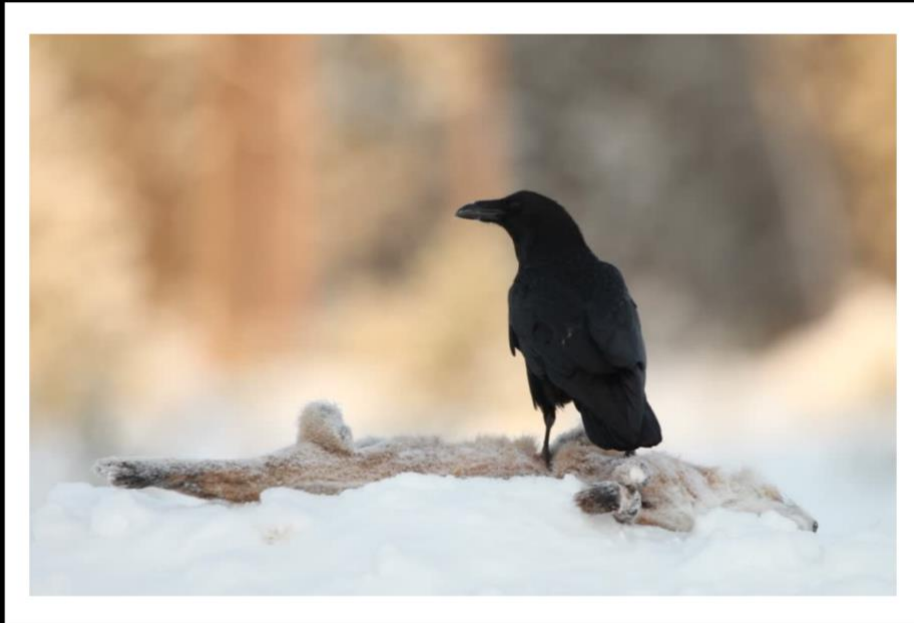


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Angelica Terso

I Was Just in the Neighborhood

Smoked salmon on flat everything bagel. No capers. Light on cream cheese.

I have a feeling she'll regret that last part. She has weakness for anything creamy and cheesy.

But *giving in to your wants, every once in a while, is being kind to yourself*, I remember from our last session.

A little low-fat indulgence won't hurt her, anyway. Her body looks like what it would've looked like when she was still in her early twenties. Only now, she looks even better. Sadder, yes. But wiser and richer. Wise enough to give people advice and get paid for it. And rich enough to hire a personal trainer to yell nonsense at her while she slams heavy balls against the wall three times a week. Ugh, how I wish my ass and breasts still look like that.

She doesn't reach for a napkin when a dollop of white gets stuck on the corner of her mouth, but her cute little tongue peeks out and lingers on the skin. It should disgust me—an attractive professional in her stylish two-piece green suit, devouring her morning bagel with not a care in the world who could be watching. I take a bite of my own bagel, and wish I was more like her. And yet even in the comfort of my own office, I dab my lips with a neatly folded napkin out of sheer habit. One just never knows when someone will barge in uninvited. Not that there's anything wrong with what I'm doing. People watching café goers from across the street isn't a crime.

Besides, a woman like her must know she's always being watched. And the thought that she's gracing me with a show of her teasing tongue tickles my stomach that I'm tempted to cross the street, take her hand, and drive off into the sunset like Sandy and Danny Zuco.

Fantasizing is a healthy human experience. It doesn't harm anyone if used as a coping mechanism.

See? Even psychologists are on my side.

She picks up her cappuccino but puts it back down as she notices the steam still steadily rising. Even from here, I can see that her ring finger is bare. It has been for a while. Three weeks to be exact. The Monday after Easter, I stared at the pale outline for the whole hour we were together. I know she saw me looking, but she was kind enough not to embarrass me for being the least bit curious.

Her late husband has been dead for over a year. Is this her way of telling me she's ready to move on? Does she feel the same way? Will she finally confess during our appointment today?

Her being mysterious just adds to her allure, even more than the fact that we only see each other once a week in a stuffy room, talking about anything and everything that isn't about the two of us.

But I want more than just an hour a week. I want more than just the polite professional interactions. I want more than just the zoomed-out image of her eating her bagel and sipping her coffee. I want *her*.

And I know people may think this whole thing is cliché. Inappropriate thoughts between patient and therapist. Middle aged woman lusting after another woman. Blah blah blah.

But these feelings are real, I *swear*.

Over time, we learn to lean into our feelings—that thing in your chest is the key to your ultimate happiness.

She pushes her chair back and throws away her half-eaten bagel and I do the same. Our 10 am appointments have been the only thing that make Mondays bearable. And today is even more special. Today's the day we're going to tell each other how we feel.

I shrug into my blazer and reach for my oversized purse, wondering if there's anyone else that hears the loud thumping in my chest as I imagine myself kissing the face I've been dreaming about even while I'm awake.

I have a hard time concentrating as I put on my lipstick, my shaky hands failing to follow the outline of my mouth, that I barely hear the light knock on my door.

"Your ten o'clock canceled, by the way. I cleared your calendar. I thought you saw."

This receptionist is new—two weeks new, in fact. Otherwise, she'd know to personally tell me about last minute cancellations instead of expecting me to check my own fucking calendar.

"Sorry?"

"Your ten o'clock. Lara Quinta? The consultant from Warner? She canceled. The rest of her sessions too."

My mouth is dry all of a sudden, a smacking sound coming out of it as I force it open.

"Did she say why?"

"Just that she didn't need your services anymore," the receptionist shrugs. "New patient is here early."

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose as I sit back down on the oversized chair. "That's fine. Send them in."

The red heels come first. And when I see the rest of her, an intense jolt shocks my body from head to toe, something I haven't felt since what's her face first came into my practice months ago.

Grace Cho, the file says, along with her address and every other personal identifying details. Her smile is the most radiant thing I've ever seen. Her eyes are bright and hopeful. Her voice is harmonic, not too high, but just low enough. And most importantly, her ring finger is bare.

I am certain I am in love.

But this time feels different, I *swear*.

Anthony Hartill

Another Autumn Day

Another autumn
Another autumn day
Another dying of the leaves

A flame before the fall
A flame before ashes blow
A flame it flickers and it dies

Another year broken
Another spring's waste
Another leaf that has passed away

I count the leaves upon the ground
I count them like the years
I count them till the number's done

I turn the earth
The earth it turns
And turns until it has all been turned away.

Brenden Hernandez

Passing Regret

Sliding from the booth, he placed the coffee cup on the table. The hot meal and the worn high-back cushion had provided welcome respite from the last hundred miles. The sun had begun to crack its setting yoke on the horizon, painting the tops of the fields and the diner's sign a bright red when he passed by over an hour ago. The quiet atmosphere of the roadside café had proven restful for his mind as well. Aside from the occasional clink of ice in a plastic cup or sizzle from the flattop in the kitchen, the only noise had been a cluster of hunters in a corner booth. Their bright orange and camouflage stood in stark contrast to the red and white checkered floor of the diner's interior. He had noticed a truck bed, tailgate open, as he rolled into the gravel lot. A dark tarp had been lashed across its contents and two slender legs protruded from one corner, hooves sharp and lifeless. From what little conversation he overheard from their table the season was showing promise. Glancing through the window over his table he saw the gravel lot and the bordering highway was now cast in a bluish gray. The chrome pipes of his bike gleamed in the overhead moonlight under a soft sheen of dust. Reaching down for his check he caught his reflection in the glass, his mind catapulting him unwillingly to before.

He saw her standing there, all knees and elbows, waving her arm in the animated way eight-year-olds do. Her hair blew gently across her face framing a wide smile. He was sitting astride the motorcycle, having backed into the street and clanked the shift lever into first. He gave their customary salute and watched as she returned in kind, placing the tip of forefinger to nose. She had always been curious about the bike. It may have started when he had placed her in the saddle when she was just old enough to sit still, allowing her to feel the hulk of the machine beneath her. She had sat there many times thereafter, shoulders hunched over outstretched legs, determined to reach the highway bars.

There were constant pleadings and the occasional outright tantrum when he denied her rides. He refused to take her until she grew older. "I'm older today, daddy," she would say, positioning herself defiantly between him and the bike. To stifle these protests, he had fastened a small bell around the left fork. Her watchful eyes had followed his every move as he explained its significance. "This bell isn't for other people on the road. It's for the rider." Then, adding for the sake of his dilemma, "When you're really ready for a ride you'll be able to hear it." He had started the engine and burped the throttle. She watched as the bell vibrated under the engine's idle. "Can you hear it?" She took a step closer dropping her left ear towards the front end for a few slow, thoughtful seconds. Her eyes darted back and forth as she tried to find the sound. Finally, she straightened, shaking her head from side to side. Thumb clicking the off switch he smiled down at her, "One day."

He was at work when the phone rang a week later. He answered to the quiet sobs of the school nurse. There had been an accident on the playground. No, he couldn't talk to her, she was being rushed to the hospital. Months had passed since then, and his grief had consumed all time and space. Her ashes now rested in a small silver urn in his left saddlebag. He had

absentmindedly realized his reflection as he had given the urn a gentle kiss before wrapping and securing it in the case.

He paid for his meal and exited the diner, zipping his jacket against the cool September air. He retrieved his gloves from the other case and pulled them on. Straddling the bike, he interlocked his fingers to seat the gloves before straightening the forks and lifting the kickstand. He engaged the starter switch and the engine rumbled beneath him as he secured his half dome helmet. He donned a pair of clear lenses and rolled onto the lip of the highway, centering the lane, and working the gears up to speed.

The sound of the exhaust bounced flatly off the asphalt and filtered out across the swaying grass. He met the occasional semi and between access roads had trailed an older model truck towing squares of bundled hay aboard a flatbed, but the road now stretched barren in front of him. He would ride another fifty-six miles before reaching the exit for the hotel. That would mark the halfway point of his journey.

He would spread her ashes and retrace these miles alone. *Alone*. He felt a heartbeat of anger course through his body. Their time was too brief. He would have, no he *should have*, held her longer. Vain promises. Why didn't he...? He felt a quick stab of nausea as his anger bottomed out to guilt in the pit of his stomach. His right wrist wrenched harshly on the throttle. His years on two wheels had made his eyes keen to contours in the roadway, more reflex than thought. A quarter mile ahead the continuous stitch weaved by reflectors in the road's centerline became detached. A sharp right-hand curve disappeared behind a stand of cornrows.

His conscious mind registered the turn when he noticed the apex bathed in white light. That swath of light quickly shrank to a small pinhole as a motorcycle rounded the corner angling toward him. The wind buffeted his ears as he squinted in the approaching beam. With the moon now nested high above he could make out the silhouette of the oncoming bike. It had the same shark nose fairing that he sat behind. Now less than fifty yards away the sound ushering towards him began to swallow his environment. The road noise, the wind, even the exhaust all now absent, replaced by a slow steady *ringing*. His mind now ripped under by a sweeping current of confusion he heard it clearly as he rode abreast of the other cyclist. *clang*. He noticed the passenger first, bare bony knees outstretched in the glow of the marker lamps. His eyes darted to the rider, face empty of expression, a mirror image of himself. *CLANG*. Huddled behind him she sat, her wide smile underlining a simple gesture of finger to nose. *CLAANGG!* Returning his eyes to the highway ahead he saw the deer broadside, mere feet away.

Brianna Barberi

My Visit with the Devil

Awakened by the sounds of despair and longing,
The air thickened-pulling me deeper into an abyss,
Multiple heads-their eyes piercing into my blackened soul,
Peeling back layers-exposing the rotted flesh, I wonder.
Not alone but no one present,
All of my senses stimulated-I am desperate.
It then entered. A smoked fog of sadness and internal destruction,
It reeked of rot, of lies, of disease.
My mind filled with questions that made no logic,
I could not make out the words-backwards,
Everything rushing in-mass confusion.
I can see this is what it wants,
It feeds off the pain that streams through my veins,
The ache my heart feels as it pumps deeply into my chest-a heartbeat that can be heard
throughout.
Death is what I yearn for-to not feel this torment,
This is eternal damnation.
Death is what I long for-no more pain,
This is punishment-this is judgement.
Death is what I ask for,
I will never be released from this endlessness.
Forever here with the uninvited,
My visit with the devil.

Bryant Vielman

The Visitor

In the throes of anguish, weak and distraught,
brooding as I was over transgressions wrought,
was my misery interrupted by a peculiar thought.

It is an attempt, no doubt, to stow my dismay,
though of its efficacy yet, I have nothing to say.

Crude, contorted, and reeking of rot
is this strange consolation which to me was brought.

But alas! here it stands nude and gory,
a potential truth stripped of glory—

“There, there,” it says with a cold, blank stare.

“Put down the load you unnecessarily bear.

Collect yourself and weep not
for it is not attributed to you the things that are naught.

Whether promises fulfilled, or transgressions wrought,
this was destined always to be your lot.”

Chisom Okafor

Circumnavigation

My father suggests we go into the night,
telling stories of war to keep awake:
how the ancient warriors of our tribe,
by doing the unimaginable to themselves,
did more to others. How violence makes all things
whole again.

I'm not listening to him.
In my head, a flower has just begun
to sprout, in the direction
of scattered photon rays, and
is headed towards my windowpane.

In real time, I am exactly six thousand,
nine hundred and seventy miles away from home.
But I want to think I am home again.
I want to think my father has become my father again.
Instead, I imagine there is a bird
trying to break free from my chest,
and has become trapped
in this complicated art of escape.

The bird is me. And my chest is my father's.
And even in the face of an abundance of light,
applause of spring, or joy of bloom,
the only life I know is not measurable,
is a three-dimensional pyramid
of separation, time,
and distance.

Christine Bevilacqua
Thoughts

Red-stained streets on
fleeing roadways
Holding breath
under bushes.
Five hours of gunfire
targeting a
festival of freedom
and love.
Purveyors of hatred.
Carnage unleashed.
No elevation.
Leading to more cycles
of destruction
and death
Humanity denied.

Christopher Fried

Retina of the Mind's Eye

Across the home, around the neighborhood,
screens small to large turn off and on. The lights
bleed out the windows as libations poured
as one to new, mysterious idols.

Reality, in turn, becomes confused,
as something less than what's viewed. Acolytes,
these surge in simulated fears and pleasures
while the new gods with images cajole
the assembly to move to weirder thoughts,
the congregated to become less bored
as simple patterned provocation wanes.

As the screens pulse, they can't resist the pull,
whether sharp LED or megabytes,
and bow their heads in the light of their lords.

David Larsen
Second String

Daniel Wade shook hands with each well-wisher, male, female, young, old, gringo, Mexican. He was far from good at this sort of thing. He'd always been the quiet, almost timid, member of the Wade family, the one Wade who went unnoticed. A few women, tears in their eyes, trembling-lipped like witnesses to the crucifixion, hugged him as they whispered what must have been sympathetic utterances, but none of their comforting words registered in Daniel's dulled mind. He was stoned, as smoked as a Deadhead a half hour before the concert, the only way he could get through an afternoon like this.

More than a few of the good old boys from town, friends of his late father and of his brother, in their best pairs of boots and wide-brimmed Stetsons, many who had known Daniel and, of course, Peter, since they were well-heeled grade schoolers, placed their hands on Daniel's shoulders or patted him on the back and nodded as if they understood just how he felt. They didn't. Daniel didn't feel much of anything; he was as numb as the occupants in the graves all around him; his only wish was that he could be anyplace other than the Dos Pesos cemetery with his brother, not more than ten feet away, his empty eye sockets fixed on the closed lid of his eternal residence. A shotgun blast to the head was even more gruesome than Daniel would have imagined. Hence: the closed casket. What the hell does Peter think of all this? wondered Daniel. Can *he* hear all this bullshit?

Not more than a half dozen steps from the polished, shiny coffin in which sure-of-himself Peter rested—for all time, perhaps amused at what the shy, sole-surviving son of the late Richard and Sandra Wade was having to put up with—Daniel stood as steadfast as he could. He worried that his quaking knees might give out on him, that he could easily slip into the hole that awaited his twin brother. But, no, he couldn't take his brother's place in the rocky, caliche-layered ground—even if he wanted to, which he didn't.

Peter, the first-born son, by a measly nine minutes, was due his birthright, or so he had claimed for twenty-eight years, an entitlement that demanded that he be the first at everything. Why not being buried? Whether he liked it or not. The second son listened to the townfolks' condolences and nodded as if he heard what was offered in hushed, reverential tones. It was his duty. He listened, but everything about the afternoon was a jumble.

Kyle Reid, the Contreras County sheriff, a man who knew the two boys about as well as anyone, was the last to amble over to pay his respects.

"Danny," said the tall, round-bellied man, "I can't say that I know what you're feeling today, but I *can* tell you that all of Dos Pesos feels like we lost one of our best."

Daniel nodded. Yes, they had lost one of the best. His throat was too dry to agree with the twice-elected man, a friend of his dead father since they were pups at Travis High School, back in the sixties.

“How long’s it been since you and Peter played ball?” The sheriff squinted as he looked across the desert at the sun that lingered like the last guest after an unsuccessful party. “I can still see you two out there on that football field, Peter throwing the long pass to Jimmie Gil with the clock running out.” He shook his head and smiled. “You were on the line, weren’t you?”

“Yes, sir. I played tackle. Second string. Peter was the star.”

The sheriff grinned. “And basketball, my God. I think your brother averaged over nineteen points his senior year.” He chuckled. “He was a marvel out there on the court with his ballhandling and outside shooting. How long ago was that?”

“We graduated in 2012,” said Daniel. He glanced at the coffin. It remained elevated, reluctant to allow itself to be lowered into the cool underworld of the desert. “Peter was something special. That’s for sure.”

Sheriff Kyle Reid sucked the dry, pungent air through his horsey teeth, then exhaled hardily. “Ten years ago? Seems like it was yesterday.” He blinked, then said, “As for the cause of death, I assured those state troopers that this was an accident. Hell, the state of Texas has bigger things to worry about than some poor kid’s shotgun goin’ off as he tried to get over a barbed-wire fence.”

Daniel nodded. Yeah, they most certainly did.

“A couple of those troopers wondered why someone would be out huntin’ with a shotgun. I told ‘em he was probably after some quail. That he got tangled up in the barbed wire and the gun went off.” The sheriff paused. “When I told ‘em that it was Peter’s own brother who found him out there dangling on that fence they seemed to be satisfied that it must’ve been a huntin’ accident. Shoot. You know how those state people are, always trying to find something that ain’t there. But I convinced them.”

Daniel cleared his throat. “Sheriff, you’ve been a great help in all of this.”

“Well, after all you’ve been through, I felt like I needed to do what I could.” The sheriff shuffled his scuffed boots in the gravel. “When your mama and daddy died out there on Highway 1129, I felt downright bad for you two boys. Having to take over the ranch and your daddy’s business. Getting’ run off the road like your parents were. Downright criminal. And probably by some hepped-up no-good just passin’ through. Didn’t even have the decency to come back and help ‘em.” The sheriff scratched under his arm, then snorted. “And that it was your poor brother that came across the overturned pickup...then he had to wait for that damned ambulance to come all the way from Ft. Stockton.

Daniel wiped the sweat from his forehead. Though it was late October, the afternoons were still in the mid-eighties.

“You never know,” said the sheriff, “when it comes to drugs, what some folks might do.” He looked into Daniel’s eyes then off across the creosote and mesquite bushes that dotted the hills. “Those boys with the state are always thinkin’ everything has to be drug related.” He removed his hat, ran his fingers through the few strands of hair he still owned and sighed. “Like in your brother’s case. Those state toxicology folks claim that your brother had marijuana and traces of fentanyl in his system. I told ‘em that that couldn’t be the case. That I’d known you two

boys forever. That, hell, your brother was one of the best athletes ever to play at Travis High. I told ‘em about how you and your brother ran the ranch and your father’s feed store without ever whining about your family’s misfortunes.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

“Damn, it’s the least I could do. I know how hard things have been for you two boys. Everyone felt pretty bad when Peter’s wife left town and took up with that gigolo over there in Ft. Stockton. And what made matters worse was that she’d been your galfriend before your brother married her.” The sheriff shook his head. “Most brothers might get their backs up over somethin’ like that, but not you two. You managed to deal with it sensibly. Now, if it’d been my brother who’d done somethin’ like that, I think I would’ve had more than a little resentment toward him. But you two, being twins and all, managed to get through it.” The sheriff wiped his whiskers with the back of his hand. “Like when you two were in school. Peter was the star, and you were more than happy to block for him while he got all the glory. You were satisfied getting’ rebounds while your brother set all of those records. Not every brother could do that.”

“He was a better athlete than I was.” Peter smiled. “He was good at everything.”

“He was good, that’s a fact.” Sheriff Reid stopped. “Ya’ know, some folks thought your brother was a bit cocky and stuck on himself. But not me. No, siree. I knew how good he was. But you were the one that always impressed me. Always in your brother’s shadow. Backin’ him up when he walked off with all the awards.”

“That was my role. Everyone does what he has to do.”

“You know, that’s the way I see it. Everyone’s gotta do what he’s gotta do. That’s just about exactly what I told those state troopers. That out here in West Texas we see things a little different than they see ‘em back in Austin. Of course, I didn’t tell ‘em that out here we just kinda look the other way sometimes. That things have a way of workin’ themselves out. They wouldn’t listen anyway. No matter what I tell ‘em, they’re just gonna keep on spinnin’ their wheels tryin’ to find somethin’ that just ain’t there. But don’t you worry none. They’ll see things as they really are soon enough.”

Alone, just Peter in the coffin plus the four somber men who waited to lower the box into the ground, Daniel gazed across the horizon. The sun would soon set. The shovels the workers leaned on were the implements of finality for his brother. It would be but one more, he hoped successful, attempt to bury the past and all its secrets. Yet, Peter would be remembered. He was the star in the family. The favorite son of Richard and Sandra Wade, their firstborn. The student and athlete who, throughout his life, had to be the best at everything. Quarterback. High-point man on the basketball team. First in the family to graduate from college, A&M, while Daniel diddled away at Angelo State, graduating in five years, one year after his talented brother.

Daniel stared at the glossy casket. Just once, he mumbled, I wanted to be the one. But you couldn’t stand it; you had to be the leader. It was your birthright, or so you claimed. I was the follower. When you told me that you’d go over that barbed-wire fence...Peter, that was the final straw. “Let me go first, you said. You hold the shotgun while I slip over the fence.” You

shouldn't have said that. Just once, you should've let me be the first one to do something. Just once.

David Martin Anderson

Papa

I was six years old when I first visited my grandparents at their farm in downstate Idaho. It was also the first time I ever laid eyes on a real horse. That was nearly a hundred years ago, back in 1928. Now, you'd think horses would have been just about everywhere in those days, but most of 'em had already been put down. Mechanization ended a 10,000-year-old bond between humans and horses. That's why the first time I ever saw a live horse was at my grandparents' farm. You see, when my Ma became ill, my Pa took her to the hospital in Boise and sent me to live with his parents for a few weeks. They were second-generation wheat farmers outside Twin Falls. So, what I'm about to tell you is based on scattered memories and family stories as I got older.

Anyway, I do clearly remember my grandfather showing me around the place and telling me about his only remaining horse being sick and dying. The horse's name was Papa, as in 'Paw-Paw' because he could do trick counting by pawing the ground with his hooves when you held up fingers. Three fingers, and he'd paw the ground three times. And so on. Real smart horse. But that day, Papa was in his stall, rolling over and over, moaning and groaning and in a lot of pain. What's wrong with him? I asked, to which my grandpa replied, "He's got colic. There's nothing I can do for him. I'd shoot him and put him outta his misery, but I don't got the heart. He'll be dead by daybreak."

Now, being only six, I didn't understand death or colic or such things. I simply saw a horse in a whole lot of pain, and there was nothing either one of us could do to help him. Watching old Papa dying deeply wounded my grandfather. To get away from the sight of his favorite horse in agony, Grandpa took hold of my hand and led me to a bluff by the river. From our spot, we could see his field of golden wheat and the farmhouse and silo and the big white barn. The land stretched as far as the eye could see. And he turned to me and said, "I took over this farm thirty years ago from my pa. In those days, we was dirt poor. We had a plow and an ox, and that was it. Only tilled forty acres of bottomland. We wasn't getting much plowed under cuz the ox always come up lame, and it was backbreaking work for a sodbuster like me to do it on his own. So, one day, I got an idea and headed south to the hills and rounded up some wild mustangs to help work the fields. That was the way it was. If you needed a horse, you went out, ran your traps, and caught a free one. Caught many a horse that way. But in nineteen ought-one, I went down there for the last time. Already had three good ones. Just needed one more. Within a day, I'd tracked down the biggest and strongest yearling in the herd. I needed a strong horse to help pull the plow. Didn't wantta foal or an old one set in its ways. Wanted a yearling. Easiest to break. When I caught him, he put up one hell of a fight. I cinched his legs and left him on the ground overnight till he got good and dry and hungry. I let him know from the get-go who was boss. That bein' yours truly. Then I cut him loose and fed him and took good care of him. Never did ride him, though. Don't think he could ever be ridden as far as that goes cuz he never

got broke thataway. That is, for riding. He was a workhorse, plain and simple. Now, you know who the horse was?"

"Papa," I answered.

And he said, "That's right. Papa. And for the next twenty years, that horse worked his tail off for yours truly. He never complained. Never wallowed in self-pity. Did his job and took his licks. Look around you. All this land. All six hundred forty acres Papa plowed under with me yelling giddy-up from his backside and him taking orders good as any soldier. Couldn't have done it without him. A few years later, I bought the gasoline tractor and the mechanical combine and decided I didn't need old Papa no more. He was the last of a great bunch since the other horses had already died. And I didn't know what to do with him, so I trailered him ten miles south and took him up to the hills where he come from, and I turned him loose. Thought he'd be better off free than cooped up where he wernt needed. A few days after I got home, your grandma says, Jonathan, look who come back. I looked out the kitchen window, and it was Papa. That's when I knew Papa's home was this farm and not the wilds. I realized he and I were like kindred souls tied to this parcel of God's sweet earth. He couldn't leave it any more than I could. So, I corralled the old boy up, and that's where he's been these past six years. He's twenty-eight years old and a rarity age-wise for horses like him. And now, after all this time, it looks like we're finally gonna lose him, and I've never properly thanked him for all the good he's done this family. And I am ashamed of myself for it."

I remember Grandpa falling to his knees and crying out loud and holding me tight with his heart crushed and me telling him everything would be all right. That night, I couldn't sleep. Seeing Grandpa all upset like that, seeing Papa in pain, I couldn't stand it, so I decided to steal to the barn. And I remember seeing Papa shivering and cold and frothing at the mouth. That's when I grabbed a horse blanket, threw it over him, and laid on top of him to keep him warm. I remember telling him that he couldn't die because Grandpa had something important he wanted to say. And I rubbed his neck. And stroked his ears. And kept him warm all night long. The next morning, my grandpa came out to the barn, sure he would find Papa dead. Instead, he found me riding Papa bareback in the corral, wearing only my PJs and a wide-mouth grin. And he asked me, "What in blue blazes did you do?"

"I fixed him," I answered.

I'd never seen my grandfather so happy. He walked straight to that old horse, threw his arms around its neck, kissed it smack on the nose and said, "Thank you, Papa, for many good years. You're my friend, and I will never forget you. Ever."

Papa died a year later. Grandpa used his tractor to dig a pit for the grave behind the house. The entire family came for the funeral. Three years later, Grandpa died, and we buried him next to his horse. It's said that one good horse is all a person ever needs in a lifetime. Guess Grandpa found his.

So, as I stand here today overlooking their graves, I am reminded that one good horse, one valued friend, can leave an enduring mark on a lifetime. And in the end, it's not the plow or tractor that defines our legacy but the love and respect we show for those who've been with us

through every season of life. In Papa's memory, we find inspiration, and in his silent presence beneath the earth, we find the eternal connection that binds us to this land. Papa's legacy is a reminder that some bonds are unbreakable, some memories are timeless, and some stories are meant to be told for generations to come.

Ijeoma Uzoma

Swallowed by the City

The Student's campus security email alert says a university research technician was killed last night. No name. Which campus? A stranger? Who was he?

The Student asks her lab mates if they've seen the news. "Another? Is this news? What happened?"

Expressions of unfortunate-but-not-shocking are briefly assumed on their faces. The psychic toll of endless victims fries their senses.

The lab mates begin another round of the game: Baltimore Murder Categories. What will it be? "Never should've happened," "unlucky," or "should've known better"?

They wait for updates.

The Student tries harder than most at not becoming a victim. She even has an anti-murder checklist: Never walk alone (not even two blocks!), don't travel home by yourself after late nights out (stay over at a friend's house!), don't walk to your car after dark (request a campus security escort!).

It's time to find out if the checklist would have worked. Would she be a survivor? Can she win the game?

The lab mates impatiently click refresh on their crime news feeds.

Would the game ever end? The Student hadn't felt reprieve since the day she moved to the City. Like the others, she'd been beckoned by promises of being among "the best of the best!" If she wagered correctly, she could win. So, she stayed. Implicitly accepting the City's challenge but vowing never to give the City the slightest excuse to claim her as its victim.

There's an update: "University research technician was stabbed while walking to his apartment in the Village neighborhood at approximately 11 PM last night."

The Village residents in the lab are jeering, "What was he thinking?! He didn't take a cab?!" This might be a "Should've known better."

The Student knows they're probably right. She remembers her friend who parked his car in that area. At 1 AM. Two blocks from his girlfriend's house. They grabbed him, four of them, put a gun to his head and smashed his face into the concrete. Stole his phone but let him go. Lucky break! Should've known better.

Her thoughts jump to her neighbor, seldomly seen these days. She just heard he decided to give up on trying to save his eye. The surgeries were getting to be way too expensive, and the results were just mediocre. He opted for a glass eye instead. He'd been attacked in broad daylight. Walking alone on a bad street, not far from today's victim. This one was tougher. "Never should've happened" or "Unlucky"?

Next update: "It says his lab is on THIS campus."

The Student worries. The murder game only works with strangers, right? The circles are getting tighter. Well, maybe not, there's hundreds of techs here. Practically one in every lab. And

sometimes two! Even so, he's not feeling like a stranger anymore. In her mind, she asks the Creators to restart the game. New prompt! New clues? Please!

The lab mates have deduced that his lab is in this building.

Next update: there is a name. A generic first name with an uncommon last name. The Student has seen this name somewhere. It's the same generic name as the sandy-haired lab tech from upstairs who she exchanged an enthusiastic "Have a good weekend!" with on Friday. But this can't be his last name. He couldn't be walking around the building three days ago and stabbed to death today.

The Student checks her email. Now it's her turn to use the clues. Ah ha! Last week she and the Tech were sent an email from their mutual friend. She will confirm his last name is not the last name in the alert. Then she will resume her morning routine and get a coffee. She'll see him in the long line of caffeine fiends in the café down the hall—his head standing taller than the rest—she'll easily make eye contact and wave. He won't know how happy she is to see him smile back. The victim won't be him.

Last week's email showed the Tech's full name. Same first and last name as the alert. The City got him.

She remembered how his face looked last Friday—radiating energy of youthful ambition. There was no warning that his time would be up in two days.

The chaos of the City won. He lost the game. The Student wished he had never thought about coming here.

J. Francis Bowyer

Death's Constellation

Black omens rise like ashes
Of an ancient west where ancestral forms flew
Over Navajo, Creek and Sioux.

Cluttering carrion expired
By bullet, rope and blade
On dirt dyed by tears and blood.

Stygian marble eyes spy meat
From circling thermals down
Upon infernal frontier towns.

A clustered musk of feathers flock
Dust roads where bladed beaks
Tear old cloth-wrapped skin.

Those feathered furies like Death
Spread across the sky as black stars
Orbiting this unrest.

A single specter leers
From a perch atop dead oak
Scorched and cored by God.

A silent judge
Sees turfed sin
And twisted earth.

Scents fresh death secreting
The soil of a settler's land
Plucked and dry of living things.

An omen cast through time
To clear the dead
And judge us mortals for our crimes.

K. Slade

Broken Bones

To dance is to die. Adela is the first, maybe the only dancer, to truly understand that. Her love for ballet is complete. She allowed it to consume her, burning away her body until only a charred carcass remained. But she knew something beautiful would bloom from it. Such beauty would make a home between the festering rot and soot, clinging to the remnants of her passion.

Adela's made peace with it. Becoming a principal ballerina demands sacrifice. The chew of her skin, the drip of her blood, the length of her bones, she gives it all.

The methodical tear of her pointe shoes brings her comfort. This time, this space, is designed for her to create. To mold. To conquer. She'd take a knife to the cotton interior and snap the shank until the satin flesh gave way to her bony fingers. She would cradle her shoe in her hands, running the flat of her thumb against the smooth exterior. She'd press her nails into it, watching as she mars the pink hollow meat of the pointed box.

It reminds Adela of her own feet. Long, crooked toes sprouting from an arched foot. She'd massage her feet, usually as she curled up on her couch after a long studio day. Or, sometimes, in the dead of night when her brain became stuck on a suspended thought, looping around the lulls of sleep until her knuckles beat down on the protrusion of bone beneath her veined skin.

But, most often, it is before the start of adagio. Adela ran her fingers over the swollen blisters on the side of her foot. She wrings the hurt out through her hands, pinching, and pulling until the soreness soured into pain.

A little more pressure and she would feel the creak of her bones. Perhaps the slick rush of blood would spill through her fingers once they cleave their way through her tender skin. How it would ooze and bubble out onto the scuffed wood below her.

The squeal of the studio doors releases her from the thought. She shoved her feet into her shoes, lacing up the ribbons in time for Mademoiselle Juliette to slink through the doors. As she crosses the room to her chair by the stereo, the company dancers rush to the center. The silence doesn't stretch for long as music hums in the echoed space. Adela took her place in the adagio: the farthest right in the studio's center, second row, and flanked between Eleanor and Maisie.

She could almost see it, the allure promised to her. Balancing on the warped box of her pointe shoes, Adela admires how her arm slices through the air. There is a finality to her movements. With each relevé, her arms strain taunt at her sides, and every plié sweeps them above her head. If she listened closely, she would hear the jut of her fingers carve out a space for her to exist.

In the mirror, Maisie's eyes slide over Adela's figure. They catch on the pudge spilling over the arm hole in her leotard. She glides over the light brown stretch marks etched into

Adela's upper arms. Maisie smiles, a sharp quirk on the corners of her lips before the choreography forces her in the opposite direction.

Adela's right leg, muscle coiling beneath the strong curve of her skin, kicks through and lands her in an arabesque. Her stomach pulls tight, sinking deep into her ribcage. Her back bows downward until the notches of her spine disappear under her burgundy leotard. The leg in the air remains pointed and still, but her standing leg quivers.

Adela feels the sickness rolling deep within her; the weakness threatening to gut her open for the entire class to witness.

Breathe. Don't fall.

In for 5. Don't Fall.

Hold for 5. Don't you fucking fall.

Out for 5.

The leg drops in tandem with the other dancers, brushing against the floor and propelling her forward into a labored leap and a stumbled landing. Sweat collects in the small of Adela's back. Her leotard clings to her, bunching under her arms and around the swell of her thighs.

The sick drills farther into the depths of her stomach. By the time she lands, her face is hot and slick. Maisie's eyes are straight ahead but she maintains her smile, a ghost of humor and mockery.

The dancers pull into a sous-sous, legs crisscrossing to become one. Adela teeters on the box of her point shoe as bends beneath her. They're dead, the boning promising to give out and snap her ankle in two.

Breathe. You're almost there.

In for 5. Don't let her win.

Hold for 5. If you fall, you're dead to me.

Out for 5. I'll fucking kill you myself.

Smile.

Adela lifts the back leg out to the side and readies herself for a pirouette. The standing foot pushes clockwise as her right leg lifts and bends until the end of her point shoe brushes against her kneecap.

"Focus, Adela!" The music halts beneath Mademoiselle Juliette's shrill voice. "Stop. Just stop."

The dancers pause, slow turns stumbling out until all eyes stop on Adela. Adela settles and watches Mademoiselle Juliette move to the center, her feet slapping against the floor.

"Why are you here?"

"Ma'am?"

"Why are you here wasting my time? Does it bring you joy? Fucking with me? My choreo?"

Adela didn't let her eyes stray from the woman in front of her. "No, ma'am."

"Then why?"

Adela hears shuffling behind her. She can feel the smiles of the others. The brutality of their teeth, bare against her neck. Waiting to tear out her throat and revel in her failure. Vultures. She can hear those vultures squawking.

Mademoiselle Juliette juts her chin up. "Why?"

"I'll do the adagio again."

Adela moves to the front, a few steps away from the mirror. She stares back at herself, blinking away the sweat in her eyes.

Mademoiselle Juliette moves to the side, reflection swimming in the edge of the mirror. "If you dance like a child, I will treat you like a child."

Adela nods.

Should I hold your hand while you dance? Maybe the next time you piss, I'll be outside the stall encouraging you. Would you like that?"

Adela shakes her head.

"Begin."

Adela's reflection matched the flow and ebb of her movements. She begins with a pli , arms opening above her head and falling to her front, the sides of her hands reaching the middle of her thighs.

The adagio begins.

Adela smiles and breathes.

She sails through the starter choreography. Leaps transform into glides that cut through the stiff air. Her legs swing and her feet arch.

Not one stumble.

Not one squawk.

She floats through the arabesque with practiced legs and swings straight into another jump. Her weight bounces on the collapsed box of her pointe shoes. Two feet hit the ground and ankles cross to prepare for the sous-sous.

Feet push against the ground and carry Adela to the tip of her toes. She waits a moment, following the imaginary tempo pounding against her skull. Her eyes flicker down to spot red blooming on the side of her shoe. It overtakes the pink satin. Her toes feel the wetness pooling into the shoe's box. A bubble fights its way through the thick fabric and rolls down the slope of the shoe. Steadily, the blood puddles on the floor.

Adela's back leg stretches to the side and bends, right foot angles next to her left knee and her left foot spins her. The right leg extends and slides back on the floor, left foot flat in front. Adela's blood is smeared on the floor, chasing her movements.

"Again."

Right foot rises in front and Adela steps through the turn.

"Again."

Left foot rises. Right leg guides the turn. She lands.

"Faster."

Another rise. A turn. Land.

“Again! Faster!”

Rise.

Turn.

Land.

Squawk. A laugh bubbles from behind her but Adela is too dizzy to see.

Rise. Turn. Land.

The room dances around her. A mix of browns and white, lights and reflections bleeding together into a blinding gleam.

Her head rolls down, focusing on the floor. A ring of blood traps her. It wells under her shoes and smudges the floor.

Rise.

Turn.

Land.

Crack.

Adela hears the impact before she feels it. There’s a ringing in her ears and she can’t see. The wetness comes first. In her haze, it feels like sweat dribbling down her forehead. Thick. Slimy.

Pulsing.

Gushing.

A burst of red spurts onto glass shards beneath her. Adela tries to pull herself up, but her hands are too slippery. Even now, she hears them.

Those fucking *vultures*.

Squawking.

Get up.

Licking their claws.

Now.

Saliva and filth dripping down their beaks.

Get the fuck up!

Adela’s head snaps toward the mirror. Part of it is missing, fractured, and scattered around her. But she catches a glimpse of herself. Her head is a mess of hair and gore, sliding down the strange shapes of her face and splattering on the backs of her hands.

She doesn’t move. She refuses to move.

She will not fail.

She will not let them win.

Adela stares back at herself before the blood takes over her vision, waiting to see which one of her will be the first to fall.

Kimberly Kaufman

Broken

There once lived a girl,
with a hole in her world,
For she shattered when she was young.

She frantically tried
To collect all her pieces
Throughout all her years to come.

She found a few in the mountains and trees,
And in the rivers and lakes as well.
Through try as she may,
She was riddled with holes,
Some she still tries to fill today.

She went down a path
To find pieces in others
And found herself deeper in hell.

Trying to please those around her
Instead of herself—
Her soul started rotting away.

Then one day,
A man appeared

And gave her a familiar key.
It opened the door
To something within
She so desperately needed to see.

Again, she went down
To her own inner hell
Where she was left to dwell.

But down in the depths
She accepted herself,
And this time she was set free.

While she danced with her shadow,
Her light shone through
All her remaining holes.

And beauty abound—
She finally found
She could build all her pieces alone.

Kimberly Kaufman

Gash

The morning after, I asked her if she remembered the night.

She stared at me with dead eyes and a blank look on her face. I asked her again, “Do you remember what you said to me before I left the bedroom?” She didn’t. I remember that night vividly. The words spewed from her lips as the dense smell of alcohol infiltrated my nostrils. They penetrated me like a dull blade and stuck inside for far too long.

It was a cold New England night, the kind that leaves you chilled to the bone from the damp air. I was “home” from college and had to stay at my mom’s for the weekend.

My friend dropped me off on his way south.

He drove away.

My heart sank.

I’m stuck here.

I stood in the driveway staring at the small apartment with my bag in hand, mentally preparing myself for the next few days.

I knocked on the door, no one answered. The upstairs windows had a soft glow. She’s home. The door was unlocked, so I helped myself in, locked the door behind me and went upstairs. I put my bag down on the couch in the hallway, which was where I’d be sleeping, then knocked on her bedroom door.

My mom greeted me in her robe, cigarette in one hand, glass of wine in the other. She gave me an overly eager hug, kissed me on the cheek and told me how happy she was to see me.

She was in the midst of her nightly routine when I arrived, drinking a half box or so of wine for dinner, chugging down cigarettes, and topping it all off with a whiskey nightcap.

I already felt suffocated, trapped like a wild animal desperately searching for a way out. The light was dim, the air thick. It had the type of haze that made visible an army of floating dust particles. Opened envelopes littered the tabletops; red-stained glasses were stacked atop the nightstand while ashes and wrinkled butts colored with coral lipstick overflowed the ashtray. It reeked of stagnant cigarettes, booze, and perfume, a scent that will forever remind me of my mother: “The Proust Effect.”

This was a time before every man, woman, and child had a cell phone glued to their dominant hand and I wanted to get in touch with my friends. “Mom, can I use your laptop for a few?” I asked. “No.” She replied with snark. “You’re going to break it, and I paid for that with my hard-earned money.”

I calmly explained that I was not going to break her computer but was simply going to check my email and get off. After a dramatic sigh, I was granted permission.

“The screen isn’t loading; is your internet active?”

A fit of rage erupted from her in an instant. Her body language was that of a drunkard outside a dingy bar looking for a fight. “See? I told you that you’d break it, you little shit; get off it! Get away from my computer right now!”

I wasn’t about to argue with her, there was no point. I took a sip of water to collect myself, and slowly started to shut the laptop when I aspirated on my drink. I tried to suppress the cough, but it exploded from me with uncontrollable force. During this coughing fit, gasping for air, my mother did not express an ounce of concern, instead she vomited the words, “Why don’t you just die already?”

And in some ways, in that moment, I did.

Max Cavitch

Nocturne

I begged the stars
for something small;
I wished the stars
would something shine.

I saw the stars
as something fine;
and longed to go
among them all.

I dreamed a life
sidereal;
and hoped the badness
to confine.

I watched the stars
for any sign;
for something that
would not appall.

I know the stars
were never mine;
I wish the stars
would something fall.

Nyla Hubbard

The Narcissist

His feet hurt. Congenital structure problems followed by too many years standing on them and the arches had given way. He had finally seen a doctor years ago but the custom orthotics he needed cost \$400 which his chintzy insurance wouldn't cover. And there never seemed to be an extra \$400 left from his paycheck. So, his feet still hurt. The difference now was in his tolerance. He was tired of hurting and tired of struggling. Daniel heaved himself from one raised bed to another. It was very early, not yet 6 AM. This was his time, when she was safely sleeping, when he could tend his vegetables and take pride in his harvest.

The pride was eluding him today, however. When he had built the beds, laboriously building the forms, hauling in dirt, enriching the soil, he visualized cooking healthy meals which he and Chloe would enjoy together. That dream was fading. Last night, Chloe had not touched one vegetable that he had so lovingly prepared. "Mom doesn't eat them," she'd said. His glance had gone to Tia who shrugged and smiled. He didn't miss the self-satisfied expression. She actually took pride in having the world's worst eating habits.

Dan had not said a word. It was always a delicate balance trying to encourage Chloe to eat properly without drawing attention to the weight she had gained through not doing so. He suffered for her, knowing what the other kids would say about her in future if they weren't doing so already. She was twelve now, a pre-teen and at least twenty pounds overweight. It galled him to remember how Tia had vowed that she would not allow her daughter to be fat. He had wondered, even then, how she planned to keep that vow.

Nothing was different. Tia found motherhood to be unexpected work. Daniel had to leave before she did in the morning, so it was left to her to feed the child and Tia found it too much trouble to come up with anything more challenging than toaster pastries and Pop-tarts. When he pointed out the calories, she simply said, "She likes them," and the pounds piled on. In his absence, when meals were not forthcoming, snacks were the answer. Of course, he hadn't wanted to deny her, but he had limited the quantity by putting the chips in a paper cup. Tia handed her the bag. It was habit now, mother and child downing a supersize bag while the veggies went begging.

It was time for work. The bait shop was busy on the weekends. He enjoyed talking to the fishermen in this second job though he would have enjoyed going fishing himself more. That was another thing he's hoped to share with his daughter, but Tia would insist on taking Chloe shopping on a Saturday. And Chloe would go, she would please her mother.

The car was slow to crank. He supposed he would have to put a new battery in his father-in-law's car. The better car, the one they were still making payments on, was Tia's. Daniel had wanted to buy a used car for her and another for him, something dependable, but Daddy's princess wanted a new car and Tia's father had insisted that they buy her one, then thrown Daniel this rust bucket to get him back and forth to work. The car wasn't in his name, of course, just like the house.

It had seemed like a reasonable thing to do when they first married. Her parents lived elsewhere, and their house was for rent. Now, twenty years had gone by, with Daniel working two jobs, and Daniel still lived in a house that did not belong to him. How had all this happened? Tia had been a cute girl, even if a little plump and he didn't feel like he had much to offer, given the condition of his feet. He'd been the first boyfriend and, before he knew it, a husband, and a son-in-law; owned lock, stock, and barrel.

It hadn't mattered at first. Tia had always been a shopaholic, spending every cent she made along with much of what he earned but, before Chloe, he hadn't cared so much. Now, he saw a future for Chloe that made him groan. The subliminal message was getting through to Chloe. It's Mommy that matters. Just look at how Grandpa and Grandma and Daddy spoil her. She says she is a princess, and I am a princess in waiting. Nothing was too good for Mommy.

When Daniel entered the house that afternoon, it was empty. No doubt, Tia would come home with numerous bags, proudly displaying her most recent purchases. He was amazed at how little she got for the money she spent until he realized that she took pride in overpaying. It was another validation of her worth, that she could afford to pay too much. What he didn't understand is how little she bought for Chloe. When she was pregnant, she had so wanted a girl, "a little girl," she said, "I can dress her, and we'll have so much fun." The fact was, Chloe got clothes when it was time for back-to-school and only then.

Before he could even take his shoes off, he smelled the dog shit. Not their dog. Oh, no, it was the in-law's dog, which they had been "watching" now for almost a year, a really stupid dog that might have been trainable at one time, but which was now hopeless since Tia refused to take her out and he was not at home enough to provide continuity.

There it was in the living room, slimy dog doo, not confined to the floor. Some was on the rug, but the rug was hopeless anyway. Multiple stains, insufficient cleanup. Tia did not clean anything. If she was forced, through lack of clothes, to stuff laundry into the machine, it was never put away. And this load was no exception. She had carelessly tossed a fresh load onto the couch, and it had spilled over. The dog had decided to deposit a dump, not on Tia's clothes, he noticed. Even the dog knew Tia was special. The shit was on Chloe's clothes, and it would be Chloe who would clean it up unless he did it himself, of course. Daniel dropped into a chair. Nearly fifty years old and he owned nothing that was not tied to a thoroughly selfish, lazy narcissist. She hadn't washed any of his clothes, he noticed.

Daniel put a pot on for the greens he had cut. He would eat them if no one else did. His phone rang. "Go to the butcher and get some steak. Oh, and a loaded baked potato." she told him.

"Good God, Tia, can't you eat something else for a change?" he tried saying, but all he got was a hang up.

After the food run, Daniel stood at the sink, or rather leaned on it to assuage his feet. He was preparing the food when he heard her arrive. "Daniel, the dog has messed in here," she hollered. Tia didn't use profanity. She prided herself on being a good Christian. "Why haven't you cleaned this up?"

“It’s not my dog,” he answered. She came barreling into the kitchen, all 250 pounds of her.

“Well, I’m not touching that,” she said with the toss of her head.

“I guess it will stay there, then,” he said.

Chloe came into the room with paper towels. “It’s gross, Dad,” she mumbled.

“You shouldn’t have to do that,” he told his daughter. She just shrugged, and his heart broke.

They only went scalloping once a year, Dan’s family outing. Tia only tolerated his family when they were doing something for her. In twenty years, she had never invited his parents for a meal. Actually, she had never cooked a meal. Today would be no different. He and his family would dive, they would get the scallops. They would carry them home. Last year, Daniel’s mother had pointed out to Tia that she saw pain in Daniel’s face as he hefted the heavy buckets. Tia had answered with a dismissive, “Well, I guess he’s used to it.”

At home, Tia would go directly inside while the rest of the family cleaned the scallops and prepared the meal. She would not move until her plate was ready to be filled and then she would eat little. It wasn’t steak.

Daniel had looked forward to teaching Chloe to dive. Today, he was the first out of the boat and encouraged her to join him in the water. She did try but the potato chips had increased her buoyancy until she had to work hard to dive. She seemed to be having fun, though, until she heard her mother call, “Chloe, get in here and fix these sandwiches. Your dad was too cheap to get the readymade.” Daniel watched Chloe as she began to take off her fins and her mask.

“Why can’t you fix the sandwiches, Tia?” he asked reasonably, “Chloe is diving.”

Tia’s incensed face appeared over the gunnel of the boat. “Did I ask you what you thought about it?”

Daniel watched helplessly as Chloe maneuvered around her mother’s float, which was tied off the transom. They all hated that float, an inflatable raft of epic proportions. Tia said she needed the float to help her get in and out of the water. But she hadn’t been in the water and the float was forever in the way. They all had to push and shove the float and it’s mooring ropes around whenever they needed to dump their catch. Tia even refused to have the tether lines shortened. “It won’t be in the way if I float out beyond the boat,” she insisted. But she hadn’t floated out and the current was strong. It held the float against the transom, sometimes even forcing it under the boat. No amount of complaint fazed Tia.

“If Chloe’s going to make sandwiches, it’s time you came in the water,” he said.

For once, his brother, who often said he had “holes in his tongue” from biting back comments about Tia, spoke up. “Yes, if you don’t come up with at least one scallop, you don’t get to eat any.” Everyone stared until Tia felt forced to respond.

“I’m hot, anyway,” she declared and began the cumbersome process of getting onto her float.

“Lying on the float isn’t going to make you any cooler,” Daniel told her. “Come into the water with me.” Ignored, he continued to dive. Freed from the agony of his feet, he could stay

down far longer than the others. His upper body was strong. He felt almost young when he was in the water.

“I don’t have to get any scallops, you know,” he heard Tia say as he surfaced. “That’s what I’ve got you for.”

Yes, he thought. *That’s what I am, a servant. And when my feet can’t do it anymore, my daughter will be her servant next.* Smiling grimly, Daniel pulled her off the float. She shrieked but he told her good-naturedly, “You have to admit that the water feels good.”

Tia brushed her wet hair out of her face, “You’ll pay for that.”

It was the look that did it. The other divers were down, and Chloe was busy with the sandwiches. He dove, pulling her and the raft with him until they were directly under the boat. It was in shadow under there and any noise she made as she thrashed was muffled by the sound of the waves against the hull. The buoyancy of the raft kept it pressed firmly against the bottom of the boat. He waited until she was still before he grabbed the mooring line of the float and wound it around her so that she floated “accidentally” tethered. Then he quickly grabbed some scallops. He dumped his catch into the bucket, then asked, “Where’s Tia?”

Richard Spilman

Morning Mist

Every morning in autumn,
the dead rise from the pond,
arms lifted to a pinkish sky,
creep into fields
tilled and reaped,
bewilder the gravel roads
as if the pale half-light
of the dying year
portends
their season of glory.
But as the sun climbs,
they fade back
into the dark pool
fringed by reeds,
and its charade of stillness
and reflection.

Ryan Mayer

The Aftermath

As her nightdress wandered past me,
rain turned white linen translucent—
her body appeared like an apparition!
Her smile chilled the coating on my tongue.

Rain turned white linen translucent
while her wet hair mimicked scorching worms.
Her smile chilled the diamonds on my tongue--
I cannot taste the moonlight on my wine.

While her wet hair mimicked scorching worms,
the gobbets on her lashes fell—bursting at her feet;
I cannot taste the moonlight on my wine,
I realized. The distant oak's limbs wither.

The gobbets on her lashes fell, bursting at her feet—
my skin paled; my body appeared: an apparition!
I realized (too late!) her distance withers my limbs
—but she has long since wandered past.

Samantha Rain

Mistress in Blue

The mistress in blue slipped through my window.
Once again, she has come to sell me a dream.

Clad in navy silk,
she robed herself in silent mystery—
the blanket of a midnight fog
masking more than a mere bedtime story.

The lady is a merchant, a witch, a druid of illusion
who has sworn to me
she can turn any beautiful, soothing lie of mine
to a new false hearted reality.

So, pressing a key to my temple,
she allowed flecks of gold and rust to pour;
taking form in her hand—
now in the shape of a coin.

A moment of hesitation, but with her greed she could never part.
So as she tucked it away, she whispered my wish to the stars.

And upon careful consideration,
they lent me a compliant cloud;
mirroring whatever image or spell
I could not bring myself to say aloud.

Yet, even though business was done,
she lingered for a little while long.
Treading her way to the foot of my bed,
I caught her eyes fixated on my pillow damp with dread.

Judging by her expression, I can see
she has become intimate with the root of my mourning.
And as the mistress graced me with a final warning,
I knew by heart this was a gift of parting...

Finally, in a hushed murmur, she solemnly vowed to me,

a fantasy of forgotten happiness I will be most blessed to see,
but none with such wisdom as the curse of the memory and *nightmare*

that was always *meant to be*.

Shawn McCann

My Burning Chemotherapy

Violating you inside,
sticking like pesticide

to your cells. You're going
to die, not knowing your time.

And then, you survive,
but the air is no sweeter;

it is seared, black fibers
attacking the atmosphere.

I wonder when the end—no,
war never leaves.

Leave me, then, the refuge
of poetry, my burning

chemotherapy.

Susan Peck

The Red Dress

The woman's red dress was stained with even darker spots of burgundy red. Her body lay limp like a forgotten Barbie doll next to the shards of glass and twisted metal. The black Cadillac was smashed so badly that it was hard to tell if it was a sedan. A pool of blood begins to collect around the woman's body. Morgan had just gotten her hair dyed the perfect shade of champagne blonde earlier that week. The paramedics moved her unconscious body onto a stretcher with care. They cut her clothes to treat the open wounds.

She bought the dress at Saks Fifth Avenue earlier that day. Morgan approached the saleslady, "I need to look as pretty as possible tonight. This is my first date in years, and I'm nervous," she said. Morgan hadn't been on a date in twenty years; she was fresh out of college when she met her ex-husband. Dating was intimidating, and her ex's affair didn't help her confidence either.

Jennifer showed her the most brilliant red dress in her department. It was five hundred dollars and a rich fabric that begged to be touched and admired. "This would look splendid on you! The red will make you stand out," she said.

After seeing the price tag, Morgan hesitated. She muttered something about to hell with her old penny-pinching ways. She smiled mischievously and placed the dress on the checkout counter.

When Morgan walked out, Jennifer heaved a sigh of relief. Her commission was only five percent, but such luxury purchases kept her afloat. Her hourly wage was not even close to covering her rent. She was about ten thousand dollars in debt due to her shopping addiction. Jennifer was trying her best; she even managed to return the Louboutin pumps. But last year's purchases continued to haunt her. Every month, the credit card interest grew along with her anxiety. It was better than drugs, she would tell herself. Things could always be worse.

Jennifer's addiction began when her mother died. Her mother never seemed to love or care about her, so her passing was a strange mix of emotions. She felt guilty about not caring more. Then, she would feel an odd, unexplainable emptiness. She told her boyfriend, Nick, "All the neglect and anger comes back. Knowing she's gone makes me realize our relationship will never improve. That hope is a bygone dream. I am destined never to feel love from my mother in this life."

Nick would hug her and whisper soothing words into her ears at night. She loved him and knew that he understood why she was who she was. Nick's comforting eyes, soft brown hair, and calming presence helped ground Jennifer. He did not mention his father being sick out of respect for her. He knew she cared, but he also knew it would remind Jennifer of her mom. So, Nick would visit his dad whenever she was out with her friends.

That night, Nick decided to visit his father at Saint Mary's Hospital. The cancer was progressing; he knew this might be his dad's last year. He walked into the lobby and looked at the flower bouquets for sale in the gift shop. Dad always loved roses. His father didn't care if

people thought they were cliché—they reminded him of his deceased wife. As Nick made his way to the checkout, he heard a group of people yelling. His focus shifted from the roses in his hands to the woman being rushed to the Intensive Care Unit.

A nurse was pushing the blood-covered hospital stretcher. She shouted to the doctor beside her, “I don’t think she’ll make it.” The staff hadn’t seen such a horrible car accident victim in almost a month. The woman’s beautiful blonde hair was tangled and soaked with blood, and her skin was red. Red stained the stretcher and everything the body touched. Nick saw the red body rush by and looked at his red roses. He stepped out of the checkout line. Nick placed them back on the shelf and reached for the white bouquet instead.

Tim Murphy

Empty House of Me

Nine months bedbound
with a living death disease.

I no longer need a mirror
to not recognize myself.

It's the parts unseen
that first disappear.

Can't bear eyes that can't hide
rivers of sadness running

through remnants bones
of this empty house of me.

Wayne Russell

In the Dead Night

And here I am, another year,
ebbing away, basking in light
of decay and moonlit wonder.

And where are you now?

Up where angels fly and
sing in choirs, running
through fields, of euphoric
and in, golden aura.

You left this world of pain
too soon,
 and yet
no one
 could really lay the blame
upon you, or could they?

Down by rusted out
railroad tracks, lost in my
admiration, of those that
have gone into that last
goodbye; that haunted
pose, of death mask gaze.

The flowers are not here,
they have all passed on
through, into the next
realm with you.

That voice of yours, haunts
me in my sleep, the one that
would sarcastically repel, all
my accomplishments and dreams.

You took my soul undergrown,
leaving a hollowed shell to roam,

down alone, by the old rail road
tracks; in the dead night; where
there are no flowers.