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# LAMP

*Literary Magazine*

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# Perri

Lily Walter

Monday: Everett suspected the girl with the sky-blue eyes had (probably) decided he was not the kind of man she would marry. While introducing himself, he forgot the name of the university he graduated from and then stammered three times while trying to pronounce “Colorado.” As he walked home that evening, Everett imagined he was a famous orator. His impassioned TED Talk about the dangers of fast food sparked a wave of violent protests against Wendy’s, which had to permanently close its doors. Being so eloquent, it wasn’t hard to convince the girl with the sky-blue eyes to marry him within the month.

Later that night, Everett heard himself respond “you too” to the DoorDasher’s “enjoy.”

Tuesday: The girl with sky-blue eyes (her name was Perri) asked Everett to identify a bird call that drifted through the supermarket’s double doors. Unsure if her inquiry was a harmless attempt at conversation or a test of his knowledge, he froze and then dimly suggested it might not be a bird at all. Hours later, as he kicked pinecones glumly down the sidewalk, he became a zoologist. He developed the remarkable ability to summon all kinds of birds—brilliant red and motley yellow, nocturnal birds and flightless birds and birds of paradise. He so entranced Perri that they were promptly married in a forest full of winged creatures.

Everett was frightened out of his reverie by a chickadee who zipped into a bush in his front yard.

Wednesday: Perri slipped while shelving jars of Jif peanut butter and cut her leg on the metal base. Everett was by her side in seconds. As he tended to her wound, he mentioned that he’d studied for a year at med school. Perri playfully suggested that he must have dropped out to pursue his true passion: selling overpriced groceries. Everett perceived that her use of lighthearted banter was a critique of his academic failures. As fierce gusts of wind urged Everett home that evening, he became a practiced surgeon whose steady hands brought miraculous healing to thousands of ailing patients. He founded a medical school and mentored the next generation of surgeons. Perri was happy to marry a man who knew how to care for her.

Later that night, Everett gave himself a second-degree burn while making pasta.

Thursday: Perri was catcalled by an old man in aisle C7. When she confided in Everett that afternoon, it was too late to confront him. As Everett walked home, his hands balled into tight fists within his pockets, he became a soldier. It was 1918, and he was fighting on the front lines. He returned home safely at the war's close, weighed down by a medal of honor, and Perri married the man she could trust to protect her.

That evening, Everett dropped a glass when the telephone rang.

Friday: Everett imagined himself a poet, an architect, an artist (every kind of man Perri could love), while Perri threw him hopeful glances and waited for him to ask.

# Transpacific

Ruth Patti

My brother and I dictate endings and beginnings  
for our matchbox cars on the hotel carpet  
that might wear thin before we leave,  
because endings and beginnings are nice to know.

*(We always wanted a real-life adventure:  
a blank map, a riverside treehouse—)*

Some days, we explore our new existence.  
Furniture stores, car dealers, show homes,  
and all the other in-between places we inhabit  
become places we have been before.

*(—sports-team shenanigans, even espionage.  
The hotel stays the same, stays the same.)*

Today we make a song about license plates.  
Tomorrow we conjure a home in an empty closet,

*(Interim: new landmarks on our maturing map.)*

and maybe the next one will be real—really ours—  
and then the closet can become a castle.

# The Ouroboros

Ava Ronchetti

Yesterday I saw a dead snake in the grass. I stopped on my way and watched it rot. I thought to take it somewhere and bury it alone before I remembered the birds would be glad to have it—eager to tear apart the scaly flesh that had been nourished on their children. The snake had its eyes open, as they always do, its fallen apple body curved in a crescent, jaws agape to itself.

I wait for the autumn the northeast is known for. I look toward a cold sun and scarred white sky, toward trees infected with fall, forests blazing in perpetuity, glowing orange under a harvest moon. I wait for an October like the October I know at home. I will see the first snow and the geese will spear the silence, mocking, *We go. We go. We go.* I will not be jealous of their sail.

My October is wild wind and the scream of feral dogs in the mountains, mornings cold and pink as sheets of Himalayan salt over the world. My October smells like ice rain and asphalt and the river water when the floods have come. The canyons are cut in layers of red and purple, needled by groves of adolescent aspens, each jaundiced leaf a glittering golden coin in the clean sage air.

But this is not yet my October. The trees are on fire, but still smeared with green, the last desperate gasp of summer. Keep your head up, and you won't see the cruelty of it. But there it is, leveled beneath you—the thin-skinned deer will starve without the grass, the worms have died of cold, and the snake is soft-bodied and black, bones breaking through emaciated wet skin.

I think of fall and I think of Lazarus, raised to life after illness shredded him. Did he sit up and feel his rotted insides shift, trying to heal after four days of breakdown, decay, bleeding color? Does the world know she has been poisoned when she feels the life in her roots stirred again? Does she pray while gravid with fruit, while the trunks wail in birth pains, crying, Just because You brought me back to life does not mean You did not kill me!

The snake will come back after his soul has been discarded into stardust or water or compost, because the planet will always have use for him.

He was at the end of the world, at the precipice of death,  
the spearpoint of darkness catching the hollow at his throat—  
and he let it split him, let his life close over the wound in the earth,  
healing it with the rich, iron flush of his blood.

# Broken

Diana Birdwell



*Digital Photography*

# Behavioral Issues

Lillian McSweeney

The school bus arrived late on Tuesday afternoon, and Desmond was not on it. Behavioral issues, they said. As if my son would have behavioral issues. He still asked me for permission to use the bathroom.

I called the school. The cheery voice on the phone informed me that Desmond was staying for a few hours at a correctional facility and would return home the next morning. I stood at the door, twirling my keys on my thumb for a long time. I should go ... but where would I go? Drive around aimlessly until I ran out of gas, looking for a place that wasn't on any map? And what if he came back while I was gone? I stood there, and stood there, adrenaline crawling up my skin, until the clock hit eight and the curfew bells sounded. Going out now would only cause more problems. What if I missed him while I was out looking? He would be home any minute. And I would be here. I eventually peeled myself away from the door and loitered by the couch, flipping through TV channels until dawn came.

The curfew end bells sounded again at six. I grabbed my keys and drove to the school.

I found the cheery-voiced receptionist at the information kiosk in the front lobby. She had polished blue fingernails and looked to be about twenty. There was a pane of plexiglass between myself and the girl and a cup of pencils sitting on my side of the counter. I fidgeted with one of the pencils as I explained who I was and asked about Desmond. Her manicured fingers flew over her keyboard.

"Oh," she said, staring at her screen. "My apologies, it looks like something's come up. His release date has been pushed back by thirty-six hours. Someone should have notified you."

"What? Why?" I leaned forward to see what she was looking at.

She shut off the screen with a quick press of a button, still smiling. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but we have to protect the privacy of our students."

"Your students?" I asked. "He's my son. Why can't you tell me what he did?"

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but as I stated, our privacy laws dictate that—”

The cup of pencils fell from the desk. The impact echoed through the empty lobby, and pencils skittered in all directions across the floor. I blinked in confusion before realizing that I had knocked them off.

The girl looked between me and the pencils. Her smile faded. “Ma’am, I’m going to need to ask you to leave.”

A security guard rounded the corner, and I backed away from the desk. On my way out, I passed a colorful banner decorated with children’s painted handprints. The letters read, “Copper Springs Elementary. We pursue excellence!” Below the main text, the handwritten lettering said, “First Graders, April 21st.”

I came up short, staring at the sign. I wondered whether one of the handprints was Desmond’s. Behind me, the security guard picked up pencils. The receptionist stared daggers. I slunk out of the school.

I sank into my car but didn’t drive away. I couldn’t stop thinking about those handprints. I went over the banner in my mind, trying to guess which hand was Desmond’s. I should have taken a picture. Which color would his be? He would have picked red, I thought. Did he place his own hand on the banner, or would an adult have guided his hand into place so the design would be aesthetically pleasing? Gestalt theory flitted through my head as the sky considered rain, then gave up the effort.

I checked my phone. An hour had passed. I had another thirty-five of those to wait. Desmond had that long to wait. I looked up “after-school correctional facility” on my phone.

“After-school correctional facilities,” my phone droned. “Instituted in 2057, these tax-funded facilities serve as a disciplinary tool for public and private schools, aiding in the educational journey of students grades K-12. Was this helpful?”

I shut off my phone, tossing it into the passenger seat, and initiated a search on the GPS screen for correctional facilities near me. The nearest result was 257 miles away, and cross-referencing after retrieving my phone revealed it to be an adult prison.

That couldn’t be where Desmond was. They wouldn’t have sent him to prison.

Right?

I slumped against the steering wheel, head thumping against the upper edge. I had been in my senior year when the facilities were first created, but I was a straight-A student, so I had no idea what they were like. My best friend, Jules, went to one a couple of times. She said it was an “excellent experience” but wouldn’t say much more about them. She seemed happy enough though, so I tried not to think too hard about it.

But now Desmond was there, wherever *there* was, for another thirty-five hours. I started up my car.

I’m not sure where I thought I was driving to, but I ended up at the grocery store. I watched myself park, get out, and grab a shopping cart on my way into the brightly lit building.

One of the wheels on the cart was squeaky. I pushed the defective cart down the baking goods aisle. I stopped in front of the chocolate chips. The thought seized me that I could make cookies for when Desmond came home. As if cookies could fix this.

I tossed the chocolate chips and a baking mix into the cart. I wandered into the cold aisle and grabbed a carton of eggs.

“Cravings got to you?” the cashier asked at the checkout. I nodded, trying to disguise how carefully I watched her while thumbing through my wallet for a card. Desmond loved to guess which of the grocery cashiers were holograms and which were real. Saying something as specific as “cravings” should have been a giveaway that it was a human cashier, but Desmond would have pointed out that the hologram programs got constant behavior updates. And they kept switching up which checkout stations were run by humans. I could never figure out why that was.

Something about the woman’s face seemed off. Both ears the same height, nose perfectly symmetrical. Hologram, I decided.

The conveyor belt moved my groceries over the scanner, and a robotic arm placed the baking supplies in a bag.

“Enjoy your baking,” the cashier said as I lifted it from the hooks. “Is it for your kids?”

The bag slipped from my hands. The cashier darted forward, snatching the bag before it hit the counter. Strong, human hands passed the bag to me. “Have to be careful about those eggs.” She winked at me.

Desmond would have guessed correctly. He always did.

I don’t remember driving home, but I know I got there, because I did bake the cookies. The drive was completely lost to my memory, but for some reason every crack of egg, every ball of dough rolled between my hands was slow motion, technicolor. Gritty brown sugar exfoliating the skin of my palms. Canary yellow egg yolks and soft blue oven mitts. I put the cookies in the oven and went to Desmond’s room.

It wasn’t that messy, but I remade the bed anyway. I smoothed the sheets, made hospital corners. Fluffed the pillows, arranged his favorite stuffed animals, dusted the planet mobile hanging in the middle of the room. Another child had lived in this room before we rented the house. They had liked space, too. I knew this because when we first moved in, I found a single glow-in-the-dark star on the ceiling, tucked away in the corner, painted over in signature landlord white. I thought about taking it down. Desmond asked me to leave it. Now, I turned over an empty laundry basket and stepped up to get to eye level with the star. It seemed to stare at me as I edged a fingernail under one of its points. Little flecks of paint rained down. I blinked rapidly as some landed on my face near my eye.

The smell of burning sugar interrupted the violence. I rushed to the kitchen and retrieved a sheet pan full of evenly sized, evenly charred chocolate chip cookies. Like little asteroids, all burned up from the fall through our atmosphere. They were dark brown, the same shade as Desmond’s eyes.

Burned cookies would not bring my son home. I got in my car and started to drive.

The GPS chirped with concern as I plugged in the directions for my destination, 257 miles away. “The state-mandated curfew will come into effect by the time you reach your destination.”

I set the alerts to silent.

Saturated greenery assaulted my vision as I sped out of town. Trees reached politely for the sky, and smooth sidewalks punctuated with the

occasional bench lined the road. I had to stop a few times for pedestrians, who waved cheerily at me as they crossed. I did not wave back.

The greenery finally thinned out, and I barely heard the curfew bells ring as I passed a sign saying “Now Leaving Copper Springs. Drive Safely!”

Minutes blurred into miles. The moon grew bright overhead. I was just beginning to think I’d gotten away with it before flashing blue and red lights pulled me over.

“Do you want to explain to me what you’re doing out here so late?” The officer asked as he checked my car’s interior with his flashlight.

“I’m looking for my son,” I managed to say, handing over my ID card for him to scan.

“Is he missing?” the cop asked.

“Yes. Well, no,” I said. “But they won’t tell me where he is.”

The officer looked at me for a long moment. He had a tiny white scar on his upper lip. I wondered if he’d gotten it shaving. I fixated on the scar as he consulted his handheld screen.

“You from Copper Springs?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. And then: “He’s six.”

Another quiet moment passed with me staring at the back of his screen while he read all the information he had on me.

“Well, you’ve got no priors,” he finally said. “Listen. I’m going to let you off with a warning. Don’t let me catch you out after curfew again, you understand?”

I nodded.

The cop handed me a small chip. “Plug this into the port behind your steering wheel. It will automatically drive you to your home address. Do not remove it until you’ve reached home. Have a good night, Florence.”

I blinked as he handed back my ID. I’d never told him my name. He would have read it on the card, or the screen. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to make a connection or intimidate me. He stayed long enough to

watch me plug the chip into my steering column and then walked away as I rolled up my window.

The car put itself into drive and made a U-turn at the next break in the median. Then it drove me back into town.

I sat, numb, as my car made turns without my input. It drove exactly at the speed limit and came to a complete stop at every stop sign. I kept thinking about that banner from the school lobby, with the little colored handprints. They had all been the same size. Were all first graders' hands really the same size? I wished I had taken a closer look while I'd been there. I'll go back tomorrow, I thought. I'll go back and check for sure, and I'll knock over that stupid cup of pencils, and when the security guard tries to kick me out, I'll pick one up and stab him in the eye.

My car shut off. I was in my driveway. My house stood in front of me.

The light was on in the kitchen. I stumbled out of the car and ran to the door, almost toppling inside as the door wasn't quite latched.

Desmond sat on the island counter, mouth hovering around a burnt chocolate chip cookie as he watched me enter. His red sweater was covered in crumbs.

"You're early," I managed to say.

"Hi, Mom," Desmond said.

In a moment he was in my arms. I pulled him from the counter and clutched him to me, tight as I could until my legs weakened, and I sank to the floor, still holding him.

"What happened?" I finally asked, voice hoarse. I pulled back a little so I could see his face.

Desmond watched me, head slightly tilted. Still holding the crumbled remains of his cookie. "It was an excellent experience."

I pulled him close again, one arm around his shoulders and the other around his head. My fingers snagged on his tight curls and dug into the knitted fabric of his sweater. I kissed the top of his head. He didn't squirm or try to leave, and when the curfew end bells tolled outside, I realized he had fallen asleep in my lap.

# Post Eye-Exam Crisis

Katherine Bechter

I used to read the  
bold letters on  
the back wall  
all the way to  
the bottom  
row.  
Perfect.

Now I've stress ordered three sushi rolls  
and sit alone in my car and use the streetlights  
to direct my chopsticks, all because some lady  
with a short blonde bob said my eyes were good  
but not perfect and sent me to the waiting room  
where I stared into skeleton eyes and tried to see  
myself in them until I gave up on mirrors  
and asked the bored lady at the desk  
who said they looked good,  
but good is not perfect.  
I stare out my windshield  
and wonder how it will feel  
to always see the world  
once removed.

# Uncle Bruce

Richard Decker

I made sure to bring him a few no-sugar-added ice pops  
and an order of Chinese food

but I knew he'd rather be at the Olive Garden  
eating spaghetti and meatballs with his sons and me

or at the diner off Route 40  
to talk about how I've been  
over a cup of coffee

or even in his garage  
showing me how to use different tools  
before sitting down at the dinner table to pray  
in the way he heard me say at my baptism

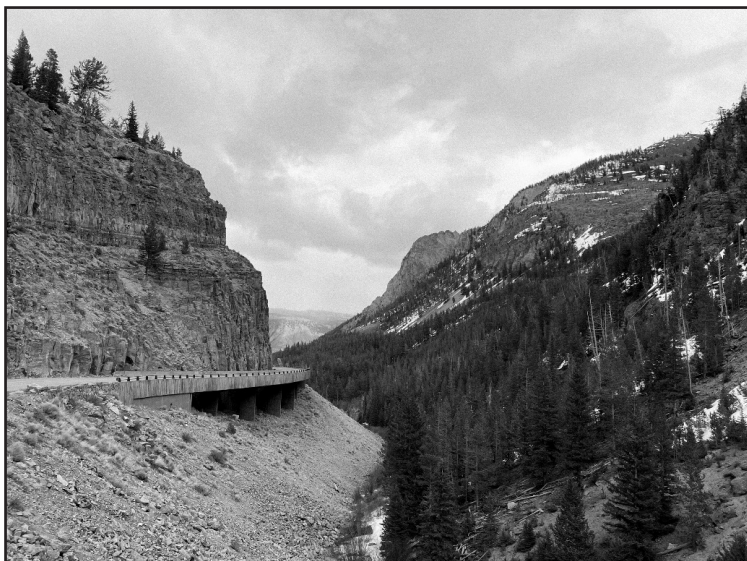
the Keytruda would rather eat his muscles

but I made sure  
to help him brush his teeth  
and shave his stubble  
and fix his pillow  
and thank him for everything

and though he liked the ice pops  
I ordered the wrong food

# Come Further In

Emily Baugh



*Digital Photography*

# Solo Trip

Landri Shope

## 5AM at the Airport

The sun hadn't risen yet, and I was sitting at my gate, alone. My fingers clenched tightly in my lap, knuckles white, so I focused my attention on the people milling about. Almost everyone was abiding by the unspoken rule that it was uncouth to talk loudly before sunrise. The smell of microwave airport food curdled my stomach. One hour left until I was lifted from the earth and deposited across the world for an entire month.

## Rome

Stepping out of Roma Termini, my lungs inflated with air steeped in history and cigarettes. I was free and scared and *invisible*. I clutched my phone with sweaty hands, rumors of pickpockets fresh on my mind, and turned down an alley washed in the syrupy rays of sunset and buzzing with the hum of a violin. As I ascended a hill, the Colosseum appeared before me, clothed in the golden splendor of evening. It arced against the lilac sky, a magnificent gem on a hill bejeweled with relics of the past: statues, columns snapped in jagged halves, and platforms partially buried in the dewy grass. Clusters of friends and families sat laughing together on the ridge above Palatine Hill, sharing wine, snacks, and the view laid out before them. I stood off to the side and snapped a selfie.

## First Sleep

The sheets were stiff and scratchy. I'd been traveling for 32 hours with only stolen moments of sleep. I was on the bottom bunk in a hostel, stomach empty, passport and euros tucked against my side, strangers bustling around me. I drifted off to sleep to the whisper of foreign voices.

## Dinner

"Buonasera, bella! We are having dinner in the courtyard, you will come, no?"

Resisting the urge to excuse myself to an early bedtime, I followed the man to a walled garden where strangers sat around a table, laughing together and sharing stories. I sat by myself and tentatively speared two grilled zucchini slices. I hadn't bought any food for myself, but I was starving. I feared I would break one of the unspoken rules of hostels, misrepresenting myself and my country.

"Wine?" the South American man from earlier offered.

"No," I said, neck warming. "Just water."

Beside me, a Spanish boy sat down, rolled a cigarette, and asked, "So, where are you from?"

## **Lecce**

Ready to disappear at a moment's notice, I walked the 20 minutes to old town without earbuds, alert and aware of every silent shopkeeper and motorcyclist.

Lecce was golden in the afternoon. With sandstone walls and buildings, it felt like walking through the spiral depths of a conch shell. I perused the streets ravenously, losing myself while simultaneously discovering lonely olive trees, dusty antique shops reverberating with old Italian rock music, and the occasional stray cat stretched lazily across isolated beams of sunlight.

When the sun dampened her severe gaze in the early evening, people leaked back into the streets, and music erupted once more from the duomo and palazzos. Smiling street merchants filled my empty hands with *taralli* samples, which I ate on the curb. Wedding bells split the cloudless sky.

By the end of the first week, I wore one earbud on my walk to town.

## **Park Benches**

Some of the benches in the park were falling apart and impossible to sit on. Some were in secluded corners with men who stared. My favorites

were in the sun by the cobbled square where children kicked soccer balls with solemn parents, and tanned old men showered the ground with bird food while ungrateful pigeons gobbled it up like gluttonous extraterrestrial monsters.

“Lean closer like an intimate friend, yes?” asked a man sitting beside me, smiling expectantly, his phone open to Google Translate.

I excused myself and hurried back to old town, my best friend already on the phone.

### **Road Trip**

“People who believe in God have it easier,” Lynette said, lying beside me on the beach. We had met the day before in the hostel kitchen. She told me she was traveling to escape memories of a man she had been dance partners with. “They have purpose. I’ve been looking for purpose my whole life.”

“I believe in God,” I said.

“Does that make it easier?”

“Yes—” I started, words forming slowly on my tongue.

Suddenly, a cloud of ash drifted over the beach. Mount Etna had erupted in a spectacularly explosive plume of ash.

Lynette left the next day, bound by boat across the Adriatic Sea to a dance festival in Split, Croatia. We never finished our conversation.

### **Missed Stop**

Once, on a bus to the beach, my friends and I fell asleep and missed our stop. When we awoke, we shared embarrassed glances before delegating an unlucky messenger to share our plight with the vexed driver. He dropped us off along a highway with only a minor sneer of disgust. We found a road to the coast, marching through a wood of pine trees, passing *taralli* back and forth, breathing the spicy aroma deeply, freely. Emerging from the shrubbery, we found ourselves atop white cliffs tracing the

aquamarine ocean. We later discovered a staircase carved into the cliff and descended into the icy blue waters one after another. In a spray of salt water, we emerged side by side.

## **Reunited**

After 32 days, my sister arrived on the evening train. I showed her the alleyways, the rooftops, the beaches, the cats. She smiled at me and snapped the occasional picture. We ate dinner outside in the hostel's walled garden. My friends sat near us.

"You are laughing so much!" Alexander, my friend from Germany, said. "You both have the same smile."

Later, we stood at the ledge of the roof, gazing across the neighbors' balconies strung with drying clothes. Tonight, the rooftops were empty, but I remembered the husbands yelling at their wives and wives yelling at their children, the old man playing guitar with no one to listen, and the couple dancing beneath the stars before settling under a tent made of sheets and lit with twinkling electric lights. Tonight, only the skeletal TV antennas protruded, snaking up toward the clouds.

Tonight, sunset burned a trail across the sky, and velvety darkness descended like a veil over Lecce.

# Lunchtime

Kayla Santos

Homemade lunches,  
Thermos full of last night's dinner.  
Reheated rice mixed with beef and green beans,  
Settled next to sandwiches  
Peanut butter and jelly,  
Ham and cheese.

Odd looks as my plastic spoon clanked  
Against the greasy metal walls,  
Chasing the last bit of rice  
While next to me, soft bites were taken from bread.  
But the looks didn't matter.  
I didn't even like peanut butter, anyway.

# Piper

Olivia Jiles



*Digital Photography*

# The Cat Burglar

Anastasia O'Donnell

The man we shall not meet  
On soft and booted feet  
Drew close his coat  
And flicked his eyes  
And padded up the street.

The streetlamps fought with fog  
While street cats monologued  
About their fur  
And lack of milk  
And discord with the dogs.

The smog condensed to rain.  
Inside, a house cat lay.  
Though all the household  
Slept, this cat  
Alone remained awake.

A scratch, a click, a scar;  
The window slipped ajar.  
The man we shall  
Not meet crept in,  
His clothes as black as char.

The cat unclosed one eye  
To watch the robber spy  
The room for safe  
Or jewelry box  
With diamonds hid inside.

The mantle held a chest  
With gold and family crest.  
The man undid  
The lid, but found  
The gem gone from the nest.

From somewhere came a cry.  
The stranger slipped outside  
With empty hand;  
His diamond-lust  
Remained unsatisfied.

The man we shall not meet  
Retreated up the street  
But turned his head  
And vowed aloud,  
“This will not be defeat.”

A yawn, a stretch—  
The cat adjusts  
The diamond at its feet.

# Spiders in the Bookshop

Annabelle Welch

The only green lynx spider in the bookshop sat on the classic fiction shelf, wedged between a brown copy of *The Wind in the Willows* and a green copy of *Emma*. The spider's name was Eerie, and he loved to be alone.

His eight sleepy eyes took in the light as the shop owner hobbled in, switching on the shop's three bulbs with the tip of his cane. The old man was Chester, and the little green spider harbored a particular affection for him. Being with him was different than being alone, but Eerie allowed it. The greying retriever who padded in behind Chester was Jane Éclair (Chester had a deep fondness for old-fashioned novels and old-fashioned desserts). Eerie tolerated Jane.

"Good morning," said Chester, making his way down the fiction aisle and tipping his navy cap to Eerie's tiny figure. The old man had a fondness for the spider too and always checked on him in the mornings. "Sleep well?"

Eerie stretched his eight green legs. Chester took this as a yes and started down the aisle. Eerie crawled out of his nook and followed Chester past a thin Hemingway collection and over a thick, overturned volume of Poe's greatest works. Jane Éclair trotted around the perimeter of the tiny bookshop, finding her well-worn bed in the corner. She circled it with relish.

Sunlight peeked through the shop's few windows, highlighting the towering books across from Eerie. Chester and Eerie noticed the same thing at the same time: a silken web, not Eerie's, strung across a shelf and billowing in the slight heat blowing from the vents. And, of course, the female spider frozen on a leatherbound copy of Dickens.

Eerie hissed.

"Well, hello," said Chester, tugging on the end of his yellow scarf. The new spider flattened against her book at the sound of his voice.

Eerie made his way to the end of the shelf, facing the newcomer. She was a trapdoor spider, colored a shade of brown he didn't particularly care for.

The old man softly beckoned with his wrinkled hand. The trapdoor spider's eight dark eyes traveled from Chester to Eerie. Eerie raised his

two front legs to let her know that he wasn't going to be friendly any time soon.

"Nice to meet you," Chester said to the female spider.

She tentatively tapped a brown leg against the metal shelf. Eerie understood the movement; it meant *hello, nice to meet you too*. She turned her head to Eerie and tapped her slender leg again. *I'm Lydia*.

Eerie thought that was a very high-and-mighty name for a trapdoor spider and decided to pout.

Chester began thumbing through the books on the shelf across from the spiders. Many were out of order from the day before, as well-meaning shoppers pulled the spines out to read a sentence or two before pushing them back in somewhere else. The old man took a handful of books from the right and peppered them in on the shelf to the left.

Eerie watched Chester with one eye, Lydia with another, and tapped an aged book's spine with one lime leg. It seemed sturdy, so he crawled up to perch at the top.

Jane Éclair barked once from her corner. She saw the postman rounding the street corner and felt the need to explain her feelings about it. Eerie sprung from his spot on the book, perturbed.

Chester told Jane to hush.

A peaceful quiet drifted down in the shop like dust. It was nearing nine in the morning, the opening time Chester set decades ago. A teeny gold bell hung limply over the door, waiting for the first customer to wake it up. Eerie preferred mornings like these.

Chester glanced at the clock. "Five minutes," he said. Eerie looked at the clock too. It was meaningless to him, but he trusted the old man.

Quietly, Lydia watched them. Eerie turned his eight eyes on her. Glowering with all his power, he desperately wanted to be alone again.

"She's sweet," Chester said, leaning toward Eerie and speaking out of the side of his mouth. The trapdoor spider had cautiously returned to spinning her web but kept peeking around a chestnut copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*. "You should talk to her."

Eerie slunk a few inches back, horrified at the idea.

The clock must've been important to Chester, because he checked it again and limped to unlock the front door. The two spiders were left alone together, Eerie's least favorite type of alone. He stormed around the shelf, crawling past his favorite places to sulk and soak in his jealousy in the dusty corner. Lydia kept spinning a web all by herself.

In the front of the bookstore, Chester set out the sandwich board sign. The door swung wide, blowing in frosted winter weather that flew down the aisles and fluttered the price markers. Lydia recoiled from the chill. So did Eerie.

He mulled this over.

Ten slow minutes passed, and a family entered the shop. Lydia abandoned her web in a flurry of moving legs. Eerie scrambled behind a book at the same time, and they found each other looking at the other through a peephole between the shelters they crouched behind. Curious.

The family headed for the children's section, and both spiders emerged slowly. The silence between the bashful spiders grew as Eerie debated bravery. Lydia remained quiet, watching him.

Eerie blinked all eight eyes and gingerly tapped one leg on the shelf. *Are you staying for the winter?*

Lydia's head turned sharply. Eerie waited, then waited some more for her to respond. He almost swore off ever speaking to a female again, but Lydia finally tapped her leg. *I'll leave for spring.*

A good arrangement, Eerie thought.

Three teenagers whirled into the shop, so the spiders stayed put behind their respective novels. An elderly couple strolled down the spiders' aisle, leaning against each other. The day wore on quite softly.

Eerie and Lydia kept that peephole for the rest of winter. As January bled into April, they crept into friendship. She began to build pretty webs for him every night, ones that Chester apologetically dusted away every morning. Sometime in early spring, Eerie finally gathered the courage to venture across to her part of the bookshelf. They took up a neighborhood in Louisa May Alcott's best works. Lydia preferred *Little Women*, and Eerie liked *Jo's Boys*, so it worked out.

At the end of April, Lydia left for her old home in the underbelly of a park bench down the street. Eerie grew to look forward to winter again, when he could be all by himself, with her.

# Among the Reeds

Madeline Kohut



*Digital Photography*

# The Scarf

Nataly Nieves

I hold you close in my arms.  
I look at your carefully woven body,  
each stitch and thread  
full of memories.

Each cotton fiber brings me back  
to the searing Thailand sun.  
The warmth of the children's hugs  
and the addiction of Thai tea  
which cooled my heated core.

I hold you to my nose,  
and new sensations fill me.

The sugary Thai desserts  
and the sweet yet spicy curry  
to the tea gardens  
that filled the air with an earthy aroma—  
a combination of soil and its fertilization  
brings me to my primitive self.

I now hold you close to my heart,  
and I'm overtaken.

The blissful connections  
between strangers.

To my dear purple scarf,  
you're the window to my memories.  
My DeLorean.

# evergreen

Maya Sanders

fractals of thorns  
in wreathèd crown  
droplets of berries  
bones against brown

white cloth flowers  
never to glean  
wilting world welcome  
our king evergreen

# The Painting

Vivian Halstead

The dim lighting set the stage for the paintings standing at attention along the blank walls. A man, an Artist, stood solitary on the faux-marbled linoleum, hiding in the sociable hum of gallery-goers meandering around him. Earlier, he had spoken with some, exchanging handshakes and imbibing their honeyed words. This small gallery accepted the Artist's painting, and to him, it began to wilt next to the brave submissions of others.

Now alone in the crowd, the Artist held his clenched fists in his pockets like a pouting child. Rampant mistakes flecked the surface of the painting. How couldn't they see them? It felt like a joke he wasn't in on. He waited for someone to start pointing and laughing.

An onyx figure slithered between the groups of bodies. She crept like a vine, sparing glances at the differing works. Her approach slowed. Harsh, indiscernible whispers rose and broke against the back of the Artist like a wave against a seawall. The whispers dimmed to a dead silence. He finally turned his attention to the woman standing beside him. Her wrinkled eyes peered down the bridge of her nose through her half-moon spectacles at the painting before them.

The Artist knew this woman; she was the lead director of the city's most exclusive gallery. He watched her head tilt and eyes squint, her dark tresses, lined with silver, swaying. As unexpected as lightning, her gaze snapped to the Artist. Her gray eyes pierced him like bullets; he almost stumbled back but succeeded at not flinching.

The crowd held its breath.

In the proceeding thunder, she asked slowly, "You're the artist of this piece, yes?"

He nodded in the same cadence.

The Director reached into the lapel of her dark coat, pulling out a small, red card, which was handed to the Artist. Without another word, she left as she arrived, and the crowd collectively sighed. The Artist released his own breath, turning the card over between his hands.

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The walk to the Director's office was a daunting one; the paintings and sculptures from greater artists who had come before him stood like proud soldiers in the marble halls with grand pillars and velvet carpets. The Artist sat in the quaint armchair, its fabric finer than his clothes. Across from the Director, he bounced his knee, betraying his otherwise aloof appearance. Despite her welcoming demeanor, the Artist's hands flexed.

The Director proposed plainly, "I'd be very glad to commission something from you for an upcoming exhibition."

The Artist, donning a mask of eccentric indifference to hide his excitement, accepted her terms. He had one year to complete the painting.

With the resolution of their deal, they stood and shook hands. However, before he could leave, the Director stopped him.

"I understand the reputation of my gallery, I understand..." glancing him up and down from above, "your reputation, but you were chosen nonetheless, and you need not overdo it."

The Artist's eyes narrowed. He politely excused himself and stormed home.

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The first week after meeting with the Director, the Artist shut everything out; he secluded himself within his modest townhouse that stood tall between many others on a hill at the edge of the city. The Artist drew the curtains on every window. He ensured that he wouldn't need to leave for quite some time.

A pair of months passed, and the Artist already found himself haunted by the rigid corners and vacant leer of the canvas. He spent weeks hunched over his desk, sketching away with the occasional glance at that white monolith, seated upon its wooden throne. The Artist had no idea where to begin.

Throwing down his pencil with a clipped breath of resignation, he wandered the empty rooms of his home, hoping to coax inspiration from its dark corners. He chanced a brief walk outside, only as far as his overstuffed mailbox.

The Artist opened the mailbox door, and like a sigh of relief, its contents spilled out onto the ground. He unfurled outdated newspapers droning on and on about worldly politics that didn't affect him. A red envelope slipped between monochrome leaves, scraping the sidewalk as it landed.

The Director was inquiring about his progress.

The Artist rushed back inside to pen a response, reassuring her that things were coming along well enough.

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Several more months glided by with the Artist's mental fatigue crescendoing. He paced the polished floorboards of his studio, muttering. He desperately tried to parse through his own thoughts, but the blurred clamor of the city outside was much louder than usual. He kicked aside spent pencils and smudged pages in his path. All he could focus on was that nonstop cacophony, smothering him like a blanket.

The brilliant idea to move his studio down to the cellar struck him. He was willing to trade the annoying bustle of the outside for the damp brick walls and the distinct smell of mold and something dead.

Deep down, he descended. Surrounded by that pit, he felt an old familiar friend, a bud of inspiration stirring inward. Here, he could find revelation, crooked and imperfect.

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It was roughly two weeks before the Artist's deadline. Below within the dead belly of his home, he couldn't feel the rumble of trucks and war machines, off to distant lands, that shook the dust from the rafters. He paid no mind to the frantic knocking at his door or the air raid sirens crying out, begging him to listen. He had something far more pressing to worry about. The discarded bits of divinity collected over the year belatedly coalesced. He finally placed a stroke upon the canvas.

By the end of the final week, he had finished his masterpiece. He stared with enchantment, entirely enraptured, only one word coming to mind: divine. Joy and pride boiled over and seized him. He would declare his success to the world.

He bounded up his creaky, wooden staircase, making for the balcony that held a view of the entire city. He flung the curtains aside, flinching at the sun's beaming rays. He stepped out onto the platform, the wind combing fingers through his unkempt hair. With white knuckles, he gripped the intricate metal railing, preparing to belt out his triumph to any within earshot. But there was no one in the streets; no hustle and bustle of workers and families going about their day; no passing cars or the local trolley. The city was as silent as the grave and held just as little life.

The Artist stood stunned for a moment.

The buzzing of an airplane overhead interrupted the silence. The Artist was relieved to see that he was not alone until, upon a more focused glance, he noticed the plane was adorned with the enemy's colors. He became puzzled once more, a seed of dread planting itself in his stomach.

He watched as the plane reached high above the center of the city. A minuscule fleck fell from its silhouette. The plane circled around and receded from the city just as it had arrived. The little fleck fell beyond the horizon of the city's skyline like the first tepid drop of rain. There was a moment of breathless anticipation, no longer than a resolved sigh.

A spark of creation.

The unholy flower bloomed.

A torrent of fire and smoke plumed from its landing point like a great beast stretching, flesh uncoiling. The city and its buildings were shoved to the side, the Devil's hot hand reaching the Artist. He violently recoiled, a shockwave slamming him back into the glass of the balcony doors. Every desire that would now rest undone drowned his mind. The Director, safe in a bunker somewhere, now cared not for his painting. He had a moment to feel his hate and pride.

The canvas of the painting sprang from the staples holding it to its wooden skeleton, curling in on itself from the heat. The Artist writhed as his sacred creation went up in flames.

# Lean on Me

Annee DeFelice



*Digital Photography*

# Gentle Sun-Dappled Circles

Emily Baugh

Gentle sun-dappled circles of green and gold,  
far better than any blinding bright city beam.  
They draw my gaze upward, to admire old

gnarled limbs, stretching tall. A weary stream  
sings softly of its path. Rippling music totters  
on, slowly through the forest. Do I dream?

If so, let me stay sleeping by the waters,  
resting near winding banks of clay worn smooth,  
time's hands shaping earth like a potter.

Some of nature's melodies cause me to mourn,  
but in these peaceful visions, my joy is reborn.

# On My Old College Try

Annika Bassett

The echoes of a thrice-snoozed *Clair de Lune* plunk gently on my scuttering thoughts.

I wedge a flowered tea mug into the Tetris of dirty dishes beneath my sink. The clock taunts me, reminding me that I'm far too behind to wash them now. I toss a dripping tea bag into the recycling bin, which needs scraping out, as there are squished raisins crusted to the bottom of it.

I know raisins and tea bags aren't recyclable, I know, but my intentions weren't lazy to begin with. I wanted both a recycling basket and a trash can so I wasn't stuffing up the belly of some glutted landfill more than need be, but now the mornings wind away so crankily that I shove everything into one plastic sack and lug it downstairs to a bin already regurgitating everyone else's refuse into the crinkled, November grass.

It's hard to keep a clean dorm on top of research papers backed up like the Starbucks line every morning after my 8:15. Today, before I charge up four flights of steps for my 9:45, I sit down in said Starbucks to work on one of these papers. I don't get a drink first; the line would make me late, and the excess of coffee in a plastic cup would only confirm my hopelessly American waste habits.

But before I can begin chipping away at my research on the life of Uta Hagen, I am accosted by a friend, prying about the progression of my rehearsals. I summarize funny comments that fall flat in retelling, and she chatters about a boy she swears is unbelievably gorgeous, but I know probably melds into a crowd like any of the rest of us would.

Unremarkable.

After she leaves, I work on my book instead of my paper.

I slug through the rest of my classes, clopping over to the dining hall in my Mary Janes to grab lunch to go.

Clattering into my room, I cringe against the blinding overhead light. I hate the headaches it inflicts, but my roommate says it keeps her awake while studying.

Only now, she's filling a trash bag with a month's buildup of drained Diet Coke bottles.

She and a commanding girl who barely reaches my collarbone have dug out caches of junk from under her bed and the back of her closet, fearlessly dumping it into the all-seeing eye of the fluorescent light. Her desk sits serene and decluttered; her bags of Chex-Mix are tucked primly into boxes on top of her chests, and a canvas tote I didn't know she possessed hangs on the wall above our miniature fridge.

I force small talk with her friend, casually leaning against my desk, so my legs obscure the popcorn kernels on the floor beneath it. I keep my gaze fixed on her as she discusses her intolerance for dust and refuse to let my eyes wander to the linty haze over the surface of my dresser.

Eventually, the recreational deep cleaner distracts herself with our broom and dustpan long enough that I can scarf down a few slimy slices of turkey breast trapped between two pieces of gluten-free bread (or cardboard, for those unfamiliar with the substance).

I discreetly add another dinner box to the stack teetering by my chair.

Finally, my roommate whisks out the door with her friend, gushing over their magnificent accomplishments. I stare at where they left the broom by the sink. I find it suspicious that after an afternoon of putting stuff back in its place, they leave the thing carelessly propped up there, smack in my view.

I swish the bristles of the broom on the floor, disturbing the serpentine tendrils of blonde hair tangled in the rug. Dust drifts against the walls like week-old snow.

I regard my reflection in the mirror above the sink, spotted with toothpaste spittle and fingerprints, just like how my acting notes have turned to scribbled strokes and splotches of cobalt ink as the year has waned on.

The amethyst half-moons under my eyes almost shine in the mirror light. I trace them with my fingers, which ache from the perpetual typing that seems to know no end these days. I flick off the overhead light and try to massage its lingering effects out of my head, mussing up my braid of unbrushed hair in the process. A package from my boyfriend sits unopened on my desk, but I leave it that way to spend some time regarding this

version of myself in the mirror, spotted and smudged, so blotched it's hard to see who's there beneath the grime.

Wearily, I set my alarm for 6:10 AM and crawl into bed.

I wake to *Clair de Lune* humming from my phone.

At 6:10, I push back the sheets to dissect the balancing act of dishes beneath my sink.

As Vince Guaraldi's *Great Pumpkin Waltz* frolics in the air, I wash the dishes. I stack them gently, and they answer me with polite plinks and clinks. I sweep crumbs and hairs into the trash, not under the rug. I cleanse the mirror. I wipe out the pillows of lint clogging the air vent and dust off my LEGO Eiffel Tower.

It's disgusting, and my sinuses retaliate, but once the layers of filth are gone, the air is clear, tinted brightly by notes of my orange blossom perfume.

Finally, I bend over my recycling bin and scrape out the raisins, and I add a trash bag to the bin. It hurts to get rid of the recycling, but now maybe I'll get out of the room on time tomorrow, and then I won't run late, and I'll write about Uta Hagen, and I'll agonize over my book, and maybe scroll a little, and open my package, and call my sister when I stretch on a clean carpet before bed, no crumbs sticking to my feet.

# Concrete

Cassandra Westling

Sunlight stains my shape  
Into the pavement,  
Wind-whipped hair a circus  
That trips over cracks, skips,  
Tangles in a gray mess,  
And I see  
A shade beside me,  
Printed to the concrete,  
Two steps behind me.  
Silent, my veins freeze.  
I blink, I breathe.  
It left; it's only me  
Searching,  
For the shadow of a person  
Who doesn't exist.

# Lift Off

Annee DeFelice



*Digital Photography*

# Cryptids

Abrianna Lanza

Spike started terrorizing Mickey Hughes's farm about a week before I arrived. I was following a trail of cattle mutilations down in Wimberley, Texas, and the farmer just about had it to his wits' end when I showed up and offered my services.

"s it free?" he'd asked while squinting at the crinkled, hand-written business card in his hands. He wasn't convinced that a hairless blood-sucking dog from Latin American folklore was the culprit, nor did he trust a walking twig like me to handle it. "I ain't paying you to get rid of no coyote. I can do that myself."

I could've used the money, but I dismissed him with a wave of my hand and assured him there'd be no charge. This time I was onto something—in this case, a chupacabra.

When you become a paranormal investigator, you learn to expect disappointment. Usually, some poor old lady calls you about a haunting that turns out to be rats in the attic, or a guy will show you the grainiest picture you've ever seen and swear up and down that it's Bigfoot. But I came to Wimberley on a hunch—that and the footage Mickey posted from his trail cams. So I staked out Mickey's pasture. Told him to give me a week, and I'd leave if I found nothing.

All I'd ever had growing up was my family, but my parents cut me off the day I walked away from a full ride at NC State to hunt monsters. They said I was throwing my life away chasing fairy tales, that I needed a *real* job. Maybe they were right because what I do doesn't exactly pay the rent. That's why I live out of my dad's old hunting camper, using the little I earn on gas and microwave dinners for one.

Were there days when I wished I could take it all back? Sure. But I couldn't. So, I just kept hunting for the things no one else believed in, hoping that one day, I'd have something to show for it.

When Spike came stumbling out of that bush later that night, with glowing eyes that pierced the darkness and his hind leg nicked by a bullet, it was like my prayers had been answered. He had smooth, hairless gray

skin, razor-sharp fangs, and beady yellow eyes with catlike pupils. His only fur was dark and wiry, a tuft at the tip of his tail and below his chin like a scraggly little beard. His ears were huge like a bat's, and his back was hunched with spikes running from between his shoulder blades to the base of his tail—hence his name. I didn't care that he was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen or that he was covered in too much blood for it to be entirely his own. I'd just found my first monster—or rather, he found me.

Dragging Spike back to the trailer was the most difficult part of that evening. Fortunately, he only bit me twice, and I don't think he was really trying to hurt me in the first place. He stopped fighting when he realized I was trying to help. Then, when his wounded leg was all wrapped in duct tape and gauze, he fell asleep on the cushioned ledge beside the window.

The next morning, Mickey knocked on my trailer. I tossed a blanket over Spike and cracked the door.

“Problem solved, kid,” he said. “Shot the mutt myself.”

“Did you kill it?”

“Clipped its leg. It won't make it very long out there on its own.”

“Great,” I replied. “I guess you don't need me to stick around then.”

Mickey huffed and crossed his arms. “I guess not.”

Mickey thought he'd shot a regular old coyote that would soon succumb to starvation or blood loss. I was happy to let him think that, but Spike was no ordinary mutt. He slept through most of the day while I observed, jotting down notes and sketching messy doodles in my journal. I couldn't help but wince each time he whimpered in his sleep, paws twitching like he was still trying to outrun something.

When he finally awoke, he wasn't panicked. He didn't react like any wild animal I'd ever encountered. He just lifted his head and watched me, his gaze trailing my every move. There was something in the way he looked at me that felt so *human*, like he could see me better than anyone I'd ever known.

I figured he must be hungry, so I threw a Hungry Man in the microwave and set it on the floor in front of him. He made a low, gurgling sound, his pupils narrowing as I backed away. Then, he sniffed the food and

scarfed it down, eating everything but the soggy, lukewarm green beans. I should've known the blood-sucking monster wouldn't like vegetables. After he ate, he curled up at my feet, won over by that Salisbury steak.

Spike and I bonded more as the week went on, and by the time Friday came around, I'd resigned myself to the fact that I was now sharing my Winnebago with a vampiric dog. We were camped out at a local park now. I didn't want to leave Wimberley just yet, but staying on Mickey's farm was no longer an option. That's when my sister Helena called. She was the only family member who kept in contact with me, and she always had impeccable timing.

I told her everything—about the trail cams, the stakeout, even the Salisbury steak.

“Monsters aren't real, Kol. You need to grow up.”

“This one is.”

Helena sighed, her disappointment audible.

“Listen,” she started sharply, “I can't keep making excuses for you, but if you give up this whole *Ghostbuster* act, I *might* be able to convince Mom and Dad to let you come home.”

Spike lifted his head from where it had been resting on my shoe and looked at me with those strange, knowing eyes. I reached down and scratched his chin, and his hind paw thumped against the floor. He flopped onto his side, let his tongue loll, and yipped contentedly.

“I'm already home,” I said with a quiet certainty I hadn't felt before. The line went dead, but the monster at my feet was living, breathing, and more real than anything I'd had in a long time.

# The Waiting Tree

Leona Johnson

My foot's in agony.  
Your knee's been strained.  
We missed town Connell  
    in the rain.  
This field drags forever on  
Without a single  
    splash of sun.

You trusted me  
To guide us straight,  
But I have failed—  
Your eyes drip hate.  
I said we'd arrive  
At half-past-eight.  
That was before

booming  
    storm  
        and  
sopping  
    boots  
        and  
melting  
    roads  
        lost  
            our route.

So now we're bogged  
Beneath this tree.  
Who'll step out first?  
You  
Or me?



# LAMP

*Literary Magazine*