

# Epiphany

Weber State University  
Nontraditional Student  
Literary Journal

2012-2013  
Volume VI

### **Purpose**

To provide a quality, annual, nontraditional student literary journal to showcase and further encourage the creative talents of nontraditional students at Weber State University.

### **Disclaimer**

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### Staff

Managing editor: Jayrod Garrett

Assistant editor: Andrew Helms

Marketing and office manager: Rachel Rigley

Design editor: Michelle C. Paul

Marketing/review editor: Tamilyn Ropelato

Marketing/review editor: John Armour

Copy editor: Stephanie Simonson

Copy editor: Shelley Williams

Peer advisor: Jennifer Sanda

Staff advisor: Debbie Cragun

English Department advisor: Dr. Judy Elsley

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We would also like to thank the Literary Coalition—*Metaphor*, Weber Writes, National Undergraduate Literature Conference, *ERGO*, the Writing Center, Purple Ink, and Nurture the Creative Mind. Each is a separate entity, but together we provide opportunities, such as this journal, to showcase Weber students' writing talents. Finally, we would like to thank Weber State University Printing Services for making this possible.

### Editor's Note

Life is about taking advantage of opportunities to grow. And that is what we hoped to have given the students of WSU through our journal. This is *Epiphany's* fourth year and sixth volume. We began only accepting submissions from nontraditional students, and now we have a diversity section that accepts submissions from the entire student body. Though our journal is in its infancy, we are grateful for the opportunity to have established a foundation that the journal can use in the years to come.

Each year we have had the opportunity to watch as the quality of the journal increases as we get more experienced staff members and come to a better understanding of writing. This year we've learned a lot about advertising, instituted a theme, and changed our rubric in the hopes of letting students know that we are here and want to build a journal that is representative of the best work they can offer. We believe that the challenges we've faced in making this journal are an integral part of its success.

As another school year of our journal comes to a close, the words of Issac Newton come to mind: "If I have seen farther it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." As we have developed our pieces, each of us had the privilege of standing on the shoulders of giants who have gone before us. Giants like Ernest Hemingway, Anthony Burgess, Nikki Giovanni, and thousands of other writers. It is our privilege to take the impressions they have left upon our souls and to offer up this journal. Within its pages there are the indelible marks the masters left upon the souls of the writers. And perhaps these words will leave similar marks upon you as you read.

Enjoy, friends!

Jayrod Garrett  
Managing editor



# POETRY

## Embryo

Dwight S. Adams (*Overall Winner*)

West-facing wall;  
a cement-gray granite slab  
between many others;  
mortar at its edges;  
glowing in the dusk like some dark-skinned fruit.  
Now part of someone's home,

it came from an outcropping on a deep-rooted  
mountain;  
it hung, drooping, fertile, until gravity harvested it;

later, taken by human hands,  
its noble origins in earth forgotten,  
grass and moss that grew over its embryo  
passing to worm, to seed, to other growth,  
the slab sat in a warehouse beside timbers  
that had once been trees, seeds, children of moss and  
worm.

Now, taken together,  
they, planted as though the fetal matter of this new  
structure;

in some time, some future,  
after the ruining of the house,  
the slab may come to some other form—  
gravel for a road, cobble for a walkway,  
some poor pet's gravestone,  
or simply repose in neglect,  
discarded by hands long since sent to ground to rot;  
or chip away in the rain, grain by grain,



## **POETRY — ADAMS**

---

as the lumber grows soggy and sags;  
these, eventual food  
for plants and imaginings,

always becoming,  
always becoming . . .

## Mama

Chanelle Pingree (*Section Winner*)

I'd awake to the sounds of the  
popping oil bubbling a wild dance,  
and the burnt smell of harina de Maiz  
floating through out the humid air—  
all which tugged relentlessly  
at my senses,  
during these blistering-hot  
summer mornings  
of childhood.

She would be standing soundlessly,  
weighed down in burdens—  
obliviously lost in her tiredness,  
while mosquitoes buzzed softly  
through out the moist jungles of  
our wet small island,  
and sleepy crickets chirped groggily.

And with the sun still exhausted in a slumber,  
she would be frying those empanadas  
with every last strength in her body.  
She did it passionately—impeccably,  
for that was how we survived,  
selling savory empanadas made  
us breathe.

Mama would go through hell and back  
to grant us food on the table,  
make it so we could afford modest clothes and shoes.  
We could've easily starved,  
went homeless,

walk the streets if she choose—  
become victims swallowed up by poverty whole.

I've always wondered in awe  
how she did it with every muscle that ached,  
every sweat that dropped.

She did it for love.

Pale and tired,

lacking precious sleep—  
she would stand there lost in thought,  
still frying those greasy empanadas.

She did it for us.

The Driver  
Dwight S. Adams

Our mistake was in thinking him dispassionate,  
The driver of the bus  
We sat and talked,  
laughed, listened to conversations  
more and less interesting,  
made relationships  
    felt the fat  
        distended  
slug of time on his long slow track.

He sat on his high seat, silent,  
and we trusted him  
like a computer no trust, truly, just blind faith;  
he was a pitcher poured out for a different purpose  
    and we full rocking sweet tea sloshing over the  
    lip.  
And he sat silent  
                                silent silent.

Our mistake was in seeing a driver instead of a man;  
no angel or devil, but a function;  
a man—all we might hope for or hate, like any other  
    no page  
but a smear of ink like anger or the drawn-out  
linear thinkings of written meanings.

Umbrella over us to it we show no gratitude  
If it were flesh we might be wet with sin  
    we might be red with vengeance  
How many times has the long bus crashed? and  
people stupidly wondered, “Why?”

## POETRY — ADAMS

---

Our mistake was in giving him the sum of our wishes.  
As we flew from the ledge at manageable speed  
    we laughed, our social masturbations climaxed,  
someone in the back stretched out on three seats  
    and slept      others, afraid to be rude to another  
nothing  
stood    shifted on aching feet  
    the bus shuddered  
and the mad look in the eyes of    the director  
    in his throne was concealed forever in bursting  
    flame  
as we went on laughing  
                                  laughing    laughing.

## Pretty Bows

Shannon Beverley

The drawer, ironically, was over the hamper closet.  
It held all the bows and barrettes a little girl could  
imagine. My  
mother always made sure my hair was done. Little  
homemade  
flower barrettes pulled back my wavy hair. Too bad the  
confidence in  
the beautiful bows couldn't stream down into my toes.  
The little girl on  
the outside looked so put together, appearance meant  
everything. But,  
inside was a wiry, anxious, lonely girl. Fidgety and  
wispy, I wished the  
time and love put into the bows were put into the one  
wearing them. As  
I grew the drawer stayed. The bows all intact, in the  
drawer above the  
hamper, in the linen closet.





**NONFICTION**



Ushering in the Future:  
A Critical Analysis of the  
Antagonists of *Beowulf*

Melanie Ott (*Section Winner*)

On the surface, *Beowulf*<sup>1</sup> can easily be read as an epic poem about good overcoming evil, heaven defeating hell, and man's triumph over the devil. While I agree that the three devilish antagonists in the poem could represent evil that is simply present to be defeated by good, I propose that the antagonists, rather, represent natural obstacles that must be overcome for the accepted yet outdated aspects of society to change, allowing the world to progress. In this paper, I will argue that *Beowulf* is a story that illustrates, through monstrous representations, the medieval anxiety about the changing and progressing world around them. Grendel, his mother, and the dragon all represent natural obstacles that needed to be dealt with, and *Beowulf* emerges as the last of his kind, a demigod-like hero whose time—like monsters, magic, and dragons—was at an end.

The first natural obstacle *Beowulf* faces is Grendel. Grendel is said to be the descendant of Cain, the son of Adam and Eve who committed the first murder. Because Cain murdered his brother, Abel, he was “Branded an outlaw / marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds” (l. 1263-64). Cain's descendants all the way down to Grendel had occupied “the wilds” long before man started showing

1 Heaney, Seamus, trans. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000.

up to settle it. Grendel is the physical representation of the anxieties about venturing out into the unknown, so his description is ambiguous and vague. Despite the limited amount of physical description the poem provides, the poem's lack of description is just as significant as the description included. Like the wilderness, he is mysterious and dark. He attacks under cover of the night, and he is dangerous and unrelenting. Grendel's unknown physique and violent disposition mirrors that of the uncharted territory the Danes were moving into, and they rightfully feared this unknown wilderness, but expansion was necessary progress.

Just as the Danes were moving into uncharted areas of the world, Hrothgar built Heorot in a newly settled area: Grendel's haunt. After Heorot is built, Grendel loathes the men and the noise of merriment radiating from the mead house:

It harrowed him  
To hear the din of the loud banquet  
Every day in the hall, the harp being struck  
And the clear song of a skilled poet  
Telling with mastery of man' beginnings,  
How the Almighty had made the earth  
a gleaming plain girdled with waters;  
in His splendor He set the sun and the moon  
to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men. (l. 86-95)

Beyond the noise itself, these lines hint at what could be exacerbating Grendel's malice. This are story tells of man rising up: the story of creation. God made man, gave him the sun and the moon, and then gave him rule over all else—including those like Grendel, who God exiled from his sight after Abel's murder. No

doubt this would be a painful song to hear night after night, a constant reminder that the time when Grendel could roam freely and molested at night was passing. Night after night, the noise and the stories destroy and agonize Grendel, and he soon becomes a malignant nuisance.

After Grendel begins to regularly attack Heorot, Beowulf appears to Hrothgar, offering his services and promising to kill Grendel. Beowulf is a man of limitless courage and superhuman strength who treaded water for five nights and still possessed the strength to guide his sword to kill nine sea monsters (l. 545, 574-75). But he would not be using his sword against Grendel. Being a wild and uncivilized creature, Grendel does not use weapons or armor, so Beowulf decides to wage battle without these luxuries:

. . . I hereby renounce  
sword and the shelter of the broad shield,  
the heavy war-board: hand-to-hand  
is how it will be, a life-and-death  
fight with the fiend . . . (l. 436-40)

Beowulf feels that he can beat Grendel in a hand-to-hand fight to the death, simply relying on his strength. And he is right. When Beowulf and Grendel meet face to face, Beowulf rips Grendel's arm off. Fatally wounded, Grendel flees. Beowulf uses his strength to control and defeat wild Grendel. With Grendel no longer a threat, the new mead house and settlement would be able to thrive. Grendel was mysterious and wild, an obstacle on the road to progress: expanding into the unknown. Beowulf beats the wilderness with courage and strength.

Grendel's mother represents another obstacle and fear: the unknown and dangers at sea. Just like

storms and ships are feminine, Beowulf faces this female adversary. Grendel's mother comes raging in like a hurricane to exact revenge on the men who killed her beloved son. Like her son, the story gives little physical description. Beyond not-nice epithets, she is described only as having "savage talons" (l. 1504) and that she was "a wolfish swimmer" (l. 1506). The lack of physical description is significant for two reasons. The first reason is to make her more mysterious. Just as Grendel is the unknown wilderness, Grendel's mother is mysterious and unpredictable like a storm out at sea. Secondly, storms are characterized by motion, movement, and so Grendel's mother's actions and movement provide description that paints the picture of a chaotic flurry of motion.

Beowulf is able to beat this opponent with his ability to adapt and act quickly. After his sword fails to kill Grendel's mother, he quickly spots another option, a sword belonging to the water hag:

Then he saw a blade that boded well,  
a sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom

.....

So the Shieldings' hero hard-pressed and en  
raged,

took a firm hold of the hilt and swung  
the blade in an arc, a resolute blow  
that it deep into her neck-bone

and severed it entirely . . . (l. 1557-58; 1563-67)

Using her own sword against her, Beowulf decapitates Grendel's mother. With little time to think and react, Beowulf completely turns around a losing scenario, all this taking place after hours swimming down to impossible depths. Beowulf faces the storm head-

on and bests it with his quick reactions and sharp thinking, along with his amazing swimming abilities.

The final natural obstacle Beowulf faces is the dragon, the last of fleeting magic and the pagan belief system before Christianity completely engulfs Europe. The dragon represents the lower law; it greatly prizes wealth and possessions, yet Christianity teaches that having riches and wealth is contrary to the teachings of heaven. However, Beowulf does not bring the higher law, so he cannot defeat the dragon. But they are worthy opponents, and “each antagonist struck terror in the other” (l. 2565). When they meet, the battle is epic:

Then the bane of that people, the fire-breathing  
dragon,

was mad to attack for a third time.

When a chance came, he caught the hero  
in a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs  
into his neck. Beowulf's body

ran wet with his life-blood: it came out welling.

(l. 2687-2893)

Beowulf is mortally wounded, and he is not physically capable of defeating the dragon. However, Wiglaf is at Beowulf's side. He is the bravest of men, a man who stood by Beowulf's side in front of a dragon and would defend his lord to the death. Although lacking Beowulf's awesome strength, Wiglaf shares his courage and conviction, and he deals the fatal blow to the dragon. While Beowulf represents the hero of old times, Wiglaf is the hero of the future: a real man with realistic strength and courage. The old times were dying off with the dragon and with Beowulf, and the new generation was there to pick up where they were leaving off.

Beowulf paved the way for the future, and Wiglaf proved that ordinary men were ready for that future. This progression was a natural part of history, and natural obstacles presented themselves along the way. Men had to expand and move out into unknown areas of the world. Men moved off the land and learned how to navigate the ocean and survive at sea. Society left behind their ancestors' pagan ways and adopted Christianity. *Beowulf* is a lasting story, but Beowulf's time was over and the world was ready to move on and to naturally progress towards a more modern future.

## The Candy Maker

Lisa Vipperman

In 1957, the man who would become my father needed a job, so he answered a want ad at Sweet Candy Company in downtown Salt Lake City. My future parents were living in Central City near the library with Mom's parents. Dad had been discharged from the Navy and was casting about for a way to make a living. Sweet offered on the job training, so Dad got a food handler's permit and learned to dip chocolates by hand, swirling designs on top of each piece that identified the contents. One design meant a caramel; another design indicated a fruit- or nut-filled confection. Dad later worked for Richard's and for Glade's, but he spent the bulk of his working life at Fernwood.

Like Sweet's, Richard's, and Glade's, Fernwood Candy was a family business. Fernwood had been started by George and Leah Wood, a couple who lived on Fern Avenue just north of downtown. By the time my dad began working there in 1970, their son Dick did most of the day-to-day managing. My father worked over a hot stove, literally. I would visit him at the factory at times, and one day when I came in, Dad was standing over a stove the size of the average kitchen stove. It had one burner, and on top of it was a huge vat of caramel, which my dad was gently stirring with a wooden paddle about half the size of one used to maneuver a canoe.

Though Dad joked over the years about his "sweet" job, it was hard work. He and the other candy

makers, including Mr. Wood at the peak times of the year, would empty one hundred pound bags of sugar into the kettles to make the candy Utahns loved.

Our family dentist once told me Dad's considerable dental problems were caused in part by breathing in so much sugar over the years at work.

When I was a freshman at the U, a graduate student from New York asked me why we had so many candy stores and ice cream parlors in Utah. I gave a flippant response concerning the lack of other vices open to Mormons, such as smoking, but I was curious enough to ask Dad. He said the preponderance of Mormons could be part of it, but the climate had a role. The dry weather and high altitude made it possible to make good ice cream. The lack of humidity is important in making candy such as toffee, which does not set up well in muggy weather.

Any cook knows that cooking involves chemistry and math. My dad used basic chemistry and math in his formulas, as recipes are called in the confectionary business. It's hard to explain to your boss why you ruined one hundred dollars' worth of fudge because you didn't use the correct amount of sugar.

The Sweet family was not Mormon like many of the other early professional candy makers; they were Jewish, but with their last name, it seemed only right to go into the confectionary business. Sadly, many local candy companies no longer exist; like any small businesses, by the third generation, there may be no family member who wants to do that work any more. One generation starts the business, often on



a shoestring. The second generation helps, working long hours. By the third generation, the children are often interested in other careers. I learned this when I worked for a small family-owned restaurant downtown in the 1980s. It was located where the Gallivan Center is now, and my boss sold the restaurant when he decided to retire. He'd owned it for years; his children grew up helping out there, and some of the grandkids even worked there at times, but they were all going to go to college and had seen how hard it was to run a small business.

Dick Wood closed Fernwood in 1990 and retired, and my dad went to work for Maxfield's, another candy company that was once a family business. He worked until a day or two before his death in 2005. Even after Mr. Wood retired, he and Dad would make holiday candy to sell under the Fernwood name. I don't know who makes them now since Dad died.

I always will associate the smell of candy with my father. When I was a little girl and he would come home from work, I would jump into Daddy's arms. He smelled of aftershave and tobacco, and sometimes of alcohol, but he also smelled of sugar. When I wrote his obituary, I described how many Utahns who never knew my dad had enjoyed his Mint Sandwiches and Almondettes. I can still buy those, but they don't seem the same. I don't think it's the formula that has changed. For me, it's the same as when people prefer Mom's potato salad or a favorite aunt's gravy. Other people can make candy. It just doesn't seem the same.

## Immortal Butterflies

Shannon Beverley

The envelope sat on my desk as I stared at it with lost eyes. The blue globe in the corner signifying the Salt Lake Community College crest burned a spherical hole in my forehead as I tried to take in its contents. Academic warning. I was being placed on academic warning. I had always been an average student. My temples throbbed. I looked at the GPA stated below. *1.3*. The carpet felt like fire under my feet. How would I pay for school if I lost my financial aid? How could I have fallen so low? My body quivered as I used every ounce of courage in me to dial the number on the bottom of the letter.

“There are protocols to be followed for students on academic warning.”

The name on her desk said “Michelle,” head of academic advising. I looked past her to a poster on the back wall. A small tabby cat hung from the limb of a tree with the statement “hang in there” sprawled across the top in a large, eye-catching font.

“You understand why you’re on academic warning?”

It had been a busy year, and I knew I had simply taken on too much. Between the seventeen school credits, work, and loads of homework, I often found myself overwhelmed. I would leave piles of homework sitting on my desk as I slept off weeklong migraines. I knew I would have to come clean about my uncontrollable anxiety. Her question was loaded, and I wasn’t ready to divulge why I believed I was

sitting in the cramped office.

“Do you know how you could have dropped from a 2.8 to a 1.3 GPA in little over a semester?”

I knew I couldn’t sit in silence forever. After all, I was an adult, not a stubborn toddler. “I guess I just took on too much, and then the anxiety kicked in and took over.”

This wasn’t the first time I’d been anxious. I had had anxiety for most of my life. As a child, the attacks brought on tears, but as I grew older, I had new disembodied experiences. Her silence made my stomach curdle as I slid down in my seat. My head pulsed faster. The next forty-five minutes were spent giving me the information for the Disability Resource Center (DRC). At the end of the meeting, she marched me ten feet to the left to the DRC to schedule an appointment with Larry. I felt like a mental patient who couldn’t be left alone in the safest circumstances.

The meeting with the DRC left me more anxious than before. Larry had thrown me a very unfortunate bombshell about receiving services.

“The only way we can help you is if you get a proper diagnosis. That can cost anywhere from a couple hundred to a few thousand. Until then, services cannot be rendered.”

My face went flushed. “Where can I get a diagnosis for a reasonable price? I’m a student with no insurance.” He shuffled his papers as he sighed.

“We have a great psychologist in the downstairs mental health clinic named Suzette. She might be able to help you in some way. As soon as you have a letter stating your diagnosis, we can set up services.”

Yet another appointment with a total stranger. I didn’t know or understand the ins and outs of the

psychologist's world. Suzette couldn't diagnose me. She was a school counselor; all she could do was listen. As the semester continued, I became frustrated, as a diagnosis still hadn't been made. Toward the end of the semester, the butterflies in my stomach fluttered furiously. Either I had to pass my classes or lose my financial aid. I didn't know how to pull myself out of an anxiety attack after the fear filled my lungs, leaving me gasping for much-needed air. By the third or fourth meeting, I began to get worried. There was no way I was getting test privileges from the DRC this semester.

I stared at the poster on Suzette's dark walls as she gabbed on ways to refocus.

"Have you tried using a rubber band on your wrist? You can flick it every time you get distracted."

I thought back to my biology test a few weeks before and swallowed the bile down. The tight, narrow room of forty-plus students seemed ridiculously cramped as I thought of my five-page, multiple-choice test. I had a pink hair-tie on my left wrist to flick whenever my mind wandered. My heart had galloped and my chest had been tight. Fifty minutes, I told myself. Fifty questions. One minute for every question. I remembered tapping my foot on the carpet as I looked around at the washed-out white walls.

Flick.

Twenty of the fifty answered. My heart had begun jumping as someone tapped their pencil on their desk, sending me into orbit. I tried to use all my energy to keep myself in the desk.

Flick.

My hand sped through the next fifteen questions. I remembered walking up the narrow aisle

toward the professor as my eye twitched. My wrist ached from the continuous flicking of the rubber band.

I was pulled back to reality as Suzette called me out on my lack of alertness. She frowned.

“Look me in the eyes when I speak to you. Let’s try some breathing techniques to bring down your stress levels. I’d also like to try some touch therapy to see if we can work through what is making you anxious.”

I ended spring 2009 with four C-minuses and two Fs. I met with Suzette again five weeks after the semester had ended. I was moving forward with a new psychologist in order to get diagnosed. I walked into the downtown office building in Salt Lake to meet with Ann three days after my last visit with Suzette. I sat nervously in the waiting room, unsure of my future. All I wanted was for the anxiety to be in control.

I left each session feeling more drained than before. It had been a good six weeks and at least half a dozen appointments since the first initial visit. I walked to the TRAX station wondering if I would ever gain control of the beast that seemed to control my mind. I remembered what Ann asked me the first day.

“What does your anxiety feel like to you?”

I sat in silence for a few seconds. “Immortal butterflies. You know when you’re nervous, it feels like you have butterflies doing loop-the-loops in your stomach? Well, my anxiety feels like that all the time. Like the butterflies never go away. They’re immortal butterflies.”

She smiled understandingly.

“Well, let’s see what we can do to get those butterflies to behave a bit more.”

I was told from the very beginning by Ann that

there were three options for helping gain control over General Anxiety Disorder (GAD): coping mechanisms, medication, or both. I had always been taught as a child that medication was a last result and decided to go with coping mechanisms. So Ann taught me about creating physical or conceptual focus objects. I thought back to that session.

“I want you to close your eyes and take a deep breath. Think of a calming place. Where is your calming place?”

I opened my eyes and looked at Ann. “A meadow of beautiful violets.” She smiled at me and took a deep breath.

“Every time the butterflies creep in, I want you to think of your field of violets and tell yourself you’re in control. Do understand?”

I looked at her and nodded my head solemnly.

I started fall 2009 with DRC accommodations. Ann’s letter of diagnosis opened me to a world of possibilities. All my tests would be taken in a room by myself. For each test, I got double time. I could have a note-taker for my classes, but insisted on taking them myself. I met with Larry every few weeks to make sure my needs were being met by my professors. These accommodations followed me as I left the tiny community college and made my way to Weber State. Every testing situation was pretty much the same. I would pick a specific time and time limit for each test. The change in my test anxiety was astonishing.

I walked into the Student Services with Disabilities (SSD) and signed in at the front desk. A man sat behind the front desk. His hair was short and wavy.

“What can I help you with?”

I set my bag down and smiled. “I’m here to take my sociology test.”

I gave him my name and W number as he retrieved my exam. He ushered me to one of their small testing rooms and laid the exam down.

“Just sign the exam and you can get started. Do you need a reader to give you the exam?”

I sign the sheet as I sat in the office chair in my own private room. “No, I’ll be fine. Thanks.” The room was small, no bigger than ten by ten feet. There were no distractions, no other students, and, most of all, no time limits. I read my questions out loud to myself and, when I’d finished, I handed my precious papers to the man at the front desk.

I hadn’t had a thumping heart, throbbing temples, and there was no flicking of any rubber bands. After I finished, I gathered my things and went on my merry way. To say the anxiety is gone would be a lie. “Immortal butterflies” will always be there, doing aeriels and nosedives on a daily basis. But all I need to do is close my eyes and imagine my violets putting the butterflies to sleep. It’s enough. It’s what gets me through my day.

## The Light

Michelle Stephens

As I lay in the semi-darkness of the motel room, I am reminded of the past twenty-four hours. This hell is about to take a new turn, one I am very ready for. Lying on the table are the room key cards and the bus schedules I printed from the motel computer. Twenty-four hours ago . . .

I was lying in this exact bed, possibly in this exact spot and position. The room was dark except for the flickering light of the television. The television was playing some stupid show, which he picked out. He always picked dumb shows, mostly reality TV. Reality TV, what an oxymoron! The sound was turned up too loud for me and I wasn't sleeping. He was. I knew from experience that if I turned the sound on the TV down or off, he would wake and yell at me. He always yelled at me. I glanced around the room and an object came into my vision. A round table was sitting just inside of the door. On the table were the room key cards and his cigarettes. It always came to his cigarettes. We were homeless, carless, friendless, and away from home. It was always the damn cigarettes! He had to have them. It was his life's blood.

I glanced to the dresser, where some of our clothes were lying next to the television. We knew we had a couple more days to stay in this motel. A nice truck driver was nice enough to rent and supply the room for us. Pity. He felt pity. The scared girl from Utah and the sick truck driver. He was always able to get attention and sympathy from others. They always



believed him, even me. I had believed in him through this entire journey.

My eyes drifted from the television and, not for the first time, saw the knife. It had been used to cut potatoes for dinner and for various other things as we were out and about. The knife. It was a very sharp knife. It could cut through anything. I bet it could cut through . . .

Stop! These weren't the right thoughts to have. It was okay. Everything was going to be okay. We would find a way out of this hell. He had gotten us this far, right? Wait, no, it wasn't him. It was me. It was my friends. It was my family. He could get cigarettes from truck drivers and others who felt sorry for him, but I had borrowed money from my friends and family. It was people who loved me who had gotten us through most of this journey. It was me. But this was also a reason to be sad. My friends and family had gotten us this far, and look at where we were. A motel room outside of Atlanta, Georgia, with no place left to go. We were stuck here. In two more days, we would be out in the cold, sitting at the Pilot truck stop next door, praying someone would take pity on us. That someone would give us a ride or at least pay for a meal. It was always the same thing.

The knife. If I just took the knife and opened it, I could . . .

Stop! This was madness. I had gotten this far. Why would I even attempt to contemplate it? We had made it this far. But none of my friends were going to send any more money. They had all turned their backs on me. They had helped as much as they could. It was my own fault for not using that money where it had been intended, to return home to Utah. It was my own

fault. No one else would want to help.

The knife.

Okay, sleep was obviously eluding me; it was time to do something different.

I walked into the bathroom and started the water running for a bath. Relax. That is what I needed to do, relax. As the water ran, filling the bathtub with water, I gathered bathing materials. I had my soap, towels, and the book I was currently reading. I am incredibly embarrassed to state that book was *Twilight*. Someone had left it behind at a truck stop, and I was so desperate for reading material that I had snatched it up and had started reading it. What an abysmal book. But it felt like a life preserver to the land of somewhere else.

I set the towels and the book on the white lid of the toilet and undressed. I stuck my foot into the water and found it too hot. I adjusted the temperature and sat on the edge of the tub, waiting for the water to cool. I leaned over and ran my hand through the water. Ah, perfect!

I eased myself into the hot water and immediately felt myself relax. I slid down on my back until my head was resting at the upper edge of the tub. I dried my hands with a fluffy white towel and reached for the book.

I opened the blasted book and started to read. Oh, what was stupid, insipid Bella going to do next? I started to read about Bella and her obsession with Edward and the other vampires. My mind started to wander and I looked down at my feet. The water was still pretty hot, so, to ease the temperature of my body, I had placed my feet up on the cool tiled wall. I could see the blood pulsing through the blue veins in my

feet. I traced the lines of my veins with my mind. One started at the second knuckle of my left great toe. It pulsed with blood. I followed the pattern as it coiled down into the other veins and arteries. One by one, I followed each intersection until I had traced each line. What if I took the knife and did the same thing?

I envisioned opening the very sharp knife and cutting into the skin of my foot, right at the knuckle where that beautiful vein started. It was so sharp; it would be as smooth as cutting butter. I could just draw the knife down, down, so slowly. The blood would flow easily. I could just drop my foot into the water and, as I read the stupid words of Stephenie Meyer, I would slip into unconsciousness, into oblivion. Yes, sweet oblivion. This hell would be over. I could go “home.”

As I stared at my feet, I realized I was in terrible danger. More danger than I had been in on this journey and more than I had ever been in my entire life. This was bottom. I had reached the lowest point in my life. This was it, either do or die. Die. Yes, that was where I was. Did I want to die? Was I ready to be released from the bonds of this life? I lay there for several minutes as the water became cold, contemplating my life. In a way, my life flashed before my eyes. I saw my childhood and all the years of living in the deep darkness of depression. That giant black hole of nothingness I had created of my life.

I thought about my friends, those who I loved as family. They were the ones who turned their backs on me when I started this journey. I had lost everything. Was there anything left to live for? What would my life be like if I continued this journey as it had been? So many questions ran through my brain. Pain. So much pain. I had lived so many years in pain,

in darkness. I was now in the deepest darkness I had ever been.

Light. I saw a light. I wasn't ready to end this life, but I was ready to end this journey. I made one final decision. I was going to send one more plea for help. If that wasn't answered, I still had the beautiful knife.

I extricated myself from the bath and gently dried away the droplets of water and thought. I slipped into my clothes and left the bathroom. Him. He was still there. The TV was still playing a stupid show and he snoring in his bed.

I snatched up a room key and left the motel room. I walked to the front office and sat in front of the computer. I pulled up the address list in my email and sent an email plea to everyone on that list.

*Please help me. I am stranded in Atlanta and I need to get home to Utah. If you can send me money to get home, I will be forever grateful and I will pay you back as soon as I can. Send an email if you can help.*

*Thanks,  
Michelle*

I pressed the send button on Yahoo! email and returned to the hotel room and attempted to fall asleep.

In the morning, I woke before him. I quickly got dressed, grabbed a room key, and went to the office to check my email. A savior! I found a savior. An old friend from high school was going to send me the money to go home. Thank every god and the universe for this savior. I was going home!

I lay in the motel bed knowing I was lucky. I was so grateful this hell would be nearing an end. I was going home to Utah to what I knew. There was a light, and his name was Michael.





**FICTION**

## Orestes Animal Park

Jessica Gabbert (*Section Winner*)

The miniature tour train chuffed down the track, squealing softly on the turns. Inside, it smelled of tourist sweat and cheap popcorn. The upholstery was sticky and worn; the back of each vinyl seat had “Orestes Animal Park” embroidered on it in fraying red thread. Very little breeze wafted through the open sides, and when it did, it carried the smells of moldy straw and animal waste.

As they rounded a turn, the tour guide—young, blonde, attractive, but as sweaty as everyone else; her bun was unraveling and stray hairs stuck to her neck—raised the PA microphone to her lips once more. “On your right, you will see our minotaur enclosure. We’re in for a special treat—he’s only fed every six months or so, and today we get to see it!”

The passengers knew this, of course, but they twittered excitedly as the train shrieked to a slow stop. Some twenty feet away was the enclosure, which was bordered with a heavy electrified fence. Inside was a pile of rocks, a small muddy pond; the beast was lurking unseen somewhere inside. The tourists readied their cameras.

A low door in a false boulder banged open. A pale, naked young man was shoved out face-first, stumbling from his momentum on the ragged grass. He might have been blandly attractive if he didn’t look so terrified. The tourists oohed excitedly as the door slammed shut and the man scrabbled at it with ragged fingernails, looking for a handle that wasn’t there.



“This particular minotaur was rescued from an animal hoarder in Crete. Thankfully, he has made a full recovery, and we’re hoping to be able to breed him soon.”

The naked man staggered to the fence and stopped just short. He was shaking. “Let me out, please!” he begged.

Someone snapped a picture. The man cringed at the flash.

A roar rang out. The minotaur appeared from the shade under one of the too-small habitat’s massive boulders. The head, with its wet snout and huge ivory horns, was too big for the body, and the whole creature hunched forward, long black fur obscuring its chest. The body was human-shaped, though hugely muscular and covered in short, thin black fur; pale scars glistened from under the hair.

The man turned, standing as straight as possible. The creature snorted once, then charged on four legs. The tourists craned their necks, watching with detached interest as the minotaur leveled its massive horns at its prey. The spurt of red hung in the air like a ribbon, glistening in the stale afternoon breeze.

More camera flashes. The tourists’ happy chatter didn’t quite drown the screaming. The fence made a sizzling sound as a detached arm bounced off it.

The train started again, the wheels protesting slightly.

“Next, we’re going to see the harpy enclosure!” the tour guide said chirpily. “We have common harpies, Grecian fleet-winged harpies, several rare golden harpies, and—the prize of the park—even a rare

fury!”

The tourists still strained their necks as the train moved away, trying to catch a last glimpse of the minotaur. A few managed to snap final blurry photos of it as they drove away, catching it with its muzzle bloody. They ignored the remains of the nameless man, scattered about in rapidly cooling, unidentifiable pieces. A middle-aged couple chatted about how lucky they were to see such a magnificent beast as the minotaur hunting.

“Make sure you save pictures for our pushmepullyu habitat!”

## Apathy

Joshua Nelson

“Your father is in a coma. You might want to come home to see him; this might be your last opportunity.”

It was the apathy in my mother’s voice that shattered something inside of me. Finding out that Dad was in a coma was terrible, but knowing that my mother didn’t think I would come to see him was worse. I had been living in Mississippi for the past twenty years, and though I wished more than anything I could travel back to see my family, I had never had the means. My family had grown tired of my long absence. My other siblings had never lived further than a day’s drive away from my parent’s house.

“I’ll be on the soonest plane I can find.”

Dad had been in the hospital several times during the previous months. Every time he was admitted, the doctors instructed him to take better care of himself. If he didn’t, they said, he would be facing heart attacks or strokes. Each time that he left, they knew it would only be a few weeks before he was back. He never listened. Dad was always a stubborn man, especially as he aged.

They kept Dad in his room with the shades drawn. He was tucked so tightly into his blankets, I thought he was already in a casket. I sat on his bed and loosened his bonds. He was breathing deeply and steadily, and when I touched his hand, his lips curled slightly and he smiled the same smile of when we rode horses long ago. His smile was the only recognition he

gave.

Mom and I sat at the kitchen table in one of the few moments we'd had alone since my arrival. We spoke briefly of the upcoming family meeting before she changed the subject. She related to me how she had got up early yesterday morning because she had too big of a house to manage and was going to let Dad sleep while she swept the floors, finished cleaning the dishes, tidied up the den, and made his favorite breakfast.

"Mom," I interrupted, "have you taken him to the hospital, or had a doctor come and check him out yet?"

"Hospitals are too expensive for someone whose vitals are fine."

"Dad's vitals can't last, he is starving, and if it's money you're worried about, don't be. Bills are cheap when . . ."

The door flew open, and in stormed hordes of children. A moment later, they were bouncing off the walls and running through the house. I glanced to my mother just in time to see her eyes harden as she began to get after her grandkids for ruining her clean kitchen. The next figure through the door was my brother. I smiled brightly, but he only offered his hand for me to shake. The other ten siblings arrived in similar fashion, children in tow, handshakes all around.

The meeting began by Mother asking us what we thought should be done with Dad. Their answers were as blows from a baseball bat. One by one, in hollow voices, from my siblings the words came.

"Leave him as he is."

My veins throbbed and my hands shook, but

I tried to dam my emotions until it was my turn to speak.

“Why, am I the only one of us that thinks Dad should be taken to a hospital so he has a chance at life?” I finally blurted.

The answers came in a flood. Everyone had his or her own reason for letting Dad stay in his coma: This is what he would want. You haven’t been around to take care of him every day. He doesn’t want to live anymore. He is in less pain this way.

“I can’t sit here and let Dad starve to death while we bicker about what to do,” I said.

“Let’s put it to a vote, then.”

“NO! We won’t put it to a vote, because y’all are ridiculous. You can’t vote on a man’s life. It doesn’t matter if we have to take care of him every day. He took care of us when we were little. Brother, when your daughter was struggling with anorexia and didn’t want to eat, did you let her stop? Did you say, ‘Well, she doesn’t want to live anymore, can’t do anything about that’? NO! You told her to eat anyway, so that she would be okay.”

“That is a diff—”

“No, it isn’t. What y’all are trying to do is kill Dad so your lives are easier.”

The arguments continued. Neither my siblings nor I gave any ground. We argued well past all their children’s bedtimes until we had no energy left, nor tears to cry. My siblings took their families home and I was left in the house where I grew up, memories of my dad and me dancing before my eyes. I walked into my old room and lay on the floor until exhaustion overtook me.

*I squint into the sun and look over the open meadows. The grass swishes against my skin, the breeze blows my hair, and I see horses galloping gracefully across the wide expanse. I am a boy of twelve again. A beautiful paint horse carrying a person trots up to me. It is my father. He tells me that one day we, just he and I, are going to ride on these horses together.*

I woke up with a start, remembering my father's unfulfilled promise, a promise made more than thirty years ago. I couldn't fall back to sleep, so I went to the kitchen and found Mother already sitting at the table with two glasses of water. There had never been a time when I lived at home and couldn't sleep that I hadn't walked up the stairs to find Mother already there, waiting for me.

"It isn't right, Mom."

"Honey, you have to understand that we are ready for Dad to go. We have spent our time with him and now know it is right to let him leave us. You have been away for so long that you can't let him go because you want more time with him."

"I can't let him go, Mom, because it is wrong to let a man die when you don't even know what's wrong with him."

"We don't need to know, honey. We just know that this is right."

"I will never understand that."

"You will stay for the funeral, won't you?"

Her lips quivered only a moment before she stayed her resolve, but her eyes exposed the pain and

loss of our fractured relationship as I silently shook my head no.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“And *that* is something I will never understand.”

Dad passed away a day later. Mother phoned me as my flight was about to leave for home.

## Because I Can

David Norman

They think they have me. They burst into my home, warrant in hand. They have me guarded by three very nervous uniformed officers as I sit at my kitchen table. These men look both terrified and perplexed at the same time. They scrutinize everything about me, from the way I look to the way I move, as if they could somehow read my soul. I know what they are thinking: “Could this really be the person capable of such wickedness? Am I really in the presence of unadulterated evil?” With the smallest movement of my hand they twitch, ready to pounce. They can’t help but react to the stress. Their eyes are dilated, chests rise and fall in rapid shallow successions, and they stand slightly hunched, possessing all the tension of a lioness ready to defend her young. Two of them are ready to run and the other . . . yes, he is a fighter. He’s angry and looking for an excuse to discharge his weapon and end it all here. And yet, I remain calm.

The detectives are searching every nook and cranny of my home. They think they will find a “smoking gun.” That’s just silly—I’m too good at this to be so clumsy. The only thing that can give me up . . . is me. And I am cool as a cucumber. They could throw me into a furnace, melt me down, and all they would find is a lump of cold, hard steel where my heart should be. So it matters not what they do. I simply will not break. It’s how I do these things in the first place. Yes, I admit it. I am evil and my actions are completely reprehensible. I torture people to death



with complete compunctual impunity. I quite like it, actually. It's almost like research at first—waiting, watching, analyzing—finding the perfect prey. I like my victims to fight hard when they suddenly realize what is happening. I like them to scream. Ideally, they will go through all of the stages: pleading, bargaining, and finally threatening. These things are requisite for my work to be perfect. Quite unsatisfactorily, however, not all victims are created equally, and many are not up to such dramatic professions. Some give up way too easily. Others are silent-frozen in fear. Finding the good ones, the victims who play their parts well, now that is an art. And I am the Michelangelo of Malevolence—the Da Vinci of Death. Just as the beauty of a flame requires the destruction of a match, I also create my works of wonder by means of destruction. The poor souls who perish ever so slowly and painfully at my hand ought to feel honored I chose them, for I will immortalize them with my gift. Forever conjoined they and I will be. They are the canvas upon which I . . . inflict my art.

As fate would have it, my work will not be appropriately valued until after I am gone, just like all of the greatest artists. I recognize that. My talents will not be fully appreciated or even comprehended for generations. I am ahead of my time, and this loathsome society of simpletons that I suffer every day is in need of much evolution and enlightenment before recognizing my genius. Perhaps in their grandchildren's or great-grandchildren's day they will attain adequate sophistication to finally honor my brilliance. But until such time that I am glorified as the Creator of Crisis, the Master of Mayhem that I am, I will be feared; I will be respected.

As for the dozen or so detectives and officers in my home now, they are nitwits. Not one of them is in the possession of the intelligence necessary to keep pace in this game we are playing. They wouldn't be here now if I hadn't led them here with an anonymous tip. They are lightweights, imbeciles. They are more akin to "Keystone Cops" than serious detectives. All the same, I'm glad we are finally to this stage now. This is where the hunter is suddenly the hunted. I am too smart for these miserable big-city wannabes. I am out of their league. Wait until they present the charges to me: "You are under arrest on the charges of fifteen counts of murder!" Oh, I can act surprised. I can feign sick, and even compel myself to vomit when they show me the gory photos of bloody, mutilated carcasses. What a worthy show I will put on! What incredulity they will see on my face! What pure shock! At that very moment, they will be struck with confounding self-doubt. They will question their investigation, their findings, everything—even their own judgment. Yes, they seem so sure of themselves right now, but they will find their arrogance shattered into a million pieces and floating away in the rivers of blood I bathed in as I gutted those poor people. They feel so safe now that they are about to arrest the villain responsible for such unimaginable debauchery. But after my performance, they will not feel so safe. They will be forced to release me and dismiss the charges. As soon as they apologize to me, a distinguished and honored professor, they will rush back to their crime scenes and files to find something, anything, to lead them to the devil that perpetrated such violence. Oh, I laugh at the thought of the detectives scrambling to start over, to find me before I strike again. But they will have already found

me, and let me go ... let me go only to become their own personal nightmare. Oh, yes! It's delightful to imagine. I almost cannot stand the perfect irony of it! I will find them, where they live, and I will wipe out their families first. I can just see it now: They will spend hours and days poring over every minute bit of information, anxiously wringing their hands in frustration, emotions teeming over to the brink of breakdown. And then one day, these mental midgets will come home to self-medicate with cheap beer and a few hours of mind-numbing sitcoms, hoping to forget the horror for a while. But instead they will find the very devil they look for has found them first.

Oh, the horror they will come home to! What gore! What a composition of glorious depravity! I mustn't think of their reactions now, for I must show no emotion, give no clue as they watch me so closely at this moment. I must remain here inside myself, hiding deep in the darkness within this meat-suit I wear, portraying no reaction, no hint of guilt or fear. They look for that; they are trained to see it. The best of them can smell it, even. But they will not see or smell guilt or fear from me. Yes, I killed all those people—and many more that they don't know about yet—but I have no guilt. How can I if I have no heart? And fear—ha! Fear is for the weak and feeling. I am strong—the strongest. They will never know it was me. At least, not until I visit them in their grief—perhaps the night of the funerals. Oh, yes! That is brilliant! That is . . . beautifully poetic! And when I visit them in their grief, they will look into my eyes and they will know that they nearly had me once. They will think, “You hideous monster! I had you! You were in my grasp, but I let you go? I released you, and now you

have murdered my family!” And then they will expect to die in that selfsame moment. But oh no! They will not know the sweet deliverance of death. No suffering will be assuaged in that moment! For I will carve out their eyes with spoons from their own kitchens that they cannot see; I will cut out their tongues with their own knives that they cannot speak; and I will sever their hands at the wrists that they cannot write. I will leave them in a dark and silent prison of their own flesh, to suffer in the depths of darkness alone, unable to see the consoling face of a friend, unable to speak or write a word, completely incapable of conveying a name—mine—as their tormentor, as the slayer of their loved ones. But their ears—ah yes, their ears I will preserve. I will not harm their ears so that when I visit them from time to time, I can whisper into them, “It is me. It’s our anniversary, and I am here to tell you yet again the story of how your family pled for their lives, how their suffering was so exquisite they repeatedly implored for death to end the pain and horror, how they vehemently begged the question ‘Why? Why are you doing this?’” I will slowly yet blissfully whisper the answer into the perfect ear of my mute and blind friends: “Because . . . I . . . caaaaaan.”

But that will all come to pass soon enough. For now, in this moment, I must bide my time. I must play the part of the perfect, innocent, and delicate housewife and humble teacher.

And so I will sit here and calmly sip my coffee.

## The Demise of Calico Cali

Naia Kiana Owens

The superstitions of cats are often quite tragic. But in this town, cats possess a kind of magic. Death has no power over these mystical creatures. And in this short tale, a special cat will be featured. So as we go along, please don't be alarmed if the life of this feline appears less than charmed, for stories are told through rhyme and through reason, and different worlds unfold different seasons.

They say curiosity killed the cat and, for some cats, this is a well-known fact. But curiosity is not alone in the theft of nine lives. Fate and misfortune may also apply. For a cat named Cali, this holds true. Her nine lives are spent before this is through. So read on, dear friends, and you will see how this came to be, in a town called Moonlight Valley.

We first meet Cali as she sits beneath a tree, looking up at the branches anxiously. Sitting on a limb is a bird she intends to devour. But regrettably, this plan of hers goes a little sour . . .

Cali's first life passed from being too eager. She chased a red robin into a tall cedar. As the bird flew from one branch to another, Cali climbed in pursuit, hoping to catch her swift supper. Soon, the robin grew tired of the chase and flew to a rooftop where it was safe. But Cali forgot that she could not fly when she jumped from the tree, which was a bit too high. As Cali fell to the ground, the robin could see that not all cats land so gracefully.

In her second life, her fate was sealed when

she trapped a brown mouse in a strawberry field. The mouse shivered with fear as his ruin drew near, Cali advancing on him with a wide-toothed sneer. But just as she was about to pounce, she heard a sound that was faint but pronounced. A squeak bubbled up from the grass, growing louder. Then more rang out as Cali started to cower. She slowly backed away from the mouse to run. But suddenly she was outnumbered by a hundred to one! Mice came from all directions to nibble at Cali, and the sound of her cries echoed through the small valley.

During her third life, Cali's eyes lit up with greed as she jumped on the table to do a bad deed. Dinner was served and the whole family ate the chicken, rice, and beans off their plates. Cali waited close by as they finished their meal, then she took a chance to find something to steal. When they left their plates and they left the room, Cali leapt on the table to consume her doom. Just as she was about to gloat, a chicken bone got caught in her throat. As she gasped for air and fell to the floor, her last thought was just for one bite more.

Cali's fourth life was lost in the shadow of night when she came upon a passageway where cats often fight. A black alley cat claimed the area as her own, and the presence of Cali threatened her throne. So she approached Cali with her ears drawn back. Arching her spine, she was ready to attack. And Cali, not wanting to look like a coward, issued a thin hiss and swatted the prowler. The fur flew high as the fight progressed. But Cali's performance was not her best. The alley cat landed the fatal blow that crumbled Cali before her foe.

Her fifth life she lost from being outwitted. It

was not a bird, nor mouse, but a fish that did it. This was not just any old fish that swam about. He was a clever little pupil from a school of trout. When Cali stuck her claw into the river for a bite, the trout began to whirl around with all of its might. To make her dizzy was his plan, so that he could get away and play with the rest of the fish swimming by the bay. Cali tried to grab the trout, but it was not very easy. The spinning of the fish inside the water made her queasy. Before she knew what happened, Cali fell into the river. The icy-cold water caused her very bones to quiver. She tried to tread water, but realized she could not swim. So she sank beneath the waves as the current pulled her in.

Her sixth life took flight like darkness flees from light on a day when most children enjoy a good fright. It was Halloween and the children dressed in costumes of vampires and goblins and witches on brooms. Most kids knocked on doors, hoping to get a sweet treat. Others ran around the streets, looking for monsters to defeat. But some kids were rather rowdy and liked to put on a show, to see how many cats they could scare through windows. So while Cali was curled up on the ledge fast asleep, a boy who cut holes into his mother's best sheets slammed into her window and shouted out "boo!" And Cali's poor heart did not know what to do. It gave one last beat and with that it was through, making Cali his "Halloween Victim Number Two."

In the passing of her seventh life, Cali's ego played the part when she made a thoughtless joke that a dog took to heart. She smiled to herself because she thought it would be funny to tease a neighbor dog, who was a mutt named Sunny. She walked proudly

beside the wooden fence to Sunny's backyard, since his owners often chained him up at night to stand guard. But Sunny lay inside his kennel with his head upon his paws, waiting for the chance to snatch Cali between his jaws. Cali purred with glee, thinking the dog was so dense. But as she stopped to lick her paws, Sunny jumped over the fence. He chased her down to Main Street, where the traffic was high. The drivers honked their horns as the two scurried by. She raced towards a corner as the light turned red, but was hit by a sedan for all her trouble instead. Fearing he would be blamed, Sunny chose to flee. So he hurried home with his tail between his knees.

As her eighth life waned, Cali was getting very old. Her thinning fur no longer kept her warm in the cold. She stayed outside when the sun was bright, and at sunset, she came inside for the night. Her family would hear her bellowing at the front door: The latest hour would be seven and the earliest four. On one snowy eve, the family went out for the night. But no one bothered to make sure Cali was all right. So when she came scratching at the door to be let in, the house was very silent, and nothing stirred within. Cali meowed, hoping someone would hear her pleas. With icicles on her whiskers, she had already begun to freeze. She waited through the night, but no one ever came. As snowflakes fell, Cali's temperature did the same. When the humans came home, they received a sad surprise, for Cali lay there, frozen stiff before their very eyes.

With her ninth and final life, Cali knew it was time. So we end her short story with one last rhyme. She grabbed her toy mouse and headed for the light, where a rainbow could be seen beyond the clouds



in sight. She walked towards the light as other cats appeared, with wings on their backs and halos above their ears. She smiled as she felt her own wings begin to grow, and then giggled as the halo tickled her ears with its glow. As she flew into the sky, she could feel another change. She was no longer an old cat with matty fur and little brain. She was a heavenly cat whose spirit would forever remain, and whom Death could never find again on this celestial plane.

We have come to the end, my enduring friends. So wave goodbye to Cali as she ascends. Parting ways always brings one sorrow, but the sweetness it leaves helps us to bear tomorrow. We will allow one last tear for Cali to be shed. Then we will make our ways to the comfort of our beds. Sleep will take hold while our dreams ignite. Let them burn bright . . . and bring the warmth of sunlight.

## Tamales and Roses

Stacy Hammon

God doesn't give you more than you can handle. Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger? It's all bullshit. It just hasn't killed you. All the signs, we saw them. But you make excuses. I should've known. I should have made Michael come back to Mom's with me. We shouldn't have let him be alone so much. Inside the house I hear the phone ring six, ten, twenty-one times. I ignore it, because I'm waiting. And freezing. It was warm earlier. I even wore shorts jogging after school. Now it's starting to snow, and I left my jacket at Dad's house when we were with him last weekend.

Why isn't she home yet? She left work over two hours ago. Where the hell are you, Mom? Why do you always let your phone battery die?

The snow's sticking to the grass. Car headlights reflect slanted daggers of snow as neighbors who left last this morning return late.

What did Dad mean, "There's been an accident"? Michael's been firing a gun since he was ten years old. He always knows exactly what he's doing. There's no good reason he'd be out in the field this time of year. This isn't an accident. I hate how everyone in this family lies.

Finally, she's pulling in the driveway. How the hell am I supposed to do this? Look at her. She's pissed at something. Oh, God. What do I say?

"What do you think you're doing, Shelly? All the neighbors witnessing my sixteen-year-old daughter

smoking on the front porch!” I can hear her say as she starts to get out.

I get up and am by the open car door before she can fully untangle herself from the seatbelt.

“People don’t know how to drive in a little snow,” she continues complaining. “It took me forever just to get past the tracks.”

I can’t speak. I count every flake that collects on the shoulders of her green coat. Dad bought it for her when I was twelve. I was with him. Emerald-green wool with a pink, shimmery lining. Pink is her favorite color—green because it flatters her eyes and auburn hair.

“Grab some groceries,” she says. “Let’s get these in before it’s worse out here. When Michael comes back, you and he need to help clear out the garage, now that the snow’s finally here.”

I walk to the trunk. All I can do is stand there while she tries to grab half a dozen bags in each hand.

“So your father? He’s letting you smoke when you stay with him? It’s tacky, Shelly. You look like trash.”

“Mom,” I can barely whisper, “it doesn’t matter. You just need to get back in the car.”

“What the hell, Shelly? Just grab some groceries.”

A little louder, I say, “It doesn’t matter. We have to go to Dad’s house right now.”

“What are you yammering—”

“You have to get in the car. It’s Michael. We have to go to Dad’s.”

“Really, Shell. You’re pissing me off.”

“Fuck the groceries, Mom! Michael’s dead! He’s shot . . . There’s been an accident.”

The sacks drop. Something shatters. Probably jelly. Michael's been out of pineapple-apricot jelly since Thanksgiving. I had put it on the list so she'd remember this time. She melts down into the middle of the pile of groceries.

Mrs. Trujillo pulls in across the street. Her trunk pops open. She has groceries too. She stands silhouetted in the garage light. Mom is crying. More than crying. That guttural, soulful, animal wail will haunt my dreams. Forever.

"Mom. I need you to stand up and get in the car. Dad's waiting for us at his place. Aunt Dot and Uncle Tom are on their way too." I cannot raise her. She's fastened herself to the ground, like weeds holding tenacious to the cracks of the driveway. She rocks, holding herself close and small.

Mrs. Trujillo picks her way carefully across the slushy street, trying not to slip in her heels. "Shelly? Mija?" she says.

She's been cooking for two days. The smell of tamales wafts around her. Her hair and clothes retain the fragrance of celebration this time of year. Mrs. Trujillo took care of me and Michael after school every day when we were little.

I want to tell her Michael's dead. Tell her he wasn't back home just for the winter break. That he's failing college and never planned on going back. That he made a big deal of telling me goodbye last week when I left Dad's. That he gave me a box taped up and told me not to open it until Christmas. But I already did, and it's all the music and lyrics he's written over the past five years. I wanted to tell her Michael shot himself in the field we've always played in by Dad's apartment. But all that comes out is "There's been an

accident with Michael. I need to get her to Dad's."

Another neighbor, Mrs. Lewis, also comes trudging through the gate that connects our backyards. Ever since Nana died ten years ago, Mrs. Lewis has been like a grandmother to us. She has on black rubber galoshes, the kind that close with three silver clasps. She's probably had them for over fifty years. Even in winter, she smells of roses. Delicate rosewater perfume she makes every year from her garden. She takes hold of my shoulders and looks me in the eyes. I notice her eyes are as blue as the ice on the pond will be when it freezes and reflects the sky on a sunny day.

"Your dad called me," she says. "He's worried you two aren't there yet. He's tried to call your cell and the house." She pulls me in to hug the smell of those summer roses. "He told me about Michael. I'm sorry, Shelly."

Mrs. Trujillo has been crouched next to my mother. Holding her. Rocking with her.

"No, no, no, no, no, no. Oh, God. No, no, no," Mom keeps chanting. She must have been this whole time.

"Angela? Angela, I'm going to help you back in the car," Mrs. Trujillo coos in my mother's ear. "Shelly's going to drive you over to Steve's." My mother's weed turns into an easily plucked flower in her grasp.

Mrs. Lewis has taken in the now nearly sopping-wet groceries. She returns back outside and holds me. "Shelly, you can do this. Your family is waiting for you and your mom. She will be okay. I've always told you how much you remind me of your grandmother. She was the strongest woman I've ever

known. You have that strength too.”

I start to cry in the roses.

She walks me over to the driver’s-side door.

Mrs. Trujillo has scraped the snow off the windshield and is working on the rear window. I get in and start the engine. Mrs. Lewis motions for me to roll down the window.

“Celia and I will take care of everything here. We’ll put away anything that isn’t soaked through. I’ll lock up and look after the house,” she reassures me.

“Be careful driving in this snow, Mija. And God bless,” Mrs. Trujillo tells me, and kisses me on the cheek.

## When Shall I Go

Eric Riddle

“Hi.”

“Hey, Randy. How’ve you been?”

“Pretty well. You?”

“I’ve been okay. You look good. It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah. It has. You look good, too. I’m sorry I haven’t been around to see you for so long. Oh, and happy birthday last week. I heard you had a pretty big party. It’s been a little rough on me, and things have been awkward between us since, well, you know . . .”

“Yeah, it was fun. Who knew that twenty-six would be such a big birthday! Listen, I’m sorry about the way things ended. I got scared, but you need to know that I never meant to hurt you. I still feel bad about the things I said to you, but I did mean them; I know my feelings won’t change. I hope you can see that. I hope you can get past that one day. I miss you. You were my best friend!”

Randy was still a little shaken from the break-up, even though it had been almost a year. It was those kinds of things she said that made it so hard to be around her. He had been so in love with her . . . and then she blindsided him.

Randy replied, “Look, I know this sounds strange, but I ran into a guy at the park a little over a year ago. He was just staring at me, looking kind of funny. The next day, he showed up again and just stared at me, but this time he was also writing things down. The last day, he showed up with a box under his

arm. He started talking to me, and eventually the topic turned to past loves. He said he knew you but wouldn't tell me how. Anyway, he asked me to give you this box for your twenty-sixth birthday. I don't know what's inside, but I've been holding it for a year."

"Randy, what did he look like? What was his name?"

"I don't know. Look, I have to go. I'm sorry I bothered you."

With this, Randy handed over the box and left quickly.

She watched him leave . . . again. When things had ended things between them, he walked away and she hadn't seen him since. She missed him, but knew that she couldn't return to him the love he felt for her. She opened the box to find a whole slew of old, handwritten books and an envelope that had been sealed with silver wax and a rose stamp. She opened the envelope, pulled out a really long letter, and began reading:

4 March, 2012

Dear \*\*\*\*,

As I pulled the dusty cover off the old machine, I laughed when I remembered how much fun I used to have in it, and now it was mine. I knew it would be mine ever since I was a young boy of ten and Grandpa had showed me how to use it—after all, I was the only one Grandpa had trusted with this "little" secret. I had just inherited it when he passed on. In reality, the will only left me a letter with a key—but the letter told me how to clean and maintain the machine and the key was to the storage container that contained the



spectacle.

I checked all the connections and made sure it was well oiled. The only problem I saw was that it only had enough power for one more trip. Why would he only leave me with enough energy for one round-trip voyage? I could go and come back, but that would be it for the old machine. Grandpa never could find a power source as effective as the one currently in use, and it was all but depleted. Grandpa had figured out how to travel in time in a machine of his own design. He shared with me the secret of how the machine worked, the physics behind it all, but refused to tell me what powered the old thing.

Once I got everything cleaned as per the instructions in his letter, I sat in the machine without turning it on, trying to remember where Grandpa had first taken me. He told me it would all make sense one day, but I was still unsure what we actually saw. I was staring off into space, remembering the old man, and I noticed a little piece of paper sticking out from under the time circuit.

“Hey, Little Britches! If you’re reading this, you are almost ready to go. Remember the first trip I took you on? You didn’t understand when we were, so I thought I’d tell you now that I’m gone. I took you to see me as a younger man. You remember the young man who was sitting on the park bench in the rain? He was me. Remember how happy he looked? I had just asked your grandmother to marry me, and she said yes. What you may not know is that once, she and I had been dating for a long time, but I did something I still regret to this day, and she died. In a different time, I stood her up the night of her death because I was too selfish. I didn’t know what I had until it was

too late. She was hit by a car that night while she was out for a walk in the rain to clear her head. She died because I wasn't emotionally available for her. It was at her funeral that I vowed to build a time machine so I could go back and fix things.

"The reason I'm telling you all of this is because I was able to use the machine to save her life. I went back a day before she died and gave myself a pretty stern talking-to. I gave myself a letter explaining the whole situation, because young, selfish me knew nothing about the other reality, and I was poised to make the same mistake again. Future Me told me that I needed to not stand her up. I was also to propose to her that night, which I did. As I sat there in the rain, I thought of how that particular rain could have resulted in her death. I remember as a young man, I looked up and saw a man and a young boy in the park, standing in the rain. When you came over on your tenth birthday wearing the same clothes as the young boy from that night, I knew I had to take you with me to that moment. I saw so much of myself in you.

"Future Me also gave Younger Me the plans to the time machine and told me I had to still build it and have it completed on November fifth, the same day he completed it.

"You may be wondering why I only left you with enough energy to make one trip. You see, this machine needs to be destroyed, but since I (well, the other me) used it to save your grandmother's life and completely change mine for the better, I thought I would give you the chance to fix one mistake. Remember after our first trip, I told you to keep a journal of some kind—with dates? Hope you honored your promise. You can read back in that and see what events in your life had

the most dramatic influence. You have once chance to make it right . . . but keep in mind that anything you change will create a new reality. Use your one trip wisely.

Love,  
Grandpa B.”

I sat there pondering the letter for the better part of an hour. Grandpa B. had always told me not to touch anything during our trips to the past because of the effects it could have on the future, and here was a letter from him telling me to go fix a mistake—to alter my life. What was I supposed to do?

I went home and grabbed all of the journals I’d filled up since I was ten. I arrived back at the storage facility with a stack of old books. I started reading through my personal history and one theme seemed to be running through all of them—it was you. I know this letter might seem to be running in circles and seem a little confusing (if not farfetched), but there is a point. You’ll find my journals in the box that this letter was in. You can read through them and you’ll know that I’m telling the truth.

I read about when we first met in high school and how I thought you were pretty—but strange. You had that smile that drove me wild, but the things you said were just too bizarre that I thought you might be crazy. A few journals later, we had a class together again and I started getting to know you better. The crazy had melted away (well, really I just learned that it was brilliance, not lunacy). You were so smart, and the “crazy” things you said were just going over my head before. Now I understood more of them and I could see your true intelligence.

Jump ahead another couple books and we're nineteen. I asked you out and you said yes . . . begrudgingly. You were too nice to say no. We had a fun date, but you didn't really want to go out with me again. Since we were both living up on campus and didn't know anyone else, you declared we would be college buddies and hang out to keep each other company. You met that kid in your lit class and fell in love. You would tell me all about him and how he was so handsome and nice but he didn't return the feelings. He would use you when it was convenient for him. You were pretty cute, and I didn't see why other guys couldn't see it. Of course, you made new friends after the first semester and we stopped talking.

Do you remember the Halloween dance our second semester at school? That story shows up at the end of the first college journal. I had almost forgotten about it. That was the night of our first kiss . . . but you didn't know it was me. Not at first, anyway. I was wearing a mask and you didn't recognize me. We hit it off and talked all night. You raised my mask just enough to kiss me, and I didn't object. I was too nervous to make the first move—although you know that about me—and once we stopped kissing, I pulled the mask off. You looked me in the eyes and there was the brief glimmer of recognition. You smiled, then took my hand in yours and fell asleep on my shoulder. In the morning, I woke up and you were gone. You had left a note saying that it was all a big mistake and that it shouldn't have happened. Actually, I kept that note and it's in the journal.

Anyway, there are a few stories about how we started dating and some of the fun we had during our three-year courtship. However, the last story about

you in the journals is our break-up . . . the whole story. I know it's written in the journal, but I'm going to hit the main points here so you can know from my point of view what happened. It was a few weeks before your twenty-fifth birthday and I asked if you wanted to go shopping. I drove you to a jewelry store. I was planning to buy you a necklace, but as soon as we pulled in to the parking lot, you told me that you weren't ready to marry me. I told you that wasn't why we were there. I said I wanted to buy you a necklace, but you thought I was just covering my tracks. Things were a little rocky for the next few weeks . . . and then things got worse. We were watching a movie, a romantic comedy you bought yourself with your birthday money, and then you got upset when the conversation turned to love after the movie was over. You told me that we needed to talk. You said that ever since you'd known me, I had been immature. It wasn't that I was truly immature, just that I enjoyed the little things in life and didn't take things too seriously. I had my goals and ambitions, but I was okay coasting by. The only thing I ever really cared about was you. You said that after we went to the jewelry store, you got scared and started thinking about whether you could really marry me or not. Could you see us together in the future? Could you commit yourself to our relationship? You said that couldn't see it working out. You just knew that we weren't meant to be. You couldn't explain it; all you could say was we weren't going to work out. I didn't understand—and all I could think about was what the last three years had meant. We were so compatible and so good for each other. We had both grown up so much and had so much in common. You taught me how to love good music,

and I taught you about geeky movies. I couldn't think of a single bad thing that had happened during our courtship.

For the next few days, all we could talk about was why we were breaking up. I kept asking questions and you kept answering them. You said that I needed to show more drive and motivation. I needed to act more like an adult. I needed to be less shy and more confident. I needed to take school seriously and get a real job. I needed to find someone who would love me like you couldn't . . . although whenever you said "couldn't," all I could hear was "wouldn't." You were choosing to walk out on me and lose something wonderful. The only thing keeping us apart was you. I couldn't take it. I walked away from you for the last time and knew I would never see you again. Except I didn't count on one thing: my grandpa's time machine.

When I finished reading through my journals, I could see that I had to go back in time and make things right with you. I had to find the crux of the problem—at what point did things go wrong? I pondered for days on the question, "When shall I go?" Because Grandpa B. had made me keep a journal, I had dates for everything. What I couldn't decide was when to go . . . when could I do the most fixing? I decided it was the jewelry store—that's when I should go. I had the opportunity to convince Younger Me not to take you there. That would have avoided any confusion and you might have not got scared. I plugged in the coordinates to just a few days before your twenty-fifth birthday, stepped into the machine, and hit the start switch. I had packed fairly heavy with all of my journals. I thought they might come in handy should I need to prove who I was.

I arrived back when I wanted and went to visit my grandpa and tell him I was fulfilling his final quest. Also, I needed a place to stay. He told me to be careful changing things—even though it was his idea to do it in the first place. It was crazy how different his house looked. The funeral would be ten years from now and everything was so different-looking. He asked me what I planned to change, and I told him I wasn't sure yet.

I went to the park where I knew I used to hang out and saw myself sitting in the swings. I really did love to swing. I was such a big kid. As I watched myself swing, I thought of all the things I had accomplished in my thirty-five years. The last ten years had truly been productive. I finished my Ph.D. in international business management and was working for a pretty large company. I never did get married, partly because I was pretty hurt by you and didn't think I would ever be emotionally ready to trust another person. Other than being emotionally precarious as far as dating was concerned, I was pretty successful.

The next morning, I woke up and went back to the park. I ran into myself again and kept looking at young me. I knew I was pretty trustworthy, and a plan started forming in my head. I went home and started writing. I packed all of my journals into a sturdy box and prepared myself to change the stars.

The third morning, I went back to the park and found myself once again swinging. I had the box with me this time, and I eventually asked myself to deliver the box to you on your twenty-sixth birthday. I knew full well that you were about to break up with me because of the jewelry store incident, but I decided not to fix anything. You had broken my heart once, and there was no guarantee that you wouldn't do it again.

However, I have grown up quite a bit, and I wanted you to hear my side of the story. I'd apologize for the way I left and that we never talked again. I'd say I wish I could fix that—but I had the chance and I didn't, so it would kind of be a lie. I hope this helps you understand my actions during the break-up. All I ask is that you never mention this to me or try to contact me. I won't ask you what was in the box because I won't see you anymore. The me you know is slowly changing to something better. I told him that things will be okay for him and told him to never give up on his dreams. Sometimes, hope is all a person needs to change for the better. All I did was show him that a random stranger could show compassion.

When I head back to the future, I'm hoping nothing will have changed except I will have a little more closure on our relationship. I have carried the regret of walking out on you without giving myself closure for too long. I will not regret walking out on you anymore. As I said, me delivering this letter will be the last time we see each other. You will live your life as you see fit, and I wish you the best of luck.

Thank you for many good times, and may you get what's coming to you.

Sincerely,

Randy L. Stevens

Randy made it back to his grandfather's house to gather the rest of his things fairly quickly. Once he was ready, he went to speak to his grandfather one last time. He had to make it back to his time. When he walked into his grandfather's room, his grandfather was holding a letter.



“What’s that?” Randy asked.

“Well, about three weeks ago, I showed up to talk to myself again. We’ve actually been in pretty constant contact over the past few years. Anyway, I showed up and told myself that you would be coming. I also gave myself a letter—so that if you didn’t make any major fixes to your life, I could give it to you. Just so you know, you made the right choice.”

“Thank you, Grandpa. I love you very much and wanted to thank you for everything. You helped me grow so much.”

“Read the letter once you get home. I love you, Little Britches. I hope you got the closure you were looking for.”

Once back in his own time, Randy opened the letter.

“Little Britches, congratulations on making the right choice. I lied about your grandmother. I never did anything I said. That was all made up. I wanted to see how you would react to such a liberating proposition. You clearly understand that most mistakes aren’t worth fixing. They shape us and make us who we are. Now that I know I can trust you not to do anything drastic, here is what you need to refuel the machine. To create more energy, just follow the instructions. Use the machine for good and, when the time comes, find an heir in whom we can trust to also respect the machine. Only use the machine for knowledge-gain and never for personal gain.

Have fun! Love,  
Grandpa B.”





# DIVERSITY

## Boxes

Rebecca Mikkelsen (*Section Winner*)

On this particular morning, Olan and I rise early—rather earlier than one would expect when one is on vacation—and not very well rested. Sleeping in late had been on the agenda when we made plans the previous night, especially since the *dom akademicki* (youth hostel) was brim-full of teenagers who felt late night was the best time to socialize. But the hard, narrow, single beds do not know our plans and push us out. Since the *akademi* is cheap and near to the center of town, we really can't complain too much. We tidy up our boxy, Soviet-era room, and go to the *restauracja* for breakfast.

A free Polish-style breakfast usually consists of jams and a basket of *chleb*—artisan-style white, wheat, and rye bread with the crusty outsides and chewy insides that Americans pay premium prices for at European-style bakeries. With the *chleb* is a plate of sliced *mięso i ser*, the kinds of cold-cuts and cheeses for which we would have gone to a specialty deli. Then beverages—*kawa i sok* (coffee and juice)—and sometimes hard-boiled *jajka*. After we have eaten enough, there is still plenty left over to save for lunch, so we make some sandwiches and wrap them in serviettes. Remembering a previous day's experience with getting the wrong kind of bottled water, we carefully purchase some *niegazowana woda* (non-carbonated mineral water). Stepping into the bright morning sunlight, we head out to tour one of the wooden churches for which Poland is famous.

The guidebook tells us that the wooden churches in Poland are unique and considered jewels. Made of larch wood, each plank is carefully fitted with pegs instead of nails. The shingled roofs are steeply pitched and feature a single square bell tower. Some of the wooden churches date back to the fifteenth century, but the one we visit today was built in 1847. The wooden boards are weathered gray, and it looks rather more like a barn than a church. This little church has the honor of two names—St. Clements and St. Mary of Czestochowa. The locals just call it *Stary Kościół* (Old Church).

As we enter the church, it takes a few moments for our sun-brilliant eyes to adjust to the darker interior. Suddenly, we feel as if we don't belong here. Someone is worshiping—an old woman, her babushka-covered head bowed, is kneeling at a pew. We look at each other, silently asking, "Should we be here?" We turn to leave, tiptoeing toward the door, but our departure is halted by a group of high school students, probably the ones who kept us up half the night at the *akademi*, who are making their way into the church. As each student enters, he or she reverently makes the sign of the cross, and then finds a place at a pew, where they kneel to pray before their tour guide points out the historic details of the church.

Quietly we step back outside, awed and stunned by the genuine devotion we have just witnessed. During the eight years we lived in Europe while Olan was enlisted in the Air Force, we had visited a lot of Christian churches: country nunneries and majestic abbeys, humble parish churches and vaulted cathedrals, ancient churches and modern edifices, ruins and restorations. Westminster Abbey, the site

of British coronations since 1066, is the final resting place of seventeen monarchs. The medieval, stained-glass windows in *Kölner Dom* (Cologne Cathedral) were saved from destruction during World War II. The Church of St. Mary in Mildenhall, England still has an axe head stuck in the woodwork near the ceiling, a relic of the days of Henry VIII's Reformation. In Mendelsham, England, the vicar took us up into the church's bell tower where sixteenth-century armor was stored, a remnant of the time when the town had a militia that practiced on the Green on Sundays. Sometimes the outside of the church would give us an idea of what to expect inside; sometimes it wouldn't. But the one thing we never saw was someone worshipping in a church.

We ponder this as we wander to the main street to purchase some souvenirs: *oscypek*, a smoked sheep cheese made exclusively here in the Tatra Mountains, which turns out to be rather nasty; and a *ciupaga*, a Polish shepherd's combination of walking stick and axe.

While tucking into a sweet *wafel*, a wonderful confection of waffley goodness topped with whipped cream and drizzled with dark chocolate, we amble over to the *Kościół Najświętszej Rodziny* (Holy Family Church). With its soaring stone bell tower, flanked by round towers and adorned with flying buttresses, it is much more impressive-looking than the humble *Stary Kościół*. This church was built in 1899, when the wooden church could no longer hold the increased population.

A multitude of people are here today, tourists and locals, entering and leaving the church, walking, running, or skipping up and down the worn steps.

Many people are milling about the square in front of the church, taking photos, and consulting guidebooks. In the tower, the bells are ringing, prompting the faithful to come. To the right of the church, we see a group of girls dressed in white who look to be about seven or eight years of age, holding little white books and having their picture taken. First Communion, we think.

Licking the chocolate and whipped cream off our fingers, we approach the church, marveling at the thick oaken guardians as we step through the arched doorway. The cool, dark interior feels delicious after standing in the sun. More people are in here, some grouped around tour guides, others taking more photos, still others craning their necks to look at the paintings on the ceilings. And there they are—the worshipers, kneeling in silence at the pews, heads covered and bowed, eyes closed, hands making the sign of the cross. Again, we look at each other. “Do we belong here?” We make our way around the church, looking at saints carved in wood and stone, enthralled by the iconic images with gilt paint shining in the candlelight and humbled by the shrines with emblems of devotion left by worshipers. Olan’s shoes are squeaking on the stone floor, the sound echoing blasphemously through the high-beamed ceiling.

As I stand and gaze up at a larger-than-life-size painting of the Christ, I notice a small, nondescript metal box attached to the wall on my left. There is a slot in the lid and the words *dla wdów i sierot*, “for widows and orphans.” I dig into my pocket and pull out a handful of *złotys*, the equivalent of about two dollars, and drop them into the box. The hollow clink tells me that there is nothing else in the box. The

sound rings—no, *pounds*—in my head. It blocks all other sounds. I look up at the icon of the Christ. I look at the Poor Box. I look around me at the brilliance of the gold and opulence of the church in which I am standing. I look at the Christ. I think I hear Him say, “There shall be no poor among you.” In my mind, a whirlwind gathers all the ornaments in the church, swirling them into the little slot of the ugly metal box. The church, swept bare, shrinks as the box enlarges to encompass all the wealth. The faces of the poor whose sorrows would be relieved, and whose woes would be comforted if that box really did hold all the wealth of the church, fill my view. Tears course down my cheeks as I weep because we don’t understand.

I walk out of the church and back into the sun. I don’t remember what happened the rest of the day. My thoughts are consumed by what I have experienced.

I still see that slotted metal box. It is there every year at Christmastime in front of a store with a Santa ringing a bell, reminding me to “come.” There is always pocket change in my car so that I can drop it into His kettle. I see other boxes too, big cardboard boxes at the entrances of grocery stores and department stores. “Please give,” they say, their bellies empty. “There shall be no poor among you.” What would the world be like if that were true?



## Funhouse Mirror

Maggie Jordan

I really didn't want to come here in the first place, but everyone says it's inevitable.

"Just go—you'll learn so much," they all say. "Everyone's doing it." The words echo through my head as I push through the double doors into the house called Status Quo. The musty, faded air creeps up my spine, and I shiver uneasily. These halls are old. Mounted lamps give off a dingy amber glow that flickers as I walk down the narrow hallway. Shuffle marks line the worn floor and the brown paint is peeling off the damp walls. These halls have known many visitors.

Reaching the end of the hall, I slip into an eerily bright room plastered pink with flowers and fairies. Dolls and stuffed toys cover much of the floor, in the midst of which sits a little girl hunched intently over a doll in her small hands. A Barbie doll. I smile as I remember the days when I too played with such a doll. The child talks animatedly for her doll, straightening her clothing and smoothing her hair, lost completely in her imagination.

Nothing seems to be amiss, but I still can't shake that uneasy feeling. Then I see it. Above the child's head in a misty fog swirl words: Princess. Just like me. When you grow up. A dream come true. These and many more like them swirl around a small orb of light. The words lightly prod and tickle the orb, causing the girl to giggle with excitement. With every touch, the orb grows bigger and brighter. The hair on

the back of my neck prickles as I realize it is coming from the Barbie doll in her hands.

The little girl abruptly jumps up and skips to a corner of the room, where stands a tall, unadorned mirror. Yet, unlike a regular mirror, it bows at the top, above the child's head, and randomly curves and twists its way down to the ground. A funhouse mirror. The girl takes no notice, however, and proudly holds her doll out next to her. Goosebumps crawl up my flesh as I see the reflection. From her perfect hair to her full, curving figure, all the way down to her high heels, stands a grown woman identical to the Barbie the child holds in her hands. The girl, however, is nowhere to be seen. The doll overshadows her completely, but the child doesn't even notice. I gasp and step back involuntarily. The reflection sees my shocked expression and smirks before turning back to the little girl in front of her.

"Don't you see?" I worriedly ask the girl. "Can't you see you're not there?" My voice grows frantic when I realize the child can't hear me. Rather, she poses, fluffing up her short brown hair and smiling excitedly, as she watches her Barbie-doll reflection do the exact same things. Then it makes sense. The child, in her innocence, believes she is seeing a future reflection of herself.

As quickly as it starts, it ends, and the Barbie's features fade into black. Her image stays behind, though, as a flawless silhouette. The perfect hair, the round lips, and full, enviable curves all the way down to her stiletto heels. No longer a Barbie doll, but still the perfect image of a woman.

Shocked, I turn to the little girl to see her reaction, but she is gone, and the room has shifted.

The once-pink walls have faded to a grayish hue that is now covered with posters of glamorous women. Closet doors bulge with hordes of clothing barely contained. To the side stands a dresser covered with sparkling jewelry and a box of colorful makeup shades. The floor is littered with fashion magazines. Seventeen. Teen Vogue. Cosmo. I follow the trail of titles to a pair of small feet and up the figure of a regular, teenage body until I see her face. It is the same girl, only older. Her brow puckers in frustration as she tries in vain to button a pair of too-small jeans. She finally manages to squeeze into them, breathing hard but wearing a triumphant grin on her face. Almost instantly it changes to confusion and she scoops up a magazine off the floor and begins leafing through the pages. Her blue eyes glitter excitedly as she skims over page after page of teen pop stars. The popular girls. Finding what she needs, she drops it on the floor again and hurries to her closet. As she quickly dresses and painstakingly applies her makeup, I notice the same swirling fog around her head.

Before I have a chance to read the words, she turns, and I see the full effect of her hard work. Before me stands a beautiful young woman. Her thin body is beautifully clothed, and nothing looks amiss, save the worried look in her eyes. She snatches the magazine up again, flips to a page, and holds it up in front of her. Her eyes quickly fill with tears as she sees her reflection in the mirror. That gorgeous dark silhouette from her childhood stands in front of her, yet that is not what she sees. Rather, the funhouse curves have distorted the reflection in front of the silhouette. The girl's reflection. Her head looks bloated and sickly, and her ragged brown hair sticks out in

every direction. Her eyes are too big and her lips too small. Her chest is flat and her waist and hips have ballooned grotesquely. Feet the size of skis hold up her chicken legs and bulging thighs. Words pour from the magazine in her shaking hands to join the swirling fog around her head. Ugly. Out of style. Not enough. Fat. They stab mercilessly at her once-radiant orb, causing the light to flicker. Tears stream down her face as she sees everything she lacks in the shadow of the beautiful silhouette.

“Don’t look at yourself that way!” I cry out, my heart aching to help the young woman. As before, she doesn’t hear me. Instead, she reaches for a packet of pills on the dresser: Leptoprin. Appetite suppressants. “Stop!” I reach for the pills, but she swallows a handful in one quick gulp. Unaware of its distorting power, she turns back to the mirror, her gaze set determinedly on someday matching up to the perfect silhouette looming behind her own twisted reflection.

It’s not right. She doesn’t understand what she’s doing—and those who do understand don’t care enough to stop her. They can’t even see what’s happening to her. I long to reach out and console her but cannot, for this is all inside her head. Rather, I watch helplessly as she raises her chin and shakily wipes the tears from her eyes before determinedly walking out of the room.

I turn to follow her, but movement from the mirror causes me to stop. The mirror quickly shrinks into a television set. The show it’s playing depicts a modern family. The house is neat and tidy, holding all the most modern appliances, and children play together quietly in the background. The focus then turns to the mother: a beautiful and trim middle-aged

woman. Her hair is fixed expertly and her fashionable clothing fits her full curves snugly. Everything about her is crisp and refreshing.

A hard sob from behind startles me into spinning around. I gulp, trying to force my pounding heart back down into my chest—I hadn't realized I was so tense. The insecure teenage girl is now a middle-aged woman sitting on a worn, plaid couch. Her red, puffy eyes are glued to the television set in front of her and she sits numbly, tears streaming down her blank face. Her features have grown worn and tired. Her hair is simply fixed and her clothing is plain but decent. The skinny frame she possessed as a teenager has been replaced with the extra weight that comes with age. Toys and dirty clothing litter the floor in disarray. Among the mess lie magazine titles: *Ladies Home Journal*, *Vogue*, and *Good Housekeeping*. I hear her children bickering in the background, but she does not. Rather, she just sits numbly. Another tear rolls down her cheek, and my heart aches with that all-too-familiar longing to help this woman, yet she doesn't even know I'm here.

Around her head swirls the same fog as did during her childhood and adolescent years, yet the contents are different. They come from both the television and the magazines this time. *Failure. Mistake. Not ideal. Catastrophe. Washout. Inadequate.* The words swirl, cruelly jabbing at her already-battered and scarred orb, threatening to put it out.

She finally manages to drag her gaze from the television screen, only to have it fall to the magazines on the floor. She picks up one of them and blankly turns the pages. Page after page of the ideal life, the

ideal house, the ideal children, the ideal weight, and many more jump off the page and join the swirl of insults spinning around her head. Heartbroken, she lets the magazine fall to the floor and numbly stands. The television set has grown tall again, its screen curving and bulging out as she approaches. There stands the reflection she saw both in the magazines and on the television. The ideal woman stands tall, hands on her curved hips, wearing a little black dress. Her hair falls perfectly around her beautiful features, and she cruelly cocks an eyebrow at the middle-aged woman standing next to her. Instead of expertly fixed hair, hers is plain brown, matted, and graying. Her slightly rounded figure has put on at least fifty pounds, causing her hips to push out and her chest to sag. Sunken eyes and crow's feet sit above a sad mouth that has not smiled in a long time. Rather than a little black dress, her clothing is worn and baggy.

“No! Can't you see what's happening?” Tears stream down my face as I see her reflection. She simply drops her head in shame and numb acceptance of her fate as the tears leak from her soft blue eyes down her cheeks. “Stop doing this to yourself!” I cry. The ideal woman laughs a cruel, cold laugh. Angrily I turn to console the woman, but she is gone.

The room shifts yet again and I turn to see the newest occupant, but there is no one. The funhouse mirror now stands alone in the empty room. I look around, but there is no young girl, no adolescent, no middle-aged woman. Just me. Curiosity drags me to the mirror while my conscience screams for me to stop, but I can't. My reflection appears, and I am shocked to see a fashionable young woman looking back at me. Her beautiful face is framed by luscious

blonde hair, and her clothing snugly fits her full curves. She meets my gaze confidently and I gape back, shocked. But I reacted too soon. The reflection smiles cruelly and steps to the side to reveal an image I never wanted to see.

There stands a young woman hunched over self-consciously. Ragged, dirty-blond hair hangs over a plain face. Her nose is too big, her lips too small, and she wears no makeup. Her clothing is out of style and much too simple. No jewelry, just cheap jeans and a blouse. Her chest is flat, her hips too large, and her feet loom beneath her like skis. A tear runs down my cheek in shame and one falls down hers as well. This is me. This is how I am seen. The thought pains me and I cringe at my helplessness.

*Failure. Not enough. Keep dreaming. Lazy. Too skinny. Lousy excuse. Inadequate.* The words pound in my head over and over. I look up and sure enough, they swirl in a fog around my head, mocking me. I see my own glowing orb of self-confidence being stabbed mercilessly by those words. *Why must I suffer this?* Another tear falls down my cheek as I remember the misguided child, the insecure adolescent, and the helpless woman. They had to go through this too. It's inevitable. Everyone's doing it. The words fly through my mind again as I remember why I am here.

*But why?* I look up at my orb and it flickers brightly for barely a moment. Why should I have to feel this way? One word slows in its path and I quickly grasp it before it can stab me again. "You are inadequate!" it screams at me.

*Says who?* I hold it by the edge carefully so as to avoid getting pricked.

"I am not inadequate." I speak without even

realizing it, my shoulders straightening. The edges of *Inadequate* become a handle that I grasp firmly.

“Who can tell me that I am not enough?” The other edge becomes long and jagged. I look up at my reflection to see her gaping at me. The other reflection steps back, shocked, her beautiful features plastered with fear.

“Certainly. Not. You.” I raise the knife above my head and stab the mirror. It cracks and shatters, taking all its distorted curves and both reflections with it down to the floor. I let *Inadequate* fall to the ground, and it melts into the broken glass as the other words in the fog dive down from above to join it. Behind the shards of glass stands another mirror, but this one is different. This one is not bowed or distorted, but rather flat and honest. The reflection therein is that of a young woman. Her blonde hair lies neatly and her features reflect joy and compassion. She stands confidently, a kindly look in her soft eyes. Her figure is her own and her clothing modest and appropriate. Nothing is too big, nor is anything too small. I smile tentatively and the reflection smiles back the same. I am looking at myself. There is no dark silhouette or sneering reflection looming behind her—just me. And that is how it’s supposed to be.



## Maracas Beach

Candice Chase

I visited my grandmother's house many times as a child with my family from the age of three to the age of twelve. We would visit her to enjoy some "real" food, as my father would call it; we lived in Canada at the time. It was always cold. Granny had a way of making delicious meals of spicy curried chicken, savory dhal and soft, chewy roti, making you feel like you were right back in the heat of our beloved Caribbean island, Trinidad. Many times during these fabulous meals, Granny and all her children would sit around the table talking about "back home" and all the great things they missed. One thing in particular that they talked about the most was the beach. Maracas Beach was the name of this paradisiacal place.

I recall sitting on my grandfather's knee and listening intently as my parents spoke about the warm waters, hot sand, and beautiful golden sunsets, which lit up the sky with bright pinks, oranges, and purples. I would often ask about this beach and why it was so important. The simple reply my grandmother gave was "because it's where the family always went!" Above the dining room table, right next to the picture of Jesus's Last Supper, was a picture in a golden frame, almost the same size as the picture of the Last Supper. This picture was the only picture I ever saw of Maracas Beach: a beach filled with happy families, swaying palm trees, and bright blue ocean waters. It was a beautiful picture of perfection.

A few short months later, at the age of twelve,

I was sitting in a cramped little car with my family, aunt, uncle, and my cousins, all eight of us trying to fit into a five-passenger car. It was clearly the hottest day of my life. I felt like I was inches away from the sun. However, there was a cool breeze that cooled us down every now and then. But my mind couldn't dwell on the heat for too long. I was filled with excitement and joy, as we all were. I was finally, after all these years, heading to this wondrous place I had heard about my whole life. We were on our way to Maracas Beach.

As we drove up the mountain, we saw dense forests—"the type where monsters lived," I thought to myself. We came to a lookout point of our journey. We all stepped out of the car. It was just as beautiful as the picture above my grandmother's dining table. Except this was real. I could feel the cool breeze, smell the ripe fruit and something I'd never smelt before, but I felt like I'd been told over and over again what it was. I knew this salty-sweet smell to be the ocean. The ocean was right at the bottom of this mountain. I could see the white sand, the deep blue ocean, and an overwhelming abundance of palm trees. Exactly like the picture that hung in my grandmother's dining room. I thought, "We are almost there." A few more grueling minutes in this insufferably hot car and I would be right there down in the ocean. We all climbed back into the car, our excitement almost bursting out of us. Then we continued our journey.

Soon the car stopped. I heard the doors open; I could see my family climbing out. Despite my excitement, I sat there waiting, hoping that this wasn't a dream. I heard my mother call my name and say, "Come on, child, hurry up." I stepped out of the car and let my tiny feet touch the hot sand. It was real.

Every bit of what I was seeing, hearing, and touching was real. I screamed with delight.

I stood there for a moment and felt the hot sand on the soles of my little feet. I could hear my little sister calling me. I looked up; she was halfway to the tree line, and just beyond the palm trees was the ocean. I hurried over to my sister; I stood with her in the cool shade of a nearby palm tree. We both looked out at the ocean. I was surprised at how big it was. I never thought of the ocean being that big. It was intimidating. For a moment, I felt as though going into those cool waters would be the end of me. I would surely drown.

My father came toward us. He held out his hand; we took it and walked towards the waters. The sound of crashing waves was calming. The ocean called to us as we stepped forward and let our feet bathe in the warm, shallow waters. I could see seashells hiding in the sand as the waves crashed at our feet. Suddenly we were thrown down by a huge wave; the salty water burned my eyes and throat. I felt like I couldn't breathe, and then the water receded and I was able to stand on my feet again. My eyes still burned from the salty seawater.

I looked up at the sand bank where my sister and I were standing and saw my mother; she was laying out a brightly colored beach blanket with a look of pure happiness on her beautiful face. I also saw my uncle was bringing the cooler we packed earlier with sandwiches and drinks. He seemed just as happy as we all were. For that moment, I felt as though we were in a postcard, or even in that picture hanging above my grandmother's dining room. Excitement filled every fiber of my being as I splashed with delight when the

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waves came crashing down on us. This was truly an experience of a lifetime, for not many people know the true feeling of being home.





# EDITORS

## The Promise

Jayrod Garrett

Bright light lines the  
Halls of memory lost.  
Another fight left just  
Fragments. Each tear a  
Blight to soil with blood  
All these whitewashed halls.

Dear God save me, Clair  
Sobbed in my ear,  
Her hair looped in  
My fist. Or was that  
Beads for prayer from  
Father Solomon?

I think I beat her,  
But memory betrays.  
Each time I blink new  
Bruises rise, bones break;  
Then I take a drink.  
Where did the time go?

A steady beep means  
You're still alive with me.  
And deep down I hope  
When you wake you'll know  
I meant to keep that  
Last promise I broke.

## Mrs. Claus

Andrew Helms

Mrs. Claus woke with a yawn and peeked out from under the red, satin covers. Pure white light rolled in through the curtains, tiny shadows dancing across the room as thick snowflakes fell outside. She rolled over, not ready to embrace the chilly morning, and reached for Nicholas's broad shoulders, but only a deep impression was left on his side of the bed. She sighed. She'd worn her silk, snowflake-printed thong to bed, hoping to get at least a kiss for her efforts.

Christmas Eve. She hated this time of year. Everyone was so damn jolly and full of cheer. Sure. It was nice for all those good little boys and girls, but for her, it meant a lonely night filled with worry. Christmas Eve was always a terrible time to be traveling, but Nicholas was determined to give everyone a Christmas. She shouldn't have been so cynical about it, but after twelve years, it was tiring.

Sitting up, she gave one last stretch before sliding out of bed. The icy floor bit at her toes as she stumbled to the wardrobe mirror.

Why couldn't they have Christmas in July? And who the hell picked the North Pole to set up shop? She tucked her strawberry-blonde hair behind her ears, telling herself to relax. Tomorrow, it would all be over.

If Nicholas had paid more attention to her, she wouldn't have been so moody. She scowled at herself in the golden, cog-trimmed mirror, a gift from Father Time.

"May time be a blessing and not a curse," he



had said when he placed it there. Half a smile curled up her face. Time had been good to her. At thirty-six, she still looked like she was twenty-seven. Twenty-eight at most.

So why the hell didn't Nicholas look at her like he used to? And why did she spend most of her days alone wandering the factory?

"Stop," she said to herself. "You're just being silly." This mood seemed to strike every Christmas Eve. Maybe she was bitter. Or jealous. And what a ridiculous thing to be. Here Nicholas was, delivering cheer around the world, and she was worried about her own selfish needs.

She grabbed his ruby-red coat from the rack and swung it around her body, wrapping herself in its folds and fingering the fuzzy, white trim. Seductively, she swayed her hips in the mirror. Nicholas would be home before she woke, and she'd rock his world. That'd cure this terrible mood.

Practicing her sways, she got lost in the reflection. A shy woman, she'd never really be able to dance for Nicholas, but it was fun to pretend.

Ouch! Something sharp had dug into her ribs. She opened the coat and found the culprit: the tip of a pink envelope. Removing it, she felt her heart warm. Nicholas had remembered her. Funny he hadn't addressed the letter, though. She flipped the unsealed flap up, and an overwhelming aroma of sugar cookies hit her. Ugh.

Holding her nose away, she grimaced. She hated sugar cookies. Nicholas knew that. Unfolding the letter, her heart fell. Passionate, full, pink-painted lips had stamped themselves repeatedly across the thick paper. Her hand clutched at her heart,

attempting to prevent it from punching its way out. It's not what it looks like, she thought. Probably a young girl pleading for a place on the nice list was all.

With trembling hands, she read:

Dear Santa,

I've waited another year for you and your present. I've been a naughty girl this year but not too naughty, I hope. So hurry down the chimney. I've left you a delicious treat wrapped in a pink bow under the tree.

-Your Sugar Cookie

The letter fluttered from her fingers, and she fell with it to her knees. It's definitely not what you think, she told herself. But there was lipstick—seductive, pink lipstick. She picked the paper up and put her lips to it. Looking down her nose, she could see the pink extended past her lip's fullness.

Maybe it was just a child with big lips, a very strange child. But yes, that could make sense. She did sign it Sugar Cookie. But what child ever called herself a naughty girl?

She couldn't jump to conclusions. This was Nicholas, after all. The jolly saint who flew around the world spreading cheer.

Or legs, her intuition said. That settled it. The only way to get this letter out of her mind would be an investigation. She returned the envelope, just as it was, to Nicholas's coat, hung it up, and got dressed.

When night fell, she stood with the elves gathered around the sleigh strip. Nicholas flung the candy-coated doors open to cheers and hollers, carrying the giant sack of presents slung over his

back. His broad shoulders bulged through his long-john shirt. Mrs. Claus admired his body, forgetting the letter that sat tucked away in the coat folded over her arms. The elves said Nicholas had the strength of twenty wood elves. They were mighty impressed with him, and so was she. If it weren't for Christmas, huge baggage itself, he'd be the perfect man. And if it weren't for that letter, she could at least pretend to be thrilled for him. But she couldn't pull it off. Not this year.

She managed to get her mouth to sit straight and opened Nicholas's coat for him. He heaved his sack into the sleigh and strolled to her, a smug grin on his face. He put his arms in the coat, spinning as he did and coming to a stop facing her. Holding his arms out, he waited for her to button him up. She did, and he leaned over and kissed her on the brow.

"Don't worry about me, Snowflake," he said, white puffs billowing from his mouth. "I'll be home before the sun's up." He moved abruptly and gave a grunt, patting at his chest. Her stomach flipped.

Maybe he'd tell her about the letter, and that would prove it wasn't what she thought. "What is it?" she asked, knowing full well.

He moved his hand from his chest to his shoulder. "Getting older, I suppose. And that sack gets heavier every year." He smiled past her, waving at the elves and moving to his sleigh.

Standing in his sleigh, he gave his typical thanks and what was sure a congratulation on another successful year, but Mrs. Claus wasn't listening. She was seething. Why hadn't he told her about the letter? He was hiding something. Disgusting, filthy images penetrated the deepest space of her mind, the space

where you know you shouldn't keep such thoughts but where you have no control either way.

Hooves beat against the ground, shaking the factory as the sleigh lifted into the purple sky. The elves stayed to watch Nicholas disappear, but Mrs. Claus had more pressing matters.

Inside her room, she pulled the safe from under the bed. She slid the numbers in place on the combination lock: 25, for Christmas Day, of course; 3, for the number of children they hoped to have someday; and 9, Nicholas's favorite number. The top popped open, and she pushed the savings bonds and the elves' work visas and passports to the side. The .40 Winchester Spock Pez Dispenser limited edition sat at the bottom.

She held it, noticing the weight. Nicholas had made her go shooting more times than she cared to, but she had never gotten used to holding such power. She tore open a package of sugar-tipped, hollow-point cherry Pez and bent Spock's head back. Loading the Pez one at a time, she jumped as a knock sounded on the door. Pez went scattering across the wooden planks.

"Mrs.," a high-pitched elf voice called. "NORAD is here. They said you called them on an urgent matter?"

"Yes," she replied. "Tell them I'll meet them in the stables."

"Will do, Mrs." The elf's feet clicked away. She finished loading the clip, letting it slide shut with a satisfying clack. Holstering it underneath her snowflake-embroidered apron, she left for the stables.

Two men in black stood at the entrance, sunglasses shading their eyes and black wire curling

from their ears to their collars. How they saw in the night with sunglasses was a mystery to her. They parted as she made her way to them. She smiled and nodded as she walked inside.

The stables were empty. The elves assigned to their wellbeing were out getting hammered on eggnog in their cottages. She yanked on a pitchfork hanging on the back wall of Comet's stable, and the hay floor began to sink and turn. When it stopped, she was beneath the stables in a room of LED screens, thick cables running everywhere, and a man who sat in front of the largest screen.

The man, Chief of Operations, watched the radar line spinning across the screen. "Nothing looks out of the ordinary. Backup fuel at three quarters, electrical functioning properly, wind-chill at a minimum, no intelligence on threats this year. A deranged man had booby-trapped his chimney, but we took care of that." He turned to Mrs. Claus. "What are you concerned with, ma'am? This year's turning out to be one of our best."

She clenched her jaw. She hadn't realized how anxious she'd been about this. Pulling the Spock Pez Dispenser from her apron, she pointed it at him but couldn't find the words she wanted to say.

The man lifted his hands into the air. "Mrs. Claus? Is that you?"

"Yes," she said, "and I need you to take me to him."

"You know I can't do that," he said, wiping his forehead with the top of his hand. "That could jeopardize the mission."

"I don't give a shit about the mission." Wow, that felt good. "You're taking me, or I'll put a hole

in that thick head of yours.” NORAD presented themselves as brutish, emotionally detached men who could take waterboarding if need be, but he was visibly shaking.

“All right, but I won’t take the blame for this. Nicholas won’t be happy about—”

“I’ll worry about Nicholas.” She did plenty of that already.

The two pilots stayed in the cockpit, and Mrs. Claus held the man silently hostage in the cabin. The chief pushed at his ear and told the pilots to locate Santa’s coordinates. The jet took off, and Mrs. Claus kept Spock butted against the back of the chief’s head until they started to descend.

“Where are we?” she asked. “Go ahead. Ask them.”

He pushed his ear and asked and after a pause said, “Montana.”

“Montana,” she mumbled, imagining a cowgirl in pink chaps.

“How long has he been here?” the chief said, sounding as though he were repeating a sentence. “An hour? Something’s wrong. Notify—”

She pressed Spock into his skull and shook her head.

“Actually,” the chief said into the earpiece, “No. That’s right. This is on the manifest. This stop is—a— orphanage. This one should take him a little longer.” She nudged him again to go further. “And you can let us out here. We’ll get him moving along. No need for alarm.” She glared at him, mistrusting his words. Was that supposed to be some sort of coded message?

Yanking his earpiece out and tugging the cord from his jacket, she said, “You better not be up to anything.” He shook his head. To be sure, she’d need to immobilize him. She found industrial-strength tinsel in an overhead bin and tied the chief up in the back of the cabin. She stuffed his tie in his mouth and ran the last of the tinsel around his jaw to keep it in place.

“If I get any idea you moved or told anyone I’m down there.” She dragged her thumb across her throat. “That’ll be the end of Santa.”

With that, she heaved the cabin door open and punched the chute button. A plastic slide exploded from the jet and filled almost instantly. She slid down.

Trekking across the snow-covered field, she could see the blinking red light of Rudolph’s nose near the top of a log cabin.

She climbed the wooden stairs of the covered porch. A sign hanging from a nail on the door read: “Merry Christmas! But if you didn’t bring me a present that requires batteries, go back to where you came from.” Mrs. Claus groaned. What nerve.

Prepared to knock a window in, she thought it might be wise to check the front door. The knob turned. Country folk were too damn trusting. She closed the door behind her with an effort to shut it quietly.

She almost let out a gasp when she saw a pink ribbon sprawled beneath the tree. That could be from anything, she told herself. But as she tiptoed into the kitchen, she saw Nicholas’s coat lying on the counter, a smear of pink across the white collar. She could feel her face turning red, burning all over.

And there were sugar cookies.

Fresh on a cooling rack. The aroma mixed with her comprehension made her stomach turn. Inspection of the floor revealed a crumb trail leading to a hallway. With her hand clutching again at her drumming heart, she crept along the trail. She kept her eyes on the crumbs because, for some reason, the cookie bits kept her mind off whatever was at the end of the hall. As she moved further into the dimness, she could hear muffled sounds. The crumb path veered left, ending at a closed door.

She placed an ear to the wood, her eyes adjusting and noticing the tacky, painted flowers running the door's edge.

"You have been a naughty girl." The voice was Nicholas's.

"Come get yer sugar cookie, Santa." The voice was seductive with a southern drawl.

"I do have a sweet tooth." He chuckled. He never laughed like that for Mrs. Claus.

"Is that a candy cane in yer pocket, or do you have a present for me?"

"Why don't you come over here and find out?"

Silent tears rolled down her cheeks. How could she have been so naïve? To think a man would love her and only her. Men were animals, especially Nicholas. Fuming, she stood there, not listening to Nicholas and his mistress but to her own thoughts. She didn't hear the constant thuds echoing through the log cabin. She didn't hear his mistress moaning in pleasure, begging for more. She didn't hear the sound of ribbon being stripped. She only heard one thought in her head: Nicholas would suffer.

She straightened up, gripping the .40 Winchester Spock Pez Dispenser. She didn't



remember grabbing it, but that didn't matter now. Kicking the door in with a scream, she barreled into the room. The unpleasant image stunned her, a pretzel of bodies she hadn't planned for. His mistress, a busty brunette, lay underneath Nicholas, her feet tied to her hands, which were tied to knobs on the headboard. The slut turned her head to the door. Her lips were puckered up and pink.

Mrs. Claus roared and drew the dispenser up, aiming it between Nicholas's eyes. "How could you?"

It wasn't embarrassment that ran across his face; it was indignation. "Don't play innocent. Like you didn't know what was going on."

"The children," she screamed. "I thought you were delivering a bit of happiness to the children. Not some—home-wrecking bimbo!"

Nicholas chuckled, a sound that chilled her bones. "Snowflake, I haven't delivered a single present in years. Parents take care of that now. No one even believes I exist anymore. Now put the dispenser down and go home." How could he be so heartless? This wasn't the man she married.

He'd regret ignoring her, stuffing his sleigh in some hooker, and most of all—those shooting lessons. She snapped Spock back and a flash lit up the room, and she clenched her eyes, the bang reverberating in her ears. She opened her eyes. Nicholas tumbled backward, almost in slow motion, a red river flowing from a hole between his eyes. Covered in blood splatter, his mistress whore shrieked.

Mrs. Claus strolled to her, stepping over Nicholas's lifeless body and giving him one last look. "You don't exist. Not anymore."

The tied-up hog struggled against the strains,

but apparently, she hadn't realized how well Nicholas could tie ribbon. He always had a way of hiding shitty things beneath pretty bows. Mrs. Claus raised the dispenser again and snapped Spock back. This time, the splatter painted itself across her face. She heaved deep breaths, staring at her work. A villain had been born, and she knew it.

She blew the smoke rising from Spock and holstered the dispenser. "Merry Christmas."

## The Request

Stephanie Simonson

The first few times Brynne had seen Aaron Milland, she'd never been able to remember just what he looked like afterward.

She'd known he was somewhat generic-looking, but couldn't pinpoint if this was in a pleasant or off-putting way. And was his hair blonde, brown, or in between? It was unfathomable to her now that once, when the boy in her project group had wandered randomly through her mind, she hadn't been able to conjure up the specific shade of his irises, the exact way his smile unfolded. The boy who would shape the rest of her life. The boy whose death she was now helping to lovingly plan. Incredible.

Brynne still marveled at the abruptness with which Aaron had gone from barely a blip on her radar to the reason she spent her lunch break perfecting her makeup in the bathroom. She knew exactly when it had happened, though. There were only three weeks left in the semester when they'd been in the same presentation group, and their professor had set the class free to work independently on those presentations. The group sent Brynne and Aaron down to the computer lab to work on the PowerPoint.

Brynne had braced herself for forced, detached conversation as they walked there together, but he talked animatedly, easily, as if they were already friends. He wanted to know whom she'd gone with to the dance on Saturday, if they'd had fun. When they reached the lab and he sat in the chair next to her,

it didn't occur to Brynne that he could hardly have sat anywhere else; those earnest copper eyes made casually sitting next to her seem like the friendliest, most intimate gesture he could have made in public.

From that alone, it could've been just another one of Brynne's short-lived, fruitless crushes. But Aaron, she quickly found, was the maddening combination of warmly accessible and somehow unattainable, the boy everyone thinks likes them but never actually makes a move, leaving Brynne—and other girls, she knew for a fact—alternating painfully between certainty that he was pining for her and crippling doubt that he ever spared her a second thought. She could've been disgusted with him if it had been artifice or arrogance, but it reeked of wretchedly adorable shyness and vulnerability. That deadly combination of hope and second-guessing his attentions was enough to make anyone obsessed.

Brynne did not regret where they were now. She knew it was sick. She knew she was obsessed. That only made it more cinematically romantic. Watching Aaron's soft profile, the snaking trail from shoulder to knee as he bent over the bed, she wondered again why it was women who were glamourized, sexualized, idealized in movies and the media. Had no one ever seen a boy like this before? There was absolutely nothing that compared. And he was oblivious to it. That final detail made it all so unforgivably perfect.

“Will you stay and watch?” he asked.

“I don't know if I can,” she choked, though she knew she would. Not just because he'd asked it of her, but that, like everything else about him, his death would be poignant, artful, and precious, something she couldn't miss.

She knew that he was seduced by the glamour of it, the literary nature of suicide, more than any inescapable sorrow. At first, she'd found it gorgeously tragic that such a golden, privileged young man struggled with such demons; perhaps it was even a perfect illustration of the hell of having everything. Being from a poor and dysfunctional home, this should have been her biggest turnoff about him, but she couldn't help finding it fascinating and poetic. Her boyfriend was a tragic character study in motion.

She had Aaron's issues to thank for him finally letting her get close, one big reason she could never resent what he was now putting her through. His pain had made him love her. When she'd broken down and confessed how much she liked him, they'd connected over comparing trials. She let him think his were bigger, and he soon had her believing they were too. No matter how miserable or self-hating she'd ever been, at no point had she fantasized about lying facedown in a pool of her own blood, whatever remained of her relishing the self-pity of no one noticing or caring.

She loved that Aaron was damaged. Only he could make sickness so beguiling. She loved that she was the only one who held him while he cried, who let him indulge his bloody sex fantasies without judgment. But what made it all the more intoxicating was that it wasn't who he was all the time, or even most of it. The Aaron she truly loved was the one who sang Disney duets with her at karaoke bars, who wasn't embarrassed about telling his parents he loved them every time they spoke on the phone, who his family and teachers adored because he was so smart and polite, and everyone else liked because he

was so unassumingly sweet and fun. Depression and morbidity were more like the passionate hobbies he resumed in his private time than his default state of mind.

Brynne blamed herself for being the catalyst. Having a captive, fascinated audience had made Aaron's obsession more potent. As it all snowballed, he'd slowly put together that he'd found someone who'd do absolutely anything for him, no conditions. He'd never say it this way, but Brynne had watched the progress of this realization. Aaron had never quite had the heart to destroy his proud, doting parents who had done everything right, given him everything, and did not deserve to think Aaron hadn't known that. With the discovery of someone who couldn't refuse him anything, he had finally found a way around this. Brynne had long expected something like this, so, when he laid down on the bed and held his arms out to her like a helpless child, she whispered, "Are you going to ask me to do it?"

"Oh, baby, no." As she buried her face in his hair, though, he breathed, "But will you tell my family you did?"

Brynne bit down on a strand of his hair, something he'd always thought was a sexual gesture instead of a coping mechanism. "You . . . you know I'd go to jail, right?" Aaron wasn't above using his pull over her, but he wasn't cruel.

"No, you won't. I've put in the note that you didn't actually do it. The autopsy will show you couldn't have. But . . . please just let my parents think it wasn't me. They'd rather think I was murdered, trust me. They think I'm happy."

*You are happy.*

“They don’t deserve this. It’s not their fault I’m sick.”

Brynne was about to point out all the problems with this solution, but quickly realized there was no point. He’d already asked her, so she already knew she was going to do what he needed.

“Okay. Okay, precious, of course I’ll do that for you.” She paused. Had she ever actually said it? “I love you, you know.”

“Oh yeah, I know.”

Dear Jane

Tamilyn Ropelato

Dear Jane,

Your faith is 'death-struck' from a lie under  
reasonable pretenses.

Your happily ever after bubble burst.

Imagine you had fallen into the trap.

Two years passed and the lie not unveiled.

The child now must reap the consequence of  
truth.

The psychopath you loved has been  
purposefully inflicting harm.

Methodically planning your demise while you  
naïvely loved.

The plan successfully achieved tears your child  
from you.

You sit observed in a mirrored-glass room for  
an hour a week.

The child is filled with rage at only one year of  
age.

You numbly function as your mind tries to  
grasp the expanse of the lies.

You watch your child suffer for years and your  
heart falls to your feet

each time some incident opens the wound you  
both carry.

You didn't only lose love, you lost life.

Your child's innocence is severed before his  
second birthday.

Is a spoiled vow so dreadful now?

Your faith will be repaired



but what will become of the faith of she who  
    loved the psychopath?  
And how will the child grow?  
Cold  
They fight so hard to make it not so . . .

Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 3rd. New York: Bantam  
Dell/Smith, Cornhill, 1848. 320. Print.

None

Michelle C. Paul

I believe  
Sometimes  
That the devil made the world

The perfect  
Hell  
Takes time to develop  
    Mature  
For the harvest

I imagine  
He sits  
In the auditorium of men's minds  
Enjoying the view  
Of the script  
    The stage  
    The cast  
He has created  
Directing when necessary  
A word here  
There  
To stir the right emotions  
Of those who watch  
Without control

What award  
    Viewed  
    Nominated  
    Voted

Will his creation win?

Or maybe

Its existence

Is reward enough

To those who know better

Or maybe

There is no competition.

### Staff Bios

JAYROD GARRETT is a senior majoring in English with an emphasis on creative writing. He loves reading and writing and has served two tours in Iraq during his thirteen-year career in the Utah Army National Guard. His dream is to be one of the few African-American speculative fiction authors.

ANDREW HELMS is the assistant managing editor for *Epiphany*, project manager for Voices Online Now, founder and president of Purple Ink, and, of course, an aspiring novelist. He writes epic fantasy, science fiction, and the occasional Christmas story. His latest project is a short story about a young, diseased man who must learn how to survive in a world dominated by stonespeakers when his caretaker dies, which will be submitted to The Writers of the Future contest this year.

RACHEL RIGLEY is the marketing and office manager for *Epiphany*. When she isn't blasting opera music while painting something swell in the art building, you can find her strumming her ukulele in her hammock or playing a video game. Rachel is a lover, not a fighter, \*wink\* ladies.

MICHELLE C. PAUL is a senior finishing her Bachelors of Science in nursing degree this year and eager to start on a Bachelors of Arts degree in theater design. When she's not working in a variety of on-campus capacities ranging from graphic design to copy-editing, building managing to writing tutoring, she loves writing and reading science fiction and fantasy, drawing and designing, video games, and discussing important matters like zombies and the Internet.

## EDITORS — BIOS

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TAMILYN ROPELATO is a single and devoted mother whose passion is to train her son to have a strong foundation and sense of self. She is a linguistics graduate and an audiobook editor who is currently pursuing her second degree in English teaching. Her hobbies are reading, painting, and, most importantly, spending time with her son. Her dream is to one day move to Italy and be an intermediate school teacher.

JOHN ARMOUR is an English teaching major with a minor in ESL. He is married and has two wonderful boys. He plans on graduating in 2014. He is an avid photographer and really enjoys the outdoors. He is more at home playing video games than playing sports with others. He plans on being a novelist, using his time off from teaching during the summers to write his novels.

STEPHANIE SIMONSON is a (super-)senior in English with a creative writing emphasis and sociology minor. In addition to copy-editing for *Epiphany*, she is currently the fiction editor of *Metaphor* and lead copy editor and columnist for *The Signpost*. She has also been managing editor of *The Signpost* and a tutor for the WSU Writing Center. She hopes to continue working in editing and writing after she (finally) graduates.

SHELLEY WILLIAMS is seeking a second baccalaureate degree in theater arts education from Weber State University after receiving an advanced degree in English from another Utah academic institution. A native-born Ogdenite, she finds herself saying “we” when talking about herself as a Wildcat and part of the WSU student body, a pronoun she

## **EDITORS — BIOS**

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seldom used at her former academic institution. She loves how Weber State University attracts a diverse cross-section of people that cuts across geographic, age, and ethnic boundaries, a refreshing thing in Utah higher education. While in the past she has engaged in everything from rock climbing and hockey to belly dancing and taekwondo, she has always enjoyed learning (though may often complain of the study involved anyway) and considers herself a lifelong learner.

