicking in. A few desperate pairs made last-ditch attempts to move forward still, but were quickly intercepted by the waiting angels. Nathan never saw any of this. A panicked shove from behind was all he knew.

He felt the water enter him. Through his nose and in his mouth. Three times he struggled to the surface, only for another panicked man or woman to shove him back under. Finally, a hand gripped him, and dragged him free of the depths.

Alice was shouting something into his face, but he couldn't hear her. He only noticed those caught in the hellfire as they screamed in endless suffering. No grace or mercy lived in those hellish flames. While most had turned and ran, others still struggled forward.

His attention snapped back to Alice, who had grabbed his face in her hands. "We have to keep moving!"

She turned forward, determined to reach her only chance of redemption. She was so close, she could feel it through the heat of the flames. Just a little bit closer. She ignored the hellfire that was rising all around her, for she could see it now. Deep under the water, the ground dropped off, surely leading to another place. Even as she felt Nathan's hand slip from her back, she continued to move onwards, right towards that perilous edge. The last Nathan ever saw of Alice was her screaming obscenities into the rising mist.

Nathan fled from the flames, the waves pushing him as fast as he could move away from the horror behind him. He continued his desperate escape until the smoke and steam that had risen was finally out of sight. Tears

Pink Moment
by Paul Steinkoenig



flowed unbidden down his sopping mess of a face, as stray mutters flew from his mouth. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Every face he saw was the same: his. He now shared their look of despair. What must they have all seen to look as horrible as he? Or had they simply given up?

Farther still he walked, until he spotted something that did not belong. Or perhaps, it belonged more than any single one of them. A single yellow flower, growing out of a crack in the Wall.

One good deed! he desperately asked of the world. Let me know one good deed.

Through his tears and his torment, Nathan was sure that he had to protect it somehow, and, not knowing what else to do, knelt down beside it.

New faces had started to pour into the area, perhaps as a result of the ended battle. Nathan took no notice of this. He merely stared at that flower, hoping that it would stay. Everything else might as well not exist anymore. Time passed, but he continued to stare at his flower, and for the last time he wondered. Why did that bullet take so long to reach him?

Contributors

Livia Abramoff won the 2015 Ventura Valdez Poetry Contest. She is a student at Montgomery College-Takoma Park/Silver Spring who has recently been accepted into its STEM program on the Germantown campus. She holds an Honorable Mention in the 2014 Ventura Valdez Poetry Contest.

Jonathan Avila recently took a poetry creative writing course at the Takoma Park/Silver campus. He hails from Washington, D. C. and considers himself a spoken word poet.

Alexander Barringer recently took a poetry creative writing course at the Takoma Park/Silver Spring campus. His work and writing have a symbiotic relationship.

Patrice Belton recently took a poetry writing course at the Takoma Park/Silver Spring campus. She won an Honorable Mention in the 2015 Ventura Valdez English Poetry Contest.

Janet Berry holds an MA from the University of Louisville and has had her work exhibited in numerous galleries and her work is in collections. She has had a studio with the Maryland National Park and Planning Commission and Pyramid Atlantic. Making art full-time occupies her time and she is especially grateful to Profs. Joyce Jewell and Wilfred Brunner.

Grace Cavalieri is the founder/producer of “The Poet and the Poem” for public radio, now from the Library of Congress. She’s the monthly poetry reviewer/columnist for *The Washington Independent Review of Books*. Author of several plays and books, her newest book is *Life Upon The Wicked Stage: A Memoir*. She recently visited the Takoma Park campus to present her work.

Teri Ellen Cross Davis is a Cave Canem fellow and has received scholarships to attend the Virginia Center for Creative Arts and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Her first collection *Haint* will be published in 2016 by Gival Press, as part of the inaugural Giron/Valdez Series for Unique Voices in Literature.

Charles Deutsch is a retired periodontist who practiced in Falls Church for 40 years and who taught at Georgetown part time for 25 years. He has taken sculpture with Lincoln Mudd, as well as courses with Joyce Jewell, Tarra

Banditt, and Wil Bruner.

Bree Douthitt is majoring in Graphic Design at the School of Art and Design at Montgomery College. She plans on continuing her education at University of Maryland Baltimore County or Pennsylvania College of Art and Design. She has a background in filmmaking with a short documentary on a local business in the Silver Spring area and a special segment on Montgomery County Public Access Television on bullying. Her work was recently shown at the King Street Gallery in Silver Spring.

Tiffani Gomez is originally from Washington, D.C., but she has spent her teen years living between Florida and California. She recently earned her AFA in studio art and works as a portrait artist and sales associate at Blick Art Materials. She currently has her sights set on continuing her education at a fashion school.

John Guernsey is primarily a print maker and has studied etching extensively with Professor Joyce Jewell. He recently displayed 21 pieces at a show at the Takoma Park Community Center and sold eight works. He has shown work in 8 past *Artomatics* in Washington, D.C., with the last one in partnership with Maryland National Park and Planning Commission in Hyattsville, MD.

Anya Higman was born in Russia but grew up in Washington, D.C. She has been a fan of poetry since she was a child and hopes to take more poetry classes.

Waringa Hunja is an obsessive reader, occasional writer, and an aspiring artist. She is currently studying Graphic Design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Charles Loren Johnson has been studying art at the Takoma Park/Silver Spring campus.

Mariette Klein holds a BA in fine arts in painting from CW Post College in Long Island, New York. She has worked as an operating room technician and retired as an RN specializing in oncology and hematology after 39 years. Thereafter she took a painting class and has taken art classes every single semester since then.

Miyoung Lee graduated from university in Korea and subsequently came to the USA and has been studying jewelry and sculpture at Montgomery College.

Richard Lorr worked as an attorney for the U.S. government for 31 years. Since retirement, he has studied painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, voice, poetry, Spanish and French at Montgomery College and the Writer's Center. He is married and has two grown children.

Marcia Marroquin is studying English literature at Takoma Park/Silver Spring. She rediscovered her passion for writing and wants to pursue a literary career. When she is not writing, she delves into fashion and spends time with her dog Flo, a Tibetan-spaniel mix.

Carlisa Martin has been studying art at Takoma Park/Silver Spring.

Betzaida Nolasco is Salvadoran but she was born in Washington, D.C. and now resides in Takoma Park. She attended Montgomery Blair High School before she enrolled in Montgomery College under the Scholars program. In May 2015, she graduated from Montgomery College with an associate's degree in International Studies and transferred to the University of Maryland, College Park.

Osee Obaonrin is a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) where she is currently attempting to find a blissful marriage between the intelligence of the hand and the intelligence of the mind. She enjoys writing poetry and exploring the vast worlds of textile arts and how the two can convene to produce provoking art pieces.

Adam Payton has been studying literature and creative writing at Takoma Park/Silver Spring.

René Pedraza del Prado is a graduate of Montgomery College and is studying at Hampshire College to continue his education. As long as he can remember, he has had a passion for language. He recently went to India to study Urdu.

Kim Roberts is the author of four books of poems, most recently *Fortune's Favor: Scott in the Antarctic* (Poetry Mutual Press, 2015). She edited the anthology *Full Moon on K Street: Poems About Washington, DC* (Plan B Press, 2010), and is co-editor of the journals *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* and the *Delaware Poetry Review*, and the web exhibit *DC Writers' Homes*. Roberts was a visiting writer on the Takoma Park and Rockville campuses of Montgomery College in November 2015. Her fifth collection *The Scientific Method* is due in 2017.

Susan Scheid is the author of *After Enchantment*, her first book of poetry. Her poetry has appeared most recently in Silver Birch Press, *Tidal Basin Review*, *Re-*

quiem, *Rose Red Review*, *The Unrorean*, *Bark!* and the chapbook, *Poetic Art*. Scheid currently serves on the Board of Directors for Split This Rock.

Paul Steinkoenig is a local sculptor whose work has been shown locally and in the New York area and has been featured in an article in the Washington Post. Previously, he worked as a press officer for the US Department of State. Steinkoenig states: “Balance fosters harmony; symmetry demonstrates perfect balance ... Then bending the balance to create an uncertainty allows me to reveal something that expresses movement and rawness—hidden with a bit of mystery.”

Joann Everly Tell began studying drawing and painting at Montgomery College in fall 2014 after many years of being inactive in art. She holds a BA in history from the University of Pennsylvania, and she resides in downtown Silver Spring with her husband, Will, and daughters, Madeleine and Charlotte.

Adriel Vega has been studying Spanish and recently won an Honorable Mention in the 2015 Ventura Valdez Spanish Poetry Contest.

Andrew Wilkinson, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, moved to the DC area alone at 17 and has been here ever since. Art has always been a passion of his but a cancer scare in 2011 at the age of 28 woke him up and he has dedicated his life to what he loves. After chemotherapy, he enrolled in Montgomery College to pursue his art part/full time depending on health status, where he has maintained Dean’s List status. He plans on transferring to a four year university to continue his education.

