

LOCH NORSE MAGAZINE

Loch Norse Magazine accepts submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and artwork annually November through February.

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

I know what serpent says when it crawls out of its skin: *I transform and do not remain the same.*

While I write this, a copy of *Loch Norse Magazine, Issue One, 2012* sits on my desk next to me, an old form of our writing community we no longer inhabit. This is *Loch Norse Magazine's* second issue; it still feels shiny, crisp, and vulnerable, especially to the editorial staff and myself. But it's here now in physical form, what so long had been only a thought.

As editor-in-chief this year, I have constantly wondered what this issue would be like. More prose, maybe longer poems, flash fiction? I tried to stop thinking about it but I was reminded of what might be every time I spoke with the writing students and faculty at Northern Kentucky University. It was with them the work in this magazine began: in the classrooms, between the classrooms, in workshops, over coffee in the library. As I met and worked with our contributors this year, I saw their poems and characters waiting just inside.

But for poems and stories to make it to these pages, the dedication of our professors, classmates, artists, and contributing writers was indispensable. I speak for the whole editorial staff when I say that we could never thank Northern's creative writing community enough for their accomplishments this year.

And as the editor this year, it has been a pleasure to compile this issue. Enjoy what new form our community has taken and celebrate with us the phenomenal talent exhibited in these pages.

Here we are again, glistening in Twenty Thirteen.

Rex Anthony Trogon
Editor-in-Chief

*Minadora Macheret*I painted the Word *Escape* and
Someone Heard

Orange was the color when the
moon said good night —
it watched with fatherly gravity
my footfalls carved into cracked
mud — TB choked me
one more day, but my
Ukranian woman's hand tugged me
so hard - I fell into grapevines
that held my body - ever ready.

Autumn Shuler

Oath Breaker

THE BREEZE IS COOL, unlike last year. The lines of sweat
made for a bad weapon demonstration. Nobody in the crowd
wants to see you exert yourself. It has to be effortless.

This year, sweat won't be a problem. I wrap the *gi* closer
to my body, sealing in my warmth and hiding my curves as I
go through the ritual to become a man. No woman has come
before me. I push the thought away, focusing on the task at
hand. The sun could be problematic, in the eyes the way
it is. It could be distracting, and a distraction could prove
disastrous.

I scan the crowd, searching for Mom. There she is, talking
to one of her friends on the small metal bleachers someone
thought to set out. I can see the reluctance in her eyes. That
smile is forced, and she doesn't really want to talk. It's written
in the set of her shoulders. But she won't let them see that.

I almost feel bad for putting her through this. She doesn't
want me to go through with it, and I know she's hoping I'll
back down. We both know I won't. I'm too stubborn, and far
too proud. To back down in front of all these people would be
weakness, and I would be ashamed of that weakness. Once I
put on the black, there is no more weakness.

I bounce on the balls of my feet, anxious to begin. But
first will be the *katas* like dances performed by the lower
belts and the weapon demonstrations that will draw excitement
from the crowd done by the other black belts. There is a
routine to the demonstration, and I am not one to overthrow
the routine. The ritual comes last and I will wait, I will be
patient. And I will try to keep my heart steady.

Easier said than done. Mom looks over and I smile, but she doesn't return it. She's fingering the lens cap on the camcorder, the fear naked on her face. I refuse to let it bother me. She is afraid, but she will not see me afraid. No one will see me afraid. I will perform.

Before long it's my turn. The regular demonstration is over, and my fellow black-belts are eyeing me, anxious to see me succeed or fail, whichever it will be. Master calls my name, introduces me to the crowd as I smile and bow. Courtesies. Always courtesies. He then turns to me, asks me silently if I'm sure. One curt bob of the head for yes. I'm sure. I've never been more determined.

Master holds the board himself, an honor amongst those of us who know such secrets. He stands to the side of me, all so the crowd can see everything better. That is part of the ritual, allowing others to see you at your strongest. I begin my breathing exercises while he explains to them what I'm doing. Focusing my energies. Bringing every bit of myself into the task at hand.

He stops talking and holds out the board, touching it to my knuckles to make sure he's holding at the right height. It makes contact against my outstretched fist and feels all too solid. So very solid. A single butterfly fans its wings in my stomach, but I push it down. Now is no time for fear. I must disregard my knowledge that what I'm doing is advanced. That it's going to be difficult. That it's going to hurt. The pain is part of becoming something more.

Master pulls the board away and taps my knuckles again, practicing. I prepare my muscles and continue my breathing. I deepen it, going deeper into the lungs and myself. The final tap, soft as a kiss, and as it is pulled away I breathe in even deeper, tensing as the board is swung towards my fist a final time, impossibly fast.

My fist cries out in agony as the board hits it and remains intact. It did not break, and the force of it had nowhere to go

but my bones. It hurts more than I can remember anything hurting, but I do not cry out. I refuse to be weak, even as the blood begins its slow ooze from my split knuckles. The crowd is surprised, they expected me to punch the board, throwing the weight of my body into the action, but that is too easy. For the ritual, I must stay still and prove I have the strength to break a board while still, and the will to not back down.

Master moves to my arm, and I can tell he is afraid. A miss in the beginning of the routine usually means we do not move on. But he can see the fire in my eyes. He knows. Nobody else knows. None of them understand that I *must* go through with this. It is forbidden to practice the ritual, but Master has trained me in many other things. He knows my resolve. I promised myself. This is my coming of age. This is my womanhood.

He brings the board down on my statue arm and it breaks with a loud snap. The crowd is still, the breath rushes out of them as one, and the sound carries to me in the unnatural quiet. They do not clap, they can sense this runs deeper than the *katas* and flashy weapons that came before. It is too sacred for clapping, even though they think it's over. They think they can be relieved.

But the second board is brought, and they know better. Little do they know what is coming as I lift my chin. Some of them begin to suspect, but believe it cannot be possible. I change my breathing again as Master begins his preliminary taps. Important that this goes smoothly.

I barely feel the wood against my throat as he taps. I barely hear the crowd muttering amongst itself as he pulls back for the final blow.

I do feel the board as it tears against my throat and I scream. It is not a scream of pain, though it hurts. It is not a scream of fear for my flesh, though I am afraid of the permanent damage. It is a scream of triumph. It is a battle cry that transcends language. No matter what has become of the skin

of my neck, I have done what I came to do. The crack of the board is loud in my ears and the reality of it is as powerful as God as the edges of it continue splitting my skin. I am now a woman.

I have mastered myself.

Daniel Smith

Undomesticated

The three barbed strands dividing the property line,
 where forest graduates to field,
 break this time beyond all mending
 and allow the cows into the woods.

Hoofing the hillside,
 upturning stones and fracturing limbs,
 they maneuver the ridge in single-file,
 tempting the angle of repose.

Compelled by an intractable momentum,
 some residual memory embedded in their hides,
 they move toward what domestication doesn't offer:
 a fenceless view of the stars;
 pasturage unblemished by a single plow.

Ryan Kriebehl

The Fox on the Wall

GREY AND WHITE, I come into existence—graphite scratches on a blemished drywall in a naked room. Born with open eyes, I look into those of my creator as she stares back into mine, seeing more of me that is yet to be drawn. Jade stones nestle in waves of aged skin that hides behind soft, amber locks—this is her face, and I wonder, what is mine? But almost as if intentionally answering me, she leans in close enough for me to smell the warm vanilla aroma of her hair, and in the wide pupils now so close to my face, I can see me reflecting through her.

I sit erect and at command, a steep arc curves down my back ending in a sharp flicking tail. Attentive are my ears, and gentle are my eyes that look back at me with understanding. Whiskers protrude through bristly, light fur like a wind is blowing through the infinite white around me. I am majestic, intimidating, and proud.

After adding a little more volume to my nose, she pulls back and scans me intently with the pencil to her lips. Although she is trying to take in her work as a whole, her green-irises keep skipping back to meet mine. Now, she is just staring into me as if she sees something there—nothing to fix or improve, but a certain liveliness. The vitality I feel that she gave to me is almost visible around me like an aura. I feel as if I could jump off this wall and into another dimension, but for reasons I can't quite grasp, I stay.

As the woman steps back and smiles; not at me particularly, but now her artistry. A rambunctious rattling comes from the door to my right and dust unsettles from the floor as a tiny, tulip of a girl bursts into the room with a cardboard box hardly small enough for her petite arm span to grasp.

She crashes into the woman's legs, and like a million icicles shattering, a cup full of colored pencils spills across the ground.

The mother hoists the coughing girl into the air and plops her down on her mother's hip. Gently she combs the blond hair out of the girl's snowy face, tucking it behind her seashell ears, and begins bobbing up and down, shaking the gathering tears loose.

"Oh, shhh-shh, honey," the woman says. "There, there, big girl. Yeah, you aren't going to cry, are you? No, no, you're not because you're a Graham. You might have the blond hair," she ruffles the girl's scalp, "the cherry nose," she pokes her nose with a boop!, "and blue eyes of your father. But you are strong like me!"

A soothing warmth overtakes me because that pitchy giggle that just erupted from the girl's pebble-toothed mouth can make the daisies bloom in February. She is lifting up her scrawny arms and flexing them with a fierce grunt.

"See, you are a Graham for sure—Oh my! Look at those muscles," she says pinching the very squishy arms that are trying so hard to be firm. Another ice-melting laugh rolls out of the girl. "How do you like your new room, Alice-baby? It's a lot bigger than your old one."

"It's so big!" Alice, the girl, says, bending her neck every which way to take it in from every angle. "Can all of my friends fit in—FOX!" Her large, deep blue eyes spot me and she wiggles out of her mother's grip to race to my wall. With a soft, plum-sized hand she strokes my torso as if she can feel the silkiness of my fur in between her fingers. I want to purr. Her touch is so careful and I have a sudden motherly urge to cocoon her in my breast. "She's so pretty, Mommy."

"Do you like her?"

"She's beautiful!"

"Just like you, baby." The woman laughs.

Alice's gaze finds her way to my eyes. For a moment I feel

a sort of surge run the course of my spine, making my fur stand erect—if it could. There is so much to see in that glassy stare: ivy crawling its way across the sea of vibrant blue, lightening in hue towards the pupil like an ocean meeting the shore. And much like an ocean, her eyes are filled with many things hidden beneath the surface—hidden to me—and as each new moon circumvents to a new day, that sea will only fill and make her into a woman one day.

“Come, honey, we have some more boxes to bring in.” With that, the two leave, and if I was given the ability to smile, it would still be present for long afterwards.

#

Days go by like minutes: Alice, the woman, and a man come and go with brown boxes; unpacking and assembling miscellaneous bedroom furniture and sorting through the mess of large-font books and inanimate animals—some very similar to myself. Alice spends most of the nights on the floor, playing with long-legged dolls and miniature sports cars, until the silky-haired mother comes in to tuck her little cub into bed. Books are typically read by her bedside until the girl’s eyelids fall like the drawbridge in her story—after the princess had been rescued, of course. And as the last bit of light extinguishes with the closing door, Alice’s purring snore is all that’s left to fill the dark room. I watch over her all night—every night.

#

As the seasons pass from summer to fall and drop into winter, the mother perfects my body in darker pencil. Trees are outlined on both of my sides with furry critters playing in the branches—Alice’s request. Grass lines the baseboards and tickles my paws, ivy sprawls up the tree trunks, and dragonflies, bees, and dandelion seeds polka-dot the remaining

space. I wonder if the insects and other animals around me think as I do. Do they care for Alice? Can they see her right now? As she scribbles colors on a white page? Can they see how big she has gotten? Oh my, look at how she’s grown. Nearly up to my chin now, isn’t she? I want to tell her I love her, the way a mother should be able to. Can you hear me, Alice? Can you see in my eyes what I feel in my heart as you look at me now? She bows her head again to the creation on her page, but I see that twinkle in her eye, it’s as obvious as the smile on her snowy face.

#

As the sun winks over the horizon on a particularly cold winter day, the normally bleak clouds and white snow blankets are drenched in hues of crimson and gold. Two figures creep into the room with silent, socked feet. I am at attention and watching carefully. Slowly, the man and the woman lean over the bed where Alice sleeps, and right next to her ear bellow, “MERRY CHRISTMAS!”

In what was only a few seconds, the girl pops like a groundhog from her pillow, throws her covers clear over the foot of the bed, and runs downstairs fast enough to leave her skin behind.

The mother and father laugh to themselves and make their way to the door. The woman places her hand on her partner’s shoulder. “Any news yet?” she asks, concernedly. The man shook his head.

“Well, what are we going to do, James? We can’t just wait until our bank accounts run dry to start worrying. I’ll get a job. I’ll—”

“No,” James, the man, the father, says as clearly as he can. “Don’t worry about money. I can handle it, I promise. We just need to wait things out a little longer.”

“We picked up our lives and came here, and for what? It’s

the car? What do we do then, James?" Her hand falls off his shoulder and she hugs herself as if chilled, obviously struggling not to cry.

"We won't. Listen to me, Emma. Things will work out. Just have a little faith in me, okay?" He wraps his arms around her.

"Mom!" cries Alice from several halls away.

"See, that's why you need to stay home. She needs her mother."

"She loves you too, you know."

"Yeah, but like you, she has favorites."

Emma laughs. "Well, you're my favorite," she says before kissing her mate.

"Mommy!" Alice cries again, except with more desperation in her voice—eager to officially begin unwrapping her presents.

"Are you okay?" James asks, his gentle palms on the woman's, Emma's, cheeks and eyebrows raised. "No pills today, okay?" She nods without looking him in the eyes.

"I know," she says, unconvincingly. "I'll be down in a minute. You go. I need to find my camera."

He hesitated, but nods and leaves.

I don't like to see Emma this way. She gave me such life here on this wall, as much my mother as dear Alice's, and yet her desperation is so thick that I can smell it stronger than the perfume she seems to be soaking herself more heavily in lately. She paces around the room, now half-crying to herself and muttering things like, "We're going to lose it. We're going to lose it." She looks around her, at the amazing and always improving illustrations by her little cub that hang randomly on the walls, at the bony oak tree through the curtain-parted window, and then at me on my grassy bed. I can feel her, and she is so afraid. Go be with your child, Emma, please. Finally, she leaves the room behind, still hugging herself as the door closes to a crack.

Within a matter of seconds, she returns, biting her nails and inhaling in deep, gutturing sobs. She paces and strides across the room, arms shaking almost violently. It takes a while, but she eventually calms to a mild shiver. But judging by the way a tear cradles on her eyelid, about to fall, when Alice cries for her mother once again, I can tell she is about to do something she will regret.

Emma draws a palm's worth of pills from her robe pocket. She stares at them blankly, unsure what to do. Her hand trembles more visibly and the light stomping of Alice's feet coming up stairs forces her to make a decision. Two white capsules vanish into her mouth and the rest are pocketed.

Three steps towards the door later and she is in the hall, and I am left with the remnants of her dignity on the floor in front of me. Oh, Emma. Silently I cry for her, because if the smile on a little girl's face—her daughter's face—on Christmas morning isn't enough to resist an urge, then nothing will.

#

Winter stays for awhile but eventually melts away as the trees birth new leaves. Emma leaves the window open on warmer days. The scent of lilacs carries in the crisp wind that rustles the leaves of the trees and tickles the grass at my feet. Alice's golden locks are now past her shoulders and swishes about at the mid of her back.

Alice spends most of her days outside, playing with the neighborhood kids in rambunctious games of hide n' seek, hopscotch, and other childhood activities that send giggles fluttering in the wind outside my window. Emma works in the gardens while the weather permits and James comes and goes, sometimes gone for days at a time only to return more dismal and weary when he sputters into the driveway at midnight—home from failed investor meetings. I can hear their arguments through the air vent below me. They grow louder

“We are not moving again, James,” is Emma’s usual contribution. James is too stubborn to give up on his dream of inventing children’s toys to look for something more lucrative, and Emma isn’t educated enough to find anything worth the sacrifice of leaving her daughter’s full time care.

“She’s eight now, Emma. She’s in school most of the day,” James says.

“You know damn well why I can’t get a job,” Emma says in a yelled whisper.

“You can stop taking the damn things,” James says. “You yell and complain to me about us not having any money, but you’re the one bleeding us dry.”

“Oh, so I’m a leech? Is that what I am for this family?”

Emma’s voice raises. “You really think this toy thing is going to catch on? Huh? Tell me, how many toys have you made for Alice? How many, James?” There is silence. “None.” Then a smack of a hand meeting soft cheek awakes Alice from her sleep—if she was sleeping at all—and she crawls with her pillow from her bed to my wall where she cuddles up into a ball at my feet.

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry, Emma-baby,” are the last words of the night before the front door opens and slams shut again.

There, there, little cub. Snuggle closer. Everything is fine. I want to soothe my cub and sing her back to sleep. No child should be bothered with the burdens of maturity.

#

A couple of nights go by and arguing turns into yelling, which elevates to screeching, and Alice takes off out of the room and scurries down the hall. I see her long shadow stop at the end of the hall, peering around the corner. I hear her call down to her parents with a half-asleep, half-worried whimper.

Sighs punctuate the argument for now and Emma comes

up the stairs, stomping a little harder than usual. “Come, Alice, Bed.” The television flicked on somewhere beneath me, and the two girls trot back into the darkened bedroom.

“Come on, back in bed. Now,” Emma says with displaced frustration. Alice scampers back underneath her covers and Emma retrieves the pillow resting against my paws from where Alice tried to drown out the yelling.

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” Alice says, burying her head back into her bedsheet. “When are you going to paint my fox? She needs to be orange like—”

“I don’t have time for you, Alice. This, I don’t have enough time for this,” she corrects herself. “You are old enough to stay in bed all night. You hear me?”

“I was scared. I thought that—”

“Don’t worry about it. You need sleep. Go to bed.” Emma turns away, eyes glassing over as she walks back through the door, closing it hard enough to rattle in its latch. The apology of the little girl teeters on the tip of her tongue, but melted into tears, which leaked onto her dandelion-yellow comforter.

Oh, Emma.

Alice’s muffled sobs in her pillow fill the air and I thought of the owl who so often sat outside the window and questioned the night until dawn broke. Your child needs you. I can only keep thinking to myself, over and over, silently begging her to come back to ease her cub back into slumber. Never leave a crying child alone, because when life needs answers, a wandering and anxious mind is no place to find them.

#

Over the next few months, Emma and James’ quarrels happen less often. However, so do all forms of interaction. James sleeps less in his bed with Emma and more in front of the television while his wife tosses and turns in her much

too-large bed; the squeaks of an experienced mattress travel easily down the hall. Alice hardly shows her wonderful smile anymore, the stress of the house sinking into her head more and more like second-hand smoke as the days go by. She sits in her room most nights and reads books to herself at my feet—moving from wide books with beautiful artistry to thin, colorless ones.

During the days while Emma lies on the couch and James stays on the road for even longer whiles, Alice cements herself in her room and arranges assortments of crayons, colored pencils, and markers at the base of my wall. While the smores of her mother grumble through the thin floors, my little cub works on giving me an amazingly burnt-orange coat. In the eyes of a more talented artist, this is merely just a child's coloring book page canvased more largely, but to me, to me it is perfection in the most vitalizing and invigorating sense. Now, as she swishes the last stroke of her crayon, I feel like a globe. A globe made up of the sea in Alice's eyes, and the shore that is Emma, both infused in me as one.

#

But now, it's all bleak. Rolling storm clouds suffocate the moon and drown the room in sharp shadows. I like it when it rains, it makes the house seem less quiet. My senses are keen and I can smell the acidity in the humid air and hear the gurgling of the drain spouts even though the blinds and windows are drawn shut. The sound of a plate and silverware clink into the sink before Alice prances up the stairs.

If I can close my eyes and just listen to the rhythmic pattering of rain on the window pane, I could most definitely fall asleep. But only for a little, because from the kitchen below, after a very quiet dinner that most likely didn't dwell in subjects deeper than the weather, comes a shattering of what seemed to be a thousand dishes in the silence. "Shit,"

says James, annoyed. I see Alice come in the room, but upon hearing the noise she sticks her head through the door to listen.

"Well, I guess we should move. How else are we going to afford new plates," Emma jabs.

"Will you give it a rest for a goddamned minute, woman."

Voices begin to rise.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that."

"Then quit acting like a fucking child!"

"Child? Child?" Emma's voice cracks and trembles like a twig about to snap. "Child? says the man that—that makes toys for a living, kicking his feet and throwing a temper when someone tells him he needs to give up his stupid fantasy and find something to take care of his - his goddamn family!"

"You think I act like a child? This is how a child acts!" Several more dishes crash to the floor.

Then comes a noise loud enough to dwarf the thunder. A clap of flesh-on-flesh, palm-on-cheek, that vibrates through the house and screams in my ear. Everything is completely silent now, except for the echoing in my ear.

The clock ticks twice as slow, and my heart beats twice as fast. Foot steps come scurrying down the hall and find their way into the bedroom, pushing Alice aside. Emma throws her body into the door and it slams into its latch, proceeding to lock it from the inside. The cries of James down the corridor are muffled into nothingness. The wood between them and the sobbing of his wife, now hugging her knees to her chest, drowns out the storm.

"Mom?"

"Alice, honey, come here. It's okay." Emma pulls her cub in close and buries her nose in her daughter's silky hair. "It's okay, honey. Sit down on my lap here. Oh, come here baby-girl. It's okay."

Alice slides into her mother's lap and curls into her like a pea in its pod as Emma wraps her arms around her. Emma's trembling cheeks are stained with tears now and Alice toys

with the split ends of her mother's hair, not making eye contact.

Why are you here, Emma? I want her to hear me so badly that I strain to force my thoughts and feelings through the space between us, though I am sure that I appear just as indifferent on my wall, hoping somehow that she will hear or feel my empathy for her. Don't let your child see you like this, my sweet mother.

The imprint of a once loving hand glows pink from the corner of her lip to the whole of her ear. No longer does her hair fall in amber curtains around jade eyes—now puffy and steely-grey. Pale skin sags from worry and is wrinkled like a dried apple. James raps on the door louder and louder and Alice looks up into her mother's eyes.

"Can I let Dad in?"

Emma is silent for a moment. "Let's sit here just you and me for a while, okay? Do you want me to sing you a song?" She begins to hum an old favorite of Alice's, but it doesn't sound quite right with James begging entrance on the other side of the door they rested on.

"I want Dad to come in," Alice interrupts.

"What happened to just us girls? We used to have so much fun together, remember?"

"Uh-huh."

Emma, stop. Don't bring your cub into this mess.

"You want Daddy to come in, huh?"

Alice nods.

"You know what your father did to me?"

James heard through the thin door what she just said.

"Emma, sweetheart, don't. I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry. Don't turn my girl against me. Please."

"Do you see this red mark on my face, sweetie?"

"Mm-hmm," Alice says, only glancing at the crimson mark for a brief second.

"Emmal Stop!" James pleads, his sobs sinking into his words.

"That's where your father hit me. He hit me." Emma looked into her daughter's eyes with a stare like ice.

"Did he mean to?" Alice says looking down at her socks, the ones with cat faces polka-dotted along the top.

Emma coughed a sob. "Yes. Yes he did, honey."

"Did he say he was sorry?"

From across the room I can see the shiver of Emma's body amplify so violently that she quivers the hairs on Alice's head. "Sorry" is only a word.

"Oh," Alice says, but I'm not sure if she quite understands. Either way, she shouldn't be here. Not in this room, not in this house, not in this situation.

She is only a child, Emmal. Alice is looking at me now and I see that ocean in her eyes turn shallow and distant, unfocused and confused. Come here, child. But she can't hear me, because I'm not real, though I know by that look in her eyes, that lack of a sparkle and depth of that black hole of unanswered questions she needs filled, that she wants me to be real as badly as I do.

"Can I go watch TV?" Alice asks.

"You don't want to sit here with me? Are you not having fun?" Emma brushes the hair behind her daughter's ear.

James hasn't pounded on the door in a minute or two and the silence now is incredibly loud.

"I am, Mommy." Alice picks at her socks. "I just want to watch TV right now."

Emma's nose twitches and she raises a hand from Alice's hair to scratch her head. "Fine. Go," she says, barking.

"Why don't you go hang out with your father, he's in a playful mood tonight."

"Are you mad at me?"

"Alice, if you want to go then go." Emma stood up, forcing Alice to roll out of her lap. She starts pacing the room, hand over her mouth and rubbing her arms and chest as if cold. She stops when her hand dips into her pocket and a small

noise rattles in the air.

“You can watch TV with me, Mommy.”

“Leave, Alice.”

“No, I want to stay with you.”

“Leave!” Emma twists the doorknob and jerks it open, and then proceeds to pick up Alice from under her arms to nearly toss her out of the room; her own room. The door slamming punctuates the short whine Alice is able to mutter before being divided from her mother. Emma turns around and runs a trembling hand through her wiry, grey-tinged hair while letting out a shaky sigh into the tension-dense air.

I can smell the acidity from the rain mixing with the stagnant, sweat that lingers in the room. Thunder rolls in the sky, originating from somewhere closer than when the storm started because I can feel the house shudder from its grumble, and then a small rattle signals that Emma has found her pill container again in her cardigan pocket. With a pop and a gulp, she drains two of the tiny capsules. All I can do is be thankful Alice isn't here to see it.

As Emma looks across the room at me, I can see her eyes become less focused and more glassy. But the way her stare catches mine, I can feel the click, like a radio finding the right frequency to clear the static, and I can tell, I can feel, that she sees that woman she used to be reflected inside of me—like the way I first saw myself reflected through her. Her eyebrows lift, her mouth parts, and I can feel the chill creep up my spine like I'm sure it is crawling up hers. A tear falls from her reddened eye and hits the floor with a pit. She walks closer and I straighten my back, our locking stares don't falter. But then her eyelids sag into something that reflects resentment, hatred, disgust. Her face scrunches into something like a withered fruit and as she jerks her head and walks away, my last hope for her redemption, her salvation, falls into a deep, black hole.

Emma pulls the drawers and dumps the cups of coloring

utensils on her daughter's desk, looking for the wedge of something pink and rubbery that she holds in her hands now. She grips it tight and strides over to me where I can see her intentions as she raises the eraser and places it on the wall to the right of my head. I look at her and project one last thought to her, I still love you, Emma.

Nothing.

Then, time slows to an infinitesimal drag as my last few moments of vision were spent looking into the eyes of the woman that created me, made me the personification of the true mother buried deep inside her, the reflection of what she will never be again, and then that rubbery block slides across my eyes, making the world agonizingly black and dimensionless. I want to cry, but I can't.

I want to roar, howl, cry, and beg for her to stop, but each time she drags that eraser over my flat face, it feels as if fire is singing each hair and nerve into oblivion.

Again and again, ferocity fueling her arm, she tears my whole life into darkness. I hear Alice call through the door and I know that I'll never be able to look at her snowy skin, cherry nose, or daffodil hair again. Her father is there too and they both pound on the door, pleading their mother and wife to let them in.

I hear a chuckle, a grim and sinister laugh roll out of the frail, broken woman, and I know what she is about to do. She may have taken away my ability to watch her destroy herself, but I am still a part of her, and I can feel the despair coursing through her veins. But most horrifyingly of all, I feel the pleasure she can't contain now of escaping this world through the only way she knows how, and the tool is unsheathed with a pop.

She must have tilted the entire container into her mouth because a sound like rain starts pattering on the floor—her pills.

For a moment, seeming more like a lifetime, Emma's

percussive gulps fill the blackness before a sound like a body crumpling follows, and I can slowly feel myself becoming... less. She gutters something that vaguely sounds like words, but I cannot make sense of it. Then every sound in the world fades into a maddening silence that envelopes us—or maybe just me. I howl into the nothingness, but no one can hear me.

In my black prison, I feel a tapping on my shoulder.

Emma appears at my side, bright and familiar with a tear pooled under those green eyes—eyes I knew a long time ago.

It's only been a couple of seconds since we had last seen each other, but it feels like an eternity. She smiles down at me; it's time to go.

We turn and walk towards something white in the distance, but I stop, Emma's hand falling off the nape of my bristly neck. Turning around, I see Alice crumpled on the ground, hugging something next to her—the limp body Emma used to belong to—sobbing and wailing into it. She is a dandelion with blown-off seeds.

She looks up at me through broken eyes, and I can tell she knows I've left—I can feel the loneliness she feels clenching inside me, and I have the same urge to stay as I did on my first day on that wall.

I turn back to Emma, but she has already gone.

So I go to my cub, curl her into my breast, and purr into frayed-straw hair as she squeezes me back like a child would to her mother.

Ranee Stemann

Just Listen

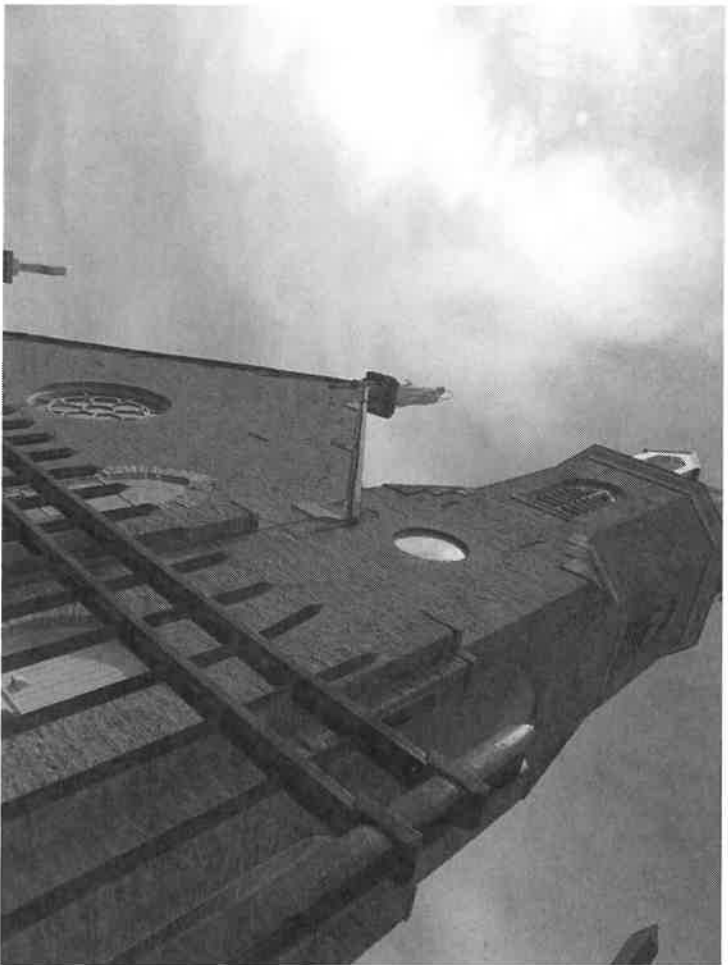
A door slams, feet patter and slide over the loose gravel, the night air is still. She breathes heavily, her heart pounds hard in her chest from what she's done. Her head sways back and forth, searches for an escape, wonders what she was thinking, what came over her. Footsteps echo in the distance and she panics, runs the other way, muscles pulsating from exertion. She steadies the bundle in her arms and knows she doesn't have long before they come after her, and her mind races with the possibilities of what they'll think, say—do. She turns a corner and braces her back on the rugged wall of an old barn, closes her eyes; flashes of light dance behind her eyelids. She slides her back down the barn wall risking the sting of splinters, her body numb with shock. It happened so quickly, there was no time to think it through, to process the consequence of the action; a moment of desperation that no one would understand. She knows she must move on and rises, glancing in both directions before she takes off running again, feet hammering pavement, with no intention of stopping until she reaches home. She throws open the rickety screen door, the wood frame banging against the kitchen counter. She turns and bolts the door, peeks through the curtain. She slumps down in a chair; contemplates packing her bags, disappearing. She looks down, and begins to carefully unwrap the precious bundle she has carried all the way through town; that she stole from a charity auction, her bid not enough to win the prize. As the wrapping falls to the floor, she can't help the smile that overwhelms her face, her heart—her stomach. The sweet, succulent aroma soothes her shattered nerves and it no longer matters what happens for it was all worth it for just one more savory bite of Mrs. Johnson's homemade apple pie.



Serra Adams - "Solitude"



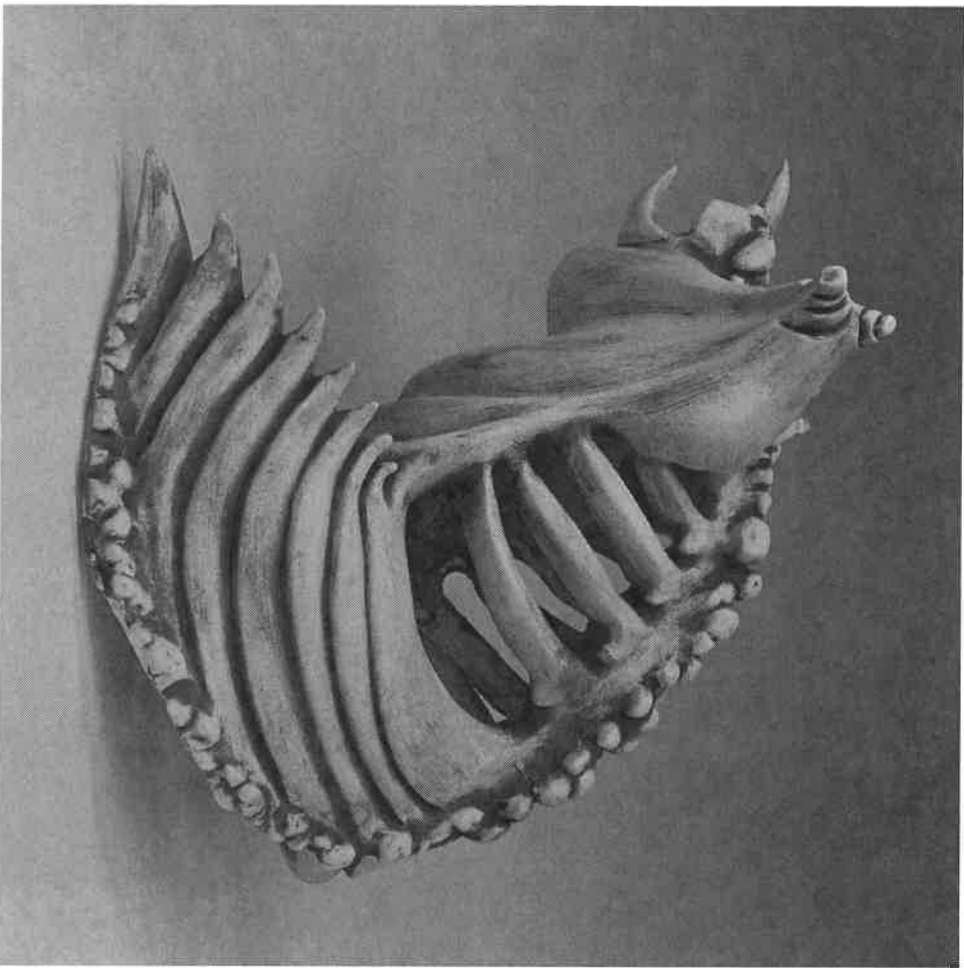
Amanda Ewing - "My Sunshine"



Angela Glahn - "Immaculata"



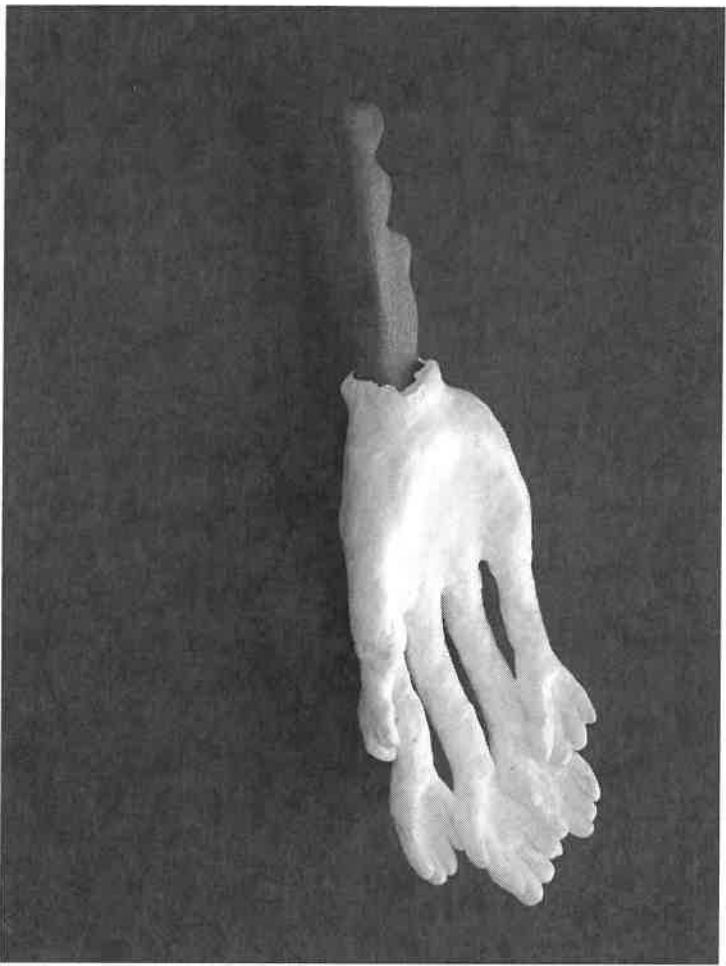
Tommy MacFarland - "Arnold"



Didem Mert - *"Remains"*



Courtney Perry - *"It's a beautiful Day"*



Adam Schmidt - "Helping Hands"



Nayrb Wasylycia - "geïsoleerd"

Lauren Lombardo

Enabling Cookies

I'VE TRIED EVERYTHING, from keeping non-stop schedules to practicing yoga, in order to grow a thicker skin. In recent years, long distance running helped me pound out every nervous bubble in my body. The endorphin high became addictive. I thought it was safe, healthy and responsible. But when a knee injury robbed me of my coping mechanism, I felt like an alcoholic stranded on a desert island. I was desperate for another fix.

It all started on a Saturday afternoon about four years, when I had a major meltdown. My husband and I were preparing to host our annual Oscar party. The two of us usually spent about three months planning a night of movie trivia, impersonation contests, costumes - the whole shebang. Snow and ice had started to fall around noon, throwing a real wrench into our day. Our driveway looked like a skating rink.

By mid-afternoon, panic sent me to my bedroom. My mouth was dry, and nausea threatened to have its way. I was losing control. I couldn't stand it. Furniture still had to be moved. Food needed to be prepared. The Jeopardy trivia had to be loaded onto the big screen. Who could I spare to shovel the mess? More important, would our guests even show up?

My thoughts were stuck on accelerate as the entire day played out in my head. After months of preparation, I couldn't bear the thought of canceling the party. I needed help. I looked in the medicine cabinet, as if *something* might call out to me out and offer relief.

Then I heard the door gently open and there stood my husband, holding a tray of food.

"Honey," he said softly. "You need to eat something." He left the tray on our dresser and walked over to me.

I started to cry like a third grader. He reassured me the party would go on, and we would handle the snow in time.

My hands were still shaking after lunch. But then, I downed some cookies. Serenity found me. And a dangerous, unhealthy addiction was born.

The Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies rendered a new kind of nirvana. I had known that carbohydrates could offset the body's lack of serotonin. But I had never considered ingesting as a way to get high.

I can still feel the firm chocolate chips crunching under my teeth and the fresh, sweet smell of a newly opened package. Yes, yes! I became addicted and stashed hoards of the cookies like a jumpy squirrel stores nuts. But like every other vice I had tried in the past, this one was also doomed.

Six months into my addiction, the cookies went AWOL. Their usual spot on the grocery store shelf was empty for three weeks before I finally got up the nerve to ask for a store manager. His name was Charles. I politely asked him what was going on with Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies.

He checked the shelf and said, "It looks like we have Famous Amos chocolate chip and *pecan* cookies, Ma'am."

Well, thanks. Now, Charles was forcing me to make a scene. I stayed cool and replied, "Yes, I know that. But what about the *plain* chocolate chip? My daughter is allergic to nuts," I lied.

"Well," the man speculated, "*we should* be getting another shipment by the weekend. Or maybe we could special order some for you."

What? I couldn't believe my ears. I jumped on it. "Can you do that?"

"Sure. No problem," Charles said with confidence. "How many boxes do you want?"

"Eight," I answered with a smile.

"Eight," Charles answered back. He raised his eyebrows

Like he wasn't quite sure he'd heard correctly.

"Yes, eight."

The next day, Charles had the nerve to tell me the cookies had been discontinued. "Apparently, the cookies have not been selling well."

I politely thanked him and groaned with disgust. I couldn't believe it. The cookies had the perfect blend of butter, chocolate and ambrosia, the secret ingredient, for heaven's sake. Surely they were available *somewhere*.

I reached for an empty box of the infamous cookies and dialed the toll free number. My vision was blurred, and my lips contorted with spasms of withdrawal. In so many words, I asked the customer service agent how far I'd have to drive to find the damned things.

"Hmm. This is strange," the agent whined, as he punched data into his computer. "It's saying there are no stores within fifty miles of your area."

He rambled on with some nonsense I can't recall, but said he would check into this and call me within the week. Of course, he never did.

Sadly, I couldn't give up. A week later, I flipped open my laptop and asked my favorite search engine where I might find the elusive little devils. Lo and behold, a solution appeared that I'd never considered – a link to my favorite online fulfillment center, Amazon.com. The cookies could be delivered right to my front door and *no one would ever know*. I remember typing in my hefty first order and, to my absolute delight, even qualified for super saver free shipping.

This solution sustained me for almost a year. Nothing, absolutely nothing could have prepared me for the day when my addiction almost killed me.

Spring break had long meant spending the week in Florida, visiting my husband's parents. It remains our kids' favorite stomping ground and usually involves mixing with dozens of other relatives who live nearby. During that particular

spring, I had forgotten to arrange for an out of town cookie fix. With the airlines charging passengers to check luggage, there had been no room in my suitcase for a week's supply. I lasted for three days and six hours without the cookies when I finally snapped. I borrowed my father-in-law's car and hit the road.

The scene along Ft. Lauderdale's A1A that day was a beach lover's paradise. Parchment colored sand welcomed bodies like a grandmother's couch. Red backed tourists gathered at the ocean's edge, diving for Frisbees and footballs. The smell of Hawaiian Tropic, pure heaven, was everywhere. A breeze carried the scent my way as I waited for the traffic light to change.

It usually took two, sometimes three times for the light to change at Sunrise Boulevard. Most days it was impossible to pry me away from the beach I'd grown to love so much. Just before I left the condo, my mother-in-law had looked at me, then at my husband and said, "If Mom ain't happy, nobody's happy." I may be the only woman alive who truly loves her mother-in-law. She gets me.

My stomach growled, and I dragged my eyes from the surf. The traffic light seemed to understand my need and turned green while "I'm Sexy and I Know It" blared from the car behind me. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw two bikini-clad babes rocking to the music from a blue convertible. I remember thinking, *I'll never look like that again*. I sighed, gunned the accelerator and sped all the way to Publix.

It took me less than a minute to maneuver the tan Cadillac into the Publix parking lot. I staggered from the car like a junkie and startled an elderly man who looked like Clint Eastwood. My racing inner voice told me it was probably time to look for a support group for people like me. But good Lord, not this particular week. While I adore my in-laws, living with them for seven days without a fresh stash was more than I could handle.

Inside the store, it was late morning. Aside from a few locals, most of the shoppers were tourists like me. The produce section was busy. There were moms and kids loading their carts with succulent oranges and grapefruits this part of the state is best known for.

I wandered to the cookie aisle and scanned the shelves. Relief almost sent me to my knees as I spotted the Famous Amos label. I crept closer and realized these were zip-locked bags of cookies, not boxes. Even better. The bagged cookies actually cost more, but their taste was superior. I don't know why.

As I moved closer to the shelf, my heart lurched. I grabbed some glasses from my bag and looked again. There must have been fifty, sixty bags of cookies on the shelf, but the ones in front were all chocolate chip and *pecan*. I immediately realized I was going to have to work for this.

I reached a little higher and started flipping past every bag, desperate to find the plain chocolate chips. Within minutes, I could no longer reach the remaining bags. They were too far back on the shelf.

Like a thief, I looked behind me to make sure no one was watching as I tested the unit's stability. I shook it for a few seconds and decided it was solid enough to hold me. My turquoise flip-flops gracefully slid between the Oreo packages on the first shelf. So far, so good.

Then, ever so carefully, I curled my left hand around the outer rim on the face of the unit. I felt like Spiderman, scaling a wall. My right hand was now free to rummage through the remaining bags. As I ruffled through, one after another, my hope waned. Not a plain one was in sight.

Suddenly, I heard the squeak of metal. I remember my heart beating double time when I realized I was suspended in mid air. Bags of cookies started flying off the shelf. The entire top section of the unit was following me to the floor. The rustle of shuffling cellophane lingered in the air while

hundreds of cookie packages searched for a landing spot.

I had managed to roll away from under the bulk of the unit, but I was buried under the layers of cellophane. A little girl with blonde pigtails came into focus. She smoothed her hand over her Cinderella beach dress and looked at me, horrified, her mouth wide open. Luckily, the only pain I felt was embarrassment. I sat up and checked my hands for blood. There were scrapes on the palms of my hands, but other than that, I was uninjured.

Several shoppers began to arrive at the scene. They broke into a chorus of unintelligible gasps, while a young man clutching a skateboard helped me to my feet. I assured him I was fine. He offered to fetch help without asking any other questions. Thank heavens.

I reached for my cell phone and prepared myself for another lecture from my husband regarding my status as a Famous Amos chocolate chip cookie monster. Instead, I returned the phone to my bag, put on my sunglasses and snuck out of the place like a celebrity in disguise.

But once in my car, the tears came in a rush. I remember thinking *how did I get to this ridiculous point in my life?* Shock seared through me in the aftermath of my near-fatal collision. I choked between sobs and pulled a pack of M&M's from my bag. I inhaled the entire pack. The straight chocolate calmed me instantly.

*Lauren Lombardo***First Breakfast**

No one noticed me at that table -
 that my plate was empty,
 my hands were cold,
 my mouth, closed.
 Home was not like church.
 Older hands of brothers and sisters
 grabbed smoked, fried bacon,
 one dozen eggs
 and father's empty pockets.
 While I,
 barely nine,
 unfolded my napkin
 like an old white widow.
 Mother stared at the table
 and whispered,
 "To breakfast like a king,
 you need four hands in this house."
 I no longer wear those Sunday mornings.

*Dylan Tucker***FML**

KEVIN PLACED A FEW more candy bars on the rack, trying to arrange them neatly. Then he leaned back, tossed his head behind him, rolled his shoulders and sighed. Part of it was sincere fatigue, the other was sincere boredom. Not a lot of people came during the night shift, and with the new Flor-Mart just a few blocks over, even less people were coming nowadays. It didn't matter, he got paid regardless. And it paid well enough to cover part of his tuition and let him live off campus, as long as he kept a roommate. Covering his expenses was more important than sleep. He pulled a few more bars from the box and stacked them.

Kevin rubbed his eyes as he heard the door chime and the click of shopping baskets from the front of the store. He focused his hearing toward the customer as they walked toward the back, but he didn't bother to look before they disappeared in the aisles. He'd see them soon enough; he was the only cashier working right now. He stacked a few more candies before going to his register.

Kevin leaned forward and rested his thin arms on the checkout space, doing his best to appear at least conscious for the customer. He didn't have to wait long, he heard the patron coming back up the aisles to the front. Still, he didn't turn toward them, just followed their footsteps.

All of a sudden, they stopped. Finally looking toward them, Kevin was surprised.

A young, gently rounded and slightly tan woman in a light jacket stood there, looking with shock and discomfort on her face. Her feet shuffled nervously. Her large, expressive brown eyes looked at Kevin, then quickly scanned the other, obviously empty register stations.

Seemed the unpleasant surprise was mutual, but Kevin reached out first.

“Hi Sarah.”

“Hey...Kevin...”

She didn’t move. One hand fumbled with her jacket zipper, the fingers of the other flexed around the basket she was holding. Her feet shuffled a bit more, as if she was about to walk away.

“Is there anyone else here tonight?” she asked.

Kevin was taken aback by the question.

“Just me,” he said.

“You don’t have, like, a...uh...self-service checkout?”

she scratched behind one ear.

Kevin patted the surface before him. “What you see is what you get.”

Sarah grimaced, before finally moving up to the register. She looked at Kevin awkwardly, her face turned to the ground.

“How have you been?” Kevin asked, trying to dispel the awkwardness between the two of them.

“Good, good,” she replied, looking away, “no complaints.” Kevin nodded. “Forgot you worked here,” she said, chuckling awkwardly.

“If only it were so easy,” Kevin said with a smile. They both became quiet. Sarah rubbed her forearm anxiously.

“You wanna buy whatever you’ve got, or are you just gonna wait till dawn?” Kevin asked with a small smile, trying to work in a little humor without being rude and hoping to move things along.

Frowning, Sarah pulled the first item from the basket. Kevin pulled his mouth to one side, one eyebrow raised.

Five pack of condoms, ultra thin. Sarah placed it gently on the conveyor belt, but the sound of the cardboard touching the surface reverberated through Kevin’s ears.

Sarah pulled out the other items slowly. Lube, cherry scented. Whipped cream. Chocolate sauce. Hershey’s Kisses.

Scented candles, cinnamon. Placing her last item on the surface, Sarah reached to the racks behind her and pulled a Twix from the candy section. Her cheeks glowed red.

Kevin surveyed Sarah’s things, mouth still twisted to one side. Why, oh why couldn’t she have waited till dawn?

“Aren’t you forgetting the strawberries?” Kevin said, looking back up at Sarah, feeling the chill in his own voice.

She flushed further, her ears going red. “He has an allergy,” she said in a small voice.

It didn’t make Kevin feel any better. Picking up her items one by one (condoms first), he started scanning. With the ‘sleeves’ still in his hand, he asked “Paper or plastic?”

“Latex. PLASTIC! Plastic, I meant plastic.”

Kevin winced only for a moment before he pulled a plastic bag out and began packing her things in it. Sarah’s entire face turned a bright red, her eyes wide as quarters.

“Your total is thirty-two sixty-nine,” Kevin read automatically, then frowned. The list of items danced with insidious joy on the screen.

Sarah paid with cash, still blushing as she handed the money and received her change. She mumbled a ‘thanks,’ then turned to go. Reflexively, Kevin said “Thank you for shopping, have a great night.” He froze, clamping his eyes shut in embarrassment. Sarah stopped, a shudder going up her spine and shaking her body, before walking out the building.

Kevin pulled his phone from his pocket and clapped it on the counter. He scrolled for the one picture he hadn’t managed to delete. He looked at the smiling faces, the happy eyes, the entwined hands.

It didn’t make him feel any better either.

After a minute or two, he snapped the phone back to the main menu and checked the time. Two hours and some change left in his shift.

Great.

Jordan Padgett

Whispers from the Mammoth

I crawl into the cave
 Make my way through
 Four hundred mile long crevices
 Etched out by The Echo River —
 It's gone now, and
 Silence has moved in.
 The long-gone rush of waves are
 Written into the walls.
 Together, I step with silence
 over age-old dirt,
 Sprinkle my footprints
 Beneath the earth —
 In the dark and the cold
 And the never-ending space.
 My ears ache,
 Call out to the Crow
 and the Click Beetle they long for.
 They cry for
 Something familiar.
 I swallow it whole,
 Chew on it until
 What is apart from the cave
 Cannot be recognized.
 I let it grow, and grow with it —

Michael Brookbank

A Temptation

She's not leaving your head, Michael.
 Neither am I.
 I couldn't care less
 if you have nothing in common.
 Neither do I.
 Look at her.
 If you have nothing in common,
 then make something.
 I mean, look at her.
 That red hair, those green eyes.
 They make something (in you)
 want to happen.
 That red hair, those green eyes
 couldn't care less.
 No matter how hard you want it to happen
 she's not leaving your head, Michael.

Andrew Boehmker

Not Like the Movies

I'M KNEELING BESIDE MY BED, hands folded and head buried deep within my elbows.

On this night--like all nights--I'm praying to be taken away from here. I guess that's sort of ironic considering my dad's a preacher and "here" is the only home I've known in my entire fifteen years of existence, but still.

I pray.

#

Wow, Lucas, melodramatic much? I'm again fantasizing about the movie that is *the story of my life*, and I choose to start it like *that*?

Hey, at least this way I'll know what section in Netflix it'll end up in.

Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, maybe I won't. Maybe that's the reason this crazy thing called my life seems so messed up right now--because it's almost impossible to define. It's certainly not a comedy, because really, what's funny about an obsessive-compulsive hemophiliac? Dito on any kind of action movie, given that I'm barely allowed to leave my house for anything but treatments or church since mom thinks just going outside will inevitably cause me to run into something that'll bruise my body or her ego. And speaking of mom, my life most certainly is *not* a romance, considering to this day she's still the only person who has ever kissed me.

So, I guess if I had to classify it, my life would be a tragedy. Is it a good feeling? No. But still, there's a kind of beautiful simplicity to it at the same time. Especially when practically all you have is time to yourself. To watch. To think.

And yet here I am, standing near my bedroom window with a kind of hollowness in my eyes. I keep looking outside at the world that seems so close but has never felt further away; if I close my eyes and concentrate hard enough, I swear I can hear the waves slamming against the shores of North Carolina just a few miles away.

I wish I could be there to see it--or even better, to film it. Because when it comes down to it, that's really all I want to do in life: to capture everything on film, to make memories out of those things we take for granted now that looking back we'll realize were the most beautiful parts of it all.

Give me lights. Give me a camera.

Who am I kidding?

Give me a break.

#

The familiar opening fanfare from *Star Wars* begins blaring through my room at precisely 6:30 in the morning, a not-so-subtle reminder from my alarm clock that it's time to start my day. I stumble out of bed and proceed to rip another page from the day-by-day calendar sitting on my desk.

It's October 6th.

A multiple of three.

Today is going to be a good day.

Well, at least "good" in the perspective of how good a day can get when you know you're going to be stuck in your house the entire time. It's also a Thursday, which means that without even going downstairs I already know what awaits me there: pancakes and pre-calculus.

"LUKE!" my mom's high-pitched voice rings in my ear, pulling me out of my brief moment of solace. "LUUUUKE!

Your father's about to leave!"

Dutifully I trudge down the stairs, inhaling the scent of maple syrup before taking a good look at the familiar scene I

once again find myself in. Dad's on the phone, mom's standing by the sink, and on the kitchen table there are three large pancakes sitting next to a book entitled *Practicing Pre-Calculus*--my least favorite of all the subjects I'm homeschooled in this year.

I take my seat next to the large window in the center of the kitchen, concentrating harder on listening in on dad's conversation than poking at my lukewarm plate. Within a minute, however, he's off the phone and moving closer to hug me.

We embrace as usual, but today he does something different; almost as if the whole thing is playing out in slow motion in my mind, he places a firm grasp on the upper part of my arms, like he's taking a good hard look at me for the first time in months. He then mimics a brief motion of brushing his chin--a not-so-subtle allusion to me showing my first signs of facial hair--before smiling and letting go of me.

It's times like these when I think my dad really gets me. Like he's looking into my soul and can tell that I'm not really happy. And every time he does I just want to break down and tell him that he's right, but I don't. Because that's just not what we do.

"Have a good day, champ," he tells me in a voice that sounds holier-than-thou but I know comes from a genuine place. "Be good to your mom."

With his small wooden cross brushing lightly against the uppermost buttons of his suit, my dad walks through the front door, out of the house, out of my mind, and out of the scene.

"Your dad loves you, Lucas. He's just...stressed," my mom says to me.

I pause.

"I know," I eventually respond before my mom can follow up on her train of thought. I sit back down and try to focus my attention on the vast amount of numbers in the textbook in front of me. It doesn't work. "That's why I didn't show him this."

Against my better judgment I hike up my left pant leg and point to a large bruise that now stretches across the better part of my ankle. Even I'm taken a little aback by it; it definitely didn't look this bad last night.

Immediately my mom is hovering over me, buzzing with newfound energy and questions.

"Lucas! What did you do? How did this happen? Are you okay? God..."

"It's fine, mom. I just didn't turn the light on when I went to sleep last night and banged it right against the bedframe."

Okay, that was a lie. But it's not like I was going to tell her what *really* happened.

"I *knew* we should've done something about that. Just knew it. Guess I'd better call Dr. Quentin..."

"Mom, really. I'm fine. It doesn't even bother me."

Now that my mind is finished going off on that tangent, I decide to turn my attention to some other ones by finally forcing my pre-calculus book open. My mom leaves me alone, going upstairs while I start crunching numbers. Starting with problem three.

God, if my life really were a movie it would be such a flop at the box office.

#

The next morning. Another night spent quietly banging my head--and any other parts of my body--against the wall, just trying to feel *something*. Although that's proved to be more difficult since I came upstairs yesterday and found that mom had placed bubblewrap around all of the corners of my bed and every other possible edge in my room.

Today should be a little better. It's Friday, which means chemistry and Canadian bacon await me downstairs. But it's also the first Friday of the month, which means that later I'll get to see *her*. If that's not enough to get me through a day

full of homework, I don't know what is.

So I spend the better part of the day balancing chemical equations until precisely 6:30, when the front door swings open to reveal my father and his best friend from church, Mr. Pierce. His best friend who also just so happened to bring along his daughter, Carrie.

How do I describe her? Carrie Pierce is the kind of girl that all good stories should be centered around. She may only be two years older than me, but ever since we were just little kids and devoured *Dunkaroos* and Disney movies together, I've felt like she lives in a completely different world than the one I'm a part of. A world that she walks through confidently with her long legs, blonde hair, and the kind of old Hollywood beauty that would make even the most cynical critic give her two thumbs up.

"Hey Mrs. Stevens," she says to my mom casually as she steps into the kitchen. "Lucas."

A mere acknowledgment of my presence. Nothing more. Her voice is as light and innocent as ever, which isn't surprising but is kind of deceptive at the same time. Because she still goes to church every Sunday I think her dad and my parents think she's some kind of angel, but in reality it's a pretty well-known fact that ever since she got a job at the supermarket last summer she's been swiping her v-card at the register of just about every guy that works there.

Not that I mind. I mean, she *was* the girl that secretly loaned me my first R-rated movie two years ago. I'm forever grateful to her for that.

We all sit down for dinner like one big, happy family. She shoots me a piercing glance while my dad prays and thanks the Lord for our dinner--a look that I want to bring up when we both go up to my room after we're finished eating to give our parents time to talk, but I'm not sure how.

"So what's new Luke?" she asks me. I can't tell if she really wants to know or if she's just trying to be friendly.

"Oh, you know, same old, same old," I answer.

"Why do I even ask?"

Just trying to be friendly. Definitely.

"I don't know, why do you?"

This causes her to chuckle. It's hard for me not to feel a little better about myself when I see the smile that brightens her entire face.

"Haha, that's why I love you, Luke," she says nonchalantly.

"You know, I kinda wish I saw you more."

"You mean that?"

"Yeah, why not? It might be kinda nice to hang with someone that I can just, you know, be *myself* around for once." She seems to be finding it hard to make eye contact with me, but her words are genuine, confident. "Still got that *Little Mermaid* tape we used to watch all the time?"

#

That tape saw a lot of action over the next few weeks. Every Thursday night Carrie would come over, and every time she sang "Part of Your World" at the top of her lungs I became more a part of hers. All of these gatherings, however, seem to have been a mere prequel to now, this cold Thursday in November that I currently find myself a part of. We're in my room, watching an old copy of *Hercules* on the small TV in the corner, when I finally decide to go the distance and ask her the question that has been on my mind for a couple of weeks now.

"Carrie?" I ask quietly as the end credits begin to roll.

"Yeah?" she responds in just as timid of a voice.

"I know this is kind of, uh, random, and I know that there's probably a pretty good chance that you'll say no, and that's fine, but I, uh, well I just wanted to see if you maybe wanted to--"

I stare at her nervously, trying not to look gazes while

attempting to gauge her reaction at the same time. And then we make eye contact. More resolved than ever, I try again.

“What I’m saying is, I just wanted to see if you would maybe want to--”

“I’m free next Friday at 8,” she hastily interrupts me, and I’ve never been more glad to hear her voice. “If that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, I actually uh--”

Breathe.

“Dinner and...a movie?” I ask once my composure returns.

“How about just a movie?”

“Even better.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up at 8, then.” I hadn’t thought of that. Thank God she drives.

“Sounds good,” I muster, my voice coming out more self-assured than ever before.

“You sure your parents are okay with this?”

Shit. I hadn’t thought of that either.

#

Lots of promises and “I’ll be at home by eleven at the latest’s later,” it’s Friday night and I’m waiting by my front door at precisely 8:00. Carrie doesn’t actually show up in her surprisingly beat-up old red Jetta until closer to 8:15, which kind of annoys me at first, but we’re still able to arrive at the theatre at promptly 8:30 thanks to a gratuitous amount of speeding on her part.

I don’t even remember the name of the movie we’re seeing. I know I let her pick, and I know it’s got Jennifer Lopez in it, but the entire situation is turning out to be a bad cliché of the worst romantic comedy I’ve ever seen. We buy our M&Ms and take our seats, and just as we finish awkwardly trying to figure out whether we should put the armrest down in between us or not the movie begins.

At least for us, the movie ends about half an hour later.

Carrie has just finished putting the last M&M in her mouth when she leans over to me and says, “this movie sucks.” I obviously can’t agree more, so within moments we’re standing up and exiting through the lobby, where we start laughing more than we did at any point in the movie.

“I am so sorry! The trailers made it look so good!” Carrie apologizes to me in her light, airy voice.

“No worries,” I shoot back, unable to stop the laughter from seeping into my own voice. “They have a tendency to do that, only show the good parts of the movie.”

“I just feel bad. I mean, you spent \$20 so we could see some movie we should’ve known would be stupid just based on the fact that Matthew McConaughey’s in it.”

“So...now what?” I ask awkwardly. “It’s not even 9:30. We’ve still got some time.”

“Well...” Carrie replies, elongating the word so that it sounds more like a long sigh. There’s an awkward pause while Carrie stops to check her phone, but as soon as her polished fingernails finish tapping against the hard screen her attention returns fully to me.

“Well what?”

“Well, there *is* this party,” she tells me, clearly choosing her words carefully. “I mean, I know that it’s not really your thing and we wouldn’t be able to stay long, but I mean, while you’re out...”

A party? Suddenly all of the talks from my parents about doing what’s right instead of what’s fun, about always being good and not giving into vice, start rushing through my head.

“A party sounds great,” is all I say. I mean, I guess that’s what she *wants* me to say. Within minutes, we’re back in Carrie’s Jetta and speeding toward what I am already feeling might be the worst decision of my life.

#

We're pulling up into the house of someone who, from what I can gather, is a friend of a friend of Carrie's. It doesn't really matter; what *does* matter is how the absolutely huge house sits atop the type of hill that I've only ever looked up at, perched to give an almost perfect view of the entire city below.

Carrie can obviously sense the intense amount of nerves I'm feeling once we're standing outside, just feet away from the door. Suddenly my room back home doesn't seem like such a bad place, geeky movie posters and all.

The two of us enter the expansive house together, and immediately Carrie is swarmed by a number of people, all of whom seem to know her and want to know where she's been and what she's been up to. I feel ridiculous just standing there as she says hi to everyone, all the while wishing, hoping, *praying* that just *one* person in this entire throng of people would know my name.

It's like I can actually *feel* the anxiety continuing to build inside me. It's been a few years since I've had a real, fully blown panic attack, but suddenly the feeling is becoming more and more familiar, like when you can still quote perfectly from a movie you haven't seen in years.

"Carrie," I mumble, tugging lightly on the straps of her purse to get her attention. She turns around and looks me directly in the eyes. Neither of us has to say anything; our gazes speak volumes. Within seconds she's pushing our way through everyone until we are out of the crowd and out the door.

"I'm sorry about that, Luke." A beat. "God, I'm just messing up all around tonight."

"It's not your fault. Maybe if I were a normal teenager I could have fun in there, but..."

"Don't apologize," Carrie tells me boldly, her tone more

assured than before. "You're a better person than any of the guys in that house, and I know that for a fact. Don't let anyone tell you differently."

I choose not to respond, allowing her words to hang in the air.

"Well, it's almost 10:30," she says, the warm glow of her phone illuminating her face that has grown strangely cold and apologetic. "I better get you home."

We head back to her car, where she sets down her purse and cell phone, and are just about ready to leave when--

"Wait."

The word escapes from my mouth before I even have the time to consciously process it. It just feels like the right thing to say.

I take her by the hand and lead her away from the house, further and further up the hill that overlooks the city below. From this far up the sprawling expanse of buildings and traffic seems quiet. Calm. Tame. The usually blinding, bright colors of the high-rise buildings now provide mere mood lighting. And we're finally far enough from the party to where the once ear-splitting music has become little more than a faint whisper of background noise. I begin motioning to sit down and Carrie complies, allowing her long body to sprawl out across the grass below. A cold November breeze moves through the air intermittently, but in this moment it's like neither of us care.

"This..." she whispers, her voice trailing off before she can even complete the statement.

"...is beautiful," I continue, paying more attention to her eyes than the city they are focused on.

"Exactly." A single word stated in a single breath that says so much.

"Lucas?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't you ever get upset? I mean, that you don't get to do

these things more often?"

I smile.

"Sometimes." I stop for a second, not sure how to respond. How she *wants* me to respond. "But I guess it's hard to stay mad when things like this make me realize how much beauty there is in the world."

She moves in closer to me, holding my head in her hand and pushing it toward hers. She kisses me lightly and then moves back, like she's surprised at her own audacity. Within seconds I'm leaning back toward her and we're kissing harder, more intensely.

"Are we really going to do this, Lucas?" Carrie asks me while taking a short respite. "Do you even know how it works?"

"I've seen *American Pie*," I answer back, trying to lighten the mood. I don't even need to remind her that she was the one who loaned it to me.

"Good enough."

And though the faint echoes of the party can still be heard in the background, for the rest of the night it is just the two of us, she and I, drunk off of nothing but each other until the sunrise.

#

I arrive outside my house at around 6 the next morning; while normally the number would make me feel good, I know that there's no good that can come from this. As I retrieve the spare key from under the welcome mat on our front door I'm praying to God that my parents are still sleeping and I'll be able to somehow sneak in unnoticed.

But just like all the other times in my life, my prayers go unanswered. I see my mom immediately upon opening the door and she's a nervous wreck, but she seems so surprised to see me that she can't even formulate a question for probably

the first time in her life. Once she steps aside, however, I see my dad.

He's crying.

I don't say anything as he stands up from his recliner and begins speaking, his voice starting as a quiet whisper.

"Do you have any idea of what you put us through? Put *ME* through? Of how many times we tried to call Carrie, her parents, *ANYONE* who might have some God damned idea of where our son was?!"

"Harold--" my mom protests, obviously trying to diffuse the situation.

"Don't! He needs to understand that treating people like this will *NOT* be tolerated in this house! I hope you had a good time, Lucas, because--"

"I did," I interrupt, all of a sudden unfazed by his potential retribution. "In fact, I had a *great* time."

My father grows silent. It's like he doesn't know how to take me standing up for myself. He takes a few steps closer to me and gives me that look, that look that says he really gets me. Then, with his wooden cross necklace peeking out from under his shirt, he closes his eyes and raises his right hand.

The hole in the wall left in my dad's wake will probably only take a few days to fix.

The hole in my heart, though?

That will take a lot longer.

#

Winter has arrived, and with it the snow has become deeper and deeper just like my new voice. It's been almost five full weeks since I've seen or heard from Carrie thanks to mom and dad, but all of the Pierces are coming over for our annual Christmas gathering and my parents are almost certainly not going to let anything stand in the way of *that* tradition.

"I see you got rid of some of your posters," Carrie comments upon entering my room after dinner, a small red gift bag in hand. "And your action figures."

"Well, I guess I don't feel like a little boy any more," I say, not bothering to observe her reaction. "I've missed you. That night--"

"I missed you too, Luke."

A beat. It's like neither of us knows what to say. Or where we left off.

Luckily, Carrie breaks the ice that now chills the room by handing me the bag in her hand.

"What's this? I thought we decided our families wouldn't get each other anything."

"Oh, it's not a big deal, really...just open it."

I slowly pull the tissue paper out of the bag before feeling something hard at the bottom. Cautiously I proceed to pull the object out, my curiosity peaked.

A video camera. Of course.

"It's old," she mentions. "It still runs on tape, I think, and doesn't do the best job at zooming. But it was just laying around the house, and I figured you'd get a lot more use out of it."

"No, it's fine...*I love it.*"

That's all I can get out while reprimanding myself for not getting her such a thoughtful present--or any present at all, for that matter. "What about you? What do *you* want for Christmas?"

"To get the hell out of this place. With any luck my present'll come in January, when I find out if any of the colleges I applied to are gonna take me."

"I'm sure they will, Carrie," I reassure her, finding myself forcing a smile to cover up my true feelings regarding her imminent departure. "Why do *you* want to leave so bad?"

"Is that a serious question?"

I stare at her, contorting my smile into a look of puzzlement.

"I guess because, when it comes down to it, I have to believe that a better world exists." Her expression makes it clear that she is serious. Alive. "For both of us, Lucas. So I want you to promise me something. Use this camera. Swear that you'll use it to go capture some of that beauty you talked about."

She remembers. And really, that's greater than any gift I could have asked for.

#

And use that camera I have. With the coming of spring I've been using it to capture the images of a life in bloom. Slowly, things in that life have started to get better. I no longer pray for a salvation that will probably never come. Mom still worries but lets me out more. Sometimes when I pass that patched-up piece of wall I can still feel the lingering disappointment of my dad, but at least when he looks at me now his expression is no longer one of anger. And making movies remains a small, good thing; something to help get me through those times when life seems like it's just too much to take.

So naturally when dad informs me that Carrie will be leaving for the summer before going away to college for good, I know I have to make one for her. I have him take me to that hill overlooking the city. There I capture on film the intangible memories of that night, of the world I could have entered but didn't.

It's that film that I'm clutching tightly in my hands now as dad drives me to the shore, the same one I sometimes think I can hear in my room at night if I concentrate hard enough. The same one that I've lived less than fifteen minutes away from my whole life but have never been able to visit. So when I see Carrie there, in a flowing white top that blows in the wind as she stands idly on a pier jutting out into the ocean, it's hard not to lose my breath.

"I've only got a few minutes," is the first thing I say to her as I walk toward the end of the pier. Her back is to me, but I can tell she hears my words because I can see the smile form on the edges of her cheeks even from here.

"Thanks for coming," she says to me, turning around and allowing me to take in the full effect of her appearance; her hair is done up in a bun and pierced with a gold headband. Instantly it's like I'm taken back to my old feelings of her, of the completely different plane she seems to exist in.

"Come on, I had to give you *something* before you head off on your big adventure," I chuckle, teasing her as I wave the video tape in front of her face.

"Is this one of your movies? You know, I've been watching the stuff you put on YouTube. Well done though, Mr. Lucas."

I want to make a comment about being more of a Spielberg kind of person, but I resist. Instead I decide to hand over the unmarked tape, which Carrie takes with a renewed sense of vigor.

"What is it? I can't wait to see!"

"I can't tell you. In fact, you have to promise me something: don't watch it right away. Save it for a rainy day, for a time when you feel like you're actually missing this shihole."

"Like that'll happen," she retorts. We both laugh. "But, okay, I promise. And in return, you've got to promise *me* something too."

"What's that?"

"Come on, Carrie, you know they just want me to have a nice life."

"Maybe," she says as she bites down on her lip. "But let's be honest, Lucas, what you're doing here...it isn't really living."

I've never thought of it like that before.

She has a point.

"Promise," I reply.

And in that moment, I secretly resolve to keep that promise. For both of us.

"To a better world," I add when I notice Carrie remains silent.

"To a *beautiful* world," she replies, and our eyes meet just long enough for me to get a quick glimpse of those piercing hazel irises I love so much.

I'd like to say we stay standing on the beach and kiss while the sun sets like in some kind of Hollywood romance, but we don't. I wish I could say that I'm going to let her leave and then rush to the airport to catch her just in time like in a melodrama, but I can't. Instead we walk back toward the shore, where she gets into her Jetta and drives off toward college and her new life while I head back home.

It is there that I check the mailbox--only needing to open the door once instead of three times for the first time in forever--and find an extra large envelope with my return address written in penmanship clearly too nice to be my own. Pulling the envelope out of the mailbox even further I notice the "NYU" stamp in the lower right hand corner and the name printed in the top left: Tisch School of the Arts. Then I look up at the sky and pray that I'll see her again soon.

I mean, there's always room for a sequel, right?

Cory Bankemper

How do snails mate?

I do not worry,
 as there
 are more and more
 for me to find
 in their garden bed.
 It's in my yard
 but it belongs
 to them.
 It is theirs, and
 it is where
 they're fed,
 and find pistils hid
 in petals of gentle scent.

It is there—
 they flash slick
 false feet, tangle, and
 savor primitive lust
 for less than the moment
 it takes the near summer
 wheat to whip back
 after the wind. And

it is done—
 they slide off, fast-
 as snails able,
 with their slime
 turned to satin,
 in each other's
 stalked eyes and

in mine, as
 I know there,
 They're just like me;
 in my slacks from last night,
 with hair slick in unshowered grease
 that I saw them dare
 mate—and
 I knew them:
 the same as we.

CONTRIBUTORS

SERRA ADAMS is currently a pre-art education major, with a focus in photography. She plans on teaching at the high school level to help inspire young artists to make the best of their talents. When asked of the inspiration for her photograph *Solitude*, Serra remarked, “the beauty of nature and how something can change from an ugly caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly.”

CORY BANKEMPER is a senior majoring in Philosophy and Media Informatics. Of his poem “How Do Snails Mate”, Cory explains, “I created my poem featured here while listening to Kelly Moffett’s account of her exploration of the kinship she had found with animals while coping with a personal matter. While the poem itself has little to do with such specifically, I attribute its inspiration wholly to her strength.”

ANDREW BOEHMKER is a senior majoring in Electronic Media Broadcasting and Public Relations. Of his short story he explains, “As a film buff, my inspiration for ‘Not Like the Movies’ primarily came from a desire to write something that was fun and kind of familiar while also including some plot twists along the way to keep the audience guessing; just like all good movies.”

MICHAEL BROOKBANK is an English Major with a focus in Creative Writing. Of his poem “A Temptation” he says, “The repetition of lines throughout the poem shows the speaker’s obsessive, overwhelming desire to pursue a person they only know skin deep. I felt as though a Pantoum was an accurate way to portray that idea.”

AMANDA EWING is a junior at Northern Kentucky University studying studio arts with a minor in creative writing. Of her piece, Amanda said, “The inspiration for *My Sunshine* was solely from my younger siblings and their innocence when they were small. When it was time for them to go to sleep, or when they were upset, I would always sing to them ‘You are my Sunshine.’”

ANGELA CLAHN is currently a senior at NKU. This is her first publication. Of her photograph *Immaculata*, Angela says, “That picture is one of the first ones that I took with my new camera. We would see the church all of the time from across the river and Eden park in Cincinnati.”

RYAN KREBIHL is a junior majoring in Creative Writing. Of his short story “The Fox on the Wall”, he explains, “My inspiration came from my need to challenge myself. This story was the first time I ever tried first person perspective, present-tense, or writing from the perspective of a metaphor. I am so honored this piece was accepted for publication and will never stop pushing myself.”

LAUREN LOMBARDO is a senior English Major with a focus in Creative Writing. In her poem “First Breakfast” she reflects on her memories of fighting for space and a voice as the youngest of seven children. Lauren enjoys all aspects and genres of creative writing, but she finds that she favors creative nonfiction. Of her creative nonfiction piece “Enabling Cookies”, she says that her story “reflects my need to lighten up and take myself less seriously. One of my jobs as a writer is to help readers understand that most of us are vulnerable, in one capacity or another. We’re all human.”

CONTRIBUTORS

TOMMY MACFARLAND is currently working on my Bachelors of Fine Arts in Art History, graduating next spring. Of his artwork Arnold, Tommy explains, "My piece is an exaggeration of how people currently alter themselves, but may not be so in the near future when the current methods are seen as too simple."

MINADORA MACHERET is an English Major with a minor in Honors. Of her poem "I painted the word Escape and someone heard" she explains, "This poem is in relation to my Grandmother's survival of the Holocaust. It recreates the moment of her liberation in the form of tuberculosis and a Ukrainian woman."

DIDEM MERT is a NKU undergrad currently seeking a BFA with an emphasis in Ceramics. Of her piece Remains, Diden explains, "With this body of work I model different animal bones found in nature and create my own anatomical forms. Skeletal remains not only bring images of death, but they are also infinite, showing the life of a creature. As Einstein theorized, 'energy cannot be created or destroyed.'"

JORDAN PADGETT is an English Major with a focus in Creative Writing. Of her poem "Whispers from the Mammoth" she says it was, "inspired by my recent experience in the Mammoth Cave system in south central Kentucky. It explores not only the cave system itself, but also the connection we all have with the earth. As the speaker moves through the cave, they must learn to adapt and take their time. Essentially, this poem is about learning to listen even when you think no one's talking."

COURTNEY PERRY is a Creative Writing student at NKU graduating this semester. Of her photograph It's a Beautiful Day, Courtney explained, "This is a piece that I did for my photography class at NKU. We were working on color at that point in the class and I thought the flowers looked so vibrant. Almost the whole backdrop for them was nothing but greenery, so they stood out even more."

AUTUMN SCHULER is a senior majoring in English with a focus in writing studies. Of her creative nonfiction piece "Oath Breaker" she states that, "After studying Shaolin martial arts for seven years through middle- and high-school, it was difficult for me to leave that world for college. I often reflect on the physical and spiritual aspects of Shaolin that I left behind, and "Oath Breaker" is a love letter to the ritualistic world I miss."

ADAM SCHMIDT is a Fine Arts major at NKU. Of his sculpture Helping Hands, Adam explained, "I have always been driven to help people throughout my life, but I could only do so much with my two hands. I created this sculpture so I could 'help' more people at one time."

MARK DANIEL SMITH is a senior English Major with a focus in American Literature. Of his poem "Undomestication" he explains, "A few years ago the cows escaped from a pasture near my family's farm in Henry County, KY. I imagine it was the most exciting and rewarding experience of their lives. This poem celebrates that experience. Their excursion also prompted questions. How far from wild is a cow? How far are we?"

CONTRIBUTORS

RANEE STEMANN is a Junior English Major with a concentration in Creative Writing. Of her poem "Just Listen" she says, "I wrote this poem using a combination of prompts that Professor Kelly Moffett sent to our poetry class. One prompt was to write a poem using sound, and the second prompt was to write a poem that began with the word "Listen" and then confess something outrageous."

DYLAN TUCKER is a senior History Major at NKU. Of his short story "FML" he explains, "'FML' was taken from a post on FMyLife.com. I felt so compelled by the post I wrote the story the next few mornings on the bus to school."

NAVRR WASYXCIA is a NKU senior undergrad currently seeking a BFA in Visual Communication. Of his piece "geisoleerd" he says, "I always try to create things abstractly and non objectively using figurative elements with the end result turning into something different from where the idea started. I'm interested in how everything connects together."