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frostfire

DREAMS

by Samuel William Mayer

Isaiah leaned against a tree along the river's edge, peering at the falls. The day was cold, and the snow was thickly packed beneath his boots. He watched the steam drift from his lips as he whistled a short, sharp tune he had heard his father sing. The cold was good, he decided, because nothing harsh was in the air he breathed, for that air was all hope, and hope was refreshing.

The rough bark of the tree felt agreeable through his coat, and Isaiah was just getting comfortable when snow suddenly dripped down his neck, making him shiver and jump away. Closing his eyes for just an instant before smiling, Isaiah opened them again, only to discover that it was all gone—all of it. The trees had turned to steel and surrounded him like a cage. The cool, fresh air had turned to smoke, and the river had become a massive conveyor at which he stood. He was having the dream again. It was the dream he both sought most to have and the one he called his worst nightmare.

Isaiah awoke. The room around him was dark, save for the yellow sliver of light that glowed faintly through the curtains. Beside him lay his wife, rhythmically breathing a constant, soothing hum that had so often ushered in his dreams. There was a time he would have held her after such a dream or even woke her just long enough to find his way into her arms before she drifted back to her own dreams, but that time was dead. All that had once been a part of that time had died somewhere in his life's long path. Isaiah's thoughts drifted downward, spiraling into an inner agony formed of evocations of past things he once loved...things he feared may never be his to love again.

Light flickered in the room suddenly as the streetlight beyond the window overheated, leaving the room in deeper darkness. Isaiah turned on his side to face the wall and curled up, his muscles tense as he lay there thinking thoughts better left thought in the light than in the

dark. Actually, they were thoughts better left not dwelled upon at all.

It's hard when the person you count on most isn't there for you when you most need him. Hard, when everything around you is falling and you reach out your hand to be saved, but it is cut to shreds. That's when you fall too, and everything around you that was alive turns stone-cold dead. The world becomes nothing more than a chain of battles. All you want to do is lie down and quit forever.

Isaiah yawned.

But you don't. You keep trudging on, trying to forget any of it happened until you can find some sort of comfort again. You want to go back, yet you don't. You want to find the person who had saved you before, but your pride causes you to strain your thick neck away from the one who once rejected your plea to be saved. You are stuck in limbo because you will not leave and you will not go back. What then?

He dug his nails into the meat between

his ribs, softly at first, then harder, ever harder, trying to feel a bit of life.

What now? To know—even just a little—would be to be alive again.

Isaiah drifted back off to sleep, exhaustion subduing his grief, at least for that moment. The morning would bring its share of both.

“Good morning, Detroit. This is Tom Hurley with your 6:00 A.M. wake up call. It’s a great day to be alive and a great day for Michigan!” Isaiah smashed the alarm’s snooze with a hollow thud.

“No, honey, we have to get up,” he heard Revah say, muffled by her pillow. She was no more eager to get up than he. Without a word, he threw the covers off, wrapped a tattered old blue robe around himself and found his way down the stairs.

Mornings were almost always the same. He made his coffee, his bit of hash or oatmeal (it was hash today), and he sat in front of the window, examining the thermometer. Once, twice, three times, at least, his eyes would go back to that device whenever he sat there. It did not matter that it was broken and read a constant twenty-one degrees, whether the weather was blistering or frigid. It probably was not far off this morning though, Isaiah reasoned by look of the clear air. After piddling around with the scraps of his meal for time sufficient enough to allow his wife to shower, he would always make his way back upstairs and into the bathroom for a shower of his own.

As he passed the mirror on his way into the shower, he stopped to examine himself. The bags under his gray-blue eyes were heavy, making them seem to seep deeper into his face. A long scar, mostly covered by his thick, brown beard, ran from the right side of his mouth all the way back under his earlobe. His hair, as it was every morning, was a disorder that may have been the only parallel he would agree that could rival what he had made of his life.

Isaiah took his showers hot. It was one pleasure he allowed himself. However, no matter how long he seemed to spend there, he found it did not seem long enough to tide him over to the next morning. When he was finished, he donned his jeans; a black, fleece lined shirt; and a pair of old, beaten, hiking boots. Today would be a day like so many others, a day with no goal in mind and no end in sight. It would be a day he had lived over and over again, his quintessential “groundhog day” as it were.

Revah sat beside him on the bed as he slipped on his shoes. Placing her hand on his back gently she said, “He’d be glad to see you didn’t change your style.”

Isaiah almost smiled as he nodded. I suppose he would.

“Come on, Zae,” Revah urged, “we need to go.”

The casket was a red-oaken color with silvery handles. It was closed. People usually close caskets when the sight of the dead is disturbing, but in this case, the casket was empty. Tyler’s body had never been found in the rubble . . . many hadn’t. Isaiah knew when they burned the casket the ash they would spread would be no more than wood. Tyler’s wife Lisa sat with her children and her sister. She was getting used to being a widow now. With no body, the funeral had been held off for some time. Isaiah sighed as he scanned the room for others he knew. There was Randy, Tyler’s little half-brother, who was now over twenty years old.

Isaiah wondered who would give the eulogy. Lisa might have asked him, if she hadn’t known better. Tyler had been Isaiah’s closet friend, and vice versa.

Revah must have told her, Isaiah reasoned. That was for the best. People come to a funeral to mourn, but they listen to the eulogy to celebrate a person’s life and gain some comfort. *I would have given them neither of those in my eulogy.*

It was Father Timothy who finally stood on the dais to give the eulogy. But

as the words came from his lips, Isaiah recognized them from somewhere else. He almost laughed, right there in the church.

Tyler wrote those words. Father Timothy was using Tyler’s own words at his funeral.

“He left here a family he loved more deeply than himself, and friends he called brothers,” the priest continued. “He spent his life distant from the evils of the world, his pen and paper his shield and fortress against them. He would not want those here to mourn his passing. He never wanted anyone to mourn for anything. He would smile so others would smile and his stories were written to uplift.”

Isaiah bit his thumb. Not the nail, his thumb. He bit down hard with his eyeteeth. Revah had called it part of his wildness. She had joked it was the wolf in him, surfacing one thumb at a time. Since then, her observation was on his mind whenever he noted himself practicing his habit. He didn’t mind though. The wild was part of who he was, back when he was something.

“Tyler said once that life was like a waterfall.” The words stood out.

A waterfall? When had he said that? Years and years past at the Frostfire.

The rest of the words were drowned out in a rush of water. The image of the waterfall flew up behind Isaiah’s eyes.

Frostfire.

He squeezed Revah’s hand with an urgency he hadn’t felt in what seemed like a lifetime. Puzzled, she looked at him and saw him smiling.

It wasn’t until the funeral ended and they were on their way home that Revah asked about the gesture. “What was that back there, Zae?”

It must have seemed crazy to her. He hadn’t smiled that way in weeks and to do so finally at his best friend’s funeral service?

“It was something I remembered,” he offered, “something Tyler and I did when we were kids.” Isaiah started biting his

thumb again as he watched the road in front of them.

"Well?" Revah asked, "What was it?" Isaiah ground the cover of the steering wheel with a creak of pent-up energy.

"We buried something," he answered. Tyler would have liked to be buried too, not burnt up, but his body wasn't in that casket.

"What did you bury?" Revah asked, interrupting Isaiah's thoughts again.

"I don't know. Tyler never told me. He put something in a box and we buried it."

"Okay...."

"I'm going back to find it," Isaiah decided aloud.

"You're going back to Maine? Zae, there is nothing left there, the war...."

The look in his eyes left no room for argument. He sealed the decision with a simple statement: "I need this, Rev."

Revah sighed heavily, biting her cheek and closing her eyes. Her red-blond hair fell across her face as she nodded. When her eyes opened, Isaiah glanced back at her, the blue of her eyes shining back.

"Thanks, Babe," he whispered, grabbing her hand. "Thanks for understanding."

They loaded up the Jeep with food, drinks, and clothes, and tied multiple gas cans to the roof rack to avoid having to smell the fuel over the whole trip. They put a full charge on the electric fuel cell and packed multiple batteries, flashlights, and camping equipment. Some hours into their drive, a few miles north of where Albany used to be, they found the gas station that claimed to be the last one until the Canadian border. Isaiah topped the gas tank off there, and both of them used the facilities that left something to be desired.

When they went inside the gas station, they saw it was a relic of the past. All over the walls, there were pictures of Albany, New York City, Boston, Buffalo,

and other cities Isaiah didn't recognize. The pictures were of the cities back before the war, showing people hustling down the streets in business suits and tourists wearing ridiculous T-shirts. In fact, the man who stood behind the counter was wearing one of his own. It said "I Love N.Y." He did not look up as Isaiah approached him, engrossed in reading some ancient newspaper. His glasses were thick, and his hair was greasy black. Deep pock-marks scarred his face and his teeth seemed to grow any way they wished. When he finally noticed his customers, he looked up from his paper and smiled.

"Making the long haul over the border are you?"

Isaiah got an odd feeling when he heard his voice. Something just sounded wrong with him.

The man had a wheeze when he spoke, his voice at almost a whisper through his haphazard teeth.

"No," Isaiah answered back gruffly.

The man screwed up his face in unattractive confusion. "No? Coming back then?"

Isaiah placed the twenty on the counter. "No," he answered. "Keep the change."

"Then where are you going?" he wheezed as Isaiah turned to leave.

"Home," he answered as he pushed open the glass door and walked outside.

After that, the road was long and empty. There were abandoned cars here and there along the roadside. The signs that once stated which exits had gas or food were all either taken down for the scrap metal or painted over black. The lines on the road faded in some places, and the hard winters had begun to cause cracks in the pavement.

Isaiah drove most of the way so far. His eyes were getting tired, and his muscles stiffened as the sun began to set. It was purple and red on the torn strips of the clouds in the west. Each moment, the sky's color changed just the slightest bit as the world grew darker. Revah was asleep

beside him, her whole body practically curled up onto the seat and her head rested on a small pillow between it and the door. It made Isaiah remember their first trip together.

It was before we married. He remembered. In fact we were going to a wedding. Tyler's wedding. Lisa wanted the wedding in Pennsylvania so her grandparents could attend. Tyler's father had been the best man, I a groomsman. We were up all night the night before the wedding. It was the first night I fell asleep with her in my arms. We were so exhausted, she just fell asleep on my shoulder while were sitting on the hotel room floor. We must have only slept for two hours before we had to get up and start getting ready. I had trouble keeping my eyes open all the way home.

Isaiah reached out his hand and placed it on Revah's shoulder gently. *I remember I watched her sleep, more than I watched the road. She was so beautiful. He yawned deeply and smiled, settling into his chair a little deeper. She still is.*

Not long after that, Revah woke up and offered to drive for awhile. Isaiah happily agreed. They pulled over, got out of the car, and stretched their muscles. The stars were clear and the night air was brisk. There were no sounds for miles; it was eerie on the roadside in the dark. Isaiah unstrapped a fuel can from the room and topped off the gas tank before he got back in the car. Revah popped the bottom of a can of coke to start the self-cooling process, and set in a cup holder in the console.

"You tired, Baby?" she asked softly as she buckled her seatbelt.

Isaiah yawned again, and blinked his eyes sleepily at her. "Yeah, Rev," he said as he grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips for a quick kiss. Minutes after they had started down the road again, he was asleep.

The streets were busy, but not crowded. It was winter and all the people wore bright coats, scarves, and hats. Isaiah found his way into a small shop with an old, whiskery man, who had a friendly

smile, standing behind the counter.

The shop smelled of wet earth and hickory smoke. Isaiah sifted through some soil and placed it in a cup. "Good worms today," the old man beamed. Then, out of nowhere his face seemed to lose its form; it became almost liquid and began to fall apart. The room seemed to do the same and, soon everything vanished. Isaiah stood at the waterfall.

The car lunged to a stop, and the change in motion brought Isaiah out of his sleep. It was nearly dawn and the street was covered in a thick fog. The buildings on the near side of the road shone back dim reflections from their dust-covered, cracked windows. The buildings on the far side were ghosts in the gloom, barely holding their own shapes. It was as if they were part of the fog.

Isaiah rubbed his eyes and stretched himself up in his seat. "Where are we?" he mumbled.

"Town," Revah answered. "Frostfire Falls."

Isaiah blinked his eyes shut tightly as if to clear the fog out of them, but when he opened them, nothing had changed. He unbuckled his seatbelt and stepped out of the car. It was cold. The air was cold, the breeze was cold, even the buildings seemed frozen in their places.

Isaiah heard Revah get out of the car and shut the door. She turned on a flashlight, and the beam reflected dully as it became diffused in the gloom. "No one," she offered, "no one stayed here."

Isaiah nodded. I knew it would be like this. Empty. Yet, I never could have imagined it. It wasn't this way, not when I left, not in the thousand dreams I can remember.

"Where are we going to stay?" Revah asked, her breath dancing with the fog.

Isaiah stopped and stood there silent for a moment before he replied, "There was a bed and breakfast right off this town strip."

He opened the tailgate of the Jeep and found a flashlight of his own. "But there was a hardware store here. Maybe

they have a better heater than our little propane one."

Bill's Hardware (as it was stated by the old rusted sign) was just a few shops down. The door was locked. So, Isaiah gave a display window a quick punch and shielded his eyes. The old brittle glass gave way easily and fell to the ground with a series of tinkling sounds. Isaiah took off his jacket, wrapped it around his hand, and cleaned the rest of the glass out of the way before he stepped through. He then turned around and helped Revah in. There wasn't much left behind. There were shelves and pegboards, but they were mostly empty. There was an old straw broom in the corner and some stray misfit tools in a crate near the counter. Isaiah sifted through them and took a crowbar with a chipped wedge.

Should make it a bit easier to get in next time.

"Zae," he heard Revah call. "In here." Revah was in a small room that was separated from the rest of the shop by a thin door on two-way hinges. It was a small workshop with a few items that looked as if they were untouched for years. Revah was struggling with a kerosene heater that looked like it weighed about as much as she did. Isaiah interceded and dragged the behemoth out into the middle of the floor.

"Brand new wick," he offered, "and by the weight of it I'd say it's pretty full." He took a couple of tries at lighting it, and eventually it started up with a sort of flickering sound, like a bird unsure of its wings. "We'll have to come back for it," Isaiah added, as he turned it off. "After we make some room in the Jeep."

Revah nodded. She had bags under eyes too. She seemed to force a smile as she placed a lock of hair behind her ear. *She's here for me.*

"For now, let's drive on over to the bed and breakfast."

It was dark, of course, but the building was not without some beauty. It had big dormers and an enormous wrap-around porch. It was a shame to have to pry open

a window with the crowbar. Quickly, they unloaded the Jeep into the building and Isaiah went back to town to get the kerosene heater.

By the time he got back, Revah was already asleep in the closest bedroom, where they had unloaded their luggage. She lay under a thick quilt that smelled of mothballs, curled up tight near the middle of the bed. Isaiah set the heater down as softly as he could, lit it, and crawled into bed beside her. Dim light flickered in the room as Isaiah kissed Revah gently on the cheek. The smell of kerosene was faint, but the warmth from the heater was growing. Revah stirred slightly as Isaiah held her. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," she mumbled.

The dream was different that night. The river was there, the trees, the purple sky, but something else was there too. Revah.

She stood in front of Isaiah, whose arms were wrapped gently around her as she leaned on him. They were looking at the waterfall. The falls were a thing alive. Each stone reached for the icy waters that fell across their smooth surfaces. The water turned pale at their touch, matching the color of the surrounding snowfall. As they stood there, the sun rose just high enough for its rays to touch the cascading tendrils of water. The sun and water seemed to dance as they cast prismatic fires along the rock face. Where the water stuck the crystal pool, a great mist spread upward as if to quench the dance of the sun and water. Each moment the sound of the river changed just a little, but always it remained thunderous yet soothing to the ears. It was a rhythm that God had crafted and a tone the earth had enjoyed for thousands of years. This was the dream he had hoped for. This was the dream he prayed for.

When he woke up, Revah's eyes were looking back into his own. He was really there. And it just so happened, the Frostfire dreams weren't dreams at all.

IMAGIN@

Have you ever had one of those days when you had a story that just had to get out? Where you knew that an entire world existed in your mind, but it was locked there, unable to move until you decided to release it? This is a story about just that sort of thing.

It's not a long story, and it's not a story with other worlds or species or characters that stretch the imagination to new limits. No, this is a story set in our ordinary world, about an ordinary young man living in an ordinary house on an ordinary road. His name was John, which just so happens to be an ordinary name. John was the kind of young man who did his work when it was needed, and he spent time with his family and friends and even God when he felt the situation arose for it. But for those other times, the times when he was just sitting alone on his bed on the couch and especially on that throne which every American male calls his own, the toilet, he would think.

He wouldn't think much about what he had to do the next day, what girl he had to pursue or even what he wanted to buy next. No, he would think about things which only imagination would allow—worlds beyond our own, species that never existed, and characters he had never met. Sometimes he would think about our own world, but in whatever world he was thinking about, something fantastic was happening. Whether it was about a motorcycle gang made up of talking cows or men who discover a world beneath the earth's surface, John would stare, as it were, out into space for minutes, even hours at a time, peering into places

where only his imagination could take him. These places no one else could see, for they were all his own; they were places where John saw amazing stories take place. Some would call this "daydreaming," but John preferred to call it a "creative mental exercise."

He tried writing his stories down, but that didn't help. For some reason, they just didn't come alive for him. He thought about filming them, but he realized very quickly that he lacked the funds to do so, especially the funds for a decent camera with which he could capture his imagination. He would tell what friends and family members he had about his stories, but the majority didn't care, and those who did care were only mildly interested at most.

This man, you see, is not a metaphorical character of my own life, for I myself find writing, filming, and telling my stories to be quite a good outlet for my imagination. After all, this is why I am writing what you read here. Anyway, John could not seem to find an outlet for his imagination. He decided to try acting in plays. Then he decided to play video games and watch movies, but nothing seemed to satisfy his imagination. He had ideas, big ideas that he wanted to communicate. He didn't want to act out, or play, or watch other people's stories; he wanted to express his own stories.

Now about this time in this short story you may be asking yourself this question: Why should I care about John or if he finds an outlet for his imagination? The answer is simple: There is no reason for you to care. You see, John isn't someone you know





by Paul Watson

and should care about; he's a fictional character. That's the beauty of fiction—none of the characters actually exist, yet for some strange reason they call us to care about them. But now you may ask: Is this even a story at all? Perhaps. I guess you will have to find out in the end. Yet still a question may concern you: What is the purpose of these words that have been written? In answering this, I will say that John represents the creative genius inside us all. That's right, I said that even you, whoever you may be, have a creative genius in you... well maybe not a genius, but I believe there is some creativity in us all. Creativity is that force that drives you to tell a joke you made up or to write down a poem or sing your own song or build something unique. But if you don't tell jokes or write poems or sing songs or build things, know this—there is creativity in you. And to those who already know they have creativity but just don't know how to express it, I give you the character John. For he, too, didn't know how to express his creativity after trying many different things.

One day (and this is when I continue on with the story you were beginning to think never even existed), John was walking along his ordinary road near his ordinary house when he came upon a piece of chalk. A small child in his ordinary neighborhood was drawing with it only an hour before. This child drew something quite ordinary on the road, a smiley face. John picked up the piece of chalk and nonchalantly added a body on the smiley face. Only this was not a standard smiley face body; it didn't have two arms and two legs sprouting out of a round little body as

most drawings of this sort have. Instead it had a long, slender body with four arms, and four legs, and a thin, winding tail. John then began to draw other strange species and characters that had been locked up in his imagination. Also, he drew strange trees and oddly shaped mountains, creating his own unique world on his ordinary road. Within an hour, this road on which he drew was not so ordinary anymore.

When the road was covered in this small universe from John's imagination and the chalk he had been using was no more than a stub, John decided to look with others who had stepped outside of their houses to observe this new creation. John indeed had created a short story, telling of a happy, four-legged, four-armed alien with a winding tail who was going through an adventure. This adventure was split up into several sections along the mural. The drawing showed that this creature had befriended other creatures along his way up a huge mountaintop where he slew the evil monster at the top and rescued the innocent creatures trapped there. John had suddenly realized that he could create stories through drawing. He could use this as his imaginative outlet. And he did just that. He painted murals, drew comic books, and went on to win all sorts of art awards through his fantastic method of storytelling.

And so the point of this story, of all this writing, is to tell you, the reader, that creative outlets sometimes don't come easy—but they can be found. Keep searching for ways you can express your imagination, and perhaps, like John, you may just come across your own perfect way to do so.

Getting Around on My Wheels

Chinye Odogwu

From shore to shore I've seen it all,
Or rather, I have wheeled it all.
I've bumped and bounced on every street
And clunked and clanged on every stair.
I'm the worn old suitcase from Pembroke Street.

In rainy, gloomy London town my adventure started,
Down crowded streets and alley ways
To Heathrow's luggage checks,
And up the stifling baggage chute
Awaiting my descent,
Until the glitter of the Dulles airport
Welcomes me to my new home.
A little time in Maryland was all that it required
To stuff my space so full of clothes
My zipper near expired.

I'm dumped in a trunk with no tender care,
With no regard for pedigree.
I'm shoved beside the microwave
and the dirty linen basket.
And off I go, on the road once more,
For another bumpy ride.


Down South to Virginia here I come,
To a land that's wild and free.
And proud, I hear, are the people there,
In the home of fine sweet tea.

I've seen it all and wheeled it all,
From the mountains of Virginia,
To the palm trees of Key West,
With some stops in between.

I've wheeled to cattle fields in Kentucky
To the flat plains of Texas.
I've even journeyed down to Africa,
That great big continent
And even in Nigeria my wheels were never spent.

So London town does hail me
But Maryland means death.

For all my travels far and near,
I know when I am spent.
Virginia, in you I'll be laid to rest.



Workin' in a Coal Mine

Stephen McClary Keith

Where did you go
dressed in black
and missed the show?
Did you enjoy your last look back?

Is it still
too cold to start a
fire?
Are you burning
diesel?
Are you burning dinosaur bones?

Hey Johnny!
You really are doin' all right!

Has your church time finally paid off?
Have your dime bag demons finally died
or
did you leave them here with me?
Did you walk the line one last time?

You left me in a ring of fire
wondering.

BEST POEM

Trainwatcher

Richard North

Before the sun rises from its slumber,
I am elevated from mine by my father.
Still clinging to the last light of the dream lamp,
I acquiesce to be carried by this big gorilla into the jungle dark.
The harsh chill of the early winter air jolts me awake.
I realize my destination as I am strapped in the front seat.
In anticipation I peer into the uninhibited black
That embraces the car like a puppy in a boy's arms.
Next thing I know the smell of creosote is strong in my nose
As my dad pulls into our usual parking spot.
I hunch forward in my seat and wait,
Ears pricked to establish a sound in all the silence.
Then, the beast makes himself known
With a high lonesome cry: long long short long.
In the distance a light breaks the contrast of black on black.
The dark figure emerges, riding the crest of the dawn.
The earth shakes to signal its imminent arrival.
The shrill clang of the warning bells
Couples with the horn to create a banshee-like wail.
I am paralyzed with fear, my virginal ears unable to bear the sound—
Then the head passes, leaving only the body
To disappear into the darkness, bright tail blinking,
And in the silent aftermath I yearn for its return.

My eyes panned over the vast ocean that was still, for a few moments, contained within the four walls of my bedroom. Suitcases were piled high, full of the contents that would soon make up the majority of my new quarters. Beneath one of the many box lids, I could barely glimpse the corner of my brightly colored linens, peering out as if to increase the level of excitement with their vibrant hues. There was, in fact, much excitement in the air. I could feel the swelling in my heart, ready to embark on a new adventure while the knot of nervousness in my stomach continued to pull tighter and tighter. After all, I had never experienced anything other than the local community college and was not quite sure what to expect.

Aloud, clear voice at the door broke my concentration. "Are you ready to get all this stuff loaded up?" my dad asked. I nodded and grinned halfheartedly, still trying to sort out the war of emotions raging inside of me.

We spent several hours dragging our tired feet up and down the staircase, carrying bag after bag to the car. Mom was, of course, outside, directing everyone on the best way to pack the luggage. Every now and then, she and Dad would get into half-playful arguments about the proper way to load a car, and the entire process would have to take a fifteen-minute break.

When we had effectively finished packing and I had run through the house frantically, several times, for last-minute "stuff checks," we piled into two cars and headed toward Lynchburg. The drive was painfully silent, the only sound coming from the random bouts of nervous laughter emitted by my sister and me.

After several hours of driving, we looked out the window and beheld the great brick block that was to be my new home for the next three years. The giant letters spelling out "Liberty University" loomed above

us, seemingly pointing out the generations of solid, hard-working students who had spent the majority of their time locked within its walls, their noses buried in piles upon piles of books.

Luckily, when we entered my new home, we were warmly greeted by my roommate and her family. Their kindness and "city sophistication" were so apparent, I knew it must have looked to them as if their daughter would be rooming with a "Clampett child" from the Deep South. However, their smiles and loud, friendly laughter melted my college jitters away almost immediately.

We spent a long time in that little dorm room after my roommate had gone to dinner with her family. Mom, again, was the director while the rest of us seemed to be crew members setting the stage for my dramatic entrance into this new and intimidating act. When sheets were finally fitted to beds, clothes packed tightly into two

drawers, and school supplies neatly nestled in desk trays; the family stood looking around, admiring their organized handiwork. "Well," said my dad, breaking the silence, "I guess it's about time for us to head out." For the first moment, I felt the extreme twinge of despair that typically hangs onto the past with white-knuckled fingers, not wanting to let go.

We said our goodbyes. They were bittersweet in that while I did not want to see them drive away, I was ready to step into a new stage of life. It broke my heart to watch them pull away in the cars, waving one last lingering goodbye. As I stood for a few seconds, wondering what in the world I had gotten myself into, I felt, again, that tug of excitement. I turned to face the building, as I stood so small in its voluminous shadow.

The stage was set, the curtain had opened, and Act One, my future as a college student, began.

by Ashley Disher

FACEBOOK

Hidden Lake by Sheridan J. Fink

Wading through the cold, refreshing, crystal-clear water of Hidden Lake, my friends and I never conceived what it would require to hike back to the ranger station.

The three of us put on our socks and sneakers in order to resume our hiking. Instead of traversing down the footpath to Hidden Lake, we are now plodding up the trail out of the valley in which Hidden Lake is nestled away from most of the world's view. Only after hiking a few miles in can you enjoy the scenery of this particular lake. Oh, the first two to three hundred yards are like a breeze. Little did I know that due to the thin mountain air in Glacier National Park, this initial distance is, by far, the easiest of our entire return trek.

Now the trail sports a gradual incline; therefore, it requires me to work a little harder, breathe a little heavier, and pace myself so as not to get overly spent. I look up ahead and see the endless track forever snaking its way up the side of the mountain. What have I gotten myself into? I can't stop now even though everything in my body tells me to. There is nothing behind me except the beautiful shoreline of Hidden Lake in the middle of total wilderness. Up away from the luscious shoreline of the lake, there is only the rocky, desolate wilderness between me and the ranger station. I have to keep trudging along.

With every step, the winding path continues to ascend the side of the mountain, but it gets steeper by the minute. No longer are we walking a simple trail scaling a "hill." We are now totally engaged in hiking up a trail so steep, it must zigzag across the face of the mountain in order to be navigated. This is known as a switchback trail. The pathway is now only twelve inches across at the widest point, and

the terrain consists of dry, loose, stony mountain dirt. The steepness and profile of the trail are now combining themselves with the thin mountain air to wreak havoc on our bodies.

My lungs start to burn letting me know they are not receiving enough oxygen. And if that isn't enough, every muscle in my body aches, warning me that this "hike" had better be over with soon. I look up and scan what I can see of the trail—no end in sight. I see my hiking partners ahead of me; they seem to be slowing down as well. I ask myself, "Are we really this out of shape?"

After witnessing the beauty of God's creation alongside the lake, I liken the desolate trail to the times in our lives when we allow ourselves to be distanced from God. There are a lot of trials and numerous situations that God allows us to deal with in order to bring us back to Him, and they usually take a lot of hard work just like climbing this trail.

The path has turned yet another sharp turn in the network of switchbacks and continues to climb the mountain. The muscles in my legs are now on fire, but that is nothing compared to the blazing inferno deep within my lungs. Oxygen, precious oxygen, where are you? I can't seem to get enough of you! Is this what it feels like to suffocate? My breathing is so deep, yet so shallow; I feel as though I'm not breathing at all. I wonder if this feeling is comparable to the raging fire nestled deep within the sleeping dragon.

Still another switchback, and the pathway continues to render no relief. Steepness as far as I can see. My mind is screaming at me, ordering me to simply breathe. I breathe. Nothing happens. I breathe again, and relief continues to evade me. My breath yields nothing

in the form of comfort. The fiery hell is now working its way up my throat, and my lungs are burning so bad I think I can taste blood. "Is this really worth it?" I wonder. "Will I make it?"

The abruptness of the trail continues to escalate, and yes, another switchback. My entire body is one big aching mass, and my lungs are begging for oxygen they cannot find. But what does this bend in the path reveal?—a trail endlessly continuing, but now along the side of the mountain. The steep ascension is gone! We have made it! I glance up to see my hiking partners ahead of me. Like me, they are eagerly traversing along this easier footpath.

At last, we reach our destination. The ranger station is in sight. The violent pain of the burning furnace within my lungs is starting to subside. With the steepest portion of trail behind us, we continue along gasping for oxygen that just isn't plentiful enough. A tranquil spot soon reveals itself along the trail lending us the opportunity to stop and rest in order to catch our breath.

I turn around and survey the winding footpath weaving its way down the sharp slope we just ascended, and to my personal amazement, it's the most breath-taking view I have ever seen. It is quite similar to other journeys in our lives. We all go through voyages in life when we think we can't make it. We wonder what God was thinking in leading us up such cumbersome paths. Sometimes we even wonder if God is with us, that He might have lost us or that we took a wrong turn. But then all of sudden, we look back and see what had originally been hidden from us, the lake that God wants all to see, and it was possible only because of the journey. And it is beautiful.

Lyrical Proverbs

Danille Viera

Sounds of rhythmic drums beat
Jazz tunes of the New York Times
Are rough and hard
Rain falls upon the ground
Floor of the Empire State building
A paradise of unending love
The one you're with
A rebel without a cause
And effect
On the teens that I
Too, sing America
The beautiful
Clear blue skies
Are gone
With the wind
Surfing the seas
And "B's" on my "project
Save the children"
From the night
Mare on Elm Street part two
Ways to when
I was a little girl
Interrupted my train of thinking
About the good old dazed
And confused
Per se



Oh

Carolynn Bullard

oh, for the life of a tree, i wish—
to stand tall and watch time float by
high in my stately branches, green with ivy
the blue moon through dark night sky would fly
glancing whispers of beams through the silty darkness

ever old i would be revered
my sturdy frame an icon of steadfast strength
withered bark in autumn so strong—
and weird fiends my fast embrace would keep
stretched forever far in otherwhere

as tree, immortal my seeds would sew
a forest-grove around me
steadfast within my leafy grove
i'd slumber
peace forever behind, and lingering still beyond.



Untitled, Sarah Elizabeth Blanz, photography

What Lingers Behind

Mallory Butincu

Anxious dreams of memories yet to be created
Blotted out before the ink can embrace the page
What lingers behind are words unspoken

Irony has preyed on my innocent and young heart
For the one love that had rendered me broken
Is the one that never began

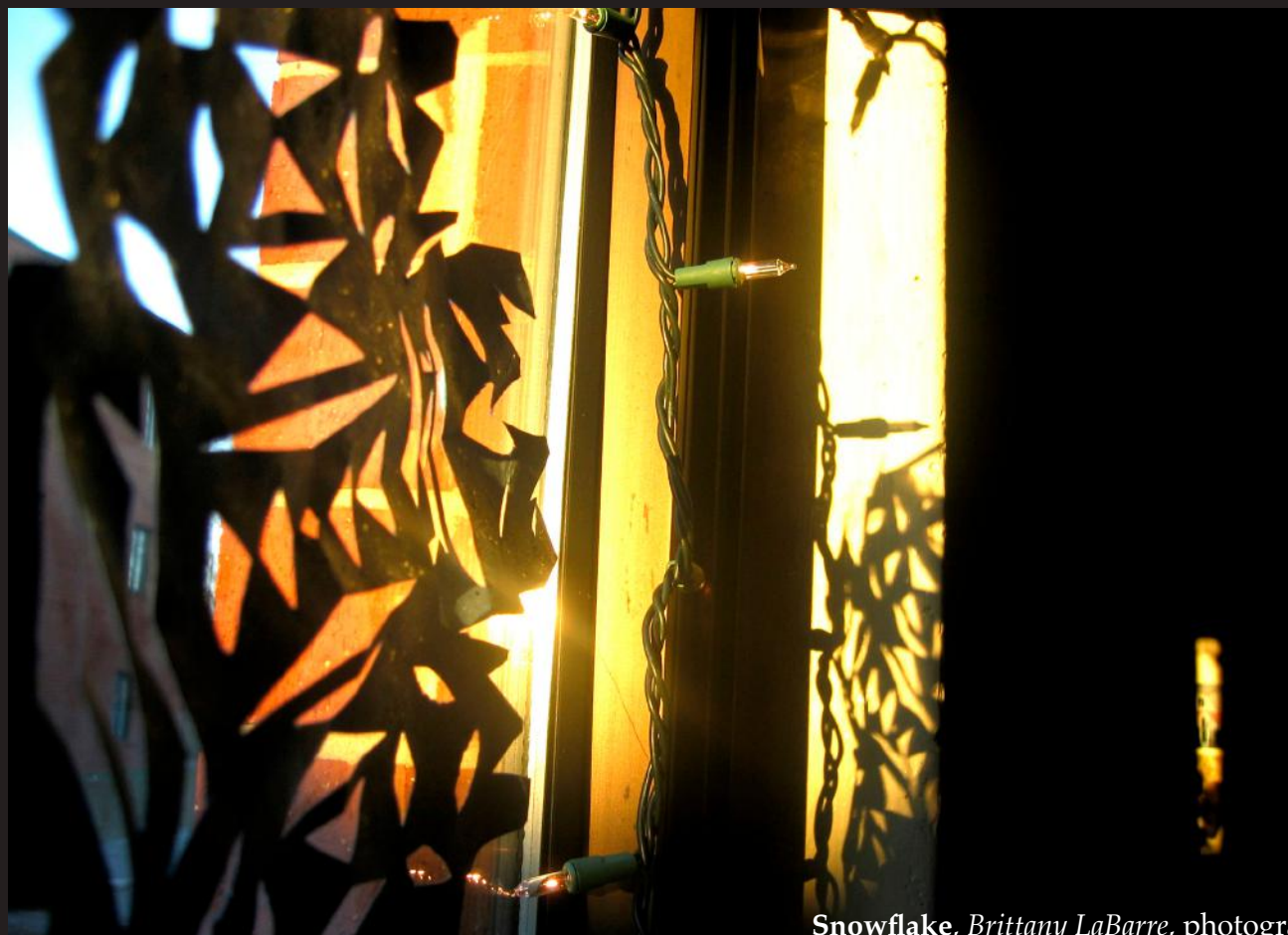
Naiveté drowns in the heat of bitterness
Bitterness simmers to tepid torpidity
Torpidity awakens to enlightenment

My intellect deems him as forgotten
My intuition cries out, "I'm forsaken!"
My soul whispers to his deaf heart, "You are forgiven."

My lips are unwillingly silenced, for he is absent
My tongue will never utter his name, Father.



Untitled, Jennifer Binger, watercolor



Snowflake, Brittany LaBarre, photography



Untitled, Sabrena Carter, photography

Mosaic

Susan Robertson

perfect palette of color
one shade to each soul before Jesus,
but perfection never stays
and life chips away at your bruised self.
Piece by piece you are broken,
cracked & laid out.
People disdain the remembrance of the once gloried color,
but to One, an Artist, who sees potential in the discarded,
and gathers together the shattered.
He adds His own colors of character & strength.
One shade becomes a rainbow,
held with the glue of Great Love.
A once perfect palette
crushed to nothing
lives again more beautiful than could be imagined.
Close looks reveal webbed scars,
but step back and view
the amazing mosaic Jesus has made of your pain,
beyond words, beyond tears,
peaceful in the basking glow of His masterpiece.

To the Crane

By Marcelo Quarantotto

You are unnatural in your state of affairs,
Counteractive to your place of employment.

Rustling, crunching, breaking, tearing
Your very existence is purposeful in ruin—
Violent in its state of affairs.

Rolling, steaming, roaring, screeching,
You leave from where you are unwanted;
The inhabitants wish you never to return, but your very existence demands it.

Back, go back to your place of residence—
Return to your company of destroyers.

To where men won't work with their hands,
For men who won't work with their hands.

INDIAN FIRE, INDIAN STARS

by andrew clark



The sole of my shoe touched the broken pavements as I stepped off the plane, and I was no longer in America. Dust blew against my face, sticking in the sweat that was beginning on my forehead.

It was ninety degrees here, and this was their winter. But the first thing I noticed wasn't the dust or my own sweat or even the heat. The smell is what I noticed first. As the plane descended, the air had gotten thicker and thicker, as if we were descending through strata of the atmosphere. The fragrance of the air as I breathed had changed subtly as the plane got closer to the ground. It wasn't an unpleasant smell, but it was an unfamiliar smell, a foreign smell.

When the door of the plane opened,

it hit me like a wall. A smell I never smelled in America crawled its way into my nostrils, sour and bittersweet. It was the smell of dust and earth, untended garbage, and foreign food. It was the smell of a different place, an old place.

I made my way across the dusty lot toward a chain link fence. A late afternoon sun burned and glazed in the amber sky. I made my way through the terminal and stepped out of the airport into a great, teeming mass of people. They swarmed around me, filling every nook, every corner of the streets and the buildings. The paths of people and the paths of buses, taxis, and carts wove together to form a tapestry of movement that I had never seen before. Small, insect-like taxis honked persistently, buses overflowing

with passengers lumbered down the streets, carts driven by bicycles darted here and there, and pedestrians lumbered down the streets and flooded the sides of the roads. The late afternoon sun beat down a brownish red light across the city, igniting the dust as it spun in spirals and wisps through the air, kicked up by the passing crowds.

I hailed a taxi and in broken Hindi I told him the address of my hotel, and we jetted down the narrow street, winding like a snake in between the carts and pedestrians. Hotels, business buildings, and lean-to shacks all huddled close to one another, forming a muddled and indeterminate cityscape around me. There was no space of the street unused, no corner, no alley not occupied. In the

distance, I could see the beams of the sun bouncing off the bulbous, pointed peaks of a Hindu temple, and the breeze carried the chants of the priests to my ears: long, drawn-out notes—haunting, stirring. They echoed in the depths of the temple and reached out into the city.

The cab jerked to a stop in front of one of the few modern-looking buildings I had seen. I paid the driver and walked to the hotel door, which was opened for me by an extremely small man. His hands and his head looked too big for his body, and he had an enormous mustache on his upper lip underneath small golden spectacles. He smiled back as I thanked him.

The lobby was enormous. It extended vertically all eight stories, forming a spiral of balconies and hanging plants. A massive chandelier hung down from the skylight above, and a great sparkling fountain, made out of dark stone, flowed in the center of the floor.

After I had checked into my room, I decided to wander the streets and see what I could see. The same small man opened the door for me as I exited the hotel, once again smiling. There was a stone wall across the street, so I had two options as to which way to go. I chose left.

I walked an entire street, passing vendors of small American trinkets and a mini Hindu temple that was little more than a large cardboard box, at which devout Hindus would kneel at and pray when they passed. I got strange looks from everyone on the street. My white skin set me apart, and it made me feel out of place. It was something I had never experienced before.

Deciding it was time for somewhere more secluded, I walked into a small restaurant with a name I was unsure of. There was a worn yellow sign hanging over the door with words I could not read on it. I could speak enough Hindi to communicate, but reading was another story. I think it was something “moon,” but I couldn’t be sure.

I was seated in a corner booth by a man in a turban. He told me in Hindi that he would get me water. Once he left, I looked at the menu and realized it was entirely in Hindi. I chuckled to myself, trying to decide which scribble of lines I wanted to eat.

As I was looking at the menu, I heard a voice from over my shoulder. “Please tell me you’re American.” The voice

was distinctly feminine, very smooth. I could tell that the owner of the voice was smiling just by hearing the words. I smiled too.

Without looking up, I said, “I’m American.”

“Oh, thank God,” the voice said, and it plopped down on the other side of the booth. She was a redhead, with freckles all over her cheeks and deep green eyes. She was wearing a black tank top and hiking khakis. She smiled, and I smiled back. “You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to find one here.”

“I might,” I said. I could tell she was naturally a friendly person. I liked her immediately.

She extended her hand across the table, and I shook it. “Aubrey,” she said.

“Jack.”

“Well, Jack, it looks like we’re fortunate to have found each other.”

“And why is that?” I said, smiling still.

“Because I need someone to talk to, and you obviously need someone to show you around.”

“And how exactly do you know that?” I asked.

“Well, for starters, you can’t read the menu. What were you going to do, guess?” She said, smiling.

I looked down at the menu, slightly embarrassed. “Something like that,” I said.

She helped me order. She actually could read Hindi quite well.

“So what are you doing in India?” she asked.

I didn’t really know what to tell her. “One of my friends back in the States told me what a wonderful place it was. I had some time off, so here I am.” I felt silly. It wasn’t really a good reason.

“I love to travel, too.” She looked around, as if taking the place in for the first time. “Although how I wound up in India, I don’t really know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just work my way from place to place, never really stay in one spot for too long. But this place....” She trailed off. Neither one of us said anything for a few moments. “This place is different I guess. Special.”

I didn’t really know what she meant. Something about her was different; I could see that much. I had never met a person that seemed to have the kind of freedom that she had. I daydreamed about traveling the world, making just enough money to get by or get to the next

place. But they were only daydreams. She seemed to be living it.

After we had dinner, I assumed we would just go on our separate ways. But we took a cab out of the city. The buildings and the dense urban landscape gradually trickled out into a scenic sprawl of open fields and small villages that grew thinner and more sparse the farther we went. Eventually, we wound up at a dock on the shore of the Ganges River. The dock waited a small boat, the blue and white paint severely flaking away. A few crew members waited on the deck, which was only big enough for a dozen people.

“Where are we going?” I asked her.

“I want to show you something,” she answered, a grin on her freckled face. “You can’t come all the way to India without seeing this.”

“What is it?” My curiosity was piqued.

“You’ll see.”

We boarded the boat and glided out on the river. The fading sun was catching the ripples on the surface of the water, glimmering and bouncing off in a thousand directions. We followed the river for awhile, then suddenly the grassy banks on either side of us fell away, and we sailed out into the Bay of Bengal. I looked toward the horizon and could see nothing but placid waters stretching on for miles, mirroring the sun overhead.

We rounded a bend in the land on our right, and a small island came into view. As we drew closer, I could see people on a ridge leading down to the riverside. They stood at the top of the crest and were looking toward our boat. Small children jumped up and down, yelling to us from across the water.

The boat drew close to the island and we ran aground on the soft muddy bank. One of the crew members propped a strong board against the boat to lead down to the land, serving as a walkway. As we exited the boat and climbed up the ridge, Aubrey began shouting to some of the people waiting for us. They responded with big smiles on their face, and Aubrey embraced a few of the women, and waved to some of the men. No one spoke Hindi on the islands; they spoke a dialect of Bengali that was different enough to confuse you if you knew a little Hindi. Aubrey spoke smoothly as if she was a native herself.

A number of the inhabitants gathered together and started walking down a path, half made of crumbled bricks and

understood enough to discern that they were taking us somewhere. Aubrey motioned for me to follow.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"This island is called Bashoo," she answered. "I stayed here for awhile a few months ago when I was sick. They took very good care of me here."

A group of men led the small procession of which I was a part, and as the fiery sunset gave way to the violet and blue twilight, they lit small torches to light the way. We walked for almost an hour. We passed small ponds with tiny docks for fishing. We passed rows of tropical trees hanging lazily over the path. We passed huts made out of mud and straw, with children huddled in front of them, wearing almost nothing. With each step our procession grew. The people on the path ahead would see us coming and would shout to others inside the huts. They would come running and join our group. There was a sense of excitement and happiness on their faces. They chattered back and forth in their language, smiling and laughing as we went.

The children did not hesitate to walk up to me and grab my hand. They looked up at me and smiled, running their tiny hands over my skin, marveling at the white-skinned stranger who had come to visit them.

By the time we arrived at an open field, it was dark. Fingers of tall grass waved to and fro and were softly illuminated by the torches. In the distance I could see another light, a bigger light. As we drew closer, I realized just how big.

The flames were at least twenty feet high. They roared and cracked loudly, hot tongues flicking the night sky. Around it were gathered even more villagers, and as we walked toward them they clapped and shouted and smiled. Aubrey waved to a number of them. I heard distant calls in Bengali, beautifully mysterious in the surrounding darkness. We were offered small stumps to sit on. I noticed none of the villagers were sitting on logs. They were sitting in the dust on the ground, and I realized that we were being honored.

For the next few minutes I sat there, taking it all in—the towering flames, the warmth of them against my skin, the wonder of being in such a different place. In a way, it was like a dream, a dream I didn't want to wake up from. I felt comfortable there, among the crowd of people with whom I did not share a

language or a culture. But somehow, boundaries had been crossed. Prejudice didn't exist. The people continued to come, and the group now formed a large ring around the fire. I estimated that there were at least three hundred people there.

As we sat in the firelight, the villagers began to sing. The tune started quietly, with only a few singing, but grew quickly as more and more of them joined in. It was a soft tune, rising and falling steadily. The high notes seemed to reach triumphantly up into the sky, and the low notes seemed to bury themselves underground, vibrating the earth below my feet.

I leaned over to Aubrey. "Is this what you wanted to show me?" I asked.

"Part of it," she smiled.

"What are they singing about?" I asked.

"It's a song of renewal," she said.

"They are happy because we are here. They love visitors and honor them. They receive honor from having them."

Suddenly the tune of the song erupted into a joyous celebration of song. The beat quickened, and the tune became louder, more strong and pronounced. The women and children began dancing in a rotating circle around the fire. Several of them came up to Aubrey and invited her to join. She did, with a quick smiling glance back at me. They danced there in the light of the Indian fire, with the earthly smell of smoke and dust. I sat alongside, watching and clapping with the rest of the men to the beat of the song. And there, in the light of the fire, there was dancing and singing and celebration, not of being American, not even of being Indian, but of being human.

The song ended, and we sat down in the dust, smiling and enveloped in the warmth and the glow of the fire.

With my peripheral vision, I saw someone approaching, and he sat down beside me. He was, by far, the most well-dressed person I had seen on the island. He wore a plain white dress shirt, American made, which was stained here and there by smudges of dirt. His pants were gray and frayed around the bottoms in the light of the flames. He looked me in the eye and smiled. There was a kindness in his eyes, but it was a kindness seen as if from a distance, separate and isolated.

"We are glad you have come," he said.

For a moment, I didn't know how to respond. For one, I was somewhat surprised to find that the man spoke

English. But more than that, the words were so straightforward and full of genuine sincerity. I had listened to people speak for hours on end without ever coming close to putting as much meaning into words as this man did in a single sentence.

For some weakness of my own, I found it difficult to return his steady gaze. "I am too," I said simply.

He turned his head and looked into the fire for a moment, then turned back to me. "Did you enjoy yourself with us?" It was a question of true concern. I could see how much my comfort and accommodation meant to this man. Out of the corner of my eyes I caught sight of Aubrey several yards away on the other side of the fire, talking with some of the women, but watching the exchange that was happening between the man and myself.

"Yes," I answered. "Very much." I meant it.

The man's smile grew even bigger, something which I had not thought possible. He stuck his hand out to me. "My name is Ashid."

"I'm Jack." Our hands met gently, firmly.

"Jack," he repeated. With his accent, it sounded more like Jake.

At that moment, a number of other men approached the fire with long torches in one hand and buckets in the other. They stuck the torches into the fire, lighting them. Then they poured water over the fire, quelling it down to a manageable size. A group started to gather at the foot of the path by which we had come, and I knew it was time for us to go. I do not know how long we were there. But it didn't seem like it had been nearly long enough.

We began walking down the path that had led us to the fire. I walked hand in hand with some of the children who were trying to teach me how to speak Bengali better. They laughed whenever I spoke to them in English, and then tried to repeat what I had said. Eventually, they began to teach me the words to the song of renewal they had sung around the fire. I got most of the syllables fairly easily and we began to sing as we walked the dark path together.

The men with the torches began to speak to one another, and soon began a different song, a strong song. Then men's voices began to form a massive choir, deep and soothing. The women began to sing over and through it, forming a beautiful

BEST ART



Tree, Jennifer Binger, watercolor



Untitled, Sabrena Carter, photography

beautiful harmony that evoked deep emotions and stirred images within my heart. Suddenly, the men stopped singing and extinguished their torches. At first I was frightened. I could not see anything. Everything around was darkness. The only things I could really know were the touch of the children's hands in mine and the sound of the woman's voices lilting up into the night.

And then I looked up.

There, in the sky above, was a vast canopy of brilliant stars, thousands upon thousands glimmering above my head in a vast panorama of light. They stretched across the night sky, spanning from horizon to horizon, so thick and tightly packed that even if I had counted for a hundred years I would not have reached the end of them. It was a display unlike anything I had ever seen, unlike anything that could be seen in America. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

The stars cast a bluish glow on all of the faces of the children around me, and reflected in the eyes of the men and women as they sang. I found myself joining in as best I could, not so much forming words as harmonizing with the tune. I looked down at the children's faces forming a gaggle around me, and I smiled. Aubrey was somewhere behind me, as equally surrounded as I was. Together, hand in hand, we all walked down the stone path, through glades of trees, past pools of water. As we began to pass huts, people and their voices began to fall away, going home. Children reluctantly took their hands away from mine. As I looked back, I could just make out some of them waving to me in the starlight.

The song became softer as voice after voice left the group. We rounded a bend and came into view of the shore, the stars shimmering off of the surface of the water. I could see the silhouette of the boat there, bobbing slowly up and down in the water, waiting for us.

I became aware of a person coming up to my side. I turned and saw that it was Ashid. He had a soft smile on his face, peaceful and happy—a smile for night. A smile for stars. He put his arm around me.

"Please do not forget us," he said quietly, his face very close to mine. "We will not forget you. Please remember us."

The words and the tone of his voice almost brought me to tears. I didn't even know this man and I had been moved by his words, touched by the presence of

his people. I put my arm around him in return. "I will never forget you," I said.

And there, standing on an island in the mouth of the Ganges River, underneath the most beautiful stars I had ever seen or ever would see, my arm around a complete stranger, I knew that I would not. I would never forget.

I turned and saw Aubrey standing on the muddy bank waiting for me. I walked down the planks laid over the mud, and took her hand. Our eyes met for a moment. The starlight reflected in her eyes was like looking back through time, back to a time when things were simpler, people knew how to know each other, and the world didn't seem so big. Back to a time when home meant something.

We crossed the rickety board that formed a makeshift walkway to the boat. I helped Aubrey on board. We were the last back on the board, and once we were on, a man squeezed by us holding a long, wooden pole. He dipped the pole into the water and shoved us off from the shore. Aubrey and I made our way to the front of the boat, and stood there. We could barely make out the shapes of the villagers standing along the muddy ridge that let up from the water. They were little more than silhouettes, shadows against a dark sky. They were waving.

We waved back, not knowing whether or not they could see us. Even when we were far enough away that we knew that it would be impossible for them to see us, we still waved. Our eyes were locked on the shore and the people until they shrank from sight, fading into the darkness of the water on the horizon.

~

One week later, Aubrey went with me to the airport. We had spent the last seven days together, and every day she showed me something new, something different. I ended up checking out of my hotel and staying wherever she stayed. Sometimes we stayed overnight in a village, in the house of someone she knew. Sometimes we checked ourselves into a different hotel, with rooms next to each other. Every day of that week was another adventure. The wonders of India were shown to me through this woman, this person I had met one week ago. I had seen fog rolling over the surface of the Ganges, forming a hemisphere of gray mist above and a hemisphere of black below. I saw the dusty land set on fire by the last light of the sun as it set on the horizon. I woke to

the melancholy sounds of the chants of the temples. I saw something in myself that I had never seen before.

Our taxi pulled up to the curb in front of the bustling airport. Aubrey walked me to my gate.

"So," she said. "You're going back to your job and your friends and your daily routine."

"Doesn't seem right, does it?" I said.

"No, it doesn't." She looked down at her feet for a moment, then back up at me, flipping her flame red hair back from her face. "Did you come here looking for something?"

I thought for a moment. At the time I decided to come, I hadn't known why I was going on this trip. "I don't think I realized at the time, but yeah, I guess I did."

She gazed at me, her deep, green eyes bright in the sunlight. "I hope you found it."

At that moment, I felt something pull at me. I felt a twinge in my heart, telling me to stay, telling me I would never find another place like this, another person like this.

"I did," I said.

She stepped close to me, and hugged me for the first time. We embraced, and lingered there for longer than perhaps was necessary.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Me?" She smiled. "I'm going to be here for awhile. Then, when the time comes, who knows? But, I'll be around. Don't worry about me."

We said goodbye, and I got on the plane.

As the rumble of the engines increased, and the squeal of the tires told me I had left the ground, I felt a wave of sadness well up inside of me. I didn't want to leave. Not the country. Not Aubrey.

The plane banked, and I looked out the window at the stretch of land below me—the brown earth, the red clay and the golden light of the sun. This amber land had changed me forever. I knew I would never be the same. And as the plane traveled farther and farther, I knew I was leaving a piece of myself, a piece of my heart behind. A part of me would always dwell there. But I knew somehow, someday, I would return. Not to retrieve the piece of my heart. But to leave more of it there.



Mount Zion

Christopher Drew Cleary

Salvation has its Zion,
Gilead has its Balm,
Judah has her Lion,
The captives have their song.

Egypt had her seer,
That family had their ark.
Persia had her dreamer,
The houses had their mark.

The preacher had his harlot,
The people had their cloud.
The woman had her ribbon scarlet,
The disciple had his shroud.

Where is my mount Zion—
The help that seemed so near?
I'm in Judah; where's the Lion?
Why have you gone from here?

Have my visions faded?
Did I miss the ark?
Is my ribbon jaded?
Did I receive the mark?

I feel as though I'm forever lost,
The Shepherd's moving on.
I've come to rivers I can't cross.
The pillar of fire is gone.

Gilead, where is my balm?
My soul needs its reprieve.
By this river I sing my song,
Rescue I wait to receive.

The desert had its scapegoat,
The altar had its Lamb,
But while I'm here I'll stay afloat,
And I'll do what I can.



Tumbleweeds

Kelly Knapp

Misty-blue California morning,
Plodding down a many mini-step sidewalk.
Mom's hand clutching mine firmly as we turn the corner.

Minnie-Mouse backpack holds me tight,
Traveling in a big, sunburned land
New houses, new trees, new people smile as we pass by.

Giggling voices up ahead,
Standing in a line, waiting for the bus.

"Look out!"
An ugly, mean tumbleweed rolls by.
A strange, new danger in the world around me.

Misty-blue Virginia morning,
Voyaging to a many miles-away destination.
Mom's eyes combating stubborn tears as we turn the corner.

Myriads of memories bring me to now,
Traveling in a world not so big and bright anymore.
New places, new scenes, new people smile as we pass by.

Another step, another marking in my journey,
Another tumbleweed rolls by.

You will tell your child
how hard you struggled.
You will tell your child
how hard you fought
to escape boundaries.
You will tell your child
of the song that rang clear
that chant, that rave, that passionate last stand
and the cry of Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!

You will tell your child
he lives in a free generation now.
You will tell your child
to taste and try it all,
to seek what feels good.
You will tell your child
sex is gratifying in all situations,
pornography is artistic and part of growing up,
a condom will protect you.

You will tell your child
alcohol is the only way to have fun.
You will tell your child
vows are till death or boredom do you part,
marriage is for tax purposes.
You will tell your child
it is survival of the fittest,
homosexuality is natural,
tolerance equals peace.

That Passionate Last Stand

James David Newman

harmony that evoked deep emotions and stirred images within my heart. Suddenly the men stopped singing and extinguished their torches. At first I was frightened. I could not see anything. Everything around was darkness. The only things I could really know were the touch of the children's hands in mine and the sound of the woman's voices lilting up into the night.

And then I looked up.

There, in the sky above, was a vast canopy of brilliant stars, thousands upon thousands glimmering above my head in a vast panorama of light. They stretched across the night sky, spanning from horizon to horizon, so thick and tightly packed that even if I had counted for a hundred years I would not have reached the end of them. It was a display unlike anything I had ever seen, unlike anything that could be seen in America. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

The stars cast a bluish glow on all of the faces of the children around me, and reflected in the eyes of the men and women as they sang. I found myself joining in as best I could, not so much forming words as harmonizing with the tune. I looked down at the children's faces forming a gaggle around me, and I smiled. Aubrey was somewhere behind me, as equally surrounded as I was.



On Graduating College

by Christopher Gaumer

June 26, 2006

To my Dearest Geoff and Stacy,

I last wrote you concerning the Wal-Mart, and how they equate wider shopping lanes with a classier atmosphere, and at the same time insist on the installation of "wood" floor linoleum—a serious, but practical debate between economics and aesthetics. Today, unfortunately, I do not have the time for such leisurely debates. Since the last letter, many circumstances in my life have been altered—namely, that my much anticipated career as a Life Columnist was cutoff by the *Local Herald*, who has firmly declared me overeducated for the position! Today I would like to bring you up to date on what has transpired since graduation and state my final resolutions in light of the new circumstances.

But before I continue, I will stop and thank you for the e-card congratulations

you sent for graduation. It revived my heart to see your hidden gem in my inbox—some may disagree, but I think nothing says "well-done" like a Hallmark hypertext. Thank you. Now let me resume.

It was to be the spring of my content. It was to be the culmination of an academic career, and the reception of a most celestial writing appointment! Eight semesters, fourteen roommates, and countless hours of study, worry and discipline. The final grades posted, a perfect career, settling for nothing but the best! The sifting of job offers was all that remained...or so I thought.

I went directly from the graduation ceremony to the *Local Herald*, not even taking time to remove my cap and gown. I never dreamed of entering the *Local Herald's* building until armed with a diploma, or was my case, a stamped note from the university registrar verifying that I have indeed earned a degree, and that it would be arriving in the mail some time this summer. On

finding the said news agency, I entered and walked into the large news room where I unveiled my note from the registrar and held it high in my left hand—this is something I practiced beforehand—and began to declare my right to reside in their midst—the room went silent, just as I had planned.

With boldness I justified my right to stand in their midst; I first told them about the advice I received from my high school guidance counselor four years ago: that in the modern world you must possess a college degree to be employed as a newspaper writer. It was to these ends, I told them, that I enrolled at a sizeable University and earned a degree in my field of choice, English. I described to them how I finished first in my class; how I have stuck it out; how I have prepared for this day; and I am here at last, a polished product of university education, ready to construct a flawless Life Column, outclassing any rival newspaper. I raised both fists in the air and shouted,

"When may I start?"

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ng
You can imagine my surprise and humiliation when the silence was broken by coarse laughter. A boy younger than I, emerged from his cubicle to see what fool had entered the room. The howling continued for many moments until a man nearby asked if I had any job-related experience. I had not prepared for this line of questioning, so I smiled and handed over my note from the registrar, which resulted in more chagrin. I began to feel timid.

"Sorry kid, you're too educated. We need clever, 'of the masses' types to write the Life Column." He handed my note back and laughed his way back to an office. The humor subsided and the other employees also returned to their stations, while I stood silent, ignored.

Hurt and shocked at this turn of events, I retaliated. I shouted across the room to a young boy, "What do you know about Shi Jing, or the *Book of Songs*?"

He stood by the tack board, observing me like a scientist fearing a chemical reaction.

"Have you heard the cry of The Hungry Stones? Or the Four Tang Poets?—surely you know the Tang Poets—Wang Wei?—Li Bai?—Du Fu?—Bai Juyi?" The boy obviously hadn't.

I kept on, "I have read Du Fu on the top bunk!—I have carried him onto a subway station!—I have quoted him in my dormitory while dancing with clay puppets—is this of no consequence?"

The boy scratched his head. "You roomed with clay puppets?" The other peering employees reemerged from their offices and cubicles and began smirking and taunting me.

"Travesty!" I yelled, and I drew back to the door, clutching my piece of paper—confused. "Have you passed an evening in the bamboo hut—or burned a pyre? Have you!? Have any of you!?" I opened the door to run and caught my graduation gown on the door jam. It ripped completely off, exposing my

undergarments and thin, pale legs, but I kept running, not daring to look back lest I be consumed by the swarming tribe of columnists!

Dear brother and sister, I find college graduation to be a confusing occasion mostly because of the noble joy I experienced while arrayed in my cap and gown, and the even greater triumph of earning the right to represent my class with a speech. I am confused and perceive I have been swindled by my educators! I make this accusation on the grounds that after receiving a four-year degree in English, I still remain a part-time sandwich artist in a small shop on the outside of town!

They say I am overeducated. That by claiming my education I have become an unemployable outcast from pop culture. That there is no place in the layman's newspaper for my knowledge of world literature, that no one wants to pick up the newspaper and read my pleas to canonize Attar's *Conference of Birds*. The *Herald* has advised me to forget the Life Column, return to the university, finish another degree, and take a job teaching. Teaching!

I should have slept through college! My guidance counselor should have specified that all I needed was a paper degree—not the knowledge behind it! I could have spent my time relating to other humans and watching television programs instead of wasting my time in books—for it appears that my inclination for knowledge is not in popular taste! I have missed out on all of the gross wit and silliness of modern vernacular! Among all graduates, I—valedictorian—am most to be pitied. Who will read my column—Genius of the Ancient?

I have resolved, therefore, that in order to realize my dream of Life Columnist, action must be taken. First, I will allow a week of collapsing into fits of rage and self-loathing, weeping

after meals, refusing to wipe soy sauce off my cheek. Next, I will begin to put into reverse my entire education, so that, when I am done, I will remember only general concepts, several lines of verse, and no absolute rules for basic grammar. Of course I cannot stop from writing in the practiced proper form—that would be too painful—but the idea is to have no reason or evidence for why what I write is proper English.

I have already begun this process by researching and ordering popular magazine subscriptions from *Cosmopolitan*, *Motorland*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *XXL*. I have also purchased a satellite dish for television operation, and a large, cushioned seat with a cup holder. I am trying to lose a little weight, and oddly enough, I have also begun lifting weights. Earlier this week I began to watch television programs in my neighbor's basement, and I can tell you, this will not be easy. This life is settling into a rhythm I have not known since I was in diapers and ran here and there looking for sugar. But do not be alarmed, my family, for these are not the words of a miserable man, but a man who chanced upon the answer to his dream. I will pursue this course of unlearning till I can relate to "the masses," at which point I will return to the *Herald* a common character, with a dumb, predictable charm and a proclivity for spouting lines from popular comedies starring Jim Carrey. This is my resolution.

I pray I have not bored you with all of this; it has been a great relief to write these things down. I wait for your reply, but do not expect I will have the energy to read it. I must go, for I have spilled my grape soda. Hit me on my cell, 257-357-7757.

John Michael, College Graduate

SLEEPERS

by Elizabeth Holbert

"Did you hear about Shawn?" They sat on a park bench on a Sunday afternoon after church. The grass was bright green, and a warm, gentle breeze weaved through the blades and leaves. The sunlight rested on their bare arms and warmed them inside and out. It seemed as though nothing in the whole world could be wrong.

"No, what happened?" Lisa asked with a cringe. She already had a good idea of how Chris was going to respond.

"I'll give you two guesses, but you're only going to need one." Lisa sighed and turned her head slightly away from Chris, so that he wouldn't see the tears starting to form in her eyes. She shut them and rested her head on his shoulder.

Everything was peaceful and serene around them, but it was just a cover. In reality, their little town had been struck with a horrible epidemic. The disease selected people at random; there was no way to hide from it. One day you were fine, and then over a few days, the internal symptoms would start to show until you found yourself on the slippery slope, speedily approaching death. That's how the disease ended for everyone it had hit, and now it took up residence in the body of Lisa and Chris' mutual friend, Shawn.

The breeze now seemed bitter, and it stung Lisa's wet eyes. Emotion filled her, and she gasped for choppy breaths, no longer able to hold them in. "I just saw him on Friday and he was fine," Lisa said. "He was walking to the Post Office and I was going to stop and talk to him, but I was... really busy..." She hung her head.

"C'mon." Chris took her hand and they

walked back to the car. Lisa buckled her seatbelt and stared out the window as Chris backed out of the parking lot and turned right down the street. As they passed empty houses, Lisa could feel the numbness spread like cold water through her veins. She shivered. With every new case discovered, her heart calloused over a little more, and she could feel less. She was startled when she realized Chris was holding her hand. The coldness that filled her had distracted her, and she didn't remember him reaching over. She looked down at their interlocked fingers and realized she must've responded to it. His hand was warm. Chris turned to her on a straight-away and mustered up the best "let's get through this" smile he could.

"I'm so thankful you're here with me, Chris." She truly meant it. There was nothing like having a companion to walk through the darkest months of life with. "I really mean it." Chris smiled and squeezed her hand. She knew he felt the same way.

They pulled up to her house and her parents invited him in for dinner. As Lisa sat down opposite from her mother, she could tell something was wrong. "What is it, Mom?"

"Two more in the last five hours." Her mother looked up. "My friend, Mrs. Parker, and...and your Grandfather." No one said anything until Lisa's father said grace over the meal. None of them were very hungry. The silence hung over them all the way through dinner, and when they had all finished, Lisa's mom tried to smile. "Thanks for coming over, Chris." His kind heart was a warm light in such a dark room.

"Thanks for having me." Chris grinned,

and Mr. and Mrs. Holland went to sit on the back porch. "Hey, I'm going to go home and try to sleep, okay?" Chris turned to Lisa. "You probably should too." Lisa nodded and saw him to the front door. He kissed her cheek and then drove off. She stood on the front porch for a few minutes and looked to the starry heavens. *God, I don't understand this...and I can't find you anywhere.* I don't know what to do. She turned around and went inside.

It was summer and Lisa and Chris were home from college. They would normally be working as counselors at a local Christian camp, but it had been shut down due to the sickness. "Sleepers Sickness" people were calling it, because of the nature of the disease where victims died by slowly drifting away. Chris and Lisa would have spent their time visiting their friends in the hospital, but all the victims were quarantined. No one was allowed to come within five blocks of the hospital in case of the disease being contagious. The days seemed to drag on mindlessly since they couldn't find jobs in a dying town. Their time was passed with walks, books, and spending time with friends who had not already "fallen asleep" or moved into different towns. A lot of families had moved away in fear, but a substantial amount of people had the idea that they needed to stay and help, though they also felt there was nothing they could do about it and they didn't have the strength to try.

Lisa knelt by her bed and tried to break through to God in her prayers, but it didn't seem to work. She fell asleep exhausted from desperation. It had been desperation

that saw her to sleep every night for the past three months and some odd days. Before she drifted off, she did what she did every night and tried to forget about ever knowing Shawn, Mrs. Parker, or her Grandfather. Though it was poor, it was the only way she knew how to deal with losing them. Lisa decided she was tired of fighting.

Lisa rolled out of bed at nine and showered. Chris picked her up at eleven, and they drove to their friend Amy's house. They were picking her and three, no two (one of them had been Shawn), others up for lunch. Chris had called them up the night before when he got home. Normally Lisa would've called (Amy was her best friend), but she didn't feel like talking. Lisa sat in the car and changed the CD while Chris walked up to the door. Lisa looked up. Amy's mom answered, and her face was swollen and red. She saw the expression on Chris' face and saw his mouth form the words: "All of them?" Amy's mom nodded and started crying again. Chris hugged her and then her husband came out to lead his wife inside. Chris opened the car door. Lisa looked at him but he didn't say anything. They started to drive and Chris pulled into an empty grocery store parking lot. He rested his head on the steering wheel and started to cry. "All three of them...last night." He sputtered. "They went to the hospital right after I talked to Amy on the phone."

Finally he pounded the steering wheel. "I can't take this anymore! I don't know what to do!" Lisa slipped her hand over his back and tried feebly to console him, but she couldn't feel anymore and had given up on trying.

"Goodnight, sweetheart." Chris and Lisa stood on her front porch that night in the cold gloom, cast more by the feeling in their hearts than by the weather. "I love you." Chris said.

"I...love...you, too." Lisa whispered. She really did mean it, but she felt so cold. Perhaps it's wrong to say that she felt anything. She decided Chris probably understood.

"I'll call you tonight when I get home, okay? I really don't want to be alone tonight. I just need to talk to you." Chris looked at his feet and back up at Lisa. "Maybe we

could pray together. I need to do that," he said. Lisa smiled weakly.

"Okay." she said. Chris patted her shoulder and headed home again.

Lisa really didn't feel like talking, not even to Chris. She crawled into bed and pulled the blankets up past her ears.

When twenty minutes came and Chris called, her mother brought the phone into her room.

"Tell him I'm asleep, please." Lisa whispered, a look of pleading on her face. Her mother frowned at her.

"I'm sorry, Christopher, she's already asleep. Can she talk to you tomorrow?" She asked.

"All right, honey, God Bless you too, goodnight." She hung up the phone and walked over to Lisa's bed. "Lisa, honey, I think Christopher is pretty upset. Maybe you should call him back."

"I can't right now, Mom. I'll call him in the morning." Lisa sighed. "I just don't feel like talking." Mrs. Holland frowned again.

"Well, you'd better call him first thing tomorrow."

"I will."

"Okay, well goodnight." And she went out into the hall.

"Lisa, honey, wake up!" someone was shaking her awake. The voice sounded panicked.

"What is it?" Lisa asked. It was still dark outside and definitely not time to wake up yet.

"It's Chris." Mrs. Holland started.

"Mom, I said I'd call him in..."

"No, sweetie...it's not that." Her mother grabbed Lisa's hand and started to cry.

"Oh, no."

"Chris' mom called me a few minutes ago. They took him in right after I got off the phone with him. It took him so fast. I'm so sorry, honey."

Lisa thought she was going to be sick. Everything started to blur, and she ripped her covers off. She was still dressed from the day before. She burst through the front door and down the street toward the five blocks of quarantined victims to Sleepers Sickness. As she ran, she kept gagging, nauseous at the thought of her Chris lying in a white bed next to all of their friends.

She reached the yellow caution tape and ran through the five evacuated blocks toward the hospital. Guards stood watch, but she managed to sneak around them. Her heart beat in her throat. She made it to the door.

"Ma'am, you can't come in here," shouted a guard she hadn't noticed. He tried grabbing her arm and pulling her away, but the crazed look in her eye scared him and she ripped away and burst into the hospital. Staggering past rooms and rooms of white and peering in the windows, she found Chris. She fought away the nurse trying to keep her out, and her knees hit the ceramic tile next to Chris' bed.

His eyes were half open but glazed over, and he was emitting short quiet breaths. The color was gone from his skin. "Oh God, tell me, what now?" Lisa choked on her words with tears streaming down her face. She reached the back of her hand up to Chris' cold cheek.

"I really do love you, Chris," she said, but he had just fallen asleep. She couldn't help but notice that his expression seemed a little resentful.

She didn't remember what happened after that until she found herself sitting on her porch. Through the fog in her mind, she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that had she talked to Chris on the phone, he would still be there with her. She almost felt that the disease was not, in fact, picking random people, but that the common denominator in their "falling asleep" was her. She remembered every person that she had been too tired and distracted to talk to and how quickly they fell.

I don't know how it would make her feel if she knew she was right.

But I do know how it makes me feel.

And God has revealed His thoughts to us as well: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:23-25).

THE BOURGAIN

by Alicia L. White

It was the perfect day for a wedding. Walking to the edge of the aisle, I could see only a clear blue sky. I knew that Kathleen was ready, but was I?

Today everything would change... again. Looking to my right, I saw that she was glowing. As she smiled, I could see so much of her mother in her. The coordinator asked us to stand at the end of the aisle until she gave us our cue, so there we stood, waiting.

"Dad, are you ready?"

"No!" I wanted to shout, but I heard myself say, "Sure, of course." Still smiling, she slid her petite hand around my arm and faced forward into the aisle again. I've known only one other to be so consumed by pure joy. She was my wife. Her life, our life together was simple, but unforgettable.

My mind blurred back twenty-seven years to the day I first met her. She was moving into the house directly across the street. We were both nineteen and unaware of what our futures would hold.

"So, remind me again. Why do we have to do this?" I asked my mom.

"James, I swear if you ask me that one more time, I will smash this cake in your face!"

"Good, then we won't have to take it to the new neighbors."

"What is so horrible about meeting new neighbors? Wouldn't you want others to make you feel welcome?"

"No, not really." I couldn't help teasing my mom this way. She always took it so well and would sometimes give it right back.

"All right, wipe that smirk off your face and go tell your father we're just about ready to walk over."

"Okay...but this is your last chance! We could still keep the cake."

She threw a kitchen towel at my head while pointing a knife in my direction. I figured now would be a good time to go get my dad. As we walked over, the movers had arrived. A couple, about my parents' age, came around the corner of the truck, struggling to carry a table. Following behind with a box full of silk flowers came the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Without a word, I shoved the cake into my mom's arms, and from the corner of my eye I saw her face immediately scrunch with anger. I knew I would have to answer for that one later. It didn't matter,

though, because I needed to help her. It was the neighborly thing to do.

With my smoothest, deepest voice I could muster, I asked, "Can I help you with that?" Only my voice cracked in my attempt.

Smiling, she politely tried not to laugh. Through her soft brown curls, the sun reflected off her eyes, and my entire body froze in her gaze. It must have been obvious because her reply was not what I expected.

"Sure, you can help...or you could just stand there staring."

"Oh, right...sorry! I'm James Knightly, by the way."

"Nice to meet you James, I'm Haley Neeson." She extended her hand, and I met her half way. She asked me to follow her, and I eagerly obliged. Unfortunately, I slightly ran into the doorway, but as sweet as she was, she tried not to laugh. I set the box down in the middle of the empty living room floor, and the spring sun trickled through the windows embracing her already vibrant spirit. Our parents entered the room, interrupting our intense gaze.

"Well, it was very nice to meet you," said Mrs. Neeson. "Please feel free to stop by anytime."

"And the same to you," I heard my mom sweetly reply. "Are you ready to go James?"

"Actually, Mom, I think I'll stay here and help out a little more, if it's okay." She burst into a quick and abrupt laughter, and then added, "Oh, you're serious? Because, twenty minutes ago you...."

"Okay, Mom, since you're okay with that, I'll see you a little later!"

With a mischievous grin, she replied with a "Sure, honey, we'll be waiting for you!"

Finally, they walked away, and I was left with the Neesons. The more I spent time with them, the more I wanted to know them, especially Haley. Never, had I met a girl whose smile made me smile and whose laugh made me laugh. We continued to spend time together the entire summer, and every day I felt I had a reason to get up to see her, to

experience the world anew through her eyes, to simply know how her day was going—to hear of the people she would meet, whether it would be the ten-time checker champion at the retirement home or the children from our local day care. Be it the annual humane society fundraiser or our church yard sale, she would be one of the first to volunteer.

Soon our town began to buzz with news of our annual end-of-summer dance, and there was only one person I wanted to take. The only obstacle that stood in my way was that I had to ask her. Mustering up some small amount of courage. Her mother answered the door and informed me that she was out back, as usual. Looking through the glass door, I saw her sitting on the tire swing, staring at her feet. I had to smile and pause for at this moment. It would be evident to anyone that she had the heart of a little girl. Not even realizing that my nervous fears had disappeared, I approached her.

"Whatcha doin'?" I asked.

"Nothin' too much...what are you up to?"

"I just came to say hi and see if you were going to the dance."

"Well, that depends."

"On what?" I asked.

"Are you going?"

Out of character, I confidently replied, "Only, if you want to go with me."

"In that case, yes, I would like that!"

"Really?"

She laughed, "You seem surprised."

"I guess I am a little.... So, I'll see you on Friday then?"

"Absolutely."

When Friday night rolled around, my nerves were unruly again. Tucking my black shirt into my khaki's, I grabbed the flower I had picked up earlier and headed over to her house. Waiting for the door to open seemed to take longer than it took me to get dressed. As soon as her dad opened the door, she came around the corner in a crimson dress that went just below her knees. Her curls softly touched her shoulders, and I knew this image would forever

remain in my memory. We exchanged the sincerest of compliments and began to walk over to the dance. It was only a few blocks away. Arriving a bit late, the music and festivities had already begun. Large tents were set up, and in the center was a large dance floor set into the grass. The food was spread all along white linen tables. Soft lights were strung, accenting the stage where the band was playing. The town always insisted on having live bands that played a wide range of music. We said hello to our family and friends, then finally, hand in hand we reached the dance floor. Dancing with her, everyone else seemed to disappear and this night was more than I had anticipated. The evening would soon begin to wrap up so we decided to head home a little earlier. This way we could take the long way down by the lake. Saying our goodbyes we walked away from the tinted lights into the midnight air and fireflies glow. Kicking off our shoes, we sat on the dock and let our feet hang into the water.

"Hey, James."

"Yeah."

"I had a really good time tonight."

"Me too."

I scooted a little closer and put my arm around her to emphasize my words. She leaned and let her head fall into my shoulder. It was a perfect fit. Without any warning of thunder or lightning, it began to sprinkle and quickly came down harder and harder. As I was about to stand up so we could head home, she grabbed my arm and pulled me back down.

Slightly yelling she asked, "Where are you going?"

"Ummm, well it's raining, so I was thinking maybe a building of some sort."

"Are you kidding? This is the best part of summer! No one realizes how incredible the rain can be because people always run from it. If you just sit and wait patiently, it'll reveal the possibilities of beauty in everything it touches."

She was right. The more I sat and waited, the more I could see through

Untitled, Jimmy Hultay, photography



Untitled, Sabrena Carter, photography

the rain and everything became clear. Across the lake I could see a mother duck covering her ducklings with her wings, an older man with his jacket pulled over him and his wife and a child of about seven years. Her arms were stretched wide, and her face was catching every drop of rain it possibly could. Then, there we were. I realized that anything I ever thought was beautiful was right in front of me.

"Haley?"

"Yes?"

"Would you marry me?"

"What?"

From the look on her face, I may have been more shocked by what I said and yet surprisingly enough the words seeped through my lips again.

"Will you marry me?"

"I...I...are you sure?"

I placed my hands on her cheeks and gently kissed her forehead.

"Absolutely."

Looking back up at me, she smiled that smile and gave a soft and confident yes. Later, after expressing the news to everyone, we made plans in anticipation. A year later we were married in the town square. It seemed the whole town attended, truly a day to remember.

As I was still reminiscing about our life, Kathleen and I were told to start down the aisle. I remembered back when she was born. I could see Haley cradling Kate and pushing her on the same tire swing. Most vividly I could picture those summer months they would walk together down to the lake to sit on the dock and Haley would tell Kate of when I proposed to her in the rain. Slowly, my mind then drifted to our last day together. It was the same annual, end-of-summer dance festival. We were all three getting ready to go.

"Don't you look beautiful, little girl," said Haley. "And for the finishing touch, here is your new necklace. Go show daddy how you can twirl in your new dress."

"Daddy, look!"

"I see you! Don't get too dizzy now. What's this on your necklace?"

"Mommy gave it to me. It's a rain

drop. Isn't it pretty?"

"My two girls look beautiful. I think you should both twirl."

"Only if you do too, Daddy."

"Okay, but only if you don't tell any of Daddy's friends, okay? It'll be our secret"

"Deal."

"All right, one lady on each arm please, and we are ready to go."

It was a beautiful summer day to walk together to the dance, especially since we lived close by. Upon arriving we said hello to both our parents and friends. I danced with Kate the first couple of songs, twirled her around the floor and let her stand on my feet so she felt as if she knew what she was doing. Then one of Haley's favorite songs began to play.

"Sweetie, do you mind if Daddy dances with Mommy for a little while?"

"Okay, I'll go find Grandpa!"

Watching each other for a moment before I approached her, it seemed we were nineteen again. Her hair was longer now, but the same soft brown curls brushed her shoulders.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

"Yes, how can I help you, sir?" she replied with a gentle laugh.

"I was wondering if I could have this dance?" I extended my hand to her.

"I'm sorry, but I'm married and I don't think my husband would approve."

"In that case, how about we just don't tell him?"

Extending my hand again, she met me half way. "Well, since you put it that way...sure, he's not really my type anyway."

She laughed the same laugh I could never get enough of as I led her onto the floor. The night continued this way until they announced they would be packing up soon. My mom approached me and asked me to help her put away some of the tables and chairs. So I sent the girls on home, and I promised to follow soon. The evening seemed to grow a bit cooler, and I quickly put away as much as I could. Saying

goodbye to everyone, I waved and began walking home. About half way there approaching the lake, I could see a man rushing toward me and lights were flashing ahead near the dock. Noticing his uniform, I realized he was an officer.

"Sir, I'm gonna have to ask you to find another way home. We're not allowing anyone to come through here right now."

"I don't understand. What's goin' on?"

"Well, I can't give you many details but there's been an accident."

"What, what kind of accident?"

I knew something wasn't right. My blood was rising, and I could feel a horrible pain in my chest.

"Officer, I need to know what happened!"

"I can't give you any details sir, not until we know more. All I know is that a car lost control and hit someone and we don't know who she is yet."

"SHE? She was hit by a car!?! No, no...please no! I have to see her, I need to see her. Please, my wife, my daughter...I NEED to get through."

"Sir, calm down. What about your wife and daughter? If you tell me about your wife and daughter, maybe I can help you."

My mind was spinning, I couldn't think to answer, but I knew it, I knew it was one of them.

"They were walking home, without me! I should've been with them! Please, let me see them! Kathleen, my daughter, she's five. Is she okay?"

"The little one is all right. She wasn't hurt. We found the mother had thrown herself on top of her in enough time where she took the worse of it. She's still breathing, but she's not going to last much longer."

As he was giving all this information, he began to lead me toward the lights. Getting closer, I realized I could hear Kate crying. Hearing her terrified cries, I burst into a full-out run.

"Kate?"

Her small voice and tiny body came running from around the car. I scooped her up and held her as tight as any

father could. That's when I saw Haley lying on the grass. In her condition, they refused to move her for fear of making it worse.

"Kate, honey...I need you to stay with the officer for a little while, I need to talk to Mommy, okay?"

"Okay."

Rushing over to my wife, I brushed her brown curls back from her blood-stained face and felt the burning tears begin to seep through. Grasping her hands in desperation, I called out her name.

"Haley?"

Through slow, harsh breaths she answered me.

"I knew you'd come in time."

"Haley...please don't!"

"James, watch over Kate, no matter what happens and...."

I could tell her breaths were getting shorter.

"And...I love you...from the first day we met I loved you."

I tried to answer her, but words had left me, so I kissed her on the forehead for the last time. She struggled to smile and let out one last breath.

"No...Haley, please NO!"

From that point on, everything became a blur. People were asking questions while officers were gathering around, but nothing made sense. I took Kathleen by the hand, and we were eventually allowed to go home. Home...home was not the same. It couldn't be.

For weeks neither one of us said much to each other. Neighbors and family came and went with condolences. Some even brought food, though neither of us had very much of an appetite. I took leave from work and they understood. I couldn't shake what had happened. The entire night kept running through my mind. I kept trying to figure out what I could have done instead. Mostly though, I stayed in my room, huddled in the corner. Both of Kathleen's grandparents came off and on to take her out of the house and away from everything, but I couldn't leave. My mother came and tried talking me into speaking to her

because she refused to talk to anyone. Every time I looked at her, I couldn't speak. Seeing her mother's face staring back at me with the same eyes, same smile, and same laugh was too much. Until one evening I decided to go see Haley's grave for the first time, but I knew it would be wrong if I went without Kate. So I went to her room to get her.

"Kate? Kate, where are you?"

Walking from room to room, I called her name but she didn't answer. Immediately, I panicked. Running outside, I screamed for her but again, there was no answer. I ran from house to house, knocking on countless neighbors' doors, none of them had seen her. I had to think...where would she go? Then it hit me, it was the last place I knew to look. A thousand things were rushing through my mind, but my only care was if she was okay. I finally reached the dock but didn't see her! I was running out of breath and time. Nightfall was coming, and I couldn't see much. In that moment it began to rain. I had to find her quickly before I was unable to see anything. That's when Haley's words came back to me.

"No one realizes how beautiful the rain can be because people always run from it. If you just sit and wait patiently, it'll reveal the possibilities of beauty in everything it touches."

Now soaking wet, I fell to my knees in defeat. Looking up slowly, trying to gain composure, I looked a little farther into the nearby wooded area. A twinkling caught my eye.

"KATE?! Is that you?"

Moving closer, I could see she was clutching her necklace. She was balled up next to a tree, shivering. Taking off my jacket, I wrapped her in it, and she cried.

"I miss her, I miss her, and I want her to come back!"

"I know. Me, too. But you know what? I'm still here. You have me, and I still have you, right?"

"I guess."

The harsh rain slowed into a drizzle, and I wiped away her tears.

"Kate, I'm telling you now that you

have me. You will have me to walk beside you for a very long time. If you trust me, I'll take you home, and we can help each other."

"Promise?"

Taking her tiny face into my hands I confidently replied. "Absolutely...let's go home!"

Shedding a tear from all these memories, Kathleen and I reached the end of the aisle. The preacher began to speak. He finally asked, "Who gives this young woman away?" Trying to regain composure, I heard Kate whisper,

"Dad, this is the part where you let me go!"

Let go? Let go...this was the moment. How could I let go after so many years of holding on? As I was asking myself these questions, two rain drops fell. One landed on Kate's hand, and the other on mine. Stunned, we both looked down at our hands, and as we did, a third fell in the center where they were joined. She slowly looked up at me with one tear making its way down her cheek. I wiped it away as I had always done.

In a childlike manner she whispered, "Daddy...."

"I know" is all I could say.

Even though the sun was shining, a soft rain began to fall and the preacher started to tell everyone to get inside, but I interrupted him.

"Actually, sir, we'd like to continue."

"Even through the rain?" He asked. Kathleen only smiled and gently laughed. "Yes sir, even through the rain."

Gilgamesh

Holly Johnson

I will tell you a secret of the gods, divulge the whispers of capricious beings
who've taken advantage of their own immortality.

Clandestine fates will bubble, flow, and spill forth from scarlet painted lips.
Stormy heart for stormy heart the rival gods created us, pawns betrayed as sacrifices.

Intended to destroy the other but not before love bound them.

Barbaric, cool men civilized by the love of prophetic harlots.

The housewife, not to be bested, tries her hand at lingerie and scandal—but one of us must be offered up.

Marriage, after all, is atonement.

And this is the secret...

This is the secret...

Untitled, Sarah Elizabeth Blanz, photography

The Passing

Tye Deweber

The pendulum's swingin',
the sand steady fallin'
onto its own past
of events that didn't last.
The vapor is sure to rise,
high into the skies;
will what is left behind
stand the test of time?

Just one shot,
that's all we got.

Just one dive
to somehow feel alive.

The fiery sun is beaming,
its scorching rays streaming
onto this frail flower
that won't last another hour.

The leaves wither
with the coming of winter,
all of nature reminding
that all is passing.

Just one chance,
a quick passing glance;
it may not seem fair
but why beat the air?

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