



Game Of Roses

Teacher-Writer | Volume IX | Fall 2017

The Connecticut Writing Project | University of Connecticut

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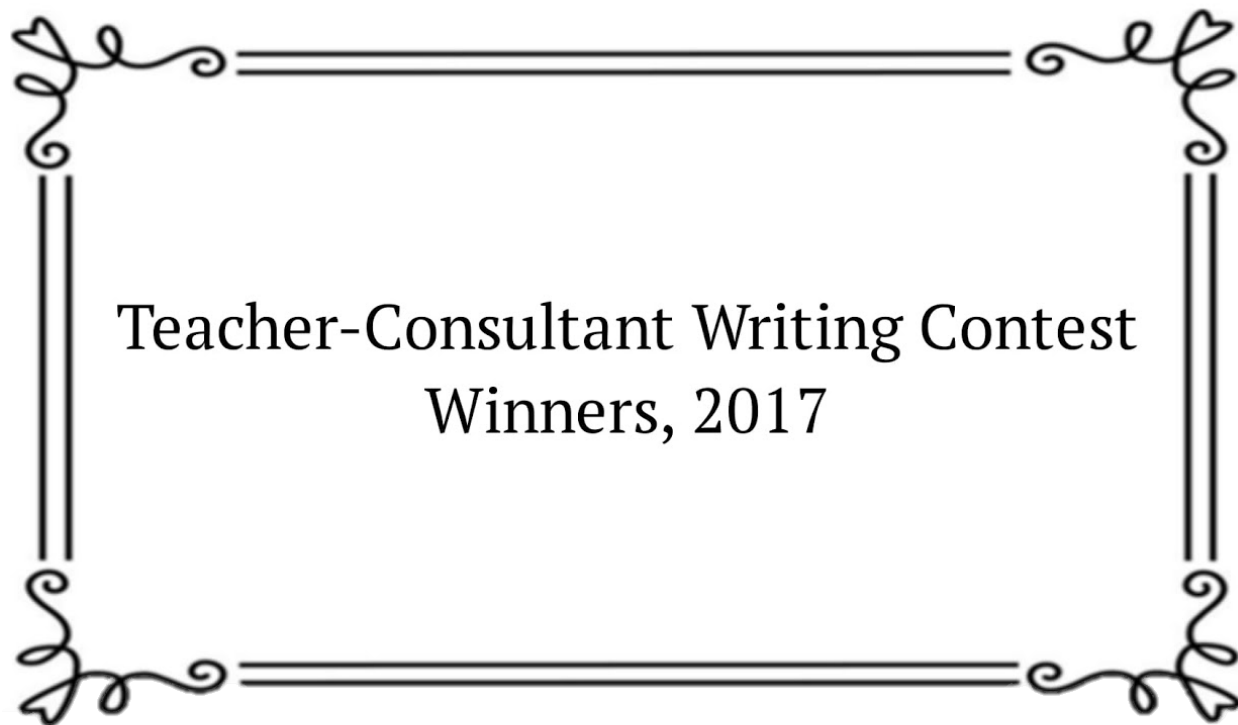
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Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest
Winners, 2017

Poetry Winner

Not The Prettiest Day

by David Polochanin (SI 99)

We're going to make a Bob Ross painting, so clean your brushes. This is something I have always wanted to do. First, we're going to treat the canvas with titanium white, then paint the sky using phthalo blue. It is not going to be the prettiest day, but it will not be completely dismal. Then, we're going to paint a bunch of little happy trees over there where I presume will be the edge of a pond, or lake, depending on the size of the body of water and I, how I—we—feel—in that given moment. Near those trees will be a stream bubbling over smoothed stones, which we will highlight in white—because even though there is no sun in this picture, there will be enough light to produce a glare. Circling above this scene will be a handsome, new military bomber. It will be gunmetal grey and blend in well with the grey-blue sky. Make it a little longer than that—about 8 or 10 inches, and darken those wings. We will scratch in the cockpit the outline of a smiling pilot. He is on a training mission, and really has nothing against this natural scene, or the village, which I have not painted, located two miles from this rural place. But he has to test his explosives out somewhere, and, if it isn't here, it will have to be somewhere else. I mean, let's keep on painting, because there's a fellow in a canoe that I'd like to include in the middle of this lake, dangling his fishing pole into the mountain water. And what about his young son, anchoring the other end of the boat? They finally had a Saturday to venture outdoors for a few hours. Wouldn't it be a disappointment to learn they didn't return because of an accident involving a major explosive? For now, though, let's not think about that. Let's concentrate on the mama and the baby bear crashing through some underbrush at the western edge of the lake. The cub is such a clumsy thing and the mama bear looks so disapprovingly at her young offspring, but this is all part of the process. I am so tempted here to paint a pavilion and a field in the center of the painting, below the mountain peaks, but this would be too obvious a target for the pilot, who really is starting to get hungry and wants to go home. We can't give him a place that blatant to drop it. Let's paint another mountain peak, along with hundreds of acres of mature trees. If there was cell phone service in this area, would it be possible to call the fisherman and his son in early and spare them a violent death? Let's reflect that aircraft in the water, add some yellow to those grasses along the water's edge, and count to ten and take a deep breath before painting anything else.



Fiction Winner

After

by Shannon Bollard (SI 17)

Look at their pretty little faces, all smiles and happiness as if the world wanted to work with them. Or, better yet, the rest of the world didn't matter to them at all. They could smile and laugh because nothing had, or planned on, bringing them down.

Even the sun seems so bright and happy, so full of life and ready to shine upon those who live for its rays. The land, prosperous and growing. The buildings—oh the shiny glass buildings in the background that peak up from the ground—even they seem ready to take on the day. It is as if nothing could bring them down, could ruin their stupendous glory.

That was the Before. *This is the After.*

I tore up the photos without a second thought—no reason to have these falsities passed around. It would just create a sense of hope that life in the glorious Before could happen once more. But how could it? Even if somehow the world reverted to its original populations, the environment had changed, our resources depleted. Even we had changed. In no world could anyone stay the same after facing the dangerous devastation we had witnessed.

My head pulled to the left as the little blue fingers wrapped around my neck tugged on me, pulling me down. I glanced over, holding my little brother's hand, my eyes questioning him. We knew better than to talk. Instead, he shook his head, gesturing towards the rectangular cut in the wall. That little cut produced the only source of light in the room—the little dimness that broke through the ever-frequent darkness. And as the light blinked, something came through, entering our dusty, ramshackle hiding spot.

I ducked down, following my brother's motions, hand grasping towards the knife strapped onto my leg. The light flickered quickly once more. I didn't need my ears to know that we were no longer alone. Holding my breath, I reached my free hand instinctively over my brother's mouth. Not hurting him, not smothering him, but covering his heavy breathing. Even if we knew better than to speak, they seemed to hear everything.

I glanced down, not wanting to even tempt myself to get up. Our only source of cover was the little counter that I had already left scattered with torn images. I wonder if that noise led them to us? Could tearing an image really be loud enough to bring death right to our feet?

As the heat rose, sweat formed at the top of my temple. My breath threatened to catch, to make a sudden loud noise, as my hearts began to pick up the pace. My grip tightened against the knife. I could not see, could not risk looking up, but I strongly believed they were above us listening, waiting for any sign that we were there. My brother's body began to shake, but luckily neither of us made a sound.

A low gurgle ruptured the silence. A guttural sound responded, the vibrations ringing the air all around us. Their brutal conversation. But what could monsters even talk about, really? Did they ask each other

about the weather? Did they look at old photos of us, photos like the one I destroyed that reminded us of innocent days, and laugh at our ignorance? Laugh because they won and we were slowly being eradicated?

Yes, we had our little settlement, a caravan of resistance, but we could only hold out for so much longer. We had the desire to fight back, but no way to win. We were on the brink of extinction.

I removed my hand from my brother, arching my body enough so I could lift my eyes just above the counter. The remnants of the old store came into my view: aisles, some fallen to the side and some still standing strong; bits of cans and other random material goods sprayed out onto the floor from lootings; the cash register smashed to the ground. We could barely find some things worthy to take on our journey when we first came in—just a few scattered batteries and a single box of dried cereal that had been smashed and forgotten off to the side.

If I hadn't stopped to stare at the pictures, the little happy shrine left behind the counter by the family who most likely ran this old store, we probably could have made it out already. My brother found the store and wanted to stop, his skin a pale blue from the never-ending hunger and the extreme, bipolar temperatures that raged our lands, but I was the one who couldn't tear myself away. He could barely remember our life in the Before; my struggle between remembering and pushing those memories away kept us holed up in here too long. They found us because of me.

Since we were still stuck in danger's doorway because of me, the least I could do to make up for my mistake was to protect him from the monsters. Slowly pulling the knife out of its sheath at my side, I did my best to remain quiet, not making too much movement. Too much, and they'd sense our presence. Luckily for me, their guttural sounds and gurgling laughter covered the sounds of metal scraping against hardened leather. Their beastly forms stood so close, yet so far. I could already see the bulges of white fat that covered their body, their weirdly circular glass heads vibrating with their speech.

I could take them. I knew I could. I could take my knife and puncture the long, thin cylinder connecting the circular tops to the rest of their fat forms. I could slice them, remove the weird glass top from the bulges of white fat and burn the bodies like we've been taught. I would probably enjoy it, too. Watching the light leave their eyes and their skin ripple as all life finally leaves their despicable forms. They would be gone and it would be two more demons destroyed, countless lives avenged.

The little hands, their tiny movements around my calloused fingers, stopped me from fulfilling my revenge-fueled dream. I pulled my head down and stared at him. My baby brother—his big eyes watering—shook his head. Not today, not now. I wanted to sigh. I wanted to yell at him. I wanted to make any sound that he could hear that would show my utter frustration. But he could lose his life, too. I would risk my own life any day to destroy these things, but never his. I would never risk my baby brother's life on account of revenge.

Eventually the monsters decided to leave, but I spent the longest few minutes of my life waiting, my body in a strange contortion as I tried to keep an eye on them without gaining their attention, and my hand clinging desperately to the knife at my side.



I wanted to kill them, but my brother did the right thing by stopping me—if the armies couldn't take them on, how could two children—only one armed—kill two monsters? I may have made some kills, but never with multiples and never on my own.

Boy, sometimes life just sucks.

The forest trees hide our small camp very well, but we moved almost every other day to keep ourselves safe. Anything we had had to be carried on our bodies in whatever scraps we could find—old backpacks, totes, duffles. Whatever survivors we stumbled upon made up our caravan: adults, elderly, and children—some even younger than my brother. While he may not have been the youngest, no one expected him to be able to carry heavy totes filled with equipment on his back just yet. We allowed him, along with the other children, to drag an old, red wagon with supplies on top. This wagon may have helped them, but it put all of us in danger considering the fourth tire squeaked at every curve, every bump in the road. Still, it allowed for the children to carry more supplies than their frail, fat-less bodies could handle.

Plus, I couldn't help but enjoy watching him do it. He dragged that wagon around like a champion, picking it up over fallen trees or moving debris out of the way all on his own. No one helped him—not because they didn't want to, or because they didn't care to—but because all of us had our own burdens to bear.

As for the adults, we took turns carrying a large black duffle—it had been fixed up with a rainbow-assortment of patches—alongside our own bags. We packed the heaviest of our gear tightly in that duffle—the tent poles, what cooking supplies we could manage, and the few extra useable weapons we found, including our only camp gun. This duffle brought peace amongst our group: we learned to trust each other by taking turns as each person had a role to play, and whoever had that duffle had to protect everyone—not just themselves. Trust in this dangerous environment never comes easily.

In this kind of place, we had to trust the people around us. If I couldn't trust the rest of the group, then why should I even bother traveling with them? While I couldn't care less if I lived or died, I had been suspicious at first in order to protect my little baby brother, with his droopy ears and wild, black eyes. My innocent baby brother. I didn't take the coward's way out like our parents did when life first went to shit because of him.

For my brother, I would take anyone down.

So I had been weary until that duffle went around to everyone and no one took advantage of the weapon. We all still worked together, hid together, cooked together, scavenged together, even fought a stray monster together. I learned to trust them in the weeks we had been together. Something as small as a simple black bag became the symbol of our caravan's relationship.

“Tessa?”

His voice, dry and hoarse from the ever-growing dehydration, pulled me out of my thoughts and memories, back to the situation at hand. The group had stopped walking and began to set up camp for the night. “Yes, Benji?”

“Do you think the monsters know where we are?”

I hesitated. What could I say to that? However, my lack of response gave him enough of an impression. His little body trembled as he dragged his wagon near a tree to set up the tent for the younger children. An act of bravery despite his own fear.

I never could answer a question like that. For all we knew, they probably always had a suspicion of where we were. How else could they have found the original survivor’s camp ten feet underground? My mind raced back to the day the Before became the After. I could still hear the excited reports when the ships first came into the sky—how ignorant we all were. As I finally drifted into my evening rest, their words came rushing back over my mind ...

“... Ships have been seen in the skies. One of them landed near the capitol building. Their language is not something we understand, but it appears as if they are trying to communicate with our government. Early reports indicate that they may be peaceful, but one watchful commentator noticed that they carried a piece of metal with a cloth attached. It appears as if it may be a weapon or a symbol of something more important to these new beings ...”

“... Look! We have a close up of the ship! It appears to have some figures decorating the side. Researchers are trying to interpret what these figures represent— whether they are symbols from the being’s language or something more. There are what appears to be three figures that are much bigger than the rest, but are repeated in smaller areas not necessarily together ...”

A sharp pain pulled me from my sleep as I bent over, holding my side tightly. My free hand reached towards where I kept my knife. Even sleeping I never felt safe anymore. A second passes when I finally realize the cause of the pain: a pinch from Benji as he crouched next to me, black eyes overflowing with fear.

Something was wrong.

Instead of the usual noises of the forest, I heard only silence. No breathing, no crumble of rocks falling from the cliffs, nothing. While our race had gotten used to silence for protection, the monsters left our animals alone; they could roam and growl and hunt and snap branches or whatever they needed to. They could make noise—we couldn’t. So this silence? This silence spoke volumes. I remember the last time the world lost all volume. That didn’t end well.

The sirens wailed, cars rushing by, all heading to the same place.

Instead of succumbing to my own fear that shook me in place, I grabbed the nearest weapon I could find in case I lost my knife and headed out towards the rest of camp. Slinking low to the ground, I crawled, trying to decipher the situation at hand. An overwhelming nausea flowed through my body as memories poked through closed doors and resurfaced in my mind’s eye:



“What about Mommy?!” “Hush, Benji, it’s okay.” “But mommy works in the city ...” “I know, my love, I know.”

For a seemingly intellectual race—who had all these advanced technologies they were using to destroy us, weapons that made the light go too bright, the sound disappear, created mushrooms of smoke, and melted our gleaming cities down to nothing—they could not see what stood in front of them. We hid in plain sight, which only made them try harder to take us out. At any rate, our beloved planet had almost been completely destroyed as they continued fighting, ripping apart the place to ensure our total annihilation. Were they about to try to destroy us again?

I noticed the light in the distance first. It raced against the night’s sky, heading directly towards us. I grabbed onto my brother’s closest arm and dragged him to me. I had seen all this happen once before in those news reports. We could no longer escape.

“Reports have indicated that there was a bright flash of light, the rumble of the ground, before they could hear absolutely nothing. Anything near the center of the attack did not survive.”

At first, I could hear him crying. He no longer held back in fear of the monsters hearing us. He knew just as well as I did that escaping would be a lost cause. We both remembered what we saw the day the Before became the After. Only this time, we weren’t seeing it on the news from hundreds of miles away, worrying about our parents as they flew back home to us.

No, this time it was happening right in front of us.

The video clips on the television began to loop, continuously showing us the danger as it headed our way: the monsters, wearing a gleaming, bulging silver skin, jumping high into the sky as they ‘marched’ with various sharp instruments pointing upwards.

We held on to each other as the light began to surround us, as a rumble grew stronger, until the silence became deafening. I felt my ear drums threaten to explode inside my ears; my four eyes all shut, incapable of remaining open much longer. Everything ... too bright, too full of pressure.

And then the heat started.

My entire body felt soaked as if I had fallen in one of the acid baths outside the city; my blueish skin bubbled unnaturally while my insides boiled away. I wanted to console my brother or end his misery now so only I would have to experience this.

But I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t move.

And then finally every last bit began to melt away and my brain just stopped.

Silence.

The monster held the flag up high, waving it to the pleasant screams of approval from those around him. Sticking it into the ground next to a cliff shadowed by the imprint of two forms hugging, it adjusted its body to block the shadows. No need to remember who used to be there. Readjusting his helmet, the monster grinned towards the camera as it captured its image. “Come on!” it yelled, laughter causing its entire body, heavy space suit and all, to shake furiously. Finally, after years of battle, they could celebrate their victory. Some folks began to dance, others ran to take pictures with the flag themselves, as they celebrated the founding of their new home away from home.

Someone hit the music and they all began to sing loudly and proudly:

“God bless America. Land that I love ...”



Nonfiction Winner

Watch Hill

by Robert Pirrie (SI 14)

We are at the coast. Watch Hill, November. A gray day, moisture in the air. A Scottish day, the wind blowing straight in one ear and out the other. It gives me a headache; I've forgotten my earmuffs. The light is muted, a seasonal melancholy descending with the cloud ceiling, yet far out on the water, past the last visible fisherman's boat, there is a wash of yellow light where the sun approaches the horizon.

Benny is with us. He is a bright boy, bright in intellect, but also in affect, in sheer sunny disposition. He has his orange fleece jacket on, and his light blue watchman's cap. He doesn't really care what he looks like, although he is fond of the jacket.

Benny is happy. A chance to poke at the sand with a stick, making the small patch of ground within his sight an entire world. No need for a patch of yellow sky.

Maddie and I are walking, not too far from Benny, kicking at the lady slipper shells, the scallops. Maddie is bundled up heavily in her brown coat, the one with the fake sheep's wool lining. Her pockets are filled with sea glass, mostly beer bottle brown, the occasional green, a rare piece of cobalt blue.

It is getting too cold. Time to pick up Benny—I swoop him up as a surprise, to drive away the loss of all that sand to poke at. We walk around the end of a row of cabanas, boarded up for the coming winter, past closed shops with t-shirts still obscuring the windows. Benny's belly is on my shoulder. He guffaws as I bounce him up and down. I set up a chant—"Romp-a-bomp-a-rump-a-bump."

The few people willing to brave a windy November day at the beach are getting into their cars, leaving. The barely noticeable moment that marks the beginning of dusk, the subconsciously perceptible diminution of light, has passed. We are about to leave as well, crossing into the parking lot, heading towards Bay Street, when we see a dog. It is a Westie. No, not a Westie, some kind of mix. What would mate with a Westie? Perhaps it has a little Schnauzer in it.

No one else seems to notice. The last cars leave the lot.

Squatting down, I beckon to the dog, which is sitting staring at the end of the street, at the point where it curves sharply just past the now-shuttered carousel. Getting up with a low "grumph," the dog waddles over, tail waving tentatively. Floppy ears, straggly beard. Hair, not fur, the lower fringes a bit muddy. The dog looks at us with composure.

I let it sniff my hand. It accepts me, so I give it a scratch behind its ears. A flick of the tongue on the wrist. The eyes are rheumy, a slight cast over the pupils. When it moves, the legs are held stiffly.

"That," says Maddie, "is an old dog." She bends down, begins to stroke its back gently.

Benny hunkers down to have a look, his hands in his lap. Studious in his attention, he looks the dog in the eye. "That," he repeats, "is an old dog."

“How come you think he’s so old?” I ask.

Benny looks me in the eye. His answer is, of course, self-evident, incontrovertible.

“Because I just know it about it,” he says.

No one has come to claim the dog. We are alone in the parking lot. We want to get going, but feel an obligation, don’t want to leave without trying to help. I check for a dog tag, find one—it is worn out, the edge curled over, gouged as if its possessor was in the habit of chewing at it, worrying it in moments of tension, or perhaps mouthing it in the gentle ennui of having to wait in parking lots for owners unaware of its absence. Markings on the tag, as would be expected, but relief at realizing the markings weren’t made to satisfy the animal control officer but were in fact a phone number at the limits of legibility. The name far more damaged—Jerry? Jenny? A quick peek at the backside confirms that this is Jerry.

Maddie goes to make the call. I stay with Jerry, who sits down again, gives me a quick look, and then gets back to staring down the street, a monument to patience.

Benny gets back to mucking about. There is an enormous puddle in the middle of the lot, and enough gravel to keep him entertained for a while. Maddie is finished with the call.

“It took forever for anyone to pick up,” she says. “I think the man was as old as the dog.” She laughs at herself. “If the dog is as old as—if you do that dog years thing, I mean,” she says. “He said he would come right down.” She goes over to help Benny chuck rocks at the puddle. I can hear his exclamations of “Woah!” and “Spoosh!” from where I am sitting, on a curb. Jerry sits very still, ignores me now.

After an amount of time that cannot be described as “coming right down,” an Oldsmobile pulls up slowly, parks at the curb. Jerry jumps to his feet surprisingly quickly. Eyes, ears, nose, entire demeanor point straight at the car. His tail gives a brief flick. His back legs tremble.

A man gets out with a leash in his hand. He is indeed as old as his dog. He has that peculiar gait which indicates a collapsed spine, that tendency to hold the hands clasped behind the back as compensation. His hair is wispy and combed over the top, very white but with a wash of yellow to indicate its original blond beach-boy color. He has no doubt lived here for decades, seeing out a string of Julys as well as Novembers, walking a succession of dogs, the latest as halting as its owner, the last in a line that marked the last walks to be taken.

There is no real surprise at seeing the dog in the parking lot, no concern expressed that the dog, doubtless in need of food and old dog medicines, is the last one out of the parking lot on a cold November evening. And yet, this is not indicative of a lack of care. The affection shown by the dog in greeting the owner, the obvious affection of the owner in greeting his dog, is palpable and fully evident.

“There you are!” the man says. Jerry wags as furiously as his tired old butt can manage. There is a greeting for me, but not a verbal one, just a smile as if to say, “I appreciate your being the latest in a series of folks who have been kind enough to return my dog to me.” How anyone can have returned the dog based on the limited clues that had to be extracted with effort from



the tag is beyond me. It is likely that the locals know Jerry well, know the owner well, call often to have him get the dog. I seem to fit into the category of local, even though I am not.

“Mfff,” says Jerry, the tail not ecstatic anymore but waving gently, with confidence based in the understanding that his owner will always fetch him, will never fail to pull through.

“He’s a rum old dog,” says the man, an odd exclamation, perhaps reminiscent of the man's former vocation or avocation. He looks like the sailing sort—Dockers, light blue khakis, white rib knit sweater. A strange sort of familiarity to the face, as if he is someone famous, now or in the past. I have a predilection for yachting magazines and sailing stories, though I am never going to be able to afford a boat. His face is the sort that belongs on the back of a book that reminisces about sea adventures.

More odd turns of phrase—“I don't know how he gets into these scrapes,” says the man, though the situation is hardly a scrape. “My wife, you see, likes to let him out, though the doctor says not to.”

“That could lead to trouble, for sure,” I say.

The man does not know how to respond to this statement, looks about him at the surface of the parking lot as though it might provide him with fodder for the conversation, comes up empty. Grabbing the only straw available to him, he continues the conversation using the same thread, repeating himself.

“It’s my wife, you see,” he says, “She can’t resist letting him out.”

He looks down at the dog, looks past the dog, focuses his eyes on something that, for all appearances, is under the ground. Speaking again, he says simply, “But the doctor doesn’t want him to.”

Regaining his composure, he looks up again, smiles. “But now, we have to get back for dinner,” he says. He hooks the leash to Jerry’s collar. Jerry heaves himself off his haunches, follows his owner back to the car. The man opens the door, helps Jerry clamber up onto the seat. He then holds the edge of the door frame, plops himself down behind the wheel. I am beginning to feel disgruntled that no thanks have been offered, but just before starting the engine he rolls down the window, looks at me, and says, “He’s a rum old thing. He’s my friend.” After a couple of tries, the engine starts. The man waves vaguely, rolls up the window, and drives away.

This, of course, happened years ago. Ben is grown up now, a college graduate, living on his own in Boston. The dog cannot possibly be alive anymore, and its owner, who looked to be in his late seventies, has no doubt passed on as well. I was 34 at the time, but now I'm 53. I still go to Watch Hill, as often as I can, but in all the time since, I've yet to rescue any other old dog.

We had planned a trip to the coast. We were packing up the car to go when Ben turned up, unannounced. We went down to Watch Hill together. It was late May, the air warm and hinting at the heat that would come with July. The sky was a washed blue, clean after an overnight rain. It was a Thursday; school was still in, so we mostly had the place to ourselves. Maddie got lost in looking for sea glass and shells. I found myself walking along with Ben, talking. Curious, I asked him if he remembered

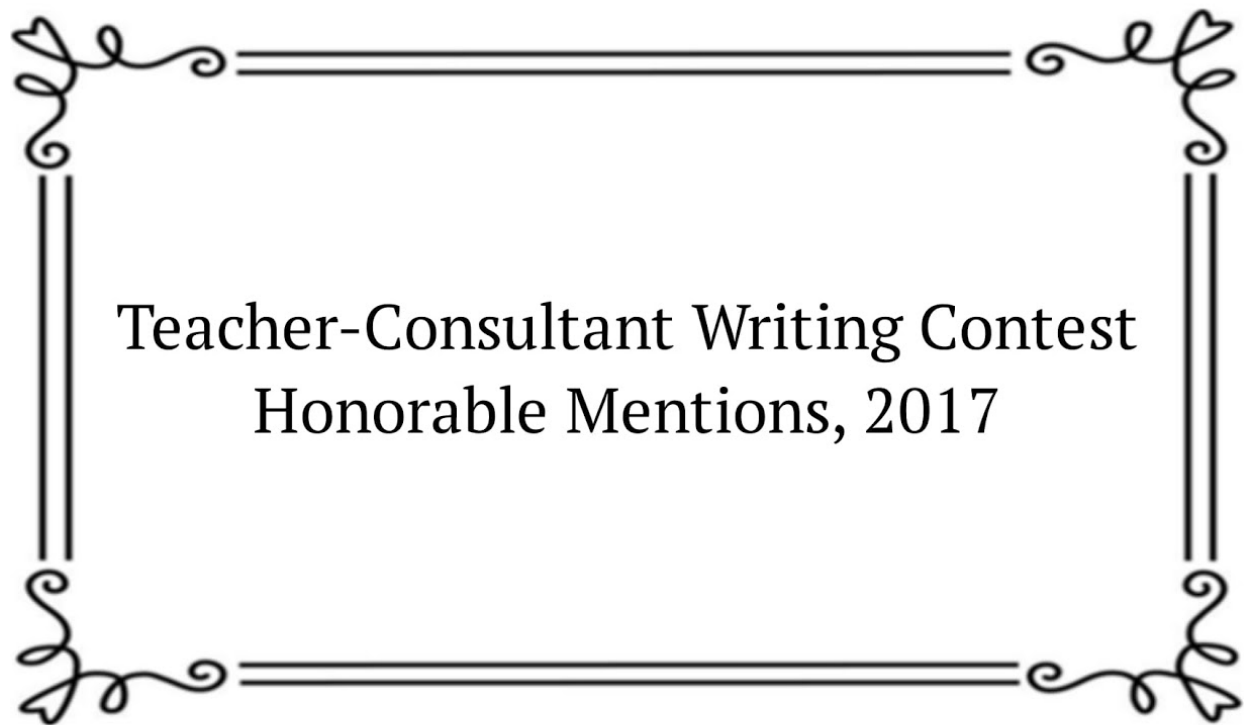
coming to Watch Hill as a child. He looked at me, then looked down at the beach, considering. “No,” he said. “All the beach trips we took, they kind of all blend together.”

“I was just wondering if you remember an old dog we found here once,” I said.

Ben stood, waiting for the rest of the story. I told him about the Westie, the man who came to fetch him, their obvious affection, the age of the two. As I approached the end of the story, I could sense the joke Ben was eager to deliver. He looked me in the eye and with a smirk said, “I seriously doubt if he could have been as old as you are.” I went to cuff him, just to prove I still could, but he ducked the blow and danced away, laughing.

For half a moment I expected him to continue dancing down the beach, laughing like a boy wearing an orange fleece jacket. Instead, he waited for me. I caught up to him, and we continued our walk down the beach, together.





Poetry Honorable Mentions

C-Section

by John Wetmore (SI 15)

Every now and then, when I think of how
they tore me untimely from the womb,
I remember that my father is a tattoo gun
and my mother a swath of disembodied
skin. Then there's me: slim cylinder
of bruise-hued ink bursting purple—
eternal umbilical smudge spread across
an open belly's serrated landscape.

I have always been a hurricane warning
on a lost continent, a square of salted
earth losing its flavor to evaporation,
generating lift, drifting away from mama's
globe until I disappear in her horizon.
I am fumbling infant fingers forever
waving an astronaut's goodbye.
I am wide-eyed test case—loyal
dog strangled by stratosphere.

But here in purple ink, transfigured
into palm-sized poem, I am again
and again newborn—a hungry lung
waiting for the slap, begging to tattoo
the air with word's endless threads.
But in her orbit I will always struggle
to breathe. There is no earth where I
forget the doctors had to dig me out—
no word for mother with gravity
enough to accept my weight.



СТИХ ДЛЯ ТЕБЯ*

by Caitlin Donahue (SI 16)

Overhead a carpenter nails wooden shingles
to a Queen Anne turret on The Merry Widow.
Anya's fingers are ringed in smoke
coiling in the morning light from the black cigarette
we're sharing. She absently sparks her plastic
lighter as we traipse down Hughes Street,
hopping puddles growing under air conditioners.

At the water tower, Anya asks me if I will write
her a poem before she returns to Ulyanovsk,
unlocking her bicycle from a lamppost
with a close-lipped smile. I hold my breath
in my mouth & let the dense milk cloud
of cloves drift over my eyes.

I walk alone past a motel with a lurid blue mermaid
jumping out of a parking lot littered with a hodgepodge
of license plates, from Quebec to Pennsylvania.
Here the tree roots of paperbark maples buckle the sidewalks,
& I drag once more & crush the dark filter beneath my flip flop.

I stop at the Michigan Avenue Poet-Tree, which has shed its leaves
in last night's thunderstorm. I kneel & collect
a green Mary Oliver, the sodden page smeared in places,
turning to pulp in my ink-stained hands.

*Translation from Russian: *Poem For You*

Mercy by the Sea

by Denise Abercrombie (SI 07)

Forgive the society of selfies, the stream of poses, the not so primal all-caps screams. Overlook the self-promotion, the tease, the favorites, the political rants & leanings, the blow by blow, the memes. Paper over the return to nature splayed in pixels on your screen—the digital romance & relief of endless bucolic scenes. Excuse the surrender of privacy broadcast through pouts, smiles & birthday cakes you'll spy but never eat. Disregard the death post—the condolences of strangers—alongside the 3D ultrasound of the infant as it floats in digital permanence before it breathes. Blink away the desire to connect with history—everyone from your past—as your family abandons you for their screens. Pardon all the food posts: the fiddleheads trending on your latest salad & those not so photogenic shots of your cuisine. Wink the addiction, the voyeurism, the stalking of snapshots as they drift downstream. Condone the tender moments & minutiae threaded in your timeline & your dreams. Absolve your own status as each soul & sacred moment erodes into an endless electronic sea. Shrug off scrolling along on this or that platform as your life hangs somewhere else waiting for release.



Fiction Honorable Mentions

In Rows of Two

by Emily Orkins (SI 17)

It begins with twos. Two legs carry one person. Said person stands beside another, and in twos, they march. But the twos end here. The line of eleven men and eleven women snakes through the town square. Dust rises and clouds long white skirts and strict black pant seams. Despite the shackles that connect each person by his or her ankles, not a slip of skin can be seen. The same can be said for his or her wrists, covered in skin tight fabric that does not leave much room for air, let alone skin. Not that they had much flesh to begin with.

The white edifice of the templar building stands stark behind the raised wooden platform. Hanging between towering pillars, a crisp white tapestry hardly stirs in the breeze. The black, silhouetted face of a wide-jawed man looms above the town square, his black eyes ever-present despite his blacked-out features. The only other images that resides on this tapestry—hanging over every templar, marketplace, and lecture hall—are two feathered quills poised under either side of the Grand Dictator’s meaty jaw.

No sound parts the dust or wind except for the clink of chains, seemingly infinite in their links. The line of twenty-two citizens march up the platform to the rhythm of these chains and their hushed breathing.

The High Priest, his skin also nonexistent, stands on an elevated dais. His arms are clothed in rich ivy green—at least, what one could assume was ivy if any could even recognize the plant. Or the color green, for that matter. From his thick neck a medallion of pewter resides, hanging between his gelatinous pectorals. Embossed on its face resides a painstakingly etched quill feather, carved within the image of a sphere made up of sun and stars.

His velvet arms rise up, both equally balanced, neither higher than the other. The two lines stop. The High Priest claps his hands together and the lines turn away from their partner. Before each citizen stands a table, simple but well made. The High Priest claps his hands twice. Chained arms rise up and rest on top of their respective tables, left forearms turned towards a cloudless blue sky.

The High Priest’s voice, raspy and as brittle as parchment, slithers out over the crowd. “With the end of the infernal technologies, the Age of the Quill has been reborn. For this, we rejoice!”

The crowd cheers forcibly, the sudden rush of sound both jarring and alien. It is made up of men and women akin to those on the platform. A sea of black and white homespun clothing and hidden skin. They suddenly fall silent once more as the High Priest claps his hands twice.

“However, there are those that still fight against rigidity. But we have found stability in our binaries! Gone are the days when mankind believed prosperity could be found in the dawn. True growth can only be done in the unhindered light of Day!” The High Priest shouts, his bulbous fingers splaying out towards the sun as it positions itself directly above the dais. His voice changes as it softens, his hands slinking back to his sides. “And true reflection can only be meditated upon in the sequestered corners of Night. Through our perseverance to keep the Balance, we have come from the brink of destruction.” He

rasps out, a bit more volume this time, but not a grand amount. “To be right handed or to be left handed, ’tis now our question! And a folly it is to think one could possibly be both! We live in a world of sun or moon, men or women. Now, we, the birds in the sky of our Grand Dictator, have risen to purity of the Right Wing or the Left Wing. Both shall take us to new heights in the search for mastery of the Quill.”

As resolve coats the High Priest’s slippery voice, twenty-two priests step up onto the platform. The line splinters as every other priest steps off to either the left or the right. Their robes, a brown as rich as the irradiated soil, hardly move as they pause in front of their respective citizens.

“Our Grand Dictator decided under the Moon’s mercy that those found to be ambidextrous shall wreak upon them the Sun’s scorn!” The crowd cheers again, falling startingly silent once more after another two-handed clap.

“These traitorous citizens will serve as a warning to those that cannot stay within their rightful place. A bird’s ability to fly in our Grand Dictator’s sky is a most precious gift. Let this be a reminder of that gift, which He chooses to bestow ... or take away.” The High Priest motions his hands for the twenty-two priests to step twice towards the citizens. Metal flashes in the noonday sun before a sickening thunk resounds over the town square.

The wooden tables bleed as twitching forearms fall to the platform. No one screams, no one cheers. Only the sound of flinching fingers and drips of scarlet can be heard.

The High Priest looks down upon the platform as the priests begin to cleanse the wood, the prisoners stepping down from the platform in their twos. As they go off to whence they came, to bind their stubs and return to their work, the crowd disperses. There is much work to be done with the remaining light of Day before the Dusk bells toll.

Yet as he turns away from the scene, the High Priest barely suppresses a shudder.

Taking measured steps down from both dais and platform, he makes his way into the templar building. His eyes do not glance upward as he passes under the shadow of the Grand Dictator. His polished leather soles hardly make a sound in the hushed lobby. Marble floors glisten, painfully polished, as the High Priest makes his way down the corridors until he reaches the one embossed with the Quills of the Age, the two feathers spread out like an eagle’s wings. His clammy hand knocks twice on the oak paneling.

“Enter.” A gruff voice pervades the wood, short and distracted.

The High Priest opens the door, shuffling inside with hardly a glance upwards as he hastily closes the door behind him.

“Well?” The voice, now behind an antiquated desk, speaks with barely concealed impatience, papers rustling.

“The order has been delivered and your justice served, my Grandor,” the High Priest’s throat bobs under his apparent wattle, though not as red as a chicken’s might be.



The Grand Dictator grunts in acknowledgement, a quill scratching away in his right hand. “As it should be. I am sure it shall be the talk of the Night when families return home. We must remain vigilant on this and all things.”

“I could not agree more, my Grandor. The priests will conduct extra rounds of the lecture halls while they are in session. Each citizen’s dominant hand has already been marked for simplicity’s sake.” The High Priest steps forward, his voice growing steadier as he relays his plan to his supreme leader. He already modeled the stark white band that circled the cuff of his right hand.

Said supreme leader hardly lifts his head from his work, nor his right hand from the page as he speaks dismissively, “As they should obviously do. Blessed Day, High Priest.”

“Blessed Day, my Grandor.” Deflated once more, the High Priest wrings his hands together as he backs out of the room. He does not breathe until the oak door is before him. Nor does the High Priest breathe until he returns to the solitary space of his office and residency on the far side of the templar. He locks himself away, keeping to his small, plain desk until the bells.

Across the town square, the Dusk bell rings once. Rising from his chair, the High Priest takes measured steps to the window to look down upon the sea of black and white, swirling like oil and water. Men close up their shops. Women take their market purchases home to start dinner. Children return from lecture halls. By the second bell, the square is deserted, filled only with dust and the barest hint of orange as the sun hesitates above the line of buildings, seemingly awaiting for the order to continue its path.

By this time, the High Priest closes the black shutters and draws heavy curtains over the window. The only light to remain in the room burns from the oil lantern on the desk.

For the remaining hour of Dusk, the High Priest heaves a sigh as he sinks into his chair, gazing down at a list of names. His eyes, framed by wrinkles deep with fatigue, do not only see the names. They see twenty-two forearms.

A quick succession of the two Night bells jar the High Priest from his reverie an hour later. In stiff movements that have been long since memorized, he stands from his chair, parts the drapes, and opens the shutters to a dark square and a star-filled sky.

In the window’s reflection, his eyes catch the firelight as they float over the platform, setting it aflame with his gaze. His shoulders sag an inch lower than the night before. Turning away from the window, the High Priest makes his way over to the heavy oak door, clicking the lock into place. Walking back across the faded black carpet, he unbuttons his robes and lets the velvet fall from his thick torso. Once at his desk, he opens the chest hidden underneath.

A flogger, the handle wide in his right palm, seems to warm in the amber lighting.

“To the Moon’s mercy, I reveal myself,” the High Priest murmurs in the dim light, a tremor to his hands. “To the Sun’s scorn, I submit myself. To fly in the sky of His Grace, I bear my shame.”

He does not feel the first lashing of the leather tails across his back. It seems like a caress to him now. Only after several more lashes does it begin to sting through the lattice of scar tissue. “Scorch from me my shame,” he heaves, raising the leather again. “Scorch from me my shame.”

His right hand raises.

His left hand flinches.

With every lash, the High Priest goes deeper into himself, letting the fire on his back burn out the shame he carries with him. The very shame that presented itself before him on that platform. The moon rises high into the sky until the scars on the High Priest’s back no longer mirror its pale iridescence. Welts of fire and shame pulse behind him as sweat beads on his brow.

“Scorch from me my shame!” He cries out as his stiff fingers slowly unfold, the flogger heavy now in his left hand. He blinks twice and looks down, jerking back from his reverie as though struck. “By the Sun ...” the High Priest curses, the flogger springing from his hand like a burning cattle iron.

Realizing his damning error, he stoops and picks up the handle in his *proper* right hand.

His knuckles turn white as he tightens his grip, flinging the leather tails over his shoulder with renewed vigor. Over and over, the High Priest focuses on the ache burning in his right hand, his true hand, the hand he must use. The only hand he must use.

With a grunt of desperation, he flogs himself harder. “I need to be right ...” He rasps, his breathing labored in time with the snaps of leather. “I ... make me right!” His voice catches. “I cannot be both ...” He heaves out a final sigh, his head and hand hanging from his slumped figure.

His voice catches once more. “I cannot be both ...”



Nonfiction Honorable Mentions

Deposit

by Theodore Richmond (SI 17)

Surviving cancer and the ensuing treatments lends itself to a certain level of introspection. It's expected, I suppose, that one would take stock of one's position in life: to look at a clean bill of health as a "second chance," to rewrite a narrative that went a little bit off its predicted track.

Some quick background is probably necessary first. In May of 2002, I discovered a lump on my testicle. That is not a sentence I ever would have been able to write in *April* of 2002, but over time I have given myself the permission to embrace the experience as something necessary and even beneficial. So, yes, cancer of the testicle ... the right one.

As I sat in the room with my doctor, before I had even gotten a chance to tell my wife, he was telling me what my course of action would be. My immediate concern, oddly enough, was the remainder of the school year. I asked if we could address this "issue," I said "issue" as if it were an unsightly skin tag or some kind of painful contusion and not a potentially life-threatening illness, in six weeks so I could take my classes through the end of final exams. My doctor stared at me, mouth agape. He started, stopped, started again, "Tomorrow," was all he could say.

"What's that?" I inquired.

"Tomorrow. You're having surgery tomorrow at 9:30 in the morning. I've already called and scheduled the OR."

I waited a beat, and then proceeded s-l-o-w-l-y to maximize comprehension, "I have to check my calendar though," I explained to the man patiently, "I'm not sure that *tomorrow* works for me. We have a test coming up and..."

"Mr. Richmond, I'm not quite sure you're understanding what's going on here. Take the rest of today to do whatever it is that you need to do. Talk to your wife, your parents, your boss, whatever. But tomorrow at 8:30 in the morning you need to be at the hospital, filling out paperwork and getting ready for pre-op. I will be performing a radical orchiectomy ..."

"What's that?" I interrupted.

"A radical orchiectomy. I'll be removing your tumor along with the rest of your testicle."

"And when you say 'removing' you mean, what, exactly?"

He smiled. Clearly he thought I was having some fun at his expense.

"I mean, 'removing.' I'll make a small incision in your abdomen right here," he said while poking me with a tongue depressor about three inches southwest of my navel.

When the tongue depressor got in his hand and why a *urologist* would have such a piece of medical equipment in the first place, I have no idea.

“At that point I will pull your right testicle up and out through the incision, inspect the tumor, and separate them both from your body.”

Despite the fact that I had nearly passed out right around “up and out,” I had heard enough to understand that *tomorrow* was not going to be a banner day.

“Doctor?” I asked innocently as an urgent question popped suddenly and without warning into my head.

“Yes?”

“Um, well, can I keep it?”

“What’s that?” he inquired.

“Well, you know, it’s just that ... we’ve grown quite attached, and, I’m not saying it’s my *favorite*, I mean, I like them both, and, you know, even though this one seems to have *betrayed* me there’s still a sentimentality, I guess, that’s ...” I stammered on for a few more seconds, having, apparently, completely lost my mind.

My doctor stared at me, mouth agape. He started, stopped, started again. “I’ll send a sample of your tumor out for a biopsy just to make sure.” That sentence gave me pause. What if it was benign? It seemed like that would be a *shutting-the-barn-door-after-the-horse-is-already-out* type of situation. “But, trust me, I know what I’m looking at,” he continued. “This is a very common procedure and a type of cancer that is 97% curable at this stage in men your age.” I was actually, briefly, elated by his reassurance, as if I had just won some kind of cancer lottery! “Unfortunately, all other medical waste, including what remains of your right testicle, will, by law, need to be sent to the incinerator.”

“Huh ... that seems harsh,” I muttered.

“What’s that?” he inquired.

“Nothing,” I said, jumping up and reaching out my hand. “Thank you, doctor. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Do you think I could use your phone? I should probably call my wife.”

I left, overwhelmed, with more questions than answers. *Will my wife and daughter be ok if things go wrong tomorrow? How in the world am I going to tell my parents? What am I going to tell my principal and my colleagues? Am I going to have to use the word ‘testicle’ in front of my students? Will my left testicle still be my left testicle after the surgery? I mean, direction is relative and, without a counterpart for reference, wouldn’t it just be my testicle?*

As it turned out, the surgery was a complete success and, after a week, I was back at work to finish out the school year. Even though all seemed clear, the biopsy did show a malignant, Stage 1 tumor of a type that had been known to spread to other parts of the body. This was about six years after cyclist Lance Armstrong, when he was still a beloved, heroic, world-beating champion and not a disgraced, lying, blood-doping scumbag, was diagnosed with



testicular cancer that had spread to his lungs, lymph nodes, and brain. In a nutshell ... I'll give you a minute ... oncologists were not taking chances, and mine suggested a proactive chemotherapy treatment, three rounds worth, to remove any doubt of my remission.

The concern was no longer life and death ... which was nice. I wasn't *excited* to undergo chemo. But, I figured, I can get it done over the summer and be back for day one. I'll just put this whole thing behind me.

"Do you have children?" my oncologist asked.

"Yes, one daughter. But we're looking forward to having one or two more."

"HMMMMMMMM ..." he hummed. "Well, you know, you are going to have to wait a full year after your final treatment before you attempt to have any more children. The stuff we're going to put into your body is toxic. The birth defect rates for chemo patients are very high."

This was a whole new level of anxiety with which to contend.

"What I'm going to do is refer you to a friend of mine, a fertility expert, at another hospital. Given your situation, you're going to want to consider storing some of your DNA before you start chemo, just to be prudent."

"I don't—what?—I mean—are you saying I need to—I won't be able to—"

"I'm not saying anything other than in very rare cases the chemotherapy can inhibit one's ability to produce healthy sperm. It's just a precaution. You're just storing something that you know has value in case you need it at a later time. It's like a bank."

"Is there are drive-up window?" I asked. I make jokes at inappropriate times when I'm nervous.

"It's all very clinical," he assured me. So, I called and made an appointment.

When my wife and I walked into the fertility clinic, I couldn't help but to avoid eye contact with everyone I saw. I skulked nervously up to the front desk, turning a dark shade of first crimson and then purple with each person I passed, and whispered my name.

"Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Richmond! It's a pleasure to see you today!" the exuberant receptionist shouted. She was a joyful woman, middle aged with silvering hair and a pin on her tunic displaying a cartoonish cow with oversized udders. She was doing her best, I'm sure, to put me at ease. It was not working.

After filling out the requisite paperwork, my wife and I were led into an examination room away from the prying eyes of those "other people" in the lobby.

The nurse proceeded to explain how my sample would be stored. She said she was actually going to need three samples.

“Good Lord, *today?!*” I interjected.

“Uh, no,” she replied patiently, “They need to be spaced five days apart for maximum viability. Your samples will be stored in our containment unit at a stable temperature until you either need them or you choose to have them destroyed.”

“What does it cost?” My wife, ever the pragmatist, inquired.

“It’s \$250 for the initial extractions ...” as if they would be doing any of the work, “... and then \$75 per month for the remainder of the storage.”

“That seems pretty steep for the service you’re providing,” I commented. “Why can’t I just do this myself? I have a freezer at home—works great.”

“Well, we maintain the optimal stable temperature and test the samples regularly to make sure they’re maintaining their motility.”

“Why? I mean, what if you discover that they are no longer viable? Isn’t that kind of a *shutting-the-barn-door-after-the-horse-is-already-out* type of situation?”

She stared at me for a moment, then handed me a specimen cup. “I’ll show you the way. When you have deposited your sample, please, put the cap on and place the cup on the shelf by the red window.”

My wife went out to the waiting room and I followed the nurse to my destination. I had seen enough movies to know what was next. I would be led to a darkened room with a selection of magazines and videos designed to provide “inspiration” in order to expedite the process. At least, that’s what I thought. The nurse, instead, led me to the tiny bathroom in the middle of the hallway between the examination room and the reception area.

“Here you go,” she exclaimed cheerfully. “Just let us know when you’re all set.”

“Ummmmmmmm ... here?”

“Is there a problem?” she asked innocently.

While I was trying to remember what exactly I had done to piss her off, I asked her, “Does the office provide any, uh, reading material to, well, uh, help the process along?”

She shot me a funny look that turned more and more to disgust as it dawned on her what I was implying.

“Yeah, we don’t do that here. Put the cup on the shelf when you’re done.” Then she turned and walked away.

I stared at the standard specimen cup, which was used, I thought, only to collect urine. I thought about that cup a second before it dawned on me that this situation was, besides awkward and humiliating, logistically confusing.



Twenty minutes later, I was still standing in the tiny bathroom, staring at the ceiling, and wondering just how in the hell I was ever going to get out of here. I had decided that the task was impossible. Maybe it was the woman who, twice now, had knocked on the door to see if it was “occupied.” Maybe it was the two nurses who took up position directly outside the thinly insulated room to have a discussion about their weekend plans. Maybe it was the first nurse who asked cheerfully, again twice now, if I was “okay in there?!” Whatever it was, nothing was going as planned.

Long story short, forty-five agonizing minutes after I had entered the tiny bathroom, I exited. I put the cup on the shelf, head-nodded to the smirking nurse, and went back out to reception to make my next appointment. I was motivated to do what I needed to do for my family, but mortified by the prospect of having to endure this fiasco two more times.

At reception, the cow pin lady smiled a big ol’ smile and actually asked, “How’d you make out, good?”

Having no idea how to respond, I simply smiled and said that I needed to make an appointment for next week.

“You know,” she said, “if it would make you more comfortable, I can give you one of those cups and you can bring a sample in from home. Just make sure we can get it in our freezer within an hour of harvesting.”

“Thank God!” I exclaimed, “You DO have a drive-up window!”

Be Funner

by Bridget O'Connor (SI 16)

I had realized I had come to a rather awkward juncture in my life: my mid-twenties. All of my friends were spontaneously becoming “adults.” And their new, adult lives left little room for the old ways of our friendship. Sure, I was also relatively busy. I had a job that I loved. I would repeat it like a mantra, over and over: “At least I have a job I love. At least I have a job I love.” But when you keep receiving texts of “We’re engaged!” and “Sorry to cancel on you, but we’re putting an offer on a house,” you start feeling like there’s something missing.

“Aww, Bridge,” my friends would say as if they were looking at a sad puppy in a pet store window. “You’ll figure it out.” Then, they would pat my arm encouragingly, their gigantic diamond engagement rings flashing in the light.

So, I decided that I needed to do something. I needed to get on some sort of path to becoming a well-rounded, active adult. I needed to get involved, find some sort of hobby where I would be able to meet new people and widen my social circle. Or, meet guys. Either one.

I kept seeing these ads pop up on my Facebook page for something called “Kickball.com.” “Join the party! Be funner!” the ads read. Despite the weird grammar, kickball looked oddly enticing. There were numerous pictures of people in their mid-twenties. I could tell by their smiling and laughing faces that they were generally enjoying all life had to offer. They had each others’ arms around their shoulders, which I interpreted to mean that they were inseparable friends. Perfect. I visited the website. Kickball.com assured me, again and again, that I didn’t need to be an athlete to join. “It’s all about fun!!!!” a bright red banner declared at the top of each page. So, it was settled. Despite my lack of athleticism, I would join a kickball team. I signed up, and the organization sent immediately sent me a confirmation email, telling me that they would put me on a fun team. The funnest team. I would be all set!

The day of the first game, I was pretty stoked. I would meet so many new people! By the end of tonight, I would be exactly like those people in the kickball.com ads, smiling and laughing with my new best friends. Maybe I would even meet a guy who would become the love of my life, and we would hold an entertaining, yet tasteful, kickball-themed outdoor wedding. I was getting way too ahead of myself, but I had a really good feeling that kickball would be completely amazing.

I arrived at a massive sports field in the middle of Hartford. Since I was told via email that I was on the orange team, I started wandering around the perimeter of the field, looking for people wearing orange. I saw tons of people my age, numerous coolers full of Bud Light, and every team color of the rainbow, except orange. Eventually, I decided to ask a random guy from another team. “Hey, I’m new here. Do you know where the orange team is?”

The guy took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. “Wait, you’re part of the Hitmen?” he said incredulously.

“What?” I asked, confused.



“The orange team. The Hitmen,” he said. “They’re the best team in the league. I didn’t know they were taking new players this season. Wow. Well, anyway, they’re over there, in the corner of the field practicing. They’re always practicing.” He pointed to a remote corner of the field.

“Uh ... okay. Thanks,” I muttered.

“Good luck!” he said. I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

I began my trek to the outermost corner of the field, my heart beating wildly in my chest. The best in the league?! Why the hell was I placed on this team? I hadn’t played kickball since elementary school. Did I really have to mention that in the email when I signed up? What about the fact that I didn’t need to be an athlete to join?

I eventually made it to my team. I held up my hand in a wave. “Hey!” I said to no one in particular. However, no one took any notice of me. A few players were off to the side, doing some hardcore stretches. The rest were practicing pitching the ball and kicking it into oblivion. I noticed that all of the players had cut the sleeves off of their shirts, as if any extra fabric would somehow interfere with the integrity of the game.

“Hey!” I said, louder this time. “I’m Bridget. I’m ... supposed to be here?”

A guy covered with tattoos looked up and jogged over to me. “Hey!” he said, shaking my hand. “Brittany, right?”

“Bridget,” I corrected.

“Right, right, right,” he said. “I’m Matt. Welcome to the Hitmen! Here’s your shirt.” He thrust an orange t-shirt into my hands and a pair of scissors. “We usually cut the sleeves off if you want to do the same.” He gestured to a cooler of beer. “We have Bud Light if you want one. But we usually don’t drink until after the game. We want to be fully focused on the game.” Assuming he was joking, I chuckled. But Matt’s face remained completely serious.

“You can get in here and start practicing if you want. What position do you play?” Matt said.

“Uh ... well,” I stammered. “I honestly don’t even know what the positions are. I haven’t played since elementary school?” I laughed as if it were a funny joke. Matt’s face, again, remained stoic.

“Oh ... well then,” Matt said. He scratched the stubble on his chin confusedly, probably wondering why I was put on his team. *Me too, buddy*, I thought.

“You’ll catch on. It’ll be fine. It’s a pretty simple game,” Matt said. *Easy for you to say*, I thought. “Here, come over here. Tanya will throw you a few pitches, and you can practice.” He led me over to a girl with long, dark hair. She was wearing volleyball shorts and cleats. *Should I have cleats?* I thought to myself. What have I gotten myself into?

“Hey! I’m Bridget. Nice to meet you,” I said to Tanya, smiling.

Tanya gave me a terse wave, as if not to waste any valuable practice time. “Hey. Okay. Do you know how to bunt?” she asked.

“Yes? No? I don’t know,” I said.

“Okay,” she said, looking slightly irritated. “I’ll pitch you the ball, and try to just kick it with the side of your foot.” She rolled the ball to me. Instead of kicking it, my foot swung to the right by a few inches, completely missing the ball, like Charlie Brown in a Peanuts comic. I could already tell that this was gonna be a SPECTACULAR season.

“Okay, then,” Tanya muttered. “Can you try that again, but ... better?”

Before I could say “Hell no,” a whistle blew from a distance.

“Okay, Hitmen!” Matt bellowed. “We’re starting in the field!”

All of my new teammates in orange trotted out onto the field and landed in specific spots, like backup dancers ready to practice their choreography. Intent on pretending to know what I was doing, I rambled out into the center of the field and stopped at a random patch of grass.

“Brit—I mean, Bridget—play shortstop,” Matt called to me.

Having no idea what he was talking about, I shuffled slightly to the left.

“No,” he yelled, “shortstop.”

I took a few steps backward, as if he were calling out the directions to the cha-cha slide. “Here?” I yelled, shrugging my shoulders.

He rolled his eyes. “Just go into the outfield.”

I ran toward the outskirts of the field, until I found an area completely overrun by weeds that I was confident would be free from any kickballs. This way, I could observe the game without actually having to play. Of course, I was wrong.

The third guy up to bat was definitely a distant relative of Paul Bunyan, although wearing a kickball shirt instead of flannel. Even from my perspective in the back of the field, I was thinking he was approximately ten feet tall. All he was missing was Babe, the trusty blue ox.

“Everyone move back!” Matt yelled to us. “This guy can kick.”

Despite the warning, I wasn’t concerned. I was practically in a different continent in my outfield position. I just looked like a creepy orange stalker, watching the game from the back of the field.



Paul Bunyan got up to bat, and the sonic boom that emitted from the ball when he kicked it let me know that I was in trouble. The ball was hurtling my way, and I knew it was on a steadfast trajectory to the most isolated spot in the outfield.

I ran in circles frantically. "I GOT IT!!!" I screamed, as if there were anyone else out here in the middle of nowhere clamoring for the ball.

This was my moment, I thought. I would catch this crazy ass ball and look like a kickball pro! My teammates would think I was awesome! Commence team bonding and friendship!

The ball flew closer, closer, a red rubber comet bounding towards Earth, and I opened my arms wide as if I were welcoming Jesus into my heart.

Technically, I did catch the ball, but not with my arms. Rather, I caught it with the side of my face. The ball crashed down into my right cheek/earlobe region, somehow managing to rip out all of my earrings in the process.

Momentarily stunned, I didn't realize that a face ball wasn't a valid catch, and I stood there, thinking about how this was the first time in my life I had gotten punched in the face, but it was by an inanimate object. I was awoken from my reverie with screams of "BRITTANY!!!!"

"BRITTANY!!!" multiple teammates yelled. "THROW THE BALL BACK!" I looked at the field and saw Paul Bunyan leisurely jogging the bases, confident that he got a home run.

"It's Bridget," I muttered as I picked up my assailant, the kickball, and threw it as hard as I could, which was roughly three feet. I decided to kick it back into the field.

After three outs, I reluctantly joined my teammates on the side of the field, certain that I would be teased mercilessly for the face ball incident. Or, worse, I would be reprimanded for letting Paul Bunyan get a home run.

Instead, I was greeted by high-fives. "Nice job out there!" "Way to go!"

"Wait," I said, confused. "Did you not see what happened? I didn't catch the ball."

"Yeah," Tanya said, "But you tried. That was a wicked tough ball to catch, and you totally went for it!" She slapped me on the back and handed me a Bud Light to ice my face with. I felt a weird and maybe not totally deserved sense of pride.

The game ended, and the Hitmen won the game, as I soon learned was tradition. Although I did not contribute to the win whatsoever, it still felt pretty good.

So maybe kickball wasn't the way for me to spontaneously turn into an adult like the rest of my friends. Come to think of it, I'm not sure why I thought joining an adult recreational league based centered around an elementary school sport would enable me to do so. But I did learn how to embrace the awkwardness of my mid-twenties by pushing myself to try new things. And, if nothing else, I discovered how to be funner.





Alex

by Theodore Richmond (SI 17)



Thursdays, beginning in the late fall of 1984, were special for Alex. They hadn't always been. Up until October, Thursdays might just as well have been Mondays or Wednesdays or any other day during the school week. There was a repetitiveness to most of Alex's days. Get up, get ready for school, endure school, come home, watch a block of *G.I. Joe*, *He-Man*, *Voltron*, and *Thundercats*, stare out the window waiting for Mom to get home, eat something that had once been frozen but was now, well, warmish, and go to bed.

Being a latchkey kid had initially given Alex a sense of autonomy. He was getting older, almost twelve now, and he liked the idea of being mature enough to take care of himself. But, he had to admit, life started to get lonely pretty quickly. The allure of being responsible enough to fly solo at home was starting to fade. While he would never admit it, at least not yet, he started to envy his friends who still went to daycare. Sure, he made fun of them for being "babies" whose parents didn't trust them, but in reality, he grew green at recess when Jimmy and Ken would talk about the games they played at Mrs. Carroll's house after school. It was getting to the point where Ken, who Alex had once considered his best bud, was going out of his way to sit next to Jimmy at lunch, leaving Alex to scramble for whatever seat was left on the boys' end of the table.

Also at play was the changing nature of Alex's parents' work schedules. Alex's dad had been working second shift for years now, and Alex was accustomed to not seeing him during the work week. Mom, on the other hand, was working an extended first shift which caused her to get home at 6:00, or 6:30, or 7:00, or ... just later than normal, that's all. It didn't really matter, Alex told himself when he started thinking about it too much. *If she got home any earlier, she'd just start asking me about my vocabulary quiz or my science project while I was watching TV.* Alex always found it so annoying to have a forced conversation while engrossed in a show.

Still, an early evening of indeterminate length filled with old house noises and fading memories was not exactly what he thought freedom would feel like. The beginning of the school year hadn't been so bad. The "adulthood" of the whole deal was liberating; plus, it stayed light out until after Mom got home. But, lately, Mom was busier and busier, and the daylight was shorter and shorter. Alex had begun watching the sun set through the chipped



picture window in the living room. By the time Lion-O was sending Mum-Ra back to his tomb, defeated yet again, the shadows would engulf the room almost completely. Alex turned on lights and kept the TV blaring despite nothing good being on after 5:30 and, some days, it was enough. But more often it was hard to stave off thoughts of dark corners and soft voices.

On Saturdays, until recently the best day of the week, Alex's dad used to get up and make pancakes for the three of them. Alex would get up early to make sure that he could crack the eggs and stir the batter. He loved to watch the batter thicken in the bowl. He was mesmerized by how quickly the viscous liquid would solidify on the sizzling skillet. "Quick, throw in the chocolate chips before the flapjacks burn!" his dad would shout. That always cracked Alex up ... "flapjacks" ... what a silly word. So, Alex, laughing, would grab a handful of Nestle's morsels and sprinkle them onto the flapjacks, then his dad would send them soaring in the air to flip them over. Every once in a while, he would miscalculate his toss and send some breakfast onto the green and gray linoleum—SPLAT!—which would just start the two of them rolling with laughter. Dad would manage the paper towels and Alex would pull out the trash can. At some point Mom would trudge down the stairs in her fluffy blue bathrobe, smiling wryly as she scolded them about the level of the noise and how this was her one day to sleep in. Alex relished those Saturday mornings because he knew, as well as his pre-adolescence consciousness would allow him to, that his weekly time with his father was tragically limited.

Two Saturdays before, as Alex and his dad were on their third round of Rock, Paper, Scissors to decide who would get the last pancake, a shriek of frustration rose from the basement.

"Ben, you'd better get down here! I think the washer's finally had it!"

Alex did not like the basement. Not only was it unfinished, but it was made of stone. Four bare 60-watt lightbulbs provided illumination for most of the space, while an additional bulb, screwed sideways into the wall at the top of the stairs, serviced the entryway. Alex would never go down there alone if he could help it. Too many shadows darted in and around too many odd-looking angles. Nothing was straight making it hard to trust your eyes, Alex thought, especially when the adrenaline started pumping and he couldn't tell the difference between regular basement noises, and those that were, maybe, something else.

Alex and his dad turned the corner at the bottom of the stairs to find an unexpected marsh.

"Damn it!"

Alex didn't like it when his mother swore. When he imagined the best of his mother through a mind's eye that still colored his memories like the finger-painted collage he had created in Kindergarten, he saw her as the soothing nurturer he wished she could be forever: the one who applied band aids to skinned knees and mixed baking soda with warm water to make the swelling from bee stings go down and rocked him in the early morning hours when the voices wouldn't leave him alone. The profanity made her less.

"Ben, do you think you can fix this foolish thing? There's an awful lot of water spilling out."

Alex's dad was busy launching musty cardboard boxes onto elevated shelves. "Huh? Oh, I don't know ... I kinda doubt it, Shelly. I mean, I'll take a look at it but, well, that doesn't look very good, does it?"

“Shit.”

Alex winced.

“Now we’ve lost them both? Ben, how are we going to afford this?”

Last year the dryer had caught fire. Alex wasn’t technically home alone at the time, but his mom had been upstairs taking a nap. She had asked him not to disturb her while the clothes were drying. Alex understood that his mom was under a lot of stress at work. She was not a complainer, far from it, but she had a weariness about her, in her furrowed brow and her heavy sighs mostly, that made Alex uneasy. He liked being able to do as she asked and would go out of his way to turn down the TV and avoid the creakiest of the floorboards while she rested. He remembered the far away beeping from under the basement door. At first, he thought it was coming from a neighbor’s house; it had a dreamlike distance to it that allowed Alex to remain ambivalent for a minute. But, as the shrillness persisted, Alex had been forced to investigate. Upon opening the basement door, a task he detested under the best of circumstances, he could smell that something was wrong. A humid acridity lit up his nose, watering his eyes before they had a chance to adjust. As he peered more deeply into the descent, a mix of smoke and shadow flickered dangerous puppets onto the foundation stones. They danced and pointed and sang to Alex to come on down.

Come down and see what we’re doing, what fun we’re having while your mom is asleep. Come down here and we’ll let you play. You don’t have to be alone. Actually, you’ll never want to leave.

His mom had found him on the third stair, staring trancelike, beginning his step to the fourth. “Alex!” She had screamed. “What are you doing? Get up here, now! Why didn’t you wake me up?” Alex didn’t remember taking those steps. He only remembered running next door while his mother called the fire department. In the end, the voices danced away, the dryer was toast, and the laundry in Alex’s household had been air dried for the past year.

“I, well, I ... like I said, I’ll take a look, Shell. But, we might end up having to—you know ...”

“What, Ben? Buy a new one? Are you going to pick up *another* shift? Am I?”

“Maybe I can find a good used one in the *Penny Saver*. I don’t know. Come on, we’ll figure it out. We always do.”

Alex’s dad flashed his million-dollar smile and high fived his son. “Alex, go grab a mop and a bucket. Little lady, why don’t you go kick up your feet and eat some bon-bons. This is your Saturday morning, after all. The menfolk will be right happy to tidy up this little mess.”

Alex knew that dad was pulling out the corny, John Wayne routine to make his mom smile. It always worked, even if that smile did accompany a snort and an exaggerated roll of her eyes.

“Ok, ok, much obliged, Cowboy.”



“Yes, ma’am. We aim to please,” Alex’s dad swatted playfully after Alex’s mom as she walked by. She blushed and slapped his hand away and giggled like she must have when they were dating. Alex felt warm and reassured. As he began to follow his mom up the stairs, wondering if that last flapjack was still warm and what the heck bon-bons were, the hair suddenly stood up on the back of his neck.

He’s lying to you. He’s not happy. It’s all a show. He hasn’t been happy in a loooong time. You know it’s true.

The voice, soft and soulful, seemed to come from the gap between the risers. As he stopped to look more closely, Alex caught a glimpse of his father. No longer the swaggering Cowboy, Alex’s dad stood ankle deep in the soapy muck. He looked older and defeated, running one hand through his salt and pepper hair as he stared through the back wall.

From that week on, Alex had a new job. He was the laundry coordinator. Every Thursday, his mom would come home promptly at 6:00. His job was to gather up all of the dirty laundry in the house: clothes, towels, dishcloths, and, every other week, the bedsheets. He sorted them by lights, mediums, and darks, bagged them into three separate laundry bags, and had them ready to go when his mom got home. While it didn’t seem like a task he should enjoy, he found himself relishing the responsibility. His parents needed him. Also, he wasn’t just waiting for his mother to arrive at some random hour. She had a schedule to keep, and Alex was not going to be the one to make her late.

After a quick meal, usually a partially gelatinous Hungry Man TV dinner or a hastily fried Steak-Umm sandwich, Alex would throw the bags into the back seat and the two of them would be off to the laundromat. The Wash & Fold coin-op was a whole new experience for Alex. It was bright and busy. Alex liked the change maker and he *loved* picking out the machines and throwing in the clothes. The washers were impossibly big, not like the rusty little Maytag that had busted its guts in his basement. Alex would stare at the sloshing innards as his family’s clothes went round and round and round. He found the spin cycle particularly captivating and couldn’t help wondering, although he knew it was a terrible idea, what going that fast might feel like.

Sometimes, between cycles, his mom would take Alex across the street to the Kresge’s lunch counter where they would split a vanilla milkshake. He and his mom would use two straws to drink out of the same glass. They would race to see who could get to the bottom of the glass first without getting a brain freeze. There was always more in the giant silver mixing cup once the glass ran out. Alex’s mom would pretend to have a stomach ache and moan, “Oh no, I couldn’t *possibly* drink any more. I guess you’ll have to finish the rest.” Then she would spin around on the barstool twice before hopping off and heading up to pay the bill.

This night, though, was different. From the moment they walked into the Wash & Fold, Alex’s mom looked sick.

“What’s the matter, Mom? You all right?”

“Yeah, kiddo. I’m fine,” she sighed unconvincingly. “Just tired. Here’s a few singles. Go and get some change, ok?”

Alex walked to the back of the room where he inserted the warm dollar bills and waited for his quarters. The last one, a real wrinkly one with several tears and a ripped-off corner took him three tries. Alex rubbed it on the edge of the machine to smooth it out, just like he had been taught. When it finally went through he shouted, “Bingo!” and turned to go back to his mom. He stopped short when he saw her emptying the contents of her purse onto the counter, picking through them, and then jamming them back.

“Are you *fucking* kidding me,” he heard her mutter, a little too loudly.

The change maker was at the back of the room near the emergency exit. Behind the machine was a small alcove containing a utility closet. The fluorescent lights did not quite reach to its door. Alex spun around as a voice started to speak. It was low, and much like saccharine, was almost sweet, but not quite.

That was a big one. Something must be really wrong. What did you do, Alex? How did you upset her? Maybe your dad upset her. Maybe she’s just finally had enough of both of you. And who could blame her. You are an awful lot of trouble. Come back here with me. Come back here in the shadow and we’ll talk about it.

Alex turned to run, but now his mom was standing next to the register. He saw her motioning with her right hand out the window toward the parking lot. The attendant was looking out with her, nodding in agreement. With her left hand, however, she was palming a handful of quarters from the nearby jar labelled *Mission Center*. Alex was paralyzed, unable to process what he was seeing.

She’s a thief, Alex. She’s a crook, stealing food out of the mouths of the homeless. Unless ... maybe that’s where we’ll all end up. At the Mission Center. Maybe that’s why she’s taking the quarters. It’s like it’s her money anyway if that’s where we go when we lose the house. Don’t worry, Alex. Wherever you end up, we’ll be there too. Why don’t you —

Alex broke into a run. His mother, now loading clothes hurriedly into the washer, looked up in surprise. Alex’s head hit her chest at full speed causing them both to stumble back against the row of washers. A man in overalls glanced over, annoyed at this break in the routine.

“Alex, what happened?! You’re sweating, and you almost put me on the floor.”

Alex clutched his mom as tightly as he had since he could remember. He let out a fateful moan and willed himself not to cry. He wanted to ask her why. About the money, yes, but also about her job, and his father, and the soft voices, just, everything lately, why? But instead he just clutched her, soothing himself with the beating of her heart.

When they finished loading the clothes, Alex laid down on the row of chairs, put his head in his mother’s lap, and watched the clothes go around and around. He knew, of course, that this was not a milkshake night. But he was warm and secure in his mother’s embrace and everything, for the moment, was quiet.



Eurydice

by Emily Orkins (SI 17)

a translation of *Die Sonette an Orpheus l.1*

A tree rises in pure transcendency,
atuned to Orpheus' singing—a willow in his ear.
The silence fell, hushed yet
burning, beckoning a change in mine.

Creatures of wild stillness drew near
from the unhindered forest of their nests and lairs.
Yet it was not from hesitancy or fear,
mistrust or terror from which their silence emerged,

But from listening.
Snarls, growls, shrieks
shrunk within their hearts to make room
for the shelter of his music.

A shelter built of his heart's darkest longing,
but not enough room did he make for me.
A shuddering entryway gives in to Doubt's tempest,
and the shelter of his music crumbles
so that I can no longer hear.

Mulled Wine

by Sara Skubal (SI 17)

Lance and I loaded our bags into the trunk of the car and set the playlist. This was our first trip back to Virginia coming from our new home in Rhode Island. "It will be fun, I promise," he said. "And at least she'll make that mulled wine!" I groaned at his sarcasm and smiled in spite of myself.

The mulled wine is always terrible. It smells comforting, delicious, and inviting, but it burns your throat on the way down. Every year, you hope it turns out right, but by the end of your mugful, the cinnamon stings and the cloves choke. The grit stays in your mouth all night.

And it doesn't even get you drunk.

When my parents divorced, my dad got Christmas day, and my mom got Christmas Eve and early Christmas morning. This was a particularly important sticking point in the custody arrangement my parents wrote. It became a matter of grave importance to both parents, and the holidays became a tug-of-war of gifts and celebration. I can do joy better than your father can. I can make jolly and bright like your mother's never seen.

I placed the array of gifts in the backseat of the car. This year, my mom's new hobby is yoga. Six months before it was vegetable juicing and organic cleanses. Before that, biking. Before that, chakra "healing." And still before that, power ballet. Her hobbies are collector's items she uses to hide behind. She buys everything associated with that particular thing, uses it once, and locks it away in some storage unit on the other side of town, the same place where she keeps her mother's ashes.

But that's another story for another day.

Though she threw a lot of it away after her second marriage fell through, her basement is still full of fad exercise equipment, rock climbing gear, and hundreds of self-help books. It's impossible to find a gift to match her new, performative "interest" that she hasn't already bought fifteen versions of.

This year we went with yoga pillows that supposedly align your spine and a hardcopy version of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which she's asked for since my sister recently started dating a Pakistani man named Hassan, and she remembered she was supposed to be interested in Eastern mysticism from her "chakra healing" this time last year. She claims to have already read the book, and loved the beautiful story and rich detail of that final battle. She sighs out how our Western philosophy is ill-equipped to understand the deep mystery of ancient India. I point out that the book was also used to justify the caste system. She shakes her head in confusion and retorted that I didn't understand the majestic story's overall message and the Indian people's cosmic awareness as "naturally spiritual beings." When I attempt to push back against her casual, accidental racism and explain that I use the text in my classroom in our unit on Eastern philosophies, she loses interest and points out how well her kale crop did this fall. They are full of folic acid, you know. Super food.

Like her elaborate, expensive pastimes, my mother goes all out for the holiday season. Christmas Eve dinner that has become a holy day in its own right, as far as she is concerned. The holiday took on artificial symbolism as the years progressed. We became characters in a play, all for my mother's sake. Her family is estranged and she struggles to make and maintain relationships with family or friends or significant others, so the holiday weighs on her. To her, it's a reminder of her failed marriages and troubled upbringing, of which she frequently reminds us. "How lucky you kids have it. You have two families that love you, when I have



none!” She would force out a laugh to keep the tone light, jovial. Lights up. We’re on. We would nod appreciatively and squeeze each other's hands under the table.

And so, Christmas Eve becomes a caricature of itself—the tree is always huge, the anticipation of Santa is hollowly exaggerated, and the music always too loud and cheerful, which never matches the ambience of the room.

The holiday became a carefully choreographed dance. 5, 6, 7, 8. Nod, give thanks, feign agreement, eat. Turn, sashay, stomach the mulled wine, hug goodbye, move to the next step. Everything is arranged, every moment is supposed to be part of a tradition that is performed as ritual. We would put on our matching pajamas, watch *Elf* and go to bed early. I got the routine down pat. We give our bows, and retreat to the wings to each other's quiet company. As the oldest, I had to serve as dance captain, director, and stage manager. This was until I moved and left the show in the hands of my younger sister, whom I adore, but does not have the kind of experience to pull the difficult number off. She’s never even been off book. She constantly asks for her lines. Amateur.

On the day we loaded the moving van for New England, Jenny held me and grumbled under her breath, “You better come home for Christmas Eve.” *I’m only the understudy.*

We arrived at around 5:30 after the full day of driving. I gave Lance the look of desperate escape, he pulled me close, kissed me, and told me it would be fine. It always is. This was his sixth Christmas Eve he's spent with us and he’s become my swing actor—filling in where I need him to. Though I did not direct the evening’s show, he still knows all his lines. A true professional.

Lance opened the door, and we were hit with intense scent of that mulled wine. The house smelled of cinnamon, star anise, orange peel, and nutmeg, which ruptured against the smells of boiled potatoes and burning ham. The clashing juxtaposition of odors was nauseating. My mother cannot cook, which my father always gleefully reminds us when it’s his turn for celebration.

We crossed the threshold and Mom’s dog, Abbie, was barking wildly (as she always does), and I knew it was my line to make the obvious joke. “What, how could you forget me?!” Cue laughter. My mom rushed into the foyer, her hair up, flour on her worn Alaska sweatshirt. She embraced me. “Hi sweetheart! How was the drive? Hopefully traffic wasn’t too bad around New York!” Open, loving, inviting. Hopefully this doesn’t burn on the way down.

I responded with overly exaggerated complaints about New York drivers and that weird road sign we saw and the funny license plate. My sister swept in and hit her mark, harkening back to an inside joke that we used to have about 95 South and that one guy in the pink sedan with his face on the side.

My mother gave me the mulled wine in her hand and patted my back. Here we go.

As Jenny hugged me her hello, she mentioned, “There is some news.” I braced myself for the plot twist. In faux nonchalance, she slowly said, “Hassan will probably join us later.” She couldn’t hide her smile. She was a bad actor.

My mom heard this miraculously from the kitchen and with phony excitement, “Oh Hass-anne?! How wonderful!”

This is a very different script than I'm used to. None of us had met him yet and my sister kept him close to her chest. She didn't want to expose him to this performance.

She had also kept him hidden from me, which was a particular sore spot because we tell each other everything. I could finally meet the man that stole a part of my sister.

Hassan comes from a small family and immigrated to the US from Pakistan when he was three. He is Muslim. My mother did not know how to approach the situation and I could tell from her stage business. She asked what "fun ethnic spices" could be added to the mulled wine as she stirred the pot.

As if on cue, the doorbell rang. Jenny rushed to the door and went outside. Presumably to go through the script with him.

After about a minute, the door swings open. "It smells great in here, Ms. Skubal," Hassan cheerfully offered as he walked into the foyer, holding a large, awkward potted plant. The kid's got a promising acting career ahead of him.

"Hass-in. It's great to meet you. But it's Smith, actually."

"Sorry?"

"Smith. Not Skubal. Well. Maybe not even Smith anymore. Maybe I'll go back to Skubal. Would your father mind, Jenny, if I went back to Skubal? Or what about Skubal-Smith? I hate my maiden name. Yezek sounds like a sneeze! Ha ha."

Beat.

"So sorry about that! I should have asked before. I would have brought you some flowers, but Jenny told me about how you feel about cut flowers and how unsustainable they are. I got you this potted plant for your home—it's more eco-friendly." He's got real chops.

He places the huge potted plant on the floor in the back of the room, out of the way. It didn't quite fit in, but it was far more beautiful than the dying Poinsettias lining the mantle.

"Oh thank you, Haz-un. Mmmmm. Do you smell that mulled wine? Would you like some?"

"I, uh, actually would love to, but—" Jenny cut him off.

"He's Muslim, Mom. He can't drink."

"Oh, of course. I don't really either. I get silly. I have some orange juice? Milk? I also have some veggie-packed fruit juice, if you want some of that. Full of fiber!"

The oven dings. "Oh! That's the oven! I hope you're hungry for ham!"

"That also sounds great, Mrs.—uh—Ms. Skubal, Skubal—Smith, but—"

"He can't eat pork either, Mom."

"It's not pork, it's ham."

I put my mulled wine down. Even one sip was one too much.



“Mmmm. Are those mashed potatoes? Mashed potatoes are my favorite. I could eat a whole plate.”
Someone give this man an Oscar.

Hassan improvises like an expert. He is funny, charming, and conversation ebbs and flows easily among the four of us “kids.” Maybe this year’s production won’t be so bad. Because this year, the troupe accepts one more.

They’re flashing the lights. Intermission is over. We move to the dinner table. Bring on Act Two.

The Mighty Mitochondria

by Emma Smith (SI 17)

The mitochondria, my mother likes to remind me, are the source of our life force. What is so fascinating about the Mighty Mitochondria is the fact that they reproduce separately from the rest of the cell. Instead of being half of your mother's DNA and half of your father's, the Mighty Mitochondria have their own set of DNA, which is inherited from your mother.

The sunlight drips through the trees and splashes on the deck as we sit drinking our coffee. It's just the two of us, my mom and me. "You have my mitochondria," she explains, "which are my mother's mitochondria, which are her mother's before her and so on and so on until we get to first woman of our maternal line. This is good because that line has great energy," she adds assuredly, patting my knee. "You might have inherited your weak stomach from your father's side, but luckily you have my mitochondria. You have my life force."

I laugh, but the moment is broken by the sounds of the enemy at the gate. Leaping up, my mother slams her half drunk coffee down, not caring that some is sloshing over the sides, and races down the deck stairs in a semi-awake frenzy. Her fuzzy pink bathrobe (which she also inherited from her mother) flaps around her as she chases away the sparrows from the bird feeders. I see her arms flailing about her as she runs one way and then walks another. "Get away, you bastards," she shouts, disturbing the early morning quiet.

The sparrows scatter (as well as every other bird trying to eat), and trudging up the stairs, she throws her hands up and whines that it's just no use. Those horrible birds just won't take a hint that nobody wants them here.

Wrapping her bathrobe around her as she plops down next to me, she confides, "I'm worried, you know, for my bluebirds. Your dad and I haven't seen them around since the sparrows killed their babies, and I don't know what I'm gonna do. What if they're gone, Em? What if they don't come back?"

"They'll come back, Mom. They came back after last year, and remember what happened to them last year? Grammy won't abandon you. She knows you need the bluebirds. She knows you need her," I say, now patting her knee.

"I just hate those sparrows so much. All they do is ruin my bird sanctuary. Don't they understand how important my bluebirds are? Don't they know they're my mother?" Her voice, no longer worried, is indignant at the thought of these selfish creatures keeping her mother from coming back to her. She picks up her binoculars and surveys the area. No bluebirds in sight.

"Well, I don't know if they know that, they are birds, but I do know that the bluebirds come back just when you need them. Remember how they came back when you were worried about Dad's invention and if it would sell, and there they were."

"Yes, you're right. They always come back. I should be more trusting. I'll stop complaining, Mom," she says turning her face up to the sky.



Her eyes laugh as she tells me that her mother is shaking her arthritic finger (you'd think that'd be cured in heaven) at her and saying, "You've got that right, Anner."

At ease now, having heard directly from her dead mother, she sinks back into her seat and resumes what's left of her coffee.

"I know I complain to her too much," she reveals. "I always have. It's always been one thing after the next, *When will this happen? Will this be alright? Will I get blah, blah, blah? Can you hear me, Mom?* The poor woman, even in death, she can't escape it." She drinks the last of her coffee before continuing, "You talk to her a lot don't you?"

I nod. "Yeah, I do. I ask for a lot of stuff, too. I wonder where I got that from?"

We laugh conspiratorially, and somewhere I think I hear my grandmother laughing with us. Her belly is shaking, her eyes water, and she slaps her knee too hard.

My mom reaches over and takes my hand. Her eyes search for Mrs. and Mr. Bluebird in their usual places: their house, the top of the arbor, and the taller feeder on the right. They're nowhere to be seen, but my mom doesn't let her gaze drop. She's still looking for them. I wonder to myself, *Why does she need Grammy to be here? Why does she need a sign?*

She lets go of my hand and wraps her bathrobe around her tighter, saying, "You know that Nan's looking out for you. Always has. She sends the bluebirds for you, too, and not everybody in this family gets a bluebird. My sisters are getting pretty jealous. Your brothers don't get them either, but I suppose my father takes care of them. The girls were always the favorites, mitochondrial discrimination, you know, and you, well you were her first grandchild born on her sixtieth birthday, so that's just a whole n'other ball of wax. She'll take care of you, Em. You have nothing to worry about."

"Thanks, Mom; I appreciate it," I say with my head on her shoulder and a smile she can't see.

She kisses the top of my head. "You got it, Boogie. Now, I have to talk your dad about our POA for today. I'm thinking that he should get some work done on our arbor, and maybe I can vacuum my moss garden. It's been a whole week and that kind of laziness just won't do," Her voice trails off as she looks towards the bluebird house. "Maybe I'll wake your brother up and he can sit out by the bluebird house with the BB gun."

She stands up to stretch and go to the kitchen, but stops at the sliding door. "You know, there's a spectacular peony bush downtown by Page Hardware. If you want to go with me tonight, like 10:30, we can cut you a bouquet to take back up to Suffield with you. You in?" Her eyes glinting at the prospect of her favorite (and only) illegal activity.

"Yeah, I would love that. We should bring Char."

"Perfect," she calls back as her (and her mother's and maybe one day my) bathrobe floats behind her. "And you know, despite what your dad says, it's alright to cut those flowers," she adds.

"Afterall, I am a taxpayer," we say together.

I sit back against the chair and let my eyes close for a long moment. Something soft lands on me and I open my eyes to my mom's (my grandmother's) fuzzy pink bathrobe blanketing me.



For Sale

by Alicia Robinson (SI 17)

For sale: baby shoes, never worn ... read the inconspicuous ad in the bottom left corner of page eleven. There it was in print. So official ... so real ... so ... permanent. A tear drop hit the page just above the ad and spread like a poison through the fibers of the thin, gray paper making the ink bleed. Through tear-blurred eyes I watch the black letters smudge and spread, oozing out beyond the very neat lines of the advertisement's box.

Why did I even look for it? I knew it would be there; the copy-editor had said as much in that voice that everyone uses. That voice that goes along with that slight empathetic tilt of the head. The one that says, "Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry," without their ever even saying the words.

So, why torture myself by looking for it? Maybe I needed to see it for it all to be real. But shouldn't the emptiness of her bassinet be real enough? Or the never-ending silence that pervades the house during the day? Or the phantom cries in the depths of the night that jolt me awake from my restless slumber sending me stumbling over to her bassinet only to rediscover its emptiness?

Crumpling the page in my hand, I walk over to the trash and toss it in as if it is just another inconsequential piece of garbage. I stand there for a moment, eyes closed, rivulets of tears streaming down my cheeks, just trying to keep breathing. Who knew just breathing could be this hard?

Footsteps fall gently, tentatively behind me. Before he can even place his hand on my waist, I feel it there, hesitantly hovering, reaching out. "Don't ...," I whisper through clenched teeth. The tightness in my chest is crippling and my body recoils under the weight of his hopeful touch. At my request, I feel the presence of his hand fall away and a dejected sigh escapes from deep within. Immediately a wave of guilt takes over at rejecting him yet again. I should let him in. Why can't I let him in?

I hear the clanging of pots and pans behind me as he begrudgingly continues about his morning in a seemingly futile attempt to play the role of dutiful husband. He has been so patient with me and I have given him nothing in return except rejection, after rejection, after rejection. How much longer will his patience last? How much longer will my body involuntarily shrink away from his every touch, every glance? I have a sudden urge to turn and run to him, beg him to hold me, but I'm frozen, held in place by the insurmountable chasm time has created.

The cabinet drawer slams shut quaking its metal inhabitants and breaking my trance. "Goddamnit!" I spin around toward the explosion to find my husband leaning forward gripping the edge of the counter red-faced and white-knuckled, attempting to temper his outburst.

"Dan! Are you hurt?" I rush toward him scanning him for injury.

"Of course I'm hurt. Are you really that blind that you can't see that?" he sneers unable to look at me.

"Where?!" I demand, panic setting in. Taking his hands in mine, I inspect them for evidence of blood. Turning them over and over in mine, examining the rough palms carefully with my fingertips. "I don't see any bl—"

“No, Molly, stop,” he insists with an assertive edge to his voice. “You aren’t hearing me.” I halt my frantic examination looking up at him worriedly. His face softens as we lock eyes and he reaches one hand up to caress my tear-stained cheek. He takes a sharp breath in, clearly unsure of how to begin.

“You ... you aren’t the only one who lost her, Moll. She was mine, too, you know. I’m in this with you. I ...” His voice cracks with a mournful tremor, and I realize that this is the first time since we lost her that we’ve held hands without it being a facade of affection.



I'm Told

by Nikki Milewski (SI 17)

I'm told there was once a time when government ruled day and night, and all crime was punishable under the law. Hard to imagine now when the scorching summers and bone-chilling winters have made survival the utmost priority. If you are strong enough to withstand the weather, you still need to watch your back at night. Killing during the day is prohibited, but getting to the next dawn is a challenge everyone faces alone. It's every woman for herself.

It is not yet dusk, but a gunshot cracks through the sounds of a normal afternoon. The entire park freezes, runners halt in their paths and uncaught frisbees float to the ground. For a moment all is still. Then fear scatters half the park goes while curiosity drives the rest rushing toward the sound. I run with this group, heart pounding, scared of what we will find. Turning the corner onto the next block, I bump into the wall of people that have suddenly formed, standing silent and still. I stretch to see over the adults in front of me, but to no avail. Instead, I shove and elbow my way around the circle of onlookers until I can see the ground in front of us.

A small boy, who can't be more than six years old, crouches next to the fallen body of his mother. His small hands turn red as he pokes and prods her, trying to get her to wake up, sit up, be alive. As understanding dawns for him (and for me), he breaks the silence with a heart-wrenching wail. The boy's miniature shoulders slump and his hands fall to his sides, his body giving in to the new despair.

A hook in my gut drags me one step forward, toward the boy, but I force myself to stop short. Scanning the faces around me in this circle, compassion is not present. My teeth chatter at the sudden chill running down my spine, as the emotionless faces remind me of another circle, years ago. Father's gasping last breaths after becoming a human shield. Tears blurring my vision, swirling together the blank expressions of the first witnesses willing to venture out in the early morning light, curious to see the aftermath of the night's final crime. Not one of them spoke to me or offered me anything, even though I was a ten-year-old newly orphaned. If my grandmother hadn't found me ... but she was long gone now.

Not a single person moves to help the boy. Without an ally, it is certain he will die before tomorrow's dawn, and become just the next child in the series of those whose frail immune systems have succumbed to our severe winters, those who have seemingly disappeared after a murdered parent can no longer protect them. It is almost as if everyone knows from experience that the boy and his mother are both beyond saving. The community sees it as an unfortunate reality—not worth the energy of an emotional response when death is so common, not worth the additional burden of responsibility for this child when personal survival is already so difficult. While it is an unspoken crime to kill a child—a member of the supposedly hopeful future—someone has already broken the rule of “no death before dark” by killing his mother. The thought of such lawlessness shocks me into scanning the crowd again, this time with paranoia driving my search ... where is the shooter?

The thought seems to have finally occurred for the rest of the crowd as well, as other heads turn frantically left, right, back, and front in a fear-inducing ripple. Whispered questions, interrogations and denials, hum through the assembly.

“Did you see anything?”

“No, I just got here. What happened?”

“Where’s the shooter?”

“Who’s the shooter?”

“Did you see it?”

“Who is she?”

“What did she do to deserve this?”

“It’s not dark yet!”

The unease is palpable. I am shoved as people try to escape past those taking on the responsibility of vigilante justice. Voices rise with the tension, and a fight feels imminent. With the sun setting, that would not end well. A feeling of panic swells within me. My chest tightens, and tears well in my eyes. The unprecedented daytime murder makes me crave safety. I need to get out of here.

The little boy is still sitting next to his mother, looking only at her, caught in a tragic bubble separate from this chaos. The pity I felt for him earlier cuts through my self-preservation, and I crouch next to him.

His confused, tear-filled, quick-darting eyes indicate I have broken the spell around him. He instinctively looks to his mother for guidance and realizes again that he is alone. I’m sure he has always been taught to be guarded against strangers, as I was when I was his age. I try to portray simultaneous reassurance and urgency.

“This street is going to be even more dangerous the longer you stay here. I’ll keep us safe tonight. Let’s go.” The promise feels false as soon as it leaves my lips. The boy nods hesitantly, letting himself feel a tiny bit of relief, and guilt pangs me. I can’t guarantee anything. I can barely save myself.

I take a steadying breath and reach out my hand. His grip is strong, clinging to what is probably his only lifeline. A tiny kiss lands on his mother’s forehead, and he stands next to me. With no time to waste, I pull him down the street, keeping my head down in the hopes of avoiding attention. He lags behind me, face turned to his mother until she is out of sight.

Right. Left. Right. I zigzag through the city maze, guided more by intuition than intention. I pull the boy behind me, hearing the pitter-patter of his feet at twice the rate of my own while his shorter legs struggle to keep up. It is not until we arrive at my family’s old house that I realize where my path was leading. Memories of security and love have drawn me here, but they are only that—memories. This boy I have taken into my care cannot replace my family, and this is not our home. But at least the street is quiet, empty, and safe enough to pause for a moment. It seems just in time, too. The boy in front of me is shaking from head to toe, his teeth chattering even though it is warm today. His eyes dart in every direction, a deer caught in headlights. His muscles are tense and he stands with as much distance between us as is possible without being obviously awkward.



I sit down on the front steps of my childhood home and attempt to forge a bond that will ease his fears.

“Hi,” I say, “I’m Finn. What’s your name?”

The boy’s voice cracks on the almost inaudible reply: “Grant.”

“I’m really sorry about your mom. I lost my parents when I was just a little older than you. I remember being really scared. Do you have any other family to take care of you?”

Grant shakes his head, a new set of tears threatening to spill down his already streaked cheeks. My fears are confirmed. I’m all he has.

“Well, if you’re willing to trust me, we can stick together. I know how to get food, and I’ve got a secret place we can hide to make it through the night. It’s not much, but my grandmother taught me everything I know, and it’s how we survived after my dad was killed. I can teach you too. All you need to do is follow my lead. What do you say?”

Grant stares into my eyes for a moment, then nods slowly. I can tell he is still hesitant, unsure if he should trust me. He’s old enough to know that kind strangers don’t exist in our society. But the sun is setting and he’s old enough to know he shouldn’t tempt fate going out by himself tonight. The rumble of his stomach surprises him, and he looks down his torso, shoulders jumping with a sad hiccup.

“Let’s get you something to eat.”

I steer him as quickly as I can toward the marketplace. Merchants are making their last trades of the day and beginning to pack up for the night. I’ll need to be fast. I scan the plaza with a trained eye, looking for a good target.

I am unnerved by all the eyes on me and Grant. I am accustomed to slipping through the marketplace unnoticed, stealing most of what I need and bartering with stolen goods when I have to. Few people care to watch a teenage girl in plain clothing, but they are captivated by Grant. The busy noise of the marketplace lowers in volume and transactions pause as we pass. A ripple of turning heads follows us. I look down at Grant, trying to see what they see. His diminutive shoes slip into the cracks between the cobblestones, making him trip along at my side. The front of his shirt is flecked with dried blood, and his hands are still smeared with the reddish-brown remnants of his mother’s murder.

My breath catches in my throat. Even if these people do not know about the death on the other side town, they will remember the small boy with the bloody hands, tragedy stamped across his face. The news will eventually spread, and it won’t take long to follow a trail of gossip to find us if someone is looking for Grant.

I don’t know why Grant’s mother was killed, but I also don’t want to meet the person responsible in order to find out. Anonymity is key to our safety. He needs to be cleaned up if we want to have a chance of appearing normal. I pull Grant over to the fountain in the center of the square, and submerge his hands in the pool at its base. He winces at the cold water, but the shiver seems to bring him out of the trance he’s been in. A tear rolls down his cheek as he watches the water around his hands turn red, the last connection to his mother dissipating into the fountain.

I scrub my own hands and splash both of our faces clean. When I am satisfied that we no longer wear the horror of the afternoon (at least externally), I set my sights on food again. Subtly using my peripheral vision to take in our surroundings, I am relieved to find that we aren't attracting as much attention anymore. Most people have returned to their business, and the produce merchant at the cart nearest the fountain is in the middle of one of her final sales for the evening, calculating how much a middle-aged woman owes for the overflowing bag of fruits and vegetables she has gathered.

I casually pick an apple from the top of the heap, and pass it to Grant. His wet and still-shaking hands fumble the apple's slick skin, and it drops with a thud, rolling right past the customer. She looks up from her bag, along with the merchant, so I place a second apple I had been attempting to pocket back in its bushel. I take Grant's hand and walk quickly toward the breadstand, where the morning's leftovers are usually not carefully watched in the evening.

The baker has his back turned while he packs up for the night, but an inopportune snuffle from Grant spins the baker toward us at the exact moment that I am tucking a baguette into my jacket sleeve. The baker's eyes widen, and I start shaking my head emphatically, as if that will stop him from protecting his livelihood.

“STOP! THIEF!”

I push off the cart into a well-practiced escape sprint, but stumble after only a few steps, my arm practically ripped out of its socket. Grant's grip on my hand tightens in terror as he is pulled like a tug-of-war rope by the baker. While I can outrun anyone in the market, Grant has slowed me down, and now we're caught.

I've never had to think of a backup plan before. Rummaging through my pockets, I find the few coins I collected this week and frantically push them towards the baker. “Please. Take these. It's all I have. I'm so sorry. We're hungry. Please,” I beg.

The baker's calloused fingers scrape over my palm as he snatches the coins, but his hold on Grant's arm doesn't loosen. Pocketing the coins, the baker shakes his head. “Not enough. Try again, girlie, or your boy stays with me until the debt is paid.”

Grant squeezes my hand, his eyes darting between me and the baker. His face crinkles as he tries to fight back the tears that well up in his eyes. I rack my brain to think of something I can trade. A bead of nervous sweat drips from my forehead and plops onto the sleeve on my outstretched arm. My jacket.

“I'll trade you my jacket for two more loaves,” I offer the baker.

His eyebrows raise in surprise at the extent of my desperation, but he agrees. I wiggle my hand out of Grant's, and hand him the stolen baguette while I slip out of the jacket. With my jacket securely in his hands, the baker lets go of Grant and passes me the promised two loaves. I turn to go.

Even though he's already won, the baker has to have a parting warning: “Next time you better come with money. I'll be watching—”



“It won’t happen again, I swear.” At least that is true. I won’t be stealing anything with Grant around. Three semi-stale loaves of bread for my jacket. Even though the evening is warm, I shiver at the thought of the coming winter. It took me months of stealing and trading to earn enough for that jacket, and now it was gone because of this little boy. I stomp toward the woods, with Grant trotting at my side. Why did I decide to take him in? This kid had caused me so much trouble in less than an hour. I could have gone along with everyone else, and just left him there. Who am I to think I am capable of taking care of anyone besides myself? I’ve got a good system for survival... why did I mess that up?? But my father and grandmother didn’t raise me to be selfish. Even my father’s final act in life was a sacrifice for me. I couldn’t dishonor his memory by only thinking of myself.

When my father was killed, I sat on the street in that spot for what could have been hours. I sat after the curious crowd lost interest, after the cleaners came to take his body away. I remember locking eyes with one of the cleaners. He was around my father’s age, and I found myself wishing they could switch places. He looked sadly between me and my father, and made the sign of the cross over himself in what I assumed was a prayer of thanks that he and his children had made it through the night safely. The cleaner went about his morbid business, but I still sat, frozen to the scene.

Some time later, my grandmother came running down the street toward me. I remember being surprised—I had never seen her run before. Our neighbor hovered in the background as my grandmother fussed over me, a million questions the result of tension between caretaker worry and her own grief. She never even got to say goodbye to her only child. I was too in shock to speak, but I pointed and grunted the best answers I could manage. Somehow, she managed to get me to stand and walk home.

When we reached the doorstep, grandmother turned to the neighbor I had forgotten about: “Thank you for letting me know.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” came the incredibly inadequate reply.

Little did she know just how much we were going to lose. Father’s protection had allowed us to keep our house through so many war-filled nights, but the vultures swooped in on their jealous wings and drove us out soon after they heard he was gone. Grandmother and I were able to survive for several years in an abandoned hut deep in the woods that few people knew about. It was never easy, especially without much insulation in the winters, but we managed.

Last winter, a group of depraved pyromaniacs discovered our haven. I was jarred from sleep by the sudden heat and cacophony of crackling wood. I ran to grandmother’s side, begging her to wake up and run. Smoke filled our lungs and flames licked at our heels as we just barely escaped. Shivering without our coats, we stood in a terrified embrace as our last hope of a home was reduced to ashes. The sick, echoing laughter of the firestarters as they danced away through the forest still haunts me in my nightmares.

Grandmother did not survive that night. Without shoes or coat, the snow and bitter wind was too much for her aged body to withstand. Coughing on smoke hours after the fire had died out, grandmother’s head in my lap jumped as her body rocked with each contraction of her exhausted and damaged lungs. She gasped for air, mouth open and sucking like a fish out of water. She squeezed my hand as hard as she could (only a gentle pressure at that point), and her wide, still-expressive eyes told me it was

important to remember her last effort. I stroked the hair off her forehead and whispered, “It’s okay,” drawing on her strength. It wasn’t until her gasping stopped that I let the waterfall of tears fall over her.

With the coming winter, I hope the sacrifice of my jacket will not lead me to the same painful death grandmother had. Then Grant would be left alone again, like I was. My hand is squeezed now, and I look down at Grant. His shoulders rise and fall quickly with labored breaths. “Where are we going?” he asks, a mix of emotions from this terrible afternoon still heavy on his voice.

I feel instantly sorry for being so frustrated with him after the incident with the baker. I had been four years older and wiser when I lost my father, and was taken in by a grandmother whom I loved in the house I had always known as home before being exiled to these woods. Grant was alone in the world, hungry, and scared. He had been captured by the angry baker for something he didn’t do, had been dragged all over the city and now deep into the darkening woods by a stranger who had told him to trust her. Considering the circumstances, he was surprisingly brave and resilient for his age.

“We’re home,” I say, and lead him to the back side of the hill in front of us.

On top of this hill the abandoned hut had once stood, and I have since carved out a small hole just big enough for me to crawl through behind it. A small branch with a tangle of dead leaves cover the entrance to my burrow, and I carefully move it aside, showing Grant how to slide down the small sloped tunnel. I emerge into the underground bubble I call home, and call up for Grant to join me.

Nothing happens. I feel to the edge of the dugout for my bag of supplies, and pull out a candle and a butane lighter. It takes four tries to get a flame. The lighter must be low on fuel. I’ll have to steal one soon. With the flickering candle as a welcoming beacon, I peer up the entrance tunnel at Grant.

“Grant, come on. I know it seems strange, but it’s safe in here. I promise!”

He squints, doubting that climbing into this hole in the woods could be a good idea. He glances around at the last flickering rays of light, debating once again which of his fears is worse: being alone tonight or following me down the rabbit hole.

I try again, “I’ve never had a problem as long as I’m inside here before nightfall. No one can find this burrow, so it’s better than being out there once the hunters come out.” The sound of a primal howl, which sounds more human than animal, seems to be the deciding factor. Grant slides into the burrow. I hand him one of the loaves of bread, and he sits next to me by the candle.

We eat our bread in silence, but each bite tastes sour. Having Grant with me, we only lasted a few minutes before running into trouble. I had given away all of my money and my most valuable possession to feed us for just one day. How would we survive? The only option that came to mind was one I’ve successfully avoided this far in my life, and I was dreading even considering it. Stealing would be much easier when the merchants weren’t there to protect their wares ... but I would have to be out of the burrow at night. I would have to fight against my most basic instinct and intentionally venture into danger when everyone smart enough to survive stays inside.



I weigh this option in my mind while Grant cries himself to sleep. At first, I want to protect and comfort him. He rolls away from me and stuffs his fist in his mouth to muffle his whimpers. So I pretend not to notice, trying to give him a shred of dignity.

“Finn?”

I’m surprised to hear him speak.

“Yes?”

“When my mommy wakes up, how will she find us?”

Sucker punch to the gut. How do I answer that? Poor Grant either doesn’t realize what happened, or is blocking out the mental images that would help him piece together the truth.

“Grant, this is going to be hard to hear, so I need you to be brave. Can you do that?”

He nods, a shadow moving in the shadows of the burrow.

“Your mom isn’t asleep, so she isn’t going to wake up. She was shot. She’s ... She’s dead. I’m sorry.”

There is a long pause as his young brain works to absorb this information. There are a few sniffles, then nothing. I discover I’m holding my breath while I wait for his response.

“So ... you’re going to take care of me from now on?”

Breath whooshes out of me and my heart melts a little. “Yes, Grant. I’ve got your back. I know I can’t replace your mom, but I’ll do my best to keep you safe and fed.”

“Okay.”

I keep quiet, waiting to see if he says more. After several minutes of silence, I hear the steady breathing of sleep. I peek over my shoulder, just to be sure. He’s asleep. Time to go.

I arm myself with my empty bag (to keep my hands free for self-defense), the butane lighter, and my knife. A few deep breaths steady my nerves just enough to get me moving, but I can still feel my heart beating rapid-fire as I slowly crawl out of the burrow. I replace the branch of dead leaves, ensuring that the burrow’s entrance is invisible from all angles. I’ll hurry, but I want a little peace of mind that Grant will be safe while I’m gone.

It is almost too easy. I run along empty streets between the edge of the woods and the marketplace. A few picked locks and I have a cornucopia of food in front of me. I fill my bag with as many items as I can, prioritizing things that would last several days without refrigeration. I don’t know when I’ll next be able to get out here. I close up the crates and padlock them again, mentally apologizing to the merchants. If I didn’t have to keep Grant fed and safe, I wouldn’t be stealing so much. Well, I’d still be stealing, but not such large quantities at a time.

While I have the chance, I check the baker's stand for my jacket. Just in case ... No luck. He had either brought it home or traded it away already. My head is stuck inside the baker's cart when I hear voices. Close voices. I freeze.

"Hey you!"

I grip the handle of my knife as I spin around. I am alone. I relax slightly when I realize the voice is at the other end of the marketplace, interrogating someone else. Three males, ranging in age from around 10 to early 20s, stand in an intimidating semi-circle around a teenage girl close to my age. I am about to tiptoe away when I hear what they are talking about.

"It's not her," says the ten-year-old boy.

"Who did you think I was?" The girl furrows her brow.

"Are you sure? It is dark." The teenage boy pushes the youngest toward the girl for a closer look. She backs up a step instinctively, and lands in the spot illuminated by the streetlight. I clamp a hand over my mouth to stifle the gasp that threatens to escape. She is wearing my jacket. I've patched it up in so many places with different pieces of cloth over the years that I know it can't possibly be any other coat.

"It's not her," the little one repeats.

"We're looking for our brother," the oldest man offers the girl in explanation. The other boys keep looking to him for their cues, and he takes control of the conversation. "He's six years old, and was last seen with a girl around your age who was wearing that jacket. Where did you get it?"

"My dad gave it to me this afternoon. He said he got it as payment from a girl who was trying to steal from him."

"Did he mention if this thief was with a little boy? Did he say which direction they went?"

"He did say she was with a boy. He thought it might be her son, and felt bad for scaring the kid so much when he caught them. He didn't mention anything after they left though."

"Okay, thanks. We just want to find our brother."

"How did your brother end up with the girl you're looking for?"

The oldest brother hesitates, but the middle one speaks up automatically. "She took him after our mother was—" He is cut off by his older brother giving him a swift elbow to the chest.

"Our mother left him. She has a pattern of doing that when her sons reach five or six years old, and then she finds a new boyfriend or husband, and starts the cycle over again." The girl seems skeptical, so the oldest brother goes for the sympathy factor. "I remember how hard it was for me on my own at that age, so I keep tabs on my mother and pick up my brothers as soon as they get abandoned. We've got a good little gang going now, and we want to rescue our newest member."



“Oh.” The girl pauses, on guard after a story that seems too sweet and happy for the community we live in.

I don’t blame her for doubting. My mind races. Grant told me he didn’t have any family. Is it really possible that he would be unaware of three half-brothers? Did he lie to me? Are these boys lying to the girl now? Why would Grant have come with me, a stranger, if he had any other option? Was I walking into a trap?

“Sorry I couldn’t be more helpful.” The girl side-steps the boys and walks backwards until she’s out of sight. Smart girl—you can’t be too careful at night.

The oldest brother watches until the girl is gone. Then he explodes, shoving the middle brother until he is pinned against a wall.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?! I thought you’d finally learned to keep your mouth shut. What were you gonna say—‘*Oh, yeah, my little brother here let jealousy get the best of his trigger finger—*’”

“Shut up!” The teen pushes his older brother away from him.

“You think telling strangers the truth would go over well?! Use your fucking head!”

“He’s only ten years old. They might understand ...”

“Understand?! You’ve gotta be kidding me. No one will understand. *I* don’t even understand, and I’m his brother.”

Through this heated discussion, the ten-year-old subject just stares at the ground. He doesn’t move, not even to follow the argument back and forth between his brothers.

“He didn’t know what he was doing ...” The middle brother offers more support.

“His age excuses nothing. I was his age when I picked you up, and you were his age when we took him in. It’s what we do. Dear old Mom decides her youngest son is getting too old to care about anymore, and we swoop in for the rescue. We add another link to our chain gang and move on. We do *not* take it personally. We do *not* cause a scene. We do *not*. *Shoot. Her.*”

This time my hand is not fast enough to contain the yelp that flies out of my throat. All three heads spin in my direction. Their eyes seem to pierce through me.

The little boy yells, “That’s her! That’s the girl!”

I run.

My first steps take me towards the woods, home, safety. Towards Grant. I swing around the corner of the next block and begin a detour route, hoping to lose them with a series of random turns. I’ve dodged

angry merchants so many times I know I can find my way back home from almost anywhere in the city. Even if it takes hours, I'll make it back. But I can't let them find Grant.

Left. Sprinting down a new street, the bag of stolen food bounces painfully against my hip with every other step. Several bounces knock apples out of the bag's open mouth. I let them fall without a second thought. I wrap my arm around the bag, trying to hold it so it won't smack against me.

Right. I hear the boys' quick footsteps behind mine, and push myself to run faster. The added weight of the food bag throws off my balance, making my right side work harder than the left. Calf muscles straining, I try to propel myself forward with longer strides.

Right. I can't let myself fall into a predictable pattern of turns. Any second longer it takes the boys to follow me is valuable time and distance between us. I hear the middle brother yell "Hurry up!" and assume the youngest boy is falling behind. I don't look back to confirm.

Left. My breathing is getting louder as I strain to keep going. I feel a cramp begin to develop in my side. I count in my head to make my inhales and exhales an equal length, and the cramp relaxes after four cycles.

Right. My knees absorb the shock of every stride, and pain becomes a rhythm gradually building in intensity. I shove the thought out of my mind, focusing on the positive, on my purpose. It's up to me to keep Grant safe. His brothers don't have his best interests at heart; I do. He can't be picked up by murderous strangers. My chest tightens—at the thought of the murder, or due to the difficulty of the run, I don't know.

Left. I haven't heard the brothers after my last two turns. I brace for a quick glance over my shoulder, and am relieved to find an empty street. I slow to a fast walk. My lungs desperately stretch to take in more air. My legs and feet scream with a soreness that is already setting in. I walk through the pain. Mind over matter.

Luckily, I know where I am, and I'm not far from the entry point into the woods closest to the burrow. I look behind me again, wanting to be sure I've lost the boys. No sign of them. One more corner and the edge of the woods loom before me. I climb slowly up the low incline of dirt separating pavement from nature, using my pain-free arms to pull me up by tree branches so my legs can have a break.

As I crest the hill, I hear them. "Into the woods!" The deep voice of the oldest brother yells. I turn. He is hunched over to catch his breath at the corner of the block, looking back over his shoulder down the street I had come from. His brothers must still be following behind. I take off running again.

Not bothering to zigzag through the trees, I use a straight path to put as much distance between me and them as possible. The oldest brother swears loudly when he trips over a root or rock, and I take pleasure in the thud of his stumble. It gives me a lead. I know these woods better than they do. Years of practice have taught me to leap over obstacles in my path and duck under low-hanging branches at just the right moment. Nothing from these woods is going to slow me down.

As I near the burrow, I glance behind me. The brothers are not in sight, although I can hear them still bumbling along. I squint for a second to be sure, then take advantage of the



moment and sprint around the back of my home hill. I swat the branch of dead leaf camouflage aside just long enough to slide down the tunnel, replacing it behind me. Hopefully it will be enough to confuse them if they make it this far.

Scuttling deeper into the burrow, my hand presses down on a tiny set of toes, and Grant awakes with a pained shriek. The boys above pause in sudden silence, and I can tell they are listening to find new prey. I pull Grant into my lap, clamping my hand over his mouth. He whimpers softly, and his warm tears wash over my hand. So slowly we are barely moving, I inch us farther into my underground sanctuary, stopping only when my back hits the hard wall of earth and I can just see a slit of moonlight from the entrance. Every muscle contracted, the pounding of my heart and Grant's mingle into a percussive rhythm that seems to fill the burrow. The fleeting thought that the boys outside might be able to hear our heartbeats only speeds mine up, so I try to breathe out the anxiety.

In, two, three. Out, five, six. Shallow, silent breathing. My lungs are heavy with panic, and small doses of oxygen are all I can manage. I stretch for the handle of my bag, and pull it towards me. The scratching, slithering sound as it slides over the dirt echo in my mind. When it has finally crossed the three-foot gap to rest next to me, I carefully feel around for the edge of the inside pocket. My fumbling fingers close around the hilt of my knife, and I pull it out, poised for defense. I hear the boys yell to each other again, but cannot comprehend their words. The muffled thumping of their footsteps above and around us continue for some time, and then stop.

Grant wiggles away from me and scurries toward the burrow's entrance tunnel. "Are they gone?" His curiosity is faster than my attempt to grab him. He is out of the burrow, and I scramble after him.

"There you are!" The deep voice sends a chill coursing through my body.

"Who are you?" Grant's voice is small and scared.

I'm out of the burrow in a second, and straighten up to my full height. As if that will intimidate this man. Up close now, my options seem limited. The oldest brother is a foot taller than me, and his muscles bulge as his grip on Grant's shoulders tighten. Time seems to freeze, or maybe that is just me. The other two brothers are only feet away, poised for action. If the youngest is capable of murder, what might the others do?

"We're your half-brothers, and we've been looking for you." The teenaged middle brother finally answers Grant's question.

"B—brothers? I don't have any—" Grant is understandably confused.

"Our mom left us. She's left you now too. We all stick together, help each other out. Family takes care of family." The oldest brother has a reassuring smile aimed at Grant, and Grant seems to be drinking the Kool-aid.

"Grant, you can't trust them!" I blurt out. "Your mom didn't want to leave you. They made that happen."

Grant's happy expression fades and is replaced by doubt.

The oldest brother is pure rage. His cheeks flush and his eyes narrow. “What. Are. You. Doing?” Every word is punctuated with a growl.

“Grant, they killed your mom. They took her from you.”

The oldest brother reaches behind his back and pulls out a gun. The gun they killed Grant’s mother with, I’m sure. He points it at me. I’m surprised that my instinct is not to flee. I can’t give up when Grant’s life is on the line. The man must sense my resolution. The corner of his mouth flicks into a sinister grin, and he moves the gun barrel away from me. Toward Grant.

I move before thinking. I had forgotten the knife was still clutched in my hand until it pierces the arm holding the gun. The man screams. The gun falls to the ground. The knife comes unstuck from his arm and finds his neck. It slides in easily this time, and spurts a red fountain. The knife tugs on my hand as the body falls. I feel the thud in my feet. More screams, younger screams. Fast footsteps flee.

My eyes burn. I blink until they don’t. Cold metal touches the hand not holding the knife. Grant shoves the gun into my open palm, and folds my fingers around the edges of it when I don’t grab on immediately.

“What ...?” I can’t find words to finish the question.

“You need to protect us. You’ll need this in case they come back.” He sounds so sure. Blood spots his shoulder and one side of his face, but he is oddly calm.

I glance at the man who now lies on the forest floor, and a wave of nausea makes me gag. What have I done? I’ve never ... not before. I’m no better than his brothers now.

“Was he going to make me dead like my mom?”

“I think so. Maybe.”

Grant nods slowly, over and over.

“I don’t think they’ll come back. I think we’re safe.”

Grant starts to climb into the burrow.

At least for tonight, I add silently.



Beyond

by Katy Blake (SI 17)

Weaving through an endless maze, thick and green,
joints fatigue, breath labors
in the desperate effort to reach the clearing before—

It is too late.

The emerald echo chamber resounds:

Is today the day?

No guarantees.

How long?

Be patient.

But ...

Miles and miles lie ahead while
minutes upon minutes have been left behind.

As single blades become verdant swords—
angular and unforgiving—pricking naked limbs,
vines transform to chains:
armor in place of an arbor.

Hostage of an omnipotent falconer.

The tug-of-war begins anew.

The canopy dissolves as
voices crack the air:

Wait!

Wait ...

Leaden lids lift and

Blink:

Blank.

Blurry smudges, absent colors.

Stare:

Stark.

Starched white coats amidst
sterile white walls and
static white noise.

Blinking again,
and deciding ...

NO.

No;
Now is not the time to relinquish the world of dreams.

Hope is a dangerous thing.
Hope is the only thing.

Letting go.

Gone.
Please!

The tension finally releases—
a victory.

A return to the meadow,
lush and infinite.

Sorry.
... [Silence]

There is simply silence.

And
body and soul
unfettered,
left to dance among the indeterminate beauty.



Scents

by Shannon Bollard (SI 17)

There hung a tree. O perfect pine perfume!
But, O Orpheus' stench, freed from its fleshy
folds,
Came a whiff so overwhelming that respiratory
functions
Cease. A flagrant fragrance, the world gasps for
life.

Out of stillness the creatures rush free,
Their woody sanctuaries violated with malodor,
And there paused. Not from desire or fear
Did they remain deep within his funk

But rather from sensory overload. Groans and
gags
Stood still in their gullets as the unwelcome
fumes
Traveled into lungs, trailing fingers down
throats,

With each gulping breath. Tears, heaves, pleads,
All of which made the innocent woods quake,
There did the ghostly gas destroy delicate noses.

The Dancer

by Emma Czaplinski (SI 17)

When the dancer moves, it's poetry.
The music begins.
An awakening.
Bliss.
A melodic
spark
ignites him into action.

The melody pirouettes within his chest
into a frenzy
and instills the innate impulse
to become a flurry of motion—
the physical embodiment of every snare hit
bass drop
each and every beat
until he's whirling,
grinning wildly—
squinting, smile-lined eyes
each sideways slide, each hip drop,
the glide of a savant.

He moves as a sort of court jester
a glint in his eye, a wink to the crowd,
knowing his euphoria is purely a performance.

He leaves the present world
and enters an ecstatic trance,
exuding the happiness and joy
the tribal drums
and 4/4 beat
bring to his throbbing heart
and skilled, sneakered feet,

the spirits of thousands
echoed in his rhythmic dance.

But the high spirits
falter.

The absolute
elation
cannot
be maintained.

Energy is sapped.

The bright lights
of the dance hall
turn to a foreboding
darkness
and the dancer is

alone.

Leaving the sanctuary of his bed
is a more difficult feat than
finding the erratic beat of
jazz improvisation.

Himself: a prison.

Motion is stilled.

Even the faltering flutter of eyelids
fails; they are forced shut.

He is needed in his dreams.
An escape from the oppressive world around
him—
An ill-match for the rhythm of his beating heart.



My Worst Realization

by Melissa Batulevitz (SI 17)

One word that I would use to describe my grandfather is timeless. Even though he just turned 90, he will always be 65 to me. Growing up, I lived with him for 26 years and continue to visit him every weekend. Since we have shared so much time together, I always felt like we knew everything about each other. That feeling changed instantly during one unforgettable evening.

My grandfather is a humble man with an incredible sense of pride and an insatiable work ethic. At 88 years old, he was still working construction six days a week, until he was forced to retire after an unfortunate car accident. Since retiring, he has struggled to accept the idea that he needs to slow down. While he lives a much simpler life now, he still lights up when he gets the chance to share stories of his past. One night, he captivated us with a story of how he was attacked by a bear when he was a young lumberjack working in the forests of northern Canada. As he was telling his story, he was disrupted several times by coughing fits as he was recovering from a cold. During one of his coughing fits, something mysteriously flew out of his mouth.

This unknown flying object started tumbling down my grandfather's chest, into his lap, and then onto the floor. A brush of panic developed within me as I worried about his well-being: no one had moved to help him. This moment all happened within seconds, but it seemed like an eternity.

Before I got up to help him, I glanced at my grandma to see her reaction. I was shocked that she was just sitting there while her husband was choking! Tears were slowly sloping down her cheek and her face looked a bit squished. She was ready to burst into laughter and I found myself getting angry because I didn't understand what could be funny at a moment like this.

My mom, who is the biggest worrier on the planet, sat there with no expression. Her body was erect, her posture awkwardly perfect, facing the opposite direction of my grandpa. I turned, ready to ask her a question, when she shot me that mom look ... You know, the one that tells you to mind your business. She continued to face the wall, avoiding the other side of the room where the victim (my grandpa) was sitting. Jeff, my husband, was the person closest to my grandpa. His forehead was glistening as his face started to turn red as a rose. His eyes widened as he stared at the window in front of him. A stern but concerned look froze on his face as he was trying to avoid eye contact with my grandfather as well.

At this point, I was so frustrated that I stood up with the intention of lecturing everyone on how disappointed I was in them. All of a sudden, I finally locked eyes on my grandpa. His short, stout body, bent over slowly to reveal how weathered it had become from the decades of hard labor he endured. His gnarled, thick hands reached towards the floor to pick up the large, white object that was positioned by his left foot. Grandpa clutched it as tightly as he was able. However, the object continued to dangle loosely from his grip. Trying to move the object in his hands safely, his plump core impeded the movements of his frail bones as he heaved his body upright. Walking towards him, I finally caught a glimpse of what that mysterious object was. It was at that moment that I realized why everyone was acting so strange.

The mysterious object wasn't food. It was my grandpa's dentures. I couldn't believe it. My grandpa had dentures all these years and they finally fell out! After knowing him for my entire life, I never knew or suspected that he had them. After realizing the magnitude of the situation, I finally made eye contact

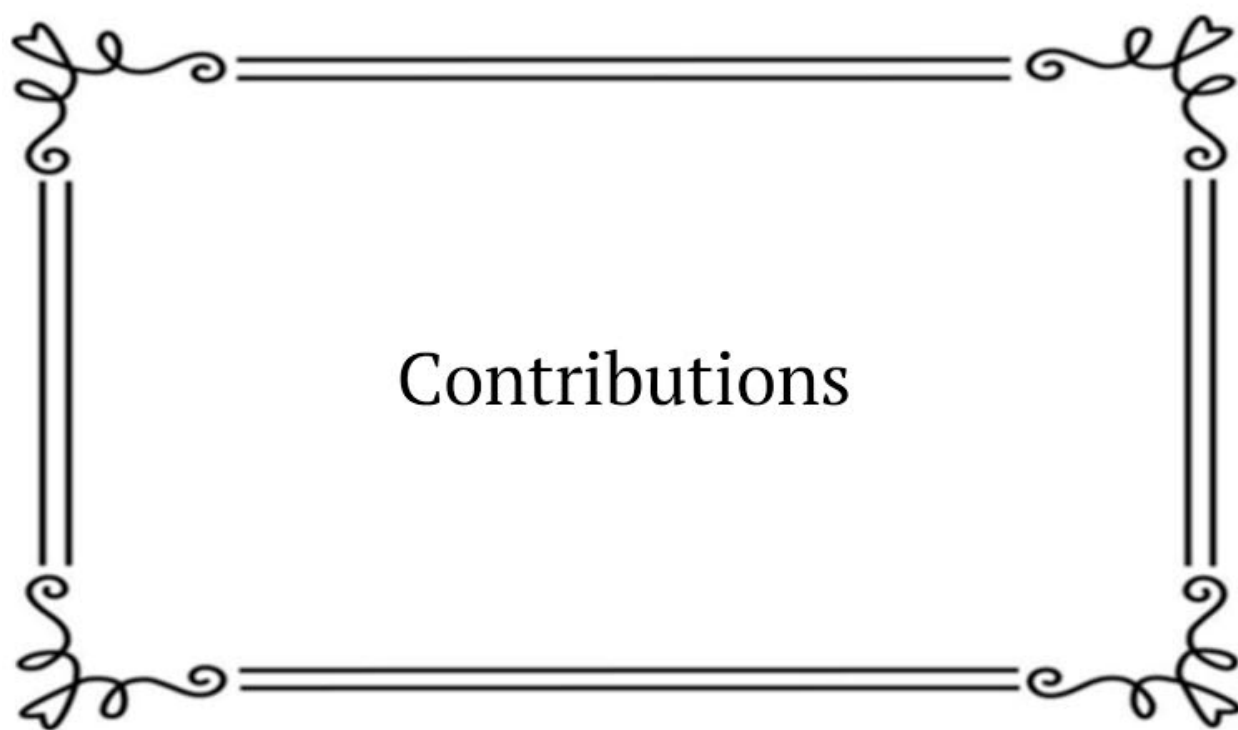
with all the people that were avoiding this moment. While there are probably hundreds of ways that I could have handled that moment, only one response came to mind. I immediately started to laugh. The worst part was that this wasn't just your average "laugh out loud." This was an uncontrollable laughter that left me with my eyes watering, stomach shaking, and lungs gasping for air.

Once I got my composure back, I looked back at my grandfather who smiled at me as he was ready to put his teeth back in. In that quick amount of time, I noticed his chummy smile looked more like an old smile. My grandfather's youthful face was now filled with wrinkles and was sunken in just a bit. At that moment, my grandfather didn't look 65 anymore; he looked more like 90.

My world suddenly turned upside down. My grandparents are the foundation of my childhood and they hold all the memories that are so dear to me. My worst nightmare was coming to the realization that they would become old one day. That nightmare came alive in that moment and I couldn't wait to see that young 65-year-old smile again.

Once he put his dentures back in, he started talking about his day and everything seemed back to normal. When I left their house, I hugged my grandparents a little bit tighter and told them I loved them a couple of more times than usual. I realized that even though they are getting a bit older, I still can hold onto the new memories that we are making today while they are still "young."





Contributors

Denise Abercrombie (SI 07) teaches American literature, creative writing, and theater and serves as English department head at E.O. Smith High School. She has taught Creative Writing and Expressive Writing in Performance at the University of Connecticut and Quinebaug Valley Community College. Her writing has appeared in *Minnesota Review*, *Fireweed*, *Connecticut Review*, *Phoebe*, *Common Ground Review*, *Blue Collar Review*, *Writing on the Edge*, and other journals. She was also a featured reader at the 49th International Poetry Festival in Belgrade (2012) and Smederevo's Poetry Autumn (2014). Denise lives in Storrs with her husband, Jonathan Andersen, and their two sons, Miles and Kit.

Melissa Batulevitz (SI 17) is a literacy coach and a sixth-grade teacher at Mansfield Middle School. She is an energetic person who loves to put smiles on everyone's faces. She has a thirst for knowledge and can always be found with a professional text in hand updating herself with the latest research in education. When she is not in the classroom, she can be found hanging out with her family, running, hiking, being outdoors, and reading!

Katy Blake (SI 17) is an English teacher at Hall High School in West Hartford. Currently, she teaches grade nine (Honors), grade eleven (co-taught American Literature), and grade twelve Advanced Literature (21st Century/Media Studies), and is an active member of various building and district-level committees. Katy graduated from UConn's Neag School of Education's IB/M program in 2009 with degrees in Secondary English Education, Spanish, and Curriculum and Instruction. She later went on to pursue her Intermediate Administrative Certification at Sacred Heart University, and recently became ECE certified. In her spare time, she enjoys running, hiking, and traveling.

Shannon Bollard (SI 17) is currently a graduate student pursuing a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction through Neag. She hopes to work in a middle or high school language arts setting within the next couple of years. She just finished up her student teaching at Northwestern Regional 7 and is currently placed at Bulkeley High School as a Teacher Preparatory Studies Intern. Outside of school, most of her time is devoted to her two beloved cats, volunteering her time at the daycare in her home town, and writing stories that she never finishes, but should.

Emily Cole is a graduate student at UConn studying education in the Neag program. She has been an amateur photographer ever since she got her hands on a disposable film camera when she was four. You can find her making lattes at Dog Lane Cafe where she works as a barista. If there's anything worth knowing about Emily, it's that she only truly loves three things: dogs, coffee, and the X files.

Emma Czaplinski (SI 17) is a seventh grade Language Arts teacher at Ellington Middle School. She is a 2016 graduate of the Neag School of Education's Integrated Bachelor's/Master's (IB/M) program at the University of Connecticut. Emma assists with the Ellington Middle School Drama Troupe and Student Council and has experience with various community theatre, a cappella, and music groups across the state. She lives in Manchester with her cat, Curry.

Caitlin Donahue (SI 16) is a fifth year English and creative writing teacher at Stafford High School. After graduating with a BFA in Writing, Literature, & Publishing from Emerson College in Boston, she earned her MA in Curriculum and Instruction from the Neag School of Education. She is also a UConn Early College Experience English adjunct. In her spare time, Caitlin enjoys learning karate, reading, writing, boating, and playing the alto saxophone.



Nikki Milewski (SI 17) teaches English and related courses in the Performing Arts and Communications Academy to grades 10-12 at Manchester High School. She earned her B.A. in English and Education from Fairfield University and her M.S. in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from Central CT State University before participating in the CWP Summer Institute of 2017. She is also a two-year participant in the College-Ready Writers Program grant through the Connecticut Writing Project. In her free time, Nikki enjoys dancing, running, reading YA literature, and "geeking out" about *Harry Potter* and *Gilmore Girls* with family and friends.

Bridget O'Connor (SI 16) is a seventh grade English/Language Arts teacher at Hall Memorial School in Willington. She is a graduate of the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education and an alumnus of the University of Connecticut Marching Band. In addition to teaching, Bridget enjoys reading long novels, hiking, playing piano and flute, and writing about life's awkward moments.

Emily Orkins (SI 17) is a graduate student at the University of Connecticut, working towards earning her Master's in Curriculum and Instruction. She recently earned two Bachelor's degrees in Secondary English Education as well as English at the University of Connecticut. Having completed her student teaching at Glastonbury High School, she is currently working as an intern at East Hartford High School developing Human Rights curriculum for an interdisciplinary History-English course. Not only does she have a passion for books and human rights, but she also enjoys curling up with a cup of tea on rainy days, preferably with a cat.

Robert Pirrie (SI 14) teaches chemistry and physics at Stafford High School in Stafford, CT. He dates his earliest serious writing to a summer of many years ago, when he read a copy of Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* while vacationing on an island off the coast of Maine. He likes to pretend he is working on a novel about a guy wandering through the Nevada desert in a VW bus. His work owes a great deal to the continued enthusiasm and support of his writing group—Jason, Amy, Kim, Danielle and Matt. He wouldn't have gotten far in writing without the help, support and no-nonsense editing skills of his wife Jen, the creative inspiration his son Casey provides, and the unabashed enthusiasm his dog Cooper shows for whatever Bob happens to be doing at any given moment.

David Polochanin (SI 99) is finishing his 20th year in the classroom—seventeen of them teaching middle school English at Gideon Welles School in Glastonbury. He is a former journalist whose freelance work has appeared in *Education Week*, *The Hartford Courant*, and a number of mostly obscure poetry journals. One day... one day, he hopes to get that book project off the ground. He lives in Marlborough with his wife Claudine and two children, Ethan and Alison.

Theodore Richmond (SI 17) is a 1997 graduate of the UConn School of Education. He has worked as an English teacher at Montville High School for twenty-one years, the last eleven as the department chairperson. In 2013, Ted was recognized as the Montville Public School's "Teacher of the Year." Ted would like to thank the members of the 2017 Summer Institute, especially the members of the "Eclectic Chameleons," for helping him rediscover how much he loves to write. Ted lives in Montville with Beth, his wife and former high school sweetheart. They are the proud parents of three terrific kids: Holly, Nora, and Eric.

Alicia Robinson (SI 17) is an English and ECE (Early College Experience) instructor for grades 10 through 12 at Wamogo Regional High School. This will be her seventh year of teaching. She received her

education at the University of Connecticut. Her parents' teaching careers sparked her interest in this profession.

Sara Skubal (SI 17) is a third-year history and social studies teacher at Montville High School in Montville, Connecticut. She received both her Bachelor's degree in History and her Master's in Education, Curriculum and Instruction from Virginia Tech. She loves podcasts, running, cooking, learning, and travel. She hopes to continue to grow as a teacher (and a student) and continue writing and reading as much as she can.

Emma Smith (SI 17) teaches 7th grade English at Suffield Middle School. She recently finished her third year of teaching. She attended the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education and completed its IB/M (Integrated Bachelor's/Master's) program in 2014. She is now back at UConn for her sixth year. The character Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* inspired her to become a teacher.

John Wetmore (SI 15) teaches Creative Writing at Arts at the Capitol Theater in Willimantic, CT. He has been a member of CWP since 2015. He cites Gene Wolfe as a major influence on his life and craft. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Liminality*, *Bone Parade*, and *Bop Dead City*.



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