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FILIBUSTER

ENJOY.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR:

In last year's letter from the editor I thanked everyone for submitting to Filibuster and encouraged readers to submit to the next year's editor. However, I didn't think that the next editor would be me! I suppose I just didn't get enough punishment wrangling Filibuster in 2009! There seems to be a recurring theme I see though this year. I am again faced with writing the letter from the editor the day before we send the files to the printers! Man, where did the time go this semester?

I would like to first welcome our new advisor Dr. Robert Klevay. You have tackled the Dr. Melton, our humble advisor for many years, is sadly no longer with us at the university. I would like to thank him here in this letter for all of the years of dedicated work he has given to this publication, Auburn University at Montgomery, and our wonderful English department. Dr. Melton, you are missed and we wish you the very best of luck sir!

This year the publication took on two layout editors, Cody Eason and Jenna Sanders, which have both done a wonderful job (which you will see in the following pages)! Thank you both for the hard work and the man (and woman) hours you have put into the magazine this year. I'm very proud of this edition and I know that you are as well.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Matthew H. Eason". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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Matthew Kemp

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Jenna Sanders

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Name Here





SPECTRE Matt Kemp



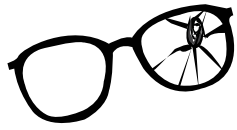
BREATHE

Audra Hagel

Deeply inhaling the refreshing air, cool, relaxing, sublime, a catching, piercing pain runs through me during the intake.
I breathe;
I live.



UNTITLED April Williams



TAYLOR

Jenna Sanders

A sweet childlike smile infused with trust and serenity.
The blooming sky as the sun slinks away from preying eyes.
A cheerful friend carrying coffee and words that heal and console.
The subdued yet bewitching sound of leaves falling from security.
A stream of tears flowing freely over new life and love lost.
The feeling of wind skating across fingertips and awakening senses.
Where are you going, and where have you been?



LOST IN TRANSLATION Emily Young



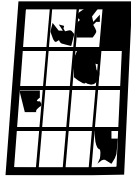
LIKE A PUP OR TWO

Corena Unpingco

I wish that I could tell you
how your voice makes my heart quiver like a child in thirty-two degrees cold.
It makes me forget the way you live, and how to stay alive... inhale
and ex – hale.
Your warm shoulder spooning with mine causes a repressed stutter of grins
and only makes me blush-flushed
like a banana turns brown – and mush.
Oh and your eyes and mouth that hold so much about you,
and so much that surrounds you,
makes my ice cream scoop plop and sigh
as it turns everything it touches into a sticky mess of ... wow.
Girls my age don't feel like this,
as I scold my mess and melting flavor on a sun-soaked pavement.
Girls like me don't say things that make you possible or impossible.
Girls like me don't expect anything but what you give,
doll, and what you give
isn't enough to make me tell...



UNTITLED April Williams



THE MOLD

Antonio Byrd

In the silence of the Jefferson's bathroom a dark spot appeared and grew on the wall above the showerhead. It climbed to the ceiling and stretched to the opposite side before it sunk to the edge where the tub and wall met. Many call these growing things mold, a normal occurrence in all bathrooms, which could be cured usually with a cleaning liquid of some kind; in the Jefferson's home lived an alien mold, whose purpose was to decay the unnatural issue that beset Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson.

Mr. Jefferson declared to himself that he'd destroy the blot, and marched to the town store to buy an arsenal of cleaning supplies: bleach, all-purpose cleaner, and two extreme measures: a chisel and a can of yellow paint. (Clearly, he had no idea what he was doing). Upon returning home, Mr. Jefferson immediately began with the bleach.

"This ought to do it!" he cried to himself, not considering the odd idea. Two days passed and the blackness not only survived but, as if in retaliation, grew over the mirror. The old man cursed and spent the afternoon digging and scraping at the wall. By evening Mr. Jefferson sat in utter exhaustion, but the mold appeared unaffected. In fact, the offensive material conquered the bottom of the toilet.

As the husband fumed with anger, the wife stepped outside for her daily walk. Not far down the road she met their neighbor's son Kelvin. He had the oddest habit: Kelvin often spoke to himself, and on this day he directed his voice to a colony of ants.

"Why are you talking to them?" asked Mrs. Jefferson.

"You mean you've never talked to ants before?"

"No . . . It's silly."

"I'm surprised!" Kelvin stood to his feet. "Why Mrs. Jefferson, you should show greater respect to the little creatures you run into on a daily basis. We poison weeds, cut tall grass, and take medicine to cure disease. All these creatures want is a little tender love from the animals that rule this green Earth."



CLEARLY, HE HAD NO IDEA WHAT HE WAS DOING

Mrs. Jefferson, of course, thought this idea ridiculous. She need not mind a lonely boy spending his time talking to ants and the stomach flu virus. But as she watched her husband struggle to rescue the bathroom from the mold, she could not shrink away from the thought that perhaps this was no ordinary mold. All practical methods—chemical or physical—failed. Maybe words, not action, worked a greater magic. Possessing a more gullible soul than her husband, Mrs. Jefferson crept to the bathroom late one night.

And she spoke to the mold, in whispers, about the weather, first. Then she explained the small events of their town, and the more Mrs. Jefferson spoke, the less foolish she felt and so the louder her voice. Soon, she was laughing to the mold.

The man of the house, as one would expect, was awakened by the merry voice he had not heard in five years. Mr. Jefferson peaked into the bathroom, frightened by his wife's behavior. She's gone insane! He thought. All these years of silence has driven her mad! And I'm her husband. I should be her companion not the mold!

Mr. Jefferson, swallowed up by guilt, burst into the bathroom, startling his wife, and fell to his knees.

"I had no idea that you were hurt this way! I apologize for all of my stupid, insensitive comments! Will you speak and laugh to me!"

"Only if you sit beside me."

And the happy couple sat together, talking, listening to one another's voice, and they spoke as if they had met for the first time. The mold, expansive in presence, began to lose its form. Gradually, the creature receded. It seemed that the bathroom was a therapist's office with mold acting as mediator. It did not speak; the mold had only to exist to offend the couple and unite them, restoring their holy matrimony. The mold shrunk back to its origin, and as the sun rose, husband and wife never noticed its disappearance until the following day.

With their relationship repaired, the Jeffersons planned to thank Kelvin and his parents. But on the night of the couple's newfound love, the night the mold disappeared, their neighbor's home burned down and the family with it. The couple was left to ponder, as we may ponder, if the accident (for that is what the police concluded) was really an accident; if the appearance of the mold and the odd suggestion by Kelvin was a coincidence. To say that the boy and the mold planned it all would be absurd. But the strangeness of life is most apparent when we speculate that our existence is either random or observed by a Force that makes its presence known in our daily, seemingly random experiences. As the mold and Kelvin had a purpose, perhaps we, too, have a place in the universe.



REFLECTION Audra Hagel



THE MAGIC OF MUD

Arvilla Fee

The rain has stopped and the mud hole lies
just beneath the swing set – where your feet
have tirelessly scooted, pushed, and dragged
the earth until all of the grass finally surrendered
to sleek, cool, plain, good old fashioned dirt

Breathe in the last of the fallen raindrops and run
to the mud; sink your arms in it up to your elbows
thereby putting on your brown, latex gloves and say,
“Good doctor, would you mind looking at this patient?”
“Why no,” you answer, coating your sister’s dolly

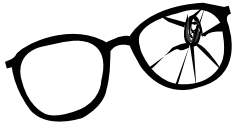
Or smear your entire face – except the eyes – with ooze
and beat frantically on your ancient leather-topped drum
You are the head of your tribe, and the tribesmen dance
around the fire, looking fierce with red and green stripes
on their faces as they chant for more and more rain

Or do the elbow-crawl and scoot through slime on your
belly – you must be quiet as a fallen leaf so as not to alert
the enemy; they must not hear you coming to rescue your
wayward cat. Inch forward, slide the belly, closer, closer
At last...you grab the cat, he scratches; you are wounded.

Or – and this is the best – scoop up handfuls of thick goop
Slop it, slap it, pat it, squeeze it, mash it, mold it, hoold it...
Lay it down carefully – and make another and another; make
one more then invite your friends to eat one of the world’s top
chef’s gooey, ooyey, sticky, icky, slimy, grimy, tasty mud pies

And some last words of advice – whatever you do, use extreme
caution when you rejoin the real world! Mud is a mushy miracle
But...when you come indoors, your sister will cry buckets over
her dolly, your dad will be furious that you ruined your drum, and
your mom will break out six bottles of detergent and bleach!

Ahhhhh...the magic of mud!



HOT

Emily Young

My legs shake, weak from wisdom.
The warmth reminds me of your bare
belly on my bare back. I slowly
turn the knob over...
and over and over.
I need to feel you closer.

I came here once to escape you,
now I come to escape your escape.
I want so badly to scream, "Give me
a minute!" But you aren't at the door
knocking now, are you?

I watch my creamy skin turn scarlet.
Water, sweat, and tears mesh as
they fall into my hopelessly empty
hands; now filled only with the knob
labeled H. It brings words to mind:
husband, hurt, hints, heartbreak.

Was it hidden behind the pride that you
accused of growing? Or possibly behind
what once was but hasn't been in a long,
long while. The water begins to burn,
a good burn...Not the burn you burnt with.

You loved me once, remember?
There was a time when this shower was
accustomed to the weight of four feet.
Back when our bed's second pillow was
simply for show and my right hand was
never lonely. Is it hard to remember?

The water's getting cold now, it reminds
me of your recent smile. My legs shake.
It's time, time to step out. To slip on that
nightgown that was once barely worn and
begin packing away four years of you.
I'd say I wish you the best, but that would
be a flat out lie....

And I suppose I should remain the one of
us who doesn't.

I COME TO ESCAPE YOUR ESCAPE

I CHOOSE THE LESSER
OF TWO POISONS

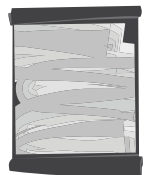


FROG SMIRK Sarah Fredericks



DAISIES

Audra Hagel



APOLOGIZING

Casey Gewirtzman

I am never ashamed of anything I know,
 unless, it is, that I know I'm wrong.
 Talking to you...seeing your face-
 in its sickening anticipation and sadistic patience
 for what I'm about to say-is like paying someone
 to kick my balls in.
 But to live with such a stubborn pride as mine
 and ignore this thought
 is like looking at you every day.
 I choose the lesser of two poisons.
 And I say
 I'm sorry.



TOO OLD TO STOP

Sarah Fredericks

The principles of physics dictate that mass in motion exhibits the tendency to stay in motion. Yes, forty-eight and a half years of forward motion have set the precedent of movement against which it is simply too late to fight. Perhaps if there were a hand book, a guide, a class to take on the methodology of inhibiting this momentum, perhaps then one could understand the underlying principle of impeding and nullifying forward motion and achieve the state of “stopping.” But now, now it is just too late. Forget it.

Forty-eight and a half years old is simply too old to learn how to stop. Thirteen years worth of grade school (repeating the fourth grade), five-and-one-half years of higher education, a combined total of 1600 hours of training, workshops, seminars, clinics, and exams, twenty-four years spent as a certified personal accountant—add to that seven years after entering the business world before finding a “nice girl” with which to settle down, four years spent in a loveless relationship, and the resulting odd-decades-and-a-half spent with the title “divorcée” stamped on my forehead. Combine that with nine years using Rogaine for men, seven years of hiding it, and another two fighting the plague stereotypically accompanying men with pattern-aged baldness and falling self esteem: gluttony. That math results in forty-eight and a half years going nowhere. Going nowhere, and going there fast. All that going, all that movement and no progress. This introduces the converse law of physics: a body at rest exhibits the tendency to stay at rest.

“The easiest way to combat adult onset obesity is the implementation of a diet and exercise program that engages both the body and the spirit; find a work-out routine and regime of healthy, natural foods that excite you, and you won’t be tempted to skip sessions and binge on snacks that lack nutrition.”

The glossy brochure featured even glossier words. What it failed to say was “a treadmill won’t be enough to get you off your fat ass and inspire you to quit stuffing your face with those fried, trans-fat filled slivers of potato-like substance and turn your life around, you balding, lazy son of a bitch.” It was disgusting. But there was science behind it, and who can argue with science? Luckily, I knew a little about science myself. Physics dictates mass in motion, and I was certainly a mass, and I certainly was in motion towards that bag of Lays potato chips positioned precariously next to the TV Guide. No way to stop it now. My only hope was to implement a new and exciting workout routine to offset the onset of my beer-belly, excuse me, beer-AND-Lays-potato-chip belly.

That's what led me to the top of the bunny hill in Noshoba Valley, New Hampshire. What better exercise program to engage both my body and spirit than swishing down the snow-frosted slopes of New England, with the icy air burning my lungs and the cold from the frozen ground numbing my butt cheeks. In retaliation, my rear melted the snow into little puddles as I sat sprawled in an overstuffed, goose-down unitard zipped to my neck. The huge unitard was dwarfed only by the giant, polarized ski goggles that stuck out from my face like the proud, perky breasts of an overly-pubescent cheerleader. A red and blue plaid scarf, the last memento of that "nice" little girl I married, was wrapped around my neck like her choking fingers; I reveled in the delicious irony. I was swaddled like a babe. I sat atop the bunny hill, surround by babes as young as four or five balancing on their skis with the ends of their little poles digging pretentiously in the ground as they swished by.



**GOING NOWHERE
AND
GOING THERE FAST**

Flopped on the snow around me were a much more serious, much more mature selection and sampling of my peers. Yes, we were here, I, the 48 ½ year old balding, slightly overweight CPA, and my esteemed colleagues, a rapacious bunch of pimply-faced twelve and thirteen year olds in bright green or pink jackets, all of us with snowboards strapped to our feet and fear in our eyes.

I had begun that day the same way any well-experienced professional could tell

you how to begin a blind venture into a world of unknown variables and risks, a world desiring exploration and heroism, a world requiring that a man step off the beaten path and blaze a trail for himself in the voracious wilderness, a world demanding individuality and a quiet, powerful solitude—I took a deep breath, gathered my courage, fortified myself with fortitude, and walked into the ski lodge to ask for help. My chest was suitably inflated. With a pompous show I strutted around in my padded unitard, and, like a real man, I went forth and promptly located the information desk. A blond, blue-eye Barbie with a high ponytail and an even higher voice met my demand.

“Yes,” she said, her pony tail flipping back and forth like a crazed pendulum, “of course we offer beginner ski lessons.” A giggle.

“No. Not skiing; I want snowboarding.”

A blank look. “Will these lessons be for...” hesitation and a raised eyebrow, “you?” Half my age, the girl behind the desk made me feel twice mine. Suddenly, everyone in the lodge seemed young.

“Yes,” I snapped.

Properly armed with my yellow slip indicating the necessary and proper transfer of funds from my visa through the wires and metrics of the world of ones and zeros, I marched with a show of bravado into circle of elite athletes-in-training already gathered around a plywood sign that read “Intro. Snowboarding. Snowduckies.” I turned the words over, testing the delicate rhythm on my tongue; “Intro. Snowboarding. Snowduckies.” Snowduckies. Snowduckies? Snowduckies??!!! Fourty-four dollars for a lift ticket, twenty-seven for equipment rental, another thirty for a group lesson and all for the pleasure of the title “Snowduckies?” The kid sporting the black ski jacket with the embroidered green skull on his back noiselessly dislodged a chunk of icy sludge with the toe of his boot. His cheeks were red, and he shifted his weight from the toes to the heels of his feet as he glanced around with darting movements. He was like a ferret with his oily eyes shifting from side to side. “Eugh! Snowduckies?!” I knew I heard him mutter it under his breath, his voice dripping with disdain. My comrade.

To turn right, rock back on your heels and dig the back edge of your board into the snow—make sure you’re leading with your right foot. There. Good. Now, ease off the edge and rotate the board around until your left foot is in the lead. Bury the edge. Don’t slide on the surface; cut into the snow. Dig deeper, deeper! Good. Once you’re in the front of the line for the rope tow, wrap your hands around the moving rope and let it slide through your fingers. Slowly tighten your grip—no, no, not so fast! The rope jerks and the children ahead squeal in alarm. When you get to the top, paddle with your free foot till you get some momentum, and then steer your way to the top of the slope and strap down your boot. Knees bent, back straight.

I sat atop the bunny hill, sprawled out on the snow. My limbs stretched out like the legs of a giant spider, their weight and color transformed in the twilight. As I sat panting after my heroic contest to surmount this frosty knoll, a bead of sweat rolled down my face and clung to the tip of my nose with the tenacity of a stalactite. It wobbled with the heaving motions of my heavy breath, but it stubbornly refused to yield its hold. In a flash of clarity I saw it. A gloved hand flicked the sweat bead away and into fleeting oblivion with meaningful homage. This is for you, Rosanne Rosannadanna. I turned to my comrades.

"Have you figured out how to stop yet?"

"Naw, how about you?"

"I just fall over in the snow when I get to the bottom," a third voice piped in. "That is, I flop down on purpose. That's the best way to stop."

"Thirty dollars for a group lesson and the damn instructors don't even teach you the basics." The children's eyes widened and their faces brightened. Adolescent boys feast upon a good swear word, the little bastards.

For a moment, I sat on the freezing ground, my limbs numbed by the cold seeping through my unitard, and I blindly watched the snow settle into drifts in the tree tops, a light powder sifting through the gaps between the branches and dusting the ground below. Entranced, I sat not on the hill, but in my living room nearly a year ago.

* * * *

I stared straight ahead, my eyes glazed over, my forehead damp. My heart pounded in my chest as energy and life careened through my veins. A lump rose in my throat; I swallowed, my gaze fixed. My nerves were ribbons of steel, holding taut my exhilaration and checking my impulsive urges. It was a showdown. My right hand twitched perceptibly. The actin and myosin in the muscles of my fingers alternately bound and detached, hinging and shortening the sarcomeres to cause minute muscle contractions. My hand hovered in the air, trembling as if I had a tic. "I can stop!" I blurted out. A bright light flashed from the TV in front of me; Clint Eastwood and Donald Sutherland stared down at the German Tiger Tank. Their eyes were squinted in the blinding rays of the sun which hung high in the sky above their heads. The showdown music originally from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* filled my ears. In the vague imperceptions of the back of my mind I reveled in the irony, yet I was conscious only of the overwhelming struggle.

A bag of jumbo potato chips stared back at me, distorting the reflection of my bald-headed image in the wavy foil lining. It waited on the TV tray in front of me. I licked my parched lips. Salty. I squinted at the bag, my brows knit tighter than the sweater Madonna wore for the Christmas special. Bright, shiny blue letters on the bag solicited a single word: "Wavy." The purple and green veins in my forehead throbbed, and I rubbed a greasy palm against my temple. Grease and sweat mingled grotesquely. My hand, no longer animated by my own cognizance, began levitating and slowly gliding near the open bag. "Just-one-more," I squeaked, the words getting caught in my dry throat.

"Wavy," it seemed to call out to me, "waaaavy!" It was a siren's call. My hand moved closer and closer. The metallic bag rustled as my fingers grazed the inside wall. The dull gray of my living room disappeared from around me and my world shrunk down to only me and the tray. My vision darkened as my heart sped up. So close. Greasy salt collected on the edges of my fingers. So close. So close.

"Aggghhhhhhh!" I screamed, knocking over the TV tray and scattering the potato chips and the shaggy carpet. "I can't STOP!"

ADOLESCENT BOYS FEAST UPON A GOOD SWEAR WORD, THE LITTLE BASTARDS

* * * *

With a metallic “click,” I strapped my free foot down to the snowboard. Edge buried and knees spread like a woman giving birth, I rocked back and forth, grunting and groaning. Stand up; stand up! My arms desperately flailed like giant bird wings. In my yellow ski-jacket, I was Big Bird on the top of the bunny hill. I was sure they were staring at me, their mocking eyes picking apart every motion and movement. To children, what’s more hilarious than a fat bald man off balance, floundering in the snow? If someone would kick me in the groin this would be a perfect moment for the little punks. Damn kids. With a snarl, I glared up at them, reasserting my position as the alpha male, despite my physical gaucherie. All around me they mimicked my movements and noises with absolute sincerity. It was a ballet of spread knees and flapping arms that crescendoed with grunting and toppling children; it was beautiful. My comrades. With a touch of sentimentality, I surveyed the group.

How many of them, like me, would spend 48 and 1/2 years of their lives going nowhere? How many would have failed marriages and menial, repetitious, unsatisfying careers? How many of them would become bald and fat and want to die just to escape the squalor of their lives? I eyed the boy with the green skull on his jacket. His hairline already looked as if it were receding. I shook my head in pity and turned away despondently. It was too late. Too late already. By now Destiny had already carved out their fates into the great stone tablet of time. They would be mass in motion, yes, but they wouldn’t be going anywhere. For a moment I was speechless. I had spent all afternoon on the bunny hill trying to fight against the current of my own destiny.

The happy voices around me disappeared. No gay laughter, no childish screams. Everything was silent except for a heartbeat pounding in my ears. People moved around me. A crowded mass of humanity that surged and flowed there on the top of the hill. I stood still. I looked down the hill and then down to my fleshy thighs and pudgy midsection and then back down the hill to my destiny—fickle bitch that she is. Oh, what the hell.

“Here’s to nothing,” I said quietly as I stood looking down at children. The boy with the green skull jacket met my eyes, and we knew it, looking at each other there on the side of the mountain. We knew destiny would tease us and toy with us, build us up only to laugh in our faces as she let us fall. Yet he had a glimmer of hope. Maybe he knew his destination in life was determined, but at least he would have a hell of a time getting there. The corner of my mouth twitched into a grim smile. I gave the boy a hearty salute and slid down the hill. Edges dug, knees bent, back straight.

The angle of the slope began gradually enough, and I took this as a positive omen. I swished to the right, pitched forward, and managed to pull myself back in time to avoid a fall. I swished to the left. More luck here. Though my edge began to give way, I cut into the snow deep enough to just barely avoid a pack of voracious five year olds on skis. A little girl screamed and the male of the group shouted nasty words at me, emphasizing his disgust at the end with a little red tongue thrust out at me. Yuppies. The next pack I find, I am going to bowl right through, see how many of the little buggers I can off. I swished past.

Midway down, I began to build confidence. I darted among the skiers with deftness. Weaving in and out, I began to cut across the mountain in elegant, sophisticated zig-zags. I was still on my feet; my knees were bent, my back, straight. I looked up. The passing scenery flashed by with flickers and breaks as if it were being played on an old movie projector. I caught a spicy whiff of pine. The few rays of the dying sun straggling through the trees only to be caught in the prismatic particles of ice and snow I kicked up with each powerful “swoosh.” The powder caught the light and it split into a thousand-colored rainbow, trapped and bouncing inside each globe of ice before falling itself back to the ground with the majesty of sparkling pixie dust. The burning air in my lungs was freedom, the stinging cold, the pain necessary to appreciate the pleasure. I could go as fast as I wanted to; all I had to do was straighten out my zig-zags.

I *could* do it. The idea was white and clean, and I felt it everywhere in my body at once. Here I was, proof that a man could *change* his life, rebel against the direction in which destiny had rudely hurtled him, and learn to make his own path, to do something else, *be* something else.

With each powerful zag I felt light and energy enter my being. I no longer felt the cold tickle the scalp of my balding-head as it leaked into my cap. The weight around my midsection, the pounds of fat and flesh that pulled me down and weighed against my miserable existence seemed to disappear. I inhaled deeply, the chilly air shocking to my senses and yet utterly refreshing. My first real breath. My muscles felt strong and alive, each firing one after the other in perfect precision. I had perfect balance on my board, and it was effortless. I was like a finely tuned machine, a shining example of human efficiency. I was a god among men.

I adroitly swooshed past the other “snowduckies” at the bottom of the hill where they lay flopped out in the snow. They were envious as momentum shot me forward. I had the luscious taste of omnipotence on my tongue. At the foot of the hill, I looped around a pack of toddlers on skis, closing in as I wound my circle tighter and tighter. I could smell their fear. I was going to plow through the group, decimating their little pretentious faction until all that was left were scraps of brightly colored ski-jackets and splinters of skis and poles. I was all-powerful! At the last moment, however, I resolved to be a gracious and merciful god, and I careened away from the cowering youths. My sharply dug edge showered a film of white powder over them. Vindicated!



My abrupt change in course launched me out of the waiting area at the bottom of the mountain and up onto the boardwalk that crossed the base of the slope. I managed to dart past a fat woman holding two steaming paper-cups filled with coffee or hot chocolate. She stepped back, flailing her arms as the brown liquid flew through the air and splashed into the snow in a sizzling, hissing moment of splendor. The very intensity of the liquid’s heat sped up its demise as it was consumed by the snow in a cloud of steam. I cut hard to the right, flying past people with remarkable speed. Around a skinny old man with a video camera, beside a woman with a red ponytail and “Peace” embroidered onto her puffy jacket, between two teenage lovers, holding hands. “Bread and butter” I chirped as I zipped between them. Seeing the nose on that horse face, fate would have split ‘em up anyway. Sensing an exit ramp, I bailed on the wooden walkway and slid onto the snowy medium that separated the hill from the parking lot.

Oh, no! A giant yellow school bus lay dead ahead, exhaust pumping out white clouds behind it. Good lord, no! I was still moving fast, too fast. A quick glance around. There was nothing to do. Nowhere to go. I was closing in on it. Faster, faster. Its red parking lights clicked off.

This was the work of Destiny, paying me back for thinking I could be free, for thinking I could stop being who I was bound to be. Stripped of my deity, I groveled before my fate. Please, I prayed. The engine roared. The tires squealed. Thirty feet. Twenty-five, twenty, ten. With a lurching motion the bus suddenly pulled out of the parking spot, oblivious to my death race. Escaped!

I breathed a sigh of relief and dropped my eyes to the ground for a silent thank you. Destiny wasn't out to get me; it hadn't been a cruel joke. I was alive.

As I looked up, still gliding across the snow, my face smashed into an icy sheet of metal. With a loud metallic twang, my snowboard stopped dead in its tracks. The recoil shook my body as falling snow gently began to settle down on me. The world began to fade away into sparkly black globes that glittered like stars. My field of vision recognized only "red" as I slumped to the ground, the white letters on the red octagon fading before my eyes: STOP.



**THIS WAS
THE WORK
OF DESTINY**



SEASONS OF HER

Emily Young

Spring: She blossoms, unknowing of how sacred her blooming is. Those fleeting days filled with giggles and pigtails, all carelessly forgotten with every new discovery. Oh, how those days were wished away.

Summer: She basks in the sun of it, foolishly not caring about the harmful rays that will begin to catch up to her in the fall. Ignorant and yet intelligently curious of what the next season will bring. Her emotions and conscience fill every second, all unseen in the flower that is her face. Those pretty petals, her prized possession.



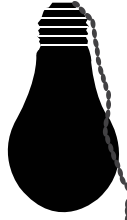
HUMANITY Hunter Jackson



FEAST April Williams

Fall: She knows now, the best of her seasons have passed. She is but the result of spring and summer, the crinkled leaves that remain of it. Her branches more bare, her color less vibrant, her mood and actions more rigid. A breeze of wisdom brushes her branches as tears rain from her face. The days of fall are falling fast, she imagines how cold winter will be.

Winter: She despises it, living in the memories of what once was. Her face free of life, save the footprints of crows 'round her eyes. Her plump fleshy fruit now aged and wrinkled, her dark satin hair turned to snow. She wants back those sunny moments in spring or those hot summer days. She wants back those fleeting fall days when she birthed springy seasons of her own. She wants back her seasons that Time has teasingly taken. She wants anything but this -this sad, sad winter of want.



TO ALL OUR FRIENDS, GOODNIGHT

Kevin Garner

The fridge is full of overripe fruit,
and the dishes are yet to be cleaned;
a pale glow slinks below the horizon,
and though I try with all my might,
the night creeps in, so I say
to all our friends, good night.

All these papers and books have taken root,
now one with the backdrop
of a house now echoing laughter.
A shadow caresses my cheek,
and though I lament the absence of your hand,
a shadow would yet sit between us
in a world where day cannot stay.

I said to all our friends, good night,
and they left without a sound,
the card table still heavy-laden
and the television dimming.

Good night,
for I must rest my weary eyes
in the arms of darkest time,
and for the pollution
I cannot see the stars.

Good night;
I place my hand where you'd be,
yet with all my cunning,
the bed weds only one to sleep.
Sleep until you awake,
and I will clean the kitchen under a new moon.

Laughter lingering in my mind,
and clattering of popcorn bowls and iced colas
and beeps of fun games flashing;
I wash the dishes lost in thought.

**BUT I COULD NOT
TAKE YOUR CANCER**

Good night;
I lay me down
next to a memory
and the promise of forever.

I could shield the bullets and knives,
and break my body to love your belly, working
overtime,
but I could not take your cancer.
Even as the dying sun gives way to dark,
my fingers clench the air,
trembling with helplessness.

I could build castles in the sky
and doors to other worlds,
tell tales of old which never were,
dream dreams and spend sleepless nights
by your side in hospital beds,
praying insurance agents will have compassion...

To all our friends, good night,
my home has lost a star—
leaving my halls dark and cold.

Good night,
until God lifts the dangling sun
into my worn world
to seek His weary child
and lull to sweet rest
before the tears start to burn.

Good night,
because despite the darkness,
it is a good night,
and I will be the watchman
to survey how life moves forward
without me, it seems,
at least until I truly awake. Good night!



LONELY ROAD Audra Hagel



DUMBO Sarah Fredericks



HAIKU

Lavernius

Vacant and hollow
Emptiness found in the heart
Death is welcoming.

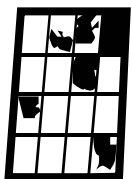
⊕ HEART, MIND, AND SOUL

Brittany Chavirria

A war within the body, which side do I take?
Love or logic, logic or love, and what about my soul?
Which side to take, what choice to make?
Should I side with my emotions and my heart,
or will I choose an alliance with my mind?
My heart is optimistic and strong while my mind is realistic and wise.
My mind says to favor someone but my heart says to love them.
It's a war of differences...
Love, caution, fate, chance...
The battle goes on. Never stopping...
And through it all my soul has become exhausted,
But will one day save me from this pain.
My heart fights...
My soul defends...
But my soul will save...
The warrior, the guardian, and the savior.



NIGHTMARE FOREST Audra Hagel



THE BLACK WALL

THE VIETNAM MEMORIAL

Lori Shelton Puckett

There is a place in this great nation
 Where soldiers stand in solemn formation
 A wall of stone black as death
 Engraved with names who drew their last breath
 The Black Wall of Death stares back at you
 A reflection of the price and those we once knew
 Those in the Army, Navy, the Air Force, Marines
 Fighting in the air on the ground or at sea
 Fighting a war controversial at best
 Fighting as told nevertheless
 Patriots of freedom dying at war
 Giving their all then giving some more
 They followed their orders to their last breath
 And because of their sacrifice
 Stands the Black Wall of Death
 Heroes to those who knew their names
 A symbol of freedom to all just the same
 The Wall stands in honor to those we have lost
 Of their courage and valor and at such a high cost
 So let us pay tribute to those names on the wall
 Those still missing in action
 And those who came home for us all
 The Black Wall of Death burns memories so deep
 Stone panels stand boldly
 The Wall's history we must keep
 For without the Wall's memories we will not learn
 Freedom costs dearly and its value we earn

In Honor of her father Lt. James H. Shelton, USMC
 KIA April 21, 1967, Fox Co. 2nd Battalion 1st
 Marine Division
 His name is located at Panel 18E, Line 64



APRIL'S BUILDING

Sarah Fredericks



PSALMS OF MOURNING

Jacob Lambert

Psalm 1

"Behold the darkness within thyself my friend; for with the changing of the moon, in all its beauty, the souls of the lost shall permeate from thy every pore."

Psalm 2

"When the skies no longer give sight to the heavens and the Earth no longer swallows its dead, close thy eyes forever; however, as sacred as thy memories are, thou cannot join us unless they be forgotten."



DESPERATION

Audra Hagel

Strike me, but I will not turn away. I may flinch, yet I will not fall, for any pain inflicted by you is done with grace. Because you hold me, I will never let go. Whatever you inflict, any pain that you may lay upon me, I will bear. I will find peace in suffering, for peace is found in you.

Though burdened with suffering, even suffering from you, you also uphold me. Strike me, but let it be with your hand. I kiss your fingers despite the pain, your palms despite the sorrow. Levy chastisement on me; overwhelm me with blows; I will not alter in my devotion; I will run to you, not away. I will not flinch in my love, for love is found in you.

I long for your touch still, even though that touch, at times, seems so rough. Strike me as I kiss your hands, for from you, a touch brings healing, even while bringing pain. Beat, batter, destroy me, but I will still look to you, still crave your voice, your touch, your presence. Slay me, only bury me in your arms, for life is found in you.

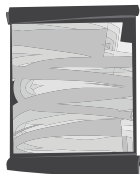


BOY AT THE BUS STOP Sarah Fredericks



TOWER

Audra Hagel



A LETTER

Matthew Kemp

I have thrown away and forgotten countless passages, papers, and thoughts. These faceless stillborn, fetal creations I have shoveled away, these poor innocent characters from my soul, lie dead between sighs of labored sleep and mounds of crumpled pages. I have become a monster tilling barren ground out of fertile pages. All of the characters with their own stories, their own lovers, even their own sons and daughters that I have mechanically discarded are dead. Yet I do not feel remorse. My fingers, once masterful brushes painting worlds of unspoken dimensions, now feel numb and clumsy. My shelves of books now brick me in with fallen empty pages upon my desk. My notebooks are death ditches reeking of useless flesh. I am a cold, amoral God in my own universe laying waste to these never twice-thought of creations...and yet the frightening thing is that this realization doesn't frighten me.



THE CATAMARAN

Matthew Wilson

I

"Comin' about!" the young man mirthfully announced. The sailor's declaration, learned the day before, was for the purpose of alerting the passengers to watch for the boom swinging above their heads as the catamaran turned sharply in the bay. The small vessel glided merrily across the glassy water leaving an ever expanding wake until time and distance allowed the sea to resume its late-morning calm. The passengers, the man's wife and daughter, lay peacefully across the canvas deck, basking in the rising sun, enjoying the novelty of the experience and infectious joy exuded by the man.

His father had found the catamaran in a local classified ad. Together they examined the hulls, lines, and pulleys, made a few adjustments and repairs, and at last they deemed it seaworthy. They made a short voyage to ensure the safety and integrity of the vessel, during which the father acquainted his son with the operation of the boat and various terminologies associated with sailing. The father instructed and the son listened and together they enjoyed a tranquil cruise in the late-afternoon bay.

"Comin' about!" The man set the course to take full advantage of the growing wind. The cat sped faster now through the water. The man marveled at the ingenuity of the vessel, a craft that drew upon all the discoveries of the ages, a craft that allowed men to harness the winds and travel effortlessly across the waters. Wife and child likewise marveled at the speed of the cat. Lost in wonder, the man sped yet farther down the coast of the bay.

His father had explained the concepts of navigating through the winds. Navigating to a given location would require setting the course of the boat at an angle, "tacking" back and forth, traveling as the winds allow until a proper angle could be achieved.

"Comin' about!" With a snap of the line and jerk on the rudder, the man set a course towards the middle of the bay. Again the cat sped across the water, one hull bouncing lightly on the surface of the water, the other cut deep into the bay yielding a large foamy wake. The water, calm and green at the coast, grew darker. The winds grew stronger and the water choppy. The hulls of the cat crashed down upon the rough waters of the bay, sending sprays of mist and laughter throughout the boat.

His father had also described the process of righting an overturned catamaran. The process was straightforward, and his father's instructions were detailed. But while the other aspects of sailing were demonstrated, the act of righting the catamaran would be performed alone.

"Coming about!" As the cat began to turn, the left hull sank below the surface of the water. All momentum was lost and the vessel sat dead in the water. Undeterred, the man resumed the previous course until he had gained enough speed to attempt to turn the cat again.

"Coming about." Once again the hull sank into the bay, leaving the cat lifeless. The man's family looked about. The joy the man had once worn so brightly had been replaced with a troubling uncertainty. Again he tried to turn the vessel.

"Coming about."

II

The friendly nipping waves of the morning snapped viciously into one another. Small white crests popped up in every direction. Water washed over the hulls and waves splashed the bottom of the canvas deck. The boat rocked and swayed in the bubbling cauldron. The choppy waves prevented the cat from moving any direction other than that of the strongest wind. On a calmer sea he might have coaxed the vessel into a more suitable course, one that would deliver them back toward the shore. They sat square in the middle of the bay, some three hundred yards from land in any direction. The man's uncertainty called out to his wife, and the child, attuned to her parents' emotion, answered with fear. The young girl cried out, unable to control the raw fear that seized her. Each cry, each tear of the child dissolved the man's bravado. He came face to face with the truth that he was in a situation beyond his experience. The fear of the child crept upon him.

**THE VERY IDEA WAS
PREPOSTEROUS TO THE MAN**

Certainly, none would lose their life. The very idea was preposterous to the man. However, he knew that if he could not return his family safely to shore there would be loss. With each passing minute, with each failed attempt to turn the cat, trust was lost; respect was lost. For nearly an hour, they had drifted in the depths of the bay at the mercy of the winds and waves.

The man scoffed at his wife's suggestion that they attempt to flag down a passing boat, realizing that what was then a suggestion would soon become a demand if he did not remedy the situation quickly. He explained to his family that in order to return they must make a sharp turn at a high speed so that they would be able to maintain momentum and keep from getting caught in the waves. They would have to assist him by shifting their weight on one side of the cat to keep her from flipping. Once again, he set course with the strongest wind taking them farther from their destination.

The passengers had become the crew. The wife and child, understanding their role in maneuvering the boat, sat ready for the moment when they would spring into action, shifting their weight as needed to prevent the cat from flipping. The man snapped the line and jerked the rudder, the hull rose high out of the water, and the wife and child scrambled to the edge of the deck. Just as the boat began to slow and sink down into the rough waters, a light wind caught the sail just right, pushing the cat towards the shore where they began their journey.

Twenty years earlier, a young boy screamed, desperately clutching the mesh of the deck. The catamaran was an eighteen footer and they were sailing in the ocean. The hulls crashed down on the mighty waves and they raced along at what the boy believed to be a thousand miles per hour. He looked up through his tears and the spray of the sea to his father and begged to return to shore.

"Coming about!" Having returned to the calm coastal waters, the man made a few more turns, leading the cat safely to the shore. He rolled up the sail and dragged the boat up the sand. He reflected on the experience, regarding it as one of the greatest of his life, and he wondered if his father had ever been afraid.



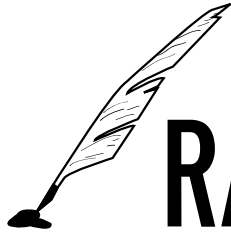
THE SHELL Audra Hagel



ON THE BEACH

Kimberly Meissner

Once upon a time,
 Away on the beach,
 Two close buddies lived.
 Reed and Sky... they were
 Always on the beach.
 Then stars flickered out,
 And their worlds changed from
 That time on the beach.
 Reed was parted from
 Sky for once, unlike
 His life on the beach.
 Searched did Reed for Sky,
 And time flew till he
 Found Sky of the beach.
 Yet, Sky made new friends.
 He had forgotten Reed,
 His life on the beach.
 Reed set sail on raft,
 Forlorn and drifting
 From life on the beach.



RAIN

Audra Hagel

I stood outside, listening to the shrill call of frogs in the evening woods, listening to the rain fall gently down. It's raining again here, but I love the rain. I just stood there. Watching. Watching. Watching. Later, I realized I had gotten wet. But then again, I didn't really care. The rain continued falling.

As each mesmerizing drop fell on my hair and face, I could feel the tiny little droplets burst when they touched my skin. For the strangest of reasons, the touch of those drops thrilled me. The weather was cool and breezy, the wind blowing the drops onto my face, tangling my hair, and sending damp leaves across my path. Each drop that touched me, I relished. I watched countless other drops hit the leaves of the plants where I stood. The small drops of water clustered on the leaves, drooping and tugging them until they culminated into a pool of liquid and slid from their leafy resting place, finally ending the journey from sky to earth.

I remained, transfixed, loving each tiny drop that burst on my face and rolled across my forehead, eyes, cheeks, and chin. Tonight, indeed tonight, I am in love with tiny drops of rain that fall from the night sky. I think the rain knows.



I WANT TO PLAY

Sarah Fredericks



DUCK TALK

Hunter Jackson



LONG WAY DOWN Sarah Fredericks



STEPS

David Gamble

O,
 Let go
 Of earth's sin.
 Be born again.
 Take him in your heart.
 Let this be your new start.
 Take the lord lift him on high.
 We will convert all by and by.
 Then we will make the Devil despise
 How together we'll lift into the skies.
 So take up your Bible; use it as sword
 To convert as many as you can to our Lord.
 Do not feel you are bound to the devil when you sin;
 Just love the Lord, have faith, repent and you'll be born again.

A PLEA AGAINST ATTEMPTED SUICIDE

Corena Unpingco

With a careless push and slicing taunts,
 "Go away!" as they threw back their heads;
 "Get out!" as they prodded with gleeful eyes;

He could not forget (yet, if you only had dear little boy)
 the eyes, the words, the rushing pull away to clattering deafness –
 which streamed out of your eyes and into your skin
 which so deeply sunk
 like a mine
 threatened the life it belonged to;

For as the sun rose-tinted the skyline
 And a crisp breath brushed though the falling leaves
 He sighed.

And with a single pull
 —not a tug—
 "Go away!"
 "Get out!"
 Go out...
 Get away...
 "Out, out..."



REST Audra Hagel



SPARKY Hunter Jackson



HEART OF GOLD

Lori Shelton-Puckett

The heart of a giver
For those in need
The heart of mercy
For those who grieve
The heart of peace
For those in distress
The heart of grace
For those who transgress
The heart of a servant
For those who lead
The heart of joy
For those who achieve
The heart of faith
For those who are blind
The heart of patience
For those who are behind
The heart of a victor
For those who war
The heart of truth
For those who need more
The heart of wisdom
For those who hear
The heart of love
For those who fear

A heart of gold shines brightly still
To care for those
Who will
To be whole

“A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.”
Ezekiel 36:26



THE HAIRPIN

Kevin Garner

"Pawpaw! Swim with us!"

"Yeah pawpaw! I can throw a football in the water. Look!" Tyler threw the spongy, miniature football to his brother. Chlorine-smell filled the air.

"I think pawpaw wants to go sit down for a little bit," Dan said, turning to him. "I'll watch these miscreants. Julie's made some sweet tea if you want a glass."

He patted his son and said, "Why the long face, eh?" Of course Dan laughed, knowing the other half of that joke, while he took his hands out of his pockets to grab a purple, gnawed pool noodle and popped Tyler on the head.

The old man saw Julie inside, floating across the kitchen to one of Chopin's nocturnes.

"Oh, Mr. Harry, want something to drink? Sorry, I was—"

He waved his hand. "I'll take some lemonade."

The house was dusty and made of old wood. The floors creaked when you pressed each foot to the floor. Harold creaked to his room. Dusty columns of sunlight stood resolute in the midst of a mess—the bed was unmade, the television was still on, an empty roll of toilet crowned the bedpost closest to the master bath, but his socks drawer was impeccable. He retrieved a pair of newly pinked athletic socks and commenced to remove his shoes. The melody in the kitchen intensified.

He returned to the living room and sat on an old couch that had minimal bottom support. "I Love Lucy" was on. Under Ricky Ricardo's tight-throated laugh, Harold tried to find the remote. Julie saw him searching, and she put down her cell phone to help.

"Kids, Mr. Harry." She laughed as she found it behind the venetian blinds. "What do you want to watch?"

"The Truman Show," he said.

"Oh, well digital cable won't have that unless it's on TBS."

"The DVD is in the entertainment center," Harold said.

Chopin's nocturne fused with Lucy's trumpeted theme song before Julie could start the movie. Afterward, she brought him the lemonade.

"If you need anything, Mr. Harry, I'll be right outside." She smiled. He smiled mysteriously and gave a meaningful, quavering grunt. He thought she was cute.

As the DVD menu began to repeat the same short sequence, Harold arose to retrieve the remote, meanwhile kicking over his glass. He took a paper towel and returned to the spot. Bending over very slowly, he used the couch to balance himself. Quite unexpectedly, his hand slipped past the cushion and into the crevice where the seat back and the not-so-springy base

met. Crumbs, lint, a few coins, a button, and other small items sprang into being when he yanked out his hand.

"What's this?"

Harold lifted his hand to eye level. A black hairpin had clenched its wavy jaws over his thumbnail. A steady, wandering rhythm worked through another of Chopin's nocturnes. His right knee began to sop up the lemonade. He was gone.

I remember you. You broke my couch. You weren't supposed to be over that night; but, we wanted to study Ben Jonson, even though we didn't know each other too well. "A horse walks into the bar, and the bartender asks 'Why the long face, eh?'" Laughter. So full of energy. Like a star giving off heat, light.

Cleaned my room and organized my socks when the folks were gone. Everyone thought we were screwing, but we were studying Ben Jonson. Idiots. They didn't know how you could molest my mind. I liked it. You kept coming over, riding your bicycle out of your way to the sticks. Sticks, you city people made me smile. We watched your movies, my movies, read my books, your books, played my vinyls, yours, read my poetry, taught you to let yourself write poems. Wasn't long 'n you were a better poet than me...

You wrestled with me, took me and threw me to the ground on these noisy floorboards while my folks were sleeping in back. Straddled me with no sex on the brain. Just like a little kid. Taught me how to wrestle because my brothers would only pound me instead of teach me. I got better'n you. I learned your moves, you learned mine after I learned yours, and I learned yours after that.

We just kept learning. 's why I would've married you. You kept me on my toes. You liked to challenge me. You made me give up the Navy just to spend time with you. We would've had sex like a starving child ate his favorite food. You'd'a been a good wife. All you wanted was to engage me and me to you back. All I wanted was to keep up. Your brain was so fast.

You worried about your faults; I kissed 'em. I liked your scars. I learned them. Their stories. Their consistencies. Like the one that never properly healed on your side. You didn't like it much, but I loved it. I knew your stories. I know your stories.

Ain't never cleaned this couch. We sat this couch to early retirement, talking philosophy, theology, the difference between my country accent and your city slang. We agreed never to say those three words unless it meant marriage, but everything about us played that melody better'n we could speak it anyway. Words failed you. Like a star. I could say what you were made of, but you were way more than the sum of your parts. You burned and burned and burned.

They wouldn't let me see you when you were dying in the hospital. I broke the guard's nose and got arrested. I just wanted to see you off. The ships had come and were taking you home to Jesus, and I just wanted to see you off. I felt like a dog whose master hadn't come home one day, and he ain't come back since.

I found these hairpins everywhere after you died. I threw 'em out. I'm sorry. You were like a second self. I never really felt married to the next one. What's a lightbulb when the sun's so fierce it's blisterin' the skin? At least the blisters made me feel alive, not like some dusty bulb that a man invented in mimicking that star. You can't contrive the sun. It just is.

Kids and grandkids. They're good to me. But you were like oxygen, and after you were gone, thinking about you...

Harold buried his face in his hands and wept aloud, alerting Julie. She ran to his side.

"Mr. Harry!"

"Don', don'," he blubbered. "I'm f—" He wailed and clenched his fists. "Why, God? Why?"

Julie let him be, and after a few minutes, he cleaned up the lemonade and went silently to his room, stuffing in his shirt pocket the wavy black hairpin.





THE WRITER'S DREAM

Audra Hagel

To take the common and make it defined, the unattractive and make it beautiful, the unassuming and make it vibrant, the everyday and make it elegant, the placid and make it alive, the boring and make it valuable, the dull and make it inviting, the humdrum and make it touching, the uninteresting and make it fascinating, the trite and make it poignant, the intangible and make it real – this is the heart of a writer.

To put into words those daily occurrences which go past without recognition, those small acts which go unnoticed, those living vignettes which go unrecorded, in essence, those things which make up the vitality and uniqueness of individual life – this is the passion of a writer.

To give a voice to that which has no voice, thoughts not verbalized, images not captured, gestures unannounced, feelings unexpressed, to describe the undefined and reveal the life, the power, the depth, strength, and longevity of language – this is the dream of a writer.



CANDLELIGHT

Corena Unpingco

Quickly now –

let's make time to match the movements of the candles–

dashing, gliding flickers against the walls;

they fill the room with rhythmic shadows

the scents linger conspicuously in our hair –

for only us to recall –

of burnt matches

of pressing skin

of smattering thoughts acted out against the golden walls

– quickly now

lay next to me...

**DASHING, GLIDING
FLICKERS AGAINST
THE WALLS**



AND A MERCIFUL STANDING OVATION



ASHLEY

Casey Gewirtzman

A tickling tongue-stud
on a salivated pleasure post
was just one actor
from that night's flesh comedy.
The others: nervous, inexperienced,
and (for lack of a better word)
unimpressive, moved in and out-
both from view and memory.
After final curtain call
(and a merciful standing ovation)
the actors departed,
never again to take the stage together.

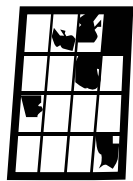
THAT NIGHT, HE WAS READY



ATTACK! Hunter Jackson



UNTITLED April Williams



THE SIEGE OF GUNTHER LLOYD

Kevin Garner

Gunther Lloyd's door had bad hinges. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, the door would fling open and slam against the wall. Of course, Gunther would be in the middle of a zombie survival horror game and turn with his gray antique Playstation controller in hand, rearing up in silent terror at the gaping void that is the hallway. His mouth would widen in a toothy gnash at first, and then he would angle one corner of his bottom lip straight down. About the tenth time it happened, Gunther whipped around and threw a butcher knife into the dark hallway. This terror occurred every midnight.

After a week, he placed objects in front of the door: plastic crates, a 35-pound barbell, the other 35-pound barbell, a broken vacuum cleaner, a stale bag of mini-sized Snickers bars, gummed-up shoes, a few wooden swords, a giant photo album less than a quarter full of baby pictures, two pairs of nun-chucks, a seriously powerful electric fan, excess pillows, the dirty clothes hamper, a box that once contained his \$1000+ computer tower, a few Dance Dance Revolution pads covered in foot grime, an array of discarded papers from school and work, a sombrero, a keikogi, a black wig, two CDs, a broken VCR, a pair of stolen headphones, and his friend Gregory. Nevertheless, at 11:58 PM that night, the door accosted the barricade. In response, the pile rolled and sloshed onto the back of the couch like an amorphous jelly monster, after which Gunther leapt onto his entertainment center and pulled forth a katana, finding nothing but his own crap strewn across the floor.

"Gunther," said his mother at dinner the next evening. "Is everything all right? Your room is a mess." His father slurped the pasta and licked the bloody tomato sauce from his fingers.

"Fine, mom. Fine." Gunther pushed his noodles with a fork. The mass moved like a tendrily creature that could latch onto a poor sap's nape while he's busy killing parasitic aliens by means of an outdated game console. That would suck. "I'm not hungry anymore." He hurried from the dinner table.

A month into the siege, Gunther became desperate. He commenced the dismemberment of his steel bunk beds and wedged the top bunk's frame against the doorknob. The first occurrence after Gunther implemented new fortifications, when midnight approached and the hands on his seashell clock elevated to the sky in the precarious tarantella of time... BANG! The door slammed against the frame, using the leverage and pressure that Gunther had spent three minutes forging as he attempted to close the door earlier, forcing the bottom half of the frame under an amassed pile of junk, pouring dust and dirty clothes all over Gunther. Blurting out every obscenity that came to mind, he fell into the cardboard box upholding his Playstation, thus yanking out the power cord. Three hours of gameplay dissipated like breaths of steamy vapor into the ethereal wind of digital oblivion, and tears welled in Gunther's eyes. He cast a weary gaze into the cold nothingness beyond his oval of television light.

"You tease," he muttered. "You bazaar of buttonless dress shirts! You bungalow of secondhand socks! Cowardly vulture in wait for my blood—face me! I will stab you! Twice!" He flailed his arms, crying, "In the face!" as he fell over again.

Nothing.

"Gunther," said his mother the next evening, propping her feet on a plastic crate. "You should get a job." She reached for a remote, compensating for her bulk by shifting the rest of her body. Her only cover was a tissue-thin night gown with striped life preservers and sailor anchors. Thus, the black lace skivvies underneath assaulted Gunther's eyes.

"I don't have time for a job, Mom." He was carrying a tub of clean socks.

"Oh, and you need to start taking off your socks without turning them inside out, Gunther. Otherwise, they won't get clean, and I ain't washing them for nothing."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, hearing a command but not the context.

He slid his socked feet down the hall, gazing at the gaping doorway before his bedroom, a hungry porthole into darkness. Nearly buckling from the weight of the box, he fell into his room, the tub mashing into his pile of miscellany behind the armchair. A green metal box with a moderately thick lid and snapping lock mechanism tumbled out of the tub, the kind of box with that green finish reminiscent of WWII and possessing deceptively voluminous weight. Having unlocked the casing, he ran his fingers through the penne pasta of bird shot.

"Phase one, fools." He pushed the box under his dissembled bunk bed.

I could've sworn some battle theme rumbled out of the air and drove Gunther to this act. Pulling a Remington from his closet, he said, "Phase two." He loaded the shotgun, shell by shell, until he had fed six rounds into the chamber. Of course, he had seen a movie about blowing aliens to bits with shotguns and flame throwers, so this act of pressing the shells against the spring trapdoor and down into the cylindrical holding place came natural. Like the sensation of having a full belly, Gunther leaned back, holding the gun.

"Phase three complete. Bring it on." Chik-chik. He cocked the gun and put it under his bed.

That night, he was ready. He took all of the books from the heavy wooden bookshelf gathering dust in the corner, scraped the hulking mass to the door, and returned them upside down and backwards. He leaned the bed frame against the bookshelf and mounted it with his 35-pound dumbbells, wedging them in the bare steel ribbing of the frame. Then, he heaped all the junk from the floor onto the weights, followed by his armchair. To compensate for the distance between his seat and the television, Gunther pulled the entertainment center to its very limit, the cable cord stretched taut across the hardwood floor. He turned on a random game and piddled with the storyline, waiting.

At first, the high frequency behind the sound effects of the video game—that steady ringing noise Gunther always heard but to which he scarcely paid attention—stood now as the primary sound in his brain. The images on the screen, the colors and their intensity, led this frequency to varied and subtle pitch changes. Gunther knew the background music so well, he could summon it in the quiet of the morning before falling asleep. Notwithstanding, even with the volume too high, he couldn't hear it audibly. Repetition reduced hours and hours of belabored compositions worth millions to inaudible electricity in the brain; in this way, innovation is no longer luxury—it's necessity.

The numbing in Gunther's brain paralyzed him. Lifeless pleasure, a goddess as seen inside the television, spurred his busy fingers to press buttons upon reflex and touch memory. His mind, wholly bent on the passage of time, fixated on how the clock's second hand scraped out each instantiation of nighttime. His head-programming allowed for that duality of thought in the quiet cacophony of his half-sleeping hemisphere under a speckled and dayless dome.

"Hurry up..." he muttered. He looked at the clock. 9:55 PM. The shotgun rested heavily

upon the dust and cardboard under his bed, ready to explode into life, meant to blast open each shell, releasing a barrage of mindless pellets. Production for use. Like in family tree, the Adam of all activities with a gun traced back to the singular purpose of firing. Gunther meant to fire that gun. He wanted something to incite his baser instincts so that he could pull the trigger, like the Romantic composer pining for pain to inspire his witchy symphony.

Purpose drove him, the doing of it rather than context, a heart yearning for that which the brain manifests no adequate sensation of discernment. Context was irrelevant in structure-realm metaphysical thought. If his mother was angry, every word that came out of her mouth meant "angry," regardless of the dictionary significance prescribed to her sundry words. Human filtering is the phrase. Humanity paints the world an array of abstract colors, full of personal meanings, all covering what would otherwise be a series of scientific facts and mathematical



MOBY DICK AND THE SCARLET LETTER TUMBLED PAST. THEN THE FAULKNER COLLECTION.



equations based on principles of genetics and physics. Man the Mathematician assigns value to variables, rendering the pixilated travails of Gunther's video game heroes so relevant and touching the first five hundred times through, but things wear out over time. Beauty can only be beautiful before the sensation addles the imagination and numbs the notion of beauty in Gunther's mind. The same picture of a starry night becomes meaningless backdrop, and at this point, Gunther was fast asleep.

As if a parked car had rushed him, Gunther flew from his unconscious state, falling forward and springing into life. 12:00 AM. Weight like a cheese wagon pressed against him, but Gunther, growling with righteous indignation, braced his legs against the mountain of junk crashing all over him.

"Stay thy hand, thou devil!" he quoth, growling. "Explicit language! I can't hold on much longer!"

Moby Dick and The Scarlet Letter tumbled past. Then the Faulkner collection. Then his Chinese urns poured forth, shattering on the floor and puffing dust into his face. Gunther cried aloud as one of the falling 35-pound weights clipped his neck. "Enough!" he said, first across the floor, then under his bed, and finally emerging with the Remington—safety not guaranteed. He took aim.

POW! Splintered wood. Chik-chik

"You!"

POW! Pieces of book. Chik-chik

"Can't!"

POW! Chunks of door. Chik-chik

"Take!"

POW! Doorjamb. Chik-chik

"Away!"

POW! Frustration. Chik-chik

"My world!"

POW! Fruitlessness.

Shells clattered. Gunther cocked the gun, but the chamber was empty. Like a collapsed star, nothing engulfed the hallway. With boiling blood and tears in his eyes Gunther ran out and screamed, flailing his arms. He kicked the door, breaking his toe. He punched the gnawed doorjamb. He fell to his knees and banged his head against the floor. Gunther had no bullets for killing the Nothing. He could file no paperwork against the intangible. No shrine existed for this great accuser, so he moaned obscenities at the messenger of his great peril: his bedroom door. His father, emerging from the darkness, snatched Gunther and fled to the other side of the apartment.

"Are you okay, Gunther? Is he still in there?"

"He? Nobody's there, dad..."

His mother screamed. "The apartment!"

Mr. Lloyd surveyed the door, the junk, the bookshelf, and then Gunther. His eyebrows wrinkled as a tremor raced across his aged body. He let go of his son, stood, and stumbled out of the hallway.

The next day, after the apartment complex owner surveyed the damage and heard Gunther's complaints about the door, he explained, "This door's been a problem for a while. I just ain't had time to fix it. You see, whenever the door directly below this is shut hard enough, the vibration causes the hinges on this door, which is directly above, to launch the door with all the pressure stored in them hinges. I cain't explain it proper, but that's the gist."

Gunther Lloyd sat in silence as his parents discussed the costs of repair and apologized for their son. His skin was cold to the touch; a sickly heat bubbled in his veins, producing sweat. Each time he thought of the damage, he shuddered. He'd trashed his room, broken his grandmother's "antique" urns, and eaten away his father's hand-me-down book collection with bird shot. Nothing was fun anymore. Everything was reflex and background. The front of his mind was emptier than the hallway outside his room, all the while a tempestuous swarm converged under the surface of his mind.

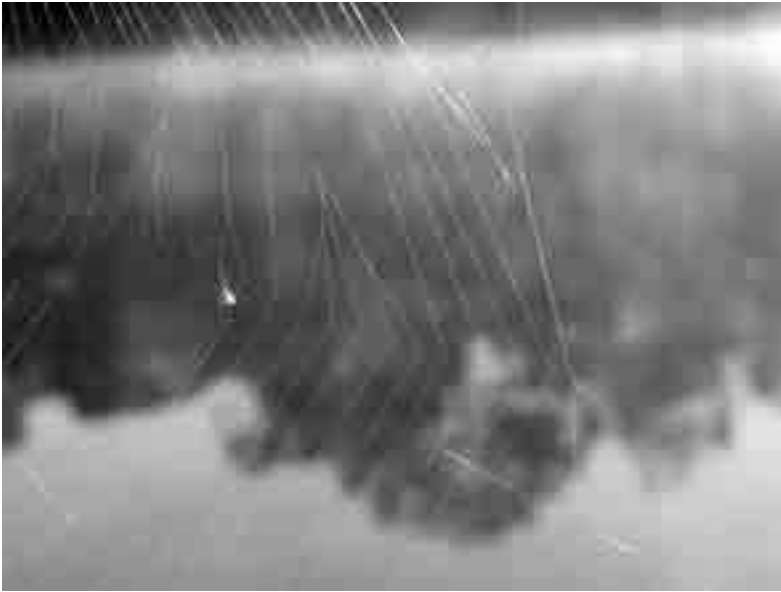
Later, when the family sat at the dinner table, Gunther said, "Maybe I will get a job."



THE ALAMO Sarah Fredericks



DECEIT Hunter Jackson



WEBSTER Audra Hagel



ZARTHA Sarah Fredericks



PIGEON Sarah Fredericks



JACKSON SQUARE Sarah Fredericks



BRILLIANT REFLECTION Audra Hagel



BIRDS LIVE HERE Hunter Jackson



AND THEN LIFE

Antonio Byrd

The Boldfield Family hopped into their SUV and drove to the supermarket. Whereas the usual grocery shopping required one basket, this time it took three.

"Pile on the pizza!" ordered Mother Boldfield.

"Get me twenty-four slabs of ribs!" shouted Father Boldfield. "And the thickest steaks you can find!"

"We need a tub of lard and fifteen pounds of butter!" said Mother Boldfield.

"And some steak sauce—four bottles!"

"Quick! Get the pig guts!" screamed Mother Boldfield.

"And you get the collard greens!"

The family split up into their respective directions. Lyla, the littlest one, could barely reach the cupcakes. The twins—Terry and Jerry—made for the meat section. Jason and his three cousins grabbed the guts and a little extra: pig feet and salted pig ears. Mother Boldfield threw in cake mix and frosting. Father Boldfield tossed the ribs in while the twins came with the steaks.

Their food purchased, the Boldfields returned home and started the Cookout. No need to call the neighbors—the smell of grilled steaks and hot apple pie brought them over. The children unpacked the volleyball net while the teenage boys went upstairs to play video games.

Mr. Jones the Hermit crept into the backyard, looking at the people as if his eyes were exposed to light for the first time. Mother Boldfield welcomed him with a slice of pie. Satisfied, he walked to a corner and enjoyed his own company. Mr. Jones watched the kids play and loved to hear the screaming from inside the house. "Roll tide!" shouted Father Boldfield. Then came the music and dancing. Finally the boys stepped outside to flirt with the girls and maybe score a few numbers (some got even more than that).

This was the 77th Cookout in the neighborhood—each family taking turns to host their own. Now, no one had money to spend: bills went unpaid, no food to put on the table for next week, and not even enough to tithe. But there were not jobs to go to tomorrow. There will be no breakfast in the morning, no CNN to watch—no one will be fired and no one will be hired. Come tomorrow everyone will be dead, for this present was the world's last night. That's right: the world was coming to an end, not with a flood or nuclear war, but in fire. Not the Second Coming, though. 77 days ago they learned that everything they believed was wrong: there was no God, no Jesus Christ, and no Buddha to look up to, no Zeus to strike them dead. It was just them and the angry sun set to blast their pathetic existence away. "Put down your Bibles and the Koran," went the Boldfield's mantra. "Grab a beer or two. Stop praying and meditating: tonight we live in the moment. Drink yourself to death. Eat! Eat! Eat! Or you'll waste all this good food! Quick! Finish your conversations! Say what you always wanted to say but couldn't because you had to be polite. There is no such thing as social order; the Universe is chaotic. The sun is

boiling and melting the Earth! It doesn't matter, though. The Boldfield family follows only one rule at this point: if you're going to die, die having fun!"

But suddenly a cold chill swept through the neighborhood. The sun, at first consuming the entire sky, shrank, and, a few hours later, dipped behind the horizon. The national emergency was lifted. The Rose Bowl suddenly had meaning. In less than a minute all that they believed was proven false. No, not the last night after all; this was just another day in Nature's unchanging course. It was just another day in that little yet enormous thing called Life. Questions of existence and God returned to their minds. Maybe they should go back to fighting for what they always thought was important: they should fight to defend Life.

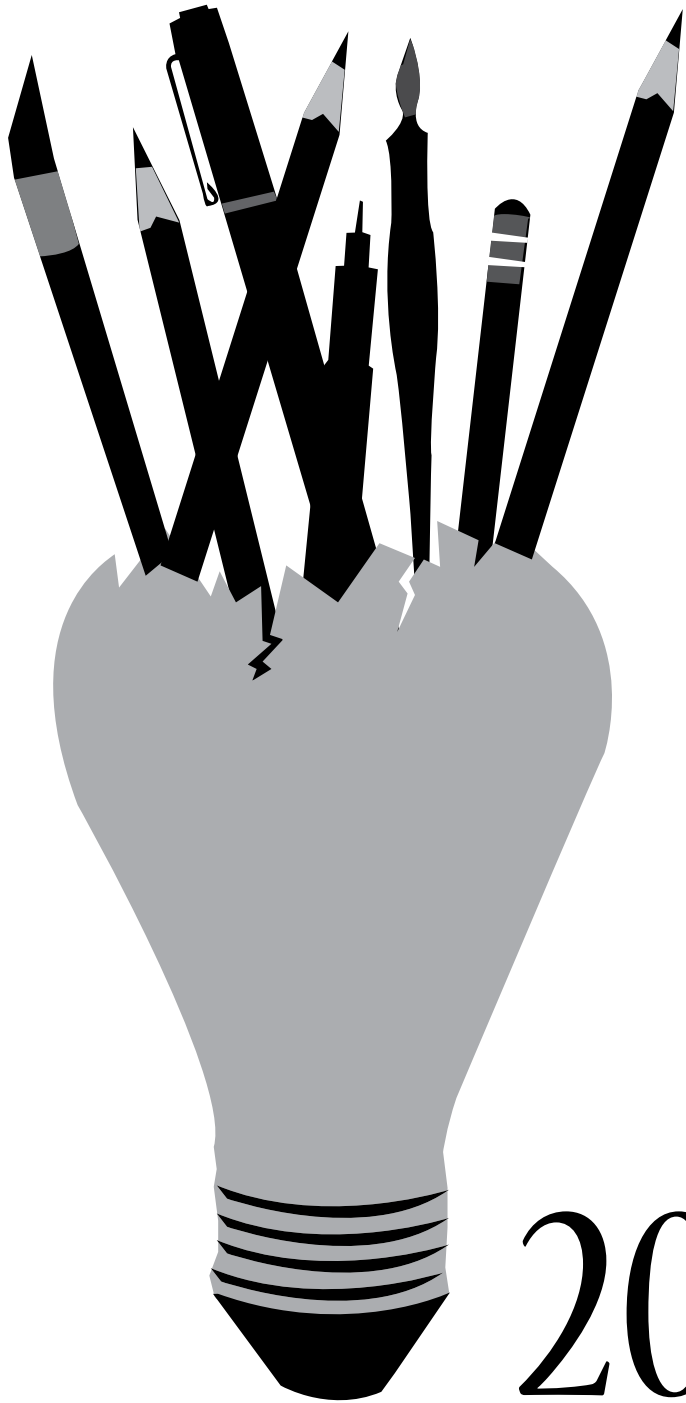
But Father Boldfield, in the midst of this silent contemplation that all the neighborhood was having, said aloud, and without shame: "Well this is bullshit!"

WELL THIS IS BULLSHIT



BIBB GRAVES Cody Eason

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