Litmag
2015

Pathways

University of Missouri—St. Louis

Cover Art: “The Footpath” by Madison Emerick
Editor’s Note

With this edition of Litmag we bring to you a celebration of literature far away from the avenues of the rustling city, along beaten pathways and past the evergreen of nearby Joshua trees to crossings unexplored. As one trail recedes another begins and we whisk ourselves away toward new adventures. Where you go is your choice, and your choice alone.

Last week I was driving home from class along I-70. As every car passed I couldn’t help but wonder where they would end up. They all seemed to tell their own unique story. The red Durango carrying a pair of worn mattresses. Forlorn hitchhikers waving cardboard pleas, stomachs howling for cold sodas and leftover chips. The outdated Chevy blazing streams of exhaust down the highway with a haul of shredded copper. A picture starts to form from the fragments of every headlight, but it is only an abstraction of the truth.

Over time the fiction begins to ware away at the truth around me. The road is only a fraction of the narrative, and while we may piece together snapshots of the truth we only discover that the truth is always one step ahead of us. I will never know where all those passengers hung their hats that night, but what I do know is the idea their journey imprinted within myself.

The editing staff of Litmag is pleased to present to you the 27th installment of the University of Missouri-Saint Louis undergraduate literary magazine, Litmag 2015 Pathways, a deluge into the veins of the written word. The selection process was nothing short of an incredible undertaking. There were a plethora of other pieces I wished we could have included this Spring semester, but in the end a magazine can only be so long. This led to bouts of heated discussion amongst all of our editors regarding which pieces deserved to be included. I am proud of what we have accomplished, and even more so proud of my peers who submitted and their efforts put forth to better themselves and their craft. A million thanks to my friends on the Litmag staff and their commitment to providing our readership with quality publications, and giving upcoming authors a new path in which they can explore their literary talents.

Sincerely,
Chad Griffin
Managing Editor
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About Litmag

English 4895 Editing Litmag, a course in editing and publishing a student literary magazine, is offered at the University of Missouri-St. Louis for the spring semester. Students interested in enrolling are invited to contact Jeanne Allison at allisonjea@umsl.edu for more information.

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It was, in a word, impressive.
An amalgamation of stained glass wings
Colored like an oil spill on concrete or
The broken windows of an old church.
Jagged, tissue thin.

There were so many, thick bodied
And filled with something viscous and yellow.
Paintballs hitting glass, an explosion of innards.
A thick layer coagulates over the entire windshield
And I am driving blind.

They don’t make that kind of darkness
Anymore. Or that particular smell.
Humidity, insects, decay.
I must be honest, I did not understand you then,
But I do now.

To All the Bugs I Killed Driving
Through Mississippi in June at Midnight

Chelsea Dryer
A Song of Endless Night

Arthur Maurer

My heart, a strange locomotive, beats,
while my car stereo screeches
Vivaldi. I surf the austere streets of St. Louie, Louie,
with a perpetual feral dog scowl. Half-Ulysses, half-mad,
I’m no longer a puppy now. In the night,
the old city asylum rises like a dark acropolis
over an Aegean sea of southside homes. All the bars are full
and bright as Walpurgisnacht, and a moth-eaten moon
winks back at me through the windshield—my pimpled pen pal.
There is nowhere to go. And you, my Penelope, the secret
muse of my poems, I seek your dyed hair among the cold faces
and windowpanes that flit by me: no trace, only frosted butterflies.
Warm me now with your deepest fears, bless me with your eyes.
It’s freezing, and I fear the engine will just scrape through the night.
As it is his custom every afternoon, Raul scans the newspaper while he tends bar for Meyer Lansky’s casino and hotel. Usually he reads the headlines and skims the stories that spark his interest. Today, there is an article suggesting that the Castro brothers are hiding in the hills upon their return to Cuba from Mexico. Another story that catches his attention reports the student demonstrations at some university in Havana. Eager, he flips to the sports section to read about the American baseball teams beginning spring training. He searches for an article on his favorite player, Stan Musial; to his disappointment, there is none.

The impatient bartender sighs as this afternoon is slow for business. In fact, it is dead – there is not a customer in the bar. He knows that there are many reasons for it: his potential customers are enhancing their tans at the hotel’s swimming pool or at the beach, playing a round of golf, or attempting one last time to capture the elusive prize fish that will be mounted with pride. Sadly, he ponders, the tourist season will be ending soon which signifies fewer tips. Maybe tonight the bar will be full of gamblers who will walk in after their success at the casino. He hopes that there will be many winners, for they are generous.

Delighted, Raul folds his newspaper as he hears the door open; however, he does his best to hide his disappointment when he realizes the customers are three ladies wearing smocks to cover their bathing suits. Most of the guests wandering in from the pool barely carry enough money to cover the cost of their drinks, let alone enough for tips. He guesses their husbands or boyfriends are either deep-sea fishing or playing golf. A woman with gray hair, wrapped in a beehive style, leads the trio. The second is a blonde wearing a pair of sunglasses which he assumes hides the wrinkles around her eyes. The third appears to be a younger woman with dark hair whose age he estimates to be about thirty. All three are Americans, and like most Americans vacationing in this resort town, are guests of the casino and hotel.

After serving their drinks, Raul resumes browsing his newspaper debating if he should begin a polite conversation with them. There appears to...
be little profit from doing so, and the bartender decides to wait for tonight when there will be better opportunities. The ladies’ conversation is loud enough to distract him as they are discussing their evening plans on where to dine before attempting their luck at the casino. The gray-haired lady announces tomorrow will be the last shopping excursion of their trip. Her two companions nod in agreement.

As they do at three o’clock every afternoon, the bells of the San Bernardino Church ring solemnly three times. Accustomed to the noise, Raul continues to focus on his newspaper. However, he pauses when the sudden silence among his customers follows the sound of a wooden chair against the tiled floor. He glances over to the source of the noise. A shirtless young man with a straw hat is sitting at one of the tables next to a large window. He seems oblivious to the picturesque view of the beach which the window offers. This handsome man positions another chair in a manner allowing him to rest his feet on it. The stranger pushes his hat over his eyes, props back into the chair, and strikes a match to light a cigarette. Without hesitation, Raul draws a beer from the keg and walks over to the table to serve his newest patron.

On the way back to his newspaper, the gray-haired woman, sitting in the middle of the three, stops Raul. He senses the uneasiness in her disapproving voice. “I thought that there is a dress code in Lansky’s place.”

Resenting the foreigner’s comments, yet not wishing to lose any business, Raul forces himself to be delightful. His means, as well as his lifestyle, are dependent on his customers’ happiness. “You are correct, señorita. But that is Diego. He means no harm to anyone. His weary soul needs resting for just a few minutes; then, he will be on his way.”

The blonde, still sporting sunglasses, begins to run her hands through her hair. Playfully, she asks for an introduction. Sensing the possibility of trouble, the bartender politely refuses her request. “Oh señorita, Diego’s heart has been captured for some time now. His is a romantic tale for the ages.”

Upon hearing his words, the brunette leans forward twirling her necklace. “What is the story? Please tell us.”

Raul smiles slyly as he decides that this may yet be a profitable afternoon. “Señoritas, before Señor Lansky built a casino and a hotel here, this was a simple fishing village blessed by the presence of a beautiful young woman named Esmeralda. Unfortunately, her mother died when she was
very young and her father, Pablo, never remarried. She was his only child. Like most men of this village at that time, Pablo was a poor fisherman, barely making enough to support both him and his daughter.

“Ever since he was a child, Diego loved Esmeralda, and she loved him. As a youngster, he carried her books home after school each day. She attended every one of his baseball games and became his biggest fan. When he grew older, Diego, like the other young men of the village, became a fisherman. Every morning, before he headed out to sea, Diego brought her a small token of his undying love. Sometimes it was a flower picked from a nearby garden; other times it was a piece of delicious fruit. Every afternoon, she greeted him at the dock and listened to the tales of his latest adventures on the open sea. The entire village approved of the couple’s bliss and everyone was expecting a wedding between the two.

“But alas, there are disadvantages to being so beautiful. Other young men of the village tried unsuccessfully to woo Esmeralda. She was true to Diego, for her heart belonged to him. However, there was one young man, named Hortacio, who was relentless in his pursuit of Esmeralda. He was the son of the richest man of the village. His father owned a small fleet of the village’s fishing boats. Hortacio’s desire for her was not one of love. Rather it was lust.

“Here, it is the custom that a man must ask and receive permission from a girl’s father for her hand in marriage. The father knows which man his daughter loves and grants his permission accordingly. However, on the same day both Diego and Hortacio sought her father. Much to the dismay of the villagers, Pablo promised his daughter to Hortacio. Being a poor fisherman whose years were limited, he realized that poverty could be his fate forever. This was not the future he desired. Instead, he dreamed of spend his remaining days being comfortable – sitting in a rocking chair on his porch and playing with his rich grandchildren.”

Mischievously, the blonde flashes a smile. “So then he is available. His broken heart needs mending.”

“You must understand that true love can not be stopped,” the bartender continues. “After permission was granted to Hortacio, Esmeralda and Diego secretly met. Sometimes they could be seen praying together at San Bernardino. She was seen visiting him on his boat after a day of fishing. The two could be found shopping in the market place together. Finally, neither one of them could no longer bear to be apart from each other. So,
weeks before she was to walk down the aisle to become Hortacio’s wife, the lovers decided to elope.

“Now, in a small village you cannot hide a secret. Someone will find out and tell someone else. Soon everyone in the village was aware of their secret. Eventually, the news of their plan reached the ears of her father and Esmeralda was forbidden to see Diego. Since Pablo was a widower, enforcing this unfortunate decree would be difficult. So every day the father took his daughter with him on his boat. Now, this was a taboo. Women, in this fishing village, rarely went out to sea.

“Each afternoon Diego waited at the dock for his love and her father to come in. With a great sadness, he watched as Pablo grabbed his daughter by the arm, not permitting the two to speak. Both Diego’s and Esmeralda’s hearts weighed heavy. Neither could be with one another and neither knew what to do.

“Then, one day at sea, a mighty squall hit. Most of the fishing boats were destroyed. After the storm had passed, those surviving boats searched for their missing friends. Survivors were found clinging to the remains of their boats. The boat belonging to Esmeralda’s father was never found. Regretfully, so was the fate of its owner and his daughter. They were the only two who did not return home.

“Diego blamed himself for the loss of Esmeralda. Over and over in his mind, he wondered that if he had been more forceful and had run away with her, she would not have been on her father’s boat and survived the great storm. No matter how many people tried to comfort him and tell him it was not his fault, the responsibility of her death became a wearisome burden he could not purge from his soul. He knew if it was possible that she was still alive, he must find her.

“So, every morning he sailed the sea searching for his beloved. Every afternoon he came back here with the other fishermen. He isolated himself from them, choosing to be alone at the table. Diego always lowered his hat as if he was hiding the guilt that consumed him. He smoked cigarette after cigarette as though the tobacco somehow eased the remorse that obsessed him. When the bells chimed at four o’clock, he left. Day after day, he returned to that seat performing the same ritual. Occasionally, he stared out the window as if he was plotting where to search the next day.

“One day, Diego failed to show up here. The villagers became worried. The following day, his empty boat was discovered bobbing in the water.
The fishermen who found his boat plunged into the water for him. Unfortunately their efforts were fruitless. They waited for him to emerge, but he never appeared. In that vast sea, he was nowhere to be found. His boat was brought back and tied to the dock. That afternoon and evening, the men of the village drank in silence as they remembered their friend, Diego.”

“So what happened?” asks the youngest of the three women.

“There were only rumors; no one knew for sure. One such rumor speculated that Hortacio blamed Diego for the death of Esmeralda. According to the story, Hortacio killed him with an oar. Many of the villagers dismissed that rumor because no blood was ever found aboard Diego’s boat. Another story is told that Diego found Esmeralda, and they swam away together. Yet, my favorite was the tale about Esmeralda turning into a mermaid, and when Diego caught sight of her, he lunged into the water to join her.

“Out of nowhere one day, when the bells struck three, Diego appeared. He walked over to his table and sat in his usual manner. The fishermen were elated to see their friend, but he spoke to no one. He stayed only until the bells sounded four times. After that afternoon, occasionally he showed up here. When he did, it was always the same time – from the moment the bells chimed three times until they rang at four o’clock, always sitting in his usual position as if he wished to be alone.

“Diego’s boat remains docked. However, there were times in the early morning hours that the fishermen find it missing from the pier. Later in the afternoon it would be discovered drifting aimlessly among the waves. As it happened before, Diego is nowhere in sight. His boat is always returned to the dock.”

The bells of San Bernardo ring once startling Raul’s three customers. It is followed by another, and that one is trailed by another. Finally its last ring announces to the three women that it is four o’clock. They glance over at Diego who is still in the same reclining pose as his legend was unfolded to them. Disbelieving everything they had just heard, they turn towards the bartender.

Raul opens his hand to the ladies and couples his fingers together. He puts them to his lips and blows into them, releasing his fingers to the air. “Poof,” he whispers loud enough for the three to hear. “He is gone.”

Raul’s captive audience looks to where Diego was seated. It is just like the bartender said – the young man vanished. They scan the room, real-
izing they are the only customers in the bar. Looking at the table where Diego sat, one of them notices smoke rising from a lit cigarette in the ashtray and points to it. They stare at the creator of the story as if they are asking where the young man could be.

A wry smile illuminates Raul’s face. “Perhaps tomorrow he will return. Perhaps tomorrow, if he finds Esmeralda, his tormented soul will be freed and he will finally be with her.”
Dawna Williams

Sunset in Maui
The Cats of Poets

1.
Eliot’s cats
Have many names.
They lounge around a London house
Lazy as smoke.

2.
Ferlinghetti’s cat
Speaks a riddle
Then falls asleep on a stack of books
Blissful, oblivious.

3.
Gray’s cat
Is dead.
The China vase
Is tucked away in a closet.

4.
Le chat de Baudelaire,
Donc comme une femme
Quand il se cambre son dos.

5.
Bukowski’s big mean tom
Sits by the typewriter
With curious paws—
Reaching to type a poem
Of his own—
Then rolls a beer bottle along the floor.
I locked myself in the closet of the spare bedroom. Yet, the sound carried. I heard their words clearly: the biting remarks of my mother followed by my father’s hot, angry silences, thick with their own meaning. I’ve heard them many times before. Her bitter, angry tones weave into his loud, emotional accusations. If you gave me their words—no voices or other hints—I would be able to pick out who said what, no contest. My parents’ arguments, the precise cause of which I do not know—I suspect I am mostly to blame—were the soundtrack of my childhood. Each new wave of arguments, ushering in a new period of my life, became the next track in my collection. When I was eight and the fights began in earnest, the current song playing was the No. 1 hit, “You Made Me Give Up My Career (For Our Daughter!).” At twelve it was, “Where the Fuck Do You Spend All This Money?” For a long time, the work of art that reappeared during every round of fighting was, “You Don’t Love Me Any More” alternately titled, “You Wouldn’t Treat Me Like This If You Did” (Track No. 3 to be precise).

When I was fifteen, the current tracks for Mom and Dad’s newest album were, “You Lying, Cheating Bastard” and “You Fucking Drove Me to This.” This new development was a long time coming, and I was surprised it hadn’t occurred sooner. Maybe it had. Each of my parents accused the other. The fight was simply waiting to happen, like a cat, hunched tensely in the back of both their minds, waiting to pounce on the next unsuspecting rat. But when things boiled over, they hashed out each and every sordid detail that I never wanted to hear in a series of fights that stretched from the beginning of August to my birthday in the middle of September.

That’s why I locked myself in the closet. Hoping fervently that the fighting had stopped, I came down to eat breakfast that morning—well, to make myself breakfast. Mom had long ago decided I was mature enough to take care of myself. The house was quiet, and I wondered if they decided to take a reprieve, as a birthday present to me, a special gift. With each step I took down the stairs, I imagined that I saw their faces turning up to me from their station in the kitchen.
How’d you like to go to breakfast at Buggies, sweetheart?

My father might say this as he ran his fingers down my mother’s arm. She would give him a quiet, private smile, in her mind reminiscing about the sex they had the night before.

That’s a lovely idea, dear. Then after we could take the birthday girl to see that new movie that came out, the one with the super heroes? What’s it called again, baby?

I’d give each of them a hug and say, “Yes, that sounds great.”

But I couldn’t remember the last time my father had touched my mother’s arm, or the last time I woke in the middle of the night to hear heavy, hushed breathing from their room—the only kind of sound that didn’t paralyze me with fear and anxiety. My parents didn’t know the name of my favorite book, or what kind of music I liked, and they didn’t seem to care that I had turned 16 that morning. When I came into the kitchen, Dad was angrily bobbing a tea bag into a mug, muttering under his breath. It was the stinky chai tea that Mom explicitly said she hated, but Dad bought it anyway. She was on the opposite side of the room, spreading butter over burnt toast in quick thrusts with a knife.

“Good morning,” I ventured a greeting.

Mom looked up from her breakfast, taking in my pajama pants and t-shirt.

“You’re not dressed for school,” she noted. Her nose was flared like she was trying not to smell the tea.

I glanced over at my dad. His eyebrows were arched, his forehead wrinkled up expressively. I let out a slow breath. This was a hybrid of tracks No. 7 and No. 9 that I encountered before, “You Pretend and I’ll Pretend (That Neither of Us is Here)” and “Passive Aggressively Ignoring You.”

“Okay, can I make tea first?” I asked as I moved towards the stove.

“What did—,” Mom started to speak, but Dad cut her off.

“She can have some tea first for god’s sake, Diane,” he muttered, flipping to the next page of his newspaper.

Mom threw down the knife she was using and turned on him. (Track No. 8, “Where the Fuck Do You Get Off, Saying Things Like That.”)

“Oh, I’m sorry. I guess what I say doesn’t matter then, does it?”

Dad rolled his eyes and tossed his newspaper to the side. “No, you’re just twisting my words around. Making tea will take less than five minutes.”

“That is so not the point, and you know it,” she hissed back at him.

“You’re just looking for an opportunity to usurp me, as always, trying to
prove to everyone that you are the nicer parent, the better parent!"

“It’s fine. It’s really fine. I don’t need tea. I’ll just go get dressed now, okay?” I said, my voice cracking a little. I could feel my heart speeding up as I took a few steps back towards the stairs. But they weren’t paying attention to me. It was too late. Even as I retreated, I could hear their voices spewing little jets of poison across the room at each other. The sounds followed me upstairs and stayed with me as I mechanically put on clothes and shoes, then went to the bathroom. I opened the medicine cupboard, took out the toothpaste and put it on my brush before beginning to scrub. I stared into the open cabinet as my movements fell into time with the noise below.

It was at these moments that I thought I might runaway or maybe swallow the entire bottle of my mother’s sleeping pills. They couldn’t argue then. They’d have to find me or take me to the hospital. But then, before I could fully commit myself to this, my mother would come home from work, and my father would serve dinner. My mother got them both beers from the fridge, opening his and handing it to him from across the table. They would exchange small talk, Dad commenting on the useless new hires in the tech company he worked for, while Mom went on about the over-the-phone insurance customers she had to deal with. I’d sit there between the two of them acting like everything was fine. They’d ask me questions about school, as if it was a normal evening meal, and I was their normal happy daughter. But moments before, I’d been thinking about how I could escape it all and what it would be like if one day they never came home at all. I wanted to tell them that. Instead, I complained about having to read *Catcher in the Rye* for a fourth time.

Most nights, after I finished my homework, and my parents went to their separate evening spheres, I listened to the country station on the radio. I didn’t like country music, but it helped to distract me from what I might hear. I’d keep one part of my mind listening to a man going on about losing his truck and his girlfriend, and the other on my parents, silently policing their conversation—like some kind of watchman, making sure things never went too far. My body tensed when I heard the murmur of their voices begin and I flipped off the radio. Soon that old familiar soundtrack would start playing eventually lulling me into a fitful sleep. If it didn’t and things remained quiet, I would sit up half the night listening, sure that it would resume any minute.

I spat out the toothpaste and washed my hands. I heard car doors opening and slamming closed as my parents got ready to leave. I decided not
to go to school. My parents left thinking I caught the bus on time. I watched from the window as their cars pulled out, one after the other, then climbed into their bed. I took a pillow from each of their sides of the king-sized bed—large enough that they had plenty of room between them at night—and wrapped my arms around them. His smelled like the musky scent of cologne; hers of the shampoo I saw her bring home from the grocery store. I mashed the pillows together, trying to blend the smells. I realized then that I only had two tracks to myself, the interlude in the middle of the album.

Track No. 5: “I Just Want to be Close to You.”
Track No. 6: “I Know I Can Never Touch You Like This.”

The house was quiet. Buried in the warmth of the blankets and pillows on their bed, I fell asleep. I didn’t wake up until I heard my parents, home from work, down stairs arguing. I slowly raised myself off the bed. Taking the pillows, I went into the spare bedroom. The closet there was big enough for me to sit in. I got in and shut the door. It was dark in there, but surprisingly cool. My head was hot and fuzzy. I heard my parents’ volume increase, someone threw something, and I heard it shatter against the wall.

I wondered again if this was the time that it got violent.

I dreamt last night that I came down the stairs after a fight to find them dead. The blood splashed on the walls, across the carpet, in the hall. A knife, a gun, a corner of the coffee table. I would call the police, and they would come and take my statement.

Yes, they fought all the time.
No, I was upstairs sleeping.

Officer, I was afraid this might happen.

I never cried about my parents, but when I woke up from that dream, my face, my shirt, and my pillows were soaked with tears. It was a fantasy. I knew that. But it didn’t stop me from dreaming. I sniffed at their pillows, searching for the scents I found earlier and realized they were gone. I stuck my face into the pillows and screamed until I was hoarse.
William Morris

The canary flutes into the mineshaft and dies ridiculously and everyone stands around with his hands in his pockets like the world’s biggest asshole. They won’t tell their wives and they will have steak or something like it and roll on blue jeans like masking tape into the long sunlit summer nights.
Walkway to an Emerald Paradise

Carly Leigraf
Possessions

A petite moon becomes
An ancient dowry
Hung above my obscure face
Turned toward you
Like a displaced thing
Discovered among
Your other possessions,
Hollow and dusty.

Catherine Howl
The sky was pale as the sun tried to hide away behind the feather clouds. On this Sunday morning everyone wore their best, as if to impress some higher power with their fashion. People murmured amongst themselves as if the person next to them couldn’t hear. The huge building held the old and the young, the competent and the incompetent, the sweet hearted and the less interested. Henry walked down the creaky wooden stairs in his small black shiny shoes with the tightened laces that suffocated his feet and observed it all. He tried his best not to wrinkle up his blue dress shirt or khaki pants that his mother bought him for complete avoidance of her Sunday wrath about perfection, though deep down he knew she would never actually speak to him. He was so small and tiny compared to the others, a naïve face but a wise mind. He knew what they thought. Not of him but of his mother.

Afar from the group and stationed in the dining room, his mother set the table. Dull plates with small cracks in them sat next to one another on the mustard yellow place mats. She started on the regular dining room table, then began to the small kid’s table. She bore a smile on her face, but the years of stress could be seen through the silver lines in her raven hair. His mother was beautiful. Her face held signs of aging from the lines around her eyes to the lines next to her mouth, but her skin still glowed. Her teeth were still as white as pearls when she smiled, and her eyes were still full of life. Her beauty, frozen in time. He liked seeing her this way; it made him forget about time itself, if only for a moment.

By the way she moved her lips, it seemed to Henry that she might have been humming as well. The loud commotion coming from everyone made him unsure. When setting two plates at the end of the barely-touched dining table, she was approached by a boy, a relative of theirs maybe? Henry was unsure. Their family was so large. The boy looked at her in confusion. Eyes of the crowd turned towards the two and by then the commotion started to lessen.

“Why are you setting those two plates there? Only me and my sister’s sitting there,” the boy spoke aloud. His voice stopped the nearby talking altogether.
“Why, for the boys of course,” Henry’s mother responded with a smile. Her eyes pondered at the young boy as if he were being ridiculous, and she continued on to what she was doing, placing the forks and butter knives next to the plates.

“But—”

“Sammy.” A woman approached, grabbing the boy by the shoulders. “Sorry, he’s always bothering people.”

“Oh that’s fine. Every child is curious. Kind of like my boys.”

Henry’s mother smiled.

The woman simply nodded and pulled the boy aside, and just as it had stopped, the talking began once again. It was as if nothing had happened. Eyes turned away from Henry’s mother as everyone went back to what they were doing. Henry’s eyes saddened at the sight, but he too went back to what he was doing, a hobby that he’d picked up over the years. Observing.

He saw the subtle colored dresses that matched the season. They ranged from modern to old, and he didn’t understand them. They should be wearing black. But maybe he was wrong. There were so many things that Henry didn’t yet understand. He saw the cracks in the walls that his mother tried her best to hide through layers of paint. Dust lay on the corners of the windows. Still, high above on the ceiling, the paint peeled, and the cream accent it had begun to turn a sickly yellow. Through all this, he looked down at her.

His grandmother stood there in her pale pink dress suit with the crocheted jacket to match. On the corner of her breast pocket a gem bug rested and gleamed like a rainbow after the rain has drifted away. It looked like more of a fossil to him. Nonetheless, her skin caught hold of his sight more than anything else; the color of it matching her dress suit, the cheeks and neck fell down to the point of hitting the collar of her jacket. Her skin cracked and bent, matching a river or a stream that held no end. The lines moved from the corner of her eyes to her bony hands that kept shaking every couple of seconds. Her silver hair was curved to the side and pinned up towards the back, every strand imitating the long decades she had journeyed through. Her old rose scent fumed into his nostrils making him pull his lip to the side in indifference. Grandma Rose. She stood next to her body, identical to herself. It laid in a long, shiny case; the name of it, Henry couldn’t remember. She too moved her eyes around in a daze among the faces, watching as random people clasped her body’s hand or shoulder from time to time with sympa-
thetic smiles.

Henry felt pity for her but joyous at the same time. It was her time. Countless events before did he see her struggling to hold onto life with her fragile hands. Finally, she didn’t have to hold on anymore. She was free.

Henry looked around back at the family and again at his grandmother. It was going to be sad to see her go; she was the only adult left that he felt he had a connection with.

He stopped at the second-to-last stair and looked amongst the large bodies in front of him with his large round, pale green eyes. Small steps staggered behind him, interrupting his observation along with his thoughts. He turned to find an identical face approaching him. They bore the same mole on the left side of their cheeks and to his mother’s amusement, they were even given the same hairstyle as well. Their whole wardrobe matched the timeless portrait their mother kept of the two of them on the wall of the entryway. The only difference was that his brother bore a frown on his face as he too looked at the large crowd of family.

“Don’t be so angry,” Henry reassured, sending his brother a slight smile.

“Now that Grandma’s gone, who is going to talk to mama?” his brother asked. Henry turned away and looked towards the floor. He had no answer.

“Henry, Arthur. Come on boys. We have to get there before it starts.” Their mother called from the large crowd as if she knew where they stood.

People stopped what they were doing and looked towards his mother with questionable glances. Others whispered in their neighbors’ ear. The boys looked at one another and pursed their lips in agony. They stood in silence next to one another and watched as the youth and the elders all poured out the door. Henry turned to look at him while at the same time, Arthur copied the exact same movement. Then he watched as his brother’s eyes moved towards their grandmother. Henry read the look on Arthur’s face, the sullen and unsure expression, but he smiled and patted his brother on the shoulder.

“I know. She was my favorite adult too.” He spoke in the softest tone.

The two of them finished walking down the stairs but Henry departed from Arthur to walk up to his grandmother, who stood next to herself, and intertwined their fingers together. There was a small jump in her body, a small shake as if after seeing so many people walk out the door she didn’t even know there was still some inside. The sweet woman looked down with loving eyes and saw Henry. He eyed her fake teeth as she pulled up her
lips in a positive curve. He grinned back at her, squeezing their hands together even tighter.

He looked up and saw his mother had already left out the door and instead Arthur stood there, waiting for the two of them. Their eyes met, and Arthur pulled his short little hand up, motioning the two of them over. Henry assured him with a motion of his head that they would be out there soon, but he knew his grandmother’s slow steps. He knew the need for her to take her time as she placed one foot in front of the other, each time her legs slightly shaking from years of walking.

Their grandmother was the only adult that they heard speak to their mother about letting go. She argued with her from time to time about the boys’ peace, but of course, their mother did not understand. She ignored her and continued on with her life. Tried, their grandmother did for years to persuade her, until she could speak no more. The last breath she was able to utter to their mother was, ‘they need peace.’ Now, here she stood, the quietest thing in the world. She did not speak to him, but did look down towards his small-framed face to send a smile or two. Henry knew. Henry knew she talked so much to their mother before, that now, she was simply tired of talking.

After a while, they were outside. His mother and Arthur were already in the car and the other relatives had already gone on their way. He looked up to his grandmother, who calmly breathed in the fresh air. Her eyes wandered towards the trees on the left side of them and so he did as well, copying the tilt in her head. There were golden leaves and darkly muddy ones. Some had already made it to the ground while others were in the midst of falling.

“I wish my feet were faster,” she spoke in a soft tone. “I have to hurry up and go.”

Henry sighed and looked away from his sweet fragile grandmother. “I wish I could too,” he murmured.

When they all arrived, Arthur watched Henry guide their grandmother towards a space in the grass, both of them standing next to the other as they watched the event unfold. There were black folding chairs set out amongst the grassy plains, and in front of it lay a deep rectangle into the ground. Arthur dared not to look. He hadn’t looked since the day he and Henry were in that situation. He’d thought that, by now, they would have been able to leave. He turned to look at their mother, who was smiling amongst the crowd as if she hadn’t a care in the world. His eyebrows fur-
rowed just slightly. Anger rose into his heart. How could she still be so calm, so happy, while they were here? It wasn’t right. Henry felt sorry for their mother, but Arthur, he felt sorry for themselves. They would be frozen in time, like their mother’s mind.

Arthur tried to calm his feelings by observing the area where the event was taking place. Red and white flowers were set up amongst the area, and soon enough, the large wooden case would join them. Arthur watched his family members hug themselves and speak with smiles, even the ones who didn’t care for the others. Genuine and fraudulent gatherings all coming together on the pale Sunday morning. He watched as they ignored his mother whispering and smiling to herself. Deep down he wanted to yell at them to say something to her, speak up, tell her the reality of things, but he couldn’t. It would only be a waste of breathe, and he knew that.

“Go talk to Arthur,” his mother called, tapping her sister on the shoulder and pointing towards the ground.

He watched as his aunt made an awkward smile and people looked towards her, waiting for her to do it. Arthur walked over towards the aunt and wondered as well.

“Oh Arthur, you’ve gotten so big!” His aunt cooed.

He appreciated his aunt’s company, but he wished she could enjoy his as well. Deep down inside, he knew she was uneasy talking to air. He smiled towards her, but his eyes caught sight of her huge round belly and the life that curled up inside of it.

Her auburn hair was curled at the ends, and she wore a flowing white dress that fell down to her feet, gracefully covering her stomach and her shoes. Her skin did not glow as tales would suggest. There were crow’s feet in the corner of her eyes instead, followed by long saddened lines underneath them. Her red lipstick was somewhat smeared and layered on. No matter what though, she was always beautiful in his eyes. Like his mother.

“Looking at the baby?” She asked, but he wasn’t.

In reality, she didn’t know what he was looking at. None of the family there did. She softly patted her stomach and smiled.

“Your little cousin should be coming any day now I hope. She’s a little late.” His aunt straightened her back and turned her head from side to side.

His mother was gone by then, and with that, she blew a sigh of relief and rolled her eyes. She forgot about Arthur and turned her attention else-
where, even when he touched her hand to grab her attention.

“Where’s Gabe? He always takes so long to park the damn car. He-” She stopped herself and covered her mouth at the realization of her words. “Oops.”

She patted the bottom of her lip.

Arthur studied her eyes. She really wanted Gabe to escort her over and announce the engagement the two of them had decided on. Arthur remembered from the time they visited his mother’s house and spoke in the dining room, while his mother was in the kitchen making food. He’d stood there, listening to the whole conversation. Now, she wore a ring to prove it. Gabe gave it to her just months after standing by her side and bestowing the life inside of her. She knew from that moment that she was forever going to protect her child; protect it with all her heart, unlike her sister. The last thing she wanted to be, was the next daughter in their family living in a fairytale because of a tragic situation in life, or so Arthur heard her whisper to Gabe during their visit.

After a while of standing, his aunt decided to go take a seat without Gabe. Even though she paid no mind to him, Arthur held her hand as she walked over. He was sure she felt nothing, but for him, her hand was hot and somewhat sweaty. Arthur looked at the ring on her finger and saw her skin turn white and red where it lay. When she was near her seat, he gently let go and went over to stand next to Henry and their grandmother. Suddenly, Gabe came out of the blue, rushing towards the seat and sitting down next to Arthur’s aunt.

“Sorry, it’s so crowded out there.”

“Right,” she muttered.

That’s when he came. Dressed in black with a white collar around his neck; his presence stopped all conversations among the old and the young. He raised his hands high into the air with much satisfaction and then slowly pulled them back down to his sides. He held a thick book in his hand with gold letters inscribed on the front cover.

“We live and we die,” he announced.

His voice was powerful. At least he was not like some in the crowd and actually believed the words that he spoke. Arthur smiled at that and soon his brother did too. It was rejuvenating. How they wish their mother could understand it.
The time was going by slowly, and the two boys tried not to complain. The man in the front asked everyone to bow down their heads and listen as he said a few words. They both watched as he looked down towards the large wooden container and started speaking. Without hesitation, their mother leaned over and sternly pointed her finger down towards the black seats next to her and made a shushing sound with her other finger. After a while there was a snap of skinny and irritated fingers from their mother. It was as if she knew they disobeyed and because of that they, along with their grandmother, decided to close their eyes. People around their mother began to make looks and even Gabe opened his eyes to the side, then nudged their aunt on the shoulder.

“Babe, she’s doing it again,” he whispered.

The boy’s aunt kept her eyes closed.

“Just ignore it Gabe. Let her grieve.”

“It’s been years thou-”

“Gabe, drop it,” she ordered.

Gabe turned his eyes away and closed them, leaving the subject as ordered. They felt sad for their mother. Heartbroken almost. Fortunately, something interrupted everyone’s silent talks. A moan, then a groan. The boys opened their eyes and looked towards the source of the sound. Their aunt. Her face was scrunched up and irritated. She bit her lower lip and tightly squinted her eyes together, as to avoid whatever pain she was feeling, straining the sad lines on her face. Another moan and another groan followed.

“Honey, you’re making too much noise,” Gabe whispered.

Arthur walked over and touched his aunt lightly, and suddenly, she began to bellow, screaming in agony. Making the old bones of elders jump out of their skin. Eyes pointed towards her. She placed both her hands on her stomach.

“Gabe!” She screamed.

The boys stood closer to their aunt and watched as a transparent liquid moved from beneath her body and dripped from the seat onto the ground. Her screams pierced their ears and made seated bodies move from their spots. Many rushed towards her as she tried to get up and move. Even their mother hurried from her seat, going right through the boys. They stayed where they were, looking in amazement. Their aunt’s face went from pale to pink to red, and a crowd gathered around her. People began to talk from
utter enjoyment of the moment, somewhat forgetting the woman’s pain. There was even a person who spoke and said, “I wish Henry and Arthur were here to see this.” Others heard it and hoped the boy’s mother did not, but she did and the enjoyment of the situation flushed from her face.

Henry turned and realized their grandmother was standing next to the deep rectangle hole in the ground, staring at the wooden container that hovered over it. Her hand slightly lingered over the open top showing her body and she sighed. Henry nudged Arthur on the shoulder and together they joined her.

“You ready yet?” Henry asked her.

Once again, she shook for a moment, as if forgetting that there were others there. She looked at the boys and nodded with her sweet little smile, her fake white teeth shining towards them. She turned to the side and began to walk away, then stopped and motioned them forward. The boys shook their heads in disappointment.

“We can’t go with you,” Henry said.

Their grandmother stopped and looked from them to their mother with saddened eyes. She walked up to the two of them and touched their hands lightly. They could feel the slight tug in her touch, but the boys shook their heads again.

“We’ve already tried going on our own. We can’t go through. We tried,” Arthur spoke angrily. They both watched as their grandmother continued to walk towards the direction of the glowing sun, knowing that she could stay no longer. Henry turned towards their grandmother’s body. The gem bug gleamed no more. The rainbow had disappeared, and all that was left was a dull, grayish brown color to replace it. Suddenly, his brother’s voice interrupted the moment of silence he was having in his mind; the emptiness.

“Now that grandma’s gone, there’s no one left to talk to her,” Arthur stated. Henry watched as a tear formed in his brother’s eyes. Not from sadness but from pure resentment.

“Momma has to stop keeping us. I’m so tired of being here!” He yelled.

“Me too,” Henry sighed, “but momma’s sad.”

“For how long now?”

Henry shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ve lost count.”
The air under him sat, painted white. Thirty-five years in that prison bed, held up suspended on a wire thin frame. The sheet cloth marked with thin blue stripes, stripes that hung sharp long ways down the pad. Some nights, he picked at those blue lines. If he could get his dry fingers under them, he could widen the space between. Widen it enough for him to fall through. Pry them open, so he could roll to his side and fall straight on through. Down through the cloth, through the pad, through the steel and concrete, through the thirty-five years back to that grey day on the street with the metal of the car door against his arm and one strong hand through the driver side window grabbing some shirt collar. If he could only fall through those razor blue stripes back to his wife, back to his little girl imprisoned in her crib by poverty, by the decisions of her father.
Blue Morpho

Dawna Williams
I am terrified
Of casual sex, of howling,

Heavy nights with throbbing
Hearts bursting
And sobbing in the morning,

Of wild-eyed boys spread
Before me, an erotic map
Screaming an invitation for me
To take the scenic route,

Of Cupid carving
A tramp stamp over my ass,

Of the free-for-all,
The filthy fuck-buddies
Filing past my dorm room,
Injecting their warning:

*Watch out. You might become
One of us,* then slinking back
To smugly stroke
The sordid constellations
Of hickies on their necks.

I am terrified of even
My own man,
His erection
Tapping *I love you*
In Morse code

Full Disclosure:

Jessie Eikmann
Onto my pelvis,
Making me fear my cramping
Desire and the heartbeat
Sunken in the pulsing womb.

I am becoming my trailer rat
Cousin in Ohio, with no ring
Blessing her finger,
Knocked up at seventeen.

She had everything to lose,
And she might think
The father will stay chained to her
For the daughter’s sake
After the spicy bloom

Of sexual attraction shrivels,
But I know she means about as much
To him as the panties they threw
On the floor, or the condom
He never used with her.
We heard Dad’s Oldsmobile humming down the street. Pat was on the landing, lost in deep tissue stretching, and I had almost finished another Lego landscape. Dinner was on the table, and Mom was reading what she called a trash-novel in the living room. How I know exactly where we were is that’s exactly where we always were. The day of the week didn’t matter.

“Hey girls,” Dad said.
We followed him to the kitchen.
“You won’t believe the new product we’re working on, Jo,” he said.
Dad started talking about work at the dinner table. Dinner was supposed to be about family. What did we learn at school, did any relatives call, etc. But this time Mom didn’t stop him.

“What is it, what is it?” I said. I was always asking him about new products, even though they were along the lines of paper towels with added layers of absorbency and adhesive wall-hooks guaranteed not to remove paint. Eventually, though, he’d be designing jetpacks and hoverboards, or at least the things directly preceding jetpacks and hoverboards.

“They already have a name for it: Black Magic.”
“What is it?”
“It’s a reverse coffee creamer. It’ll make weak or bland coffee taste strong and bold!” he sounded so proud.
“Well that’s great,” Mom said to her fork.
“Can I have some coffee?” Pat said.
“No caffeine,” Mom said.
“They’ve made me manager on this project. It could be my chance to make a step up. Rollins headed that non-toxic carpet cleaner project, and look where he is.”

“Who’s Rollins?” I said.
“Eat your potatoes,” Mom said, even though I had already finished my potatoes.
Pat had scraped hers onto my plate.
After dinner, in my room, she would thank me for taking the pota-
toes without complaint.
  “Too many carbs,” she said.
  “Do you even drink coffee?” I said.
  “Sure.”
  “When?”
  “It’s a secret.”
She was nine, and I knew for a fact she hadn’t ever had coffee, but I gave it to her, just like the potatoes.
  Pat was jogging in place, watching me build houses on the floor. Or maybe she wasn’t watching me, but she was in my room and so it felt like she was.
  “Do you have to do that?” I said.
  “Yes. Exercise is good for depression,” she said.

I was getting bigger, like fatter, because I didn’t have the lungs to play outside with the other kids, and our school excused gym if you were in the gifted program; Pat was turning sneakier by the day, finding new ways to get expensive organic foods in the house, and learning new exercises from the gym credit she was taking in addition to her gifted class; and Mom was talking less and less, sleeping longer, barely waking up in time to drive us to school an hour before the doors unlocked, so Pat could do her class per a special arrangement.
  Black Magic demanded full attention from that day on. Dad didn’t want to talk about anything but work. He dominated the dinner table, not even leaving room for Mom to talk about how Aunt Linda was having another baby and it would be as ugly as the last. We would all laugh if she said that, because we would have to. I’d have to laugh because it was true and I knew it. Pat would laugh because she was insecure about her body and wondered if she’d been born with the ugly genes Aunt Linda was passing on, indiscriminately, too. And Dad would laugh because I think he was scared as hell of Mom.
  But that’s not how it was anymore. Dad would tell us about the pros and cons of potassium chloride versus potassium benzoate. Mom sometimes sighed, and sometimes tried to build a pyramid of peas on her plate, which was cool. Still, whenever I asked a question or Pat tried something sneaky, she’d be ready to shoot us a glare and tell us no. And what could we do about it, other than sink into our little distractions?
I had Legos and science fiction novels from the library where Mom had recently started working part-time. I liked to build vast landscapes with forests and lakes of green and blue plastic, and then disrupt the serenity with an alien rocket. I’d make this huge scene in my head and work at it for days. The trouble was that I wanted it to be realistic, so it looked like the aliens had actually landed in the middle of the forest, crushing everything in their way. So I would have to build the entire landscape, rocket-free, first. To make this truly authentic, it was crucial to pretend I didn’t know the rocket would be landing—that way I wouldn’t be prejudiced toward a certain piece of land, leaving it slightly barren so it would be an easier landing space. The natives never anticipated colonization—otherwise, why bother? Then it was a matter of removing the trees from that area and, in their place, building little patches of debris out of brown plastic, surrounding the towering rocket.

“Jo, watch out!” Pat said.

She came flying into my room, all legs and hair. My most recent creation was a desolate cityscape—something I hadn’t tried before, with half a dozen saucer-shaped UFOs scattered throughout. I was going to use it as a prediction of interstellar battle for my special history class: War and Destruction. Some were atop crumbling buildings, others rested in the streets, crushing abandoned vehicles. Pat’s trajectory sent her whirring through the nightlife sector, where the buildings were small but crowded, and tumbling knees-first into a decrepit skyscraper. There was blood and rubble everywhere.

Pat said: “Ow!”

“You ruined my invasion!” I said.

“I’m bleeding,” she said.

At the hospital, the doctor used a small set of tweezers to remove one of my Little Green Men from Pat’s heel. He also applied peroxide to her knees and elbows and bandaged her wounds. Then he asked me how I was feeling and I said I was still feeling dizzy but I didn’t think I would faint again.

She was pissed at me the whole ride home. Pissed! At me! As if I had asked her to display her newest interpretive leaping move while residents hid in their homes, too terrified even to evacuate.

“We’ve started the taste-testing process,” is what Dad said when we got home.

And I said: “Um Dad, we just got home from the hospital.”
“The hospital?”
“One of Jo’s stupid Legos got stuck in my foot. Then she passed out.”
“When there is an alien attack and you are evaporated by their lasers, then you will know real pain.”
“Shut the hell up and help me make dinner,” Mom said.
Over macaroni and cheese, Dad told us how he was still getting used to drinking coffee. “I’m a tea drinker myself, you know, girls. I love a good cup of chamomile after a long day. And it’s not a rare thing that when people offer me coffee and I reject, they say: Good, you’ve got enough energy as it is, you don’t need caffeine, Hank.”
“That is so true,” Mom said, laughing. I don’t know if I’d ever heard her laugh before.
“Do I have enough energy as it is?” Pat said.
“Eat your dinner,” Mom said, eyes cutting straight through Pat, forcing the pasta into her whiny little mouth.
Macaroni and cheese is all carbs and I felt like this was ample payback for her dumping mashed potatoes on my plate once a week. Not to mention making me wake up early and sit in the hall while she did her advanced poetry class five days a week. Maybe the pasta would weigh her down and she wouldn’t be able to get up in time to wake Mom tomorrow morning. Then I would get a full night’s rest.
“But as Project Manager, it’s important that I take part in the taste-testing process. How will I know what kind of product we’re putting out if I don’t work hands on? We’re being diligent here. And ceaseless. Diligently and ceaselessly, we will get this puppy worked out.”
“Can we get a puppy?” Pat asked.
“Jo’s allergic.”
“I am?”
“But it won’t be easy. There’s a learning curve to anything like this. We’re still working out the kinks –”
At which point Mom laughed again, I don’t know why.
“—Not to mention I’m still getting used to the taste. So bitter.”
Pat was passed out on the couch right after dinner, while Dad was still buzzing from his caffeine high, and I was in my room trying to reconcile some of the damages Pat had caused. Bedtime came and I lay there, listening to the thumping on the wall between my parents’ room and mine. A few
nights later, I’d realize they were having sex, which I had a vague understanding of at eleven years old.

Most nights over the next few months, Dad got home late. Mom stopped cooking dinner before he got home, and alternated between watching television and reading. She did this with an almost methodical degree of randomness. She would be over halfway through watching a competition show about models on a remote island, then switch to reading Moby-Dick, which was not one of her trash-novels.

“Imagine what you could do with that money, Jo,” she said while I labored up the stairs with a bag of chips. Somebody had just won a big sum on one of those shows, and she was leaning in close to the TV, like she thought maybe she could fall in and steal the money or something.

This was the period where Black Magic talk became most prolific. After those months of diligent and ceaseless work, the guys in the lab had finally concocted a recipe that achieved like their goal-taste. We went to a Japanese restaurant to celebrate, and Dad had a beer.

“Listen,” he said. “I love what I do. You girls know that, right?”

We nodded. I imagined him as a space-commander on an intergalactic mission, giving his crew the pep talk they needed to push on. This was a time for high seriousness. None of those childish games like around the table at home. The Japanese were known for their seriousness. They would prefer death to dishonor in a time of war.

“I get to help make things better. Little things. But still, it’s all adding up. It’s like how a carpenter builds stairs: one at a time. Every little thing counts. I guess what I’m trying to get at is, you girls should do what you want in life. If it’s something big, great! But if it’s simpler, more modest, that’s fine too. Everyone’s always talking about shooting for the stars. And I think that’s good and well. Jo, you’re probably interested in literally shooting for the stars, what with the Legos and rockets. But you can do whatever you want. By saying ‘shoot for the stars,’ I think people are really limiting their children. Because, what if you wanted to repair antique furniture? There’s no celebrity in that, do you see what I mean? You can’t get famous doing that. But it’s still a good profession that makes people happy.”

And before I found out it was too expensive to send people into space anymore, I did want to shoot for the stars.

Mom rolled her eyes. I was the only one to see it, and I only saw it
because, while Dad was talking, I looked over at her like, Mom, are you hear-
ing this? Dad is being motivational. He is drunk, isn’t he? She was in the mid-

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marriage and all, too,” she said. “A sense of self-fulfillment separate from the act of parenting.”

“And we have that, right?”

“Sure, Hank.”

Which was followed by another one of those thumping matches. This time, though, they both came out of the bedroom after the thumping had stopped. In their robes, Mom and Dad floated past my room and descended the stairs. I crept after them because if everyone was going to be downstairs, I wasn’t going to be left out. They had let Pat sleep on the couch every night since the Lego incident, because she said it felt better to elevate her foot on the arm of the chair. Somehow this injury hadn’t slowed her daily exercise regime, though, and I thought she was full of shit.

Neither of them saw me crouched on the landing.

“I think we’ll make it,” Dad said.

I heard Mom inhale deeply but quietly, and wondered what that meant.

I think Dad’s speech that night really got to Pat and me. After school the next day, Pat lined up her old stuffed toys and shouted out steps as she exercised in front of them. Mom started reading Heart of Darkness, and she had to stop every so often to tell Pat to shut her ass up. For my part, I moved on to building a model rocket out of whatever I could find around the house. We were all going to become better people, following Dad’s example.

Mom started keeping track of how much each contestant won on a few of her shows. She would flip through advertisements and be like, oh man, we could totally buy this washer/dryer set if we won that much money. But then she’d go back to reading Heart of Darkness and I think she probably thought something like, how cool would it be to see all of those skulls posted on spears around the station house? That’s what I thought, at least. Very intimidating.

Dad came home the next night looking sullen and downtrodden. He was home on time, which was weird because he had hardly ever been home on time since introducing Black Magic into our lives. At the dinner table, Mom asked what was wrong, and I looked at Pat like, do you hear this? She is initiating conversation. But Pat was trying to weigh the pork chop in her hand to judge if it was a four-ounce serving, so my look went unacknowledged.
“They said it’s not marketable in its present form,” Dad said.
“What does that mean, ‘not marketable’?”
“Jo, please,” Mom said.
“What, Mom, I was just asking a question.”
“If you have questions, please save them until Dad’s done with his story,” Mom said. “Go on, honey.”
Who the hell was she, talking to me like that?
“Think about why you would want Black Magic in the first place. Now, I’m a reasonable man. I can admit to my faults and weaknesses. For instance: I don’t know the first thing about brewing coffee. So sure, I would love to keep a canister of Black Magic on hand to help accommodate our coffee-drinking company. But think about most people. I think it’s safe to say that most people—which is what the company has to think about, isn’t it—don’t want to admit it if they can’t make decent coffee. So who’s going to keep Black Magic in their houses? By marketing it towards the coffee drinkers, we could really sell the stuff! Those guys won’t kid themselves about their friend/neighbor/family’s ability to make good coffee.”
“So what does that mean for you?” Mom said. There she was, asking questions!
“Well, we designed these sleek looking canisters, much fancier than ones for regular coffee creamers, thinking it would draw the eye, you know. But if we’re going to market it towards coffee drinkers, to use at their friend/neighbor/family’s house, it has to be discreet. Because, are you going to go to your mom’s house and bring a canister of reverse coffee creamer, like ‘Sorry Mom, but you make substandard coffee, and I have to use this to make it bearable.’ I don’t think so.”
We sat in silence.
“You’ll like this next part, Jo. So what we’re going to do now is make a line of accessories to go along with Black Magic, that way people can tactfully dispense it. There will be watches, umbrellas, pens, glasses, phones, all of which will have reservoirs to be refilled with Black Magic. Of course, we’ll come out with a few items first, so we can start moving the product, then work on a full line of releases for the future.”
And I did like it, because it was like he was designing equipment for spies, which is a predicate for futuristic inventions. Dad’s outlook on the project was less positive, considering that it meant months more work and plenty of opportunities to show less-than-adequate management skills.
The first Saturday Dad decided to make his team go in for work happened to coincide with the day I was supposed to launch my rocket. I had built a few models during those weeks after Dad told us about the Black Magic accessory line, feeling inspired to be more creative and innovative in my designs, and it was summer now, meaning there was plenty of time to perfect upon a rocket, making it resemble the alien ships I'd built. I wanted to ask Dad if he was crazy for working on what could be the biggest day of the formative years of my childhood, but I was scared he'd say he was. He'd been slipping lately—walking around the house singing what he said was 80s music and calling us by nicknames that had no basis in reality. He would run down the stairs without a shirt and say, “Hey, Peppermint, pass the salt,” and I wouldn’t know if he was talking to me or Pat, or where the salt was.

So there I was, standing in the middle of the street, with half of the neighborhood kids waiting for me to launch this rocket. Mom was on the sidewalk, yelling about how we had to watch for cars. If we got hit by a truck, she said, our bodies would lay lifeless in the street where we stood. Pat was dancing in the garage, wearing hardly anything and trying to come up with an ‘interpretive aerobic routine.’ Those were her words. What that meant was anybody’s guess.

The launch was less than stellar, with my rocket reaching a peak of maybe 10 feet. Pat slipped on some oil and fell dramatically, which everyone laughed at.

The kids went home disappointed, and I felt brooding and defeated.

“Don’t feel discouraged, Beanbag,” Dad said when he came home. I was in my room, crying, and he had this wild look in his eye from a long day of drinking coffee that had been strengthened by powder creamer dispensed from a wristwatch.

“It was pathetic.”

“Remember when I thought I had the Black Magic formula worked out perfectly? And then those bastards—I mean, and then the guys at corporate came up with the marketing idea, and it was basically like starting over? This is what I was talking about, Turtle. It’s a step-by-step process.”

“But if it hadn’t been for Pat falling,” I said, “they would have been laughing at me.”

“That’s why it helps to do test runs without an audience. You only show them the finished product. You need to wow your audience. People
want to be wowed. Surprise them with your skill. Perplex them with your prowess. Crush them with the claws of your chimerical foot.”

“Dad.”

“If you have to work on the car, do it with the garage closed. If you’re trying to make a caffeinated reverse coffee creamer, do it in Test Kitchen B.”

So I would work on a model, maybe changing the wingspan or investigating engine types online, in my bedroom every day.

He must have given Pat a similar talk, because she kept working on her thing in the garage, but with the door closed. What she was trying to accomplish, I have no clue. There was poetry-reading, film-viewing and dance-practicing involved, and I knew it was supposed to be something symbolic and athletic, all at once. She was obsessed.

Mom said we were spending too much time inside, and that we needed to do something as a family. She was one to talk, with her game shows and Picture of Dorian Gray. She started taking us to the park, not realizing that it was pointless because we were too old to play on playground equipment, not to mention my shallow lungs. Pat used these occasions to recite Wallace Stevens, forcing me to guess from which poem she was quoting.

These daily outings cut drastically into the time Pat and I could spend on our work, forcing us to extreme measures. We worked on alternate clocks, her getting up early to work on her thing in the garage each morning; me staying up late, well past the thumping and recently added moaning through the wall, studying aerodynamics in my room each night.

A few weeks passed with Mom trying to find things to do with us outside, and we were all agitated and sunburnt.

After one of these nights, I told Dad I wanted to talk. We had to put this ‘outside’ nonsense to rest.

“Dad—”

“We’ve got it, Vacuum!”

“Got what?”

“The watch, the glasses, and the pen.”

“Today?”

“We finalized all of them today, yes! You’re ready to do another rocket-launch this Saturday, right? Well I think you should have all the kids and their parents come out this time. I’ll make everyone coffee.”
“Dad.”

“It’s perfect! I’ll make them weak, terrible decaf coffee, and I’ll add Black Magic to every cup, right in front of their eyes. No one will notice, and everyone will come up to me and say: ‘Wow, Hank, you have really made strides in all areas of living! Your daughter, Jo, is quite the engineer. Pat over there, she did one hell of a dance. And I’ll be damned if that’s not one of the best cups of joe I’ve ever tasted. Even with all of these developments, look at you in your jeans and shirt, still driving that Oldsmobile. Some things never change, eh Hank?’”

He didn’t stick around long enough for me to make my case against Mom’s daily excursions.

The next day at the art museum, I imagined myself becoming a famous sculptor, creating model rockets out of stone and plaster, and putting them on display as ‘Mixed Media.’ For the first time, Pat and I were satisfied with the way Mom chose to waste our time. There was nothing special about the art museum, but at least it was indoors and air conditioned. If I made sculptures of rockets, they’d be so big the art museum people would have to put them outside, on the lawn. That would wow a crowd and show Dad what I’d learned.

Probably the most boring part of the trip was the Chinese art, because it was mostly little ceramic stuff in glass cases. These were the kinds of things that were built to last, but they weren’t built to entertain. Dad was right about the importance of the wow-factor. They were tiny and ornate, but without character. The little blue paintings on the ceramics depicted pretty cool scenes. It was probably some really epic stuff, like the Chinese version of the Iliad or something, but I didn’t get the story and it was on such simple backdrops, it didn’t really seem to belong. Pat and I looked on with quiet indifference.

I couldn’t help but think about Mom, who I hadn’t seen in awhile. We were getting restless and there was no need to make a scene in the museum, whining or yelling in boredom, so we went to find our caretaker.

There she was, at the end of the oblong room, on her hands and knees at the foot of a giant statue of Buddha. The people immediately surrounding her watched with a mixture of confusion and fear, as if she’d get up and stab them. Her body was trembling and she kind of did this thing like she was bowing at the statue’s feet. Of course, Pat saw, too, and went running. It took us a surprisingly long time to get her off the ground, and when
we did, she was crying. I ran out of breath and fell to where Mom had been, on the ground before that Buddha.

Oh God, I thought, what is happening to our family? We are making a scene here, in the art museum, in front of all of these strangers.

The Buddha she had been worshipping was huge. It was maybe brass or copper, and towered over me where I lay. I looked up at Pat like, our parents are insane; just picture what tomorrow will be like, with Dad spiking intentionally disgusting cups of coffee and making our neighbors into lab rats. And we are just as crazy with our bizarre hobbies we are going to force upon them.

I couldn’t breathe.

The look Pat gave me in return seemed to say, what are you talking about, Jo? Of course we’re crazy, but we are a family, and we have to support one another, especially in our moments of insanity.

I tried sitting up. My chest tightened, like my outsides were shrinking but my insides weren’t. Everything was changing shape and size and the room was getting longer and there were more and more faces filling in the empty space around us.

The way Pat stood above me, supporting Mom’s sobbing figure, I felt tears welling in my eyes, causing everything to go blurry, and I hit my head on the marble floor.
Carly Lieter

Pollen Pillows
Cranberry Rays Behind
A Tibetan Woman

Darlene Wang
Under the Bridge

[modern dope]
“I loved blood pudding as a girl,” Nana looks up from the pizza dough and smiles at me, the gap between her front teeth seemingly widening as she grins. “I used to help,” she continues, her gnarled fingers working the dough with rhythmic thumps. “I held the bowl for the blood under the pig, and my uncle sliced its throat.” And just like that, she’s done it again—she’s transported us from a small Waukegan kitchen to a farmyard in Calabria, jar- ringly reminding me that she’s lived experiences I will never fully understand, that are intimately connected to and yet far removed from my life. I try, but I can’t really imagine her as a sunburned scrap of a girl roaming the hills of Italy with her shepherd uncle, curled up at night terrified of wolves, growing up without knowing the father who worked on railroads in America, or, in this latest story, obligingly holding the bowl as the family pig is slaughtered for blood pudding. These are all stories I know to be true, verified through the retelling of lived experiences, but they don’t quite mesh with my own lived experiences of my Nana. I feel so distant from her in moments like this.

I struggle to find the words to ask about her childhood. “How did it feel to come to America when all you knew was the wilderness of southern Italy? Did you resent your mother for forcing you to call your father “papa” when you finally saw him again after ten years? How did it feel to enter an American third grade classroom at the age of sixteen?” But these are not the type of questions my Nana answers. She talks in generalities, passing on sto- ries like legends. She is a fairytale to her grandchildren.

In turn, my Nana struggles to find words for what she wants to know about my life. “You still working? How do you like it?”

“I like it a lot. I’ve been with the company for nearly four years now.” I’m ready to elaborate, but she nods as if she has learned everything she needs to know and moves on to other questions.

“How is school? You still doing classes?”

“Yes, and I’m loving it. I’m working on . . . ”

“That’s good. You’re just like your father.”

We dance around one another, each with a wealth of lived experi-
ences that we don’t quite understand in the other. And we meet in the middle; we talk about food, and I help her cook. She asks again when she’s going to get a great grandchild, and with dexterity, I avoid the question. These are the steps we know, the well-worn path that is our comfortable relationship.

I grew up as the favorite grandchild, the one who is just like her only son. “Your father is smart,” Nana has told me, usually pointing to the kitchen table as she declares with her trademark bluntness, “He used to sit right there after school and do his homework. He helped his sisters because they were never as smart as him.” She is constantly boasting that I am smart and beautiful, and when she took me to Italy after I graduated high school, I had the distinct feeling that she was showing me off to Italy rather than the other way around. “Look, I have produced such a granddaughter!” To be the center of such fierce love and pride is flattering, but there’s an undertow of “otherness” associated with it that leaves me both driven and sad. When my Nana tells me again how much I take after my father, I hear unspoken the thankfulness that she had a smart son who could give her smart grandchildren . . . because her knowledge would not count in the same way. When she asks about my life, it’s as if she awaits to hear confirmation that I am still following in the footsteps of her son, I am still doing better, being smarter, looking beautiful. And I feel separate, invisible from the cultural heritage that produced me and responsible to it all at the same time.

I have come to realize that my feeling of invisibility is an outcome of attempting to translate between discourses. The Italian hills of my Nana’s stories are unfamiliar because they aren’t a part of my everyday discourse. Translation is required for understanding, but sometimes the translation can be fraught with difficulty. Sometimes these fumbling attempts take the form of tentative questions, soft probing into another’s story.

I may feel like I’m hovering on the boarder of my cultural heritage, but it also marks me; I feel distinctly responsible to it. My great grandfather lived his life away from his family, working in backbreaking conditions to bring that family to America. I am a result of such efforts, and I sense the perceived fruition when my Nana says, “How smart you are! How beautiful! Nana is so proud of her granddaughter!” These are the roots from which I come, and despite the variance in experiences, the lonely sense that my Nana and I are living on different sides of an invisible line, I have still inherited a discourse of values, borne from a small Italian kitchen surrounded by food and family. These are the connectors that help to span the gap between our
experiences—that help give shape to where I am based on where my family has come from.

I come from a smart father who had a hardworking mother who grew up in Italy. I listen to the stories my family has to tell, and I feel centuries removed from the woman sitting across from me now, working on another batch of pizza dough after telling her blood pudding story. I want to know her more fully and, in the knowing, discover more about myself. Both of us may fumble in the dark, feel horribly responsible to one another, connected and disconnected to each other, wanting to know more but not knowing how to ask or tell—we try to translate, and the relationship ensues from the trying.
When I dwell on nails they rattle me,
Their nature of driving, delving, puncturing.
This is their nature.

Sometimes I think about a needle, like
A nail only starving, sliding into my gums
Right between the tooth and gum line.

Other times I think about that summer
Spent at Aunt Helen’s, six hours southeast.
Where I played with my cousins at that

Construction site where all the new houses
Were going up. We played dirt-clod wars
And follow-the-leader through the 2x4s.

I remember not being scared, when Sherry
Had a hole torn in her arm by that nail, and
It made me feel strong and brave.

Until Aunt Helen saw what happened, how
Sherry couldn’t stop crying, why the heck
Couldn’t she stop crying? Aunt Helen got

This look in her brow, it rigored into little
Lines, billboardings some quiet fury. She grabbed
My arm, up top, where it’s meatier. She sank

Her nails into my skin, as if they were pulled
Below by anchors, sinking subdermally,
Hitting rich deposits of silky, boyish blood.
Her nails rattled me, the sudden shock of pain
And the even more painful reddening of my face
For the crimes of childhood.

That night I slept dreaming of nails, all different Kinds, and I vowed in those dreams, soft as lambs Ear, that my nails will never be like your nails.

That my nails will scratch stickers and sniff,
Mine will be kept trimmed, my nails will tap
On your coffin to make sure you’re dead.
She was forgotten between the pages, an old bookmark, a hidden secret.

No name on the back, only a dog in her lap.

The dog was always being scratched, frozen in place, smiles on both their faces. Captured within the frame, only black and white.

They resided within Proust’s prose – only to be uncovered later.
The Shuvler Twins

From Ole Wet Tallahassee,
Had two boyfriends
And they did something nasty.

Now, the Shuvler Twins
Had loaded green eyes,
The kind that tortured men
and glowed when they lied.

“Tell me where you been
On that sweaty June 2nd,
Ya’ll were seen with them
The night things got hectic.”

With the black sparrow perched
And the slim sun a risin’
Those good people searched
But the hounds couldn’t find ‘em.

Shortly thereafter the Twins went missin.’
Folks of the town told the story quite tragic,
Of four green eyes
That hung in the attic.
“It’s just that I hadn’t heard of it before. Timber marketing? Granted I could probably make some sense of it if—”

“Inability to think. Unable to think on his feet,” said Griffin.

“—if I didn’t have to acknowledge the stay-at-home mom or the teacher. Perhaps we oughta look at this in a different way,” said Sajak.

“I’ve seen you handle the obscure ones before. Don’t blame the man’s profession.”

Vanna sits on a couch behind the two men. The TV, mounted on the wall in front of her, is on. She watches that night’s episode. The TV distracts Sajak. Griffin focuses exclusively on Sajak. Vanna does not pretend to ignore the men; they are nothing to her. She hasn’t spoken to Sajak, off screen, in days. Griffin speaks for both of them. Sajak is receptive as long as Griffin respects his headphone policy. That is, when Sajak’s headphones are on, he is not to be disturbed, save for Wheel of Fortune related emergencies.

“Don’t call it offensive. The guy took exactly zero offense. Look at it this way. We had a special little bond over it. He thought it was cute, or at least to be expected, that I’d make a little let’s-call-it intentional joke about his timber thing. Plus, ya know, isn’t it better for him?”

“How’s that?”

“That as opposed to the other two, who got the standard ‘name, profession, great to have ya’, he got something else. I’d say something else and something better. I’d even say we made one timber man very happy tonight. Which is to say, I made it very happy tonight. Him.”

Pat Sajak drives to work every week day. Before he drives to work and before he sets foot in his garage (he fears leaving the car outside, for even though his neighborhood is positively crime free, the bird droppings, morning dew, rain residue and, most of all, conversations with neighbors are things for which he has exactly zero tolerance), he looks himself in the hallway mirror. But before the morning mirror business, Sajak brushes his teeth, applies Crest White Strips, which he swears haven’t touched his teeth in months—“au natural,” he says—then flops his fit-for-a-fifty-something’s
body to the floor and slams out fifty push-ups and cranks out one-hundred crunches, all while listening to *Huey Luis and The News*’ “Hip to be Square” on repeat.

The song reminds Sajak of the scene from *American Psycho* in which Christian Bale hacks up—with perfect form, Sajak might add--Jared Leto with an axe. More than anything, Sajak sees the scene, and by implication the song, as a testimony to Christian Bale’s excellent physique. For his handling of the axe was bar none. So while listening to the song, Sajak actually thinks about Bale’s powerful swings, the muscles needed to execute said swings, the exercise necessary for developing said muscles, and finally the amount of exercise he himself needs in order to come anywhere close to Bale-level excellence.

He recently purchased headphones and a Walkman.

Historically, Sajak’s filmic affinities have affected his work. First, there was the lotion fiasco, which Griffin attributes to *Silence of the Lambs*. “But wait,” Vanna says. “What about *Dracula*; I know he saw it. And remember the black trench coat, the one with the high collar?”

“For the lotion about, then? No mention of lotion in *Dracula*,” says Griffin.

“He bit Trebek…”

“But for two weeks he called every woman in the studio ‘Clarice.’ And need I remind you of the slip? The infamous slip. The military wife who slipped on and landed in Jergens?”

Griffin was right about the Jodi Foster phase. It would have brought *Wheel of Fortune* to a stand-still, but at the last minute, Griffin cut the Jergens lady a sweetheart deal and she withdrew the suit. And yet, the staff would happily take that Sajak over this, the *American Psycho* Sajak, any day. For even though he set a new precedent with the lotion—it was the first time his post-work habits interfered with his “durings,” a Griffin-coined word denoting any activity one engages in during the studio’s time—the staff feared a similar incident.

Now, Sajak wears the headphones every day. They’re on until he and Vanna walk arm-in-arm into screen-shot.

“I have here that you’re a mother of three—ok, yes, I see…well, I see two of ‘em out there…left at home, I wonder; a bad boy left at home, methinks—and you’re a scrap booker. My own personal mother was a scrap booker.”
“Um, well yes, I love scrap booking and I do a lot of travelling for it, for conventions.”

“We have a travelling scrap booker here, folks. Let’s give her a hand. May I spin? Shall I spin the Wheel?”

Sajak spins it. A few rounds and then comes the first commercial break.

“Mr Sajak, sir, I was awfully nervous back stage and let me tell you, sir, that not only am I positively thrilled to be up here, on stage, with the likes of Vanna and the very personable you; but gosh lemme tell you how much of a relief it was to see you, the pro, nervous, like me, the very definition of an amateur.”

“In your mind I was nervous. Tell me why, now.”

“Oh no, sir, I meant nothing by it. Just that I saw the headphones on, up ‘til you and Vanna, who is just gorgeous in real life, sir, like more gorgeous than the TV version; and I figured, considering the headphones, that it was what I’ll politely call a means to fight off nerves.”

“Why I listen to what I listen to is of exactly no concern to you. We have fifteen seconds until cameras role and I am keeping my composure. I keep my composure in spite of you, scrap booker. Be like these two and hush, now, or I’ll sick the audience on you.”

Rounds go by. The scrap booker does exceptionally well. She is one solid round away from making comebacks impossible. Sajak winces.

“Take my hand and walk with me, here. Stand on the red X, if you would please. May I ask what you will do with your winnings?”

“Oh, yes, I—“

“What will you do with your winnings?”

“I will invest in my boys’ education.”

“Terrific. Now I assume you know how this works. The rules. I spin, you choose. I spin this little wheel, and you choose an envelope. We’ll give you some consonants and vowels and you’ll work with those. Or you won’t. Ready?”

“Is that an ear bud, there, in your ear?”

“Please affirm that you are ready.”

“I can hear music. Music’s coming from that bud, there. In your ear.” She turns to Vanna. “Is he OK? He’s going through his pockets like a madman.” A hushed audience. The pain on Sajak’s face has faded--displaced by an impish grin. Meanwhile, Griffin pleads with the switchboard people,
demanding that they go to commercial. But credits run in less than a minute, and so the show’s locked in—with no chance for break.

Vanna approaches Sajak and the scrap booker.

“Hi folks. Pat seems to have fallen ill, here, on stage, but we’ll have to forgive him for acting a bit unusual. Dear, I think everyone would love to see you choose an envelope. I’ll go ahead and spin for Pat, who may or may not appear, to the folks at home, to be drooling. I’ll go ahead and assure you folks that he is not. Pat, go ahead and assure the folks at home that you’re just fine.”

Pat Sajak drools. Watching it all, Griffin can take no more. He plunges past the switchboard people, flips two switches and sends up the emergency “technical difficulties” façade. The number of viewers who see Sajak drool and moan and wince is small. The scrap booker is awarded a consoling twenty-five thousand. Avoiding the puddle, Vanna steps over Sajak. She and Griffin approach each other, ignoring the scrap booker’s puzzled and searching eyes. This is Monday, and Griffin must now prep Tuesday’s contestants. For people need their Wheel.
A Sestina for Anne

Chelsea Dryer

There is an insatiable hunger
But I don’t like these pills
This is my first ideation, my second hospitalization, my fifth doctor
How can they know my ills?
“We can’t all have a far away lover,”
Someone says from far away. This realization kills.

And what it kills
Is hunger
And the hope for a better lover
Or better pills
Or cleaner ills
Can’t you help me, doctor?

Can’t you hear me, doctor?
Are you the one that kills?
Are you the one that guts the ills?
Do you squelch the sticky hunger?
These never ending bottles of pills …
Do you know my lover?

And just who is this lover?
And just who are you, doctor?
Can you change the color of these pills?
Can you change the passions of these kills?
This hunger?
These ills?
And what remains without these ills?
Aren’t the ills my lover?
Aren’t they my hunger?
Don’t I play the doctor
That kills?
Don’t I prescribe these pills?

The beauty of these pills
Is that they don’t quite fix the ills
They don’t quite stop the kills
Of a faraway lover.
Of a doctor.
Of hunger.

Is there a hunger for the pills?
Do they even require a doctor, or ills?
Is it always the faraway lover that kills?
On Friday, March 6, 2015, I had the immense pleasure to sit down and talk with Julia Gordon-Bramer about her recent book, Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath. We chatted in her living room, which had several, laden bookcases, about her work and why she chose to write about the famous and troubled American poet author known for The Bell Jar and her collections of poetry. According to Gordon-Bramer, she began her research on Sylvia Plath while she was graduate student at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She had discovered that there was a correlation between Plath’s poetry and the tarot, a well-known divination tool that resembles playing cards (used to foretell the future or answer questions), after getting her hands on the restored edition of Ariel. In 2004, Frieda Hughes, Plath’s daughter, decided to republish her mother’s work as she had originally intended, and it was from this re-release that Gordon-Bramer had realized that each poem connected to each card of the tarot and in the order they are supposed to be arranged within a deck.

In Fixed Stars Govern a Life, Gordon-Bramer discusses how the first twenty-two poems reflect the Major Arcana, the major influencing cards, of the tarot in the intended Qabalistic or traditional occult order. Gordon-Bramer further defined this order, the Qaballah, as “God’s social network” and His or Her different levels of communicating with the world. She also explained that she believed that these different levels are different mirrors reflecting different truths, but all are connected to the higher power.

During our sit down, the minute the tape recorder was turned on, what would have been a traditional interview shifted into a conversation on shared interests in the occult, paranormal presences, psychic ability, and creativity:
What initially drew you to creative writing and how did you get started?

“I have been a writer ever since I knew how to write. Ever since I was six-years-old, I remember not being able to stop writing. It’s kind of just what I do. I never understood writer’s block, because I have always had something going on in a different genre. I write poetry, but I also journal and write fiction. And I also do scholarly work. There is always something brewing here. If I get lost in the work, and I have, I would come upon different times when I was in the system and everything was opening up, I would sometimes stop and ask ‘Oh, am I trying to force something? Or making something happen here that isn’t organic?’ I would then usually back off and just wait for it to be revealed to me.”

“For example, there was another Plath poem I hadn’t cracked and I couldn’t figure it out. So I decided that I wouldn’t push it. It will just present itself to me. And literally the day before I submitted, viola there it was. I was reading something unrelated and a word, ‘cradle,’ triggered something. That was when I realized that her poem, “Words for a Nursery,” was a tribute to Boston, the city where she grew up.”

In your forward, you said that you loved Sylvia Plath’s word. Can you elaborate more on why?

“When I was sixteen, it wasn’t the poetry that had me spellbound. It was The Bell Jar. It was very much a young adult novel. All of that teenage angst, and such. There was in the copy that I had a poem, a pretty famous poem by her called ‘A Mad Girl’s Love Poem.’ And I always did love that. But for the most part I was a normal, partying teenager. I wasn’t a bookworm, but I did read and write. And I did write some poetry back then, granted it wasn’t good poetry. We all have to have some place to start. I always knew that I had some strange synchronicities with Plath. For example, I was born exactly nine months after she died in the same year, 1963. And my grandfather lost his left leg in the war and her father lost his to diabetes. My mother was British and came to America, while she was American and went to Britain.”
Again, you mentioned in your forward that the more you dug into your research the more connections you found between Plath’s poetry and different areas of mythology and the occult. Why do you think these topics were of great interest to Plath and any writer in general?

“No one has ever realized that Plath had such an interest in mysticism or the occult, due to her buttoned-down academic life. That was her public appearance, which was essential since she had been institutionalized. If she displayed public associations with the occult, who knows what she could have gotten for that. She grew up in the Unitarian church in England, and according to her childhood journals and letters, her ‘Sunday school’ homework was in astrology and mythology. She was literally raised in it. Her mother got her master’s degree in Alchemy, and all of this was a part of her life long before she met Ted Hughes, her husband (who everyone believed to have introduced her to the occult). She gravitated to Ted due to the mysticism and he absolutely pushed her further into it. Absolutely. But she had her interests long before.

“Writers should explore mythology and the occult because it is just full of taboos and Freud was one of the first to see it. Thus all of his complexes are named after mythological stories. Generally not topics for polite conversations…I think the thing about Qaballah or the occult is that it usually makes most people uneasy. It is very much ‘owning the god-self,’ as well as exploring the darker parts of our natures. Most people brought up in a rigid fundamentalist perception will refuse to explore anything dark for any reason. Not sure that is a smart thing to do. Do we just deny all negativity, and pretend that it doesn’t exist? I suppose that might be the way that people will resist the occult. Basically it boils down to not being willing to be open to the unknown.”

The conversation with the delightful Julia Gordon-Bramer continued for over an hour delving further into the mysteries of Sylvia Plath, her creative process, the life of Plath and Frieda Hughes’ decision to republish her mother’s work as she originally intended.

For more information on Fixed Stars Govern a Life, you can check out the website, www.fixedstarsgovernalife.com or purchase a copy of the book from Amazon.com, in which Gordon-Bramer goes into more detail about her research into the mysterious poet of the mid-twentieth century, Sylvia Plath.
High on the cliffs of the canyons there are no remains. Nothing to bury. Flesh, muscle, organs and even bone are torn apart and lapped up. The entirety of the being is consumed with only a flicker of memory to its existence. Hunger rises again, and then even the memory is stamped out. The scavenging imps circle around the rot, tugging, pecking and destroying. They eat all the stringy parts and all the squalid parts until the pieces of white skeleton lie scratched but whole. Overhead a shadow looms unnoticed cutting through the wind with blades of feathered obsidian. The Lammergeyer descends, parting the lesser birds by decree, by the order; pecking and otherwise. He clutches a large bone in his talons and draws it close to his body. He glides high over huge slabs of rock and drops the bone; it plummets hard and shatters. The only remnant of the being is broken to pieces and swallowed. The bones that surrendered, the frame that crumbled are dissolved away in the belly of the Lammergeyer.
Hitchhiking to Vegas

Catherine Howl

It had turned to snow when I decided
Not to show up at the cathedral.
Still dressed in white,
I attracted a truck driver
Who became my new companion.

He seemed lost clocking miles
From the weathered webs
Of Chicago freeways
To an unruly straightness,
Headed for the vastness of Vegas.

As we passed by Joshua trees,
I imagined white tigers
Trapped behind glass
As the Casino Mirage.
I longed for the door to freedom
That opened when we pulled into
An evening service stop.

We were close enough to see
The ribbons of lights
Laced like lit matches,
In an oasis of neon hotel signs
That eventually invited us to check in.
The grand bedspread was taut
Over corners of cool sheets,
Where I finally fell asleep.
In my inebriated dreams,
I gripped a plastic bucket
Full of change
To gamble the future
With a one-armed bandit.
The night winds of sand
Matched the movement
Of my quick hands reflected
In every machine that I played,
Only for me to leave behind all the
Mismatched lines of countless lemons.

When I woke with a fever,
I could hear your last syllables
Still pouring into my inky coffee
That you had left me
Before our hotel door
Clicked shut.
Jumping off the Charles Bridge

I woke up staring at my ex-boyfriend of all people. The hospital called him, I guess, because he was the only contact on my phone with a Prague area code. His face was an interesting mixture of concern and reluctance to see me. Even after being told that I had just tried to drown myself Virginia Woolf-style, he still could not help but to hate me apparently. Though, I did not expect any more of him than that.

I was lying in a hospital bed in the Motol University hospital, in their standard blue hospital gown wondering why the rocks had failed to keep me under, and what exactly had happened to them. Nobody could explain to me why I still lived. For a week, this question haunted me. Several weeks after all this had become clear though, I found an article about myself on the expats in Prague website. A graduate student journalist had discovered that I was an Austrian medical student, and the entire incident was very publicized due to the nature of my actions and my background. The awful picture from my Charles University exchange student I.D. was included in the article, too. It would be hell being known as the crazy Austrian medical student who jumped off the Charles Bridge with rocks in her pockets.

More importantly, I learned that two men had watched me drop below the surface and decided to jump in and save me. The article mentioned I had stuffed nine rocks in my pockets, and the men had to throw them out before I could be properly pulled to the bank below the bridge. I always wondered what drove people to try to be heroes, especially when it was obvious the person they wanted to save would much rather die. Waking up to my ex, at first, I thought I was in hell. When it was clear that I was alive, I really wished they had left me to drown.

He was silent for a very long time, just staring at me. I had nothing to say either, and the only sound that came from me was the sniffling of my stuffed nose as I attempted to breathe. I felt a cold coming on, subtly, but did not take any major note of it until after a few days of lying in silence behind a locked door with nothing to do except think. I realized my jumping into a freezing river in the beginning of November caused the cold. I remember
wondering if whomever “saved” me were also sick.

“How are you feeling,” Kvido finally said. I felt a smirk form on my lips and my eyes roll cynically. I figured he didn’t want much of a reply if he was asking me that. He probably did not want to hear my voice. I wasn’t sure of what to say.

“Edit,” he edged closer, dropping his voice, “I asked you how you are feeling.”

I narrowed my eyes in response and heard my own voice, unplanned, “Kvido.”

He fidgeted uncomfortably— or so it looked to me since I thought he should be uncomfortable—at the sound of his name. He did not have any more questions for me that day, which was fine, since I had no answers. Nevertheless, he was so unwilling to leave. He carried the rest of the conversation with random statements and conclusions as to my near future.

“You know what will happen now, I think,” he continued, “they will lock you up.”

No, I had not thought about that at all. I assured myself shortly before jumping that death was imminent, and in death, there would be such a beautiful, silent nothingness. I would no longer have such unbearable, uncontrollable emotions such as I’ve always had. Kvido would not know though. He never understood me. He only drank, smoked, and snorted away his feelings all night, until they inevitably returned in the morning with the fading of his high. Then he poured himself a cup of coffee, checked his email, and planned his evening, intending to start the process of avoiding his feelings all over again.

He mostly ignored me while pursuing these things, until he wanted sex. I liked our sex though. These were the only occasions I could convince myself that someone wanted to make me feel good and distract me from the anxiousness that always consumed me. I also had a theory that sex was the only time Kvido could ever think about someone other than himself. Otherwise, he was an entirely selfish creature relying too much on his Id.

“You’re not going to be able to finish your studies,” he continued, “if they lock you up for too long.”

My studies? I no longer cared about my studies. I wanted to be dead. Surely, he could grasp that someone who had just tried to kill herself had no shits left to give about her studies. As he stared at me, gaging my reaction, I had a short fantasy of sticking my head in the oven with the gas on as soon
as they let me out. I was sure they would let me out after only a few weeks or a month. I just had to trick them into believing that I had lost my will to die and found a renewed interest in life. I felt my lips unexplainably crack into a smile.

“I don’t know how you can smile at a time like this,” he said, “Or maybe you like the idea of quitting school and losing your freedom.”

I found his assumptions to be hilarious, and I was suddenly laughing uncontrollably. He stared at me, his squinty aqua eyes nearly popping out of his head.

“This isn’t a laughing matter, Edit,” he scolded me. “This is very serious.” He sighed as I laughed harder. What in the hell did he know about life? He did not really live. He lost himself in narcotics and alcohol. He stood up and gathered his leather jacket and black and white striped scarf.

“I hope they can help you, because you need it,” he said as he walked toward the door. He disappeared around the corner. My sudden solitude rushed over me like a tidal wave, and I could laugh no more. I realized his absence saddened me more than his presence. I forgot what exactly was funny to begin with, but I immediately missed that light feeling that laughing had given me. I desperately wanted it back. Unfortunately, I could find nothing else in my empty, white hospital room to be amused by. Except for the occasional announcement over the hospital intercom in Czech, my room was enveloped in a silence, which I originally thought would be comforting, but was actually quite crushing. I eventually cried myself to sleep that first night, wishing that Kvido would come back.

On the first night, I dreamed I was observing Sylvia Plath on the day she died. I sat on her sofa in the other room, listening as she shooed her children away with an elderly woman. I felt as though I were awaiting an audience with her; yet, she never came to hear me out. I was also aware that she would kill herself, and I remained to see what would unfold. She didn’t kill herself as soon as the children were gone. Actually, she disappeared into her office for a while, and I grew tired of waiting for her to return to the sitting room. I got up from the sofa, and wandered hazily and unbearably slow into her office. I felt like the air was the consistency of gelatin, or that I was trying to walk through water and that I would never reach my destination.

I never did reach the office to continue to watch her, and woke up in a cold sweat and a panic, as if I had been running for my life in the middle of winter. My eyes were heavy and burned. The scratchy sheets were stuck to
me, and I had kicked the thin, fleece top blanket into a wad at the end of the bed. It was still dark outside the barred window. I did not want to be awake.

A nurse cheerfully clambered in behind a cart stacked with trays of bread rolls and coffee mugs. I heard the phrase “dobrý den,” but it didn’t register with me for a moment. She continued speaking to me in Czech for at least thirty seconds before I realized I was supposed to make sense of her words and reply. Unfortunately, I didn’t speak Czech. She noticed me staring at her, no doubt with a blank look on my face.

“Erm. Are you feeling better today,” she asked in English.

“Yes, thank you,” I replied, hoping she would not ask me anything else.

“Tea or coffee,” she continued, slapping down a tray on my bed stacked with a bread roll, a pat of butter in a plastic cup, and other assorted items for eating. The tray legs wobbled precariously as she placed a mug next to my bread roll plate, and then a cup of fruit. I wasn’t sure if I wanted anything on that tray. I certainly could not decide if I wanted tea or coffee.

“Surprise me,” I said, struggling to remember how to speak English. She regarded me in silence. I guess she was unsure what she should do. Finally, something clicked in her mind and she picked up a pitcher. Dark liquid poured into my mug and I let out a sigh of relief, expecting her to leave.

“Sugar? Milk?” Of course, there were follow-up questions.

“Yes,” I replied, losing my patience.

“Yes?”

“Yes. All of it.”

She stared at me and appeared to be more confused than ever. She hesitantly poured some milk in my mystery liquid and pressed some sugar packets on my tray. She finally maneuvered her cart around and left me alone.

I peered down at my breakfast and realized that I really wanted to get up. Actually I didn’t just want to get up, I needed to get up. I had to use the bathroom. I glanced about me looking for a table to put my tray on. I found one next to my bed, but it was about a half of a meter away. I would have had to get out of bed with the tray and walk a bit to reach the table. Carefully picking up the tray, I discovered another barrier to my escape.

The rails of my bed had been raised as high as they would go and locked in place. I could not even climb over the rails from my sitting position beneath the tray, nor could I jump over the rails with a tray in my hands.
“What are you doing?” I had walked the tray to the end of my bed and was attempting to hoist myself over the bars, but after setting myself upon them, I found that my feet were half a meter from the ground. I looked up from my spot on the bed rail and saw Kvido standing at the foot of my bed.

“No, I don’t want anything from you.”

“Huh?” Kvido was staring at me.

“Nothing,” I said, realizing I had unintentionally shared my thoughts with him.

He placed a cold hand on my forehead, “Do you have fever?” I continued to stare at him, eyes wide in disbelief that he was touching me again.

“How can I have a fever when I am dead?” I asked suddenly.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“Very much so.” I didn’t though. I wanted him to stay and well...love me, I suppose. I couldn’t say that, though. I was dead to him if the hospital did not plan to let me out—even if I did just have a fever and I lived still. He was visiting my grave. This was him saying goodbye, because he was too stir-crazy and prone to unpleasant feelings without a girl to distract him when he had the whim. He would find another while I was away. I watched him turn and stomp across the room in his combat boots. He paused at the door.

“Maybe someday you will get your wish,” I said, “and you won’t have to pretend to be visiting my tombstone like now.”

“And what is my wish exactly?”

“That I would die.” He visibly tensed up and I heard him sigh. He left without replying.

I was mad he wouldn’t do as I wanted him to do. I was also mad at myself for dismissing him again. He had touched me for the first time since a year ago that day. I had been wishing nearly every day of the past year that he would merely come to me. Well, he had come. He had also touched me. What else would I get? Apparently, I wanted it all. My grandmother, if she were alive, would say that I wanted the stars. I wanted all he could possibly give me in my imagination and in reality, plus all that he could not give me that existed solely in my imagination—mostly just his love. He could not give me that though, because he had none, or so I could only speculate.

His presence was both a secret joy and a great disappointment to me. He disappointed me, because he only reminded me of what couldn’t be. I was still overjoyed to have him there, because his presence foolishly gave me
hope for our future. Once I no longer heard his boot steps on the ceramic, I let free my tears I had been holding back his whole visit. Suddenly, the door to my room swung open and a new nurse ran in. Then I remembered that I had to go to the restroom. I had not touched my breakfast.

“Erm. . .you have not eaten breakfast?” This new nurse with graying blond hair struggled to say.

I shook my head. “I need to get up.”

“Get up?” She seemed to be confused.

“Potřebuji . . .” but I trailed off as I realized I didn’t know how to say the rest of the sentence: “to go to the bathroom.” Instead, I pointed toward the water closet and felt stupid as I said, “Toalet”, as if I were asking a question.

“Oh! Ooh,” she replied, mumbling quickly in Czech. She moved faster too, getting to business moving the tray off the bed. She lowered the bars around my bed too, trusting me—in a surprising turn-of-events. I sprang from the bed and rushed to the restroom, fearing I would explode, finally relieved that I could leave that bed. While on the toilet, I wiped my tears from my face and tried to compose myself again, since I was not alone.

She was still waiting by my bed when I came out. I was surprised she had tolerated my shutting the door, since I was on suicide watch. I had been trying to recall all the things I had learned in the required seminars back in Vienna about treating the mentally disturbed and psychology. Perhaps, Czechs were different—or like Kvido—they all did not take my suicidal behavior very seriously. I wasn’t going to complain though. I would not be able to relieve myself with a nurse watching.

I climbed back into bed while the nurse put everything back in its place and folded the top blanket in a neat rectangle at the end of my bed. I tasted my drink, recognizing the taste of overly strong instant Czech coffee. The coffee made something groan in my stomach. I paused from exploring the rest of my breakfast so the nurse could take my vitals.

“How long until I go to the psych ward,” I asked.

“You are there already,” she replied, smiling too much considering the substance of her response. Did Kvido already know I was in the psych ward? Why would he keep that from me? I grudgingly let the nurse take my blood, while I pretended that I was not just pricked by a needle and there wasn’t an uncomfortable pressure in my left arm.

“When I can I leave this room,” I asked when she was finished and I
could open my eyes again.

She shrugged. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“I am bored,” I continued, feeling as though I were about to nag, “Can I have something to do?”

“Eat,” the nurse answered, “and then I bring you something.” Then, she left.

I pushed the apple slices around in their bowl for a while before picking a slice up and tenderly taking a bite out of it. My stomach purred at me, but felt nowhere near satisfied with that apple. Still, the thought of food made me gag. I couldn’t taste anything around the snot in my nose anyway. I took a bite from the bread roll and realized it would taste better with butter. But, I didn’t have a knife. Why would you give someone butter, but no knife? That is terribly cruel. I was so frustrated that I threw my bread roll down in disgust on its plate and turned my nose up, rejecting this notion of spreading butter on a roll without a knife. Now, that was madness compared to jumping off a bridge, because you can’t stand the way you feel any longer, being given bread with no utensils is even more insane and senseless.

I heard the door handle turn and looked toward the corridor instinctively. I was surprised to see Kvido wandering in with a see-through bag of pastries, looking as though he felt foolish doing this, or could not fathom why he was doing it in the first place. Before I realized what was happening to my mouth, I smiled. He noticed and smiled as well, appearing either surprised, confused, or a perfectly plausible cocktail of both.

“They told me you will not eat,” Kvido said. I assumed he had heard it from the graying nurse who had checked my vitals.

“I had to pee,” I replied, trying to sound crass. He laughed. “Do you still have to piss?”

I shook my head.

“Then why do you still not eat,” he asked, “you have no excuse.”

I gestured to the bread roll and that stupid butter. “They did not give me a knife for my butter.”

“Well, you will have to make do without.”

“And why is that,” I asked, “Because I am already in a psych ward?”

“Yes,” he replied, “and they told me to let you know that you are on--I think it is called “suicide watch” in English, and aren’t allowed sharp objects. I thought that you--a medical student--would expect such a treatment.”

“Why didn’t you tell me I was already in the psych ward?”
He shrugged and then placed a croissant on my tray. “I didn’t want to scare you.”

“And what about the rocks in my pockets? Did they mention if I’d get those back after this treatment? They were rather pretty.”

He looked at me in confusion. “What rocks?”

“The ones that were in the pockets of my dress when I jumped off the bridge.”

“There were no rocks on the list of items they gave me that are yours,” he replied, “They probably fell out during your fall.”

“How would you know?”

He focused his attention on his croissants, but sneezed and had to blow his nose on a bandana hanging from his back pocket. Then, he replied. “I guess I wouldn’t know.” He looked terribly melancholy then. “Why the fuck would they keep rocks for you?”

“They were special to me,” I said. “People should not make assumptions about the worth of others’ items.” I realized I was being intentionally difficult.

“You should eat that croissant,” he said, “before they get the idea to force-feed you.”

“Why won’t you let me die?”

“I would feel guilty,” he replied, “I heard that force-feeding is not comfortable, so I will help you with this croissant.” He tore the croissant into small pieces and held one in front of my mouth.

“How do you know so much about treatment of the mentally unstable,” I asked.

“I’ve been doing research,” he replied. “I couldn’t sleep last night, so I stayed up all night reading some of your old textbooks that deal with this subject.”

“I am not hungry,” I said, my words interrupted by Kvido placing a croissant piece between my lips.

“Chew,” he said, sitting back and watching me from under his eyelids. I tried to chew.

“Kvido,” I said, mouth full.

“Edit,” he retorted, “You know better than to talk with your mouth full.”

“But--“

“Eat.”
“But what about my heart?”

He groaned. “Edit, that is really stupid,” he said, “Please do not start with this now. You are supposed to be eating.”

I grudgingly took a bite from the croissant, hoping that having something else to think about would keep me from crying more. It did not help, however. The tears added extra moisture to my food.

“You are crying so much,” Kvido continued, “I think you do belong here.”

“I am not crazy though,” I said.

He smiled and patted me on the head, as if humoring a child. “Eat.”

“I am not hungry anymore,” I said. I felt that I needed to explain a bit more, as he stared at me. “The Dead don’t eat.”

“You are so morbid today,” he said, chuckling.

He picked up another croissant piece and tried to stuff it in my mouth. I sprang from the bed, knocking the breakfast tray over. My mostly untouched coffee toppled and rained down on the hard breadroll, which landed at the end of my bed while the plastic cup bounced away toward the window. The bowl of apples and tray along with the butter fell off my bed and landed on the floor at Kvido’s feet. I pushed Kvido away, trying to claw at his eyes, but he caught me by both of my wrists and pinned me to the bed.

I heard the door open and many racing footsteps.

Kvido and the nurse yelled back and forth in Czech and he stepped away. The nurse who could speak English came in.

“What is going on,” she asked me.

“I’m really not hungry and I cannot possibly eat anymore,” I said. Kvido turned and spoke quickly in Czech, this time a lot quieter.

She replied to him and I had no idea what they were saying, obviously. But she addressed the other nurses who had rushed in and were now cleaning up the mess on my bed. They nodded and continued with their tasks.

“Because you act like this,” the nurse continued, “You can stay in isolation for few more days.” The nurses left me alone with Kvido after they cleared the mess and replaced the sheets and blankets. He didn’t press the food issue anymore.

“Maybe I really did die,” I said to him, “And this is purgatory. And you overdosed.”

“Hmmm,” he replied, scratching his little patch of goatee. “I have
been feeling like I’m in some sort of purgatory lately.”
“Maybe you should have the croissant then,” I said, “Since we’ll both be on our way to hell soon. I am afraid I cannot properly enjoy it.”
He was silent for the rest of this visit, probably coming to terms with the fact that we were both dead.
Upheaval

“To W.W.
My star, my perfect silence.”

A two-story stump,
pockmarked – by the absence
of what made it so grand,
enticing climbers from
near and far.

Gone are the homes,
eliminated with a force so strong,
only possible by man.
Cracking Facade

Madison Emerick
Katie Lynn

Blue Birds
The Movements of a Swan before It Spreads Its Wings

I

All night I will be performing surgery, dissecting old wounds just for the hell of it. I will dance epileptically and drink imperial stouts, pantomiming Chopin’s 9th nocturne as if performing at a concert hall where they stare down at me from balconies for being insane. The lights will conduct along with me and sing, and I’ll tango with a blithe floor lamp, screaming, “Now is the winter of our discontent…”

II

In the morning, I’ll have the eyes of an electroconvulsive patient, my hair standing comically on end. My dreams will have been about beautiful \textit{femme fatales} pretending to love me when in fact they’re Soviet or Nazi spies. I’ll see Rasputin’s visage in the mirror, his hand raised to bless me—or else to signal my dynasty’s end. A bust of Schubert’ll still be tossing its head at me from across the room.
III

The cycle will repeat. There will be, generally speaking, more “wills” thrown into the mix. I will contemplate different ways to die on sticky notes. An owl will sing lullabies of “Hoot, hoot, hoot,” which I’ll consider hallucinations. Burning beer labels with a Zippo, I’ll notice the stars are as far apart as her and me (even though we’re less than a block away, both of us breathing heavily in the night.)

IV

I will suture gashes wide as our distances with red wine, invoking Berryman’s Henry in the cause and draining Elmer’s glue for the purpose. I will cry out to spiteful gods, deaf and cold as Odin, “Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich?” to which the reply will invariably be dimmed houses drugged with quaaludes. Driving empty interstates well after midnight, I’ll consume their chiaroscuro and wonder just where in the hell I’m going.
She pockets his discarded watch on the way out. He’d left it splayed on the dresser top, practically flung it off in his eagerness as he’d undressed. It had hit the wooden surface with a scratchy thunk and sat there gleaming silver, ticking faintly in the still room. It looked expensive—the type of thing she could see wrapped up and tied with a satiny bow, presented on a Christmas morning or anniversary evening. The kind of thing a wife would choose carefully for a husband who was always late, or maybe just had a taste for the expensive things in life.

Somewhere between her bra hitting the floor and what came next, she wondered why he’d felt the need to remove it. Perhaps he simply preferred attending to business devoid of clothing and timekeeping accessories alike, or maybe—you never knew, with these sort—the silver watch was too much like a cuff, reminding him of the binding commitment he was ardently betraying. But she would never know; he had pulled her to him then, lips coated in velvet words, and thoughts of the watch were temporarily set aside. Empty whispers of seduction slithered over her skin, coiling around her, without venom but not without cold-blooded purpose.

“You’re so beautiful . . . you’re so amazing . . .”

He’d repeated it over and over like a mantra, almost to himself, as if he’d needed to speak the words more than she’d needed to hear them. The gold on his left hand shone dully in the dim room, cold and hard as it brushed against her skin. Before long, it was over, and he was snoring under the sheets, oblivious to his bedmate rolling out from beneath the covers to pull on a dress, slip into shoes, snatch up a purse.

Swipe a watch.

She didn’t steal from all her clients, but she had no particular qualms about relieving this one of his possession. The ring on his finger seemed to weigh him down plenty already.

Her new silver watch now sits beside the crumpled wad of bills she’d collected up front, heavy in her pocket and still faintly ticking away. Good luck explaining to your wife how you lost this, honey, she thinks, glancing once more at the snoring figure on the seedy motel sheets before closing the door on it all.
The gloam: those fleeting seconds just before the sun’s death, creep across a pale blue melancholy sky. An invading palate of gloom falls on the darkening landscape. Purples and reds splash defiantly in the distance, as a hearse carrying an open coffin, filled with glowing embers, pulls into a cemetery on the horizon. The pallbearers of night, dressed in black and silhouetted in the dim twilight, step forward and grasp the handles. They raise the coffin on their shoulders and slowly turn, and then march westward. Their black boots clump-clump-clump a cadence of late evening minutes on the cold ground. The mourners, standing close by and slightly illuminated by the fading rays, are caught in the penumbra, and partially hidden in the shadows. The lid is sealed and the loved one of light is slowly lowered out of sight. An ancient undertaker, wearing a long coat with tails and a stove-pipe hat, heaves dirt on the deceased. The despondent mourners, gathered at the graveside, weep at the passing, and then shuffle off into the blackness, as their tears fall on the blades of grass and cling as unseen drops of dew.

Clump-clump-clump, boots echo in the dark. The pallbearers of night are returning, followed by mourners with heads bowed, all dressed in black. The pallbearers take their positions along the graveside, as the mourners kneel on the fresh burial mound, scratching at the earth, tearing at the coffin lid, while wailing a mournful chant of lament. The funeral pyre within seems gray and cold. Many frantic hands search through the pile of ashes in the darkness, until a single pair of hands cups a tiny glowing ember. The mourners crowd close, and gently blow, while they sprinkle tiny twigs, hoping beyond hope to rekindle that burning orb once again. The ember flutters, and then erupts into a majestic ball of flame. The flame grows, and slowly floats up from the grave. The black of night is pulled back as a layer of dark paint, and the dots of light, those ancient gods of night, retreat westward, like a high flying flock of geese in flight. The loved one of light has risen from its earthen tomb, and slowly ascends skyward, as the mourner’s lament turns to joy, heralding the first rays of a resurrected sun, bursting forth to dry their tears of dew.
The earth is still in quiet reverence, as the flaming beacon crests the surface, beckoning to every living thing that the sun has risen. The long shadows ebb eastward as a receding tide of darkness, until they disappear for an instant in the brightness at noon, and then slowly march out toward the horizon again, like dark soldiers heading to distant lands. The pallbearers, blinded by the brilliance, close their eyes, as they wait patiently for another day’s passing, arms in front, hands folded in respect, their stony faces illuminated.
Biographies

Kaylyn Bauer is a senior in the Biochemistry and Biotechnology program. She has been previously published by Bellerive and enjoys a nice bourbon.

Nikki Bausch is a recent graduate of the Modern Languages program for German. She lived in the Czech Republic and Austria for a year each. In Czech Republic, she was inspired to write this story after witnessing a group of young British men on a stag trip jump off the Charles Bridge (they were fine, but this is extremely stupid and dangerous). She is pursuing a professional writing certificate through UMSL.

Chelsea Dryer is a senior at UMSL. She plans to earn an MFA in Creative Writing after completing her BA in English. She draws her inspiration primarily from her own personal experiences, nature, and places that she has lived, specifically the Midwest, the Pacific Northwest, and Southern California.

Jessie Eikmann is a third-year English major at UMSL. She often works for politicians when she’s not hiding in her house. She obsesses over old novels, the macabre, and her ridiculously awesome girlfriend. She spends her free time reading, adding to her massive music library, writing, and snuggling. She is working on polishing her prose and swears that she someday she will publish something that isn’t about sex.

Madison Emerick is an English major and undergraduate student at UMSL. Madison intends to pursue a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing following her graduation in spring 2015. She hopes to teach at the post-secondary level and write young-adult literature. Madison enjoys music and making art. She has been painting since she was nine years old and is a hobbyist artist. She can be found writing or creating her newest masterpiece in her home studio.

Katherine Feldman is currently a senior in Business with minors in Transportation Studies, Studio Art, and will also be receiving a Photography Certificate.
Catherine Howl will graduate from UMSL in May 2015 with an MFA in creative writing, as a member of The International English Honor Society, Sigma Tau Delta. In 2014, she placed second for the University of MO., Mahan Poetry Prize and as a semi-finalist for the Poets Billow, Bermuda Triangle Prize. Her poetry has appeared in The Pacific Review, The Gold Coast Review, Phineas and The Writers Institute National Guild, Southern California.

Sam J. Imperiale graduated from UMSL in May 2014 with a BA in English, a creative writing certificate, and an Honors College certificate. He is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing at Lindenwood University, where he is a graduate assistant, working as assistant editor of the Lindenwood Review. He was on the staff of Bellerive 14, Chimera, and the staff of the 2014 edition of Litmag.

Afton Joiner currently is a junior pursuing a degree in Studio Arts. Her artwork “Never Withering Music” was featured in the 2014 edition of Litmag. A collection of her work was presented in the Gallery FAB at UMSL. She strongly values the mentorship of her instructors and credits progress to their counseling. Future hopes for Joiner are to continue making artwork that are enjoyed by others while continuing to explore her passion.

Heather Kaufman has her BA in English from McKendree University and is currently pursuing her MA in English, Writing Studies. She is an associate editor of Periodicals at Concordia Publishing House and a Des Lee Scholar. Heather’s life currently consists of a seemingly never-ending cycle of editing, reading, writing, and cleaning up the many and varied messes of her active six-month-old.

Marie Kenney is an undergraduate English major and a member of the Pierre Laclede Honors College. Like most people, she enjoys the fact that she drinks too much coffee and writes late into the night. Marie is a fan of Flannery O’Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Donna Tartt, and Nic Pizzolatto. Last year another of Marie's short stories was the runner up for the Besse Patter- son Gephartd Award for Best Undergraduate Short Story. This is her first time being published in Litmag.
Carly Leigraf is a freshman, Biology major and is pursuing a career in the medical field. She enjoys taking nature walks and, during them, seeks out perfect snapshots to add to her photography collection. Her passion for photography is propelled by the awe-inspiring beauty of nature and her desire to showcase the glory of its Creator.

Katie Lynn is an undergraduate receiving a degree in Drawing. She is a Pierre Laclede Honors College student seeking Art Education Teaching Certification and a Masters in Education from UMSL. Her influences include nature, architecture and geometry. She explores many mediums including painting, photography and ceramics; she tries to use the same basic ideas for each medium. She tries to refine each piece to its most basic compositional elements.

Arthur Maurer is a senior at UMSL who will (hopefully) be graduating with a B.A. in English come May. He writes both poetry and fiction, drawing influence most from those writers who can speak simultaneously to the heart, soul, intellect, and imagination as well as to the darker, rawer sides of human experience. His work has recently been featured in Bellerive, and this is his second time appearing in Litmag.

Conner W. H. Meyer sometimes puts his imagination away in the hamper for a moment and takes a look around at the real world hard pressed to find any benefit in doing so. He always takes it back out, smelling of yesterday's stories.

[modern dope] can be found at www.moderndope.com

Jessica Montgomery is a senior studying English. She lives in St. Peters with her husband and their cat.

William Morris will be entering the MFA program at UMSL this fall. He has work published or forthcoming online at Crab Fat Literary Magazine and Fiction Southeast. He has previously worked as an editor for both Litmag and Bellerive. He lives in St. Louis and loves cats and coffee.

Danyel Poindexter is a sophomore English Major who aspires to become an author. She takes inspiration for her writing from everyday situation and turns them around. She was accepted into a publishing company at a young
age of thirteen but declined because she wanted to better her writing. She hopes to grasp the hearts of many with her writing and even inspire the future writers who may be hiding.

**Amber Scholl** is majoring in English, minoring in Spanish, and seeking a Creative Writing Certificate. She loves playing with language and putting the stories in her head on paper. She hopes to graduate in 2016 and pursue a career that lets her explore her love of writing and literature every day.

**Cody Spotanski** is a junior majoring in English at UMSL. His young career in poetry starts here in Litmag. Inspiration for his work comes in part from the music of Lucinda Williams and conversation with Midwesterners, including his cousin Trevor N. Theis.

**Darlene Wang** received her BS in Elementary Education from UMSL, then studied fine art at the University of Wisconsin. She worked as a teacher and served on school boards in the US, Malaysia, and China. She founded the PTA at the International School of Beijing, and later served on the Planning Committee of the Beijing International Society, a primarily diplomatic forum for cultural exchange. Her images focused on characteristics of global culture and held solo photo exhibitions in Beijing.

**Robert Weismiller** graduated from UMSL in December 1978, with a Bachelor’s in Business. His degree enabled him to have a rewarding career in Information Technology. He lives in the St. Louis area with his wonderful and supporting wife. They have two sons and a daughter who is currently a student at UMSL. Robert has been writing short stories for several years and is currently working on a novel. His inspiration comes from art, music, and travel.

**Dawna Williams** is a Doctoral Graduate student in the Department of Political Science. Her first declared major at San Diego State University in 1980 was Fine Art but doing this for a grade just ruined the fun in creating something beautiful. Photography, painting and drawing have been a fulfilling and relaxing hobby dating from the time she was a child. “It’s truly an honor to see it published!”

**Logan Baseley** and **Gabriella Black** did not provide biographies.
SUBMIT TO THE MAGAZINE

Litmag accepts submissions from October to February. As we are tied to the semester calendars, we are unable to read submissions during the summer months. Please visit the English Department Litmag webpage for submission guidelines. We look forward to reviewing your work for the 2016 edition. Only previously unpublished work will be accepted.

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Students can earn credit by taking ENG 4895 Editing Litmag, a course in editing and publishing. Students participate in all phases of the publication process, working with a small group of peers and a faculty advisor to produce the magazine, which is distributed annually during UMSL’s Mirthday Celebration. This class can be taken as a capstone course for the Writing Certificate. Interested students are invited to contact Jeanne Allison at allisonjea@umsl.edu for more information.

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