2013

Commonthought (2013)

Commonthought Staff

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Commonthought is a celebration of the creative endeavors of Lesley University.

Front and Back Cover Art: Dylan Griffin
Foreword

On Wednesday, November 20, 2013, the student editors of Commonthought reached an impasse. They were evenly split on the matter of this issue’s cover. Half of the class was in favor of the dueling canine images by Dylan Griffin that eventually won out and half of the class was just as passionately in favor of the striking image by Lyndsey McElreath titled “Little Boo.”

Despite my attempts to remain impartial, I was firmly in the latter camp. And so, it seemed unfair to let me cast the deciding vote, as I have been asked to do in previous semesters, as I did all too often when I was production editor of my own undergraduate literary magazine way back when.

Instead, we flipped a coin. Tails for the dogs, of course, and heads for the mannequin in deep thought.

As I have been since I took up the post of faculty editor in September 2010, I am impressed with how seriously my students take their work on Commonthought, with how much passion goes into every acceptance and rejection. And it never ceases to amaze me how divisive some decisions can be.

For instance, when a group of students debated my own piece, “One Player or Two?” (submitted anonymously to them), I was both silently rooting for the acceptance and marveling at how two students could enjoy the piece so much while another protested loudly of how much it bored him.

The decisions now final, we are proud to print within our pages the work of students, faculty, alumni, and friends of Lesley alike.

We hope you enjoy this year’s issue of Commonthought, and that you will consider adding your voice to the magazine next year.

E. Christopher Clark
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Letter Home

Alyssa Marshall

Dear Mom and Dad:

It's been three years since I last spoke to you. I was just writing to let you know what I've been doing since I left. I found a little apartment just south of Boston, and I got a job bartending there, but I have managed to keep my head above water.

I guess I'm really writing to tell you that I'm getting married to a girl named Elizabeth. She's a student at Harvard, the most beautiful girl I've ever met. It's not just the looks; she's smart and patient. We would both like your permission to attend the wedding. If your feelings are the same as they were three years ago, then you'll be at the wedding, I imagine.
All of the ex-girlfriends went by their middle names, but no one ever could tell why, as Ashleigh woke from her nap amidst Prof Trough’s lecture on the correct method of eating grapefruit, her Kalashnikov under her desk, we saw it, but only just saw it, freshly sawed having come to eggplant eroticica their bulbs the size of cat thumbs, and oh,———

This great movie on the tea-v bag last night, a young skateboarder, and a text change gone wrong, where he was a male, now he is an ale, or rather a Gail (force wind) who loves receiving chain mail posted return to Grapefruit Land, all rights re—severed with a large dope and hide of ayes, inching.
Pizza Dude Wasn’t You But Like For a Second He Kinda Was
Jess Rizkallah

i bought a slice of pizza from him once.
he had nice eyes, they came out of his mouth when he spoke
which is to say he said the type of stuff
that someone with nice eyes would say. which is to say
that he said the type of stuff that someone
with eyes would say. which is to say that
all eyes are nice

but prose needs something to talk about
prose needs some eyeballs where ice cubes usually go
in the tallish drinks of water drunkenly thrown into chest holes when chests flirt with dehydration and anyway, i’m more of a chocolate milk kinda girl, kinda

i mean i guess it’s just that dairy leaves my stomach
unsettled so i write poetry about it,
but i change dairy’s name to yours
so you’re like
a milkshake shaking shaken, cocktailed
with blue that will always run vein in the face because the sun doesn’t want to touch you.

i’m fine i didn’t drink any milk today, i’m just
wondering how you are
i am wondering how close you are. i’m wondering

if you will ever turn to roses when oxygen reaches you
Night Time Scavenger
Marisa Glynn

My talons scrape secrets inside the flesh of the hangman’s tree. My paws stained with crimson liquor, chewing the ventricles of my own thrashing heart. I turn myself hollow, emptying the tin cans of our wedding rings. Fingers tying knots in the veins to our miss-matched pulse. It echoes in frayed yarn. The wires of innocence are dinged yellow and coated with lint. It has been so long since we were electric.

I am rodent, clawing through the hammock of skin and whistles of bone. You collect tarnished journals and orange rinds, as if citrus stains would purify the rubbish in your promises. Building stilts on falsified memory, you have forgotten what it is like to place your feet on solid ground.

These rubber bands have snapped, worn down with age. The cereal has gone stale, crusting calloused. These items on which you depended never had the pleasure to love you back. I swallowed the beat of their inanimate before they ever had the chance to.

The stripes on my tail resonate the crossed out sentences in your page. The lavender fingerprints beneath your eyelids. I am black eyed bruise. The skeletons in your closet are following you. I know that I am only one of them.

Children never taste the rotting despair in their games. Rocks bruise, scissors slice, and paper fades with a scratch. Tin cans tied with yarn never made great for playing spy. It is a failed form of communication. The soup label stained my ring finger. My animal tattooed with your absence.

They call me nighttime scavenger, but I am mechanical man. I bite through your remains with zipper teeth, chewing the heartstrings of yarn. They spark into static before the light goes out.
Jungle Eyes
Ben Peipert
U.S. 1, Howard County, Maryland
Michael Ratcliffe

Asphalt and concrete,
rutted, cracked, pot-holed, patched,
curbed and uncurbed,
planned and unplanned,
junkyards, repair shops,
used car dealers, new car dealers,
warehouses, truck stop, rail yard,
gritty bars that open at six when the night shift ends,
gas stations, liquor stores,
shopping centers, restaurants,
motels for travelers passing through,
motels for the suburban poor,
travelers’ cabins whose residents never leave,
trailer parks, apartments,
new homes, old homes,
neighborhoods.

You proclaim your presence
with a cacophony of signs,
disorderly and non-compliant.
You do not celebrate your diversity,
which arose from the dull practicality of life.

You are not sexy like I-95,
fast moving, designed for speed from city to city.
You are not beautiful like the Parkway,
stone bridges and tree-lined;
nor are you efficient like Route 29,
moving the outer suburban elites
to work and play without wasting time.
You are the step-sister—
once first, now least.
You are the old hag,
coughing and wheezing
through diesel fumed days,
from Elkridge to Laurel,
carrying the burdens.

You have no pretense to beauty;
no tree-lined verges;
no manicured medians.
You are rough-edged, ugly, and stained.
Your open spaces are empty lots
and forest tracts waiting to be bulldozed
and opened for business.

Now we are changing you,
like we changed ourselves.
We are making you orderly and neat,
sweeping away the dross,
like we swept it from elsewhere in the county.
The tide of suburban conformity
is rising over you,
parcel by parcel;
redeveloped;
standardized
commodified.

When the transformation is complete—
the removal of the old,
the decrepit,
the unwanted,
the nonconforming—
what will you be?
What will we be?
Waking up is the worst part of my day. Complete darkness envelops my aching eye sockets, and like yesterday and the days before that one I have to accept that this is my fate. It wasn’t too long ago that I could take in a morning sunrise; have it seep through the cracks in my blinds and disrupt my deep sleep. My eyes would wince and wish to slip back into darkness. The darkness is now something I have had to get used to.

My wife helps dress me now, although her fashion sense was never quite up to my standards I do trust her judgment when it comes to the start of my day. She feeds me and prepares me for my day ahead, all of them seem the same to me now. When she leaves for work I make my way to the basement to take care of business. Ever since I lost my vision I’ve had to work from home. E-mails from clients are now read aloud through computer programs and I am able to write my replies through voice recognizing software.

Nothing really interests me anymore; I still love my wife, but being 34 and blind isn’t exactly the way I thought my life would turn out. Growing up in a small town just outside of Denver I enjoyed everything that a normal young boy enjoys. I played sports, chased girls, went to college, and what not. I met my beautiful wife Chelsie while I was doing graduate studies at the University of Iowa. She was an undergrad in the English department and I was getting my master’s in business. We got married when I was 26; she was just a year younger.

The cancer didn’t develop until about two years ago in the fall and it spread too quickly for the doctors to act on. I was blind by the winter. I had to learn to accept my life as a blind individual. There are still plenty of things I can do as if I could still see, but there isn’t a second that goes by where I don’t wish it all would just wash away and I could see again.
Having something as critical as sight striped away from someone is devastating, as people we think we are totally invincible until it strikes. God has no mercy, when it is your time, you go. He has a plan for me apparently, and it involves me never having the gift of sight again. And that’s exactly what life is, a gift. It’s a gift that can be taken away at any moment.

While I’m at home I’m simply counting down the hours until Chelsie comes home for her lunch break and when she comes home for good. Something once simple like making food isn’t exactly so simple anymore. My days are spent responding to emails and listening to sports radio, I often wonder how the rest of my life will pan out. Is this going to be the cycle forever? Often I ponder the thought of Chelsie leaving me; I can’t say I would provide the most entertaining life from here on out. The power of love is strong, and we’ve been married for almost ten years. I’ve learned better to not count on having something forever at this point in my life though.

Since the cancer our relationship hasn’t exactly been the same. What once was a passionate and loving connection has almost become a doctor and patient situation. I would come home from work and kiss her on the forehead; we would talk about the work days we just endured as she made dinner. It was a routine that I miss terribly. When she comes home now she asks me how I am doing it’s no longer a question about my emotional being or anything like that; it’s more of a question of my physical being. Have I run into anything today? How is the pain? Have I done everything I was supposed to do?

We’re both just running through the motions without stopping and realizing we both need help. I love her so much but the fact that our relationship is deteriorating from husband and wife to friends, with barely any benefits.

Having not seen anything in two or three years, the urge for excitement has hit its peak. I would do anything to just see something again, especially Chelsie’s face. There’s only one way
to get close enough to sight: dreaming. Sleeping is my favorite thing to do when I’m home. Considering I lived my whole life with perfect sight, I can see in all of my dreams. Sometimes I don’t, it’s a dream based on sounds, tastes, and smells but when I’m lucky I have dreams just like everybody else. But unlike most people I have the ability to have lucid dreams. The ability to control what I do during a dream has become somewhat of a second life for me since I’ve lost my eye sight. Sleeping or taking frequent naps are one thing but usually it takes something extra for me to completely knock out.

It’s about noon time and Chelsie just stopped back home to fix lunch quickly. I take a moment to hug her and run my fingers through her hair, it feels frizzled and out of place. She must be stressed out or late, or both. Chelsie has been working on overdrive and I can tell that she’s at her breaking point. She’s back out the door in less than thirty minutes and I’m back by myself in the darkness. She barely had time to ask her typical half ass question about my well-being, but I think nothing of it. I shovel down the pasta and meatballs and shuffle my way to the bathroom. My hands search for the mirror as I slip through prescription bottles. My fingers graze over the brail labels until I find the NyQuil, I grip the bottle and move toward the bedroom.

I keep most of the drugs in an old shoebox that I know Chelsie won’t look in or throw away. As I sip the NyQuil I can feel my body grow anxious for the upcoming episode. When my sight was lost all of my other senses became enhanced in one way or another. I’m usually and anxious person but once I begin to tip back this bottle I can feel my body melting. I continue to drink about what feels like half the bottle of NyQuil and almost immediately I can feel myself getting drowsy. My body has built up some sort of a resistance for the sleep aid, what used to take me just a few sips has become an ongoing increase of dosage. Buying the amount necessary was getting suspicious to Chelsie so I’ve managed to make a few friends in the neighborhood. The
teenagers who smoke pot near my backyard and I have agreed to keep a few secrets. They run to the convenience store and get me a few bottles when I need it, and I don’t tell their parents about their after school habits. All it took was to hang the threat of an angry mother or father over their heads one time to get them on my side. I set an alarm for five o’clock, which gives me about a half hour before Chelsie comes home from work. In a matter of minutes I’m out cold.

It’s a large banquet room, and I’m sweating profusely. I feel nervous but at the same time as I look around most of friends and family are in the room too so I’m put back to ease. Music begins to play, it’s Paul McCartney & Wings performing, “Let Me Roll It” but it sounds backwards. The lights turn out and a spotlight shines on the dance floor where Chelsie stands in a white wedding dress. My palms are no sweating profusely as I begin to swipe them across my pant leg but pause for the thought of the sweat leaving a wet mark. The dress is exactly how I remember it, and she looks as beautiful as ever. The moment is so surreal I almost begin to cry, but I’ve had this dream before. She stretches out her hand and I embrace her as we start to dance. We circle around the room and my eyes shift from Chelsie’s blue-green eyes to the faces of my parents, family and friends.

“Are you happy?” she asks.
“Couldn’t be happier,” I reply.

The music is on repeat, and by the third time through I request a new song to Paul and the rest of the band.
“How about something a little faster paced?” I ask.
Sir Paul nods his head and he counts off into a standard blues cut and the floor begins to fill with my closest friends. For a moment I wish the night would never end but I know this dream only lasts up to another few songs. I pull Chelsie aside and we talk about our future as husband and wife. I often tell her how I
can see the future and reveal the incident I’ll have during our eighth year of marriage but she shrugs it off and laughs.

“You have the wildest imagination,” she says.

We both stand there in silence as I take in my surroundings. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to see the little things. The way my wife’s eyes sparkle when the light hits them, the face people make when laughing, not the straight from your belly kind of laugh but the kind where you lose your breath for a moment, that kind of laugh. It’s beautiful, everything is simply perfect.

Chelsie and I continue to talk and I catch myself getting lost in her eyes over and over again. I can’t remember the last time I felt her like this. She was genuinely happy, for me, for us. I can’t seem to tell her I love her enough to the point where the repetition is almost nauseating.

I look into Chelsie’s eyes as I can hear an alarm ringing over the band’s last song. I take one last walk around the dance floor as I struggle between the real world and dream world. She turns to me and whispers, “I will always love you.”

That simple line that she ends the dream with every time is so frequent that I whisper it back to her in unison as the dream beings to dissipate. I pull Chelsie close but I’m pulled away from her like a reluctant child to its prized blanket.

All at once I wake up to darkness. Waking up is the worst part of my day.
The Kid
W. Luther Jett

About Reuben sandwiches
I was always confused.
The way that postcard
stuck in my throat—as if
a song wanted singing. Don’t
boil that kid. Handle it
with a chorus, with care. Cheese it,
the cops play ring a rose
window. Morning. Pickled cabbage.
I was, too. On rye. Oh, show me
the way to the next,
I’ve been thinking, little dollar,
oh, oh, where, where are you?
The sign in the deli window,
burning like a hechsher
in my ferris-wheel night.
And me, down to my last
two cent plain. Red string,
strung along, egg cream.
There never was a Brooklyn
I didn’t like. They bricked up
the gate to keep the goat
from sliding through
on mother’s milk.
Hawks in Harvard Square
Lisa DeSiro

Sometimes they hover, sometimes glide above the buildings. Citified, they perch atop the church clock tower, or the high-rise by the park—

that park where once I thought something swept past in a blur, swooping into the plane tree nearest me. But from underneath all I could see

was quivering greenish sunlight twisted between branches. The hawks had nested only in my mind. No matter.

Wind went rippling like dry water

through their feathers, through my hair, through the air throughout the square.
Central: Grand
Willow Coronella

Her scuffed canvas oxfords kissed the tiles
as she gazed at the god’s view of the constellations.
A blood red jacket weaved its way
through a circus of minds in boxes of metal.
A skirt of floral print drifted and floated
beyond a sea of creased trousers
and patented leather shoes on their way to a desk.
No. Not all who wonder are aimless.
Martha’s Vineyard Seagull
Tyler Plourd
Untitled
Zachary Najarian-Najafi

1
The city is a congested heart on verge of a massive attack, she says while opening a man of Academia Nuts. Just look at the tube, the twoube, just look, hook. Naked (wo?)men gyrate their lips, tips, pips, sips ————rips, jell-o, fellow.

2
Grumbling dreams flood the abasement. Your rabbit fears point up, pup. She runs from my puns, grabs a gun for my buns——hell in dove——Helen Love. The Nuts are lawn, cut around to rise——just my prize size, dyes.
An Active and Personal Devil
Anne Higgins

It has been reported by the New York Times...that as technology increases, more and more people are coming to believe in an active and personal devil. —Miller Williams

The door was wood, with peeling paint and a china doorknob white, cracked, spider web of black cracks, but not chapped. The door was closed, but not too hard to open. The devil sat behind the door, hunched over a table, hiding. She was thin and young. I asked her why and she looked at me and did not answer. I left her, but left the door ajar. I felt in my shoulders two red tomatoes, like organs of the body, red balls, and furry. They tell me to watch out, that I’m letting my heart go. Soon I see a small white closet with a black tile floor. In back of it waits a thin cherry door, a hoard of copper pipes. I see the door leads to another country, Backed up by a stone In a deep summer forest. Laminate, I think, no, Lamia.
The glass pane of my exhibit at the Cincinnati Zoo had been so comforting. It protected me. It was glittering and beautiful in the sunlight when small children pressed their faces up and camera flashes shimmered against it. Glass was not so pretty after the bomb. I trudged through it, my gouged paws dripping blood on the glinting cement. In the years to come, they would try to wash the stains out but they would stay until they ripped the pavement up. Even after the carnage was cleared there would be ghosts in bloody pawprints.

I had stalked the walls of my cage my whole life, and now there was no one to feed me.

I ate the bodies of the animals that hadn’t survived the blast first, the Galapagos tortoise who had died from the shock of the bomb alone, the elephants whose enclosure was broken but whose cement night housing still stood strong enough to starve them. I shouldered open doors they were too big to fit through. I knew they were dead before I went inside because the keening, mourning noises they made over their mangled, starving family finally stopped.

I wondered sometimes about the woman who had fed me since I had been born. I knew they weren’t supposed to treat us like pets, because we were dangerous, but sometimes when no one was looking she would rub me behind the ears. Tigers can’t purr, but my chest would rumble in pleasure.

There were no human bodies at the zoo.

I would have stayed there, but meat rots. I trotted out the front gates when it did, following the wolves and foxes, the group of lionesses whose lion had died in the flash-bang heat of the bomb. There were no people in the houses. Near the zoo everything had been leveled, but further out everything was pristine. There was no meat except for small birds and squirrels.
My hunter’s instinct, so long dormant, rose like bile in my throat. But this was not enough to feed me. I grappled a gaunt and desperate lioness in the living room of an abandoned white house. I could smell death in her mouth—she was so hungry she was already half-rotted. I ripped out her jugular.

It was an act of mercy and hunger. I like to think she didn’t fault me for killing her. She knew what starving felt like.
Untitled
Emma Benard
A Man, a Plan, a Canal
Carolyn Clare Givens

Date: December 25, 2008.
Time: 0510 hours.
Officer Making Report: Kevin N. Ivek.
Incident: Confiscation at routine security screening, International Terminal.
Reason: Potential weapon.
Description of Confiscated Item: Ice pick with wine bottle cork on sharp end. Stanley brand. 6 ¼ inches long. Clear yellow transparent handle with painted red accents.
Action Taken: Perpetrator questioned and released to board his flight. Item confiscated.

Officer Kevin N. Ivek finished filling out the form and handed it to the officer behind the confiscations desk, who looked up from thick book with onion-skin pages. The confiscations officer was studying English or something in college, one of those really useful degrees. He had those glasses with thick plastic black frames, which were probably supposed to make him look cool and studious. His uniform shirt was as wrinkled as the pre-creased polyester could get. Kevin watched the confiscations officer look over the form. He had really wanted to write down that the perpetrator was a complete moron who couldn’t comprehend that an ice pick was a potential weapon or that he thought covering the tip of it with a cork from some vineyard in Virginia mitigated the fact that he was trying to get a sharp, pointy object on the plane. Unfortunately there was no place on this form to describe the perpetrator’s idiocy. That was the responsibility of the officer who’d questioned the guy.

“Ha!” the officer behind the desk barked out a laugh. “With your middle initial your name’s a palindrome.”

“A what?” Kevin asked.

“A palindrome. You know: ‘a man, a plan, a canal, Panama’?”
“Huh?”
“It’s the same backward and forward. A palindrome,” the officer said.
“Oh,” said Kevin.
“Wouldn’t it be cool if the word ‘palindrome’ was a palindrome?”
“I guess so.”
“Like ‘mondegreen.’ ‘Mondegreen’ is a mondegreen.”
“I have no idea what that means,” Kevin said.
“It’s when you hear—”
“And I really don’t care,” Kevin added.
“Oh, sorry.”
“Do you have everything you need?” Kevin asked.
“It’s all here, Officer Ivek,” the confiscations officer said.
Kevin watched the officer toss the ice pick into an open box sitting next to him on the desk. Inside was the night’s collection of a vegetable peeler and t-wrench. Kevin turned his back on the chatty desk officer and walked back toward the screening area.
As he passed the customs officer’s lounge, a snatch of conversation caught his ear.
“You’ll never believe who just came through,” a man said.
Kevin stopped to listen. He always stopped to listen, just in case it was her they were talking about. If she ever came through he was sure he’d hear about it.
“Who?” another officer asked.
“This guy just came in on the flight from Ecuador dressed as Santa Claus. Fake beard, red suit, carrying a little plastic Christmas tree in one hand and one of those pop-up electric Coleman lanterns in the other,” the first officer said.
Kevin sighed. It wasn’t her.
“Ecuador? Ugh. I always hate those flights; you always get somebody trying to bring in produce.”
“Yeah, trying to explain to the guy in front of me that he can’t bring in his cucumber and lima beans but the last guy could have two dozen roses…”

“I know!”

Kevin continued on his way, the conversation fading out behind him. He opened a door and passed out into the screening area. One or two passengers were disemboweling their carry-on luggage to get to their computers and quart-sized bags filled with three-ounce-bottles of liquid. Kevin could never understand why people seemed to keep those items at the bottom of their carry-ons when they knew they’d need to pull them out.

Mike Becket, working the x-ray machine, saw Kevin enter the screening area.

“Hey, Ivek, get back out here! My kids are waiting for me—presents under the tree, you know.”

“Sorry, Mike,” Kevin said. He approached to take over the scanning and told Becket about the talkative confiscations officer.

“Well, I’m off then,” Mike said. “Your turn to break in the new kid.”

Kevin looked up at the kid returning from the entrance to the screening area. His fat, pimply face seemed to be squeezing out of the top of a still-creased blue polyester-cotton mix shirt, the embroidered patch on his shoulder sticking out flat and stiff.

“The new kid,” Kevin said.

“He’s not so bad,” Officer Becket said. “And you’ve got a slow morning.” He looked down at the sheet and read off the schedule, a flight departing at eight and one at nine forty.

“See you,” Kevin said. “Merry Christmas.”

Becket left, and Kevin sat back on the stool to wait for the trickle of people who thought you still should show up three hours early for an international flight on Christmas morning. Kevin knew they wouldn’t be busy. He’d have time to think about her, to remember her golden eyes, to bask in her smile.
The new kid stood at attention behind the metal detectors, wand in hand, looking as professional he could with his pimply face and too-small shirt.

“Kid,” Kevin said. “You can relax. It’s Christmas morning.”

“Yes, officer,” the kid said, not moving.

“Seriously, you’ll pull a muscle.”

“Yes, sir.” The kid spread his feet apart a step and put his arms behind him.

A passenger set his bag on the conveyor belt and Kevin pushed the button to take it through the x-ray. The man stepped through the metal detector, and nothing happened. Kevin saw the outlines of books and a cell phone in his bag. The man’s loafers were neatly placed next to the bag in a bin. The pennies showed up black on Kevin’s screen. He pushed the button and the bag came out on the other end of the machine. The man picked it up and set his shoes down on the floor. Slipping his feet into them, he took a step before turning back.

“Always this empty on Christmas?” he asked.

“Yes,” Kevin answered.

“Hey, you guys got any packaging tape? I’ve got a book with a tear in the cover I wanted to fix. Keep forgetting to pick it up.”

“Kid?” Kevin looked over at the new kid, who was standing at attention once again.

“No sir, just masking tape.”

“Sorry, mister.”

“No problem. Thought I’d ask.”

The man walked toward the gates. Kevin closed his eyes and imagined her walking up to the conveyor belt and taking off her sandals for the security check. He opened his eyes to the sight of the kid’s pimply face. Trying not to shudder, he gave the kid a look. Immediately, the kid flushed from fat neck to hairline and stood at ease.

“Officer Ivek,” the kid said. “Have you worked Christmas morning much?”
“Every year,” Kevin said.
“Really?”
“I request it.”
“Is it always this slow?”
“Has been for seven years.”

Kevin didn’t encourage the kid to talk. He wanted it quiet. He had seven years of Christmas mornings to think about. Seven years. For a moment he wondered if he’d still know her after all this time. He closed his eyes again and the doubt fell away. He didn’t even have to try; her form came before him in an instant: a golden mane of curls falling over her perfectly tanned shoulders, a yellow sundress, the color of a lemon, clinging to her perfect figure, tied round her slim waist with a piece of green twine, her legs tapering to delicate ankles. She was lovely, but it wasn’t until she’d smiled that Kevin’s heart had been caught. She came alive when she smiled, alive in a way that Kevin was sure he’d never been. He’d thought about her every day for seven years, but Christmas mornings were the worst—or maybe the best. Kevin wasn’t sure whether seeing her in his mind’s eye was a torture or a pleasure.

A young family came up to the screening area and began to shed coats and bags into the plastic bins.

“No, Zachey, you can’t carry that through,” the mother was saying to her son. “You have to put your tape measure in the bin.”

The father took the tape measure out of the little boy’s hand and set it on the far side of a bin. The boy started to wail, and his mother tried to comfort him.

“It’s just for a minute, honey! I know, I know, it’s hard to give up your new present even for a minute.”

“Just get through, Celia,” her husband said.

The woman walked through the metal detector as Kevin pushed the button on the conveyor belt. The boy followed his mother and ran to the edge of the belt for his new toy. He paid no
attention as the alarm went off on his father and the new kid began to wand him. The mother handed the boy his tape measure and he began using it on the leg of a table. The new kid finished with the father, and the man gathered his things together and tried to get his wife and son moving toward the gate.

The boy began to scream again when his father picked him up, and Kevin was glad to hear the cries fading into the distance a few moments later. At least their gate was far away. He looked at the table leg the boy had been measuring. It was probably thirty-six inches, Kevin thought. He wondered why there was a plastic footer on it. The janitorial staff must have been proud of their shiny floors.

Kevin closed his eyes again to find her. He looked for her in his mind whenever there were screaming children or disgruntled passengers. She was his refuge.

“So, Officer Ivek,” the new kid said, “you’ve been working TSA since 9/11?”

“Yeah,” Kevin said.

“What’s the strangest thing you’ve confiscated?”

Kevin thought about it for a moment. “Candle snuffer,” he said.

“What?”

“It looked like a hammer, so we pulled the bag. Turned out it was pewter candle snuffer. Probably would have broken if they’d tried to use it as a weapon, but we confiscated it anyway.”

“And why do you always work Christmas mornings?”

Kevin thought about telling the kid to shut up and mind his own fat, pimply business, but decided to lie. “Good money,” he said; then he closed his eyes again and watched her approach his desk as she had that morning.

He’d worked seven years of Christmas mornings just in case she came back. Seven years at security in the international terminal just in case she traveled somewhere else. She’d been
going to the Bahamas on that trip. He could remember her destination, her dress, and her smile, but he had no memory of her name.

Kevin opened his eyes and saw Spinelli get up from his stool up at the entrance to the screening area. He walked toward them.

“I’m bored to death up there,” Spinelli said. “Anyone wanna change?”

“I will,” Kevin said. “You can talk to the new kid.”

Getting stuck there with Spinelli would be worse than the new kid. The guy reeked of garlic, even though it was only seven o’clock in the morning. And he’d talk. He always talked. Kevin walked to the desk at the entrance to the screening area. He slipped on the blue gloves and picked up the highlighter and UV light.

A man came through and Kevin took his boarding pass and ID. He glanced it over, looked at the man and initialed it, _KI_. Between passengers he let his mind wander, imagining everything he’d say to her if she ever came through again. How he’d catch her attention with his wit. Automatically he wrote his initials on the boarding passes, _KI, KI, KI_, as people came through, but his mind was seven years in the past and a lifetime into the future all at once.

He smelled a light, delicious perfume and automatically reached his hand out for the woman’s boarding pass and ID. _Sarah H. Aras, Panama City, Panama_, he read. Then he looked at the picture on the passport and snapped to attention. He lifted his eyes and met hers. Her golden curls surrounded her perfect face and framed a set of honey-colored eyes. She was wearing blue this time, but the light fabric still clung about her slim form like it belonged on her. Then she smiled, and her whole person was suddenly alight. All over again, Kevin felt that he didn’t know what being alive really was, and that he never could know until she was a part of his life. In an instant, seven years of imagined greetings flew through his head. He tried to open his
mouth and say something charming, but nothing would come to his tongue. There was a pause as he drank in her presence, then, finally, language came to his lips:

“A man, a plan, a canal—”

“Panama,” she finished for him, laughing a little.

“With your middle initial your name’s a palindrome,” he said.

She smiled. “It is.”

He wanted to tell her that his was, too. Or that he really didn’t care about any of that and wanted to sweep her away to an island in the Pacific with him; that her smile was the light of his life, the thing he’d been hoping to see again for seven years, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Goodbye, Miss Aras,” Kevin said.

“Bye,” she said with another radiant smile. “See you.”

Sarah H. Aras turned away and moved into the screening area, and Kevin N. Ivek watched her go.

“I’ll see you,” he whispered.
Cold Night, Main Street, Cambridge
Michael Ratcliffe

Cold night...
Main Street, Cambridge...
As I walk to my hotel after dinner,
a guy about my age, thin jacket, walking toward me—
more than a shuffle, but not much—
whiskeyed eyes, half a cigarette in hand.
Our gazes meet—mutual nods of hello.
Perhaps he sensed that I thought he would speak to me,
so he says “I’m not going to ask you for money,
but, I do want to talk.”

He said he was homeless, and that he’d been hurt.
“I’m on my way to my parents’ house south of Boston—
it’s okay, I got money for the T—
just need someone to talk to first.
They’re gonna give me a hard time cuz of how I live,
and I’m just gonna have to take it,
cuz I need a place to stay while I get better.
I don’t want to argue and make them mad.
And, then, my mom’s gonna fix
all the foods I ate when I was growin’ up,
but, you know, I can’t eat them cooked that way anymore...
peppers bother me now,
and anything fried,
and when I say something, it’ll only upset her.”
I said “I know what you mean,”
and we talked about getting older,
and the intestinal troubles that hit you after forty,
and how our mothers just want to take care of us,
like when we were boys.
And we go along with it, but only for so long,
and then we feel like the worst goddamned sons in the world.

We shook our heads, saying what can you do?
then shook hands and told each other
we’re lucky to have mothers
who still want to cook for us.
This is a Baby
Ethan Riley
Shame
Bonnie Rachel Lutz

He’s our friend; I continue to smile. He holds my little body up, wrapped around his hip. His arm circling my middle, my flat chest against his bulk. My legs spread, one knee crooked up against his belly, toes at his crotch, one foot dangling low. His free hand on my child leg, rubbing up-down in unobtrusive rhythm. Up-down my innocent, unshaven calf, close to my silent thigh. He stands in the open, as if all is chaste, talking to my father.
Untitled
Zachary Najarian-Najafi

She called me a see-you-in-tea
even though I had buried my cat
the day before, under the power
lines in a plastic shopping bag,
because I didn’t have a box. I
said have some sympathy you—
——cur——you——you——
These afternoons we pray at the
altar—in the—cathedral—of—
mediocrity, for the salvation
(of broken bottles), to escape
from needeyocrity, hoo-haw!
Under the power lines, where
the grizzlies fire off blanks where
Birm goes for morning runs,
is where it wear is ware it,—
hair, nair is for your hair, not cat
prayers,—stop—negotiating—
Four Bullets
W. Luther Jett

Somewhere in southern China, my father spent one sleepless night bleeding in a rice-paddy after his convoy was set upon by bandits.

Already, one gold star hung on a placard in my grandmother’s window (Uncle Bill fell at New Georgia); two would have left this tale untold.

In the morning, my father rose, mud-soaked, and pried four bullets out of his truck’s door-panel. The one which creased his back, he never found.

The village elders wrote him a letter of apology, in order to keep face.

Now, I hold those bullets in my hand, feel their lethal weight, the copper cartridges flattened by impact, and give thanks they missed their mark.
Early morning office gossip,
soothing and inconsequential
warbled observations
about the weather,
a form of birdsong,
the traffic on the beltway coming in,
details about children,
their schools, their health.

Jackie chirrups about Ronald,
her stepson with medical problems
from her husband’s previous marriage.
The calming sound of her trill
puts me in the relaxing mood
of Saturday morning on the front porch,
newspaper in hand,
coffee on the table beside me.

But then a note
pricks up my ears,
and I’m wondering,
did she say
“ex-wife” or “sex life?”
There’s a slight trill of scandal
piping in her voice,
a whistle with a warning,
but I’m no closer to identifying
the exotic cry
when all conversations ceases
and the pecking order re-establishes itself
as work begins in earnest.
in the laundry room

removing my hot clothes
I was wondering who

had transferred them from washer to dryer
maybe *Pylon* (red hair)

or *Skin* (uncircumcised)
or one of the other nick-

ames wheeling kegs through the hallways
in our co-ed dorm they

got girls like me
drunk by giving us *BoJos*

(beer mixed with orange juice)
I was wondering which

had helped me pick up the pieces
when my mug slipped

smashed on the concrete floor
then he was there *Crazy*

*John*
shirtless and tan reaching

down and out of my basket
lifting up a single sock

stuck to panties saying
Oh are these yours?

and then I knew
Little Boo
Lyndsey McElreath
So I’m banging a deaf chick.
Maybe I should be a bit more polite.

I am in a relationship with a lovely woman who is incapable of hearing. Her name is Katherine, and I call her whatever because, you know, she can’t hear. If I wanted to, I could call her Slagathorian of Brisbane and she wouldn’t know. Granted, I’d have to cover my mouth because she’s better at reading lips than she admits, but I digress.

I have a tendency to call her Kat because I find that easiest to maneuver with sign language. She’s a really great gal. Dresses impeccably, great to be around, likes the stuff I like and is in general very clean and put together. But she can’t hear. Talking is...difficult, shall we say. She tends to avoid it, citing volume control issues (yelling is easiest when you don’t even know you’re doing it) and an inability to enunciate properly, what with her lack of reference. She’s never heard the spoken word, which leaves her sort of up the creek without a paddle. From what she’s told me (and this may or may not be true—she likes to mess with me because she thinks I’m sort of an idiot, though in her defense I am one) her best guesses at speech come from having read lips, and learning how to do that was a nightmare that encompassed her youth. Because of her distaste for learning to read lips (and despite how much she enjoyed the end result), she never learned to speak. More or less she tries to mimic what she’s seen. The results are varied. Usually bad.

Everyone that knows me was surprised when I told them that I was dating a deaf girl. I’m a big fan of music and noise in general, and Kat has no opinion on either of those. Actually scratch that: she likes some types of music depending on how the vibrations are. Metallica allegedly has oppressive drumming. I tell her that’s because Lars Ulrich is a very bad man. This almost
always makes her laugh, which she’s quick to catch and stifle. We’ve been together for a few years now, but she still tries to keep from vocalizing in any way, shape or form.

Back to me, though: I like music. I listen to music. I like all types, but I’ve got a special sort of criteria that usually decides whether or not I like a band or song or whatever. Most of the time it’s usually the vocalist that decides it for me. The guys with weird voices are my favorites: Angus Young, Dave Mustaine, Ozzy, Bruce Dickinson, Claudio Sanchez, Freddie Mercury, Brendon Small, Rolf Kasparek, the list goes on. It’s not just weird voices, though—just the sound matters to me. As much as the world hates it (and as much as I tear its use to shreds in reviews), Auto-Tune is one of my favorite inventions ever. Not just that, basically any sort of voice modulator does it for me. Something about the reverb and distortion they can add to voices is just music to my ears. Hah. Puns.

For as long as I’ve been able to remember, I’ve always had some sort of fixation on voices and the nuance to them, natural or unnatural. It was this fixation that actually put me into my line of work; I ended up getting so good at describing different types of noises that I discovered I was a pretty decent writer, and because of that I wrote about the stuff I liked. Now I get paid for it. In other words, I’m the guy everyone in the music industry—or any artistic industry, really—hates: the critic. I get paid to hate things. I also do some voice acting on the side, though that’s more for fun than anything. So it came as a surprise to about everybody, including myself, that I ended up with someone who for all intents and purposes lacks a voice altogether. My mom put it best in saying, “I always thought you were going to end up with a girl with an accent or something.” Up until I met Kat, I was inclined to agree with her. Cosmic irony, I guess. So that’s me.

Like I said, Kat likes the things I like. Same foods, same stupid TV shows, she even likes the insane books I read. Music isn’t her thing, but she lets me listen to it to my heart’s content as
long as it doesn’t shake the house. She also likes it when I talk out loud, for some reason. For the longest time I had no idea why, and she refused to answer. So I more or less narrated my every move as I went about the house for, like, two years before she finally relented and answered my question.

“Yo,” I called as I walked into the living room. Kat was laying on the couch, surveying her freshly painted nails with her soft brown eyes. When she didn’t look at me, I picked a pillow up off of my armchair and tossed it at her legs. Forever a gentleman.

Dropping her hands down and rolling over, Kat blew some of her straight brown hair out of her face to uncover her eyes. I nodded at her, and she nodded back. She didn’t like to talk when she had just painted her nails—either smudged them or got polish on her hands. So we communicated by nodding at each other and hoping to get the point across. It was surprisingly effective after all the time we’d been together.

Kat sat up and held her hands in front of her, blowing on them to expedite the drying process. I dropped onto the couch next to her and unmuted the TV but left the captions on. The channel was turned to one of the movie channels, and The Sound of Music was on. Darn Nazis.

I put my feet up on the coffee table, nudging some of the contributor’s copies of magazines I’d written for aside and leaning fully back into the couch. Show tunes were pretty okay by me, too. Kat liked the fact they told a story. She also liked concept albums for that, although she could only ever go off the lyrics. I had actually had her help me write a few reviews for a couple of concept albums that had come out recently. She was an editor at a publishing house, so she had a fairly good grasp on coherent stories. She scratched my back, I scratched hers—helped her fact check descriptions on sounds all the damn time.

After a while, Kat started to drum the fingers from one of her hands on my shin. I pretended to ignore it for as long as I could
until my valiant crusade was brought to an abrupt end by a palm to the face. Kat was direct when she needed to be.

What’s up? I signed at her. Her eyes peered through the lenses of her glasses, intent and inquisitive as ever as they watched me try to speak her language.

Say that again, only out loud, she signed back. When we first started dating, we had communicated almost entirely through writing. Texted a ton, even when we were in the same room. She had tried to insist that I speak out loud at first so that she could just read my lips, but she discovered that I talked too fast for her to read. I had the same problem with her—she signed way too fast for me to read. Those dainty, slender fingers of hers flew like they were all alive and trying to escape one another. That wasn’t a problem anymore, now that I had learned sign and she had gotten used to reading my lips.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Ask me your question again. Her hands paused for a second. Out loud. No sign.

“Why do you like it when I talk out loud?” I asked.

What’s sound like? She signed back.

That was less of a curveball and more of a holy-shit-it’s-coming-from-the-ninth-dimension-ball. Not only did she answer my question with another question, but it was a question I had no idea how to answer. What is sound to a deaf person? What are colors like to a blind person? How can someone answer any of those questions?

“Pffffffffffffff,” I said, “you’ve got me, Kat.” I always called her by name if I could help it—she liked seeing me say it.

Not good enough, she signed. You’re a writer, you can figure out how to say it. Take your time.

I looked back towards the TV and frowned, trying to think of how to even tackle the question. A half-assed answer wouldn’t work, either. Kat was a perfectionist by nature.
“What a question,” I muttered to myself, only to have Kat put her hands on the sides of my head and turn it so that I was facing her.

*Think out loud facing me. I want to see you work this out.*

My mind rolled over the countless songs and sounds I’d listened to over time. It touched on the voice acting I had personally done, and the ways I had gone about that. Vocal cords tensing and relaxing, guitar strings twanging, birds chirping, the creak of wood, the whirring hum of an air conditioner, dogs barking, cats meowing, the sound of rain hitting a rooftop. How could I put any of that into words and explain it to Kat, who had never heard any of it or anything at all? I couldn’t explain the sound of the Undertaker’s gong to her even though she had seen it in action. That was as good a starting point as any, I figured.

“You know how everyone goes crazy when they hear a certain sound?” I asked. Kat nodded, and I continued.

“Obviously there’s no way every sound ever is unique, but the context is pretty important, same with familiarity. Even ignoring that, certain sounds just naturally evoke certain responses in people. Loud, shrill stuff like in alarms naturally scares the shit out of people, just like low rhythmic sounds can calm them down. Rhythmic slapping sounds are still a no-go, though. At least in locker rooms.”

Kat shook with stifled laughter and I smiled at her. As strange as it was to say, this was her being open. Around other people she didn’t laugh at all, just smiled. I figured that even if we were together for a thousand years she would never let me hear her laugh outright. And you know, I was okay with that. Maybe she’d prove me wrong. Our jobs were pretty cool in that we could stay at home and be lazy pieces of shit forever if we wanted.

“So sounds do things to people, but that doesn’t really address what sound is like, I don’t think …you’re fashionable, so you’re pretty good at colors. Maybe sounds are sort of like colors
and each of them can come together to make something great, and a song is just a rainbow. Only that doesn’t make sense because rainbows are all scientific and uniform, and they’re not violent orgiastic maelstroms of colors that come together in sometimes perfect ways. Sounds aren’t colors, forget that. Goddamn, this isn’t easy.”

Kat nodded and leaned sidelong into the couch, her eyes focused on my lips even as I was quiet and mulling the question over. A small smile was on her face.

“Actually,” I said, “you know what? Sound is a color: it’s the color gray. Like that stupid book you read, there’s tons of shades of it. Some of it is light and hard to discern but it’s there and you can appreciate that, and then some of it is dark and heavy and in plain sight, but that’s okay too because it has its own charm. Sound is the entropy of the universe given a form, and it’s got infinite possibilities to it—although not all of them are good—and it’s pretty awesome. As much as the smell of fresh baked bread or the sight of your house after you’ve been away for a long time is soothing and amazing to the senses, there’s sound analogues to all that too. Sound is food for the ears.”

Impressive, Kat signed. Very impressive.

I nodded, wondering if she had actually been able to follow everything I’d said or she just got the gist of it. Didn’t really matter one way or another in the end—she seemed happy with my answer. And I was too. I felt like I had accomplished something and had some sort of epiphany. Maybe it wasn’t the smartest thing I’d ever said, but I thought that it was something I could stand by if I had to. I was proud.

Why do you ask? I signed back to her. My mouth and throat were sort of dry after saying all that.

Just wanted to see what you had to think on the subject, she signed. I’ve asked tons of people, and you’ve given me the most detailed answer.
I went to sign a response only to have her whack my hands and then point to my mouth. Guess she was real set on me talking out loud. “Well that’s cool,” I said. “What does that have to do with you having me talk out loud all the time, though?”

*Because you love the sound of your own voice, and because you love sound in general. I can’t talk, so you have to do it extra to make up the difference.*

As vain as my girlfriend was making me out to be, I was touched. That was incredibly thoughtful of her, although in a needlessly underhanded way. Wanting to change the subject so as to not get all teary eyed, I called on the previous subject: “You said you asked a bunch of people about sound, yeah?” She nodded. “Well,” I said, “what do you make of sound after all that then? What’s sound to you, Kat?”

Kat started to sign something before stopping, one hand in a fist and one open. She slapped her fist into her open palm in a mortar-and-pestle type motion. I nodded at her, urging her on. After a prolonged quiet, her hands started to move with the same conviction they always had as they cut through the air.

*You’re sound. The rumble that comes out of your neck when you talk in your sleep is sound to me. The vibration of the music you’re always blasting or singing along to is sound to me. I’ve got no idea what sound, you know, sounds like, but that doesn’t matter to me. It’s something you love, so I try to understand it as best as I can.*

Short and sweet. How like her. Well, I was definitely a bit teary eyed now. Wiping my eyes and playing it off because I’m macho as hell, I smiled at her. “That’s nice of you,” I said.

*Of course.*

With that out of the way the conversation died down and we turned back to the movie. Kat leaned into me and rested her head on my shoulder and I had thought she fell asleep until she picked the remote up off of my leg and muted the TV. Looking down at her, I raised my eyebrows.
“I love you,” she said. It came out pretty rough and it took a minute to hit home, but when it did it hit hard. Those were actually the first words she ever said to me. As odd as it sounded—not only Kat’s lackluster mastery of the English language but also the alien nature of it being Kat who was speaking—I was enamored. Kat didn’t let me respond in any way, held my hands and looked away from my face, but it stuck with me until we were going to bed.

“Hey,” I said, nudging her as we got into bed. “I love you too.”

She blushed a little and grimaced, holding her hands up in the dim light the TV offered. How awful did I sound? she asked. I smiled and shook my head. “Best sound I’ve ever heard in my life.”
Russian Bride to Be
Harrison Ford

A Russian bride to be
In her underwear
Once gave me a pixelated glance
Her vacant eyes were frozen
And her airbrushed body trapped

She didn’t look much like a bride
At least the classic
White-dress type
Her hips could never bear a child
Why she must have been one herself
Her Soviet father
Would have been enraged
Her mother would have been ashamed
Or maybe they would not have cared
As long as she mailed home her rate

I wonder if she had a name
I wonder if she’s found a man
And if she has,
Does he treat her right?
Does he at least take out the trash?

She might have been a paper doll
Flat and thin
And weak in the wind
She might have been a girl on strings
A puppeteer’s slave
A magician’s prop
Perhaps she was a charlatan
A native of Los Angeles
Perhaps I’d seen her once before
While accidentally watching porn

Once a Russian bride to be
Made a mute advance to me
Overexposed and underdressed
She caught me quite off guard
And my response was a toothless smile
And my refusal was polite
I hope I didn’t break her heart
I hope that she is doing alright
Let Her Sleep
Alyssa Marshall
Tall, Pockets
Lexie Mumey

When I look at you
I wonder how those big proud Europeans could ever believe
that the world was flat
because the slope of your nose
and the full moons in your eyes
and that lazy river line between your lips
are everything but that,
When I look at you
i know I’m never going to stop wishing
to old brick wells
or Orion’s belt because
your scars look a lot like stars to me and
your words fill me up like water
deep
down from the souls of my feet
to this messy mane crown that always gets in the way when you
kiss my cheek
but that doesn’t stop you,
and when i look at you
I don’t understand
how there are bombs going off in Syria and Iran
because the world is one place
and I know that that’s true when your hands hold my face
because no color in your touch can exist without the other
black white red brown
light dark lost and found,
to be at all, we must all be together.
and When I look at you I know what together means
and I’d love to know what forever means
but we’re just too fucking young
and right now i am far too many states away
to taste your laughter or your grace
but I can’t forget your face
on all those nights you asked me to stay
and I won’t forget those lines by your eyes
that one morning I kissed you awake
and when you looked at me
i felt like gold
and my heart beat earthquakes
all throughout my bones
And those hours with you
rewrote fable into truth.
and it makes me weak to believe
in the mile’s power to conceive
fade.
but i am strong too
because my heart was never wrong to you
and your heart kneels well
to the king from which it fell,
and though directions of me want
your east and your west,
the beating compass beneath my ribcage beckons:
Daughter.
let it rest.
And now all i know to do
is expect a garden
with seeds and weeds and roots
and harvest.
and in a thousand days
maybe you’ll be planted there
as a thorn bush or a grapevine or a yellow Bartlett pear

or maybe you’ll be in the back, deep
beneath the light,
behind the marigolds in me
there You’ll be the tallest tree,
good and growing
and never knowing
the worlds of when
i look at you.
Little Troll
Ethan Riley
Go to the Cemetery
George Leetch

The iron gate beckoned like a seedy carnival crier bidding me enter his illuminated tent. The words “Memorial Cemetery” were wrought in iron above the entrance to the massive plot of land that presided over one tenth of the town of Cofbedd. A spectacled woman carrying a shovel stood on the other side of the gate.

“ Took your dear sweet time didn’t you Mr...” The gravedigger motioned for me to finish.

“For the fourth time this week it’s Matt Sveager.” I raised an eyebrow. She had spent every morning this week in my apartment grabbing coffee and chatting. I’d told her about how the leaves didn’t change color in my hometown like here, about how my accounting degree wasn’t getting me anywhere, and how I’d rather just own a hobby store for the rest of my life. Being forgetful is one thing, but she should know my name.

She leaned up against one of the oaks that cast long shadows across the cemetery in the setting sunlight. “I’ve got a lot on my mind Mr. Sveager: there’s always something happening in here.”

I walked through the gate and surveyed the gravestones along the path. The cemetery was laid out chronologically from Cofbedd’s founding in 1633 to the present, and no one traveled it except from start to finish. The gravedigger stood directly before the first gravestone some twenty feet into the cemetery.

I motioned to the empty grass plots on either side of the path. “Why don’t you ever dig a grave here? You could just use some of the empty space instead of expanding the cemetery on the other end.” The gravedigger chuckled and patted me on the back.

“Then we’d be out of order Mr. Sveager, and the whole path wouldn’t make any sense.” She hefted her shovel onto one shoulder. “You ready?”
“Ready for people to stop ostracizing me because I couldn’t find the time to walk through a damn cemetery?” I shook my head. “Of course I’m ready.”

I was ready for the weirdness that was this town to stop. I’d been here for three months, and no one would let me forget it. The first few weeks here weren’t a problem. I got a few comments from my neighbors about how I should take a walk through the cemetery, and how everyone did it once a year, but I still had to unpack my comics and find a new job. Kickass Comics and Collectables had transferred me to managing their new Cofbedd location, but by the time I finally moved out here that store was starting to go under and they let me go to cover their losses. The rent was lower than my old apartment and I figured I could live off of some saved cash until I got back on my feet. I was eager for work and my résumé was tight, but I couldn’t get past an interview. Cofbedd Pizza, Laerman’s accounting, Roasa’s Roast Beef, they all called me back and we scheduled interviews the same day. The introductions were cordial, and the interview questions were typical; “What is your greatest weakness? Why do you want to work with us? Would you call yourself a people person?” The tanned Greek pizza shop owner, the Hawaiian shirt wearing accountant and the jovial Italian woman all said they would love to hire me, but they always gave me another question before we shook hands.

“Who lived on 324 Meedfield St. In 1647?” Failing to answer that one brought a sigh and a shooing hand motion from Michael, the Greek.

“What was the name of the general store in 1742?” Mr. Laerman shook his head and told me that my position was already filled.

“What did the doctor call my great grandmother when she was dying?” Roasa lit up her face with a smile and looked expectantly, but when I remained silent she filled her pristine
kitchen with the tutting of her tongue and told me to go to the cemetery.

Each time I went home and disregarded the place that every person in Cofbedd centered their life around, like a black hole holding together a galaxy. I applied at a few more places, but my emails were returned with questions.

“Who broke my great-great grandfather’s wooden fence and blamed it on wolves trying to get at the sheep?”

“Who killed the mayor in the dead of night in 1870 and never skipped town?”

“What did the kids call soda locally in the 20s?”

I sent the first one a cordial response that I didn’t know and he told me to go to the cemetery. I asked the next place how the hell I should know that when everything I looked up about it said that he was never caught.

His answer was simple: go to the cemetery. Everywhere I went I got the same reply, as if they were drilling a mnemonic device into my head: Go to the cemetery. After two months my neighbors, a couple of twenty somethings not much younger than me named Anne and George, came up to my door every morning and asked me more of those questions.

“What was the unnamed baby that died September 22 1789’s favorite color?”

“How many puppies did the Smith family drown during the depression?”

They only got worse from there.

Living here wore me down like acid rain pelting a tombstone. People would bring up these obscure facts in every interaction I had; I couldn’t buy box of cereal without being asked how many daughters the founder’s cousin lost in the harsh winter of 1635. My confusion made store clerks that I’d never met look crestfallen, and then disappointed. I was used to being ignored, but having someone I didn’t know be disappointed in me tore at my heart. The problem was I liked it here. Cofbedd entranced
me: the way fall’s chill changed the color of the leaves, the way that the mist hung over the town like an insulating blanket, so the whole place seemed an island in the sea of the world, and the way that every last person cared about everybody that wasn’t me. They met each other on the street and struck up conversations, but any ones they started with me ended the same.

“Go to the cemetery.”

The children started heckling me when I walked down the street.

“Look at Mr. Sveager, doesn’t even know what the mayor’s wife’s maiden name was in 1844.” A troupe of middle school kids pestered me with facts while a spectacled woman walked down the street. I clenched my fists and screamed at them.

“Well if I’m so stupid tell me!” I opened my hands and held them up to my face. “Please tell me…” The children continued to laugh at me until the spectacled woman yelled at them.

“Leave him alone, Bob? Mark? Sue? Gertrude…” the kids stopped their heckling and were slowly backing away from the woman while shaking their heads at each attempt at their names. The woman scratched her head while she paused. “Whatever the hell your names are, leave!” the kids scurried away, and the woman turned towards me. “It was Covino Mr. Sveager, but you should really go to the cemetery.”

“Thanks” I wiped the tears from my cheeks, “but who are you? And why the hell should I go to this goddamned cemetery so much?” She stuck out a hand for a handshake.

“I’m the gravedigger, pleasure to meet ya!” I took her hand and she shook it with the force of an assembly line robot at a rave. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you Mr. Sveager, you just need to walk the path.” She smiled and started to walk away.

“I really meant your name you know.” I called after her.

“I forget, just call me the gravedigger.” She was nicer in her insistence to get me to take the cemetery walk, but she was no
less annoying. My neighbors questions and the children’s heckling was entirely replaced by her daily visits to my apartment. I was a blue whale trying to scrape off the barnacle of her cheery incessant barrage. Her ploys had obviously worked, as I was right about to walk the cemetery path.

“Just relax and keep walking” She said. “It’s usually pretty rough the first time.”

I took a step forward and heard a baby crying, felt the pain of my first love, Matilda, dying at the age of 13 to a disease I didn’t know the name of. I felt the scar heal over when I met my wife Jessica, a girl with beautiful black hair and a penchant for embroidery. I felt love for children I’d never had. I tasted tobacco on the end of a pipe, and felt the shame of coming home to my loving wife drunk and angry the day half my crops were killed by an early frost. I felt the satisfaction of having lived to the old age of 55 and having had 8 of my 12 kids survive to be married. I felt the pain of the four gravestones given to me by that one harsh winter. My name is Robert Smith. I was crying.

“Take it slow buddy, there’s a long time to go.” The gravedigger was patting my back again.

“What’s my name?” was all I could muster.

“Matt Sveager.” She looked down at the graves. “You’ve only taken one step.”

I kept walking down the path.

I grew up to be the best dancer in all of Cofbedd, even though I was married at the elder age of 18. My father didn’t have a lot of money, but he finally got enough saved to give a small dowry to the love of my life so we could be wed. I was barren, but he didn’t care one bit. We lived on 324 Meedfield St. My name is Margaret Swilthington.

“Your name is Matt Sveager.”

I felt the need to adventure. My dream was to sail the seven seas as part of the Queen’s navy, but my dad died when I was ten. I managed the general store from that point onward. I never
got to leave this town, but I did have a wonderful family. I renamed the store the Cofbedd Beachside so I’d never forget my dream of sailing. I never saw the ocean except in pictures. My name is Anthony Partridge.

“Your name is Matt Sveager.”

Blue.

My name is Herbert Greaves, I loved being a villain. That mayor had it coming for letting the protestants into town and I died just as I lived: a sinner priest.

“Your name is Matt Sveager.”

I lived to be so very old. I loved every single one of my children and grandchildren deeply. By the time I was dying no one knew I was anything but a sweet old lady. Nobody knew that I had cheated on my husband with 3 different men. The only one that did know was the doctor tending to my deathbed. Old Jim was the best out of the bunch, the only other man I’d actually marry. He called me a perfect saint when I died. My name is Marie Volid.

“Your name is Matt Sveager.”

Jack Jackson’s the name. I was an enterprising youth that eventually left this town to invest. I lost everything in the crash, and everyone forgot the Jackson name. The last thing I remembered before putting the gun up to my mouth was a night when I was 9 drinking grape schmoozy on top of my roof while staring at the stars.

“Your name is Matt Sveager.”

I named every single puppy in the hopes that mama would let me keep em. The depression took me just like it took all my dogs. I think we musta drowned 30 of them. We tried to keep our dogs from fuckin’, but it was no use. They needed to get through the depression same as all of us. I’m John Smith.

“Your name is Matt Sveager.”

I passed the final gravestone and collapsed. I was panting, and I spoke, not sure whose voice would come out.
“What year is it?” The gravedigger went over to her shed at the edge of the cemetery and came back carrying a bottle of water.

“September 22 2013.” She opened the bottle and started pouring it in my mouth.

“How long have I lived here?”

“Just about three months.” she propped me up on a bench and handed me the rest of the water.

“What’s my name?” I couldn’t believe that I didn’t know. I searched my memories, but I felt so old. There were centuries to sift through, and all years had hundreds of accounts conflicting and corroborating each other in a furious collage of emotion. The town was inside me, and as I looked into the gravedigger’s eyes I saw that it was in her too.

“Your name is Matt Sveager, and you’re officially a citizen of Cofbedd.”
sorry you are not an instant winner
Doritt Carroll

the beat of one fly’s wings
can convect the universe
blowing it flat
like the Big Bad Wolf

that’s why i wore the pink earrings
every day
because their glint
deflected your rages
tied a braided string around my wrist
like a cross-hatched fence
that would keep us together, inside

and now i pause
with the little pink brush
just above my fingernail
afraid that even daring to polish
the nibbled nubs of my nails
will be the pinprick that pops
the fragile balloon of
this moment’s love

i am writing this on the printed back
of an email in which you said
you had never loved me

then you said
you did
Closet
Juliet Degree

I let others see inside my closet,
look how I have ripped all the skeletons out.
Just polite clothes on hangers,
hung now without the tension of before.

Look how I have ripped all the skeletons out.
Cotton and lace so admired by others
hung now without the tension of before.
I have been replacing your old clothes.

Cotton and lace so admired by others,
hands reach in to touch their softness.
I have been replacing your old clothes-
they don’t fit me anymore.

Hands reach in to touch their softness.
These feelings I used to have,
they don’t fit me anymore.
If you can forget, I can forget too,

these feelings I used to have.
Just polite clothes on hangers.
If you can forget, I can forget too.
I let others see inside my closet.
Untitled
Dylan Griffin
One Player or Two?
E. Christopher Clark

It was here. Fifteen minutes ago, it was here on the desk, next to the controller, beside the N.E.S. There was only the one and he’s sure it isn’t one of the coins in his hand because all he sees there is silver. No gold.

But wait, he thinks, pennies aren’t gold. Even freshly minted, they aren’t. They’re copper, right? Copper.

Where is it? He checks under the rug again, inside his shoes one more time.

If the clerk at the Mickey Dee’s was reasonable, it wouldn’t matter. But the girl who works the Sunday night shift is a meth head, complete with missing teeth and runny nostrils and delusions of grandeur. For her, a penny is a penny is a penny.

On screen, the game he set up to simulate while he was gone is finished. He thinks to pause his quest, find the notebook, and take down the stats, but his stomach roars its disapproval and he keeps on keeping on.

Someone knocks at the door, one of his housemates, probably the ski bum who’s offered him the ride, but maybe the ski bum’s pigtailed girlfriend instead. It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t know either of their names, doesn’t know the name of anyone in the house, and how can he ask for a penny without at least being able to ask them by name? “Hey You, could you give me a loan?” No, that won’t fly. It has to be “Hey, Kurt” or “Yo, Tori” or else nothing at all.

“You almost ready?” It’s the girl. Liz? Kim? Courtney?

“Almost,” he says. “Just scrounging up some change.”

“We can loan you some money, Evan.”

Evan. Great. She knows his name. And what was that, the bit about scrounging up change? That was as good as asking, wasn’t it? What would Dad think? asks the meanest of the voices in his head.
Dad’s dead, he whispers to himself.
“What?” asks the girl on the other side of the door.

As they ride in Victor’s car—Victor, the ski bum is called Victor—Tammy, the girl, asks him what’s the deal with the video game.
“It’s baseball,” she says. “I get that. But what are you writing down in the notebook?”
“Stats,” says Evan.
“The game doesn’t do that for you?” says Tammy.
“Not really,” he says. “Not in any meaningful way.”

In the driver’s seat, Victor chuckles. He makes the turn into the McDonald’s parking lot.
“What’s funny?” says Tammy.
Victor holds up a hand and shakes his head, staying silent.

It was Dad’s thing, the stats. A long time ago, when they first got the game, they actually played it, actually sat down on opposite ends of the green and brown couch, controllers in hand, and took each other on. Dad mastered the pitching mechanic, Evan was unmatched in the virtual batter’s box, and Mom, when she played, had a knack for the outfield that brought deep ball players to their knees. They had a blast. But once Dad found the “season” mode and realized you could simulate games in about a quarter of the time it took to play them, he got it into his head that he was going to see how things played out over the careers of their pixelated players, over the lifetimes of franchises not named for their real life counterparts, so as to avoid lawsuits from a league that hadn’t quite figured out what to do with video games yet. He brought the original Nintendo to his office and bought a new Super Nintendo for Evan and Mom to play with in the living room.

“We all getting the same thing?” asks Victor, braking just shy of the Drive Thru.
“One patty melt,” says Evan, handing his change up front.
Victor tosses the change into one of his cup holders, where it
mingles with the quarters he keeps there for the tolls he pays to
go home on weekends—he lives in Vermont; that much, Evan
does remember. Victor holds out his hand to Tammy. From her
purse, she produces a crisp twenty, depositing it into his palm.

Victor pulls forward, then orders.

The patty melt is a thin slice of hamburger, covered in Cheese
Whiz and diced onions, on a soggy rye bun. There is nothing
appetizing about it, and Tammy and Victor are saying as much.
They can’t understand why Evan was so anxious to get one.

“Because they’re only here for a limited time,” says Evan,
parroting the commercial he hears five times an afternoon while
tucked away in his dorm room between the end of classes and
the start of dinner. “You never know when they might be gone
for good.”

“Not a minute too soon,” says Victor, dabbing at his lips with
the wrapper, then tossing it out the window.

“Victor!” says Tammy, slapping at his arm.

“I couldn’t stand the smell,” he says. “You should get rid of
yours, too.”

“I will,” she says, “in a trash can, when we get home.”

Victor adjusts his rear view, as if to look Evan in the eye by
way of the mirror. “Is this another of those family traditions?” he
asks. “Did you and your father go out for shitty fast food every
Sunday?”

Tammy hits him again, this time with a closed fist instead of
an open palm. She knows—they both know, apparently—how
much Evan is missing his father.

“Only when there was something new on the menu,” says
Evan. “Like, last year, when BK had their Italian chicken
sandwich,” he says, though that was one he had more often with
the girlfriend who worked at the Dunkin Donuts across the
street, the sandwich it had felt weird to eat with Dad, because of
the things he and the Dunks girl had done in the BK parking lot after eating, the parts of her he’d put in his mouth, the parts of him she’d put in hers.

“You must really miss him,” says Tammy, reaching back, opening her fist, and then taking Evan’s hand into her own.

They fuck once or twice, Evan and Tammy, just after she breaks up with Victor and just before she hooks up with the painter she will marry after school is through. It’s even fun, except for when she fakes her orgasm, which she seems to do for his benefit, maybe because she wants him to feel like some part of him isn’t broken, which she knows is a lie, which is why she fucks him in the first place: in the hopes that her lips will heal him, or her cunt, or maybe even just the look in her eyes as she looks up at him and sighs his name.

But he is broken, all of him. It is the fourth of October, a year since Dad’s brain seized up for the last time, like the game is seizing up now, and he is still balling his eyes out on a daily basis. Evan takes the cartridge out and blows into the end of it, trying to get the dust out, wiping at his leaky eyes as he does. Tomorrow is his birthday. Maybe he’ll buy a new game, assuming he can find a place that still sells them for this old junker, now that there’s not only the Super version to contend with, but the N64 as well. Maybe he’ll ask Tammy to come over again. After all, things with the painter can’t be that serious, not yet. And it is his birthday, after all.

He slips the cartridge back into the N.E.S., pushes it down and into place, and then hits the power button. They are back in business. He grabs the notebook. He blows his nose.

He and his mother celebrate at the Friendly’s up the road, just over the New Hampshire border. She orders a hamburger, plain, well-done—the only way she’ll eat it. He gets the patty melt, for comparison’s sake. It is good, delicious even, but he hates every
bite. Just like Mom to take him some place that ruins a memory of Dad. She was going to leave him and she’s still pissed off that she never got the chance.

“How’s school?” Mom asks.

He says nothing, stabs a French fry into his pool of ketchup instead.

“Have a favorite class yet?”

Damn, he thinks. The fries are better, too.

“Met any girls?” she asks.

“One,” he says. “She slept with me because she felt sorry for me. I don’t think she feels sorry anymore. Or, well, maybe she is sorry still, just for different reasons now.”

His mother nods along, sprinkling her fries with salt. She has never enjoyed his candor, believes he has a disorder of some sort that keeps him from keeping his mouth shut when he should. She brought him to a doctor once, to have him tested, but his father swept in at the last minute and took him out for ice cream instead. Dad had black raspberry, Evan orange sherbet.

“What did you want to get for a present?” she asks, handing him the card he knows is filled with one hundred and eighty dollars in cash, ten bucks for every year of his life.

He shrugs, opens the card. He stuffs the wad of tens into his pocket without counting it, without really looking at it at all. “I was thinking of visiting Dad’s grave,” he says.

“No,” she says. “It’s your birthday. That is too morbid, even for you.”

He shrugs, soaks up the last of the ketchup with the last of his fries.

“There isn’t anything you want?”

He shakes his head. She drives him back to his dorm. When he gets out, she forgets to hug him. She doesn’t realize, it seems, until he’s almost at his door. Then she hurries herself across the grass, her heels sinking into the muddy lawn on every other step.
He stands still while she wraps her arms around him, lets her do what she think needs to be done.

The cab from the college to his hometown costs him more than he’d imagined it would, but there is still plenty left over for the sandwiches and the ride back. When the thought strikes him that he could have asked Victor, he brushes it aside, telling himself that good old V is still mad about Evan and Tammy, even though he knows full well that Victor hasn’t thought about Tammy since they broke up and has, in fact, moved on to the Asian girl who lives upstairs, a computer exec’s daughter who loves buying him breakfast only slightly less than she seems to enjoy waking the whole goddamned house with her harpy’s wails at two in the morning.

Evan has the cabbie drop him in Drum Hill, at the Burger King. He buys a pair of Italian chicken sandwiches—they’re just back in season, while supplies last—and then he walks across town with them under his arm, to keep them warm.

It’s dusk when he gets there and there’s an old man by the supply shed, a ring of keys twirling around his index finger. Evan waves at him, then walks up the hill, toward the back of the cemetery.

He sets one of the sandwiches atop Dad’s grave, then cops a squat on the grass in front, opens the notebook, and begins to run down the numbers. He pauses for a bite now and then, but doesn’t really eat until he’s caught Dad up on the game.

“The cartridge is crapping out on me at least twice a day now,” he says. “I was thinking…”

But saying it, even to a hunk of granite, is harder than thinking it. Asking for permission, even when there’s no one left to grant it—

Evan cries. He tries to stopper the tears by dabbing at his eyes with the only thing he has, the sandwich wrapper, but all he
manages to do is smear melted cheese and cooling tomato sauce across his cheeks.

“I was going to buy something new,” he tells his father’s tombstone. “But I had to ask you first. And now there’s nothing left, so it doesn’t matter anyway.”

Evan stands, runs away. He doesn’t answer when the man with the keys asks, “What’s that on your face?”

It isn’t until he’s back in his dorm room that he realizes he’s left the notebook behind. He empties his pockets onto his desk to see if there’s enough, but there’s barely enough to get across town, let alone across the state. And then, what about getting back?

He flips on the TV. Another season is complete, ready for him to document it. He slams his fist down on the game console and the TV screen goes black. The game’s load screen flickers back for a second, then blinks dark again. Flickers, then goes dark.

Evan hits the N.E.S. again and the flickering stops. From the console’s cartridge slot pops something small and copper. It lands on the desk, heads up, Mister Lincoln in profile.

“So that’s where you were,” says Evan, picking up the penny. “So, that’s where.”

He crosses his fingers as he hits the reset button, hopeful, ready to start over. The load screen comes up, stays constant. Evan does not reach for paper or a pencil. He reaches for the controller. Then, he plays.
Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood
Charles Rammelkamp

Ever since Margaret died
I’ve dreaded getting out of bed,
until A’nh, the girl who did her nails and hair,
started visiting me, texting, calling,
insistent as a kitten demanding to be fed.

Her name means “light ray,”
and she is, an angel,
shining a light on my world.
I call her my loving daughter –
she’s only thirty-five,
half my age,
even though her husband’s like a jealous lover,
as if I’m trying to steal her away.

The guys at work jeer,
as if I’m a simpleton, a rube,
“You old fool,” Billy Ray sneers.
“She’ll take you to the cleaners,
leave you spic and span,
broke and in debt.”

True, I’ve hired an immigration attorney
to get her sisters out of Ho Chi Minh City,
bring them here to America
where they’ll be free and safe,
but what else am I going to do
with all the money I saved?
Buy a big TV and sit at home watching movies?

Sure, A’nh’s “taking advantage,”
but what’s wrong with helping someone in need?
Margaret would have approved.
I’m as certain of that as Billy Ray,
convinced I’m just a sucker
driven by loneliness to lose it all.
Subway
Matthew Cobb
Square Harvard
Harrison Ford

Students with their stylish slacks,
Their loafers, and their button-ups
Chat it up like chickadees
About their beer-soaked weekend plans.
And then there are the ne’er do wells
Wasting space on wooden benches,
Living in eternal weekends,
Locked outside the ivy walls.

I’m smothered by the pizza grease
And grounds of coffee that surround me,
Overpriced boutiques are chic
For broads who shop in frilly frocks.
Stuffy chaps in business blazers
Eye the beggars with disdain
And dirty, dreadlocked artists wonder
When did this become a mall?

Flocks of tourists march on bricks
That look like cobblestones and gaze
At every tired monument
With foreign fascinated faces.
Days like this are damp reminders,
Moist and cool like Autumn rain,
The novelty of Harvard Square
Is not so novel after all.
“Take heart, dear. You’re among the strongest we have—if any can emerge from this night, it’s you.”

Farris had drawn the short straw, and it fell to her to face the specter that appeared with the dusk.

It wasn’t really a fair drawing in Farris’s opinion. As the commander, Oswald hadn’t even drawn a straw. Orion had no doubt cheated, but she wasn’t quick enough to catch him and call him on it. The crafty archer never drew the short straw, and Farris made a mental note to break his fingers if she survived the encounter. See how well he could cheat without thumbs.

The company had come to a halt when they saw a dark fog hanging over the bridge they were supposed to cross. For a while everyone stared at it, dumbstruck. Straight from a fairy tale, the black fog was the calling card of the Jolly Reaper.

Called so because of the grinning skull mask the man was said to wear, the Jolly Reaper was a mythical black knight who would appear all across the world. The situations he appeared in were varied, but the end result was always the same: resounding slaughter. Wherever the dark fog appeared, bodies would follow. Sometimes it had just been one, and sometimes entire cities had been butchered. Nobody quite knew what sort of blood tithe the Reaper needed before his thirst was sated, and nobody cared to find out.

As lieutenant of the elite troop of knights, Farris was one of the only champions skilled enough to potentially survive an encounter with the Reaper. Orion and Oswald were the only other suitable candidates, and each of them had managed to shirk the duty. Really it amounted to nothing more than Farris being the sacrificial lamb so that the group could continue forward. On some level she hoped that the killing wouldn’t stop with her. If she was to die, she wanted those that sent her to her
death to die with her. The bitterness kept her warm as she walked into the cold winter air.

The fog hung like a plague over the entirety of the bridge. Thick and pitch black, it looked more like smoke than anything. Farris had no idea if she would be able to see inside it, or even if she would be able to breathe it. The thought struck her funny bone: she had survived countless battles and killed countless men, and her fate could very well be to die by suffocation. How utterly ludicrous.

Nervous glances and low murmurs followed her as she walked through the camp, her eyes fixed on the dark cloud as she grasped her sword in one hand. The greatsword had been her constant companion through the years, and she even continued to use it after it was broken in a skirmish. Despite its effective range being cut in half, the edges were still sharp. A number of jagged metal teeth replaced the pointed tip. The silver sword was with her since the beginning; it was only right that she die with it in her hands.

Once she reached the edge of the camp, Farris paused. Part of her had been expecting Oswald and Orion there to see her off. Perhaps to wish her luck, or perhaps to wish her a final farewell. Neither of them were.

Because she was in no real rush to die, Farris took her time in walking to the bridge. She strode along the riverbank, listening to the rhythmic rush of the water as it passed her by. It was somehow both calming and nerve-wracking at the same time. Glancing at the clear surface of the water, she was startled to see her reflection.

Wrapped in her hooded green cloak, she was a surprisingly regal figure. She had never really identified herself as a knight—she was a fighter, a warrior, but never really a gallant knight—but she thought that it would be an apt description for her for once. Her white leather armor so valued for its flexibility caught the moonlight just right, causing her to give off an ethereal glow.
Hard gray eyes stared back at her from the water, and her short golden hair glowed like her armor. For a moment she stood, transfixed, before she turned away and continued walking. Vanity would do her no good in the upcoming fight; she could look good all she wanted after she defeated the Jolly Reaper.

It was a freezing night, and Farris was glad for the thick cloak she had donned for the occasion. Her breath rose in thick clouds as gooseflesh erupted on what little stretches of skin her armor failed to cover. The blade of her greatsword danced about as her hands shivered, and she clutched the hilt tighter in an attempt to steady herself. Once she entered the heat of battle’s forge she would be fine, but she wanted to be steady beforehand as well.

The bridge the company needed to cross wasn’t especially long, but it seemed much larger when it was entirely covered by otherworldly fog. Walking up the riverbank and circling to the mouth of the bridge on her end, Farris paused before the wall of fog that marked the beginning of the bridge. She was certain that there would be no return once she walked through the wall and into the body of the fog. For a fraction of a second she was filled with the wild impulse to run, but she strangled it inside herself as quick as it came.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the fog.

Vision was perfectly fine inside the fog, it turned out. On the inside there didn’t seem to be any fog at all. Light itself seemed to be different in the fog. It was night on the outside, but it appeared to be twilight on the inside. It felt to Farris like she was inside a portrait of some kind, a stagnant world where time didn’t exist. After setting eyes on the Jolly Reaper, Farris wished it was a bit darker.

He was clad in dented black armor and a tattered black cloak. The terrible silver mask was upon his face, and emptiness filled its sunken eye sockets. The mouth was carved into a wicked, fanged grin. In one hand he held an iron sword that looked like something an executioner might wield: it had a thick, broad iron
blade blackened by gore and ashes with no crossguard and a wide, curved tip like the blade of an axe. The hilt was without decoration and the pommel was a simple ball. It was a tool expressly for killing, and designed for anybody to be able to use it to its full potential.

In his other hand was something much more unsettling: a heart. It throbbed in his hand, pulsating again and again. Blood continuously poured forth from the still-beating organ, thick ribbons of it leaking from between his fingers.

Calm washed over Farris as she realized she was going to fight whether she wanted to or not. Her eyes flitted from the pooling blood at the Reaper’s feet to his mask. It was impossible to see his eyes, but she could feel them on her. He was as a statue, not moving or speaking.

Putting both hands onto the hilt of her broken sword, Farris took a step toward the Reaper. At once he responded in kind, starting to walk towards her. His pace was slow. Deliberate.

The calm within Farris caught fire, and she became hyperaware of her surroundings. The Reaper’s hand tensed on the hilt of his sword, and he leaned his upper body forward as he walked. Because he was using one hand to fight and the other to hold the heart, he would be incapable of putting too much force behind his swings. Rather than heavy blows they would be quick strikes, and that was how she was going to win the fight. The hammering of her own heart in her ears beat out the sound of the Reaper’s heart, and she quickened her pace to close the distance between herself and him. If her sword hadn’t been broken, she would have had a huge advantage in range.

Immediately when she was in range, the Reaper swung his sword at her sideways. She raised her greatsword and blocked the strike. Just as she went to attempt a counterstrike, the Reaper brought his sword down in a large overhead chop. Farris barely had time to react, and she snapped her sword up to block the strike. Because of the axehead design of his sword tip, the Reaper
wouldn’t be able to pull his sword away from blocked attacks as easy as if his sword had a straight edge all the way through. The weight of his sword combined with his monstrous strength made his blows rain heavy like hammer strikes, but Farris thought that she would have an easy time throwing him off balance and running him through. Because neither of them had terribly effective armor—Farris’s was light by necessity and the Reaper’s had been worn as thin as paper over who knew how long—a single landed strike could very well mean the battle. Farris was content to let the Reaper wear himself out before trying to go on the offensive herself. She stepped backwards, blocking another strike with the flat of her sword.

Crack.

The battle fury that had taken Farris over evaporated at once as a horrifying revelation set in over her: she had fallen into the Reaper’s trap. The worst thing to her was that it wasn’t even really a trap—the Reaper just wasn’t an idiot.

Through some great oversight that would surely end in her demise, Farris hadn’t considered whether or not the Reaper was capable of tactical thought. She hadn’t even really thought of him as a person—he was more a force of nature than anything else. Like a hurricane or bolt of lightning couldn’t make a tactical assessment, she didn’t believe the Reaper would be able to identify a structural weakness in her sword, much less make use of it. He had identified a weak point in her greatsword and forced her to block with it over and over again, each time hitting it harder. Of course it was going to break the blade. Farris almost had to laugh as she realized her loyalty to her sword was going to kill her.

The time that wasn’t on the bridge seemed to grind to a halt as the blade cracked and shattered. Shards of steel exploded from where the Reaper struck her sword, and a number of them caught Farris in her forearm. She lost her grip on the blade of her sword and it tumbled impotently from her grasp as the tip of the
Reaper’s sword raked her abdomen. Flares of pain, hot and jagged, burst across her stomach and arm and she took a wobbly step back, toppling over. Her right hand still had an iron grip on the hilt of her greatsword, which amounted to little more than a comb now. About an inch of steel rose from the hilt, and it was all jagged teeth. No longer a sword in any sense of the word.

The Reaper stepped over Farris, pointing the tip of his sword at her neck. The hand with the heart in it hovered over her, and blood poured down onto her. Farris looked at it rather than the cackling metal face that stared at her, and for some reason she felt more hatred for it than the man that was about to kill her. Fury welled up in her and before she knew what she was doing she was swinging the remains of her sword towards the heart as he leaned his sword forward into her neck.

It took a moment to process, and she had to roll her eyes in a very strange manner to see the black knight’s sword. It had stopped just after biting into her skin. Her eyes snapped to her own sword, the jagged tips of which were buried in the heart.

The Reaper jerked his sword away from her neck and lurched backwards, his hand snapping open and dropping the heart. It burst into a spray of blood before hitting the ground. Farris was too dumbstruck to follow up on his confusion and try killing him.

“By the gods,” the black knight said in a hollow voice, reedy from disuse. “How awful.”

Once the fog dissipated, Farris looked immediately in the direction of her camp. Gone. How long it had been gone was anybody’s guess, but she assumed it had at least been a few hours. Dawn was just breaking, the sun casting its bloody morning rays across the bridge. When Farris turned back to the Jolly Reaper, who was walking down the bridge. A sudden feeling of panic overtook her, and she chased after him.

“Wait!” she called. “Where are you going?”
He flipped his hood back. Shaggy black hair lay beneath it, matted by the straps of his metal mask. Raising his sword arm up, he swatted at his mask with his wrist until it became dislodged from his face. Once it was loose, he shook his head and let it fall to the bridge with a metallic clatter.

“River,” he replied. His voice was laden with rust. His eyes were steady and green, though there were dark bags beneath them. His face was pale as snow and pasty. Had he not been moving—had he not nearly killed her—Farris might have thought him to be a corpse. Beyond all that, though, he looked human. That was really what surprised her the most.

“What’s your name?” Farris asked, following him to the river’s edge. With her friends long since vanished, she found herself quite alone. The Reaper may not have been her first choice of companion in an ideal situation, but the prospect of being alone again after so many years was a startling terror to her.

He didn’t answer at first, standing at the river’s edge and staring at his reflection in the water for a while. His expression never changed, though he did seem to be awakening to the fact his left hand was no longer stuck to a heart. He moved his arm starting with his shoulder and upper arm. From there he tensed his forearm and turned his wrist, staring at the limb in dumbstruck surprise. Once he seemed to be satisfied that his arm was once more his own, he worked the fingers. A number of pops and snaps came from each of the joints as he broke them free from their torpor, and he let out a sigh before he dropped his arm again. His fingers curled up as if holding the heart still. Farris suspected that it would take him quite a bit of time to rid himself of that habit, if he could at all.

“Telford.”

He dropped his sword and flung his gauntlets off onto the ground. Each of them were the same ghastly white as his face, though the fingers and palm of his left hand were a dark,
blackish red. Grimacing, Telford kneeled before the river and plunged his bloodied hand into it. He let out a subdued groan at the system shock of the sudden cold, but he kept his hand submerged. After a few minutes of the blood not coming off, he began to scrub with his right hand. Still the blood stayed. His hand appeared to be stained by the heart’s blood.

Realizing she had blood on her as well as some minor wounds, Farris kneeled next to him and scooped up a handful of water, splashing it on her neck and rubbing the blood off. Telford continued to try and wash even after Farris had completely cleaned and wrapped her wounds.

Just as Telford’s frustration mounted and the white flesh on his hands went red and raw from his harsh scouring, Farris stepped in. Putting a hand on his arm, she shook her head. “It’s not going to come off,” she said. “You’d have to remove the skin if you wanted to be rid of it.”

It was intended as a joke, but for a scary moment Telford’s eyes rolled to look at his sword. Sense prevailed, though, and he stood up, water dripping off of his hands.

“I’m Farris. We were strangely met, I’d say.”

Telford stared at her. “Yes,” he said. And then once he realized he hadn’t said anything at all he shook his head. “Thank you for saving me. I’ve nothing to reward you with, regrettably.”

Farris shrugged and gestured behind her to where the camp had been. “My friends abandoned me.”

“My damned me to the service of some insane god,” Telford replied.

“Mine sent me to fight you. They sent me to my death.”

“And yet here you stand.”

Farris shrugged. “Where are you going, Telford?”

Telford put his gauntlets back on, working the fingers on his hands again. “I have no idea,” he said. He picked his sword up off of the ground. “I’ve nowhere to go—the world I knew is long since gone.”
“Why don’t we wander, then?”

Farris had been thinking of it since she saw her camp gone. She was going to do it anyway, but she thought it would be better to have a companion. Telford seemed to think about it before nodding.

“Fine,” he said. “So long as you leave any fighting to me—I don’t think your trick of letting your enemy destroy your sword will work against conventional opponents.”

Just as Farris was about to take offense and argue, Telford smirked and chuckled.

He wasn’t nearly as scary anymore.
Aphrodite
Lyndsey McElreath
A Respectable Old Widower Marries an Ambitious Young Vamp
Charles Rammelkamp

She needed
a base
from which
to work out
her overall plan.
Loneliness ate
at him with
jaws of longing,
chewing him into
the pulp of desire.

She knew
what she wanted,
and she got it.
He did not
know what
he wanted,
and boy,
was he going
to get it.
Over Coffee
Gregory Luce

Nothing happens because he says everything is contingent like the steam from his cup rising in random intricate patterns between them as they talked over coffee almost forgetting to drink their eyes meeting through the steam then she lowers hers and regards the surface of the coffee in her cup following the rise of the steam upward look at the steam she says.
Maddy’s hair had grown out a considerable amount over the last four months, now swinging well past her shoulders. She milled around with the other children on the playground, her pale blond hair making her stand out from the crowd like a white star. As she laughed and played with her fellow kindergarteners, her crooked smile revealed a slight gap between her two front teeth—an endearing charm conventional dentists would no doubt insist on altering with braces. But my baby girl was perfect as she was.

Maddy boosted herself up onto a swing, jangling the chains together as she settled her weight into the bendy, plastic seat. It seemed like just the other day she could barely climb her way up onto the park benches to eat her peanut butter and fluff sandwiches when her lunch break rolled around at one o’clock. I felt like these days we spent at the park were flying by on fast-forward—each day she grew a little more before my eyes, and I just wanted to reach out and pull her into my arms where she could stay my little angel forever.

Maddy jumped from her swing, landing in a crouch and then springing up into a full run for the slide. She climbed the rungs of the ladder and then threw herself down the slippery plastic. Coming to the edge, she tumbled and was sent sailing into the woodchips that covered the dirt beneath the playground. She curled up into a ball and clutched her arm. When she lifted her face I could see the tears welling up in her eyes.

I gathered up my coat, draping it over my arm, and picked up the crinkled paper bag that had been tucked in my lap. I rolled up the top of the bag to keep the ripped up bread crumbs from spilling out. I glanced over at Mrs. Riley, the kindergarten teacher, as I strolled over to where Maddy sat, nurturing her scrape at the bottom of the slide. Mrs. Riley was preoccupied
with another child—the front of his khaki pants appearing to be three shades darker than the rest of the fabric. Maddy looked up at me with teary eyes as I came closer and knelt down beside her.

“That looks like an awful bad scrape ya got there,” I pointed to the tiny pink scratches on her forearm that she was cradling against her chest. “Does it sting real bad?”

She nodded her head and held onto her arm even tighter.

“Well, you’re a real trooper, I’ll tell ya that. Earlier today I got the worst scrape on my finger—had me crying and rolling around on the floor; it was terrible! Ya wanna see?”

Maddy sniffled, though her tears had stopped. “Ok…”

I held out my right index finger for her to see and dramatically threw my left hand up over my forehead in a mock swoon.

“Hey,” Maddy pointed to the perfectly unmarred flesh. “You don’t gots a scrape at all.”

“What!” I called upon my best shocked expression. “You don’t see it? It’s huge!”

A crooked smile tugged at the corners of Maddy’s lips. “You’re silly,” she accused with the waggle of a small finger. “This is a scrape.” She held out her arm, suddenly feeling very tough and proud of her little pink marks.

“Indeed it is,” I said, looking impressed. “Like I said, you’re a real trooper.”

Maddy tilted her chin up and sported a cocky grin.

“Say,” I said, thoughtfully rubbing my hand over the stubble on my chin. “I was just on my way across the street to feed the ducks at the pond over there. With my finger being injured and all, I could really use some help ripping up the bread.” I smiled at her and shook the paper bag I was holding, indicating I had the bread all ready to go.

She smiled back up at me. “I can help! I love ducks. My uncle has ducks on his farm and my brother and I chase them and play with them all the time.”
“Really?” I said, standing up and taking her hand in mine. “That sounds like fun.”

As we came to the edge of the park I threw one last glance over my shoulder to see Mrs. Riley was still occupied with the small boy who’d peed his pants. I held Maddy’s hand tighter as we crossed the street. She never made it to the pond.
Untitled
Dylan Griffin
I don’t know you
Bonnie Rachel Lutz

Do I have one sincere memory?
One
not sculpted out of shadows?
One
not cobbled from others’
hints and nudges?

I say my deep laugh is yours,
my voracity for reading,
my addictive leanings…
How do I know?
I’ve forgotten so much
I can’t remember
what.

I remember remembering
you. Jutting eyebrows lowered
over hot and cold shades
of fire-blue
to freeze or thaw
our family home;
thick brown hair thrown
back with laughter—
the laughter we could hear
outside, down the street—
the hair you loved
my fingers running through,
raising scalp’s oils,
groaning when I ceased;

I remember remembering
words of advice meant to carry
me through, spoken in
illness’ desperation—

How do I know? Do
I remember you?

I remember remembering
the recurring surprise
of your smile suddenly engulfing
me—the smile that poured
beams from your
sky-lit eyes, wrapping me in sweet
forgetfulness—as you greeted me,
“I love you so much,
you know that?”

How I would say,
“I know, Daddy,”
embarrassed,
and so happy.

Do I know you?
Euro Trip
Fabia Oliveira

On the grassy hills of
The Sacre de Coeur
I drank ruby red wine,
On top of The Arc de Triomphe
I stood triumphant
At the champs de elysee
My spirit was freed
And on the other end
Of the metro
I stepped into
A new side of me
Lavender in the air
Lead me and I was
Home in my own skin
The hibiscus drink
Made my eyes swim
And I danced on
Streets to Spanish boys’ guitars
I played at
Being a child at
Goel Park
At the old banks of Marseille
Embarked my new endeavors
A plot to return
and to keep the fire in my belly
alive and well.
It was 5:10pm. She would be back in 20 minutes. I could only tremble in horror as I imagined her beastly fury. Her nostrils would flare and her hair would stand on end as she let out her screeching cry:

WHERE ARE MY DAMN COPIES?

I wolfed down another Midol. This could not have happened at a worse time. The stupid thing could’ve broken down while the President of the United States was announcing that world peace had finally been achieved and it still would have been less inconvenient than this very moment.

I glanced down at the machine. Random lights were flickering everywhere. ERROR flashed repeatedly on the tiny screen. What on earth could I have done wrong this time? I followed all of the pre-copy protocol: insert item to be copied, load paper, and check the tray for any leftover copies of Jacquie’s son’s ass from Bring Your Kid to Work Day.

I examined the machine’s screen, praying to the office gods that this fix would be simple.

Come on, I pleaded. I am a decent employee. Hell, I even showed up an hour early today. That’s gotta count for something, right? Please don’t do this to me. PLEASE GIVE ME A SIGN!

A giant green arrow on the screen blinked furiously to an image of the top of the copy machine. With no hesitation, I practically tore off the machine’s cover and followed the instructions to the letter. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary until I noticed a faint flicker of light near the belts. There it was, the source of all my turmoil: a tiny paperclip.

Immediately, I reached for my phone to once again check the time. The screen was completely black.

“Not again,” I groaned, as I began to beat the outdated piece of shit against the copier. Surprisingly, no major dents or
scratches appeared on the phone’s surface. Nokias really are indestructible.

I looked at my watch. 5:15pm. Hallelujah! There was still time for me to get this report done on time. Carefully, I inserted my freshly manicured nails in between the machine belts and pulled….and pulled…and pulled….

Stuck.

A minor setback, but I was sure it would prove to be no major predicament. I felt my eyes dart around the room until they settled on a pencil. This would definitely do the trick. I wedged the pencil into the tiny opening of the paperclip. As I pushed down on the pencil, I was starting to regret all those nights I chose going to Luigi’s Pizza Shop over lifting weights at Planet Fitness.

For the love of God, Justine, I thought to myself. The Egyptians could move tons of stones to build the pyramids and you can’t wedge a paperclip out of the copier!

Suddenly, I felt movement from the belts. A grin spread across my face. I had done it. My butt was saved! No mere office supply was about to outsmart my cunning. Unfortunately, that feeling of triumph was quickly squashed when I heard a sharp snap coming from the pencil.

Fantastic.

5:20pm. I felt my heart rate start to speed up ever so slightly. My stomach muscles tightened and twisted the more I imagined my fate. I examined the room once more only to find a stapler with no staples and a broken coffee pot. I ran out into the hallway. Everyone had gone home early for the weekend.

This was it. This was the end. I knew I wouldn’t stay here forever, but it wasn’t supposed to end like this. I was supposed to stay here for 1 year until I could pay back my loans. I was supposed to go out in a blaze of glory. I was supposed to cover the office in toilet paper, put fake slime into my co-workers’ desks, and hide behind the copier with a wolf mask to scare
Jacquie’s son so badly he would never drop his pants again! Yet, there I was, 3 years later, being duped by a paperclip.

I knelt down onto the carpet and met the tiny fiend at eye level. There it was, just sitting there. Mocking me. Toying with me. Microsoft Office made these things appear so helpful, but I knew now that was not the case. They were just evil, career killing monsters.

I just wanted to go home. I could envision my living room. My Snuggie would rise up from the sofa, welcoming me home with open fleece arms. My bunny slippers would hop onto my feet as I snuggled deep into the fibers of my pizza stained sofa. Oh, how I wanted to just run home and console myself with Haagen Daas and reruns of Dancing with the Stars.

5:25pm. I heard the main door creak open. She’s back early. My heart now pounded hard against my chest, as though it also wanted to make a break for it.

“Justine!” I heard Ms. Larson’s terrible, screeching voice call out.

I remained crouched on the ground, figuring that if I just stayed real quiet, she would go away.

“JUSTINE!”

I was dead. I was dead, dead, dead, dead, dead. I looked around the room one final time. No windows. No doors. No hope of getting out of this one. I stared at the budget report for tomorrow’s meeting that still sat in the copy tray.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I did my best.”

I knew deep down that hiding was futile. It was only a matter of time before Ms. Larson’s beady eyes found me. With a deep breath, I slowly emerged from the copy room to meet my doom.

“There you are,” Ms. Larson squawked. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Sorry, ma’am,” I replied. “I was just making copies of the report for the merger meeting tomorrow.”
“Oh, so you actually did work,” she said as she quickly started to unpack the supplies from her briefcase. “There’s a first. They’ll be done by 5:30, right?”

“Well, Ms. Larson, there is a slight problem…see, well… The copier is not working…”

I shut my eyes tightly, awaiting her terrible screech and nostril flares.

There was a long pause, but I could still hear her breathing heavily from walking up the stairs.

“You understand that this meeting is crucial, right?” she asked, her voice becoming more high-pitched with each sentence. “You understand I’m coming in tomorrow, on a Saturday, for this meeting that could make or break this merger? And, you’re telling me, you broke the damn copier? Did you spill coffee on that like you did with your computer Wednesday?”

“No,” I mumbled, eyes still shut tightly. “It was…a paperclip.”

I heard her sigh.

“You know what? I am too tired to deal with your shit today,” she said. “Call David. He’ll fix that thing by 5, I’m sure.” My eyelids popped open.

“But, Ms. Larson, it’s 5:30 now.”

Ms. Larson stopped, stared at me, and chuckled.

“Oh, dear,” she smirked. “It appears that someone forgot to change her clock for daylight savings.”
Key
Gregory Luce

What use now the key
this skeleton key
that still fits the lock
shaped like a half hourglass
turns a little stiffly
the knob loose on the spindle
the door slightly askew
in the jamb scrapes the floor
you have to use your shoulder
to push it halfway open
swirling the dust that filters
the weak-tea colored light bathing
the bed sagging deeply
moored across from
the scarred desk with one drawer
partway open inside nothing
but a ring of keys
missing one key
the key in your hand.
Player
Michelle Kubilis

Your affection is a cornucopia
of fabrications,
the basket woven with a lucid barbed
tongue.

Does your life consist of scripts?

You play for the audience, charming women who slip
coins into your back pocket.

I think they’re auditioning for my role.

The director’s signal.

Act I is coming to an end.
“Exit stage left”
as the lights
dim.
Bugs
Benjamin Peipert
Hooker-Sorrento Pantoum
Harrison Ford

The muted stillness of the playground after dark,
The whizzing motion of the illuminated highway,
The dizzy juxtaposition of both, head spinning,
Drinking a beer, sitting on a swing, swinging.

The whizzing motion of the illuminated highway surges,
While vulnerable to the climate, I sit and swing and sting,
Watching strangers drive down the pike in December,
I’ll probably see thousands before finishing this can.

Vulnerable to the climate, I sit and swing and sting,
Tag-teamed by regrets and bitch-slapping wind,
Frozen and lonely, down the road from my home,
While the strangers inside smoke butts and watch TV.

Tag-teamed by regrets and bitch-slapping wind,
Holding the can of beer I picked up without asking,
This can was my cue to leave silently, gracefully,
Straight to the pavement and on to the playground.

Holding the can of beer I picked up without asking,
Its sudden emptiness weighing far more than a keg,
The barren bars and slides making a mockery of me,
I force myself up and stumble back to my dwelling.
Sometimes I Think It Was Just a Dream
Michael Ratcliffe

She was waiting for me outside her hotel, urbane in a print tunic dress, black tights and boots, dark hair pulled back, sunglasses perched on top of her head. A vision in the morning sun.

We drove around Northwest and Bethesda looking at neighborhoods for her to live in if she got the job that would bring her back. I pretended we were looking for places for us. At lunch, we sat outside a small café and talked about work, spouses, kids. I said she should buy a country estate so I could be her gardener. She said she’d have to work too hard to afford it; she’d rather be a kept woman, living a life of leisure. Later, when we walked along the towpath, and then among the stalls at a flea market, I wanted to hold her hand, but thought she might vanish at my touch.

Driving back to her hotel, we got stuck in a maze of streets and traffic somewhere near Kalorama. She nestled in the seat beside me, content in the warm sun. I wanted to get us back to her hotel, but couldn’t find the right street (that’s how dreams are). When we finally hugged goodbye,
I wanted to kiss her,
but was afraid I might awaken.
“if it rained an ocean, I’d drink it dry
and lay me down dissatisfied” — Townes van Zandt

...how in the middle of the night
it sits on your chest
like inert gas and seeps
through your pores
and caresses your nerve ends
until they quiver like wires.

When you get up
the coffee tastes of
metal and awakens but
imparts no energy.

Plowing your way
through a metro station
like a small boat overladen
in a crowded harbor you
are still utterly alone.

On the train you are
jostled, shaken, a dry
stick fallen away
from the bundle.
Others Keep Hearing You
Amy Coole

And reminding me
how your voice is a crowd, how you’re a crowd.
I have not heard you for a month, but briefly
you are speaking next to my ear, loud as
copters, deafening as gunfire, the roaring
brassy rounds of your breath and sighs
until you are all around me, a shrieking
wind, whirling like
the house
   is coming
down.
Julius Bishop (5:03PM): Power meeting @ Lalime Memorial Park.

Dragging the tip of her knife across the top of the picnic table, Valentine Jágr came to a realization. She had been waiting for her boss for over two hours.

It wouldn’t have been a problem if it wasn’t the hottest day on record. Wouldn’t have been a problem if the warehouse district where she was supposed to wait for him didn’t reek like shit and metal shavings. There would have been no issue at all if he had told her what she was there for in the first place.

As best as she could figure, Val had been asked out to the hellishly sticky picnic table to wait for Bishop to show up. Best guess from there was they would head into the club hidden away in the warehouse a stone’s throw away from the little “park” Val’s picnic table was located in. “Park” was a pretty generous term for the patch of dead grass the table sat on, but she couldn’t really describe it as anything else. A number of terms came to mind, but none of them were particularly kind.

Flicking aside the plastic shavings that the tip of her switchblade had raked from the table’s surface, Val cast a glare at the front of the warehouse. It was an unassuming building with no advertisements or anything of the sort on the wall that faced the polite world. Big. High walls, blacked out windows with bars on them and a big metal door. Run by a gang leader named Hector Larue. Nice enough guy when he wasn’t shooting you in the face. Courteous. Little greedy. Probably had high blood pressure.

Folding her knife shut and then flicking it back open, Val drove the tip into the table and let it stand. The metal bits on the grip were starting to get sticky from the humidity. Made the knife sit strangely in her hand.
“God, fuck this.”

“Something wrong, pretty lady?” a voice asked. Val turned her head to look at whoever had spoken, and she frowned when she saw him. Seemed normal enough. As normal as a dumb thug could seem, she supposed. Mundane to her. Sports jersey, baggy pants, the faint bump of a gun noticeable on his waist. Most interesting about him was the chain he wore: rather than an actual necklace sort of chain or anything sensible like that, he had an actual goddamn chain around his neck, the type people locked gates up with. Didn’t seem that comfortable, but Val wasn’t too keen on asking him why he wore it. Fashion was suffering, after all.

“That’s your date?” he asked, giving her a grin.

“Not really,” Val replied. “I’m waiting on my date, actually.”

“Well, if you’re just waiting, I could keep you company.”

“Just waiting,” Val said. Chain guy took this as an invitation of some sort and he walked around to the other side of the table. Careful not to disturb the delicate balancing act of his sagging pants, he sat down. He plucked the switchblade out of the table and fingered the blade, inspecting it.

“Looking for some company?” he asked, giving her a grin.

“No really,” Val replied. “I’m waiting on my date, actually.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep.”

“What’s his name? He a friend of Hector’s?”

_Name dropping now, are we?_ she thought. Hector was _the_ guy in these parts. Being one of his friends—or one of his lackeys, which was functionally the same—was about as high up on the food chain you could get. At least, unless you knew bigger people. Val was sure the thug didn’t actually care what her date’s name was. Not yet, anyhow. Definitely would soon.

“Julius Bishop.”

That achieved the usual reaction someone dropping Bishop’s name did. Immediate departure of any color in the face and a slackened jaw. Chain guy looked around in much the way a child would look around a darkened room for the Boogeyman before standing up.
“Sorry, miss, I had no idea you were a friend of Bishop’s,” he said. “I just remembered I’ve gotta go walk my dog, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“Nah,” Val said, catching Chain guy off guard. He stopped mid-step and looked at her, confused.

“Nah?” he asked.

“Nah. The fuck is up with your chain?”

He lifted the chain up with a trembling hand and looked at Val. The resemblance he had to a cornered rabbit was really pretty remarkable.

“It’s just a chain,” he said.

“I like it,” Val said, giving him a smile.

That seemed to ease his nerves a little, because he gave her a cautious smile back. “Thanks,” he said, a trifle unsure.

“Give it to me.” It wasn’t a request. He realized this and was quick to heave the chain off of his neck and put it on the table.

“Beat it,” Val said as she picked it up. It was as heavy as it looked. When she looked back up, the gangster formerly known as Chain guy was gone. Smart.

Picking up her knife, Val dragged the tip across one of the lesser travelled graffiti routes on the table, carving an epitaph in: **CHAIN GUY 2013 RIP**. With that done, she stabbed it back into the table and folded her hands, already annoyed by Bishop’s tardiness again.

A few minutes later when she was ready to call Bishop and tell him to hurry his ass up before she went home, the faint sound of music blaring out of the sides of earbuds came from behind her. ‘Fuckin’ finally,” she said, turning around to look at Bishop as he wrapped his headphones around his mp3 player.

Bishop wore a business suit with a hideously orange fish shaped tie. His short brown hair was carefully parted and even looked as if it had met with a comb. Val would have liked to say he cleaned up nicely, but he really didn’t. Nothing if not
unremarkable, Bishop looked like the definition of average. At least, except for his eyes.

There was an ever present gleam just behind the blue of Bishop’s eyes. A light somewhere on the spectrum between genius and insanity—which themselves were two sides of the same coin—his eyes were easily his most striking feature. They were convincing, is what they were. It was mostly because of Bishop’s eyes that Val had dropped out of med school and joined up with Bishop’s crew. His words were plenty convincing on their own, but there was just something otherworldly about the eyes. They were a testament to his charisma and leadership abilities. Although she had never met any of them, Val suspected that a similar gleam could have been found in the eyes of the types of guys like JFK, Stalin, Caesar, Hitler...all leaders, for good or ill. Charisma was deadly, especially when you were a leader. People died for Bishop just as they died for all the other leaders that came before him.

“What’s up, Val?” Bishop asked.

“Just waiting on you for a few hours. You know how it is,” Val replied.

Bishop nodded and walked past her to the other side of the table, taking a moment to glance at her switchblade. Pulling it from the table and holding it, he frowned. “Someone named Chain Guy died this year,” he said. “How sad.”

Val gave him a shrug and crossed her arms. “So why were you so late?” she asked.

Bishop held a hand up and reached into his suit jacket. A small snap came from its depths, and he pulled a handgun out.

“Had to get this,” he said, and he went to put it back into his chest rig before a beam of light cut through the darkness from the street. Val put her hand up to block the majority of the light, squinting toward the source. Cops. Perfect.

“I hope you’ve got a permit for that, Bish,” the driver of the police car said.
Bishop gave him a broad grin, his hand not moving. The grin dared the cop to say anything. “Bishop. And I thought open carry was legal here. My mistake, officer.”

The light was cut off. “...Y’all be good now, you two,” the policeman said before driving away.

Even though she was with Bishop, and even though she would have an extensive criminal record herself if not for the understanding between Bishop and the police department, Val couldn’t help but feel a bit jarred by the fact a cop just ignored crime in front of him. She was glad that she and Bishop wouldn’t be going to jail, sure, but there was just something so fundamentally wrong about an officer of the law ignoring someone breaking the law. It didn’t matter that Bishop was untouchable, it was still strange.

“We’ve got a meeting with Hector,” Bishop said, putting the gun back into its holster and folding his hands on the table. “You ready?”

Val nodded and stood up, following Bishop as he walked right up to the door of the warehouse and pulled it open. Holding it for her, he gestured for her to go inside.

Because they were visiting Hector, the two didn’t actually get to go into the club proper. They went into the de facto lobby that was packed to the gills with Hector’s boys. Glorified bouncers, they each had an earpiece and a handgun. Two of them guarded the elevator that went up to Hector’s office, and they had submachineguns instead of handguns. Val wasn’t really sure why. Might as well save some money. It wasn’t like you needed the fucking Swiss Guard to protect a mob boss.

“How come you don’t have bodyguards?” Val asked as the thought came.

Bishop glanced at her and chuckled. “I’ve got you, don’t I?” Val wasn’t sure if he was serious or not.

The atmosphere stiffened in the lobby as Bishop walked in. No outright hostility, but a measured level of discomfort. Bishop
was a megalodon in a goldfish bowl—his presence anywhere was cause for alarm. Him being in the club of the second biggest gang in the city meant something big was about to happen one way or another. Most likely it was only the fact he walked in rather than drove a tractor-trailer in through the wall that kept the guards from freaking out.

“Hello there,” Bishop said to the guards at the elevator. “We’re here to see Hector.”

The guards looked at each other from behind mirror shades. “Do you have an appointment?” the more proactive of the two asked.

“Nope.”

Warning bells started to ring in Val’s head, but she kept quiet and kept her eyes off of Bishop.

“...Whaddaya want with Hector?”

“Just to chat. Won’t be long, I don’t think.” Bishop gave the guard a smile.

The two guards looked at each other for a long moment before shrugging. “You packing heat?” the talkative one asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Bishop said, reaching into his coat and taking his gun out. He offered the grip to the guard who took it and then looked at Val. She patted her pockets and cursed internally when she realized she must have left her knife outside. She shook her head. The guard looked as if he wanted to search her for a moment, but Bishop caught his attention.

“You’ve got my piece,” he said. “We done here?”

“Go on up, I guess,” the guard said, punching the ivory up arrow on the wall behind him.

“Much obliged,” Bishop said, guiding Val onto the elevator.

With a momentous squeal and groan the elevator started its ascent. A mite uncomfortable by the enclosed space, Val crossed her arms and leaned up against the mirrored wall. She was normally pretty open to whatever schemes Bishop worked up because they all worked themselves out at some point or another,
but this time around things were different. Bishop wasn’t in the habit of bringing her into the lion’s den without some warning.

“What’re we doing here, Bishop?”
Bishop just shook his head. “You ever listen to Tech N9ne?”
“Can’t say I have.”
“You should. He’s silly.”
Annoyed but without any other recourse but to huff and scowl, Val stayed quiet even as the soft ping signaled the elevator’s arrival on Hector’s floor. Bishop was humming a vaguely familiar tune as he entered the office.

One would imagine a mob boss’s office as the picture of opulence or at least functionality. Hector’s was neither. Overflowing filing cabinets lined the walls and their spillage covered most of the floor. Scatters of trash were all around as well, from pizza boxes to broken vials that used to be filled with coke. Empty pill bottles and bloody tissues were strewn about. Two cheap folding chairs sat in front of the ugly metal desk in the corner, and the man himself sat on the opposite side, framed by neon lighting that managed to filter in between the slats of the window shade.

Hector held his hands out in greeting to Bishop and Val, and his pudgy face split into a broad grin. “Welcome to my club, my friends!” he said. He gestured for them to take the seats in front of the desk. Giving Bishop a questioning glance and receiving a minute nod, Val sat in one of them. Bishop remained standing, his hands in his pockets as he looked around the office.

“You need to do some redecorating,” Bishop said. “This place is a shithole.”

Hector flushed a bit but said nothing as Bishop paced around the room, prodding walls and inspecting things. When he finally got back to the desk, he nodded at the drawn shade.

“That show the dance floor?” he asked.
“Sure does. What brings you here, Bish?”
Bishop walked to the other side of the desk and parted the segments of the shade, looking out at the dance floor. “Bishop. And I just came to check in on things.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” Hector replied, and Val could see how uneasy he was.

Bishop dropped the shade and stepped away, standing uncomfortably close to Hector and looking down at him as he sat. After a minute, Bishop gave Hector a bland smile.

Crack. The unmistakable sound of gunfire snapped from down below. The last vestiges of liveliness Hector’s face had were completely gone at that point, and his lower lip was quivering when the gunfire started in earnest. Bishop kept the same bland, even smile on his face for the duration of the shooting and muffled screams.

“What the fuck do you want with me?” Hector asked.

“The city.”

“What are you gonna do?” Hector asked. “What if my guys got yours? What if they’re on their way up here right now to shoot you in the fuckin’ face you piece of shit?”

“Well if that’s what happened then I’m probably going to die,” Bishop said. “But I have a good feeling about tonight.”

“You gonna kill me?” Hector asked. Val thought that she saw tears in his eyes.

In response to that Bishop shrugged and reached into his pocket, pulling her switchblade out and flicking it open. The steel had a sinister gleam to it as the lights normal and neon alike reflected off of it.

“I dunno. D’you think I should?”

“No fuckin way man. I swear to god you let me outta here alive and you’ll never hear from me again.”

“Probably, yeah. But if I kill you I don’t have to worry about you being honest,” Bishop said.

Val slid her chair away from the desk and stood, catching Bishop’s attention. He raised an eyebrow at her but said nothing,
and Hector looked at her with pleading eyes. Shaking her head and looking away from the scene in front of her, Val turned away and walked over to one of the filing cabinets.

“You okay, Val?” Bishop asked.

“Just give me a minute,” Val said.

“Okay.”

Just when Val steeled herself to turn around and look again, a sound like a drain being unclogged came from the direction of Hector and Bishop. When she turned Hector was clutching at his freshly red throat as ribbons of blood streamed out from between his fingers. Bishop had taken a step away and held her switchblade to the side. The stainless steel blade was coated in blood and droplets of it dripped from the tip onto the files below.

“Shit,” Val said.

“Pretty much,” Bishop said, raising his voice over Hector’s wet, ragged gasps for air. “You want to go get McDonald’s or something after this? They still have the McRib, right?”

“I think I just wanna go home, Bishop.”

“That’s cool. McRib?”

“What.” Val’s attention was divided between Bishop and Hector, who was still trying to gasp for air as he clutched his throat.

“Does McDonalds still serve the McRib sandwich?”

“Oh,” Val said. “Nah, not anymore.”

Bishop cursed and then shrugged. “Hey you were a med student. How long’s it take for someone to bleed to death after having been stabbed in the throat?”

Hector was still gasping, but he had taken his hands away from his throat and was flailing his hands across his desk, making a general bloody mess of everything before he slumped forward, smashing his head into a full ashtray.

“Dunno. A minute or so, give or take.”

A dull calm had washed over Val, and she was surprised to find that she could stand the sight of a dying man much easier
than before. A few gunshots still snapped off from downstairs here and there, but the office soon fell silent. Hector was as dead as disco.

"Guess that’s it," Val said.

"For now," Bishop replied.

Still rather numb, Val nodded. Bishop took the switchblade and wiped it off on Hector’s back before closing the blade. He walked over to the elevator and punched the down button, humming the same tune from before. The elevator opened without incident, and they got onto it. Something occurred to Val as it started going down: “What if Hector’s guys did get ours?” she asked.

“We die.”

Ding.
Rider
Lyndsey McElreath
Sleep piled high
Chris Chew

A hill of
post orgy
embrace
but no warmth
save for the glow
of roses budding
withered against dusk
tinted skin.
Crowd the basement,
shoving like salmon
trying to swim upstream.

Bottleneck the hall and
drink from bottlenecks and
pretend we’re not there.

Someone pulls a pack of stickers—
“Hello My Name Is”—
from their backpack.

Names and slurs
stuck to walls, floors,
and over the cereal labels.

Kicked from the house,
not because of the stickers—
someone peed under their stairs.
Fort
Shem Tane

It took a full cycle to raise the foundations and place the beams.

Huddled from the slits of light that intersects with the cross-section.

The howitzers sing in their baritone moan.
A red fern distorted toppling over a swaying willow.
You focus on the blinking light shoes stored in the ramparts and turn towards the swinging goose feather buttress.
Single solider manning the front, forgetting the pinups he left underneath a rock. Staples run through the lips of the Nile and you have lost your purple crocodile. Hatshepsut carved in sand and tears; the outer wall is breached Saladin stands with open arms.
Holidaze
Fabia Oliveira

The guests would arrive
And into our lives
Collide with our
Failings
Secrets simmered
While pots stewed
I put points in a brown bag
Found out,
But you were missing
The hollow of your cheeks
I now understood
The spoons you
Used to cook it up
Now found,
All we would admit
to that day was a
Happy Thanksgiving
Reprise
Michelle Kubilis

No, mother,
I’m not an advocate of illicit
activities
or behaviors that Catholics deem “sinful.”
And when you ask, why
don’t you tell me anything? It’s because
my words are feathers, not anvils
   (not heavy enough for you.)
The Long and Winding Road
Jamie Truman