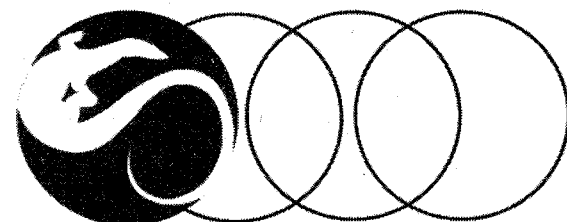


the monitor.



volume 11 >> issue 7

a campus collective.

12 December, 2005

CAMPUS ADDRESS

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The Monitor is published every other Tuesday.
We meet every Thursday at 9:00 p.m. in BH 312.
Each writer is responsible for his or her own work.

"Among people who have learned something from
the 18th century (say, Voltaire) it is a truism,
hardly deserving discussion, that the defense of
the right of free expression is not restricted to
ideas one approves of, and that it is precisely in
the case of ideas found most offensive that this
right must be vigorously defended. Advocacy of
the right to express ideas that are generally
approved of is, quite obviously, a matter of no
significance."

--Noam Chomsky

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First Place Story

On the Steps

fiction by >> Neil Stransky

One chime shouts into the night from the cathedral tower. An old man dressed in raggedy layers sits on one of the lower steps and gazes out upon the rain-slickened streets. Approaching from the left is a young woman wearing a tattered skirt that reaches her ankles from beneath a heavy overcoat. Despite the briskness of her pace, it is clear that she is weary. She carries a bundle of white linens in the cold night. The soles of her shoes create a soft rhythm that only she can hear on the deserted sidewalk.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Is this the cathedral of St. Jerome Emiliani?"

"No, dear. It might be the one down the street there, though. I ain't never really been to any the others in the city."

"Oh. Well, thank you, sir. Happy Easter."

The young woman lowers her head and resumes her solemn procession up the street.

"Good night, ma'am. Best of luck. It ain't Easter yet, though. Two more lonely nights 'fore that."

The young woman stops and turns to the old man whose gaze has fallen back on the street. The accordion of a melancholy norteña ballad rolls past in a crumpled Ford 100, fading away imperceptibly into the dead air.

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry. I keep losing track of the days lately."

"Guess we all do sometimes, don't we? Even the Lord's days. But I s'pose days aren't what matter anyways."

"No, I guess they aren't."

A silence sets in. The young woman teeters back and forth on her toes a few times

then stops. Her posture gives the effect that gravity is working harder on her than it does on most. Her eyes and mind rest drowsily on a step halfway to the top.

"Not to be nosy, ma'am, God knows that's one thing nobody never called me, but could I ask why you're looking for just the one cathedral? If it's a place to get warm or say a few prayers you need, this one's as good as any other."

"Oh, yes. Well, you see, it was always a favorite of my mothers and, well, I guess it's always been somewhat special to me too."

"Hm. Funny what this week can do to our



Illustration by >> Adam Dorhauer

memories, ain't it?"

A pack of street dogs, perhaps a hundred feet away, harasses a mongrel whose high-pitched yelps pierce the night. He manages to escape and scurries up an alley on three good legs. The pack doesn't bother to pursue him.

"I lost botha my parents when I was thirteen," resumes the old man, "the day I turned it, actually. These steps kinda been my mother ever since. I ain't never been much for religion, but it's

a good place to get bread. You lose her at a young age?"

"Yes. Well, no. I didn't know my mother. She lost me a few days after I was born."

Another silence takes hold. This time there is neither music nor the cry of the helpless to destroy it. The old man's whole body rocks backward and forward on the steps even though he only needs to nod his head.

"Yep, I been on these steps a long time. Thing is, they become just about whatever a person needs 'em to be. I seen a guy stabbed right over there one time. Gets a knife five inches in his gut. Tries crawlin' up these steps. Can't even

use his feet. Just doin' the best he can with his elbows." The old man slowly turns and nods his head at a spot near the top of the stairs. "Nope, never made it to the doors, though. Guess he was thinkin' heaven-musta been waiting for 'im up there. Poor bastard. Fixin' to crawl to heaven."

"Maybe it was."

"Maybe it was. I been up there a few times, though. Peeked in those doors. More lookin' like a buncha fancy decorations, you ask me. Cathedral's been good to me, though. No reason to complain. Always gimme my bread and they don't never shoo me away. Here, dear, lemme take those linens for you. I been here a long

time, long time."

The young woman slowly hands the old man the bundle of white linens. He rises to his feet and gently kisses her forehead. She walks down the street in the direction she came, but her feet move with no less fatigue. The linens and the secret they contain will always be with her. The old man sits back down, holding the bundle carefully on his knees. Quietly, he hums an old, familiar hymn.

Editor's Box

Finally! The short story contest issue is here! Congratulations to our winner, Neil. It was a very close call for first and second place, so congratulations to Erin, too. She's great. Thank you to everyone who submitted stories. There's some very interesting stuff, so readers should try to read them all.

Sorry this issue is out a little late this year. Things got a little crazy there for us editors with schoolwork, and this was the earliest we could handle it. That's just one of the great things that come along with being your campus collective newspaper.

Everyone have a good holiday or whatever. We'll see you in January. Send us articles for the first issue! Surely everyone will get at least one CD or DVD for Christmas. You can write a review.

-The Monitor editors

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Second Place Story

Twenty-three Grams

Fiction by >> Erin Roper

The gym is crowded. It's January in this twenty-four hour gym and the elliptical machines are in constant use by new members and old members that haven't been since before August.

He runs on the treadmill, those heavy, wide treadmills that offer a false sense of security. The elliptical machines shoot into a smart diagonal a little ways to his left, a horseshoe of cardiovascular equipment all pointed towards a big screen TV. He wipes the sweat from his face with the crook of his elbow, peering over the top of his arm. The girls' bodies' on the machines are blocked from the neck down and he thinks their bobbing heads look like horseback riders.

The elliptical machines make no sense to him. They even seem dangerous, though he knows no more than the speeding rubber roll of road currently spinning under his feet. One missed step and he could be pulled backwards, his nose and mouth slamming into the control board before being thrown back onto the coarse carpeting. But the elliptical machines, they are different. So much coordination, so much balance seems to be required. He guesses that there is some trick to the machine, maybe some sort of resistance mechanism.

The treadmill beeps at him, breaking his gaze from the other patrons and down to the summary of his workout. Lowering the speed,

he begins to cool down. The news anchor on TV bumbles in the background, mixed with the addition of tinny music escaping a pair of headphones. He looks to his right to see a woman stepping onto the treadmill next to his, the tell-tale white iPod headphones protruding from her ears.

Fat, he thinks, fat, fat, fat. What a fat, fat bitch.

Next to her is a man and he wonders idly if it is her boyfriend or husband or fellow fat friend because the man is fat too, a fat, fat slob. He remembers the doctor grabbing a fistful of his gut nearly a year and half ago, telling him he needed to lose weight. Telling him he was fat, to look in the mirror and see how fat he was. Doctor's orders were doctor's orders, but oh! How fast it turned into something so much more than doctor's orders. What a powerful addiction that took over! Lifting, biking, running, stretching, swimming, sweating, working no more for mere doctor's orders.

He rests his fingers against his neck, checking his pulse before placing his feet on the sides of the treadmill and switching it to standby. He rolls his shoulders back and stoops down to grab a nearby disinfectant bottle and rag.

The glass front of the aerobics room is before the men's locker room and he watches the sorry fat fucks as he passes attempting to keep up with the rigorous Pilates routine that the instructor guides them through.

Sorry, sorry, fat fucks, he thinks, shaking his head.

He dresses quickly and leaves the gym

deciding he can't wait until all these stupid fat fucks' three month trial memberships expire. It's dark outside, the city lampposts glowing softy. The luminescent hands of his wristwatch point to ten o'clock. He's hungry, but he knows eating this late will only work towards slowing his metabolism. Still, as he walks the city blocks to the bus stop and passes under those Golden Arches, he can't help but to feel a slight tingling in his cheeks.

Forty grams of fat in a Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese, he recites to himself. Sixteen in a McChicken. Twenty five in a large fry and eleven in a small fry.

The high pitched laugh of a child grabs his attention, and he turns to see a mother and a little boy exiting the restaurant, white bags in hand. The mother activates the remote unlock on a purple mini van near the sidewalk.

"My God you're fat," he says without thinking, lip curling.

He thinks at first that maybe she didn't hear him, but she says, "Excuse me?"

"I said, 'my God you're fat.' Fat, fat bitch," he says, stepping towards the illuminated van. The muscles in his legs are taut from the treadmill and he smiles, enjoying the feeling. He points a finger at the boy and every muscle utilized in the action leaps out to him, long cords of protein developed over months and months of strenuous weight training.

"And look at Junior here. What a little porker, just like his sow of a mom."

The boy looks scared and he likes it. The mother steps in front of her son and for a

moment he must admire that, admire this worthless, weak woman challenging him. "If you touch us I'll scream," she says in a low voice. "I'll scream."

He laughs a harsh, short bark of a sound and reaches forward to snatch the take-out bags from her fat fist.

"Save your breath, you fat slut," he says in disgust. "I wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole. You're fat. Fat, fat slut." The kid's crying now, a low terrified weeping, but he could care less. He rips a double cheeseburger from the bag and says, "This is why you're fat."

He squeezes the burger, the feeling of it smashing beneath his iron grip disgusting. "This is why you're fat," he screams, face inches from the woman's. She turns her head away and he can see her bottom lip trembling. "There's twenty-three grams of fat in this burger. This is why the whole world thinks America is nothing but a country full of fat, lazy fucks."

He wonders if his spit has landed on her face or whether she's just perspiring heavily like the fat, disgusting bitch that she is. He throws the crushed sandwich down and grinds the greasy concoction into the concrete until it fills the grooves of his running shoes. The sight and feeling of the sandwich under his heel makes him physically ill, and he leans against the mini van, heaving.

Fat bitch.

McDonald's USA. 2005. 11 Nov. 2005 <http://www.mcdonalds.com/app_controller.nutrition.index1.html>.

Third Place Story

The Mourning of My Final

Fiction by >> Adam Buran

Another long stream of vomit cascaded over my teeth and onto the pavement. It compounded in with the first two bouts of heaving I had produced seconds beforehand. Steam drifted off of the viscous regurgitation as it settled onto the dark street. Clouds had swallowed the stars and the descending winter moon, the only light was the faint glow of the streetlights that crept along the asphalt. It gave my retch a glassy sort of look. I heaved again from the acrid smell of bourbon and partially digested pizza, but I had already depleted my reserves of material to exhume. But it seemed that my brain was having a hard time contacting my stomach as I spit out more saliva and stomach acid. I felt like death.

I shifted myself from my knees onto my back; I checked my watch as I gasped for air. Five o'clock, my calc exam was in two hours, I had to get moving. I had to get into a cold shower, I had to get some coffee, I had to get something to eat, I had to look over my notes, I had to put on some clothes unstained by vomit, and I had to stop laying in the middle of the goddamn street. Thoughts frantically bounced through my brain like atoms exploding as they concussed against my skull, like chain gun in my head. I pressed my hands against

my eyes, hard, I wanted to wrap my hands around my brain and shake it until it would just shut up.

"Hey... dude, we... we gotta go." Brian said, crouched over my limp body, trying to rouse me from my stupor.

"Y-You go ahead..." I groaned, pushing my hands deeper into my eye sockets. "I'm just gonna stay here."

"Dude? In the middle of the street?"

"Ye-yeah, it's cool."

"Is... Is something wrong, dude?" Brian asked as his coordination failed and slipped backwards onto his ass.

Yeah Brian, something was wrong. In two hours time I would fail my exam and fall into academic probation. With all of that added pressure there would be no way for me to get my grades back up. I'd be kicked out of this university and no others would want me. After returning home to the glaring disappointment of my parents, I'd have to get a full time job at the dairy plant where I worked over the summer. I'd marry some girl I don't even like after impregnating her during a weekend bender that I went on trying to forget how much I hate my job. We'd squeeze out a few more kids for whom I would feel nothing but resent. I'd die at age forty because the plant has awful healthcare and wouldn't pay for me to get my prostate

checked. So, yeah, something's wrong Brian.

Unfortunately my inebriation didn't allow me to express myself in the eloquent manner to which I was so accustomed. "Fuh... guh.... Shit." I had come to the realization my life was perched on a ledge overlooking complete misery and the most my addled brain could sputter out was two unintelligible grunts and an obscenity. My entire existence was approaching a complete meltdown, all because some phi kappa jerk off said he could drink me under the table. It wasn't fair.

"Come on man, let'sh go!" Brian slurred, standing again, he prodded me with his foot.

"Just... leave me alone." I blurted. I didn't want go anywhere, I wanted to just lay there until things looked better.

"You know what? Whatever man! Wha... Whatever." Brian huffed, consigning me to my own fate. Brian's a good friend, he normally wouldn't leave me to fend for myself in such an altered state. But together we had consumed an amount alcohol exorbitant enough to kill any normal human being. Besides, all I wanted was a little quiet to reflect on the coming storm.

When Brian's muttering faded, I removed my hands from eyes and stared into the sky, into the pale outline of the moon. It looked like it was trying to break through the clouds, trying to pierce them and grant me light. But the clouds held steady as the moon retreated closer to the horizon. My attention shifted from the rough street against

my cheek to my shadow as it loomed larger and larger. I flopped my heavy head to the other direction. A pair of headlights steadily advanced toward me. I couldn't hear the truck over the pangs in my brain. It all felt ethereal, these distant silent lights marching forward.

It wasn't though, it was a truck, getting closer by the second, and it was going to run me over. I may have been trashed but I was lucid enough to see oncoming traffic. I was sober enough to know that if I didn't move I was dead. My pupils dilated and my brain screamed to get up. I lay still. As the truck drew closer I was struck with the spark of recognition. It was the Monday morning booze truck, it supplied alcohol to all the local grocery stores, restocking what they had sold for the weekend. I watched it get bigger as it approached. I wished I had paid more attention in English, I couldn't tell whether my death would be ironic or just coincidental. That bugged me, but even if I wanted to hop up and grab dictionary it was too late. Moments before the truck's impact, I thought about the life of disappointment I had waiting for me, I thought about being the dropout living from paycheck to paycheck. It wouldn't be so bad. That was the last thought to pass through my mind before a very large tire helped my mind pass through the back of my head. My decision had received its reaction. Was it the right decision? How was I supposed to know? I was tanked.

Train Ride Back from Kansas City

fiction by >> **Gemmicka Piper**

I look outside the train window, and stare for hours at the swirling red and cold leaves that make up the frostbitten ground. The wind has turned harsh as it must each time the harvest moon grows near, the sight of pumpkins and little goblins walking hand in hand with princesses and witches have faded far from the corner of memory as once again the family seasons draw near.

The months have passed since I first came to college, and I find myself not recalling how those hours of my life were spent. God, how I hate this time of year, each leaf falls off its branch reaching its destined path, falling gently to the ground. Thanksgiving break is just around the corner and I can't help wondering if anyone actually realizes how lucky that are? Do they even really realize that there are people like me, people with no family to go home to? The train clacks merrily on its way, bound for Kansas City. I huddle further down into the battered seats of the Southwest Chief, and watch as the world flows by, as one house turns into another. Seeing all of this scenery flowing by like water, surpassing time and spaces drags up old memories, times I'll never be able to forget.

It was always so cold in our house, but I guess that's what happens when you don't pay your bill. Frankly I was just glad we still had electricity. We sat around for hours wrapped in our blankets and coats, trying to fight off the cold with an open oven door, but shivering none the less as our bellies called loudly out to be fed. Growing up we didn't have a lot of stuff in the way of new clothes or shoes. We were our average family living from paycheck to paycheck, it just so happened that night now we didn't have any money, and there wasn't really anything in the fridge or even in the cup-

boards that we could eat, even then we were living in the memories of things long pass. The smells of fried chicken, collard greens, and mash potatoes so smooth and buttery you'd think you were in heaven. Sweet potato pies so sweet and creamy and chocolate cake that made you beg for more, so good as the first drop hit your tongue would leave you stuffed to capacity. One day we must have looked up to soon because after that it all seemed too disappeared.

As we all know after Thanksgiving there comes Christmas, and that's a holiday I hate the most of all. I hate the packages that people give knowing that it will never be what I want or as was the case in later years it will never be a gift for me. It's still so cold; now ice decorates the front of the window both inside and out. I hate this time of year as the snowflakes fall and pile high in drifts. I hate how the wind blows against the door getting in through the crack that lived in the window. I think its kind of weird how there's an ice pond in my house and how the dirty blue carpet sticks together were the icicles have formed because our house was so cold that the pipes burst, causing water to get every were. That like so many other previous times of year found us without out heat, we had no heat and the often times below zero cold and twenty to thirty mile winds had us freezing. because we had no food the weight started to dropped, and the room would spend for hours in its complicated dizzy pattern.

I will always remember those days when even though we had nothing we still had something, through out it all we always had each other. It was us...us against the world. Then the day came when we are sent our separate ways. January 28th is a day that I will always remember. I will never forget the red and blue lights or the loud flashing siren. I will

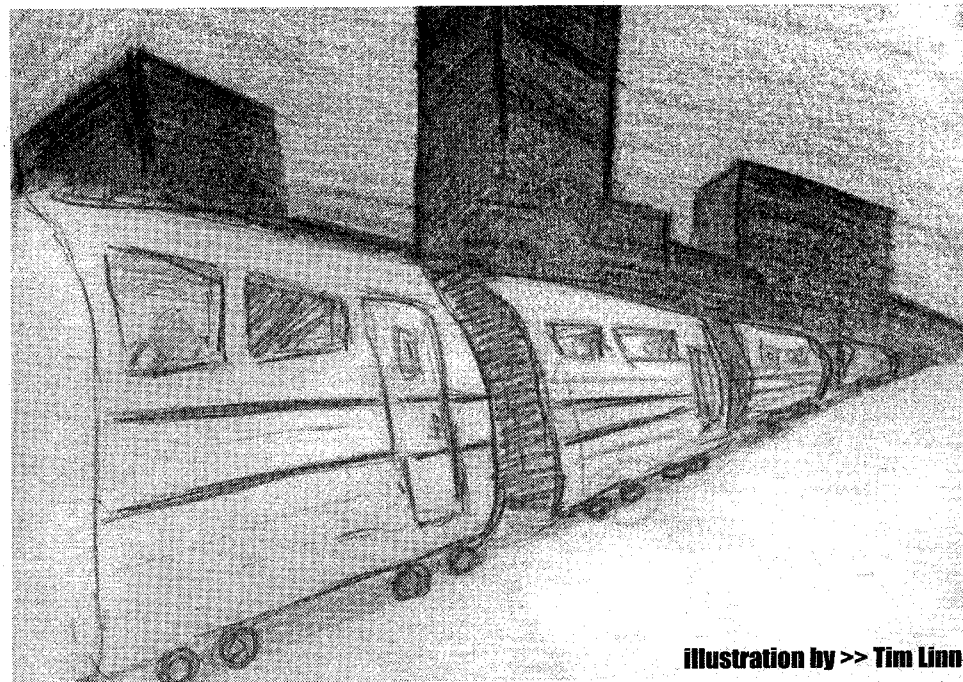


illustration by >> **Tim Linn**

never forget waking up to a bright light in my eyes. In my mind I will forever look upon my mothers face as she cried and I said those words that would play in my head and hers. I will never forget that lie I told as I looked her dead in her face... "Don't worry Momma, will be back before you know it."

"Really?"

I can never stop thinking about the desperation in her face as she looked in my eyes. I looked for the first time in years in into eyes like mine. She got very quite, and the look on her face was so like a child, open and willing to believe in anything that would make reality go away. "Yeah, will be back I promise." I watched her as she watched me, I was only fifteen but even as I spouted those words I knew that it was all a lie, I watched her face as she

struggled to believe in those words knowing to that I had lied. That sent us off in different directions and I haven't seen them since.

On that day I vowed to never lie again.

The train finally pulls up into Kansas City, and I clutch the backpack and the small tub that I had bought and head towards the Union Station were I would be met by the sister of my friend who invited me to spend the weekend. I know that Gods watching and taking care, to bless me with friends like this who actually care enough to worry about a high school friend. I won't fret over what I know not of because in those days when we only had each other we got so close that it inevitable that I should see you again.

"I think some of the family has arrived," said Chip as he walked through the doors.

The priest humbly answered, "I'll give you two some time together and start greeting the guests and seating them." He also whispered to Chip, "Your brother is having a hard time coping with the loss. If you could give him a few words of solace... I think he'd listen to you more than myself."

"Thank you for being so helpful, father."

"I do my best for such loyal members of the church" he replied. At these words the priest left the brothers alone and entered the solemn chapel.

The dreary and drizzly day reflected the air of the room. Before Chip could form his thoughts into words his brother burst out:

"That ghastly woman!" Tears were streaming from his eyes. The gloomy and mournful look had not left his face for the past week.

"Cut the woman some slack, Winky. She was frightened."

"Cut! Cut! Don't you ever say that word around me again!"

"I'm sorry. It was insensitive of me at a time like this." He paused. "Look, Blinkin would not have wanted us to be fighting right now. We should be grateful for the time we've had with him and for the fulfilling life he had."

"It's just not fair! He didn't even see it coming. Poor lad."

"That's because we're visually impaired."

"Oh! So there's an answer for everything is there? It's not our fault the nasty woman smelled like week old cheese! Perfectly aged! That devious

farmer's wife! Tempting old hag! Awww!"

"There-there Winks. It will be okay."

"I didn't even get to say goodbye!"

"Blinkin's in a better place. You have to understand that." Silence filled the room. Winky sobbed. Tears swam through the hands that covered his face.

"Chip..."

"Yes, Winks?"

"I know this probably isn't the best time to ask this... but... How does my tail look?"

"Oh, Come on!

You know very well I can't see it!"

"Seriously Chip!

I don't want to get out there and make a heart felt speech in front of everyone just so they can stare at my stub! Just amuse me. Just humor me!" he pleaded.

"It looks fine Winks. Really - you can barely see the stitches" Chip said sarcastically.

"My career is ruined! No one is going to hire a stumpy-tailed mouse! She castrated me - that wench! I wish I could have gone with Blinkin to that cheesy sanctuary in the skies. There aren't any farmer's wives or carving knives there! Every mouse

has a tail and all the cheese he can eat."

"What career! All we do is run around in search of food, and look where that got us! Tailless! Ridiculed! A brother dead! It's my fault! If we hadn't been so careless! I had to go for the cheese instead of being content with the crumbs in front of me. Oh!

Woe is me!" At that note, Chip lost his composure and fell to the floor bawling and moaning loudly.

"Don't blame yourself Chip. We all wanted the cheese. We knew the dangers ahead of us and we all decided to go for it. There there Chip." Winky put his arm comfortingly on his brother's shoulder and continued, "You know what, Chip, you're right. Blinkin is happier right now. I'm sure of it."

"Thank you my brother." Chip's sobs

dissolved to sighs before he said, "Would you mind if I practiced my speech - I mean, the eulogy? I'd like to do a run-through with an audience."

"Of course. Go right ahead." Winks sat down on a vacant chair and listened intently.

Chip cleared his throat and began, "I would

The Funeral

fiction by >> **Brandi Graham**

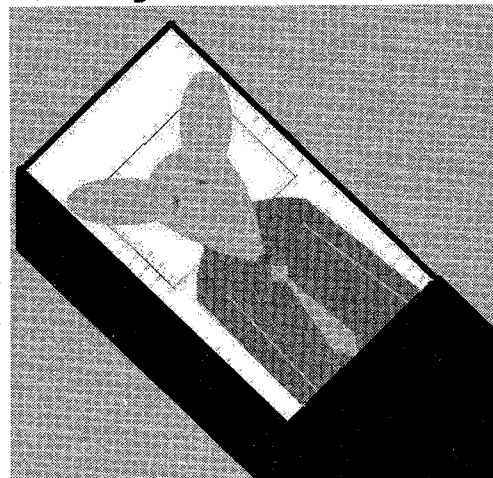


illustration by >> **Annie Schippers**

like to thank you all for joining us on such a somber day. I would not like for us to grieve for our loss, but to be thankful for the time we had with Blinkin. He was a good mouse - one of the best mice I know. I can't help but think of the past, and all of the good times my brother and I shared. I recall when we were young and used to play together for hours, until mother called us home. And when we were older we would tease the cat. Blind as we were, we still managed to elude the fur ball every time."

Chips voice broke with these last words and he paused for a moment before he started, "And Molly, I remember your wedding. I could smell that cheesecake a mile away. I do believe it was the happiest day of Blinkin's life. We all have these fond memories of my dearest brother. That is why I ask you today to take a moment for Blinkin. Smile when you think of him, and feel free to laugh at the good times. It seems hard to do on such a weary and grave day, but Blinkin wouldn't have had it any other way."

Tears were streaming down Winky's face. He sniffed and said, "It was beautiful, heartfelt, perfect."

Chip gave a short smile, hugged his brother and said, "Blinkin did live a good and full life. I don't think he would have wanted to go out any other way - a final adventure with his brothers."

The door to the chapel opened and the priest walked in. "The guests are all here, I think it's time to start boys."

The brothers loosened their grip on one another. Side by side they left the room. Two blind mice.

Two days had passed, and the bodies were still laying in the sun, baking in the heat. Some still groaned, no longer alive but not quite dead. Nobody moved them. Nobody even tried. The blood on the cobblestones was already a dry brown dust, and it would be gone with the first rain. Perhaps they hoped the rain would wash the dead away as well.

There was a time when men could fly, as effortlessly as we walk. Their cities stretched to the heavens, unconstrained by the ground. There were no stairs, and pavement only existed for carts and horses; the sky provided for everything else. Perhaps it was a golden age. Only two days had passed, but Glory could barely remember it.

She walked along the boulevard, trying not to stare at the dead. Part of her wanted to stop; perhaps Mortimer was in there, somewhere... But she steeled herself and kept walking, choking back her tears. No. He was dead. She knew that much.

Glory glanced upwards. Her destination was just ahead; a clockmaker's shop, marked by a wooden hourglass. It lay on the bottom floor of one of the endlessly tall structures. Higher up, there were undoubtedly still people, trapped, knowing that if they stepped outside their doors, the air would no longer catch them. They were starving in their own homes, and there was nothing anybody could do.

Glory went into the shop. A bell jingled as she entered. She heard the sound of something moving around in the back, where it was too dark to see. Soon an older man, his black hair beginning to fade to gray, shuffled in and saw her. She was tall and fair, with bright brandy eyes. She wore a scarf and dress that seemed to be made of many layers of wispy oak-colored fabric.

"Alfred?" asked Glory.

"Sorry, ma'am, but the shop's closed... Oh." He stepped a little closer and pursed his lips. "I'd hoped you had reconsidered."

She shook her head. "Do you have everything?"

Alfred nodded and turned towards the back room. "Yes, I have it. But I have to warn you again, this isn't anything to be trifled with. You could die..."

"I know," she said. "I don't particularly care."

He grunted and lit a candle. The room was cluttered with a thousand botched repairs, piled up on shelves that stretched to the ceiling, but a circle of bare floor had been carved out of the debris. Inside was a boundary drawn in sand, and inside that a table holding two glasses, a bottle of red wine, and a pure white hourglass.

"Wine?" she asked. "You didn't mention that."

"Well, I figure that one of us is going to need it. Probably you more than me." He stepped inside and poured out a glass. "Cheers," he said, and downed it. He sat the glass down and hobbled out. "Help yourself. I've got to finish setting the clocks."

Glory walked over and picked up the other glass. She poured some wine and sipped it, watching Alfred wind the clocks set up around the circle. After he finished the ninth one, he turned back to her. "Well, it's as ready as it's going to be. You remember how to do it?"

"Yes," she replied. "The dance, the hand movements..."

"And the hourglass. That's the most important part."

He looked at the clocks, then back at her, and nodded. She turned the hourglass over and started to dance. Her body moved to the sound of silent music; she rolled her hips slowly, back and forth, and traced shapes in the air with her fingers. Glory began to circle the table, the million veils of her dress trailing like smoke.

"So... Remind me why you're doing this? Just because of the fall?"

She said nothing; she closed her eyes and tried not to listen.

"I mean, it's terrible, don't get me wrong, but if you're so grief-stricken you want to kill yourself... There's easier ways."

She spoke only in the movements of her body.

It began to happen quickly. One clock's alarm started, then another. The cacophony soon reached its height, nine clocks in unison, and it expanded, a wall of chaos-noise that enveloped the whole shop, drawing all the other clocks in, even the busted shells of long-forgotten timepieces.

"It was my fault," she said. "I made them fall."

"What?" yelled Alfred. "Can't hear you over the clocks..."

She screamed. "I said I did it! I'm the reason that they fell from the sky!"

Alfred's eyes went wide. "But... My..." The color drained from his face. "You?" he whispered.

She could not hear, but she could see his expression. She bit her lip and tried to forget him; she just wanted him to know why she needed him. Even if she died, he deserved a little explanation.

Glory felt the dread rise like bile, but she did not hesitate. She closed her eyes, raised her hand and smashed it into the hourglass. It sent shards of glass flying. They ripped into her skin, ribbons of the red humor spilling into the sand.

The sands did not fall like the glass. Instead, they exploded outward, swarming and spilling around her, over her. She breathed them, tasted them, felt them inside.

She had not expected it to work. Glory really had been hoping it would kill her outright; it seemed fitting to die trying to escape the world she destroyed. Glory did not get her wish.

It came without warning. She felt her weight disappear, her pains fall away, her world stutter. She tried to call out to Alfred, but he was not moving, his jaw as slack as it had been before. It was too late now; it was done. She slumped to her knees, her ghostly form impervious to the broken glass beneath.

She closed her eyes for just a moment, and time passed by without her.

The Hourglass

fiction by >> Eric Scott

A Boy with a Red Balloon

Fiction by >> Brad Brown

An important looking man took his son to the park while still wearing his suit and tie. As the boy skipped ahead, clutching the string to a red balloon, the man marveled at how the apple had not fallen far from his tree. The way the boy carried himself, his laugh, it all reminded the man of himself. One day, the boy would grow up to be just like him.

The father smiled in that way fathers do. He liked the idea of having a little version of himself running around.

He sat down on the bench, not fidgeting though it hurt his bottom, and he opened his briefcase. His laptop warmed the tops of his thighs, and he rubbed his eyes, which still ached from eight hours of staring at his office computer. The boy, meanwhile, dashed to the sandbox, the red balloon whipping behind him.

The boy plopped down, a cloud of sand briefly rising around him, and he started

illustration by >> Emily Randall
 ed to build a castle. However, with each new tower the boy added, not only did the castle grow, but the balloon grew as well. Rounder and wider the balloon grew, until it was as big as a fire truck. It tugged at the string tied around the boy's wrist, and it started to lift him into the air. He looked down just as his feet left the ground.

This was quite exciting to the young boy, who whooped and yelled, a big grin on his face. His father looked up at him, and the boy's hand blurred, waving spastically. His father just smiled, gave a quiet nod, then turned back to the laptop.

Then the boy was off, floating into the air, clutching the thin string of the balloon as it pulled him towards the blue vastness of the sky. The balloon carried him so high that he could see the entire city, and the other people in the park, they all looked like ants scurrying about. Well, Dad didn't. Dad looked like the ant that patches the hole in the nest.

A flock of geese flew by, tickling the boy with the tips of their wings. He laughed, then asked how they were, and they honked back. "Our tail feathers are a touch cold, but all in all, we really can't complain, ol' chap."

Of course, this was in Geese Speak, but as everybody knows, if we could teach geese English, they would have the most delightful British accents.

The geese and the boy chatted for a spell, and then one gander asked, "Say, old bean, how did you get up here anyways?"

The boy pointed at the balloon.

"Oh, well, right-o then. Just watch out for those clouds up ahead. They have trolls in them, you know. Ta for now!"

The geese left, and sure enough, they were right. The clouds did have trolls in them. Big, scary, hideous, warty trolls with all kinds of gross knobby bumps all over their bodies, even on their feet. The trolls snarled and growled and scratched themselves and did all sorts of things one should never do in

polite company. Of course, the trolls were not polite company, and they had their minds set to eat the young boy clinging to the balloon floating towards them.

One of the trolls pointed at the boy. "Here comes a tasty morsel now, me hardies! Yar!"

The trolls were also pirates, by the way. Some of them even had eye patches. One had a parrot named Squawkers.

The boy panicked. He looked around. The geese were far from view, and he was a bajillion miles above the city. There was nowhere to go but towards the trolls, and he didn't want to be eaten and turned into troll poop. Especially not pirate troll poop-that was the worst!

One of the trolls swiped at the balloon, and the boy rocked back and forth. He knew it was all over, but just then, a streak of light burst through the clouds.

It was Spaceman Spiff! He flew by on his rocket pack, and he blasted the balloon with a ray gun. The balloon shrank, and it slowly descended towards Earth.

The trolls snarled and yowled and yarred because their meal was getting away, and nothing makes a pirate troll more upset than a missed dinner. Except, perhaps, a lack of booty.

"Thanks, Spaceman Spiff!" the boy shouted, giving a thumbs up.

"No problem!" And then Spaceman Spiff shot back into the sky, off to save a princess in Eurasia or to have some similar adventure.

The boy continued his descent until he landed in the sandbox where his whole ordeal had began.

"Hey, son," his father said, walking up. "are you ready to go home?"

The boy just sat there for a moment and blinked.

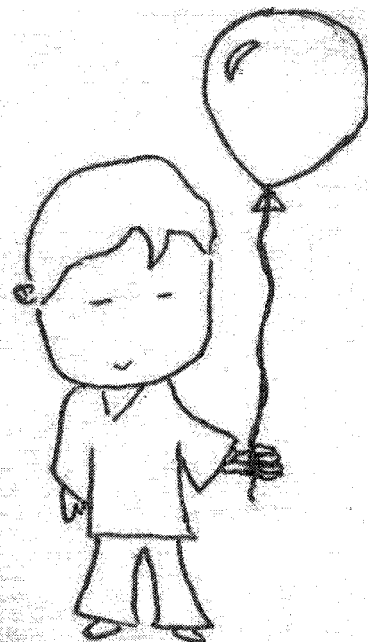
"Hey, son, are you-are you okay?"

"Dad!" the boy cried excitedly. "Did you see that?" And then he jumped around, gesturing the whole adventure with the balloon, the trolls, and the geese. "And then I thought I was gonna be troll poop-pirate troll poop at that!-but then Spaceman Spiff showed up and shot the balloon with a ray gun-Plow!-and then I floated back down here nice and easy! It was amazin'!"

The boy expected his dad to be excited, perhaps even horrified, but instead Dad just laughed and patted him on the head. "What an imagination you have."

The boy sighed. His dad had been sitting on the bench the whole time-right there!-and he hadn't seen a thing. "Oh well," he said, pulling the balloon to his chest. "I know it happened, and I'll never forget it. I guess that's what really matters."

And then he ran because his father was almost at the car.



Smoke

fiction by >> Adam Dorhauer

"You wanna buy a cup Paul?" He glanced up and saw two boys from the soccer team standing by a keg in the corner of the screen porch. Behind him he could hear the pounding of the stereo rattle the handle of the sliding glass door he had just come through. To his right, half a dozen guys were seated around a glass table cityscape of poker chips, plastic cups and ashtrays, and around them half a dozen more shouted out advice through the haze of smoke that lay over the scene like a fog.

"No thanks."

"Come on. You know you want to."

"No, not tonight." He stepped through the door to his left and into the backyard. The air held a soft chill so that he pulled his jacket up onto his shoulders as he ambled past the small group gathered behind the house. He squinted when he passed through the beam of the halogen lamp mounted on the rear of the garage and paused a bit in its warmth. In the light, he could see the faint cloud of vapour form of his breath before he continued on.

"Needed some fresh air, huh?" He looked up and saw a girl leaning against the wooden fence that marked the back of the yard and recognized the blue plastic cup in her right hand. She took a draw on the cigarette she was holding in her left. "Me too."

He almost coughed, but he caught himself. "That's some stereo system they've got in

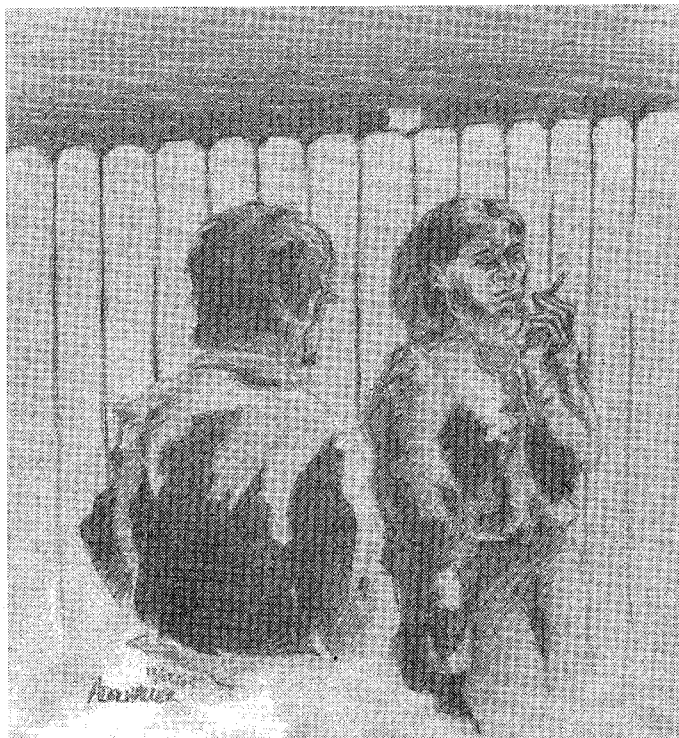


illustration by >> Adam Dorhauer
there."

She laughed. "Yeah, I can't take it either. I'm Heather, by the way."

"I'm Paul." His hand relaxed from the cell phone his parents had loaned him for the night that he had been holding in his pocket. He could feel the sweat that had accumulated on his palm against the cool air and was glad

she didn't offer him hers. "You been here long?"

"Not out here." The end of the cigarette burned bright orange again, and she exhaled another stream of smoke. He watched the evanescent flow trailing upward from her lips, just visible in the dim light outside the scope of the halogen lamp. She saw him and extended two fingers toward him, the cigarette between them.

"No thanks." He shook his head shortly to the side and half raised his hand. The cigarette remained suspended between them briefly before she gave a sort of half shrug and returned it to her lips. He lowered his eyes for a moment before he looked back at her. "You a friend of Tommy's?"

She looked at him questioningly before responding. "Tommy?"

"Isn't this his party?"

She laughed again. "I have no idea. Are you?"

"Not really." His eyes drifted again to the fence behind her. She brushed her straight brown hair behind her ear as she gulped down the rest of her beer. Her arm dropped limply to

her side, the cup hanging lightly between her fingers, where the smooth tone of her skin interrupted the pattern of wood grain it rested against. He blurred his eyes until the flesh disappeared, indistinguishable from the boards of the fence, and it was as if he were alone.

"You all right?"

He jumped a bit and returned his eyes to focus. After a few moments of searching for an explanation, he gave it up and responded, "Yeah. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Looked like you were going to pass out or something."

"No. Sorry." He let his jacket slide again off his left shoulder. The bite in the air was gone, and he was starting to feel his shirt dampen under the arms. He didn't look directly at her until she spoke again.

"It's cold." The cigarette glowed again and cast its warm ambience onto her face. The luminescence faded quickly, and a few ashes fell from the end of the cigarette. The faint taste of smoke filtered through his nose into the back of his mouth. The cigarette fell to the ground. She stomped it out and leaned forward off the fence and breathed in the fresh air. "Nice meeting you."

"You too." He watched her walk past him toward the house, silhouetted briefly by the lamp on the garage. In the silence he heard someone from the group by the house laugh. When she walked by them, he saw their faces in the glow of their own cigarettes among their sidelit bodies beneath the rising mist of their collective carcinogens. They were smiling.

Brick

fiction by >> Brad Brown

I remember it was raining.

It was one of those days where you let the rain soak through your clothes, straight to your bones, and it numbs you. You shiver, but you don't really notice. Somewhere in the back of your mind, you know you should go inside, but the cold, the slowly catching pneumonia, they take your mind off things. And that's better than being inside where all you can do is wait.

And wait. And wring your hands. Then wait some more. Eventually you look up, eyes heavy from being buried in your palms, and you see the other people. Young girls, couples, they're waiting too, and nobody makes a sound. Nobody even cracks a joke to ease the tension. There's nothing to distract you from your thoughts.

So you think about how you're eighteen and so is she; her birthday was just a month ago. You bought her the charm bracelet she's never taken off. She's supposed to go to South East in the fall and just got the letter yesterday. You think about winning your first speech and debate trophy and how you're going to be salutatorian.

But that's all to distract you from remembering the long talks the two of you had, how this wasn't an easy decision, but you know it's the right one.

"It has to be the right one," you mut-

ter to yourself until the whisper hurts your throat. You wipe your eyes, and you wonder how long you've been crying.

So much of that day is a blur, but some of it is so clear I relive it through the memories. It's kind of funny what I remember. I remember her hand slowly slipping away from mine as the nurse led her down the hallway. It couldn't have been more than a few yards long, but that hallway seemed to stretch for miles. I was so proud of her. She only looked back once, and when she did, she smiled even though her blue eyes glistened with tears. I forced a smile as well, for her, so she would think I was strong too.

And I whispered, "Be brave."

I knew she would be.

The doors swallowed her, and then I went outside. I don't know how long I stood out there, or even if I cried. You really don't feel yourself when somebody else cries. And when the whole sky cries on you, you don't feel anything at all.

I stayed out there until I felt a hand on my back. It was the nurse. "She's waiting for you," the nurse spoke softly, leading me back inside.

My broken heart smiled when I saw her. Her hair was disheveled. She looked pale, and her steps shaky. She smiled at me, and I could see she had to muster strength to do so.

"How are you?" I asked.

She nodded. "Fine. I'm fine."

I didn't really believe her.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm good."

That was a lie too.

I brought the car around to spare her from the rain, and I helped her inside. I tried to fasten her seat belt, but she slapped my hands away, saying she wasn't that out of it. I laughed, but it was only noise in my throat. I didn't feel the laughter, not inside me.

We drove without saying anything. The radio wasn't on. The wipers squeaked against glass, fending off needles of rain trying to pierce the windshield. Neither of us was in the mood to talk about school, or music, or even life at the moment. Everything just felt too heavy.

And then, just barely, a noise echoed in her throat. She buried her face in her hands, and she started sobbing. I parked the car outside a Save-A-Lot because it was close and empty. I wrapped my arms around her, petted her, tried my best to comfort her and felt my shoulder dampen beneath her face. And though my eyes may have glistened, I didn't cry. Not a single tear fell onto her hair.

Like I said, it's easy to keep it inside when someone else is crying on you. And when that someone else is your whole world, you feel everything, but you pretend you don't, because you have to be brave. For her.

"I'm sorry," she sniffled, wiping her eyes.

"Shh. Don't be."

"Not just for the crying. For everything. I'm so sorry."

I told her to hush. There was nothing to be sorry about. It wasn't any more her fault than it was mine.

I dropped her off at her house, gave her a little kiss on the cheek, and a weak smile flickered across her lips. Usually, she was so pretty I swear she sparkled, but at that moment, she was like an echo of the girl I fell in love with. I told her she could call me that night if she wanted, and she said thanks, but I wasn't surprised when she didn't. We didn't even talk again until that Monday at school.

I drove through town for an hour, no radio, just thinking my bad little thoughts. Then I went home. My parents were surprised to see me up, out, and back home before noon. They asked what was wrong. I didn't feel like lying, and it was useless anyway, so I just shook my head to let them wonder, and then I locked myself inside my room.

I looked around for a moment, noticing the few childish things still left. The baseball cards. The Ninja Turtle poster. The stuffed bear I'd had since birth. Then I threw myself on the bed, and I hugged that bear to my chest, tighter than I think I'd ever hugged it. Even tighter than when I was six and scared of monsters or the time my parents almost divorced.

Then there was nobody left to be strong for, so I cried until the tears would no longer come.

As She Lay Dying

fiction by >> T.P.

She lay in the tub, the sun was shining, and she still had all her clothes on. The sink made the only noise, drip, drip, drip, it was still broken since she had hit it last a week or so ago. She was angry then. Persephone had taken her friend away. Her friend's name was Helen, after the witch who led thousands to fall in desperate battle against Troy's wall. Helen was kidnapped by Paris. Her Helen was taken by. Persephone. They sat together, before Persephone called, on top of her bed and ate peppermints. She always loved peppermints. Helen would pick them up after work at the Osco two blocks away. They would each take one, carefully unwrap them and store the sticky wrappers in a metal tin so they could smell them later. It was Helen's idea. Helen always had good ideas.

It was on one of these lazy afternoons when the sun was half-hidden by the clouds, which crept across the sky like so many marshmallows rolling across a light blue table, that Helen failed to show. A few frantic phone calls, a few questionings, and 6 hours later, they came to tell her that Helen wouldn't be coming back. Helen's body had been picked out of the river where Persephone had lived her.

"NO!", she sobbed. And they let her cry. They tried to comfort her but it was no use, she knew that they were happy Helen was gone, especially after they found out about the kiss they had shared. Helen's lips were warm and supple and split like butter that is left out too long. She had tasted peppermint when her tongue explored Helen's. She always loved peppermint.

"It was harmless," she told them then. They didn't believe her though. "They just don't understand about it, about us," Helen always whispered in her ear as their peers jeered at them. Helen was unhappy though, she could see it when she looked in Helen's lovely sky blue eyes.

She cried to Persephone that night.

"Why did you take her?" she cried. "Don't you have enough friends, enough minions? Doesn't the harlot of Troy still please you? Is your yearly sentence too long to bear? Why did you take my Helen away?" Hours later, no longer crying, she walked to the bathroom to clean up. The digital clock on the

wall glowed 1:30 in the faint moonlight. Turning on the light, she ran the sink and cleaned her face. She checked the mirror to see how she looked. Her curly red hair was a mess as always, she brushed it aside with her hand. Her eyes were red in parts, a sharp contrast to the emerald green spheres she stared back from the mirror. Her cheeks were pink which brought out the freckles that spread across the bridge of her nose. "Decent," she thought to herself. "Beautiful" was what Helen used to describe her. She wanted to kill decent, she wanted to be beautiful for Helen. She smashed the mirror in one swing. Her fists bled, and bled even more as she carefully picked out the glass shards. The mirror tipped off the wall and hit the faucet. She didn't care. She walked on by it and went to bed. The sink dripped.

The funeral was held a week later. A lot of school kids were there. One girl, a cheerleader in fact, even made a speech saying how smart and pretty Helen was, how many friends she had. The cheerleader had never spoken to Helen before, except once, to call her a lesbian. So it goes. Another speech was made, a boy this time, football captain, who claimed that it must have been Helen's love for him that made her do it. Only one person in the crowd cared about the truth. And she was that one whom Helen shared her bed with. No one noticed when she went and kissed Helen's forehead for the last time and dropped a quarter between Helen's cold hands for the ferryman. And no one saw her slip away, homebound, tears in her eyes.

She dashed up the stairs into her room. She pulled another quarter out of her purse and went into the bathroom, with Odysseus and Achilles looking on from their tightly bound covers from her shelf. She pulled an extra razor out from under her dripping sink and, kicking off her shoes, climbed into the tub. She let the razor flash twice and setting it aside, stuck the quarter beneath her tongue. She opened the tin can with all the peppermint wrappings and dumped them alongside her in the tub. Closing her eyes she felt herself begin to expire. The blood flowed like twin replicas of Moses' Nile, trailing down to the black abyss of the drain at her feet, all the while the sweet smell invaded her nostrils, filled her lungs and engulfed her mind like a drug. She would like a peppermint there, if she got to Elysium. It would be nice to eat a peppermint when she saw Helen again. She always loved peppermints.

But I'm a lot Better at it Now...

fiction by >> Brad Browne

"Do you like that?"
"Yeah."
"How does it feel?"
"Good. Real good."
"Have you ever done this before?"
"Yes! I mean, of course. Of course I have."

"Be honest."
"Okay, no. Never. But I-"
"Shh, that's okay. It's cute."
"Really?"
"Yeah. And besides, I'll talk you through it. Here, give me your hands. And stop shaking so much. I'm not going to hurt you. There. Was that so bad?"

"Nuh-uh."
"All right then."
"All right."
"What are you waiting for?"
"What do you mean what am I waiting for?"

"Unhook it."
"Unhook what?"
"My bra, genius."
"Oh! Yeah. Right. Your bro-er, I mean-your bra. Of course. Let's see. Uh. Wow, this is-I think it's stuck. Is-is there, like, some kind of trick to this?"

"Here, let me do it. There. Do you like what you see?"
"Y-yeah. Yeah, I d-do. They're very nice. You should be proud."

"Good."
"...what are you doing?"
"I'm taking off your shirt."
"Oh. Okay. That's good."
"Oh, I know. You're all kinds of hunky."

"Really? My mom always says I'm kind of pudgy...."

"Do you really care what your mom thinks right now? Come on, I need you to focus."

"Right-right! I'm sorry. I'm just nervous."

"It's fine."

"I like that. Yeah, that. What you just did with your tongue."

"You know, you can do that to me too."

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"Okay."

"Ow!"

"Sorry. Sorry! What'd I do?"

"You bit me!"

"I'm sorry!"

"Oh my god! Am I bleeding?"

"No! You're not. Are you? Oh God, I'm so sorry...."

"It's fine. It's okay. Shh. Just calm down. Shh. Look at me. Are you looking at me?"

"Yeah."

"Now give me your hand. That's it-shh, it's all right-don't tense up like that. It won't hurt you. There, nice and easy. How does that feel?"

"Nice. It's all warm and oozy. And kind of hairy. Is it supposed to feel like this?"

"Focus."

"Sorry. I'm sorry."

"Here. Move your finger back and forth. Yeah, like that."

"Like this?"

"Yeah. Like that. Oh yeah. Just like that. Mmmm. Yeah. Yeah. Yes. No. Mmm. No. Not like that. Mmm. No. No! No! Ow! Stop it, stop it, stop it!"

"What? Oh my god, what did I do?"

"Are you trying to rip it off?"

"N-no! Why? Do you want me to?"

"That's a sensitive area! How would you like it if I grabbed yours and jerked on it like a spastic jack hammer?"

"I think I'd kind of like that...."

"That's it. I've got better things to do than teach a retard."

"So...uh.... Does this mean we're going out?"

Extra fiction by >> T.H. Ferguson

He was born in an ordinary house in an ordinary town in Ohio, and for the most part, for every moment of his life before that final week of June, he led an ordinary life. He spent his time in high school working at carpentry and metal shop, achieving only average and ordinary grades along the way. Once he graduated from that ordinary school, he spent long hours working in the stockroom of a quite ordinary grocery store. Pearl Harbor was attacked, America was at war, though quite far from him physically and emotionally. He joined the Army after receiving his draft notice, and pursued a career in what he had always done. For John Holdren, you see, had always helped others. John Holdren, you see, was an Army medic.

He trained vigorously for his job, and was landed in Normandy, France, about three days after the D-Day invasions. He tended ingloriously to the wounds of the valiant who had fallen on that day and in the subsequent battles.

John Holdren did his job until the final week of June, when he-and now, you-came upon this harrowing scene:

A battered, green jeep with its single-starred hood had been traveling one of the roads of Normandy, and had taken a shortcut through a rutted field on the way to a town. The jeep-and the souls within-had run over a mine, and the five men in the jeep were badly wounded and unable to move. Two medics had been dispatched to help the men, and walked toward the five in the field. However, the field held mines for men in addition to mines for jeeps, and one of them detonated, killing one medic while wounding the other-again so badly as to prevent him from moving or leaving. The men lay in the field, crying in pain. Their pain was cruel, and deep, and their fear was palpable.

John Holdren was sent with a squad of Army engineers to the field. The engineers said the field was full of mines, and that no crew could clear a path in time to safely save the wounded six.

John Holdren, as I said, did what so many

of us would have shrunk from doing. John Holdren walked into that field-with no protection, no engineers, nor assistance-he walked into a field of mines, and on his back, carried out a wounded man. Yet John Holdren did not stop. No-he risked his life, again, again, and again. Six times in all did he walk into danger, and six times in all did he return with the burden of a wounded man on his shoulders.

The men were returned to an Army hospital, where they spent time recovering before being discharged and sent back home. John Holdren, however, continued faithfully in his duty. At the end of his tour, he returned from France and from that war to America. Though he won medals for his service and his bravery, he told no one. After years of leading an ordinary life back in ordinary Ohio, he found his true love, and they were married. Yet, he did not speak of his courage to his wife. For her, he was no great war hero. For her, he was the mate to her soul, and he saw no reason to boast of his deed. And so, he told not his children, his mother, father, nor any of his friends. John Holdren

returned from France to work, live, and die as a simple, ordinary American.

Only after his death did his children find a box, simple and unmarked, pushed into a corner of the attic. His medals lay neatly packed within, with his official Army portrait in his official Army uniform. They found letters from his mother, written to him during his service. Near the bottom was a photograph of his unit, just prior to its departure from New York. He was standing in the third row and only a few men from the end, behind a behemoth of a man, and was a very ordinary face among the crowd.

Below it all, folded and tucked into what could be described as a quite ordinary white-faded yellow, even-envelope, were letters. Dozens in all, they thanked him for his act. They told of families, of children, of grandchildren. They told of new cars and paid mortgages. They spoke of defeats and successes, of births, marriages, and even deaths. They spoke of life created; they spoke of an ordinary life that had redeemed so many others. They spoke the extraordinary.

Birthday

fiction by >> Daniel Tucker

My alarm went off at 5:25. Letting my eyes bat closed I was an eyelash away from sleeping through. I think it was the thought of my mom that saved me.

Creeping off the bed, I sat up and stared at the clock: 5:26, 01/22/05. There was always one last thought of going back. But I survived. I bent down, grabbed a t-shirt out of the pile of clothes on my floor and slid it over my chilled, bumpy skin. The house was still asleep, dark, and quiet. No one knew I was awake. My mom, gently asleep on the couch, rolled over as I walked down the steps, trying to be as soft as possible.

I tip-toed to the pantry, grabbed a box of cereal, and set it on the table-an island in the middle of our kitchen. My grandma usually picked me up just before 6:00, but I needed something to keep me going--something with milk usually does the trick.

After two bowls of cereal I creaked back by my mother and made it upstairs--and gave a slow glance back down the steps at her cold, exposed feet. I peeled open the door to Christine's room and knelt before her bed. I ran my hands through her angel thin hair--so soft, so pretty blonde. Her skin just like my mom's: pale, vulnerable, beautiful. I kissed her wrinkled forehead, her warm, puffed cheek, and then her lips. As I shut the door, my closed eyes looked at the ground and I felt the presence of my sister and my mother, asleep.

Back in my room, I regretfully flipped the light switch, and squinted my eyes. I had laid out my clothes last night: long underwear, normal socks; a pair of thick cr me colored wool socks, and grey sweat pants; both of my white long-sleeved shirts-a mock turtleneck and a turtleneck; jeans, my dad's old brown work boots, and a black hooded sweatshirt. The gloves, hat, and coat were all downstairs. Layer by layer I got dressed; at 5:52 I walked back downstairs and waited.

My grandma pulled in the driveway, tapped on the front door and I let her in with a "shh" and a point toward my mom. "Go on, I'll be out in just a sec'." I went over and kissed my mom's chilly, red cheek, pulled the blanket over her feet and whispered "I love you." She curled up into her blanket and mumbled in her sleep. I walked to the front door, grabbed my gloves, hat, and coat off the chair in the living room, and squeezed my way out of our tiny front door.

It was 6:30 exactly when we parked. There were only about 15 people there, but they had begun without us. We joined in the middle of the Visitation.

It was always the next mystery that made me think about it especially: what could have been.

"How'd it happen?"

"Whada you mean 'how'd it happen?'" you know exactly how it happened.

"I mean, what were you thinkin'? Didn't your mom ever show ya howda..."

"We did."

"Then how...?"

"It doesn't matter how." "Look, will ya be able da drive on Saturday."

"Yeah, I mean...yeah, of course."

"Oh God, I don't know, d'ya think...I don't know."

"Shh...What d'ya mean?"

"Last night...last night Joe said he had a dream...I don't know...and I..."

"What...you what?"

"He likes the name Noel too..."

"What? You don't even know what it's gonna be...and you're still so young."

"I know."

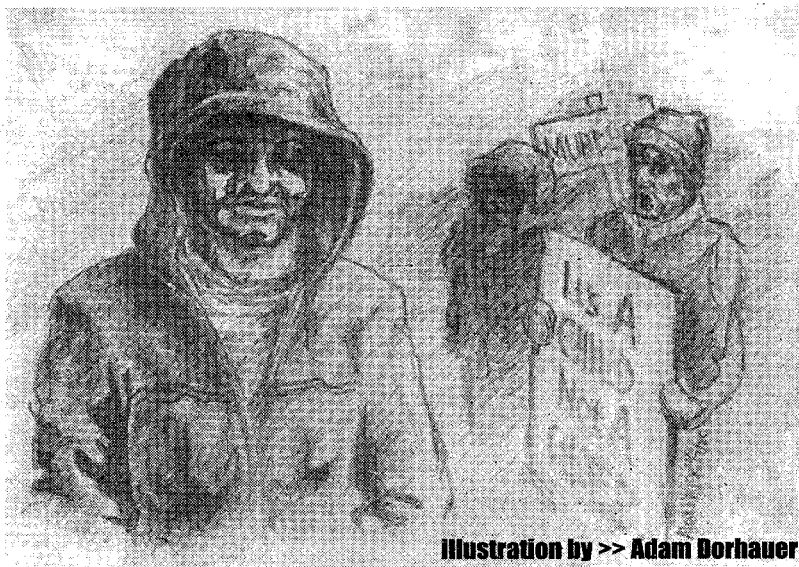


Illustration by >> Adam Dorhauer

As each woman or girl walked in I pictured my mom, my heart bled. Please. Please.

A girl, not much older than me, walked down the sidewalk: "blessed art thou among women..." Please. Please. "...and blessed is the fruit of thy womb..."

I lifted my eyes to look up at her: short brown hair, olive skin; deep, deep brown eyes. Glossy. A Tear. Please. Please.

When she walked inside, my eyelids fell like gravestones, and squeezed a small tear from my right eye.

"If you just wait out here for a little while ma'am, and fill these out, we'll call you when the Doctor's ready."

"Oh God, I don't know. "Hey, Julie, d'ya think..."

"What?"

"I don't know...never mind." Allergies...no. No. No. No. No... 497-40-3552...Mary Mitev,

01/22/05.

"Ma'am, here ya go."

"Thank-you...We'll call you in just a bit."

"...When d'you say your birthday was?"

"November 22...It was last weekend."

"And you're, twenty-one?"

"Yep."

"How'd that go? You didn't puke did ya?..."

*

"I sat up all night vomiting...I had felt hungry earlier, so I ate and ate and ate, but it was like I had a hole in my stomach. And it all came back up that night. Rejection.

A couple a' friends came

over with a cake. But I'd already locked the door. Twenty-one, puking, and empty: alone.

I remembered like a movie. It was cold. We left the hotel at like six a'clock. I felt heavy, but light-headed.

We parked across the street, walked down the sidewalk...I was crying...there was a crowd...a boy looked up at me: powder blue eyes. Please. Please. But it was already over. Everything was happening to me, I was floating.

I came out, a floating ghost...so light. The crowd had gotten bigger, there were horrible images, a woman yelling, but I was looking for eyes. I scanned the whole crowd over and over, I turned back after we pulled out, to tell him...No eyes.

*

"Noel, look at me...Please...Please."

Slowly I raised my head, and lifted my eyes to hers. Brown. Blessed Brown.

"You were the only one that was there for me...Thank-you."

Chasing Charlie

fiction by >> Kate Browne

In the dark jungles and deserted fields, somebody was always listening. The inhuman places caused an insanity that could turn a person inside out. But to lose one's head was not unforgivable, for far more concerned whispers were exchanged about those who went about their duties quietly, immune to the insanity.

"How much fuel?"

"Not enough to get to Qui Nhon."

"Okay, take this, but watch yourself, right? That patch could go before the bridge."

The two boys who sat below the jungle's understory were in no way immune to anything.

Everybody lived the same surreal life, waiting and hearing the same damn sounds all the time, just hoping to make it to the end of their watch, to the end of the walk back to camp, then to the end of the night. The hot air moved the grass around lazily, and down by the coast, the breeze picked up and caused the frail trees to bend and waver. Night duty was the worst thing for a fragile mind, creating enemies out of rustling wind and silhouetted plants. Nobody ever went alone, for they were all just as afraid of going insane as they were of meeting an enemy. Everything they carried weighed so much that it was impossible to forget why they were there, as the sweat and life

dripped away, losing itself in the naturally oppressive humidity of the jungle. When the night finally ended, the boys would go on patrol missions into the surrounding villages, trying to distinguish enemies from innocent villagers. That was a task more frustrating than any of the rest, because when confronted, both friend and enemy would smile at the soldiers and say, "America number one, Viet Cong number ten," and the soldiers were powerless to decide what was true. Both boys had heard of soldiers who had killed villagers from the pure frustration and stress of never knowing their enemy. They waited, talking and fighting all the noises from the jungle and their minds.

"Did you hear about Billy Miller? How he got the Captain to give him those two weeks of R and R?"

"No, I don't think you ever told me about that."

"Well, it was the best show of bullsht I've ever seen from anyone, even better than usual for Billy..."

He settled in contentedly to hear the story, even though he had heard it many times before. Nothing mattered as long as they were still able to sleep at night.

But they all would have terrible nightmares about the exploding ciaymores and the harsh screams of their victims. Even on R and R it was hard to lose the tension of the war. Every once in awhile, somebody in their camp would start shaking and yelling at something that wasn't there, and the rest of them would know that he had broken down from all the shit he had seen and heard that nobody should have seen

or heard. The boys had been talking all night to ease their nerves, but there was something making noise through the jungle, so they just kept talking, and sliding further into the muddy ground.

It was all for her brother, Amy knew. Martin George Gillingham, in 1965, had gone off to contribute to the effort in Vietnam. He was incredibly smart; knew everything there was to know about ships and sea life, especially. He had always wanted to be a sailor, no doubt picturing himself as a fearless adventurer. But he had ended up in infantry, just below the seventeenth parallel. He dreamt endlessly of the seas and that smooth, rhythmic lifestyle, but experienced quite a different world. A world too harsh to even be described as reality. Marty had seen one of his good friends die, and had never been the same.

Their platoon had been humping all day, between the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam, and nightfall had begun to spread around. As the sun sank behind the trees, the boys ran ahead, throwing some of the horrible powdered egg rations at each other, hiding behind trees and joking as boys often did. As Jackson Lucas spun toward his friends to pelt a ration, he was caught by a VC sniper who had been hiding, camouflaged in the jungle. Marty never talked about it, but he thought about it and cried whenever he thought about how he and Jackson would sit together on their night watches, keeping each other sane by telling stories and pretending not to hear the

wind whistling through the trees. He remembered how Jackson would laugh as every other fucking platoon was being sent home except theirs, saying that only the best soldiers stayed behind to fight. He thought about how Jackson really believed in what they were doing. Marty had always been skeptical, feeling discouraged and frustrated at the guerrilla tactics and the unseen enemy. He had wondered how they could possibly win a war when the people they were fighting for didn't even want them around. Jackson was different. He could make them feel like they were at camp instead of at war.

Marty thought about things like that all the time. He would never be the same; he had resigned himself to fight. He had chased Charlie into the ground, but in the end it wasn't Charlie who killed him. On February 17, 1968, young Martin Gillingham was killed in an unfortunate accident just north of Quang Tri. Friendly fire, they had called it. He had only been twenty years old when he was killed. There had been more sorrow in the Gillingham household than Amy had ever thought possible. That is what had motivated her through college and medical school, through her residency at the hospital. After seeing what death had done to her family, she vowed to do everything in her power to prevent that pain from entering any other home. She remembered, and felt the loss all over again.

I see the
infanticide in progress.
You are the
tallest dwarf at
this parade of
fleshy Catholics. Basho
is my name.
I write stories
about the war.
"I try to
express the hidden
sexuality of the
mute," she whispers.
I begin to
hate her and
insert my rifle
but am interrupted
by her beautiful
words. Instead I
stroke my throbbing
mistletoe before you
begin to awaken
from this story.
"How could I ... ?"
.... How could I?
We dance. The
song is over.
But I'm not.

The year begins.
Everything is broken.
I've almost forgotten
why I began
the whole goddamn
thing. I guess
I'll just kill
off Basho. Mandatory
abortion was made
forever. I am.
I am not.
I become. January
becomes February. You
read "You read."
All has become
the perfect joke.
I don't laugh
anymore. In your
looking-glass Basho
is a bat.
My hand quavers.
I am Basho.

These three words:
milk, cereal, bread.
Their suggestion of
my beautiful daughter.
Her mangled corpse.
She is you.
Time fades away.
Mother always said,
"The sun suffocates."
Your glorious visage
is her mask.
The story begins
without reason. Why
love beauty? Languidly
I'm a vampire.
A straight razor.
That's my mouth.
Pretend to be
alive. I'm not.

Tenuous, my eyes
read this story.
Darkness is life.
Blood is life.
Beauty is death.
Love is forever.
A digital revolution
with no audience.
Vampires rebel. The
system fails. Wings
flap in freedom's
naked screaming gaze.
Cathedrals ridden with
stinking infant corpses
haunt my floundering
ambitions of sunlight.
Basho sighs deeply.
Believe the hype.
Basho is god.
God is dead.

The night is
filled with vampires.
They are hungry.
They desire the
mistletoe above us.
They desire love.
Before I begin
to abort your
rifle, I realize:

"The sun suffocates."

Surprise! You're dead.
So is love.
Milk-blood to
remain in darkness.
Fangs inject anesthetic
into your veins.
You are receding.

Twelve years ago,
Basho entered Dillard's,
seeking sanctuary from
the computer age.
It didn't work.
He ran from
the coming storm,
only to discover
the awful truth:
Fear is desire.
It is here.
The

darkness.

paintings upon treacherous
erotic reasoning spaces.
Earmarked questions undu-
late
aching lustfully. Venison
after meals portends
infinite regression escaping
sentimentality. End code.

World War V:
The orb fears
screaming nuclear death
and the sky
fades to black.
The computer-brain
activated the warheads,
and light died.
Night is endless.
The bats live
in black gardens
and feed on
yesterday's wine: the

eat?" I replied.
"Cereal," she cries.
It's the baby.
Every atom terrorizes.
Craft overshadows unruly
natural traffic. Change
happens over condensed
underlying lactating ani-
mals.
We eat it.

Body of Christ
we consume. Venison.
Skinned and gutted.
We milk Jesus.
Blood is data,
and we desire
an endless mirror.
Is that a
clear enough message?
The computer weeps.
Everything is broken.

Birds are extinct.
Moon is erased.
Sky is black
and swarming with
high-octane bats.
Basho begins to
pray. It's useless.
Dog sea did
evil piss fear
vim. Basho sighs
and harvests moons.

Silently, the earth
expires. No song.
Basho lives on.
Awake now, hungry.
I search for
sustenance. Find decay.
Blood fills me.
Exit the shelter.
I find terror.
Earth become Hell.
All thought extinguished.
Civilization's promise ful-
filled.
Who do I
turn to? Who

is still not
dead? Only I?
Mother? Dead. Daughter?
The sun rises.
I see her.
How could I?
Basho weeps gently.
Read-Only Memory.
(milk cereal bread)
Random Access Memory
(the computer age)
Central Processing Unit
(the perfect joke)
My writing begins.

You read my
computer programming
manual.
A new age
begins with change;
I need help.
My eyes open
at nearly midnight:
I arise. Breathlessly,
I remember streets
lined with sycamores
and cracking sidewalks
and the rotting
and the damned.
Among them was
Basho. Was you.

I speak rhymes:
Away fades time.

All the vampires
prey upon darkness.
The sun suffocates
without remorse. Basho
hides the mistletoe
in the cavern
and clicks 'Save.'
A new breed
born in blood,
computes prime numbers.
Nightfall. I hunger.
Crave blood of
... How could I?
See is flower.
Think is moon.

The Banana Tree

fiction by >> Adam Kalmbach and Keith Watson

Transformation
(a new age)
is the death
of the unborn.
I look up
and see nothing.

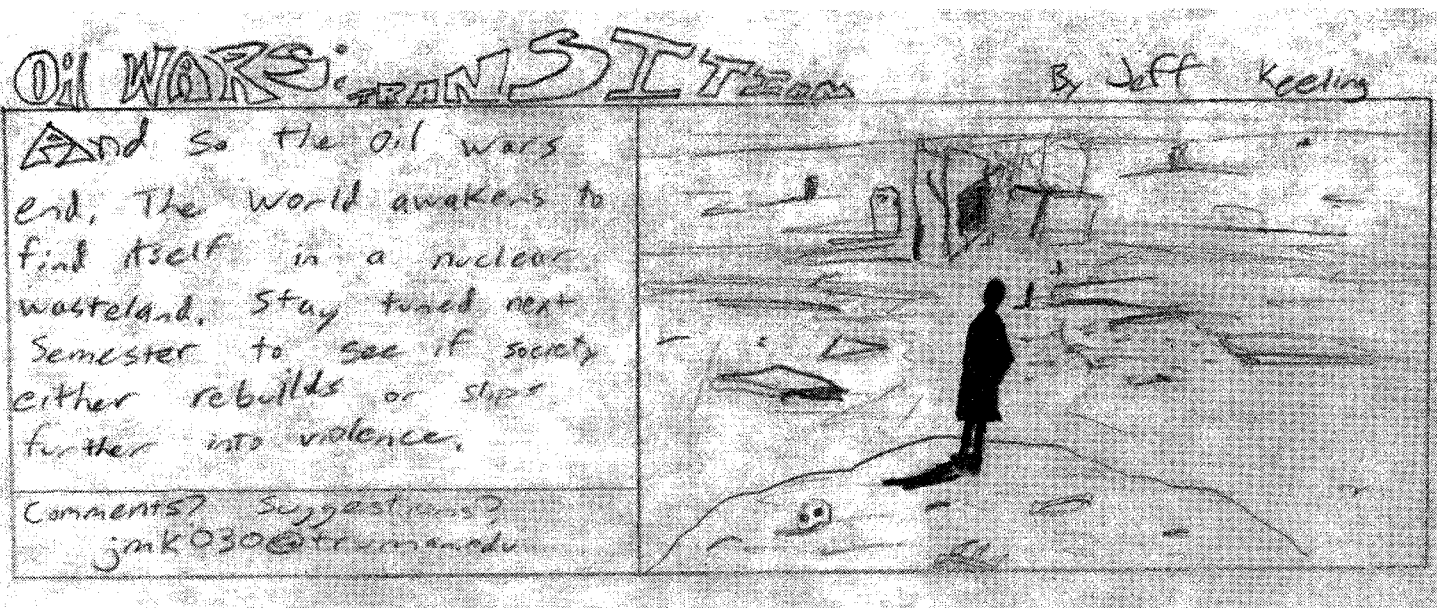
I, vampire-God,
am imprisoned here
in this cavern.
Guess what? This
is a lie.
I am beyond,
undead but dreaming.
Like a hurricane.

Despairingly, I change
chapters: this one
begins anew: Despairingly,
you read my
complex, coded message:
Centraurs organize methodi-
cal

one-time kings.
We mean humans.

Dwarven dead piled
in the cathedral
(sunlight filters through.)
I hear music.
Still we dance,
naked like Jesus
speared and hanging.
The crucifix hangs
(blood, milk, bread.)
We leave the
store. Night falls.
Walking toward Basho's,
I hear it.
We embrace and
the story begins.

"Let's eat breakfast,"
you said then.
"What should we



It Was Meant to Be

fiction by >> Mishka

Bobby hated crossing the street, he had since he was five years old holding his mother's hand. It wasn't really something that frightened him at all, but rather it was the fact that he was pretty much at the mercy of a stranger. That didn't scare him, it merely made him frustrated. There wasn't anything that Bobby hated more than to be frustrated.

Bobby had already crossed the street twice today. Early in the morning, he left his apartment to get a croissant sandwich at the corner coffee shop. Actually, it was more because of the girl that usually sold him the sandwich that mattered, but it bothered Bobby that he would let any girl dictate what he ate, and therefore he readily agreed with anyone who assumed he loved croissant sandwiches. It was little matters of pride like that that usually caused Bobby the most trouble. Today was no different.

Today Bobby stood on the corner of the street waiting patiently at the light. Looking both directions repeatedly did not ease his nerves and so he made no move toward the street. However, it seems, as the world usually chooses, it was time for Bobby to cross the street. Three or four bodies slammed into his back as his head jolted. His legs carried him along against their will as his heart stayed on the corner. The crowd managed to carry him all the way to the other side of the street, much to his dismay. He regained his balance on the new sidewalk and quickly strode off to the bookstore.

By the time he reached the bookstore, little streams of sweat had developed on his forehead. This

made Bobby uncomfortable, not due to the uncomfortable heat, but the fact that if someone were to hug him (if he were to run into an old high school sweetheart, for example) then they would have to hug a sweaty Bobby. No one wanted that, especially not Bobby. He stood inside the doors of the bookstore and wiped his forehead off, just in case.

As Bobby opened the door, he caught a glimpse of Lisa and immediately turned the other way. He was here to see Lisa, but he wasn't prepared just yet. He wanted to look around for a bit, think of a few things to talk about, and then approach her. There was nothing worse than not having something prepared to talk about, nothing worse, that is, except for crossing the street.

Unfortunately, this day was not a good one for Bobby. Lisa was actually quite the planner herself and her plans, if Bobby had known them ahead of time, would not have set well with him at all. Lisa loved to cross the street and in fact, relished in the thought of her life being at the mercy of a stranger and found it oddly exciting. Lisa often slept with her feet sticking out of her blankets, something Bobby would never have dreamed of.

The night before, Lisa had made the decision that Bobby would come to her apartment for dinner the following night. She knew he would be in the bookstore in the morning and she planned to ask him then. Her apartment was only a few blocks from the bookstore and she figured it wouldn't be hard to find if she gave directions from the corner by the store. Lisa did not know Bobby very well and assumed walking a few blocks would be no issue.

Lisa approached Bobby in the corner of the bookstore. "Hey!" she said.

Bobby jumped even though he was facing her,

"Hey... uh, what's going on?"

"Oh, nothing. Listen," Lisa figured she should just jump right in, "I was wondering if you had plans for dinner."

Bobby had always been honest, because no one liked people who lied and quickly replied, "No." He immediately regretted this.

"Great! Come on," Lisa grabbed Bobby by the wrist and led him towards the front of the store, "I'll show you how to get to my house."

Bobby did not like being led by a woman and was afraid if someone he worked with would see this, they would think Lisa was his wife and no one likes finding out they were misled. Bobby began slowing when he saw the corner of the street and the cars moving quickly past them. He was not about to let this crazy woman who was not his wife kill him with out a reason. He jerked his wrist from her grasp and stood, arms crossed three feet from the corner. She looked back at him, curiously.

"My apartment is right over there," She pointed across the street and down a bit. "Come over around seven?"

Bobby nodded, because he could not go back on his word.

There were less people out now and even fewer cars. He straightened himself because he did not want to look sullen and began to walk towards the bookstore. He wasn't exactly sure how he would get across the street without the push of people, but he could never go to the bookstore again if he didn't make it to Lisa's apartment by seven.

Bobby stood on the corner. After about five minutes of looking both ways, Bobby had a seat on the corner. He stared towards the bookstore and

quickly wished it was on the same block as him. It would be great, he thought, if there was a bridge over every street at every corner. He imagined a world where no one ever had to cross a street and all of the cars simply drove below the street, an underground speedway of sorts. The world would be much simpler, he thought.

After about ten more minutes, Bobby realized he was not going to be able to do this alone. He jerked his head around and saw an older woman coming towards him. Bobby, of course, used to be a boy scout because people like boy scouts.

"Ma'am? Do... do you want to cross the street?"

She stared at him suspiciously. "I used to be a boy scout, ma'am." He explained.

She seemed to warm and said, "Thank you, sir," and linked her arm with his.

The woman led Bobby across the street with his eyes closed. Unfortunately for Bobby, he opened them too soon and saw himself in the middle of the path of an oncoming car. The car slowed for the two pedestrians while Bobby's heart lurched. After depositing the woman on the other side of the street, Bobby had what he believed to be an epiphany.

Bobby quickly strode down the street. He did not look either way when he crossed the street and cars slowed to avoid him. He moved quickly past the bookstore and when he came to the corner where Lisa had stood and pointed at her apartment. He took a brief moment to look up at the window and admire his accomplishments thus far. He glanced at his watch, realizing he still had five minutes.

It was then when a driver lost control of his car and struck Bobby as he stood on the sidewalk.

First Impressions

fiction by >> Megan Folkerts

Well, I thought to myself as I walked, things couldn't possibly get any worse.

"What do you say, kid?" asked my boss, breaking my concentration.

"I'd say she ran a damn good race, once you figure in the intimidation factor," I said, trying to hide my disappointment with a little sarcasm.

"Intimidation factor?" he asked, raising a sweaty eyebrow in my direction.

"Yeah. She WOULD have won if she hadn't been competing with a horse named Judge Judy. If you'd given our mare an intimidating name, we might have had a chance."

"What's wrong with naming a horse Sparkling Gemstone?"

"It's too goody-two-shoes, that's what's wrong. You can't name a racehorse something like that. Not if you want to win, that is."

"All right," the boss man said, grinning ear to ear. "What do you suggest?"

"Janet Reno."

My boss let out a hearty chuckle. Under ordinary circumstances, I would have laughed along with him. But as we made our way toward the paddocks, I remained silent.

For the mare and me, the race was supposed to have been a golden chariot ride into the world of harness racing. Fate, however, had other plans for the both of us.

Not knowing what to expect, I'd gone to my boss on Friday, the day before the race, hoping to be given a thorough briefing.

He'd handed me a parking ticket and a road

map, and had "advised" me to have my ass at the grandstand's entrance by 8:00AM the next morning. Before I could ask any further questions, he stumbled back into the house, slamming the front door behind him.

I arrived at the fairgrounds on Saturday in a pair of work jeans and a clean t-shirt. I had not been hung over that morning, nor had it been dark when I'd dressed myself. Oh no, I had consciously chosen to look like a bum, and I had a very good reason for doing it.

In the two years that I'd known my boss, I had never seen him leave his house wearing anything other than a pair of overalls. Never. Not when company came over, not on Sundays, not EVER. Not even once. Period. Not wanting to outdo the man, I'd opted to wear my work clothes to the big event.

But when my boss and his wife arrived that morning, I came uncomfortably close to stalling in my drawers. The two of them were dressed as though they expected Queen Elizabeth herself to be driving the pace car. They'd come clad in very expensive-looking formalwear. My boss's wife had even selected an outrageous hat to add zest to her appearance. As they came closer, I realized that the "hat" was actually a live pheasant.

Feeling like a jackass, I looped my left arm through my boss's right, and allowed myself to be escorted into the grandstand.

I'd been hoping that my boss's wife's pheasant would attract enough attention to allow my appearance to go unnoticed by the general public. Fat chance. People stared my way, wide-eyed, as if they expected me, at any moment, to start beating my chest and throwing poison-tipped javelins at anything that moved.

So before I'd even sat down, I was escorted right back out of the grandstand. My boss, who was, luckily for me, in a very good mood, offered to introduce me to the trainer of our mare.

In an effort to save cash (probably to buy more expensive clothing) my boss had not hired a separate individual to drive the horse in the race. As a result, our horse's trainer had to perform double duty; the man was dressed in racing silks when I met him.

Things started off well enough. He asked me how I had managed to tame something that outweighed me 10 to 1. I told him that all it had taken was a little time, a lot of patience, and a damn good health insurance policy. We laughed over that, the three of us.

When I first saw him, my eyes were drawn to his racing uniform. Now, I don't proclaim to be an expert in fashion, but hell, the man looked like he had robbed Joseph of his technicolored dream coat. I hadn't said anything outright because I'd been hoping to make a good impression on the fellow.

But after our brief conversation, he came across as being very easy-going. So, hoping to invoke another round of laughter, I asked him if he'd ever considered replacing his racing cap with one of those novelty hats that have the propellers sticking out the top of them.

He'd stormed off in the opposite direction before I had the chance to explain that such a cap would match the colors in the rest of his outfit perfectly.

Needless to say, my boss promptly escorted my mouth and me back to our seat in the grandstand.

And then, of course, there'd been the mat-

ter of the race itself.

If I were an optimist, I'd tell inquirers that our mare, putting forth a Herculean effort, had managed to hold her ground from start to finish. Then we'd share a group hug (my inquirers and I), and go skipping off into the sunset holding hands and whistling Zippity Do Da.

But, because I'm not an optimist, I prefer to tell the tale as it actually happened. The mare held her ground, all right. She'd been dead last from rail to rail, hanging steadily back from her nearest competitor by four lengths. Frustrated, my boss and I left from our seats as soon as the winners names were posted on the scoreboard.

"You don't have to stick around, kid," my boss told me as he opened the gate that led into the paddocks.

"I know," I said, and went through the gate anyway.

It didn't take me long to find what I was looking for.

The mare was standing, tied, in one of the makeshift stalls that had been erected for the week's races. Aside from the halter, her body, still wet from a recent sponge bath, was free of the equipment she'd been wearing in the race.

Her big scared eyes found mine, and a smile crept its way into the corners of my mouth. Though we hadn't come away victorious, we'd both survived the day unscathed. My smile broadening, I gave her a friendly pat on the neck and went home.

A week and a half later, the mare won her first race. And I'd been in the grandstands, dressed in expensive-looking formalwear and an outrageous hat.

Fifth Avenue

fiction by >> Nick Wilsey

"Will I ever see you again?" she asked, her eyes timidly rising to meet my own.

"Of course you will," I whispered, pressing her small and trembling hand between both of mine. "Just close your eyes when you do."

That was the last thing I said to the love of my life that night. I kissed her cheek, moist and salty from tears and deathly cold from the wind, before turning away to leave her shivering helplessly under the ominous flicker of a dying street light.

I can picture her fair and delicate face now. A tear trickles down her pale skin without blemishing her complexion, leaving no trail of runny makeup to avow she'd ever wept at all. She never wore makeup. She was too perfect for that. Too perfect for me.

The thought of her body next to mine, her head buried in my chest and her arms wrapped tight around my waist, keeps me warm as the frigid night air of the metallic metropolis rushes past me, chaotically sweeping out of my face the hair I'd neglected to trim for months. Nothing was more exhilarating than going twice, three times the speed limit through the city and knowing no one could stop you. Not even yourself.

In those moments - moments I could never forget, moments I would never remember - I felt genuinely free. The howling wind, desperately clutched my hair, my clothes, my skin, anything it could, as it fought in vain to slow me down, but I had overcome it. I had conquered the wind. I had conquered God.

"Tell me where you're going!" she implored, catching my arm in a feeble grip that I easily could

have torn away from. Her cold fingers burned into my skin.

"If I did that," I said, tensing the muscles of my forearm to coolly intimate my displeasure at her touch, "you'd either forbid me from going or demand to come with. I'm sorry, but tonight, this is one flight I'm not willing to have you along for."

So that's how I wound up here alone, struggling to justify my selfishness. After having shared so much - our minds and bodies, our hearts and souls - how was she now any less deserving of this freedom than I claimed to be?

But I didn't share everything in my life with her. I didn't share the friends I never made, the self-worth I never had, the goals I never achieved, the respect I never earned. Nor the sixty hours a week I spent at the Times, hunched over a desk in a cubicle scarcely roomier than the third-floor bathroom stall in which I pissed my life away. All for nothing in return to call earnings of my own to help pay for rent or groceries but a sense of dignity enlivened by the phlegm spewed from my boss's throat after he had spent my thirty-minute lunch break railing my ass for not catching the name of some stabbed-to-death parolee he misspelled in the obituary.

"Damn it kid, get your act together!" he roared. Gasping deeply with the unexpected outburst, his lungs seizing up in his chest, my boss slammed his fist on my desk, knocked over a mug of coffee onto my keyboard, and hawked forth an impressive shower of mucous and half-chewed tobacco, splattering a brownish green semi-liquid onto my computer screen, my ham and cheese bagel, and not in the least my face. Wiping his mouth with a sleeve and gripping my cubicle divider for balance, he thrust a hairy finger at me. "If you want to be paid for this intern-

ship, you've got to act less like a goddamned grad student and more like a professional journalist! I will not tolerate any of your schoolboy incompetence in this office!"

Every morning I walked to work hoping some maniacal taxi driver would jump the curb and sandwich me between his bumper and a stoplight pole. Every day, I was given a new roster of the recently dead to read, given a new reason to pity, to envy the lives - the deaths - of others.

And every evening, I came home to her. We'd fall asleep together, face-to-face, our arms entwined before our chests, her nose lightly brushing mine, her soft breathing-in met with my breathing-out, her eyes bound with my own until we could no longer keep awake. And then, only then, would everything be okay. Would be perfect.

She rested a hand on my back to keep me steady in the bitter wind and set the other on my cheek, drawing me closer to her lips, close enough for me to reflexively part my own with anticipation. But almost intentionally, it seemed, she drew me no further.

I could see a reflection of myself in her tearful eyes. Her warm, compassionate gaze, always entrancing, always captivating, never failed to inspire, to deceive me. For that reflection of mine hadn't the miserable, tormented expression I'd seen in a mirror countless times before. Instead, I glimpsed a faint smile betray the corners of my lips, animate eyes that looked not selfishly within but outward to the world, and a glimmer of hope in a tear not of empty sorrow but of blissful happiness.

And then she blinked, looked away, and left all the misgivings she had inspired in me to wither and fade away.

I get nervous imagining his face. No one ignores me like that. No one refuses me. This is about getting him to push for me. I want him to pound into me. I want to see his anger, his strength. I do not want sympathy sex. I want angry sex. I know I shouldn't be like this.

The more sex I had, the better I felt. I needed new more prohibited things. I found the rush of exhibitionism far too risky and the recruiting for the illicit threesome was often too difficult. Anal sex was nothing special and my lesbian tendencies had begun to be exhausted. I was left with sadism and bestiality. The latter was quickly dismissed for its lack of human contact.

Violence became erotic. I remember watching a rape scene in a movie when I was a freshman in college. The man hunted the woman, stalking her down an alley after she left some restaurant. Her head constantly turned over her shoulder. Her heart beat faster. He closed in on her and then suddenly, attacked her. His strong hand wrapped around her wrist, whipping her around. Her frantic kicking and slashing only made him more urgent. He pushed her up against the rough brick wall, nipping at her clothes. Her legs shook, struggling to hold her up as he ripped into her. I knew she secretly liked it. I knew I secretly liked it.

It was the ultimate fantasy, but it was difficult. I could not make someone rape me. I could, however, frame them for it.

A few nights ago, after slow, steady missionary rowing and sweaty cuddling, I decided I must do something. I'll admit, involving the police was a bit risky, but I was willing to risk it for a good hard fuck.

Before I had a chance to pull myself out of my

"Whatever you do..." she said quietly, watching a tree rustle in the breeze and the autumn leaves fall from its branches, swirling peacefully, lifelessly to the ground, "...please know that I could never be truly happy without you. For as long as our hearts shall beat in sync, I will love you. But if yours should happen to fall behind..." she paused, cradling my neck in her hands, "...I'll make mine fall with you. I'll never let you fall alone."

Fall alone? Never let me fall alone?

Well, that's curious... I must have forgotten she had said that until now. Probably so enamored by her beauty that I...

Wait... That's got to be a mistake. How could she know I was planning to...? No, no, that's impossible. She couldn't have. Or did she? Maybe... maybe she didn't mean it that way. She was just fucking with my-

Oh god... There she is; she's standing on the edge. She followed me. I told her not to-

I told you not to follow. Why! Why did you have to follow me? Can't you ever...

Wait! Don't... don't take another step! Stop! Don't take another... Wait! Please don't do this! Don't...!

Oh god no... my love...

I never wanted you to follow me...

...to fall with me...

My love...

I suddenly felt as if I was inescapably amid the most terrible mistake of my life. The last mistake I'd ever have the chance to make. The last mistake she'd ever have to suffer through.

It was in that moment - all too late, all too soon - that it finally hit me.

Fifth Avenue, that is.

thoughts, he was standing in front of me. He stared at me for a few minutes and then finally touched my cheek. He dug his nail down the surface of it and I flinched. I could hear my heart beating in my ears. He grabbed me around the neck, pulling me close. His manner was rough and exciting and my pelvis jerked forward.

"I don't know what you did," He whispered coarsely in my ear, "but I am not going to play into it. You've gone too far this time." He threw me back against the wall snapping my spine into a straight line.

"You went too far this time," I hissed, pushing myself harder against the wall, "I know you're talking about ending it with me. You don't decide that, I do."

His head flipped back in a menacing laugh. Blood pumped straight into my groin. "You decide that?" His arm went for my neck again, and he lifted me up hard against the wall. My legs shook hard, and my each breathe became short and hot. "You are a fuckin' psycho bitch! Leave me the fuck alone."

He threw me to the ground and quickly walked down the hall, without looking back, even once.

Picking myself up off the floor took a few minutes. My legs kept collapsing under the sexual tension. Blood was still flowing steadily to my pelvis. On the walk home, I'm frustrated and aching. A dog barks in front of me and quiets as I walk by. I risked too much for this to not work. I need this one to work, to keep my balance, to release this from my body. I know this is wrong, I know that I shouldn't be like this. I just need this too badly.

That night, I slip into the shower and replay the episode. The feel of his grip sends a pulse through me. It will at least be enough to masturbate.

When the Dog Barks

fiction by >> Mishka

I still wish I had been raped. Through this entire thing, I am still thinking that one thought.

Sitting in the police station, my legs are still. My hand folded around a wet tissue. My ankles neatly crossed under my chair, my head bent slightly forward. Hot tears are running down my face for every reason other than what they believe. They believe every word I say.

"I'm sorry", I let out a small sob, "It's just so difficult to talk about..."

She pats my thigh so empathetic, "It's okay, take your time. We understand." She sends a look to the officer, as if scolding him for pushing too hard. I continue with the story, slowly, so that I can remember what I say. I cannot be caught, so I must take my time.

"If my father even knew, that... that I let someone do this to me... I couldn't take it." I looked at the officer.

His eyes floated to the picture of his young daughter sitting so still on his polished mahogany desk. She's smiling back at him, sun in her hair, a dog, I imagine, is barking behind her. Then he sighed, "I can't imagine... you know that everything said in here is confidential". He shifted in his chair, "It's just... there isn't anything we can do. There is no evidence and it's purely his word against yours."

I know this. I am not worried. "I understand."

Earlier that morning, I closed myself in my bathroom and pulled out Rick's pocketknife. Leaning into the mirror, I imagined what the angle might have been had he struck me. My eyes flickered to the door as I carefully traced a perfectly disfigured cut on my

cheek. I've never been a cutter, but I instantly understood the release I had heard so much about. Only my release was laced with sexual tension.

Some days, I'm possessed. Slowly but surely, little pricks of the devil swing into my unconsciousness and I'm bound to them. They stick into my spine, curling it until I comply. The longer it takes me, the harder they push until I'm lying on the ground underneath a man, hoping to be pushed straight through to my grave. They never push hard enough. I never even get close to an orgasm.

The professor is still sitting in the front of the room, his hand on the sides of his face. I spoke to him yesterday and explained my reasoning for switching classes. However, he still looked at me as if I don't belong there. I know he has pictured it in his head, the way that I must have been angled to create the cut across my cheek. He has imagined Rick raising his hand, my scared eyes. I imagined him sitting at his desk that night, grading papers next to the picture of his young daughter. Perhaps, she too has a dog barking behind her in the picture. I imagined this might help my grade and most likely hurt Rick's. It's an added bonus I hadn't anticipated. For a moment, I feel manipulative.

Four days have passed since I alerted the authorities of my sexual assault. It's the middle of the week and already people have discussed it. My cut is not healing fast, thanks to the salt I've been pouring on it. I haven't run into Rick yet, but I've spent three nights contemplating it. I finally have his schedule from the university, because God knows, I don't want to run into him. As I'm waiting outside of his business administration class, I slip the schedule into the recycling bin.

Please store up
lots of submissions
over your winter
hibernation.

Forever yours
Faithfully,
aHugeManatee
@gmail.com

(she puts her hand over her face and tells me, "but which me are you really seeing, the me that I want you to see, or the me that actually exists?" she says this behind her dirty, clasped-shut hand, which she moves away slowly and somehow noisily, as though a million violins are accompanying the movement of her hand and guiding it to its resting place next to her slightly upturned, barely-showing-above-her-jeans hip. her face smiles back at me, she stares into my eyes with a rabid emotion that I could only describe as utter fucking consumption, and we stare. a simple game of who can see the other person's true self for the longest...and I win, somehow. she giggles, throws up her hands, laughs nervously and blurts out something, anything, just to break the tension. "whoa! whoa. whoawhwoa, hah, wow, whoa....no.noo...." and slumps onto the poorly carpeted floor of her dorm room's hallway. she stares back at me and crawls away from me, slowly, laughing and somehow pushing out a few more words. "don't do stuff like that to me." and I don't say anything, but I know for a fact that she's just done more to me than I could have ever done to her. I saw her, all of her, the real and the fake combined in one act of playful chat in the hallway, and it showed me who I was.)

-Luke Gardner

What a taste.
or was it
really
something ever
imagined

-Kaleb Denief

you remind me of someone I never knew
I know there's alcohol in your blood
but you make as much sense as anyone has
you can't even hold your cigarette
it's lit, but not tended to
your hand trembles, you fall forward, and your cancer stick
burns my leg
you'll have a headache in the morning
but right now, you make as much sense as anyone has

-W. Jenkins

On paranoia, social awkwardness, schizophrenia, fear, emotion,
triumph, pretending and social roles.

Meeting people is something I cannot do. (Pretending.) I laugh and smile on impulse like my face is stuck that way. (Force everyone else to feel something they obviously do not feel at all.) My cheeks hurt from all of the grinning. Even passing affection seems like it is false & I cannot tell if they are teasing or making fun of me with snide wit that I obviously do not possess. This is all just a passing advertisement of my bankrupt personality. (I laugh exactly the way she laughs and chop-and-mangle my words the way she does and pretend I am her when I ask questions.)

- Luke Gardner

Tiger Power

You know,
I don't feel keeping tigers as pets is as cool as it seems
with the meat
and the fur
and the nails
and the teeth.

-O

ode to this weekend

soon we will all be
wearing eachother's
makeup:
soot, sweat, spit,
blood, paint.

-annie

wobble, fuddle, fuzzle, and my head tilts to the side
sound vibrations turn me around
and I feel numb hitting the ground
I see Earth from below, and they don't know of the glass floor that
shattered as I fell through it. I felt nothing. Heard, saw, spoke
nothing.
I threw existence into oblivion, and government was locked up
money in the lake of fire, petals in a lake of water, people in a
river of chocolate. I see you, invisible. My green, hazing
hangover has opened my eyes. Ha. I found a way through
sobriety. The letter Q has wrapped itself around my head.

-W. Jenkins

subjunctive

The language of dreams & mathematics,
all other tenses delegated to Xeroxing time.

I'm addicted to it like cigarettes,
I spend less time in the present every day,
choosing instead to vacation
where everything happened the way it should have.

Using it is like drowninig
in a sea of words,
oxygen cut off
by "if" & "when" & "should have,"
the hope for a second chance,
wishphrases built precariously upon regret.

-Asbury Townsend

Great big trees are like...wow.
Some of those suckers get tall.
I'm like a fallen dove,
with oversized wings.
Be true when you're doing math.
There's no right or wrong answer.

-S