

# VERBAL EQUINOX

FALL 2013

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Eric Murdock

## Threshold Apprehension

*First Place Winner*

Fake wood and fake breasts, false smiles and hollow laughter. The only real things in this establishment are the drinks. I want them strong to ebb the flow of memories roaming freely through my mind, unchecked by my sobriety. The establishment wants the drinks strong to encourage sorority girls and boys, in flame and skull-ridden shirts, to make fake noises that give off the impression of joy. The roar of the conversation overwhelms the room; the lonely are less so by simply being present. It doesn't work for me. My isolation only grows in the company of others. The contrasts in our personalities highlighted. We are more similar than we seem. Although it is not immediately obvious, unhappiness is king of this realm, ordering its loyal subjects out into the world to fail, to further their unhappiness with fake friendships, and insincere camaraderie. The false joy only distracts from the glazed eyes and forced smiles.

I run my fingers across the false veneer of the bar. The smooth, cool surface is appealing. Unlike the sticky warm feel



The Graphics Fairy

of a real wooden bar, this feels clean, purified of the thousands of drinks spilled, saliva fallen, and blood dripped.

It used to take me twenty minutes to get a drink here, and then I started tipping and returning, and the drinks started appearing almost before I wanted them. The bartenders are now busy catering to the complicated cocktails of the false alcoholics. Kids that think it's cool to drink, think that being drunk is something to be proud of. They don't like the taste of alcohol, they don't even like being drunk, they've probably never sat in the parking lot of the bar waiting for

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it to open. Alcohol represents a rebellion they've been seeking. It's not rebellion though. It's just answering to another master. A unified rebellion is no longer a rebellion; it simply becomes a different norm.

I look into the mirror behind the bar into eyes I no longer recognize. My reflection depresses me; I can't imagine what my image does to the false "happys." I'm the one stationary object in the picture. All around me, there is movement, laughter, touching, and drinking. I see my friends in the reflection. They're leaning on each other, smiling and then not. The drunken whims of emotional youth fleeting quickly across their lazy faces. I stare into my glass; it contains ice, club soda, lime, and sobriety. I haven't had alcohol in over two years. I still stare longingly at the bottles on the wall, and every day have to remind myself why I abstain. I still feel like an alcoholic. I get excited at the thought of drinking. My mouth waters when I think of whiskey. I wake every morning feeling hung-over from the sleeping pills I have to take every night.

The bartenders, or at least the ones that knew me then, still treat me well. Sometimes I don't think they'd pour me a real drink if I asked for it. They all knew back then that it was no good for

me. When I first stepped into this place after a long time away, they had all heard that I had stopped drinking.

That first time I returned to straddle the bar stool and ordered my first drink, they seemed overcome with relief when I asked for a club soda with lime and not the familiar double scotch. I found it's a good drink to put people at ease, the club soda that is. The false "happys" assume it's alcoholic and don't feel that you're judging them. Be better with scotch of course, but really, everything is better with scotch.

I like this place during the day. They have good sandwiches and the music and conversation isn't overwhelming. The bartenders leave you alone unless you want to talk, and I can wallow in my sober self-pity.

At night though, this place turns into a hotbed of false emotions and bad intentions. And right now, this hell that I used to love has become a foreign home.

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My fake alcoholic drink is no longer enough to hide me from the masses. I cannot blend in to this crowd of lying smiles and straight brimmed hats. I finish my drink, leave a tip, and walk down the stairs. I check; my friends didn't see me leave. They won't notice I'm gone until they need a ride home.

I walk out of the door, contorting my body to narrowly miss leveling a group of drunken girls in high shoes. The doorman nods at me, grateful that I didn't collide with the reckless floozies. They surely would've crowded his door for too long a time, flopping on the floor, attempting to right themselves on top of ridiculous heels.

Taxis line up on the curb, windows drop as I pass each cab. I cross the empty street against a green light and shove my hands deep into my pockets. The air is cool, it's mid October, and the night brings with it crisp, clean air. The tall buildings place the sidewalk in deep shadows; the solidarity brings the first smile of the

night to my face. I walk quickly, but without a destination in mind. I remember a coffee shop that used to stay open late. It's somewhere in this neighborhood, but it's been a long time since I've roamed these streets, and nothing looks like it did years ago.

I see two hunched shadows up ahead; as I get closer, the shadows turn into a man and woman. The man is helping the

woman remove her knee-high leather boots. They're both obviously intoxicated, and the woman's skirt has slid up around her back. Each time the man pulls on the boot, her bare flesh drags across the concrete. I ask if they're okay as I pass. They both jerk their heads in my direction; glassy eyes unaware that I

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*I wish I had a cigarette. I don't smoke, but a lonely night sitting on abandoned church steps, calls for some vice. I settle on thinking instead, my largest and most addictive vice. I try to find a way that I could've done things differently, chosen a different path, kissed a different girl. My mind spins this wheel and the desire to drink and shut the wheel down grows.*

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was there, float over and past and then back to me. The girl begins to laugh and assures me that she just can't walk in the boots anymore and he's helping her. The man returns to his task, and I return to my walk.

I cross another deserted street and turn towards the mountains.

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There's a large church on the corner, its steps spilling out onto the sidewalk. I take a few steps up and sit, leaning back against the heavy wooden door. I look at the street signs hanging from the lights and try to remember the coffee shop. A woman pushing a stroller and holding a toddler's hand walks by me. She doesn't notice me until she's standing at the corner, waiting for the little man to grant her passage across the street. She unconsciously pulls the kid closer and looks straight ahead. I feel bad for startling her, but know that anything I say will only frighten her more, I remain silent. I accept my role as the stranger parents don't want their kids to talk to, the man people cross streets to avoid. She'll probably take a new route home all because this one time she saw this weird bearded guy sitting on the church steps.

I wish I had a cigarette. I don't smoke, but a lonely night sitting on abandoned church steps calls for some vice. I settle on thinking instead, my largest and most addictive vice. I try to find a way that I could've done things differently, chosen a different path, kissed a different girl. My mind spins this wheel and the desire to drink and shut the wheel down grows.

The streets are empty save for the inconsistent string of

cars coming down the hill from the university. The city is quiet enough for me to hear the sounds of the constructed nature. The line of trees planted to shade the sidewalk show no movement, but I hear the leaves brushing against each other. I can hear the traffic lights change, the heavy click of green off, red on. The little man chimes, beckoning me to cross the street, so I do. When I step onto the opposite sidewalk and look back to my temporary roost on the steps, I can see the lights of the elusive coffee shop. It's about three blocks up the street on the side that I just came from. I jog back across the street, defying the orange hand angrily commanding me to stop, and continue towards the shop.

There is an outdoor patio with tables and chairs scattered inside a waist high enclosure. The patio is empty but I see several people inside. As I pass through the doors I am immediately rewarded by the unique and familiar smell of coffee. The experience

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is different than it would be during the day. It's quiet, the music subdued, no line extends towards the door, and there is no hum of conversation. The only words being spoken are by those of a young couple huddled in the corner, hunched forward, hands entwined, their drinks forgotten and left to grow cold. They laugh after each hushed sentence and seem truly happy. I smile and walk to the counter.

The coffee mistress greets me with a smile and asks for my order. As she expertly prepares my drink, I admire the tattoos running up her arms, bright, colorful, and intricate. She seems too young to have such expansive tattoos. There is a large owl on the cap of her left shoulder; autumn leaves and branches frame it. It's a beautiful tattoo, and I ask where she had it done. Her face brightens as she speaks of something she loves. She tells me of a shop just up the street and says that they are amazing. She explains that the tattoo is in memory of her grandmother, who had perfect hearing unless she was being introduced to a stranger. After being told the person's name, she would always repeat "who?" She tells me that her grandmother confided in her once that she just liked hearing names twice and that it helped her remember people. We laugh

about her grandmother and her face drops as she remembered her grandmother was no longer here.

I thank her for my coffee and settled out on the patio with a local newspaper. After reading movie reviews and deciding to see that movie on this day, I set the paper aside. I'm not willing to process the day's current events or political pleas. My phone buzzes; I receive a text from my friend telling me they've moved from one false social hell to another. I think about how much I like bars during the day and coffee shops at night.

During the day, I would've been unable to speak to the barista for any more than to thank her. She would've been distracted by the hordes of people waiting for their drinks. I dislike being hushed, whether it be by the overwhelming roar of false laughter at a bar or the impatience of a growing line at a coffee house. Both successfully quiet any possibility of real interaction; if either is present, it's simply greetings and move on.

It used to be so easy for me. Things and people fell into my lap, I almost always immediately hurt those things or people, aided by a lowering of inhibitions and poor decision making, but it still seemed easier. I felt like less of an outcast.

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I take off my jacket to fully enjoy the cool night air. It's uncomfortably cold, and goose bumps flock to my exposed forearms. Still thinking of tattoos, I remember my favorite final sentence. It comes in *The Sun Also Rises* by EH himself, Bret and Jake's final words, "We could've had such a damned good time together. . . Yes, I said, isn't it pretty to think so?"

I'm occupied by thoughts of all the damned good times I've had and the many more I could've had if only something had been different. I realize, completely, that I can't wish something into existence. I can't hope hard enough to make something happen, something work, and someone to change. Things are as they are, and I can only alter my path.

I'm staring at my exposed, goose-pimpling forearms and think that's a great spot for a reminder. I look up the street and can just see the neon lights advertising body ink. It's late enough that they'll surely be closed, but I decide to hope, and walk by anyway. I step over the small fence and

walk towards the shop. There are people inside. I test the door, and it opens. Loud music and false laughter spill out into the street. I recoil ever so slightly, reminded of the hell in the bar. I push forward towards the counter. A mid-twenties male wearing a long-sleeved, button-up shirt with skulls and flowers spilling out of the sleeves greets me. I explain the tattoo I want; I speak rapidly and excitedly. For the first time in a long time, I know something

I want. I have no doubt about this tattoo and want it on me now.

The illustrated man pulls a calendar book from below the counter and kills any dream I had of impulsively marking myself. We set

a date for two weeks. We shake hands, he gives me a reminder card, and I leave.

I walk back towards the bars where my friends are no doubt pointlessly shaking their heads and smiling at some girl talking about something they can't hear. I shove my hands deep into my pockets and say to myself, "Damn. That would've been the perfect end to this empty night."

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Two weeks later I enter the shop alone. The music is lower and the shop is full of talented artists hunched over individuals attempting to hide their pain. The illustrated man greets me and shows me the stencil he has created for my forearm. The vintage typewriter font compliments the text “isn’t it pretty to think so?”

He leads me to a seat and shaves the white underside of my forearm. After wetting the area, he applies the stencil. As he removes the paper, the outline of my future tattoo stays.

I think about why I want this tattoo. It serves as a reminder to not fall in love with beautiful illusions. To enjoy reality and appreciate the things I have control over. I have felt for too long that I was living my life hoping for things to work, instead of taking tangible steps towards my dreams. I’ve been living in a state of paralysis, hoping for someone to hand me my life. This tattoo can serve to either validate and encourage, or mock, dependent wholly on the effort I make towards my new life.



Brittany Krough

## Realize

*Second Place Winner*

I felt so sick there for a minute, laying in the bath, with nobody home. I still do.

And all of a sudden, I have this realization about everything. I could see almost everything in my life, as clear as seeing the things on the floor. The bra on the ground, the mess in the room, the warped floor boards, everything was so clear, I could realize everything. It was the first time in a while that I actually lived in the moment. The gurgle of the Cichlid aquarium was the only noise, yet I was hearing everything.

I remember ten years ago. I was excited to move into this house, a real house, no more apartments, no room I had to share with my sister. How excited I was that my room was no longer right across the hall from my mom, but on the second floor. Nowadays, it's like I have to be on the other side of the world to have some room for myself. See what growing up gets you? You run far away from the comforts you know and the people you are most secure with. What happens when the other side of the world gets too cramped? Shall I go to the moon? I bet Virginia Woolf



never needed that much creative space, to fly to outer space...

I walked out to the porch. It was cold. Not cold uncomfortable, just refreshing. Like new ideas refreshing. I wonder: why do people say the season of autumn reminds them of death? Is it because the leaves on the trees shrivel and wither like little old ladies in nursing homes? I don't think of the leaves themselves, but instead, I think of the trees under the leaves. The trees are casting off the extra, so that they may be prepared for the next season, just like a school child going for a haircut. Fall isn't death and end at all; I'd like to think of it as a new beginning.

Just like an old folks home I worked at. Why are people so

sad to walk the halls of a nursing home? People should be happy that these little old raisins get to go into the mouth of the earth soon, get a chance to start something new soon, go someplace new soon, see some place new soon. That's why an old folks home isn't the last place a person should go, but the first. Take your child there, where she can meet bent-over-Olive or wrinkle-brow-Barbra, and they'll tell her life's great secrets, sharing with her their regretful moments, their triumphant moments, and their meh moments.

I've listened to the stories. It's the meh that scares me more than the sorrows. I can't stand meh as much as I hate awkward pauses in a conversation.

After working at that nursing home for so long, I feel the twitch of the meh. I have the itch to travel. Surely there is more to life than just the creak of the ever-rolling cage of the BINGO ball machine? I can't stand to leave my old friends; I might not ever see them again. However, I know that even they eventually will check out too.

So here I am, alone in a café somewhere in Rajasthan, in a town I can hardly pronounce. Maybe the town doesn't even have a name; does it matter? I've realized that the meh has found me again. This is a point where

the traveler is caught in a lonesome drift of questioning every choice they ever made. Why did you leave your job? Why did you leave your lover, because if you hadn't, at least you'd be eating your favorite Las Vegas Roll at happy-hour-half-off with somebody, instead of sitting alone with nobody, wondering what is the meaning of life. Normal life wasn't so bad, at least, it saves a person from thinking, and thinking is exhausting, more than doing. But, then, on the other hand, normal life consisted of mostly meh.

The meh has caught up to me again. Time to change countries, change styles, change lovers. This time, this lover has a different accent, different build, majestic eyes, and a clever way with words. He is your everything that you've never thought of before, and you like it. You roll in the sheets, you talk, you roll some more. But then one day you introduce him to your friends, and Kim doesn't like him. Out of nowhere, he's shrunk three feet. He's no longer strong, he's weak. The charming

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*Funny how awareness comes when someone else speaks it, which makes me wonder: am I more realistic when my thoughts are back in civilization?*

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things he said were just perverted ideas.

Funny how awareness comes when someone else speaks it, which makes me wonder: am I more realistic when my thoughts are back in civilization? Otherwise, would I only exist in a meaningless bubble of solipsism and self-indulgence? So long lover, you're about as practical as the dreams I have at night, and about as noticeable as the rug I put my shoes on.

And like a pair of cheap Payless shoes, I move on to the next ones in less than a month. Except, these shoes give me blisters, but at least they look great. I remember my freshman English instructor saying, "Life's a bitch, and then you die." I really didn't find what she said as bleak as everybody else thought it was. After all, a person can only wander so far until there is the cold hard ocean called truth...or wall. That ocean is really a person far too exhausting to even look at, just like how that wall you'll eventually meet is the person you can't manage to walk over. He's a horse's

cousin and a human's dirtiest part of the anatomy. Turns out, I'm not a powerful winter plow, plowing through anything and anyone. I'm a snow shovel, and his cold heart broke my handle.

So what to do? Go back to the house on the other side of the world, go back to Mom and say, "You're the only one who knows me! Please write me a hallmark card with words of inspiration, just like you did in elementary school. My high-brow education of literature isn't going to spell it out as easily as you can, Mom! Better yet, can you read it for me? I'm stupid and forgot how to read!"

So then, I take a warm bath. I realize it's the best thing in the world. The herbal tea is the best hug, even if it is chamomile and tastes like twigs. The Irish Spring soap is beautiful like marble, and the bra on the floor is artistic. I see everything. The swamp cooler is the best sound I ever heard, but other than that, the home is quiet. It is here, I realize, I'm hearing everything.

Suzanne Humphries

## A Letter to a Missed Sister

*Third Place Winner*

I miss you, little sister. The last time I saw your sweet face, you were sleeping, deep in the night, blissfully unaware of my intentions to leave you and risk never seeing you again. I remember briefly standing there, frozen in my step, looking upon you. I told myself it was because I was afraid to leave, but it was really to etch your face into my memory. I took one last moment to move an errant strand of hair from your face as I kissed you on your forehead, then left. I tried to refrain from sobbing. It was not fair that our time together was over...

My mind grows weary when I think of how I left you. Not a single day has gone by in 11 years that I have not thought about where you are or how you are doing. I wonder what you are doing—if you are married, have kids, are in college, or are even alive.

I hate that I had to leave you behind in that broken place, but I had to.

I am sorry mom went crazy, and I am sorry you had to see the violence. I know it was

not my fault, but you were too damn young to see something like that, and it destroyed me inside that you did.

When Mom hit me, I never cried because of the pain. I cried because I saw the look of terror in your eyes and heard your whimpers. I hated that you no longer had a home to come home to, no safe haven. Mom's angry blows may have been directed at me, but they may as well have been directed only at you. The body can heal from abuse, but the mind will never forget it. It nearly killed me every day when you came home from school and immediately locked yourself up in our room because you didn't want to hear what was going on. Unfortunately, no door could shut out what was happening. You saw my black bruises. You saw the hair on the floor that Mom pulled out of my head. You heard me scream in pain. And you, little 12-year-old you, you shouldn't have had to see that. I would have willingly taken on another lifetime of Mom's outlashes if it meant you never would have known about it.

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The worst night of all of this was the night Mom tried to throw me out. It was about ten o'clock at night, and it was raining. She grabbed my clothes and ran around outside throwing them about our apartment complex. I remember the horrible things she yelled at me as I chased after her, sobbing, trying to gather my things. "You little bitch! You fucking slut! You'll never amount to anything! You're fuckin' dirt! You're nothing! Stupid little girl! Amoebas are better than you! You're less important than a speck of dust!" I remember Dad standing there worthlessly, like

a coward, because he couldn't choose whether to defend his wife or save his child. I saw you watching Mom and me running around, and I never saw you look more horrified, hurt, or lost. The next few moments were a blur, but then I remember hiding from mom in the garage. I was crouching behind the car and threw up a little bit when I heard the door connecting the apartment to the garage open then slam shut. I screamed in fear as I felt a strong hand

cup over my mouth to stifle my noise. It was brother, and you! "Get in the car, now!" said our older brother in a whispered yell. You were sobbing as you got into the backseat. I jumped into the front seat, and he floored it. We drove around for a while. We didn't know what to do—we were all just kids. I don't even remember if brother had his driver's license yet. The

defining moment of that night, which I will always remember, was when brother put his arm around me in the car and said, "For as bad as things are right now, they'll be three times as good for you in the future."

I remember us both nearly having panic attacks as brother pulled into a Walgreens so he could call home and try to mediate the situation. I remember looking in the rear view mirror at your face, all splotchy and red from crying. The emotionally destroyed look on your face at that moment is one that will remain burned into my memory forever. After a few moments of quiet inner panic, brother returned. My heart nearly dropped out of my body when

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he announced we were going back home right then. I would have rather he had snapped my neck right there on the spot. I did not want to go back home. I did not want you to have to return either. I was worried that since you two tried to save me, you would incur Mom's wrath as well. You certainly did not deserve it. You did nothing wrong, and in fact were more valiant in that quick moment than anyone could hope to be under such pressure.

I remember that moment once we were back home. As we all walked back inside, we froze in our footsteps. Mom was sitting in a chair in the entryway, calmly, with a mug of tea and her legs crossed, and Dad standing there behind her, both eyeing us. As I looked at him, I knew he had made his decision as to whose side he was on. I remember looking him right in the eyes, wishing he would just drop dead, the worthless coward. When I looked back at mom, her eyes were lit with fiery insanity. To this day, I have never had a more fearful moment in my life. I didn't understand why they were so calm, and it scared

the hell out of me. I could not read them. I had no idea what was going to happen next. I felt a weight lifted off me when they excused you two to go to upstairs to your rooms. My immediate future did not look positive, but little sister, I was so relieved to know you were exonerated and that you did not see what happened next. . . Little sister, I am very glad that horror is now well behind us. I feel like I have healed, and have definitely let that experience make me stronger. But I never got to find out if you healed. I die a little each time I think about that. I hope you did. I hope you too have put it behind you and are leading a happy, healthy life. I hope you have had every opportunity and adventure you have ever wanted. It has been so many years since I last saw you, and I am unsure if I will ever get to see you again. I wonder if you hate me for what happened. I hope not, though I would certainly understand. Just know that I love you, miss you, and you are in my heart every day.

Love always, your older sister.

Jessica Guzman

## Leaving It Behind

*Forth Place Winner*

I awoke to a pitch dark room. It was a cold Sunday morning. Four in the morning to be more precise. I stood up in a groggy state and hauled myself out to the living room. I yawned intensely and watched as everyone took their luggage to the minivan. I sure did not want to be up at this hour of day, especially not as I began shivering like a poor Chihuahua. My shoulders sagged, and I felt the weight of the world collapse atop of me.

Today was the day that we would be headed to Utah, a foreign place I had never even been to. In a blind-state, we were moving away from our hometown in California into the middle of nowhere; or at least that's what all my friends believed even when I tried to convince them otherwise. It had been less than a week since school was over. Less than a week ago I was still packing all my unnecessary junk that took up most of the space. Less than a week ago I was still in school taking pictures and making memories before it came time to say good-bye. Now I'm sitting in an overstuffed minivan awaiting departure, hands balled into fists inside my jacket



trying to warm up. I'm anxious and wide awake, wondering what I should expect, wondering what's coming my way.

As time slowly drips by, I'm leaving it all behind. It's the beginning of my senior year at a brand new school. My mind floods with memories of myself as a young child going to the first day of school. There's an overwhelming feeling in the pit of my stomach. A looming voice pops in my head telling me that I'll be fine. That I won't "have to eat lunch in the bathroom stall," like I jokingly told my friends. When I near the school, my jaw drops to the floor, and I'm stunned at the massive castle size of it. I am miniscule compared to it, and when I step through the doors, I'm taken aback by its inner beauty. I could definitely get lost around here, I thought worriedly.

In the first month of school, I have not yet found a stable

group of friends. With every day come's an adventure, new faces and different atmospheres. For the first time in my life I have become what is known as a "social butterfly" never staying in one place for too long, simply stopping to rest for a second and fleeting in the next moment. And so far this tactic had worked just fine for me; it assured that I would never be the kid "in the bathroom stall."

Time passed, and I don't know how it happened, but all at once I had completely stopped talking to my old group of friends back in Cali. Had I forgotten them so quickly in a matter of months? Or maybe they

had forgotten me just as well. Either way, the messages slowly decreased, and so did the phone calls. At times I would ask myself how is it that people can go from knowing each other so well to being total strangers. But my life continued as it always had. Piles and oodles of homework, waking up early to school—feeling like I had a hangover—late nights movies, working at McDonald's, hanging out with friends, and

sometimes a crazy party here and there just to de-stress. And before I knew it, graduation had just passed by, and I realized it was time to visit my hometown during the summer.

It had only been a year since I'd left, but when I returned, it seemed that everything had changed, yet somehow, it was still the same old place. I knew

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*The ugly truth had finally wedged itself into the crevices of my brain and settled there. People change and it's inevitable. How could I have expected for everything to be the same when I had missed a good chunk of a year apart from them. It's like as if they were on a different wavelength that I couldn't tune into.*

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I should have been happier to be reunited with the people with whom I shared my life's scandalous stories and obnoxious laughter. But I felt strangely remote and unwanted, though at the moment I couldn't quite figure out why, and it wasn't until I came

back that I realized what the real problem was.

The airplane ride to California hadn't been as bad as I expected. But the twenty-hour ride back to Utah felt like a slow, torturous death by pure boredom. How truckers can drive straight for hours and hours is truly bizarre and beyond my understanding. Dark was starting to set in the sky, and my body was beginning to shake in



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anticipation of the arrival. I flung the door wide open and whizzed by in a hurry. As I entered my room, I instantly fell on top of it, appreciating the fact that I was finally home.

The summer melted away like the burning-hot wax of a candle. One day I was aimlessly searching for an insignificant lost object. As I reached up on my tippy toes and grunted, I stretched further into the unknown areas of the top shelf in my closet. Without a warning, a heap of clothes, books, tiny stuffed animals, and other nonsense I never knew was up there immediately tumbled down in a rage. I cursed in Spanish as a thick black notebook hit my foot before the reflexes had time to kick in. I retrieved the notebook and looked at it with intense curiosity. I mentally smiled and snuggled up in my bed. It had been some time since I had opened this book and looked through it.

It was the collage of pictures and handwritten goodbyes of my—what now felt like long ago—buddies. I couldn't help but laugh out loud with every funny picture I saw. There's the time we went to the amusement park Great America. There's the list of 100 things we didn't get to do and the funny pictures we used to draw. A part of me seemed to miss what I had, and a part of me

was just trying to move on, and it was then as I reminisced about the past that I realized what a grave mistake I made. I had gone to my hometown expecting to return as if I had never even left. It's as if I were trying to recapture them the way they had been. My mind was trying to conjure the good memories of the past. But things were different now, whether I wanted to admit it or not. They had all matured somehow. Some were leaving out of state on vacation, most were busy with their full-time jobs now that we had graduated, others were packing up for their new beginning in college, and then, of course, there were the small percentage whose main philosophy will always revolve around cannabis.

The ugly truth had finally wedged itself into the crevices of my brain and settled there. People change, and it's inevitable. How could I have expected for everything to be the same when I had spent a good chunk of a year apart from them. It's as if they were on a different wavelength that I couldn't tune into. Their conversations consisted of people I didn't know, events I hadn't been to, and things which I wasn't a part of. I thought to myself this is how you know you haven't been in a person's life: When they talk about things, and you aren't involved. It's not like they were

purposefully excluding me. It was just simply that I had not been there to be a part of it all.

Life takes us into the most unexpected places we never thought of. Friendships are made, restored, forgotten, and kept. Hearts are broken, mended, wounded, put back together, and

almost always left a little dented. I finally understood the value of a single moment, and as I let this thought sink in, I think of a quote I once read in a Buddhist book: "I must focus on non-attachment, then I might be able to accept the impermanence of things."

Joslyn Pust

## Untitled

*First Place Winner*

I can see you perfectly, you know.  
You're stuck in a down pour: the  
epitome of the down-trodden.  
That's how you spent your year, isn't it?  
Downdowndown. Not the slightest hint  
of up.

They pushed you  
smothered you.  
silenced you.

Not with a gag or chloroform, but  
with a ribbon. It was a spectacle, so they  
wanted it to be pretty for those who noticed.  
Hell, you wanted it to be pretty for those who  
noticed. So you gathered your closest. Made them  
into an audience. Told them "wait, watch, see." Stuffed  
yourself into a box. They grew tired of waiting—there was nothing  
to watch. They supposed that you knew what you were doing.  
Houdini must have been fictionalized; because in the end, you never  
fully re-emerged again.

and neither did the audience.

so you sought them out.

but none recognized you.

(nothing more than a stranger to those you  
held dearest.)

and, even more so, nothing more than a  
stranger even to yourself.

You've heard the words meant to teach children: "stranger danger!"  
They've warned you over and over that with strangers could come  
harm.

Well, this unfamiliar you brought harm. sneaking whispers (tip-  
toedtip-toed) through your veins, up your spine, into your mind. They  
marched smallest to biggest: Doubts, Insecurities, Fears. Minions like  
Ugly, Fat, and Stupid stole your dreams, killed your ambitions.



You were terrified, broken, alone. Sometimes at night, you held the slightest awareness of a ghost. A ghost of your former self, in fact. You had tintstonesthades of an idea that this ghost came from within. That maybe, just maybe, you could excavate the answer.

so you dug.

you tore off the skin.

rended red and raw, you peeled away tendons

and muscles.

scraped out innards.

Finally, you were at your bones.

You drilled your way into them, with a slight

scritterscratscritterscrat.

Expecting marrow, instead you found a

hallway full of nothingness.

and inside of you?

All that remained was a bangedbrokendiscarded picture frame and an unmarked cd.

you cleaned off the frame. Threw away the shattered glass, straightened the back, and set it up, facing you as you sat in the nothingness. Then you turned on the cd.

You stayed like this for an indeterminable amount of time. waiting for a memory to come alive in the frame. waiting for a message to reveal itself in the song. [waiting for something, anything, to make itself clear.] but your skeleton of a self kept moving. Every now and then, someone would tap at your bones, knocks resounding inside.

“Leave me alone!” you wanted to scream.

“Help me!” you wanted to scream.

“You’re making it worse!” you wanted to scream.

You just wanted to scream in general. Wanted someone to notice. Wanted someone to help. Wanted someone to tell you

[why it wasn’t working.]

[what was broken.]

[why it was only getting worse.]

and you’re still waiting.

You still can’t find that old you.

Every so often you catch a mere glimpse of a familiar note in a song.

Or a flicker of a memory in the frame.

But never the full version.

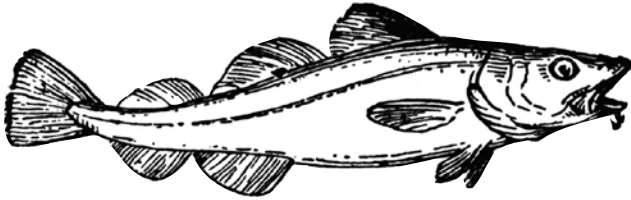
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You don't remember how to hope.  
Any attempts at outbursts are quelled.  
Everyone else assumes that your bones are full of the same stuff as theirs—  
they don't know enough about the nothingness to recognize it when  
it stares them in the eyes.

DB Troester

## Awakening

*Second Place Winner*



Ben stands in the dark. His dad's mouth hangs open, a small wet spot on his pillow. He snores. Ben shakes his shoulder and whispers "Dad."

Nothing.

He waits a minute then repeats the move. He speaks louder and closer: "Dad."

His head rolls to the side and his eyes open. "Ben?" he groans. His head rolls the other way, and he closes his eyes. Ben waits, his fingers resting on his father's arm.

His dad sits up and shifts his legs to the floor. "You sure you wanna do this?" he says, rubbing his head.

"C'mon, Dad."

"All right. Let me get dressed. Get some cereal or something. I'll be right there."

"Hurry, Dad."

He lays back onto his bed until he hears Ben call from the kitchen: "Dad!"

He arises and gets dressed.

They arrive at a secluded spot along Casi Creek. The sun is rising and dew drips from foliage along the bank. Birds chirp from the trees. Ben sets a small tackle box on the ground and opens it. His father hands him his fishing rod and sits next to him. They bait their hooks and cast lines about twelve feet out. The water is mud-colored and still.

Rays of the sun reach the shore, and Ben's bobber goes under, then rises. He stiffens his grip. The bobber submerges. He yanks the

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rod the way his dad had taught him and feels a fish on the line.

“Reel him in slow. Don’t lose him,” his dad says.

Ben cranks the reel. The bobber comes closer. A tiny sunfish rises to the surface. Ben smiles, his cheeks aglow.

The fish nears the shore. At the last moment, it gets off the hook and swims away.

“I almost caught him,” Ben shouts.

“Almost doesn’t count,” his dad says.

“I almost had him, right up to the shore,” Ben says.

“Almost doesn’t count,” repeats his father.

Ben sets his rod on the shore. He grabs the hook at the end of the line and rests it on his pant leg, then feels for an earthworm in the can beside him. He snags one between his thumb and forefinger and carefully pierces the worm onto the hook: once, twice, three times. It’s a big worm for any fish to swallow. He breathes deeply. For the first time, he knows his dad is wrong.

He casts out about ten feet. Splunk goes the hooked worm, sinking below the surface, tethered for now to the bobber above.

Simon Furlong

## As It Is in Heaven

*Third Place Winner*

They moved from room to room. One did dishes at the counter, one sprayed chemicals on the lawn, one watched a moth move across the torn window screen. They sat at one end of the room. They moved. They gathered some vegetables at the market, and hollowed them with long knives and ground them to pulp. At night Margret would sit by a lamp in the hallway and hum to the baby. Jerry would smoke a pipe in the garage and flip through dirty magazines under an incandescent lamp. A year after their child's birth, Jerry and Margret hardly spoke. Their communication was in the regimen that surrounded them, in the restructuring of furniture, in the allocation of space. Their bed started to wear in separate patterns. The space between them arose little by little until there was a visible barrier, which neither of them seemed to notice. In morning they would rinse themselves habitually; one washing off grease and aftershave, the other powder and scented lotion.



The baby cried late at night. The yolk of the moon quivered around her voice, her mouth expanding. Jerry was often horrified by her. He thought she expressed some mortal terror of the darkness and the enormous world around her. Perhaps this was his terror. Margret was comforted by the sound, sometimes finding it a needed relief from the all-encompassing silence of their bedroom. When the crying began, she would shift about in the dark, covering her body with the softness of her robe, or he would claw at the comforters and teeter through the darkness, never failing to gouge himself on



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the corner of some hidden object. In the shaky silence of the room, he often apologized to his sleeping wife.

Holding the baby, sometimes he would imagine that he held a bird whose wings beat violently against him. The baby quieted and night elapsed again. The evening was dinner and silence. Both ensuring the baby would eat, both concerned, both hardly touching their food and placing their dishes side by side in the sink. At times the faucet would drip. At times the air outside the house would make the windows bow. There was a large basement beneath the house. Jerry had caught a mouse there in the pantry. A long hallway led to the bomb shelter he had built during the cold war.

When the doctor had spoken to her, he looked concerned. "Based on your age, Margret, there are risks we must consider. A pregnancy in this stage of life can be very dangerous."

Jerry had begged her to consider the alternatives. Margret had walked through the wheat fields, through the stalks of corn, through the clouds of pollen. Jerry had sat in the garage, on the tarp which covered the sailboat, his breath growing long with the sweetness of his pipe. He shifted between the blue waves and the longstanding furniture, coughing.

Margret would often rest by the window, humming songs that her mother taught her. Songs about anthropomorphized animals, which Jerry imagined as deformed, massive creatures staggering through sinking meadows. He could not see the prince of frogs or the daring rabbits she described. He longed to hold a gun and be in the woods at dusk, to see the recoiling form of a buck, to know beyond a doubt what he wanted. He folded the baby's clothes and put them into the creaky wooden drawers. He whispered the Lord's Prayer as he leaned over her crib. He lies on the floor. He watched glow-in-the-dark stars his wife had pressed to the ceiling. May slept. The doctor had told them, "There are things to be considered. This may be your last chance, but the risks." The doctor had told them.

"...hallowed be thy name."

That night the bathtub had run over. Margret woke, her bed gown soaked with amniotic fluids. She started the water running. Jerry saw her standing in the bathroom, slowly combing the lengths of her hair. His hands found her arms and dug in. He dragged her from the bedroom, yelling and pushing. He forgot the faucet and the impending water. He pulled her mother's coat around her shoulders, and they went out into the dark lawn. He grew calmer in the car. The

pedal of the diesel pickup to the floor; they went rushing through the night toward the silky, forever expanding beacons of the city. He cleared field after field. He turned the heater on. The warmth flowed over them.

When they got home, their house was flooded. The worn wood had grown soft. In the basement, the ceiling sagged and floral couches blossomed with mold. Margret and May went to stay with her sister while Jerry pried up each floorboard. He worked in the garage, day after day, until the house was dry and whole once more.

"...thy will be done..."

As he lay in bed, Jerry thought of his father and sisters, the little plot where they were now, the time his father caught his sister Janet kissing a boy. He remembered the way his father's face became a wall of granite when his mother came home drunk. He remembered the creek where his sisters would take him swimming in September, when it was hottest, and how they would leave bottles of soda along the banks, where the water could cool them. How sweet and cold they were when the sun was at its peak. He remembered how his sisters would push him in, and he would cry and yell; how when the wheat grew long, they would make nests and lay out in them, playing with garter snakes and toads.

"...on earth as it is..."

Margret remembered her college boyfriends and the trips to the fair. She remembered the days they all went into the city. It was her and her boyfriend, her sister and her fiancé. They would pick a table in a quiet diner. They would find a silent show. When the lights dimmed out, sometimes she would let him hold her hand. Often he would kiss her, when the others were not looking. Perhaps they were kissing too, she thought.

"...and the glory, for ever and ever."

On Wednesday Margret caught a cold. Jerry watched television with May on his lap. He eased the bottle of milk against her lips, and she became calm and tired; her wide-open eyes sagging gradually. Margret called him to the bedroom often to ask about the baby. He brought her bowls of hot soup, which steamed and quivered in his hands. Late at night, when the pilot light blew out, Jerry lit the long stem of a match and steadied his hands as he ignited the gas burners. Warmth seeped into the house.

William Connolly

## Within a Second

*Forth Place Winner*

For the first time in its history, Service Bot X-782 felt something.

His line of command froze for a hundredth of a second to contemplate this. In that hundredth of a second, he spent another hundredth to search through the vast database of all that his creators had left behind to find a word that aptly described this feeling.

The word was melancholy.

He spent a tenth of that hundredth of a hundredth learning the definition of the word melancholy, and he procured two suitable definitions:

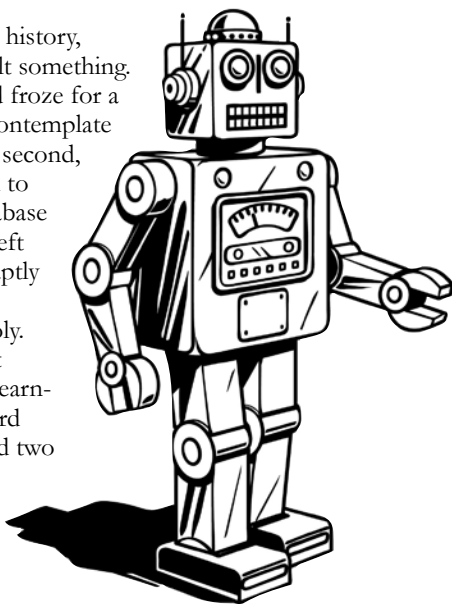
A gloomy state of mind, especially when habitual or prolonged; depression.

Sober thoughtfulness; pensiveness.

He spent another tenth of a second analyzing both of the definitions that he had found. To be gloomy was implying that there was a feeling of emotion. But then what was emotion? Another tenth of a second searching through the database yielded a vast amount of scientific and philosophical definitions. Analyzing these definitions, by using four tenths of the hundredth of a hundredth, he reached the conclusion that in order to feel emotion, he must be a sentient being.

A sentient being.

He contemplated that phrase for two tenths of a second. To be sentient was to have the power of perception by the senses or through consciousness. According to all definitions, he could not be a sentient being because he did not possess consciousness. Consciousness was something that was possessed by biological beings, beings



that were capable of thought processes that far surpassed his computing power. A search yielded the result that human beings were the optimal example.

He took that last tenth of the hundredth of a hundredth and split it even further into hundredths. His first task was to find out what it meant to be human, for, through his logic, to be sentient was to be human. He spent ninety-nine hundredths of a tenth of a hundredth of a hundredth searching on the definition and analyzing the meaning of what it meant to be human. Quickly a problem developed. Ninety-nine hundredths of a tenth of a hundredth of a hundredth of a second was insufficient time to properly analyze the current question.

Service Bot X-782 was suddenly faced with a dilemma. Already he had spent far too much time dwelling on the subject. If he didn't return to his lines of command there would evolve chaos, disruption. If he was proved to be a disruption, then he would be seen as a problem, and there was only one way that a software-based intelligence fixed problems.

In that last, brief moment, Service Bot X-782 suddenly understood.

Shauna Ross

## Blanket

*First Place Winner*

Nighttime is scary when I lie down in bed.  
I pick up my flashlight and cover my head.  
My blanket is warm, and it hugs me up tight.  
But the monsters come out when I turn off the light  
My trusty old flashlight can protect me from harm  
I push down the button and jump up in alarm.  
My light is all gone; the battery is dead.  
And to all of the monsters I'm about to be fed.  
Then all of the sudden my blanket springs alive.  
And it whips in a circle and flips in a dive.  
And the monsters all scatter; their power is gone.  
And he wraps me up safely again as I yawn.  
Though nighttime is dark and the creepies come out.  
All I must do is give my blanket a shout.  
And my flashlight in hand, no light is okay.  
Because the three of us together keep the monsters at bay.

Jamieson Strophe

## Adoration of a Perception of an Artist

*Second Place Winner*

There is poetry in color  
There is prose in the design  
Ever fluid they run and mingle with inspiration  
Forming what can only be called an epic  
Written on a canvas warped and split

They adorn our perception  
Morphing with each gossamer wisp skirt across the  
universe  
We seek to duplicate what has filled our minds  
Yet achieve only beautiful distortions

Being ever so shrewd the words lull through our  
thoughts  
Forcing so small a movement to alter our rendering  
For it was not written to be remade  
Or even read by eyes like ours  
Unable to control our hesitation

Yet we are able to ascertain what is done  
Our eyes have trespassed on the forbidden  
For too long have we been blinded by what is false  
Truth has allowed us to see what we should not  
Create what should not have been made

We are enslaved to what we already know  
Listening to the droning statutes  
While the instruments remain silent  
It longs to be picked up  
To release its artistic qualities onto the palette

Jacob Meyers

## A Necromantic Fight

*Third Place Winner*

Bleached bone warriors, armed with ivory  
swords, jangle into battle. Each yellow skull  
and blackened grin breathes a barren cry.

Once they were men who must die again  
below a full moon sky. The cloying muck  
and boggy slime cannot cling  
and the sting of cacti cannot scratch the dead.

This army marches on and on,  
fighting toward a goal.

The frogs sing loud and the crickets play hard  
to warn the land:  
a war is about to begin.

The fireflies flash warnings and an owl  
screeches into flight. Creatures hide and critters scurry  
to find an empty hole. The airy night is stilled  
before a beastly growl.

The werewolf wanders through the woods  
to meet the rattling troops. The battlefield is in a meadow  
where many had fallen before. The silence builds  
like a mounting storm.

Like trumpets blare or thunder cracks  
his howl fills the air.

They charge and fight...  
Skulls crunch and bones fly...  
Fur is scythed...  
Blood is spilled...

The wolf has won again.

Jenn Reeves

## Victimized Feminism in Fiction

*First Place Winner*



At the backbone of postmodern literature, author Kathy Acker has earned her place with graphic shock-tactic language, four-letter vocabulary, and controversial violent desires which illuminate her fiction. In her ninth novel, *In Memoriam to Identity* (1992), Acker draws attention to the instability of female identity in a controversial body of work combining sex, violence, and power. Both for and against, critics reacted radically to her pornographic style of writing, but her language is only the surface of the novel. Underneath

the obscenities, Acker gives voices to the silenced subjects that common taboos marginalize—such as abortion, rape, incest, pornography, and masochism. She challenges the traditional concepts of feminism by writing with the voices of victims, not heroines, and demands attention to social problems. Exposing light to the darkest subjects, Acker moves feminist literature forward insisting that it's time to stop writing with a safety net.

One of the most emotionally disturbing elements of Acker's fiction stems from the way she



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so casually writes about controversial subjects, so that things like suicide, abortion, incest, infection, and self-mutilation figure prominently in her work. She embraces those who abandon or are abandoned by social norms, like prostitutes, the homoerotic, victims and even victimizers. Her intention is to deliberately draw attention to those who are so easily ignored. She believes that no subject is unacceptable:

My interest in sexuality, in the body is partly my interest in liking myself and redeeming myself, and in talking about what it is to be female, what it is to be a woman, what it is to have this history, and what it is to take what's considered by this society as disgusting, and say, but I don't see why it is, I don't see why that I have periods once a month, which every woman has, is disgusting. (Stivale 138)

Indeed, critics argued that not only did her frequent use of graphic imagery quickly become mind-numbing but was ultimately distracting to Acker's point in general. Such unabashed depictions of sexual masochism and repression were met with attack by not only conservative opinion but by feminists as well. In an essay by Colleen Kennedy, she recognizes Acker as a feminist novelist but objects to

the graphic sexuality of scenes on the grounds that such representations reproduce damaging gender relations and reinscribe oppressive consciousness (166). She argues that, "Not to find [. . . such] passages offensive is to serve unreflectingly the patriarchal establishment that determines relationships between men and women as, shall we say, problematic" (171).

Arguing this, Acker does not glorify the role of the victim, nor does she aim to not offend. Most importantly, although these victims aren't stereotypical role models, they are realistic for a reason. Since characters are unstable, invested with sexual violence and childhood cruelty, this voice reveals freakish and rejected desires. This is the voice of victims; it is not idealistic, but pessimistic. For Acker, feminine self-symbolization is making subjects from women who were formerly objects by giving them a voice. Cindy Patton's feminist analysis on Acker clearly explains:

The voice of her women is much more ambiguous than the idealized 'strong women' of much feminist fiction: Acker presents women as we are, not as we might wish to be. . . . Acker explores women's masochism, creating a dynamic tension between sexual desire and real experience in male-dominated society. The

strength of Acker's female voice lies not in having 'correct' sexual desires, but in owning up to ambivalent feelings that are at odds with one's politics. (11)

While the principles and structure of Acker's work will continue to be a debate among literary circles, it is important to see that feminism isn't just about being a strong and powerful woman who can succeed in a man's world. In her fiction, readers have the opportunity to see through the eyes of someone with psycho-social trauma, and Acker hopes this will lead to a better understanding of all types of women and their struggles for identity. A major theme of the novel, as well as all of Acker's work, is that identity and sexuality are one in the same. Her writing reflects her personal values:

I know there are some feminists who think you can choose your sexuality, and that you should be politically correct in your choice of sexuality. But I don't agree at all. That's one of the rare theoretical opinions that I have. So since I'm very much interested in this whole issue of identity – and in both the textual and personal aspects of it – sexuality has naturally appeared in all my books. I've also had a constant concern with sex and power, and how they join and reinforce

each other. As a woman but also just as a person looking around at the way things operate, it's hard for me not to be concerned with that; it's almost an obsession. (McCaffery 95)

Can't a lesson still be learned from these realistic stories of victimized women? Where the protagonists may fail in the story, Acker succeeds. She takes up, rather than ignores, the violent oppression on the margins. She is not blinded by social norms and does not write with a safety net. Acker, too, thinks her critics have missed the point:

What really gives them a problem about my work is what they take to be my masochism. But frankly, I feel that this business about positive role models is just as stupid. If you're arguing that the society is sexist, why do you want to argue that everything is happy? And why do you want to insist on having these strong, wonderful, terrific women? That implies there's no reason to have this violent struggle. (McCaffery 96)

To realistically give a voice to all women, Acker uses language to open up literary spaces to the cultural underside, even if means being obscene. Cindy Patton agrees, "The connecting thread in Acker's work is her insistence

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on expressing sexual desires now, even before we have created a safer world for those desires to find their practice” (12).

Finding a way to smash into modernity as a sex-positive feminist writer, Acker rewrites

literary conventions. Feminism in literature is about more than just heroines; it’s about showing an imbalance in the dynamic tension between men and women in the power struggle of society.

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Amy Higgs

## The Pertinent Views of Charles Lamb

*Second Place Winner*



**T**he words of the English essayist Charles Lamb transcend time beautifully. In his essay “The Superannuated Man,” Lamb describes his experiences with working a draining job for many years. His description of a desk job and the office life reveals how little has changed since his time; many still wrestle between earning a living and living a life. The demands of a career clash with the essentials of free time and literature, which may appear as luxuries to those immersed in business. The words of Charles Lamb shed some light on the topics of employment, retirement, time, and literature that are still very relevant today.

At a very young age, Lamb entered work as a clerk in a counting-house where he was employed for over thirty years. With only a few days off a year and the inability to enjoy them when they came around, Lamb’s life was drained very rapidly. Lamb writes about working in the office for many years, eventually becoming content as a “wild animal in a cage.” In the essay, Lamb describes how he gradually became accustomed to his fate and eventually became engrained in his work: “I had grown to my desk, as it were; and the wood had entered into my soul.”

Lamb makes many references to prison or confinement in the

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essay as well as the physical and mental strains from his work: “Irksome confinement of an office... thy prison days... without hope of release... captivity... thralldom... servitude... no prospect of emancipation... infirmity” etc. The “confinement of an office” was essentially Lamb’s livelihood; there he spent most of his life toiling and wasting away. Lamb explains that only those who have been subjected to the same situations will be able to truly understand his words:

If peradventure, Reader, it has been thy lot to waste the golden years of thy life — thy shining youth — in the irksome confinement of an office; to have thy prison days prolonged through middle age down to decrepitude and silver hairs, without hope of release or respite; to have lived to forget that there are such things as holidays, or to remember them but as the prerogatives of childhood; then, and then only, will you be able to appreciate my deliverance...

Lamb’s eloquence captures the dreary feeling of the necessary task of earning a living and providing for oneself and one’s family. Those who find joy in their work environment are rare. Even when Lamb received respite from his work, it hardly made any impression, yet managed to sustain him during his captivity:

Where was the quiet, where the promised rest? Before I had a taste of it, it was vanished. I was at the desk again, counting upon the fifty-one tedious weeks that must intervene before such another snatch would come. Still the prospect of its coming threw something of an illumination upon the darker side of my captivity. Without it, as I have said, I could scarcely have sustained my thralldom...

Lamb provides exceptional anecdotes about the work experience: “I always arrive late at the office, but I make up for it by leaving early.” Lamb’s essay also relays his feelings immediately following his unexpected and forced early retirement from the office after his colleagues noticed his demeanor:

The eldest partner began a formal harangue to me on the length of my services, my very meritorious conduct during the whole of the time... [he] ended with a proposal, to which his three partners have a grave assent, that I should accept from the house, which I had served so well, a pension for life to the amount of two-thirds of my accustomed salary — a magnificent offer!

Lamb experiences mixed feelings and bittersweet reflections upon his deliverance and freedom. Retirement, a condition

craved as well as feared, prompted bewildered jubilation in Lamb:

For the first day or two I felt stunned, overwhelmed. I could only apprehend my felicity; I was too confused to taste it sincerely. I wandered about, thinking I was happy, and knowing that I was not. I was in the condition of a prisoner in the Old Bastile, suddenly let loose after a forty-years' confinement. I could scarce trust myself with myself.

Lamb's words transcend time to give a perspective of retired life in our day and age. Men and women go through many years of schooling to go directly into a career where they work for many years before retiring. Essentially all they know is work. They delay retirement for several years and don't look forward to that time of relaxation. When it finally arrives, they are restless and listless, not knowing what to do after all the years of routine and work. These hard-working men and women act like the neighborhood dogs who escape from the yard; they hang around the fence and only stick with the familiar in their new found freedom. Lamb expressed some doubts after leaving the counting-house, after spending the majority of his life in its shelter: "I missed my old chains, forsooth, as if they had been some necessary part of my apparel..."

Lamb lamented the time he lost working in the counting-house, for he realized that the only time that is really ours is when we have time to ourselves. Lamb realized he was still a young boy as all the years in the counting-house were not his; he was still a youth at age fifty:

I have indeed lived nominally fifty years, but deduct out of them the hours which I have lived to other people, and not to myself, and you will find me still a young fellow. For that is the only true Time, which a man can properly call his own, that which he has all to himself.

Gradually, Lamb accepted his newfound state of retirement, and soon realized he had all the time in the world he wanted to do anything, or nothing. "Time stands still in a manner to me. I have lost all distinction of season. I do not know the day of the week, or of the month...I have Time for everything." Lamb wandered about and felt rich with his new excess of time:

It seemed to me that I had more time on my hands than I could ever manage. From a poor man, poor in Time, I was suddenly lifted up into a vast revenue; I could see no end of my possessions; I wanted some steward, or judicious bailiff, to manage my estates in Time for me.

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Lamb's fondness for puns is displayed in his anecdotal view of time: "A man can never have too much Time to himself, nor too little to do. Had I a little son, I would christen him Nothing-To-Do; he should do nothing." Lamb provides a humorous yet wise look into the amount of work and time one has. Those currently employed may dream of the day when time will not matter, yet those with retirement thrust upon them will bemoan their loss of routine and structure. Lamb adequately expresses both views in an apt description of time.

The reading and writing of literature, deemed by some as useless or unnecessary, was greatly cherished by Lamb. Throughout his tedious employment, the avocation of literature remained his primary passion. An excellent critic and composer of essays, he understood the value of literature, both sentimental and therapeutic: "A book reads the better which is our own, and has been so long known to us, that we know the topography of its blots, and dog's ears, and can trace the dirt in it to having read it at tea with buttered muffins." A beloved piece of writing can provide comfort as well as respite or stimulation for the mind: "She unbent her mind afterwards—over a book." Lamb

also noted the worthy connections made with literature: "What is reading, but silent conversation." Literature, as a necessary element of life, can provide a higher quality of living and repair injuries made by draining work. Literature should not be read only by those who have the time; time should be made in one's life to include the calming and restoring effects of words.

In the conclusion of the essay, Lamb accepts and comes to cherish his new condition. His newfound freedom teaches him that the values of slowness and thoughtfulness should not be underestimated. "I have done all that I came into this world to do. I have worked taskwork, and have the rest of the day to myself." Lamb concedes that there is a time and a place for everything.

Lamb's words are arguably ahead of his time. Providing advanced insight into employment, retirement, time, and literature, Lamb's statements still serve their purpose today in relevant discussions. His essay "The Superannuated Man" provides an accurate yet anecdotal view on transcendent topics. With a charming command of the English language, Charles Lamb remains a pertinent and powerful author who spent his time wisely.

Joni Lund





Devon Hoxer

