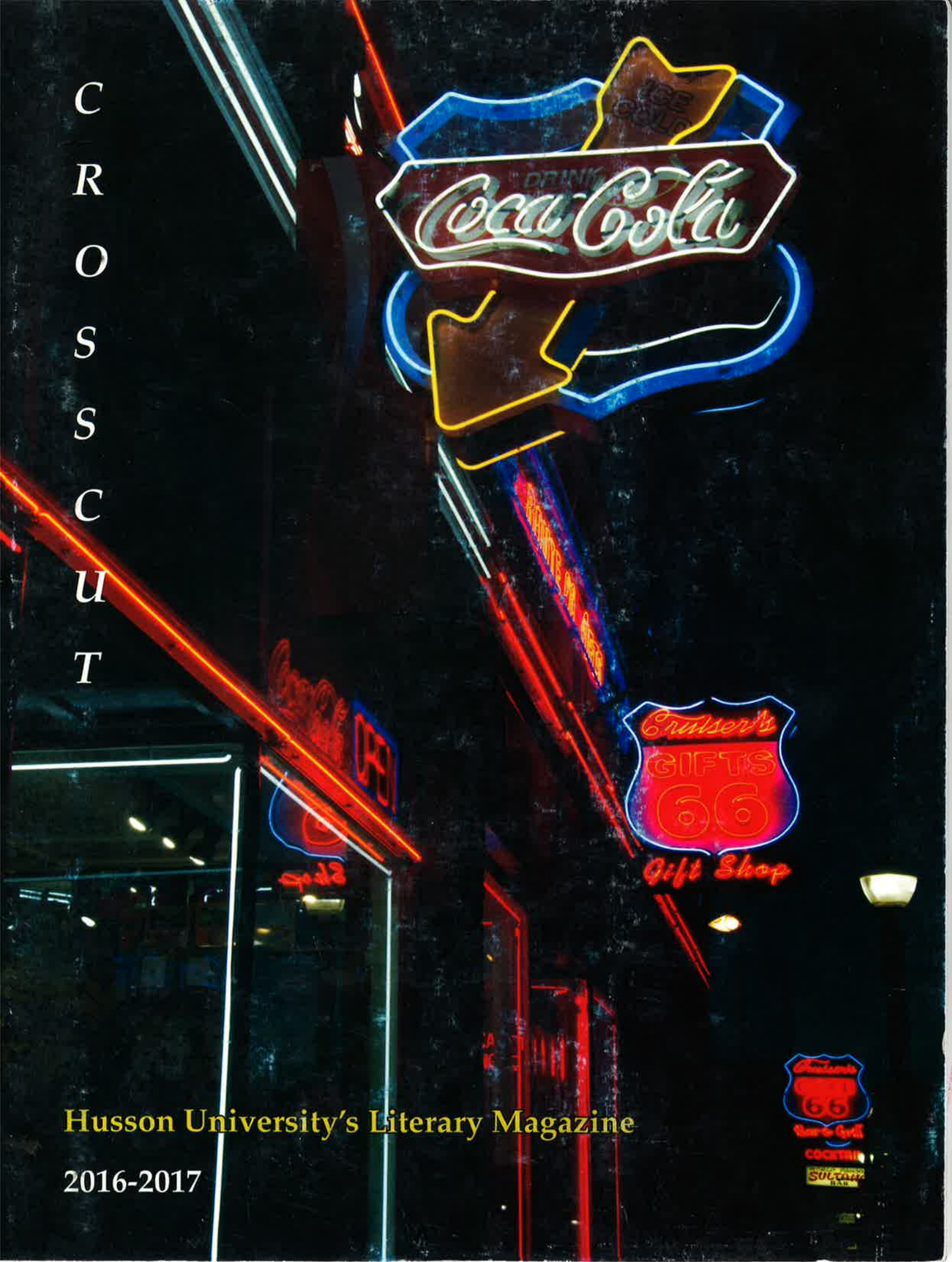



# CROSSCUT

Husson University's Literary Magazine

2016-2017

***Life's journeys*** is the theme of this year's *Crosscut,* a creative literary magazine that seeks to capture the often unspoken and invisible dimensions of students' lives as they forge through college at Husson University. This edition's theme focuses on paths and passages through which students emerge with a clearer understanding of their experiences. Whether in a short story about a painful break up, or a poem capturing the essence of an image, these student-authors reflect, write, and express complex and meaningful insights.

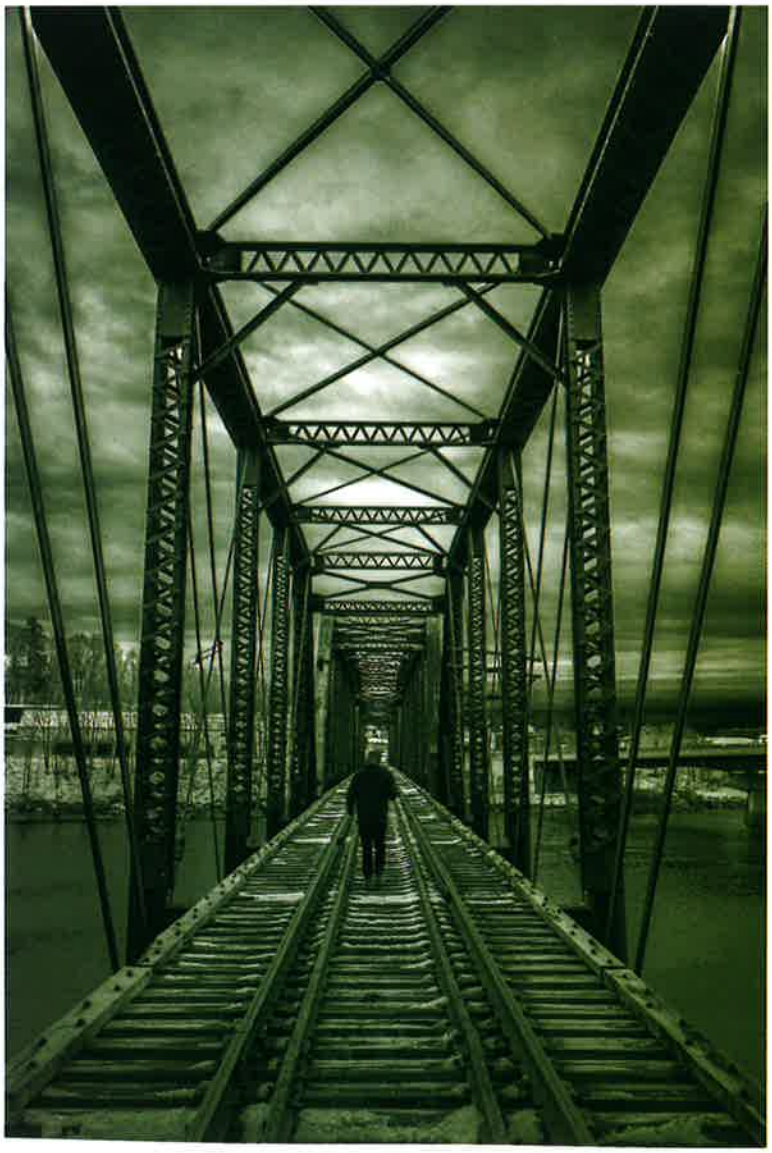
It is indeed timely to remember that in this fast-paced world of professional degrees and the competitive job market, the creative process matters and has a place of significance at Husson University.

We would like to thank Husson University administration and all of our talented student contributors.

**This is *Crosscut* 2016--Enjoy!**

Maria J. Cahill, Ph.D., Editor

Assisted by: Lola Ellis, M.A., Clinton Spaulding, M. A., Morgan Egan, and David Cahill.



By Patrik Orcutt

**Fall 2016**

Volume Twenty-four

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# *Table of Contents*

## Fiction and Poetry:

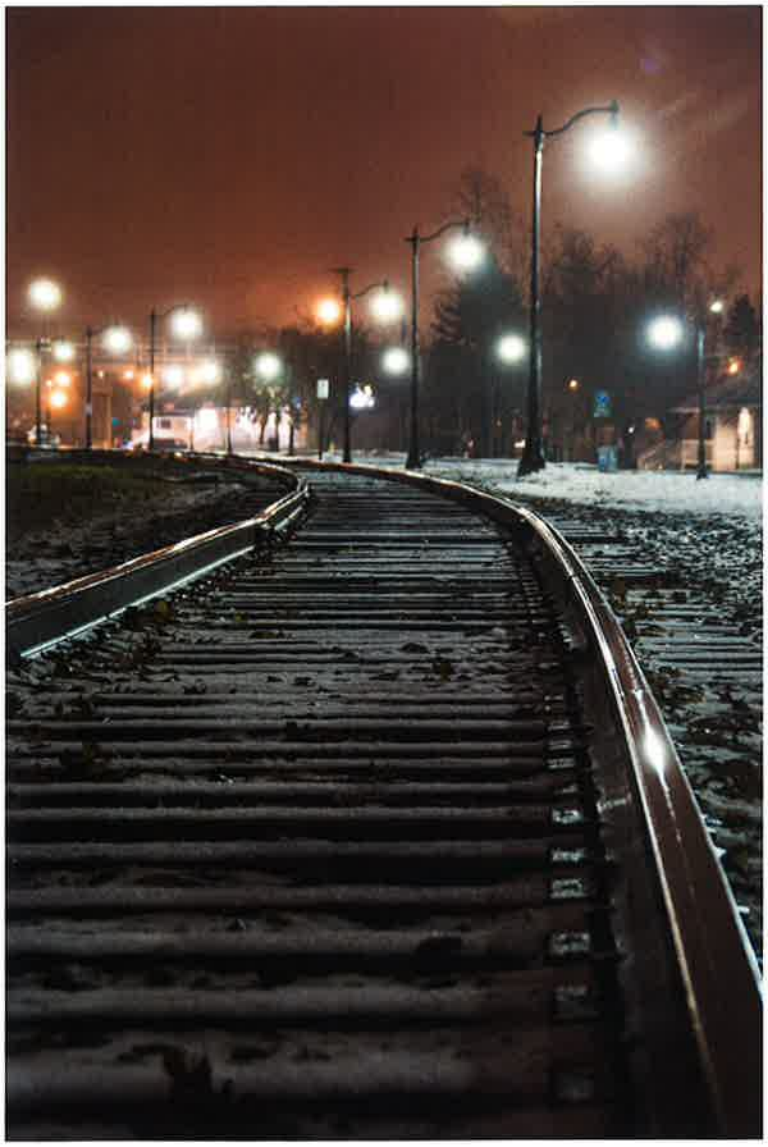

| | |
|---|---|
| Sacagawea | Scott Bowers |
| Rook and Cat | Jacob Erskine |
| Three Haiku | Eric Roth |
| Untitled Quatrain 1 | Eric Roth |
| Untitled Quatrain 2 | Eric Roth |
| Batter Up | Sam Brown |
| When It Rains | Brice Campbell |
| Beings of the Night | Sadie Ferguson |
| The Future of Mail | Heather Littlefield |
| Neighbor | Liza Buck |
| Three Haiku | Lori Stanley |
| Rain | Gabriella Kaper |
| A Missed Opportunity | Julie Hutchins |
| Nighttime | Rachel Clark |
| The Garden | James H. Stein |
| A Better World | Jason Mathieu |
| Ghosts | Kaitlyn Hill |
| Old Endings, New Beginnings | Kaitlyn Hill |
| The Need to Survive | Katelyn Baker |


## Art:


Gaze of Wise Eyes by Rebecca Erskine

Calla Lily by Ashley Charloux

All Photographs by Patrik Orcutt

By Patrik Orcutt

# Sacagawea

by Scott Bowers

Three children were sitting on a log near a stream. One of them looked up at the sky and said, "Where do you think God came from?" The three of them sat there for a few seconds, perplexed.

"Like, if God made everything, who made God?" His second question came with a thick gust of uncertainty. His sister spoke up.

"Nobody made God. God made himself, silly."

"Well, how did he do it?" Stephen seemed to have a question for every cloud in the atmosphere. Thomas, the oldest of the three Murray children, traced the movements of a fruit fly with a stick. He finally spoke up.

"What if God is just another fairy tale? What if God is just a story that parents tell their kids so they'll be good when no one's around?"

Samantha turned to face him. "You mean like the Tooth Fairy?" she asked.

One fateful winter night, the twins caught their mother tripping over Stephen's labyrinth of plastic Hot Wheels tracks on her way to slip a letter under his pillow. She thought they were still asleep, so she lifted his pillow as they watched in horror, eyes half closed. The twins collectively held their breath as their mother tip-toed across the shaggy green carpet. The door squeaked behind her, then clicked shut like a casket. Stephen and Samantha furiously tore open the fancy envelope that they were so used to opening with care. Samantha unfolded the note with shaky hands while Stephen rummaged through his under-the-bed shoe-box for his flashlight. He switched it on, and a gold Sacagawea coin shimmered across the ice-white paper. Samantha whispered as she read:

Dear Stephen,

You've been so good this year. I hope you lose another tooth soon! I need some more strong teeth like yours for the addition to the castle I've been working on! Take this magic coin, and hold it tight when you're afraid. It will always bring you the best of luck.

Love, The Tooth Fairy

Stephen and Samantha's eyes had met each other in a panicked stare. Everything that they thought to be true was now in question.

"Swear you won't tell her we saw?" Samantha asked.

Stephen gulped as he nervously nodded his head. His hand drifted to his pocket and squeezed the golden coin he had never spent out of skeptical hope. His gaze drifted back to the clouds. "If God's not real, then how do we know what happens when we die?"

"We don't know," said Thomas. "I think it's up to us to decide what's real and what's pretend."

Samantha put one arm around each brother's shoulder. "I've always wondered about, God, too," she said.

"Maybe we'll find out someday. Until then, I'm not going to worry about it." Stephen sighed and let the gold coin slip back into his pocket.

"I don't think I'm going to pray before I go to sleep anymore. I'm just going to think about the things that make me happy."

"Me, too," said Thomas.

"Me, too," echoed Samantha. She looked at Stephen.

"Swear you won't tell Mom?" she asked.

Stephen laughed. "Swear to God."



The Gaze of Wise Eyes by Rebecca Erskine

# Rook and Cat

By Jacob Erskine

Melvin Forrester could not remember a time he looked at his face and his nose was not hooked. He'd known from the time he was capable of perceiving that a reflection in a mirror belonged to him, that his nose would be hooked.

Eugenia Forrester, his mother, had a perfectly petite nose, freckled and pink tipped; however, his father, Wilbur Forrester, had a long sharp protrusion that jutted out and down forming a cartilage crook. Since the age of five, Mel took every caution not to speed up the process of his own slightly downturned beak.

Other than his nose, Mel was a normal child. He'd inherited his mother's thin lips and wide smile. His tawny blond hair was the same color that his mother had romped in when she was a child. His adventurous side came from his mother and he liked to play outside, but he often played alone, afraid of the taunts that his classmates would make about his nose. He'd also developed a liking for scarves, making winter his favorite season. Winter offered him the security of a scarf and bulky jacket, which conveniently his mother also insisted he wear. Scarves and winter jackets were perfect for hiding unwanted facial features. His favorite scarf was red and fuzzy with tassels, and when tucked into his jacket, was so fluffy it would cover half his face.

"Mama," he'd just come in from playing outside by himself one fall day, "why don't you and father give me a little brother or sister so we can play outside in the sun and I won't be alone?" he stated.

He heard his mother chuckling over the dishes. She squeezed some more soap on her dish rag. "It's not as easy as a wish and a prayer, Mellie," she responded. "It takes time and patience to have a baby."

Not finished with the conversation, but also disliking not being in his mother's arms, Mel pulled over a kitchen chair to climb up on the counter. He thought about what she said while watching his mother's hands dipping in and out of the soapy water.

"How patient did you and father have to be before me?"

"Hmmm," she said. "We were married for almost a year before you came along."

"A year!" he exclaimed throwing his hands over his eyes. "Why'd you wait so long?"

She set down the bowl she was scrubbing and removed his hands from his eyes. His eyes were mirrors of hers and full of concern.

"Babies take time to come, and they need nine months in a Mama's belly before they can come out. If we wouldn't have waited patiently for the right time, we wouldn't have had you!"

He groaned in frustration. His eyes rolled in their sockets. "A year and nine months! I'll never have a playmate before I die."

Eugenia kissed the concerned boy's cheeks.

"What if I tell you," she whispered dramatically even though they were the only ones in the house, "that your pa and me are weighing our time and patience to try and get you a baby brother or sister."

The tawny head shot up, and a thin smile cracked his face.

"Really?"

Melvin's tiny arms wrapped around her neck. They hugged for a while before he released her.

"I'm really excited, Mama, but aren't you concerned?" he said as he hopped down from the counter. He stood with hands tightly clasped in front of his stomach. He'd stopped making eye contact with her, she noticed.

"What's wrong, Melvin?" she asked.

"I dunno," he answered.

Eugenia dried her hands pondering why the boy was preoccupied. She'd always been sensitive about how to start a conversation with her son. Taking hold of one of his arms, she led him through the kitchen to the living room. The living room was flooded with light. It was her favorite room in the house. Each member of the family had a chair of their very own in the room, and nightly they would gather and relax together. She sat Mel in his small wicker chair and pulled it over to hers. She tried to think of what could be bothering him while she sat down in the worn rocker. He bit at his bottom lip and his hands reknit themselves in his lap.

"What's wrong, Melvin?" she asked again. He spoke, but it was too soft for her to hear. "You need to speak up, baby."

He cleared his throat. "I'm scared."

"Scared of what?"

His eyes filled up with tears. "I'm scared that the baby will have a hook nose like me and father, and I don't want that to happen because it's no good having a hook for a nose, and I want the baby to have your nose. It's not something people stare at." He spoke so rapidly she had to listen hard to catch all of what he said.

"You're afraid that it'll have a curved nose?" Her thin lips pressed tightly together as she tried not to smile.

"Yes, Mama." Tears started to roll over his cheeks.

Scooping him off of his little chair, she pulled him tightly to her. "Don't worry about that, Mel. You have a beautiful nose. There ain't a thing wrong with it."

"You only put up with it because you love me."

"Melvin Forrester, I love you because when I look at you I see a little ball of light that radiates energy and pureness. I don't see anything wrong with how your face looks."

He struggled in her grasp so she could see his face. He pushed up the drooping end with a finger. "Don't you think it would look better like this?"

"No, I don't." She brushed his hand aside and settled him next to her. She rocked him, his tears dampening the front of her blouse.

"Do you think your Pa cares about what people say about his nose?"

He didn't respond for a while. She thought his even breathing meant he was asleep.

"He's older. That's the key. He just laughs at what people say about his nose. I'll die before I get over it. I'll be dead and buried in a museum."

She choked on a laugh. "Mausoleum, honey, and yes, he does. Do you think that instead of being ashamed of your nose you should be proud instead?"

He was quiet before answering, "I don't want a baby brother or sister."

*********

After this incident, Mel developed a habit of holding the tip of his nose upwards in a mirror. Wilbur would taunt Mel after catching his son fighting the feature he'd given him.

"You know, kid..." Wilbur would say after finding his son at the hall mirror. His gray eyes would glint at the opportunity to 'strengthen' his son. "A man's ears and his nose are the two parts of him..." he would begin to laugh "that don't stop growing!" His father's laugh reminded Mel of the rock quarry where his father worked that he would sometimes visit with his Mama, to bring lunch to his Father. The air coming from Wilbur's lungs sounded like a landslide in the rock quarry — sputtering at first, then building to a loud passage of granite wheezes.

Mel tried not to cry while he stared at his nose in the hallway reflection. But hearing his father's laughter felt like little pebbles were pelted at his nose, stinging and sharp. It made his face grow redder. And as the tip of his nose became redder, his father would laugh harder.

However, Wilbur felt bad for the boy and tried to calm him down. "Don't cry, Mel. I don't think yours will get quite as long as mine, but for sure you got that hook."

Hearing the noise, Eugenia Forrester knew her husband was doing something upsetting. She loved her husband, but found his nightly bourbon made him tease the boy. Later she would confront Wilbur with her soft voice. He would listen to what she would say and would agree that he'd gone too far.

She blamed Wilbur's sense of humor on the twelve hour days and hard men he worked with at the quarry. They lived in a town where you either worked at the White Pine Quarry, Pelletier's Granite Quarry, Co., the Albee's General Store, or were a woman at home. The White Pine Quarry, where Wilbur worked, produced some of the finest white and black speckled granite in the State of Maine. It also produced a different breed of man.

When Eugenia would take Mel with her to deliver her husband's lunch, she would stare any man down who started to tell an inappropriate story or was cussing around her son. The quarry-men's harassments about her husband's hooked face were the taunts she hated most. Wilbur had learned to live with his nose and the ridicule it brought; it had made him harder on the outside. His son, however, was still turning the tip up in a mirror, and Eugenia understood how they affected Mel. She'd become an expert

at shutting these jeers down as soon as they slipped past a quarryman's lips.

One lunch she, Wilbur, and Mel were sitting on a blanket at the upper mouth of the quarry. Some of Wilbur's quarry friends had come over to chat with him and to see if Eugenia had brought any extra food with her. Everything started out fine: she answered a few small-talk questions, and Mel was asked about his schooling. Wilbur's vest and pants were covered in dust.

"You been blasting this morning?" she asked Wilbur.

He slugged down some of the coke she brought him before answering. "Yeah, ran into some tree roots earlier. Had ta get 'em out. We tried using a hand saw to fix 'em, but the damn things are thick and strong."

"Don't you think tha' nose of yours could make a good saw?" An older quarryman said. His hair was just as disheveled as his clothes, sticking out and tucked back in no apparent order. Eugenia watched him sway back-in-forth in his flannel and worn boots. She figured he was either drinking on the job or full of rust, not capable of putting pressure on any one knee too long in case it finally rusted out.

"Yeah, Willy," another haggard quarryman chimed. "I'll pay you a nice sum to timber all my trees the wifey keeps yappin' bout." Wilbur and the other men laughed together.

First, she tried the initial stare-to-stop technique, but she couldn't get any of the quarry-men's attention. She noticed Mel's hands had dropped his PB & J sandwich and were slowly creeping up his corduroys towards his face. She stared down her husband, but he had started to laugh in a low rumble of raspy breaths, ignorant of their child's emotions. Still wanting to be discreet, her hand searched the ground next to her for anything she could find. Like a mother eagle trying to provide the security of food for her young, her fingers dove in the grass for ammunition. Her fingers grasped a small fragment of granite, and she focused on the quarryman's mocking mouth. Her eyes quickly glanced at Mel to make sure he didn't see (his head was lowered with a few of his fingertips pinching the tip of his nose) and she launched the granite fragment directly at the quarryman's face.

"God damn!"

She smiled when the stone hit the mark on the left cheek, startling and causing the quarryman to yelp in surprise.

The yell had startled Melvin as well, and his little head turned distracted away from his nose. Eugenia laughed along with the other quarrymen who now made fun of their 'whining' coworker who probably had a bug land on his face.

*********

After entering kindergarten later that year, Melvin decided he hated children, even though he was still one himself. His classmates were detestable to him because they couldn't keep their mouths shut. He was away from his mama during the daytime, and his classmates could make petty jabs about his nose without any repercussions. The worst of his classmates was Brian Harper, who had a perfect nose. Brian called Melvin 'beak face,' 'captain hook,' 'schnoz cannon,' and 'snout sniffer.' The names hurt Mel's feelings, but what hurt more was having a crush on Brian's girl.

Kindergarten romances meant that holding hands was a home run. Mel developed a crush on a girl named Janie Scott. She was a twig with fuzzy brown hair and slightly taller than him, but her smile made Mel's thin lips explode into one to match. After all the ridicule he faced from his other classmates, he convinced himself she was the key to his happiness. Out of all his classmates that year, Janie never once commented on his nose, but instead was always nice to him. He tried to be her partner in class activities and sat with her on the bus when Brian wasn't there.

One of the very last days of kindergarten, Mel searched for Janie during recess. He wanted to tell her how he felt about her. About how he saw spring daisies and black-eyed-Susans and wanted to give them to her. About how she was the only mature girl in the class, someone who didn't see the hook.

He found her on the swing set. The red and yellow plastics of the playground glared in the midday sun. Her fuzzy hair had been pulled back into a bun, but pieces had gotten loose. She was cawing like a crow, and as she reached the top of the swing's pendulum motion, she extended her hands out and cawed extra loud. She looked like a mess, but he loved it.

"Janie!" He had to yell over her cawing. "Come here! I need to tell you something." She looked at him suspiciously for ruining her fun. Slowly, she stopped swinging and hopped off the seat.

"What is it, Mellie?" she asked cheeks flushed from the labors of swinging.

Suddenly, he couldn't speak. The sun had caught her in the perfect light, illuminating her hazel eyes. The emerald-golden colors danced. Beams of light passed through the parts of her hair that had come undone.

Mel stood their smiling stupidly.

"I—I" he tried to speak. Her cinnamon-colored cheeks pulled into a wide smile revealing her perfect white teeth.

He couldn't help it, but he looked at her nose.

It was a very respectable nose in his opinion. Small and flatter than his. He knew that she was the one.... He thought of his own nose. The hook. The 'schnoz cannon.' He couldn't tell her how he felt. She would reject him. Reject his nose.

"I can't—" He flew forward. He realized that he had been pushed to the ground when he saw Brian and his group of kindergarten bullies.

"What are you doing talking to my girl?" Brian said through the gap he was missing in his front teeth. "Beak Boy shouldn't be talking to my girl."

Mel was lifted off the ground and forced to stand up. Brian moved to the head of the group.

"You think that I wouldn't notice you talking to my girl? I can spot that beak a mile away. I think you need to get taught a lesson. I'm a real good teacher," he said rolling up his sleeves.

Mel tried to reach up to cover his nose, but Brian's group held his arms back. So, Mel's eyes drifted to the one tooth Brian had left in his mouth. The thing was bright yellow and white tipped. It reminded him of candy corn. Mel hated candy corn.

Brian's arm was extending back and ready to strike, when agile and fuzzy as a cat, Janie jumped in front of him and punched him in the stomach. Saliva and air rushed from Brian's mouth as he hunched over in shock. Mel was quickly forgotten by Brian's group as they flocked to their injured leader's side.

"We're not together anymore," Janie spoke with her teeth showing as if they were fangs. The group started to back away afraid of another cat attack. "Now get!" she commanded, scattering the herd.

During this whole scene, Mel had fallen to the ground when his captors released his arms. He'd watched dazedly as she'd struck a good one right in Brian's belly.

"Here," Janie helped him up. "I don't really like all that bully stuff, you know?" The sun again glinted through her fuzzy tresses.

Mel looked at her and smiled his mother's smile.

"By the way," she said taking his hand, "I don't think there's anything wrong with your nose."

He had to fight a moment's panic of someone commenting on his nose. He tried to take his hand out of hers, but she held on tight.

"Don't be shy with me." The school bell rang, and they started to walk back together. "My favorite animals are hawks. They have curved beaks that look kind of like your nose. I think that's cool."

Melvin smiled and squeezed her hand a little tighter.



By Patrik Orcutt

## Rain

By Gabriella Kaper

Pitter patter, rain
Knocking at my window sill
Pitter patter, rain
Deep clouds overhead
Skies begin to cry above
Light no longer lives
Falling down from up
Riding with a breath of wind
Soaking tired earth

## Thee Haiku

By Eric Roth

An afternoon sun,
glistens off the sprinkle of rain.
The plants welcome it.

A winter breeze
gently swirls around me.
Welcoming a snowfall.

Leaves slowly drifting,
hesitantly awaiting the earth,
as the wind takes them.



By Patrik Orcutt

## Untitled Quatrain 1

By Eric Roth

Inside he goes away from the night.

Packing away the day of stress,

only to be opened again in the morning light.

But at least for now he won't obsess.

## Untitled Quatrain 2

By Eric Roth

She looks above her and sees the rain.

She observes the drops and watches them alter.

Although it pours her gaze does not falter,

for this sight makes her forget the pain.



By Patrik Orcutt

# Batter Up

By Sam Brown

We kept the cellar door locked. No one went down there besides Dad when he was working on one of his wood crafting projects. However, since he contracted cancer about a year ago, his projects seemed to be few and far between. One day when I went by I smelled an odd, familiar smell, like something I hadn't smelled since I was little. The odor got stronger until finally, I opened the door and went down the rickety steps. As I slowly crept down the stairs, I began trying to dig the identification of the smell out of my memory bank, but I was unable to do so. There was definitely a scent of freshly cut wood, but there was an undertone of some chemical, perhaps a polish, that I knew I had smelled before but had completely forgotten its significance. I reached the end of the stairs and to my surprise, I saw my father sitting at his dimly lit workbench. He turned around, startled at first, but he greeted me with a warm smile saying, "I didn't want you to see this until it was finished, but since you're already down here, come have a look."

I walked over to the workbench and stared down at a brand new, shiny wooden baseball bat crafted from a prime cut of maple. I couldn't stop looking at this piece of art. I became lost in its beauty and memories from the past. I remembered the first time I had experienced the smell that had just brought me down to my Dad's workbench. He made me a bat before my first season of town recreation baseball when I was five-years-old. Dad gave it to me on my birthday, and it still had that "new bat smell." I keep that bat in my room to this day. I'm surprised it hasn't broken from all the times it has smashed baseballs every which way. I used it for everything: practices, games, backyard homerun derbies with my friends, everything. I even remember bringing it to school for show and tell because I thought it was so cool that my dad made me my very own baseball bat.

My trip down memory lane was cut short, however, when my father broke the silence. "Since it's your senior year and all, I figured I'd make you one more bat to slap some dingers with before I keel over, since I can't make too many more if I'm in the ground, right?" he chuckled. Dad was always joking about his condition, trying to make light of it so my mother and the kids didn't feel too bad for him. Unfortunately, I was a bit too old for these jokes, and I was able to see through my father's façade. I knew that he was frightened by the thought of death, and stage-four lung cancer had been staring him in the face every day for the past year. Death was a possible reality for him every day. Dad, however, was a fighter. He had gone through countless cycles of chemotherapy to no avail, and he refused to spend his last few months on Earth in a hospital bed. This, of course, resulted in the expedited worsening of his condition. It broke my heart to come to the realization that my father would most likely miss my high school graduation, my college career, and my development into a young man. However, I eventually found peace knowing that he would soon be in a better place, no longer suffering. I tried to say all this to my father as I grabbed ahold of him and gave him a huge bear hug.

"Dad, this is great. Thank you so much, for everything." I never wanted to let go, but I knew that sooner or later, I would have no choice.

Try outs were just around the corner. It had turned out to be a gorgeous beginning of spring here in Connecticut. We usually have to begin our season indoors confined to the space allowed by our small gymnasium. However, the end of this winter had been forgiving, allowing most of the snow to melt away. It seemed as though we would be able to start Day One outdoors on the field barring a late snowstorm--which as anyone from New England knows, is quite possible. There's nothing like baseball in this kind of early spring weather. The sun is shining, but the air is borderline frigid. You have to keep moving to avoid freezing off your fingers and toes, but no one thinks about that. Everyone is too focused on showing their coaches and teammates what they're made of. I have always taken pride in my baseball skills, and the days leading up to tryouts are always the toughest for me. I had been voted an all-state center fielder my junior year and now couldn't wait to take the conference by storm and go out on top in my final senior year. I had a hard time focusing in school that first day of practice and spent most of my time counting down the moments until I could grab my bat and glove and take the field.

At long last, the day of tryouts had come. I woke up early that morning in order to get a complete breakfast before heading off to school. My mother gave me a kiss and wished me good luck before I left. I went upstairs into my father's room to speak with him before leaving the house. He had been experiencing difficulties this week and was bedridden for the most part. As I walked in, he opened his eyes and gave me that famous warm smile that lit up a room as only Dad could do. "Wish me luck, Dad, I'm heading off to school; try outs are today. I'll let you know how they went when I get back."

"You didn't think I forgot tryouts were today, did you? I'm not that far gone just yet! Go out there and have fun, just like you always do. Also, I want you to always remember, even though I can't always physically be there with you, I'll always be there in spirit." I smiled and gave him a hug. As I turned around to leave the room he added, "Hey! Don't forget your bat."

I nodded and replied, "Of course." I grabbed my new bat and glove and started off for school.

"R-I-I-I-I-N-G" the final bell of the school day chimed, and I sped out of my extremely boring biology class and made a beeline for the locker room. As I changed into my gear, the returning team and hopeful prospects began pouring into the tightly packed space. As I scanned the room, I paid close attention to the revealing countenances of each player. There were

returners who seemed relaxed and ready to go for another season, and there were returners who looked too relaxed, almost as if they weren't concerned about the upcoming season at all. Surely, they would receive a rude wake-up call when Coach weeded them out. Then there were the new players; almost all of them looked nervous, hoping they had practiced enough in the off-season to avoid getting cut. The looks on their faces reminded me of myself when I came on to the scene as a stringy freshman hoping to make varsity in my first year.

I had spent the entire summer following my 8th grade season working out and playing with the players who had already established themselves on the high school team in an effort to establish a rapport with them. Despite working my tail off in the offseason, I was afraid I would not make the cut and even considered giving up the sport at one point. I shared my concerns with my father who supported me the entire time. He would take me out to the field and pitch to me and hit ground balls and pop flies to me which allowed me to hone my skills as a hitter and as a fielder. As a result, I made the varsity team my freshman year and the rest was history. My, my, how I had grown over the past three seasons from a skinny freshman who was scared of the "big boys" to one of the most highly recruited, most skilled players in the state. And to think, none of these dreams of mine would have come true if it weren't for the encouragement of my Dad.

Finally, tryouts began with the usual stuff: introductions, stretching, fielding--and then my favorite part--hitting. On my way to the batter's box, I examined my new bat a bit. I was once again taken aback by the quality of the wood my father had used; he had really outdone himself with this one. Just before I arrived at home plate, I noticed an engraving on the barrel of the bat. It read: "Always there in spirit. Love, Dad." I smiled and took my stance. I stared down the pitcher-- it was Simon Newbury--one of our best starters. I knew he was going to bring the heat because there's no way he had forgotten me badgering him about improving his arm strength last season. It seemed as though he had taken my advice; he looked stronger, more toned. He looked at the catcher, nodded, and wound up. Just as I suspected, a fastball. I timed up the pitch and took a huge cut at it. As soon as I heard the crack of the bat, I knew the ball was going into orbit. I crushed the pitch way out of the park, and as I rounded the bases, I couldn't help but think, "This is going to be a good season."

After tryouts, I returned to the locker room. I looked at my phone and saw two missed calls from my mother and a text from her that read: "Please come home right after practice. We need to talk." Oh no, a "we need to talk" text. I began rummaging through possibilities trying to figure out what kind of trouble I had gotten myself into that my mother could have possibly found out about. I hoped she hadn't gotten a call from my biology teacher because, Lord knows, I wasn't doing so well in that class. I reluctantly gathered my things and left the locker room to face my fate. I pulled into the driveway and walked through the front door. There sat my mother, red-faced and teary-eyed. Sitting across the table from her was a cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows. My favorite. I was confused. If I was in trouble, then why had Mom made me hot chocolate? And why was she crying? I had to get to the bottom of this. "Mom, what's going on? Are you okay?" She blinked and tears rolled down her face. Then she looked me in the eyes.

"No, I'm not okay. It's your father." I froze. I hadn't even considered that something might have happened to Dad.

"What happened to Dad? Is he alright? Where is he?"

She began to sob, caught herself, paused for a moment, and finally stuttered, "No, he's.... He's gone." To this day I cannot describe the way I felt after hearing such heart-breaking, life changing news. Just like that, my father was gone. I couldn't even cry; I felt like I had been frozen in time, frozen in a nightmare through which there was no escape. I knew this day would come, but I had no way to prepare for the moment when it actually did. All I knew was that I wanted my father back.

I dedicated my final high school season to my father, as did many of my teammates who had played for him when he coached our town's little league team. Our team was incredible and made it to the state championship where I experienced a moment like never before. The game had been hard fought, and each team had played to their strengths and exploited their opponents' weaknesses. It all came down to the bottom of the last inning with the score tied 2-2. Our first two batters were struck out by our opponent's ace closer leaving the fate of the game in my hands. Before stepping up to the plate, I looked up to the sky and prayed for my father to be with me and give me some much needed courage at this time. I stepped into the batter's box and awaited the pitch. The pitcher shook his head twice then nodded. He wound up and released the ball. It was an almost identical pitch to the first one I had ever hit with the bat my father made me: a blistering fastball right down the middle of the plate. I dropped my shoulder and swung at the pitch with all my might. "CRACK!" The ball carried into the outfield, and I began sprinting towards first. I had made solid contact with the ball but not enough for the ball to make it over the fence. Then, as I was rounding first, something amazing happened. The ball simply defied gravity and kept on carrying as if someone were flying out of the park with the ball in hand. I thrust my fists in the air as I rounded the bases. As I reached home plate, I was mobbed by my teammates. I celebrated for a moment then picked up my bat on the way back to the dugout. The engraved words on the barrel caught my eye, and everything around me seemed to stop.

"Always there in spirit. Love, Dad."

# When It Rains

By Brice Campbell

Running through the night, Kait could barely see. Tears cascaded unrelentingly down her face in the cold night air. Lights from the streetlamps were her only guide as she ran. How could he? How could he have chosen *her* after all this time? Kait had been with Peter for two years since just the month before. How could he have broken it off for that loose, second-hand fling? Two years of love and being together--and he broke it off for a short skirt with a string of boys already in her little black book.

Kait barely noticed when she reached the park gates. She heard a car rumbling up the curving street behind her. Certain it would be Peter in his truck, Kait pushed through the iron gates onto the unlit path of the park. The ancient gate swung and closed heavily behind her. Thunder rumbled threateningly overhead as she ran. She had always thought rain brought bad luck, and now Peter was breaking off their time together just to chase some loose painted doll? She had never had worse luck from a storm.

Caught up in her thoughts, Kait's foot snagged on a mound of something and with the momentum of her half-run, she went sprawling on her face. A coarse set of swears and rustling revealed the source of her trip as human. She tried to push to her feet, but her skirt had become hopelessly tangled, and thrashing caused it to tighten alarmingly.

"Oi! Easy does it there!" sounded a gruff voice in the dark. Sudden hands settled on her shoulders as strong arms lifted her into the air. Without the streetlamps, the ancient park was pitch black hiding the identity of the voice and arms. In truth, he could probably see her perfectly since the distant lamps were behind him. A bolt of lightening overhead illuminated a familiar face as he placed her back on shaking feet. Kait relaxed a little as she recognized Paul, the server at the local diner. He was dressed in layers, with half a rain tarp still trailing around him. A disrupted pile of ragged blankets that Kait had tripped over was his makeshift sleeping pile.

"Sorry," she mumbled. She made to push past him, but his grip hardened like a vise refusing to let her wander off. Freeing one hand, Paul reached toward a bench Kait had miraculously avoided. He flicked on a lantern he had set there.

"Kait?" he grunted in surprise, "Da' devil are ya doing out 'ere so late?" Letting go of her arm, he dug a handkerchief out of his pocket. Before she could break away, he pushed her onto the bench beside his light and leaned in close. His eyes swept the tear-soaked lines as he grumbled, "It's no good for ya ta be out late like this, fool girl. We're expectin' a right mighty rumbler to pass through 'ere soon." He rubbed at the bruised edges of her cheeks with rough strength but spoke gently as he added, "And call me a fool but that's a mighty amount of tears fer such a brief fall. Normal eyes aren't puffed up red like that neither."

Having finished his rough brushing, Paul pressed the handkerchief into her hands. Turning away so as not to invade her privacy any further, he stooped to collect his blankets. Although he had moved away, Kait no longer had the strength to run. His words seemed to have pulled all of the energy out of her. She buried her face into the handkerchief as fresh tears threatened to overflow. In the silence her mind finally registered something. What was Paul doing out here?

Paul lived in an apartment complex downtown. Last she knew, he had even been promoted to headwaiter at the diner 'Little Moon.' Her wondering was cut short when she heard a voice calling. Paul rose at the distant noise. It was Peter, calling after her from the road. Paul turned to glance at her as she buried her head in her arms, drowning him out. After a strained silence, they heard Peter's truck race away, pursuing her into the night. Paul glanced back at the road. Kait could feel the shift in his behavior now that he had realized what was going on.

"I take it ya two 'ad a row?" Paul's voice had softened, like a father seeking to comfort his child. He didn't turn around, so Kait was forced to give a small sniff in confirmation. He sighed heavily. "I thought ya 'elebrated two years jus' last Valentines?" Kait heaved a huge sob and broke into fresh tears. In a flash he was standing next to the bench, wrapping an arm around her sobbing shoulders. Paul's hand thumped hard on her back as he murmured, "Easy. Easy there lass. Come on, I'll lend ya a shoulder home. That's it...."

* * * * * * * *

"'Ere we are," sighed Paul in reassurance. His small beat up VW groaned to a halt outside the house she shared with her college friends. Paul's car had been parked just outside the gate of the park. Kait thought it was rather strange she hadn't noticed it, but then again, she had been running with a veil of tears. Paul stopped her when she reached for the door."Ol' thing don't open right. Best let me get it for ya," he explained. Kait watched as he climbed out of the driver's side and stumped around to her door. He pried the twisted door open with a grunt. Holding out a hand, he pulled Kait out of the tired seat. "Glad the rains 'eld off at least, but I bet da drive 'ome ul be 'errible," rumbled Paul as he walked her around to the back of the building. A light flickered over the yard as they approached the porch that was Kait's front door.

The tall fence was weathered from long exposure to the elements, and a single folding chair lay forlorn and abandoned in the corner of the shriveled lot. The enclosed porch consisted of bug netting and a tin roof attached to the wall by a wooden beam.

Kait pushed open the screen door and stepped up onto the porch. Although her eyes were still red, she wasn't crying any longer. The journey home had mostly been a silent one for her, but Paul had kept up a steady dialogue with himself. She rather thought he had been trying to comfort her in his way. She had to admit, he had succeeded mostly by drawing her into his memories and stories. Kait put the key in the lock just as she heard a familiar engine come down the street. Frozen, key still unturned, she heard Peter's truck skid to a stop on the curb.

Paul looked up at Kait, shaking as Peter yelled hoarsely from the road, and sighed. He straightened his back, tucked in his shirt, and marched around the building with the air of a man about to enter battle. A bolt of lightening burst across the horizon as the rain began to fall. The tin roof rudely doubled the noise, but Kait clearly heard Paul call out to Peter as he cut the engine.

Their words were drowned by the rain bouncing on the tin roof, but it was clear that Peter was shouting. Paul must either have been very quiet, or else the rain must have been louder than she thought. The wind began to pick up as Peter's shouts carried into the night with growing hysteria. As the sound reached its peak, Paul's strong voice suddenly cut across him in sharp rebuke. The steel in his voice was given further power by a sudden crash of thunder. Unable to hear any more of their exchange, Kait determined Paul had shocked Peter out of his hysteria. Paul was good at grounding people.

Finally, Kait heard the truck's engine turn over. After a moment, Peter's truck pulled away from the curb, his headlights visible as he drove past the building. As the rain and wind settled into their full fury, the truck vanished into the swelling storm.

Paul appeared around the corner, soaked clean to his skin. He stomped up onto the porch, shaking his head in exasperation. Shaking out his hair, Paul wiped his eyes clear of water before meeting Kait's gaze. He sighed heavily before offering her his hand. Clutched in his fingers was a bright pink ribbon.

"Peter wants ta talk 'ith ya lass. Seems ta think there's been a misun'erstanding somewhere." Kait took the ribbon with shaking hands. It had been how Peter had asked her out originally. He had tied the bow around his head one Valentine's day and sat on her porch to ask her to dinner. He had waited past nine until she had come home. She had spent the day visiting her newly married sister and had no idea he would be waiting on her doorstep. Kait thought he had thrown the ribbon away ages ago. Watching her, Paul sighed and turned to peer into the rain. "Seeing how ya was I sent 'im home. Best ya sleep off da shock and talk with 'im tamarrow, when ya both 'ave clear 'eads." Kait watched Paul reach for the screen door but reached out and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Um... thank you... for helping," she mumbled, just loud enough to be heard over the tin roof. Paul chuckled and nodded, without turning around. Curiosity overcame her and she asked, "Paul? Why were *you* in the park? You have an apartment down on Olds Street, right?"

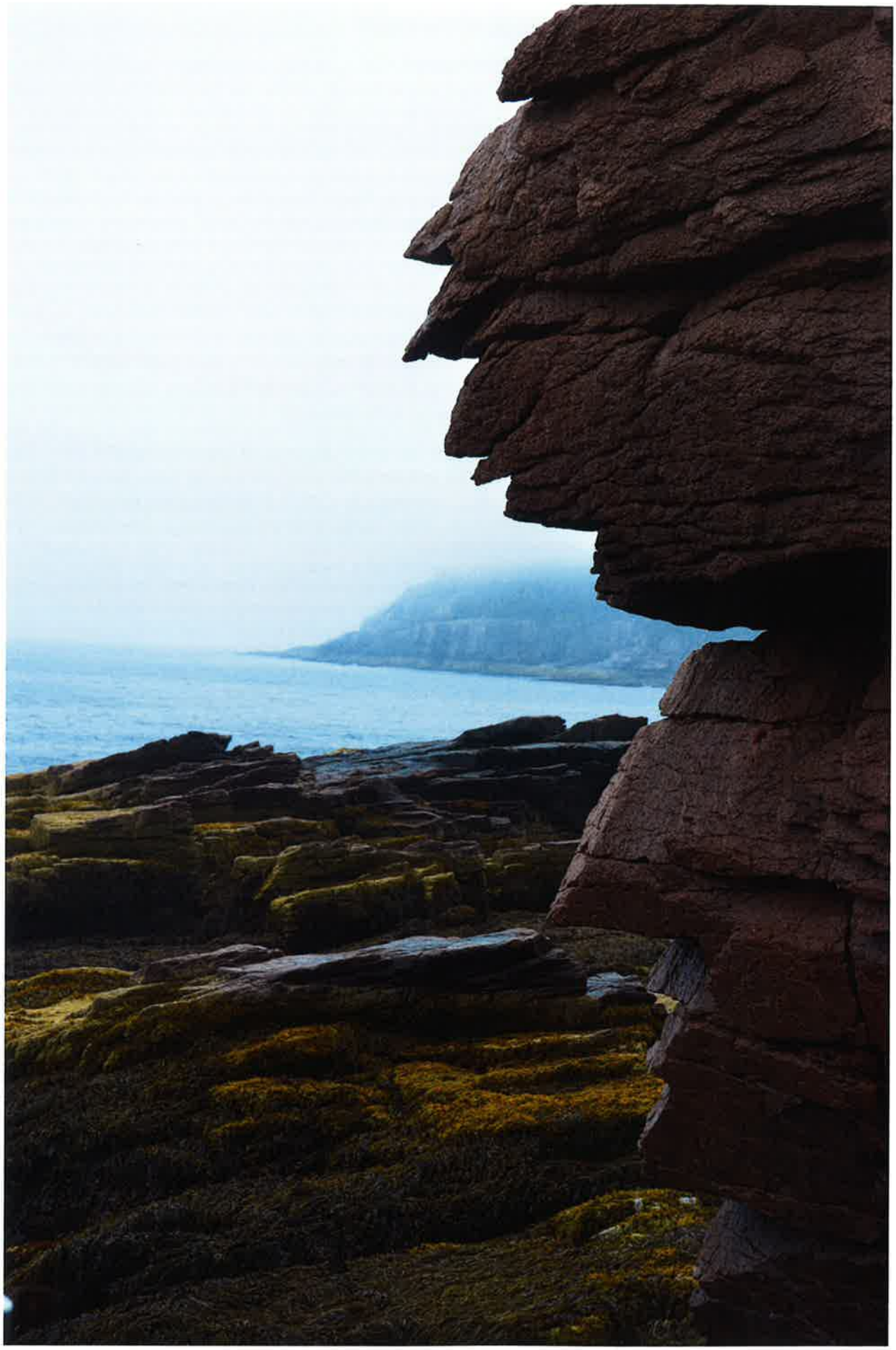
Paul paused in the open doorway, rain whipping by and turned to look at her fully. He looked slowly over the image of her standing there in the half-light of the flickering flood lamps. He smiled in his knowing way. "Meh ma always were tellin' me that when the rains come some folks will be sure'nuf in need of help. Someone always 'as a rough day when da rains come. She'd go walkin' out in da rain with dis big old umbrella." He mimed opening the huge thing, smiling fondly with the memory. Returning to himself he chuckled, "En sure 'nuf every time she'd 'ome home with some folk or other un'er it. Da'd sit with us in da ol' shack an' wait out da storm with us." He tugged at his coat with pride. "Well, ever since I grown out from da house I go out when it rains. Always seem ta find some folk needin' a 'and." Paul turned from her, and with a tip of his old hat, he added as he walked into the storm, "That's jus' the way it is when it rains."



By Patrik Orcutt



By Patrik Orcutt



By Patrik Orcutt

# Beings of the Night

Sadie Ferguson

My eyes opened slowly, still heavy from my peaceful slumber. I glanced at the clock lying on my nightstand - it was 10:27 P.M. on a Friday night. I must have dozed off after getting home from school and had just woken up; that heaven-like memory foam mattress could place me in a coma, I swear. I groaned, realizing I had wasted most of my night. It was unusual of me to waste my free time haphazardly. I picked up my phone to see what all of my friends were up to. I clicked on the glowing blue *Facebook* app and sighed at what I found. Tara was cuddled up at home watching *Netflix* with her "baby" (also known as her ancient fat cat); Kiara was partying with a bunch of awkward looking teenage boys (no surprise there); and Leah was headed out of state for the weekend with her family. My eyes glazed over as I read through the other names, not truly interested in hanging out with animal-killer Billy or chick-flick watching Allie. Usually my friends didn't invite me to foolish social events because they knew I would rather spend my spare time immersed in nature, but I was still upset that I hadn't been acknowledged during my lengthy nap. I sighed, dragged myself out of bed, and headed into the kitchen, where my mom lounged at the table partaking in a late-night ice cream binge. This was a ritual she practiced at the end of nearly every week. She claimed it helped her release stress.

"Sweetheart! Where have you been? I haven't seen you all day.... I assumed you went out hiking or something, hours ago. It's not like you to waste a beautiful afternoon," my mom said in her sweet, honey-like voice.

"I had planned on reading for a while, but that just about knocked me out cold, so here I've been sleeping until about five minutes ago," I answered. Her face looked as disappointed as I felt.

"Well, that's a shame. But hey, you *have* to check out the moon! It's a Harvest Moon tonight, absolutely gorgeous, something a nature-junkie like yourself definitely shouldn't miss!" I nodded in response and gave her a hug goodnight before heading to my room to bundle up and endure the chilly outdoors.

When I arrived at the local public garden, just two blocks from my home, as always I was mesmerized. The gardener unfailingly seemed to keep all of the flowers pristine and perfect. Each blade of lush green grass adorning the ground was the exact same height, and never grew taller than an inch or two. Every plant was nurtured daily, and any dead leaves were plucked to rid of imperfections. It was not a large garden, since it was maintained by a single person, but every inch of life was clearly loved and cared for. There were three wooden benches that were regularly re-stained and repaired to assure stability. My favorite part of the garden, though, was a small stone fountain adorned in carvings of fairy-like creatures. It flowed steadily, even through the night. The sound of flowing water always gave me feelings of peace the instant I stepped foot on garden grounds. All of these manmade structures were connected by a rounded cobble-stone walkway that felt rather fairytale-esque. This garden was not extremely popular due to its remoteness and small size, but it was one of my favorite places to come to when I needed a quiet environment to read or meditate in. I ran my hand along my favorite bench - the one placed next to the ruby red rose bush - and sat down.

When I looked up, I observed a gorgeous glowing red orb floating in the sky. It was difficult to believe that it was the moon! I was always amazed by Mother Nature and God's gifts. I didn't get to enjoy the splendor for very long, though; in almost the same instant I gazed upwards I heard a noise that was eerily inhuman. A shrill noise cut through the silence of the night like a knife and penetrated my ears as goose-bumps covered my entire body. The sound was almost like a rabbit being killed (which is a *dreadful* sound), but it gave off a menacing tone rather than a terrified one.

"Who's there?" I called quickly as I froze on my beloved bench and tried to halt my breathing so I could listen for more calls. Just as I was about to give up and walk briskly home, I heard a splash as something landed in the pure water of the garden's fountain. I simply *needed* to know what produced the sound, so without hesitating, I sprinted for the fountain in hopes that the producer of the terrifying sound would reveal itself.

As I strained my eyes, gazing into the dark abyss of the fountain's water, a small creature made its way to the surface. My first instinct was to strike myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.... I definitely wasn't. The moon's brilliant light was bright enough that I knew the image before me was not just the night's darkness tricking my eyes, but I still couldn't believe what I was seeing. A small, humanlike creature emerged from the water and began to dance around. It had green skin, almost like that of a frog. Its hands and feet also looked like they came from some sort of aquatic creature. Its head was no bigger than my thumb, and its eyes were like tiny green emeralds floating in its skull. The creature had wings that were almost entirely transparent, aside from a blue-ish hue. If I hadn't known better, I would have identified the being as a fairy.

"Umm, hi. What exactly *are* you?" I asked, struggling to find the breath to summon words.

The critter answered in a voice that sounded like the lightest of wind chimes. "I am exactly what you think I am. I'm a fairy. Not like that Tinkerbell fool that you humans have created. No, we are much more sophisticated than that," the fairy said with a disheartened sigh.

"Well, why haven't I ever seen your type before?" I asked, still in awe of the creature in front of me.

"We are only visible to humans on Harvest Moon nights because of the way the moon reflects on our skin. Typically, we are never caught or seen. But when we are, we are required to give a special prize to the human who caught us. Sort of a bargain in order for you people to keep your mouths shut about our existence."

"Was it you that made that terrible screeching noise?" I asked, skeptical of the fairy.

"Indeed it was. I was trying to warn the others that there was a human near. Apparently, I wasn't quiet enough to warn them without alarming you," the fairy replied, showing clear annoyance with itself. "Anyway, if you follow me now, I'll give you your prize. Our home is in the forest, so it will only take a minute to reach. You don't have to come, but I promise that if you do, you'll simply *die* from excitement."

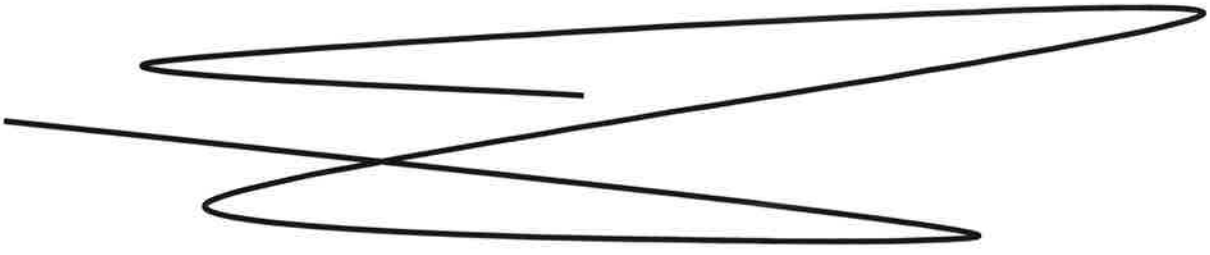
I shrugged and replied, "Not like I have anything better to do, I suppose." *Besides,* I thought to myself, *what harm could a little fairy do to me? This is probably just some crazy dream anyway.*

The fairy flittered around for a bit, trying to dry its wings I assumed. Then, it darted towards the woods that bordered the garden as I chased sluggishly behind it. It flew with the urgent speed a hummingbird flies with, making it extremely difficult for me to keep up. It didn't help that the forest floor was covered in both fallen leaves and jutting sticks and roots. The fairy would stop every so often to allow me to catch up, but it didn't seem overly patient or enthused with my slowness. It would roll its eyes at me whenever my pace slowed. By the time the fairy stopped, I was gasping for breath. I tried to summon words of criticism to the fairy, but I simply could not. The fairy let out a giggle that sounded like that of a toddler, yet the laughter sent chills down my spine. Something wasn't right. My instincts were telling me that this fairy was not as adorable as it had once seemed. My eyes widened as I tried to run away, trusting that the fairy did not have good intentions for me. I hadn't taken more than three steps before I fell to the ground, all of my limbs completely immobile. My heart started to race as I panicked and attempted to escape whatever bound me so tightly. It was as if I had completely forgotten how to move. I was aware of my surroundings, and I could *feel* my limbs, but I no longer had control over them. I felt like my insides had turned to stone, and the only muscles I could move controlled my eyes.

"You little fool. You are encased in fairy magic. No living being can escape that! I have magical powers, and you have absolutely nothing on your person that can stop these powers. You might as well cease your struggling; it will only make your death more painful," the fairy sneered. The fairy had told me it was nothing like Tinkerbell, and that was definitely the truth. This fairy was clearly an evil being. I tried to open my mouth to scream, but the magic was a vice that bound my entire body, mouth included. This caused me to be even more terrified, so without meaning to, I attempted to flee. The result was extreme pain. The fairy's magic sensed my movement and punished me by making my skin feel as though it were literally on fire, although the forest around me showed no signs of flame. The fairy laughed maniacally again and began to flitter around me. It sent out its shrill call and one by one other fairies joined it, laughing at my stupidity. They came from every direction, practically appearing from the trees themselves. It seemed they were overwhelmed with joy at my capture. In fact, even their flight patterns seemed giddy.

When it seemed as though every flying creature had arrived, the fairy I met spoke to me in a formal and rehearsed tone:

"Dear human, it is unfortunate that you have fallen into the hands of the fairies, but this is your fate. Each year on the night of the Harvest Moon, we lure a human into our realm much like we did to you. We lie and convince the humans that we were 'accidentally' caught and that we owe them a prize. You see, each year when the harvest moon is out, we feed. We have specialized digestive systems that take an entire year to process human blood, and so we only feel hunger once the Harvest Moon appears again. This is why we must kill you. You are simply playing your part in the food-chain. Don't you worry, though; your body will be of great nourishment to us. And you didn't struggle too much, so I have chosen to make your death relatively painless, human. Thank you for your service," the fairy said in a sincere tone that did not calm me. My eyes widened as I watched every fairy surround my magically hovering body and dance ritualistically. They lined up, licking their mouths hungrily and smiling at the feast they were about to enjoy. I attempted one last scream before I was struck by the fairies' sorcery. I could feel as each part of my body began to shut down. My extremities felt no sensation whatsoever, and I could tell there was a stillness in my organs. The dazzling light of the Harvest Moon faded as my eyes began to close involuntarily. I felt my final heartbeat thud in my chest as I heard the fairies begin to devour my body.



▲

# The Future of Mail

By Heather Littlefield

*The Wedding*

The outside air cloaks Sara in a warm blanket. She makes her way to the Chapel garden. Finding a bench, she sweeps the dirt off the seat and folds her dress under her as she sits. "Need a smoke?" a deep voice bellows from the shadow of the building. Sara looks up to see David standing there. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, with one hand in one pocket and the other hand holding a lit cigarette. His sandy blonde hair is slightly tussled from the wind. They had just met a few hours ago, at their mutual friends' wedding. Sara's thin lips deliver a polite smile in response. She begins to form the word "no," until her eyes lock with David's. Before she knows it, a "yes" escapes from her mouth last minute. She finds herself thinking how beautiful his caramel-colored eyes are.

David is astounded at the beauty radiating from Sara. Never before has he seen a woman carry herself with such elegance. The women in his family are laborers, overworked and underpaid. Some of them worked in factories, others on farms and, as for his mom, she worked in construction. And then here is Sara, with skin as soft as silk and womanliness that drew him to her, by his heart. He could tell that he had an instant connection with this woman.

Sara turns an envelope over in her hands. Admiring the words printed in black, she runs her thumb across the text. TO SARA EGAN. Oddly, the letter arrived from a letter delivery company (that prints letters and delivers them in person). Sara's curiosity was peaked and that's when she had excused herself from the reception to go see what this letter was all about.

Unfolding the letter, Sara starts to read it as she smokes her cigarette. The white filter is no match for her red lipstick as it soaks through the filter. She was rather glad she said "yes" to his offer at this point.

> Sara,
>
> How does one convince someone that they are in danger without ever having met them? You are sitting outside in the garden, smoking a Newport menthol cigarette that David just gave to you. You're holding this letter in your left hand, left leg crossed over the right, with your yellow dress shining in the sunlight. In 3 seconds you will jump at the sound of a dog barking from one of the parked cars, 3...2...1. How much more proof does one need?
>
> My name is Alex, and, unfortunately, per certain circumstances, I cannot tell you much more about myself at this time. I can tell you that I truly have your best interest at heart. We do not have much time, and what I am about to ask of you may seem absurd, but I need you to trust me. I need you to take David to a safe spot, where no one will find you guys for a day. Need more proof? Something you were thinking today as your friend Allison was saying her vows to Todd was a question of how they got all the little gems on the ceiling of the church. You missed most of the wedding pondering this thought, and as you snapped out of your daydream, everyone was headed off to the reception hall.
>
> You must go. You have about 5 minutes. Please hurry – I will explain later.
>
> Alex

The dog is still barking as Sara finishes reading the letter. She looks to David, who is still standing there admiring her beauty. Bewildered and scared, she goes to stand up, but as she does, she gets light-headed and everything darkens around her.

David cusses as he realizes that Sara is about to pass out. She's within reach, and he catches her as she faints. Her grasp loosens on the letter as David is settling her onto the ground. David picks it up from the grass. Holding Sara he glances down at the letter and begins to read the printed text. He isn't one to intrude in one's personal life; however, he couldn't help but notice his name in it.

This has got to be the strangest letter I have ever read, David thinks to himself. He looks up at the blue sky, quickly folds up the letter and stuffs it into the inside of his tuxedo vest pocket. The reception hall echoes with sounds of music, lots of chatter, and glasses clinking. He decides that no harm can be done by getting Sara to his car to recuperate, privately.

Only a few minutes have passed when Sara awakens. "Did you read that?" she asks, noticing the letter sticking out from David's tuxedo. David is answering yes when a black SUV pulls up in front of them and two men step out; both retrieve handguns from inside the vehicle. David turns to Sara who is staring at the men. Without thinking, David slams his BMW into reverse, and the armed men run back to the SUV.

*The Cabin*

The rocks underneath the car's tires sound like waves crashing in the ocean. David and Sara drive all night and well into the next day. They pull up to a moss-covered log cabin home. Fallen leaves encompass the cabin, and a stream from the mountaintop slowly flows beside the driveway.

"Whose place is this?" Sara inquires while putting on her jacket.

"It's my family's place. We've sort of just forgotten about it." David leans into Sara and smiles as he unfastens her seatbelt and hops out of the car. Considering the weird situation that they both have been put in, the two of them can't help but notice how natural it feels to be with each other.

"You sure no one is going to mind us being here?"

David chuckles, "I'm sure."

The door creaks as David opens it for Sara. She walks inside. Part of her wants to run back home, but another part of her knows that the men with guns she saw yesterday were scarier than an old cob-webbed log cabin. Sara's heels echo below the wooden floor into the basement as she walks over to the dining table. There's an envelope sitting there, with type on it, just like the other letter. She gasps and takes a step back. David rushes to her and holds her arms. "Are you ok?" he asks gently.

"Yes, yes but look. It's another letter. And it's labeled to you." Sara's voice is filled with anxiety. David picks up the letter and begins reading.

David,

By now you have already read the letter that I have sent to Sara, and you have both made it out to the cabin. There are many questions you both have, but I can't answer those yet. What I need is for Sara to answer her cell phone when it calls with an unknown number. Feel free to turn off GPS tracking if you don't trust me.

-Alex

Moments after David configures Sara's phone to have GPS coordinate tracking disabled, Sara's cell phone rings. It scares them both. Sara picks up the phone and can hear an automated message playing in a monotone male voice. "Sara, this is Alex. I know that you two are scared and confused right now. Please enjoy the food and wine I have left for you both in the cellar. Everything will be fine in the morning as long as you stay the night here. You will be safe. Goodnight. "

David stands up and begins to gather the firewood into his arms. The firewood lands with several loud thuds next to the fireplace. David brushes off the small pieces of wood on his shirt and bends down to place the logs into the fireplace. Sara walks over and hands him a box of matches that was sitting on the mantle. David takes a candle from a window sill and lights it, then continues to light the firewood. "Shall we raid the wine cellar?" He looks up at Sara.

Together they carefully make their way down the old rickety stairs to the basement. David holds Sara's hand as she follows down after him. Walking through several cobwebs they find their way to the wine shelf, and with delight, David picks up a very dusty bottle of wine. Sara inches closer to read the bottle. David rubs his thumb across the label, and Cabernet Sauvignon 1972 reads in old typeface print.

David attempts to wash two wine glasses, which were in the cupboards. The plumbing is so old that a bunch of brown gunk just oozes out of the faucet. He walks over to Sara and hands her the opened bottle. "I'm going to have to lay on the charm real thick, and share the bottle with you since I can't rinse out the glasses." They spend the next hour sipping wine and sharing stories. They talk about the phony email they both received a few months prior. It was an email that Allison and Todd's wedding was canceled; they had received it because Allison's email got hacked. They both were enjoying the warmth of the fireplace while discussing the bizarre circumstances. Sara's face begins to turn rosy pink as the wine buzz settles in. The fire glowing on Sara's face is one of the most gorgeous sights that David has ever seen. He sets the wine bottle down, leans in to Sara, takes one hand and touches her cheek to draw her face closer to his, and they kiss. It's a kiss that speaks a thousand words. They spend the night making love in front of the fire.

*The Hospital*

David and Sara fell madly in love with each other. It came as no surprise when Sara found out she was pregnant the month after the night in the log cabin. Since that day, things were calm and the letters from Alex had stopped. The two moved into a new house and were anticipating the arrival of their new baby.

"Keep breathing Sara. In, in, out. In, in, out." David's BMW is speeding through downtown DC. He appears calm and collected, but inside his mind is in a panic. Sara is sitting beside him, squirming in pain and holding her eight-month pregnant belly. "Ugh, I don't know if we're going to get there in time, David. I feel like I need to push!" Sara is moaning as she speaks. They take their next right. Each passing traffic light turns green. David pushes his foot further down onto the gas pedal and grips onto the steering wheel. As he reaches the 6$^{th}$ light he notices something is very wrong with this scene. Not only is his light green, but so are the lights going in all directions. "Sara!! Put your buckle on!!" He knows she isn't listening. He quickly lets go of the steering wheel, seeing the impending accident that's coming, and reaches for the seat belt as fast as he can and snaps it in for her. As their car sideswipes a car running in the opposite direction, they begin spinning as David is tossed around in the car and then SMASH. A city bus hits David's side of the car, sending him flying on top of Sara.

*Two days later*

David makes his way on crutches down to the maternity ward. It was a miracle that an ambulance happened to be called to a fake car accident and that they were on their way back when they witnessed David and Sara's car spin around like a ball in a pinball machine. Quickly, they were able to escort the two to the hospital, where Sara delivered a baby boy. Not long after she gave birth, they decided to name their son, Alex.

Sara is holding Alex as David walks over and wraps his arms around them both. They look out the hospital window into the city. As they gaze out into the city, the lights begin blinking and scrambling around until the lights spell out *I love you*. As Sara and David turn to look at one another, the nurse walks in with a puzzled look on her face and says that a letter just printed out from their printer for them.

David & Sara,

I am hoping that this letter makes its way to you. If my calculations are right, you haven't heard from me since the bizarre day in the cabin, when fate brought you two together. I'm Alex. Your son. I grew up and discovered how to time travel, through technology. Essentially, I am able to hack into electronics in the past. The reason you have been in danger is be cause my competitor, Beckworth Industries, figured out my "secret formula" so to speak and wants to claim this extraordinary discovery for themselves. They realized through tech time travel they could prevent my parents from procreating. The ability to alter life events, through hacking into electronics in the past, is like playing god. And put in the wrong hands, well, you can see what has happened.

It's been a long battle. What I am about to tell you is the complete story. It will be a hard dose of truth to swallow. The false email about the wedding cancellation was the first interception by Beckworth. If I hadn't gotten the letter to you at the wedding, Sara, you would have been gunned down as you left the reception hall. The weirdest thing for me is having a memory of this, although I wouldn't have been born. Time manipulation is strange. So that's when things started to get a little fuzzy for me, as these memories started to pop up, that I didn't have before.

So as for the phone call in the cabin — I originally sent out the automated message to prevent you from leaving the cabin. If you had left the cabin, the men in the SUV would have found a way to hack into the BMW's GPS device, and they would have killed you both. Again, I cannot explain how I know this; it's a fuzzy memory implanted into my head. But after I hacked into the automated system, a fuzzy memory of you not answering the unknown number appeared. So then I had to write you the letter to get you to answer the phone. Really, the hardest of all things was getting that bottle of wine in place, and the food. There is only so much you can do within the limits of electronics. Apparently, I can make miracles happen. So, luckily, things were quiet for about nine months for you as Beckworth didn't know where you two had moved. There were no public records that were electronically published. But what was published was the hospital where I was born. Beckworth spent nine months figuring out how to hack into the city's cameras on all the traffic lights. That is how the war of the lights happened the night I was born.

I know it's a lot to soak in. And at this point in time I don't know what the future holds in store for us, but I ask that you keep an open mind.

Love, your son, Alex



By Patrik Orcutt

# Neighbor

By Liza Buck

Thomas pushed his computer chair into his too-neat desk wondering who would find his note first. He had just finished his last day of his lavish nine-to-five job of being a telemarketer and looked around for someone to utter a few parting words to, but didn't know the name of a single face around him. Facing his cubicle again, the three and a half wall-vacuum for his energy and life, he felt a twinge of sadness but also felt it pass as he realized that he hadn't hung anything up. No pictures on his desk, no silly sticky notes about the boss from a coworker, not even a calendar to keep track of how many days he no longer had to live.

After clocking out, Thomas sat in his beat up Corolla and tried to think about something he might have to do before leaving town, but his mind was blank. Turning the key, he drove through a few intersections and pulled onto the highway. A few hours later he pulled up to the motel he had called to see if there was any availability. Clearly, that hadn't been necessary because there were only three other cars in the parking lot and one of them was sitting in front of the lobby. After parking next to that one, he stood up and stretched his aging body feeling multiple bones in his back crack along with other sounds of protest from various limbs. Even his bones were exhausted and done with this life.

Thomas reached the front desk and rung the bell adorned with the typical "RING ME IF NO ONE IS AROUND" paper scotch-taped to the bottom of it. While he waited for a pair of shuffling feet to reach him, he inspected the room he was standing in and wondered how old this place was. The floral and palm tree wallpaper was peeling from the walls and looked ridiculous as he was nowhere near a tropical place. The ceiling had smoke stains and was missing tiles. The shaggy rug looked equally as used and was putrid green, and then the man who finally arrived before him certainly looked to be the finishing piece of the room. He was wearing slippers, gray sweatpants, a button-up t-shirt, and was balding. Thomas noticed liver spots as he asked him for room number twelve, his favorite number, and shoved a wad of bills into the cracked and spotted hand of the owner. He watched his eyes dart up to meet Thomas's; the wrinkles around his mouth became apparent as it formed a large O.

"I'm not sure how long I'll be staying...." But that was a lie, Thomas knew exactly how long he'd be staying, but wanted to compensate the man in some small way for whatever trouble he was going to cause him.

On his short walk from his car to room number twelve, he noticed movement in the room next to his and saw the flicker of bright red hair move. He realized that the woman the hair belonged to was dancing. It was not touching her shoulders as she was spinning, but it was up in the air and large strands of it were covering most of her face. He hesitated a moment longer, waiting to see someone dancing alongside her, but realized that she was alone. The woman caught his eye mid-twirl and he quickly closed the distance between himself and his door. As he was fumbling with the key in the knob, a deep voice to the right of him startled him saying, "She's a looker ain't she?" But it didn't seem as though he was asking, and a chill ran down Thomas's neck as he finally forced himself to look at the man from which the voice traveled from. He found that it only made him feel more uncomfortable. The man sat in a white plastic chair that sat outside each room, and he wore a white sleeveless shirt and jeans that had multiple holes. A cigar sat between his stained teeth, and he looked to be about sixty. His dark eyes were darting around, looking Thomas up and down, and then he sat back and gave a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. Thomas grunted an answer, hoping he sounded neutral and entered his room.

Thomas locked the door, pulled the curtains shut, turned the palm tree lamp on, and emptied the small duffle onto the stained bed. Out tumbled a pair of boxers, a t-shirt, a large bottle of prescription pills, and a box cutter.

Back at his one-bedroom apartment was a note, a short one comprised of three lines: "I lost the one person that made life livable. I resent the person in the mirror. I can't be here anymore." It was beneath a magnet on the fridge, and he didn't know who would be the first to find it. A strange neighbor, a squatter who realized that a person no longer lived there, or perhaps his parents that he hadn't talked to in a few years. He suspected that it didn't really matter because they would probably receive the news of his death before concern drove them to his apartment.

Later, when night fell, he drove himself to a local convenience store and bought a scentless candle and a lighter. He blew out a sigh of relief when he pulled into his spot back at the motel and the old man wasn't sitting in his chair, but a cigarette was still smoldering in the ashtray next to it. So, Thomas hurried to get inside.

In the bathroom, the tub was filling up with hot water, and a chair sat next to it with a glass of water, the pills, box cutter, and the candle. Thomas wasn't a religious man, nor was he very spiritual, but he was a big advocate for self-comfort and these things were exactly that. Just as the white, stained tub was nearly full, he turned the faucet off and moved to light the candle, only to find that he had forgotten the lighter in the car.

Thomas grabbed the lighter from the cup– holder in his small car and was almost back inside when a quiet, silk voice asked what was the matter. The man stopped with his hand on the knob and craned his neck to see the dancing woman with fiery hair sitting there searching his face.

"You look so sad," she continued, and he dropped his hand from the knob and pocketed the lighter.

"Uh... nothing I suppose," Thomas answered lamely.

"Come sit with me, please, I'm lonely, and you look like good company despite your sad eyes," the beautiful woman said. "I'm Mary." He started to make an excuse about needing sleep or making a phone call, but stopped himself short because some-

how he felt as if she'd see through it and find out what he was really doing. Thomas pulled over his white plastic chair, dusted it off and sat across from her. He couldn't get a good look at her because of the vanishing daylight, but what he could see was stunning. She had long legs that were crossed in the chair, sitting Indian-style. Her hair seemed to shine it's crimson color despite the fading light, and her cheeks seemed to be made for smiling.

"Let me guess, it's about a girl," Mary started in. *If only you knew...* Thomas thought, and remembered his late wife, her long battle with cancer, their miscarriages, and his life following it all.

"Something like that," he decided to reply.

Then, without warning, Mary began telling him her life story. She started with a profile on her entire family and worked her way to the first time she rode a bicycle, described each boyfriend in detail, and only paused to twirl her red hair around a finger and then place it between her lips. Words and stories began walking out of her mouth. The more excited she got about a memory, the more her hands and arms became involved. Each time she laughed she tossed her head back so her hair had no choice but to fall away from her face that seemed to have an ivory glow to it in the now-bright moonlight. When she was done, he was exhausted but intrigued. She had brought him up to present time, but he felt as if the story wasn't finished, it wasn't enough for him and he was left unsatisfied. She let out a giant yawn and announced that it was time for her to turn in, but wanted to have breakfast with him the next morning so she could hear about his life. Thomas simply nodded, afraid to speak and ruin her streak of talking, and she surprised him again by hopping up and planting a feather-light kiss on his cheek and disappearing into her room.

Thomas sat there for a few more minutes trying to gather his thoughts and figure out what had just happened. When he finally felt like he would be able to stand without falling over, he stood, grabbed his chair, and turned to go into his own room. After a few steps he looked up and almost dropped the chair when he saw the old man from before sitting in his chair again in the shadows so that Thomas couldn't see his eyes. He coughed to cover up his fright, then said, "Goodnight."

"Jesus Christ you must be somethin' special, huh? She's been here for, oh, around a week and she never talked nothin' like that," the man responded, smoke punctuating his words. Thomas grunted, again at a loss for words, and entered his room locking his door behind him.

He stood there in the middle of his room with his arms out wide to either side of him as if inviting someone, a god or an angel, to explain what just happened or what to do. Then, he decided to return to what he was doing before Mary's interruption and fished the lighter from his pocket and placed it next to the candle on the chair in the bathroom. He dipped his fingertips into the water and found that it had turned to ice. He fully submerged his hand to pull the tub's plug and reached to turn the hot water on again, but something stopped him. He had a finger on his lip and thought about red hair being there instead, and was imagining a spritely ginger-girl tripping up the steps at graduation and falling off her bike the first time she rode it. *Get it together Thomas... Do the world a favor and take yourself out of it, do what you came here to do...* he thought to himself. But he turned the water off, then the light in the bathroom, and was fast asleep underneath the musty blankets completely unaware of the shadow of a man in his window. A shadow that normally would be standing outside the next window down.

Thomas opened his eyes. He didn't expect to do that ever again, but here he was, lying in a completely unsanitary bed staring at the broken ceiling tiles, and thinking about breakfast. He grabbed a strawberry Pop tart that he'd forgotten he put in his bag for the car drive. As he stood in his doorway with his door not entirely open, he heard the man's voice and it sounded falsely positive, as if it were covering up honest frustration. "C'mon Mary, go on a date with me... come over to my room and watch a movie-" the voice said, but Mary's voice interrupted and kindly spoke,

"Oh, you are such a funny man."

A fog must've drifted in from a nearby swamp and hadn't completely dissipated yet. It was a quiet morning; no sounds of birds or traffic and peace seemed imminent. Thomas heard the man's door to the left of his open and close, and he stepped outside. "I'd started to think that you forgot about me," Mary's voice filled the morning air. Thomas's stomach muscles tightened and the corners of his lips curled up for the first time in months, maybe even a year. It slipped away as he looked over his shoulder to make sure that the man wasn't looking out his window, then dragged his chair over to her. He sat down with his silver-packaged breakfast and mumbled, "Good morning."

They chatted while eating breakfast, or she talked and he listened. That was perfectly fine with Thomas because it gave him a chance to really look at her. He started at her feet. Her toes were painted red and had a handful of freckles on each foot, her legs were covered with a loose-fitting pair of pants with flowers all over them, and she was wearing a t-shirt of a band that he wasn't familiar with. Her bright red hair flowed over her shoulders and touched her breasts, and he felt his stomach tighten again. Her lips are where his eyes traveled next, and he noticed that there was a dark freckle that was half on her skin and half on her lip as if it couldn't decide which part of her it loved more. More of them were sprinkled all over her nose and across her cheeks reminding him of a clear night sky. All of these things were great, but didn't amount to the beauty of her green eyes. They were big with flecks of brown, and she had these dark lashes that fanned out on both.

After about an hour, Mary must have become bored of the one-sided conversation because she declared that she had to leave to go to the store, and said, "See you later, maybe." Thomas finally felt back to reality as he watched her walk down the cracked sidewalk away from the motel. *There, this feels normal... no one talking to me to confuse me... no one to make me believe they care....* Thomas thought, and picked up his chair.

"Wow, breakfast too, huh? What's your name again? Which way did you come from?" This time Thomas expected the

man's voice, but that still couldn't stop a chill from running down his neck.

He croaked out his name, "Thomas..." and it was as if there was a question mark after it, like this man's presence made him question everything he felt and said.

"Well, Thomas, *maybe* you'll see your red-headed friend later, but maybe you won't." Thomas watched those words ooze from this stranger's lips, felt them crawl onto him and settle on his chest, and he opened the door to his room with a shaky hand and shut away the world, ready again to do what he had come here to do.

The depressing collection assembled on the chair next to the claw foot tub once again, and Thomas turned the faucet on. Minutes later he was stripped down to his boxers and sitting in the bath; he didn't want the old man with liver spots behind the check-in desk to find him naked; his life was enough of a joke without people he didn't know seeing him clothes-less as well as life-less. He had decided upon the box cutter because he wanted to at least *feel* something as life escaped his body. He grasped it now, fingering the metal clip that was meant for easy-pocketing, and felt the contrast between the cold metal and the hot water he was in. Extending his arm, he pressed the brand new, sharp blade into his left wrist on top of the big green-blue vein. *Radial vein? Is that what I read online?* "Who the hell cares?" Thomas whispered, feeling the need to hear his own voice – validating that he was awake and truly in the tub with a blade against his tan skin. The muscles in his right arm contracted even more and the blade entered him. He tipped his head back and let out a loud breath, feeling as if he was nearing the end of a long, overdue assignment. A loud rap on the door caused Thomas's head to jerk back upright, and he instinctively pulled the blade out which made him gasp in pain. He remained very still for a moment while his wrist bled into the water, silently deciding whether or not he wanted to answer it – *why would I? I'm minutes away from not needing to answer anyone.* Directly after he had that thought, he was standing up in the tub and stepping out onto the tile floor. He hadn't laid a towel down because he had no plans of getting out, and nearly fell. He grabbed a towel off of the crooked metal rack and held his wrist against it while it simultaneously covered below his waist.

Thomas cracked the door open just enough to peek through, and his eyes met the magnificent red color that was piled high on top of Mary's head. She didn't hesitate to push the door the rest of the way open and then stopped short when she caught sight of the entirety of the man before her. "What in the hell have you been doin'? For Christ sakes your trousers are soaked and your towel's covered in blood!" Thomas felt the blood travel to his face and remained frozen near the door while Mary continued on into the room. He felt his heart flutter as he became acutely aware of what the bathroom looked like.

"What are you doing here?" he blurted. "I mean didn't you say you needed to go to the store?"

"Jeez grumpy man, yes I did... about four hours ago... Did you fall back asleep? Why are you all wet?" she repeated the question. *Four hours ago?* Thomas thought, and glanced at the clock on the bedside table to find that she was right. "I'm going for a walk, there's a path back behind here and I wanted to know if you wanted to join? I mean, if you'd like to put some dryer clothes on..." she smirked. Mary stepped back outside, pulling the door closed behind her and left Thomas standing in the same spot glancing at his wrist, thinking maybe he was already dead and what just happened wasn't real.

Following their walk, Thomas was lying on his motel bed staring at the ceiling, his mind reeling. He couldn't remember feeling this light, couldn't remember the last time he'd talked to someone like he just talked to Mary, and had actually enjoyed it. It didn't feel like he had been reading from some long tragedy asking for whoever was listening for their pity, and Mary didn't give him that pathetic look that everyone else seemed to every time he shared a bit of his life. *What is happening... what about my plan?* Thomas thought. He saw her face, Mary's hair, and heard her laugh and maybe even began to see himself through her eyes.

He found the room's plastic laundry bag on the top shelf in the closet, which clearly had been put there years before as his hand brought down a pile of dust along with the bag. He walked into the bathroom and the box cutter, pills, and candle all went into this bag, and he tied up his darkness. As he walked it out of his room to bring the bag to the large bin at the far end of the lot, he looked over his shoulder into Mary's window that was now illuminating his path toward the dumpster, away from oblivion. She was dancing again, and he smiled to himself thinking about their plans to drink the box of wine she'd bought on her trip to the store. *Holy shit I have plans, and I'm smiling. There's a tomorrow....*

His thoughts were interrupted by a strange sound as he pushed his door back open and peered into his dark room. *I don't remember turning the light off....* Not seeing anything or anyone, he stepped into the room and closed the door, thinking about taking a quick shower. Before he could take a step toward the bathroom, a hand slapped over his mouth, and then an arm was crushing his windpipe. His arms were flailing and scratching at the large arm that was blocking his airway, his vision was blocked by the hand, and he heard running water. When he regained his sight, the strange man's face was inches from his, and he smelt a disgusting combination of whiskey and cigars. "You show up and think you can steal that Mary's heart? I've been watching you.... I saw the money you gave Al. I saw your bag, your face, and I heard them pills shaking around." The man punctuated everything with spit on Thomas's face that was already wet with perspiration. "I'm gon' finish what you came here to do you little.... You don't deserve that Mary." The man removed the hand from Thomas's mouth, but before he could gain any air or let out a scream he was under water. The same arm that had crushed his windpipe was now holding his entire upper body in the tub.

Before long Thomas gave up struggling and just stared up at the man's grinning face through the water. Bright red blood flowed from somewhere on his body; *he must have broken my nose...* and as his vision became blurry and tunneled, his focus was on this color. As blackness closed in, the last thing he saw, the last thing he thought of: red.



By Patrik Orcutt

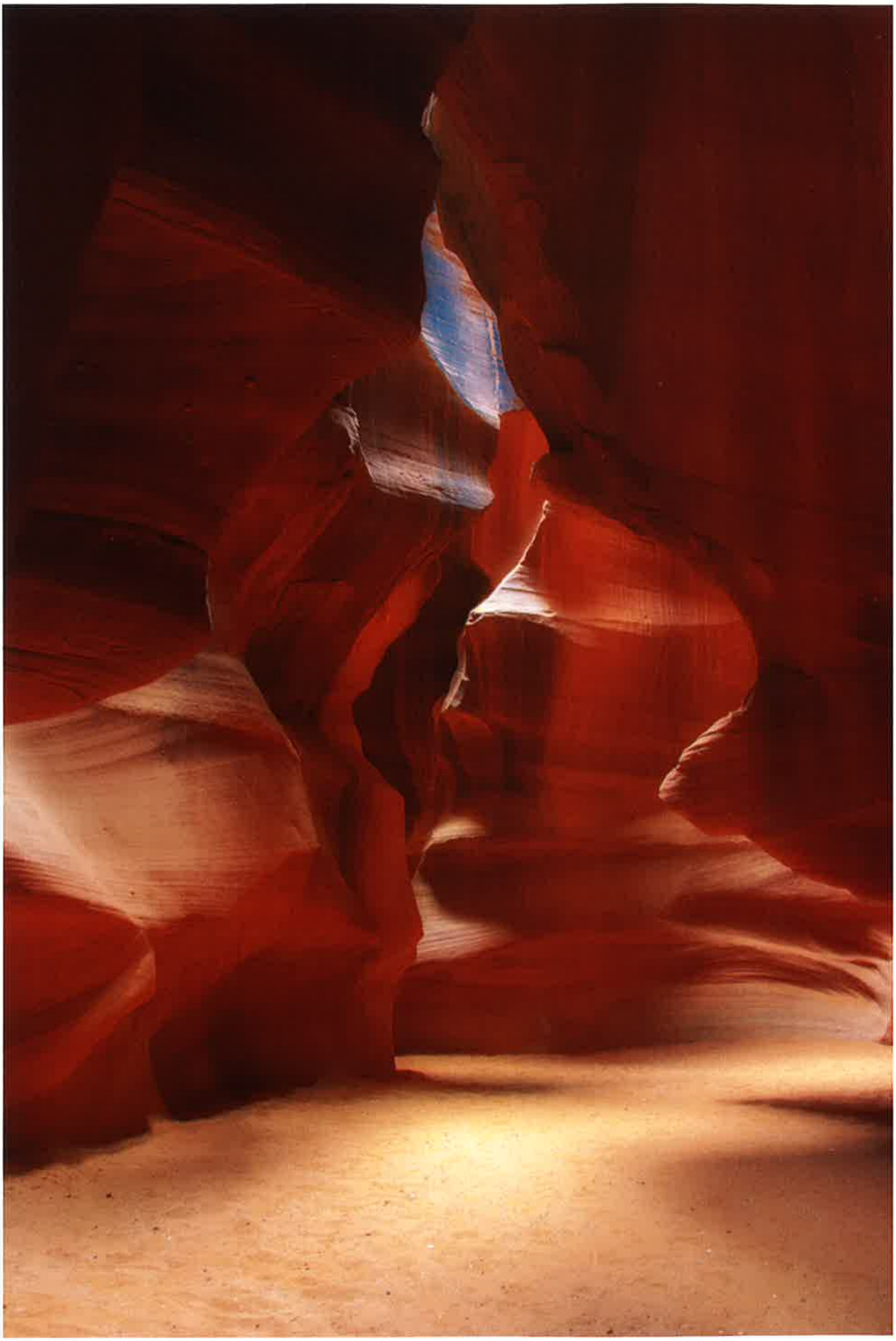
## Three Haiku

By Lori Stanley

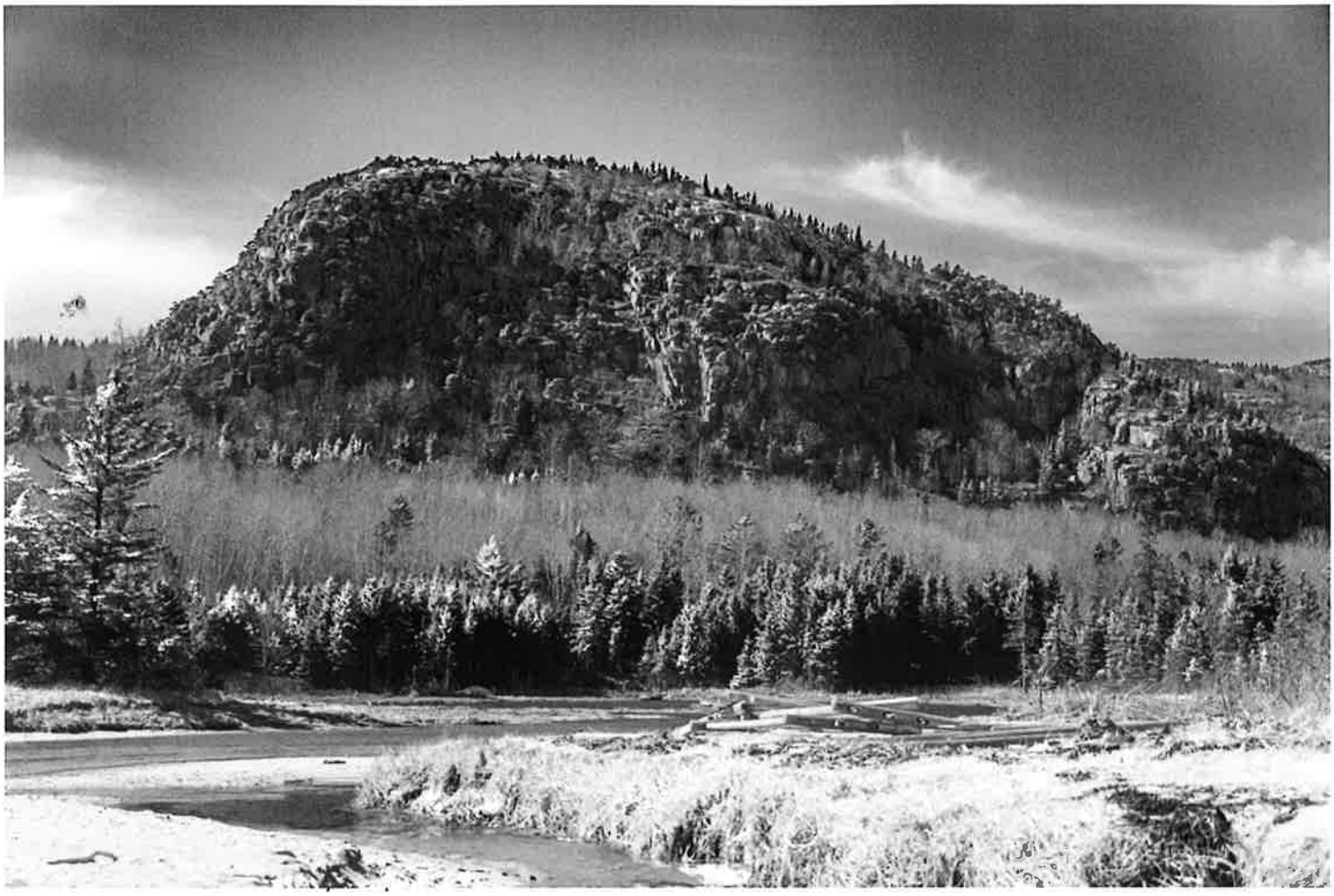
Yellow leaves begin as green
The sunshine grows low
Bare branches show life

The brown earth is bare
Soon we see change in growths
Life remains unseen

A blossom is growth
Colors vary and surprise
The eye awaits sight



By Patrik Orcutt





By Patrik Orcutt



Calla Lily by Ashley Charloux

# A Missed Opportunity

By Julie Hutchins

There was once a chance I didn't take. It was a chance that I thought would change my life forever and make me the happiest man in this world. It was such a rough day out. The storm was going back and forth between torrential rainstorms and powerful gusts of wind that were so strong it gave my truck a run for its money. It was growing difficult just trying to stay on the drenched road. The weather did not matter to me though. I just needed to get to my girlfriend before she left for the entire summer. We had spoken the night before, and she gave me the option to call it quits for a while so that we could see where life would take us while we were separated. I did not want to agree to it, but I could see in her eyes she wanted this for me. She wanted me to experience life without her, and find myself.

I had already found myself, though; I found myself through her. She made me into the man I am today: happy, driven, successful. She was everything I wanted in a person, a lover. If you could dream up the perfect woman, it was her. She was constantly making me think about life, about my future, and what great things were in store for us. It seemed like she already knew everything there was to know about life and love. It was no longer just about me, but rather the both of us. That is why I went after her that morning. Ignoring all weather channels that told travelers to stay inside, ignoring all of the cars I saw pulled off to the side of the highway, waiting for the storm to cease.

However, my mind was made up and my vision was clear even if the roads weren't. My thoughts were clear. My will to get to her was clear as day. I could almost hear her speaking to me. "What in the world do you think you're doing? Are you trying to get yourself killed for me!" She would say to me if she knew what I was doing. Well, yes, actually, if that is what it will take to keep you by my side.

I was always trying to pull these obnoxious stunts when I first met her, stunts that would sweep her off her feet. She always rolled her eyes and called me goofy, but I knew she secretly loved them. I wanted her to know that I would always try and make sure she knew how much I loved her, and that no matter what, I would always make her feel like a queen. She still always makes me nervous, and gives me butterflies. The first time I saw her, I couldn't speak. She was so beautiful, and she walked right up to me.

"Hey there, my name is Rachel," she said with a smile on her face. All I could do was smile back at her.

"What's so funny?" she asked. I was so nervous, but I knew I needed to say something so that she wouldn't walk away from me with all of her friends.

"Nothing. You are just really, really pretty," I said looking up into her eyes.

She blushed, but I guess it worked because she stayed around for a few more hours. We were both freshmen at the same college, both at school a month early for fall training, both giddy and innocent. She was a soccer player, and I played football. Rachel was not allowed to be in a boy's dorm past a certain time, and she always followed the rules, so we snuck back to her dorms and stayed up all night talking about life before college and how much of a culture shock it was for the both of us.

The change in scenery no longer stuck out to me at college after that night; Rachel did. I fell in love with her that night. I found myself thinking about her all the time, in class, and at practice. She always had a smile on her face, and she always put one on mine. This was how I knew I couldn't just let her walk out of my life. This was why I found myself driving to the airport when everything and everyone was urging me not to. We belonged together; we deserved the chance to see where life would take us, as a couple.

As I got closer to reaching the airport, I visualized how I could make this as romantic as possible for Rachel. Would I make her feel like a character in the movies that she was always talking about? Would she come running to me and jump into my arms before I could confess my unending love for her? Or would this storm keep me from making it to her terminal in time? And would she get on the plane before I could convince her that there is no one else for me out there? I found myself running the worst-case scenarios through my head over and over, and that was when the panic and anxiety began to set in. I couldn't be late.

I slammed my foot on the gas and got myself into the passing lane. I found myself shooting by cars and trucks that were going a respectfully slow pace to make sure they stayed in their lane. I turned the music up so that the sound of the wind pulling on my truck wouldn't distract me and make me feel as if I should slow down. I already knew I was driving too fast, and frankly I did not care. I only had a few more miles to go. At the rate I was driving, I would be there in no time.

The quick break in the rain cleared a spot for me to see out of the window. I caught a glance of a woman walking towards the middle of the highway with her arms in the air. I could see her mouthing something at me. I slowed my truck down

and rolled my window down a crack.

"Slow down!" By then she was waving her arms frantically. "Slow down! We were in an accident up ahead. I need your help!" she screamed to me.

I paused for a second. "Get in," I told her. But I didn't want her to. I wanted to keep driving. I wanted to make it to Rachel.

"Thank you so much," she said in between heavy breaths. "The wind knocked out my reception. I haven't seen a vehicle in an hour it feels like." I could tell how thankful she was; she kept offering me money for stopping and thanking me every chance she got.

"It's fine," I assured her. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"My friend and I lost control of our car, and we hydroplaned off the road. She's still stuck in there, and you're the first person I've been able to stop for help."

We pulled up to the accident, and sure enough, the car was flipped on its side and pushed to the end of the tar. The woman jumped out of my truck and darted for the flipped car. Her jacket was being blown off of her, and the rain was pushing her body away from the car. I was about to put the truck in park when I thought about Rachel. She was at the airport about to leave me for good. Our relationship counted on this one moment. I looked down into my lap. Rachel was the most important person in my life. She was my world. I put my hand on the shifter; I looked over and I saw the woman trying to lift the car herself. This could be the most important person in her life, and here I was standing in the way of them being together.

In a split second, I slammed the car in drive and drove up to the side of the car. I jumped out of the driver's seat and reached in the back of my truck for any sort of cable or chain. I was able to connect my chain to the side of the car that was erected into the air and to the hitch of my truck. The woman just stood there talking to her friend stuck in the car, telling her it was all going to be okay. Once I had the car back on all four wheels, we were able to pull her from the seat. Once we did, she fainted.

I was once again faced with another decision. The airport was in a completely different direction from the hospital. Rachel was going to think that I didn't care about her anymore and that I actually wanted to be alone. Who was I kidding though? I couldn't leave these two out here stranded and hurt. I got my phone out and called the hospital informing them that we were on our way and to have them contact the police about the scene of the accident. I asked the woman, whose name turned out to be Jill, to call my parents and let them know what was going on just in case something came up on the news.

I pulled on to the other side of the highway and started for the emergency room. Jill's friend was still passed out in the back seat of the truck. However, Jill could feel a pulse, so it made the drive a little more bearable. The weather only seemed to grow worse. The wind became fiercer; large trees were strewn across the tar, and telephone poles leaned closer and closer towards the soaked ground.

I could feel myself coming close to tears. My throat tightened. I knew what I was doing was the best decision I could have made in this situation. I knew that I just did something that could potentially save and lengthen this relationship between these two strangers. But at what cost? My relationship with Rachel? I knew I should call her and tell her all of the things I had planned for her today. But that wouldn't change the fact that I wasn't able to actually make it to her. I should have left sooner; I shouldn't have let the conversation go the way it did last night.

I thought I would have more time. More time to digest the conversation and think about how to go about fixing things, before this happened. Before it was too late. I heard Jill gasp from the back seat.

Curiously I asked, "What, what's happening?"

"She opened her eyes; I think she's conscious." Her eyes darted from my face to her friends'. "Are we almost there?"

We were. I pulled up through the emergency drop off area. I opened the back seat doors and grabbed Jill's friend and carried her through the front doors. Doctors and nurses came running towards us. I set her down on a stretcher, and I was flooded with questions. Did I shake her, did I do this, did I do that, and how did she react to it? I didn't know what to say, so I just said, "Yes."

"Talk to her," I said pointing at Jill. "She can tell you how we got her friend out of the car. I just found them on the road."

The doctors started pushing her stretcher away through towering doors, and the nurses kept asking us questions about her family, medical history, all things I was oblivious to. There were doctors in long white coats marching every which way. Everything seemed more serious than we originally thought on the way there. Jill broke out into tears and told the nurses that her family was on their way. I felt bad for only thinking about myself, so I went over to her and tried comforting her, although I didn't even know who she was an hour before.

"This is all my fault," Jill said between sobs. "It was my idea to go out in this mess. All my idea."

I felt a hand on my back. Thinking it was another nurse, I said, "Hey, come on. Her family is almost here. Can you just wait for them and give this girl a break?"

"Mark, it's me."

My heart almost fell out of my chest, and I lost my footing. I knew this voice. I knew this voice so well. I spun out of my chair to see Rachel standing behind me with drenched clothes and hair, smiling.

"I didn't go to the airport this morning," she said. "All flights were canceled. But I didn't tell you because I wanted to see what you would do, if you would stop me or not. I realize now how stupid it was. " She began to cry a little. "But when your mom called me, and told me you were on your way when you came across this accident, I knew I needed to come find you."

I was in complete shock. If she had told me about her flights being canceled, I wouldn't have found these two women on the side of the road. They might even still be there, and Jill's friend might not be in the same state as she was. If I had driven by Jill, and gone to find Rachel, I would most likely have heard about a fatal accident, on the radio, hours later, knowing I could have saved them. But look where I was, in the hospital, safe, with the love of my life.

"There's no way I could have actually left without you, Mark. Yes, I said all of those things last night, but I just didn't want you to feel stuck when I was away all summer. I wanted to make sure you were doing what was best for you, and not just waiting on me," Rachel said looking into my eyes. "I just want you to be happy."

"I shouldn't have even let you finish your whole speech last night, Rachel. I want you to be happy, too. Deep down I felt that you needed to be your own person this summer as well. We both want what's best for each other, that is extremely clear, but I know in my heart that you and I were meant to be together. From the first time I saw you, Rachel, I knew we had something."

"I don't even want to leave now, Mark," Rachel pleaded. "I have you back, and I couldn't imagine if I had actually left."

"You have to go; look how much love we have for each other. Nothing is going to change that; nothing is going to make me love you any less. Definitely not distance," I said.

Then, she just hugged me. I held her for what seemed like hours; I had her back, and she had me. Everything was going to be okay now. Once I came to that realization, I glanced over at Jill. She was sitting with her head tilted down cradled in her hands, and her body slouched. She was so scared for her friend. Rachel and I sat with her. We were in that waiting room for a few hours before anyone came out to update us. The family hadn't even arrived yet.

The nurse came out in a sweat. Rachel was asleep on my shoulder, and Jill's knuckles were turning an off shade of white. The nurse put her hands on Jill's shoulders and looked right into eyes and told her that her friend was going to be just fine. There were a few broken bones, but other than that she was going to make a full recovery. As the nurse was walking away, she said, "Hey you, come walk with me."

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Honey, if it weren't for you today, that young girl..." the nurse said, bit her lip, and looked away. "She would have surely passed in that car. Yes, she is okay now, but there were some life threatening issues occurring that could have been much worse. Hold a loved one close today, and thank you for being in the wrong spot at the right time."

I turned and looked back at Rachel, who was looking at me a little confused, but still smiling. In that moment I knew I made the right decision. I could have taken a chance and left without helping. Thankfully, I didn't take that chance. I saved a life, and I still wound up looking at the most important person in my life. Everything really was going to be okay. Everything was going to work out.



## Nighttime

By Rachel Clark

I lie awake in bed, restless
The fan whirs calmingly
And still, I can't sleep
You aren't here

I fight the urge to stand, to pace
My blankets hold me tight
My dreams don't want me
You aren't here

Why am I not good enough?
Come, rock me to sleep
My prayer, unanswered
You aren't here

And when you come back, finally
To be with me and sleep
When your whims are through
I'll be here



By Patrik Orcutt

# The Garden

By James H. Stein

It was a dark and stormy night when Ashley stormed out of the apartment and began running down the street. The wind was blowing hard, so hard that the leaves smacked her in the face every ten feet she ran. The air was as warm as a midsummer night. The lightning lit up the sky like tiny explosions in the sky. The thunder was booming in the sky like a bowling alley. It was dark outside and felt like it was going to rain soon. Ashley did not care. She ran faster and faster through the dark and lonely streets of the city. They were as empty as her relationship had become. The street lights flickered as she ran past them. She ran for what seemed like miles past the buildings and houses until she arrived to a wooded trail just outside the city. The trail was filled with branches and roots. She began to slow down in fear that she might fall.

Ashley was a smart girl and never liked to get in trouble. She was proper at times, but liked to have fun. She had a great job that allowed her to work with animals. Her parents gave her a puppy when she was ten years old, and she loved to be around animals ever since. Ashley was the kind of person to always lend a helping hand even if it meant going out of her way. She was a kind person. It could be said that she was too kind as she often overlooked the bad qualities in people. Ashley loved to be in control of a situation and could not handle chaos well. It was no wonder that she and her boyfriend had broken up that night. She had seen the good in him, but always felt like she could fix him. He was kind of a wild person at times and never followed the rules as much as her. In the end it was the thought of being able to fix him that made her like him even more.

She arrived at a garden that she frequently visited every time she had a fight with her boyfriend and wanted to clear her head. The garden was in a small wooded area on the edge of the city and was well hidden. No one had kept it up, and the plants and trees were withered. It reminded her of the garden her grandmother had when she was young. Every spring they would build up the garden. Every fall they would watch it wither and die. She thought back to a conversation she had with her grandmother when she was younger.

"Why does the garden die each year, grandmother?" she asked.

"It dies so that we can rebuild it each year better and better," her grandmother said with a smile on her face.

"Then next year I want to have more flowers! Next year will be the best garden ever!" Ashley jumped and raised her hands. Her grandmother looked at her and smiled.

Each year they planted rose bushes, tulips, and a dozen other flowers, and each year it become more and more beautiful. Even on the darkest days the garden lit up the yard like a neon sign. Her grandmother had passed a few years back, and not long after, Ashley stumbled upon the garden just outside of town. It contained a single bench that looked just as bad as the rest of the garden. The garden had a lone street light that hovered over the bench. It provided just enough light to see the bench and about a five foot radius around it. She often wondered why there was a light in a old rundown garden that no one visited, but never questioned too deeply because it allowed her to visit her favorite spot day or night. And tonight, she sat on the bench and cried.

When Ashley felt like she had nothing left in her, she started to think about what she would do next. She knew she could not cry forever and started thinking about her life after her boyfriend. Ashley stood up and began to slowly walk through the garden looking at all the dead plants and weeds. She started reminiscing about the first time she had stumbled upon the garden a year ago. She had found it one day while she was out jogging through the woods. She never mentioned the garden to anyone and never saw anyone else there. Even though it was not a pretty garden, she enjoyed the solitude and found it was a place where she could clear her head. She thought about adding some flowers to it next spring. As she was walking she suddenly tripped and then quickly caught herself before she fell. She looked down to see a long root from a tree. Ashley was never a clumsy person and had excellent balance. She silently scoffed at the idea that a simple root could take her down. The root wrapped around the garden and led to a tree that was as withered as the rest of the garden. She thought that it was odd she had never noticed the tree before. It was outside the range on the garden light and was difficult to see.

Ashley walked around the tree looking it up and down wondering what kind of tree it was and how old it was. While looking at the tree she noticed there was some writing on it. She could barely make it out. It read "10 paces north. 5 paces west. 12 paces north." Ashley was intrigued, but not so interested that she had forgotten about her troubles. She went back to sitting on the bench and thought of all the good and bad times with her boyfriend. She remembered the time they were on the lake in a canoe and he stood up to look at some birds and they tipped over. Her thoughts quickly turned to an argument they had about their future together. She wanted to discuss the possibility of marriage, and he just avoided it. She wished she had not wasted all those years with him and wished she could get that time back. She cried some more.

Ashley got up and decided it was time to go to her parents' house to spend the night. She stood up, wiped her eyes, and began to walk out of the garden. As she was walking she tripped again. This time she did not catch herself and fell down onto the cobblestone walkway. She flailed her arms as if she were drowning. A loud smack echoed throughout the garden as she fell onto her face. She checked her head to see if there was any blood. Luckily there was none there. She got up, dusted herself off and let out a loud expletive. She looked down to see another root, this one smaller than the one before it. She began to follow the root with an intention of kicking whatever tree was at the end of it. This time it led her to a small tree which was no taller than her hip. The tree was slightly beyond the garden, on the opposite side of the previous one. As she was about to stomp on it, she noticed another piece of writing which read "Start here." She remembered the writing on the other tree. She was very curious so she walked 10 paces north, 5 paces west, and 12 more north. This led her through a small wooded area to a door. The door was made of metal and looked really rusty with vines covering it. It was as withered and broken down as the garden.

Ashley started looking around the door for a handle or latch. She finally gave up and just pushed on the door. She pushed so hard that she fell through the door and onto her face. Luckily the ground was soft. Ashley picked her head up and started dusting herself off.

"Dammit! How many times am I going to fall on my face today?"

She looked up to see where the door had led. She found herself in another garden, this one was twice as large as the last. It was no longer dark and stormy, but cool and sunny. It felt like a nice fall day. The sun felt warm on her face and the air was slightly cool, but not too cold. She looked back to see the door and it was no longer there. The door had been replaced by a large brick wall covered in vines. She quickly searched for an opening in the wall, but found nothing. Confused, she turned back around and faced the garden. She began to walk and noticed that this garden was nicer. The flowers were not dead, but budding. The walkway was brick and not cobblestone. The grass was green and thick enough that you could lie down and fall asleep on it.

She looked around and noticed the bench was not run down as the other had been, but a nice wood bench that looked sturdy. She also noticed a man sitting at the bench. The man was dressed in black, had a bowler hat on, and was facing the opposite direction of her. She walked up behind the man and before she could tap him on the shoulder he spoke her name "Ashley." She stood there confused at how this man knew her name. The man stood up and turned around and looked at Ashley. He was a handsome gentleman, around Ashley's age. He looked at her and said:

"How are you doing today?"

"Fine," she said nervously as she looked around confused about where she was.

"I am sure you are wondering why you are here and who I am. I am here to give you a choice. The choice is to get the last two years of your life back...or not" the man said with a smile on his face.

Ashley started to worry that she may have fallen one too many times and was now suffering from brain damage. She began to move back towards the wall where she had come in from. Looking at the wall she was reminded that there was no door there and started moving to all sides of the garden. She felt all around the walls looking for another door. Each side was covered by a large brick wall covered in vines. There was no way out.

"What exactly do you want from me?" she asked anxiously.

"If you could go back two years and never meet your ex-boyfriend would you?"

"I don't know. Maybe," she said while looking around for a way out.

"You have to make a decision," he said.

"Why do I have to make a decision?" she said with a mix of curiosity and frustration.

"I cannot tell you why. You simply have to make the decision."

She was becoming increasingly frustrated. Who was this man? Why did she have to make a decision? And how was she going to get out of there? She continued to look for a way out. She started ripping the vines off the walls until there were no vines left and only the brick wall remained.

"If I make a decision will I be able to get out of here?" she asked.

"I do not know. Will you?" he said with a blank expression.

Ashley's fear and anxiety started to turn in to anger. Her anger began to increase like a boiling pot of water. She was ready to punch him in the face. She moved closer to the man, but she noticed the closer she tried to get the farther away he became.

"You have an opportunity to change your life. Many people do not get this chance." He looked at her and smiled.

"What chance are you talking about?"

"You will find out soon enough."

"Fine! Then I say no! Even though I had some bad times and it did not end well, I would never want to forget the good times we had. Life is about choices, and we live with the choices we make." Ashley threw up her hands.

"Then you wish to live with the choices you have made?" the man asked curiously.

The man's vagueness had finally gotten to her. She picked up a rock and threw it at him. It hit him square in the chest. The rock bounced off him like it had hit a brick wall. The man smiled, turned around, and started walking. The man turned to dust and the dust blew into the wind. Ashley, now completely frustrated, noticed a small tree just beyond the bench. She was too focused on the walls and looking for a door. She walked up to the tiny tree. It had "start here" written on it. Just then she had remembered how she got there. She went 10 paces north, 5 west, 12 north. Suddenly she was in front of the wall and the wall had a door. However, this door was not like the other door. This one was as beautiful and new as the garden she was in. Ashley scrambled to find a latch or knob. She could not find one so she pushed with all her might. A flash of light shined in her face. It was as if she were looking at the sun without glasses. Suddenly, she was standing in a coffee shop. She was confused and started to look around. She seemed to be in line to get a coffee. She looked at the date on a Garfield calendar that had been hanging up. It was two years ago.

"Hey! Move up or get out of the line," some guy in the back yelled.

She moved up. All of a sudden a man walked up to her and said, "Hey, I am really late. If you let me in front of you I will pay for your coffee."

Ashley looked at the man and realized it was her ex-boyfriend. She knew where she was. This is where they met. This is where he bought her coffee then asked her out for the first time. She looked at the man who clearly had no idea who she was and said,

"Sorry, no cuts."





By Patrik Orcutt

# A Better World

By Jason Mathieu

"I haven't seen it this busy in here since they first opened the place," Will Marsden said into his phone as he scanned the restaurant. "Apparently I wasn't the only one craving Chinese."

"It's always busy there. You know they're the only ones in the city that make Chinese ribs that are actually edible, right? Don't forget to get me some to-go."

"Don't worry, I already have a doggy bag."

"Alright, so when are you going to be home?"

"I'm gonna head out in a few minutes. Everyone else already left; I'm just finishing up."

"OK. See you soon. I'm proud of you Will. If Sarah were here today, she'd be so proud of her daddy."

"I hope so. I love you."

Will hung up the phone and started gathering his things. His PharmaCorp coworkers had bought him dinner to celebrate his breakthrough cure, and what better way to celebrate an enormous victory than Chinese food? After working tirelessly for months, Will discovered the most important cure humanity ever needed: the cure for Möbius Mortem, the never-ending death.

Usually called "Double-M," Möbius Mortem genetically mutated cancer cells, rendering the previous treatment methods, mainly chemotherapy and radiation, completely ineffective. With Double-M prevalence rising rapidly, almost 75% of the world's population affected, pharmaceutical companies needed to research and develop new treatments quickly and aggressively. PharmaCorp conquered the challenge, developing a treatment plan that would suppress the Double-M gene as long as possible. Double-M affected people of all ages, but the younger the patient, the more effective this treatment was. However, when their lives ended, it did help the older generation stay more comfortable.

PharmaCorp became so successful and influential they gained control over and united several major governments, calling for "A Union for a Better World." A centralized world government, The Union, formed. PharmaCorp started making all the decisions and pulling The Union's strings, since their agenda encompassed more than just medicine. They firewalled the world's free Internet access, instead limiting data transfer to officially approved corporate channels and information. They quickly erased hundreds of years of net neutrality, replaced the Internet, and created the "Better World Exchange" information system.

"Don't forget fortune cookie," the little Chinese waitress said, wearing a big smile and using her best broken English. "Have good night!"

"Thanks. You, too."

Will cracked open the cookie. It read: *Your life is in danger. Say nothing to anyone. You must leave the city immediately and never return. Repeat: say nothing.* Even though Will was a pretty healthy and fit guy, the message still gave him chills. One of his co-workers must have played a prank, right? A little worried, he scanned the dining room until his and the waitress' eyes locked again.

"Yes?"

"Which one of them put you up to this?"

"I am sorry, I don't know what you mean."

"What, did they ask you to give me a fake fortune? Was it Jim? Bald guy, about yay tall?" He held out his hand to demonstrate Jim's approximate height.

"No. Cookie from same bowl with all rest of cookies." She pointed at a large glass bowl overflowing with wrapped fortune cookies. "Cookie bowl."

Confused, Will scrunched his face. His goatee scratched his nose, and he bit the inside of his lip. Even though it didn't make sense, he thanked her again and exited using the double doors leading to the main parking lot. Outside, transports filled the parking lot. Where hundreds of years ago sat a sea of gasoline-powered automobiles, now lay an ocean of their upgraded counterparts: the transports. Transports were introduced as much safer and environmentally friendly than the gas-powered engine. Since the inception of the "Better World Exchange," transports became completely automated, allowing the driver to sit back and relax after using the integrated console to input their destination.

Will had the latest model transport, fully equipped with curbside pickup service. After about twenty seconds, Will's mid-

sized blue transport drove up and parked itself in front of him. A little shorter for a man, he had no use for the full-sized luxury model; it just presented more expense for extra legroom he'd never need to take advantage of. He opened the door and boarded the vehicle. He touched the electronic console to load his integrated "Better World Exchange" news feed. The restaurant and his house sat only a few blocks apart, and he looked forward to relaxing with Emily and Michael, his wife and son. As the vehicle drove him home, he scrolled the latest daily news stories. The headlines read:

*Lifespans are shortening. What will you do?*

*Even with treatment, infant mortality rises for seventh month*

*We are NOWHERE*

*5 reasons not to miss your next checkup*

*Double-M: Do's and Don'ts*

"Tomorrow, things change," he mumbled.

Will thought hard about tomorrow's reveal — so hard he didn't even notice the on-board display flashing "NOWHERE" over and over again. He only noticed a problem when the vehicle shut itself down one block too early. Unsure why he stalled, Will tried pressing the help button, but before he could, a strange man dressed in a dark coat entered the car's passenger side and quickly sat down. The man slapped Will's hand out of the way.

"Don't even think about it, Bud! Didn't you get my message in the cookie?!"

Will felt trapped. Feeling pretty claustrophobic, internally, he could only picture hugging a crowded elevator's wall. He had trouble breathing, his heart raced, he felt his hands shaking, and he almost wet himself.

"Don't worry, I'm not the one you gotta worry about. They're after you. I had to be sure I could get to you when it was safe, but plans changed. We gotta go now!"

"Who are you? Get the hell out of my car!"

"My name is Julian Jones. Good to meet you, Bud! I'm the one who's saving your ass today, so do us both a favor and direct this car out of here. I'll give you the address once we're clear."

"Clear of what?"

The ground shook. A sound like a thousand guns discharging echoed everywhere. Will looked ahead and watched his house collapse like a waterfall of concrete, wood, and vinyl. He stared until only a cloud of billowing smoke remained. He heard piercing screams for a moment, then silence. Momentarily, the world stopped and between two beats of his heart, Will's entire life completely unraveled. He jumped out of the car and started running toward the smoke cloud, even with the heat of a thousand suns scorching his face, consuming and burning his tears as soon as they left his shattered soul. "No! No no no no no!" Only a burning ash pile remained where his house had stood ten seconds ago.

Will ran toward the billowing inferno, but Julian quickly caught and tackled him. Julian looked Will straight in the eyes. "You can't, Bud! I'm sorry, but we need to get out of here before they realize you weren't in there!"

"You don't understand! My wife was in there! My son was in there! They could still be there!"

Julian looked Will straight in the eyes. "Nobody survived that; I'm sorry. There's just no way. That was meant for you. We need to go. We can't be here. They'll find you if we stay."

"Who?! Who did this?!"

"Car! Now!"

Even with Will completely hysterical, Julian somehow lifted him off the ash-covered ground and dragged him back to the transport. Will's entire life raced through his mind. Through his tears he couldn't pay attention to Julian talking. He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe.

Julian punched an address into the vehicle's navigation system and off they went, away from the city. Away from the smoke, away from the fires, away from the people, buildings, and lamp posts. Near the edge of the city limits, the car turned into an old parking garage. The car drove down the lower levels of basement parking where no sunlight reached, only level after level of fluorescent lighting, until it reached a deep sub-basement level. Then, the car slowly stopped, opened its doors, and powered itself down.

"No," Will managed to say after a few minutes. He could barely hear himself over his ears still ringing.

"No?"

"I'm not going inside anything with you until you explain who you are, and what we're doing here. What's going on?"

"I told ya, Bud. I'm Julian, and we're NOWHERE."

"Oh great, so terrorists are saving my life now. What do you want from me? Just let me go and grieve in peace..."

"We're not terrorists. Most terrorists probably say that, but we're not, Bud. We're trying to free the world of PharmaCorp's hold on them. The only information you get is what they allow you to get. The only job you can get is what they've chosen for you. You don't even have free speech anymore. It's disgusting. We're gonna fix it, but we need your help."

"I just watched my house burn. My FAMILY! I don't understand what's happening."

"I'm sorry, Bud. That was them. The corporation planned that. You were meant to be inside. If I hadn't hacked your car and saved you you'd be history."

"That doesn't make any sense. Tomorrow I'm going to save the world from Double-M! PharmaCorp gets to take all the credit for curing cancer once and for all!"

"They don't want a cure. Think about it. How did they gain control in the first place? People were sick! People needed their treatment! A lot of it! They got rich. They got greedy. They bought the government, and now they are the government. You really think they're gonna allow somebody to just swoop in and cure away their flow of income? You really think they'd allow that?"

"No...no, that's not possible. PharmaCorp cares for the sick. They already stepped up when everyone else failed. They spend every minute making this a better world for everyone."

"Better for who? For you? For me? People are still dying out there Bud! They don't give a shit about a cure! They only care about their wallets! They can't have somebody screwing that up for them. They'll go down. They know it. A cure would end them. They need you to keep your mouth shut. They cannot have the world knowing Double-M is curable."

"I can't...this is too much. I just can't."

"Come inside with me. Meet the rest of the guys. Come see for yourself."

So Will followed, but the door just led down another flight of stairs. At the bottom stood a large, sealed steel door and a biometric entry pad mounted to the right of it. Julian pressed the entry pad, and the door clicked open.

A large crowded room greeted them. Directly ahead stood several desks, each with large display screens set up with a different person staring at each one. Assessing the room, every wall was completely covered. From more displays, cabling and wiring, control panels, maps, and new clippings, it looked like every inch of the already crowded space was taken up, compacting the room even further. Will noticed a few people from various desks standing up and approaching them.

"It's cool guys, he's safe."

"Amazing! I wasn't sure Julian would make it to you," one girl said. "This went down crazy fast. Faster than any operation I've ever seen."

"So it's true?" someone else said. "You actually cured Double-M?"

"Well, it doesn't look like I'll ever be able to implement it. If PharmaCorp really is trying to kill me, I'm already locked out of the facility. I'll never see my lab again." He paused, and tears started filling his eyes again. "I failed her."

"Look," Julian said. "Emily knows you were trying to do the right thing. She knows you just wanted to help people. You didn't fail her."

"That's not what I mean. My...daughter. Sarah. She died about a year ago. Möbius...Mortem...the big Double-M. Took my little girl before her time. While she was on her deathbed I promised her I'd find a cure, no matter how long it took. I found the cure, but I still managed to fail."

"I wouldn't throw in the towel just yet, Bud. We're gonna take down PharmaCorp. You're gonna help us."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't call ourselves NOWHERE for nothing. We're good. We're really good. We're like ghosts. We can hack anything, and it's like we were never there. Like we came out of nowhere. We're gonna get a video of you announcing the cure, then rip the Internet wide open again so everyone has free access to it. You're gonna rally a revolution behind your cure. The world will rise up against PharmaCorp once and for all."

"So you just need me to announce the cure?"

"Not quite that simple, Bud. The firewall has too many layers and physical blocks to allow any full access from outside their server complex. It's just not possible, no matter how good we are."

"I think I know where you're going with this. If they think I'm dead, there's no way I still have door access. It'll probably start setting off alarms if my biometrics even request access! They've gotta be monitoring things like that."

"Not a problem. We can hack into the infrastructure controls and re-enable your access. We'd also remove any flags they may have set, just in case. So, your hands get a couple of us physically inside the building. Once we're in, we need to install a virus directly into the server so the others can remote in and take control from here."

Will understood. "So, once you take control from here, then you broadcast the video we make of me describing the cure. But what makes you think this will convince people to rise up against the corporation? Against their government? You're not just talking about convincing a few people to support your debate; you're talking about an all out revolution."

"The people have been controlled for too long. Look around you, Bud. We aren't the only ones who see the truth. Plenty of people are getting sick of being treated like sheep; they just need a nudge in the right direction. Be the nudge."

"OK. I've got nothing to lose anyway, right? Even if this fails, even if they kill me, I'll be with my family again. I'm in."

Julian and two other guys grabbed a recording device and some equipment from the adjacent room. When they returned, they showed Will the couch and told him to sit and relax.

"When we start rolling," Julian said, "talk about your daughter. Pull the heartstrings right from the start. Tell them you have a cure, and that PharmaCorp wants you dead so they can keep profiting off their sickness. Tell them the truth." And the camera started rolling.

Even though Will proclaimed himself a "science nerd," he did have a way with words. He took a deep breath, gathered his composure, and poured out his heart:

"Hello. My name is Will Marsden, former researcher and bio-engineer for PharmaCorp. One year ago Double-M claimed the life of my beautiful daughter, Sarah. Ever since then, I have been working tirelessly to develop a cure for the disease. I know we've all lost people to this disease, so I know you feel my pain. However, what I'm about to tell you next is going to be hard to stomach." He paused. "PharmaCorp, the corporation that created the 'Better World' we live in today, wants you sick. They profit off your sickness and your deaths. As long as they can sell more treatment medication, they can keep lining their pockets with the blood of your loved ones. But not anymore. I developed an effective cure for Double-M, and I intend to synthesize it to be distributed freely by all. We're going to wipe this disease off the planet. But that's not the only disease that needs to go. You have the power to wipe PharmaCorp off the planet as well. They already attempted to assassinate me because I have the cure. They need to be stopped. You can stop them. Thank you."

"Awesome job, Bud!" Julian cried. "First thing in the morning, we're doing this! Get some rest. You're gonna need it."

The next morning, when everyone prepared, Will, Julian, and two other guys rode Julian's transport to PharmaCorp. They stopped the vehicle a few blocks from the complex to avoid suspicion, and snuck around the far back side of the building. Will led the group through a damp wooded area to an access door.

"There's a maintenance tunnel through here," he said as he pressed the access pad. As promised, his biometrics opened the door without incident. However, unknown to the group and their base, opening this door triggered a silent alarm that transmitted its signal on a system physically separate from the server. PharmaCorp programmed this completely internal system unhackable. Their paranoia now proved beneficial.

As trained security moved to intercept the group where the access tunnel meets the server room, the base recognized the looming danger. "Guys, you need to head back. Abort. Return home. Abort."

"I can't do that," Will replied. "This could be our only chance. This effort isn't going to waste. These bastards are going down for what they did to my family. The rest of you can go back if you want, but I'm finishing this."

"Hey if you're in, I'm in, Bud," Julian said. He moved forward with Will, and the other two agreed as well. Against the base's instruction and judgment, the four of them entered the server room.

"Guards in the hallway, north side!"

"Go plant the virus!" Julian said to Will, pushing him towards the servers. "We'll take care of these guys. Get the message out there. Save the world."

"Alright home base, what am I looking at here?" Will asked.

"We've marked the access panel from here. That's as far as we could get. You'll know it when you see it."

Will didn't understand servers or viruses. Will's forte was chemistry. However, as he navigated this sea of flashing lights, wires, metal and plastic, he saw what they meant. A flashing message illuminated one of the access panels about twenty-five feet down the left wall: "NOWHERE is now here." He approached the server, but stopped short. He heard weapons discharge behind him and a blood-curdling scream.

"Julian? Julian! No!"

Will relived the intersection all over again. He could almost feel the explosion's heat singeing his eyebrows again. This time he sprinted back to Julian's aid, but unfortunately not soon enough. As Will rounded the corner, he almost fell over because the floor was wet and slippery. Will almost vomited when he realized he just slipped in a dark puddle of Julian's blood. There was a lot of blood. The walls had stains and spatter. There was a pool of crimson blood freshly flowing out of a crisp, burn-covered hole in Julian's chest. Slowly, he tried lifting Julian's mangled body, but Will couldn't move. Really, he didn't want to. He blamed himself, and he couldn't take it anymore. He lost everything: his job, his family, his home, and now he even lost Julian. Tears descended his face, like acid rain, and pooled around his lips. Defeated, he lay himself down next to Julian's body.

The guards circled back looking for Will. He heard the footsteps getting closer, closer, closer. Sitting in Hell, he heard home base one last time.

"Will! We found them! We found Emily and Michael! They weren't in the house! We're going to pick them up now!"

"What? Em? Mikey? How is that possible? That's not...Really?!"

Like a phoenix he rose from the ashes of death and destruction a new man. Invigorated and reborn, he had only one job now: return to his family. However, Will held one more task: planting the virus. He grabbed Julian's blood-soaked weapon and started discharging toward the doorway the guards' footsteps echoed through. He shot and shot until the weapon powered itself down; then, he dropped it and sprinted faster than he'd ever run before.

Back in the server room, Will finished his journey, found the glowing panel, and inserted the small disc NOWHERE had commissioned him with. All the room's screens and access panels lit up with his face. As he exited, he heard his own voice echoing behind him: "Hello, my name is Will Marsden..."

Once the vehicle drove Will back to the base he quickly descended the stairs, nearly falling flat on his face, and opened the door. As promised Emily and Michael stood waiting for him. With joyful tears in his eyes, Will embraced them tighter than ever before.

"I thought you were home when... I saw the house, and I just thought..."

"Michael wanted to buy you a gift to celebrate your big day. We were almost back home when we saw. We thought you..."

As they held each other, they watched the mounted screens along with the rest of NOWHERE. Up there, several stories above their underground lair, the revolution started.

"Oh my God," Will exclaimed. "PharmaCorp was the world's government. Even if they were evil, greedy bastards, they were at least stable. What now?"

With riots spreading like wildfire, the Marsdens and NOWHERE witnessed the world quickly becoming Anarchy. "Is this really what we wanted?" Will asked. "Is this really a better world?"

## Ghosts

By Kaitlyn Hill

My hand searched across the bed for what used to be your warmth.

The coldness of the sheets startled me; my eyes shot open.

I was confused until I remembered you left six months ago.

As time passed, the ache in my chest started to fade

And I wasn't thinking about you as much anymore.

But you always visited me in my dreams,

And I realized that you never really left me.

## Old Endings, New Beginnings

By Kaitlyn Hill

The way you tucked my hair behind my ear

And ran your thumb across my cheek

One look at you erased all fear

The sun came up, up and over the peak

The answers to my questions were in your eyes

I never thought I'd find myself with you

A part of me couldn't recognize

The way you loved me like you always wanted to

It didn't feel like anything was real with us

A figment of my imagination

Maybe it was in the way you always told me to trust

And how you took my 'no' without an explanation

You helped me heal with the way your fingers danced across my skin

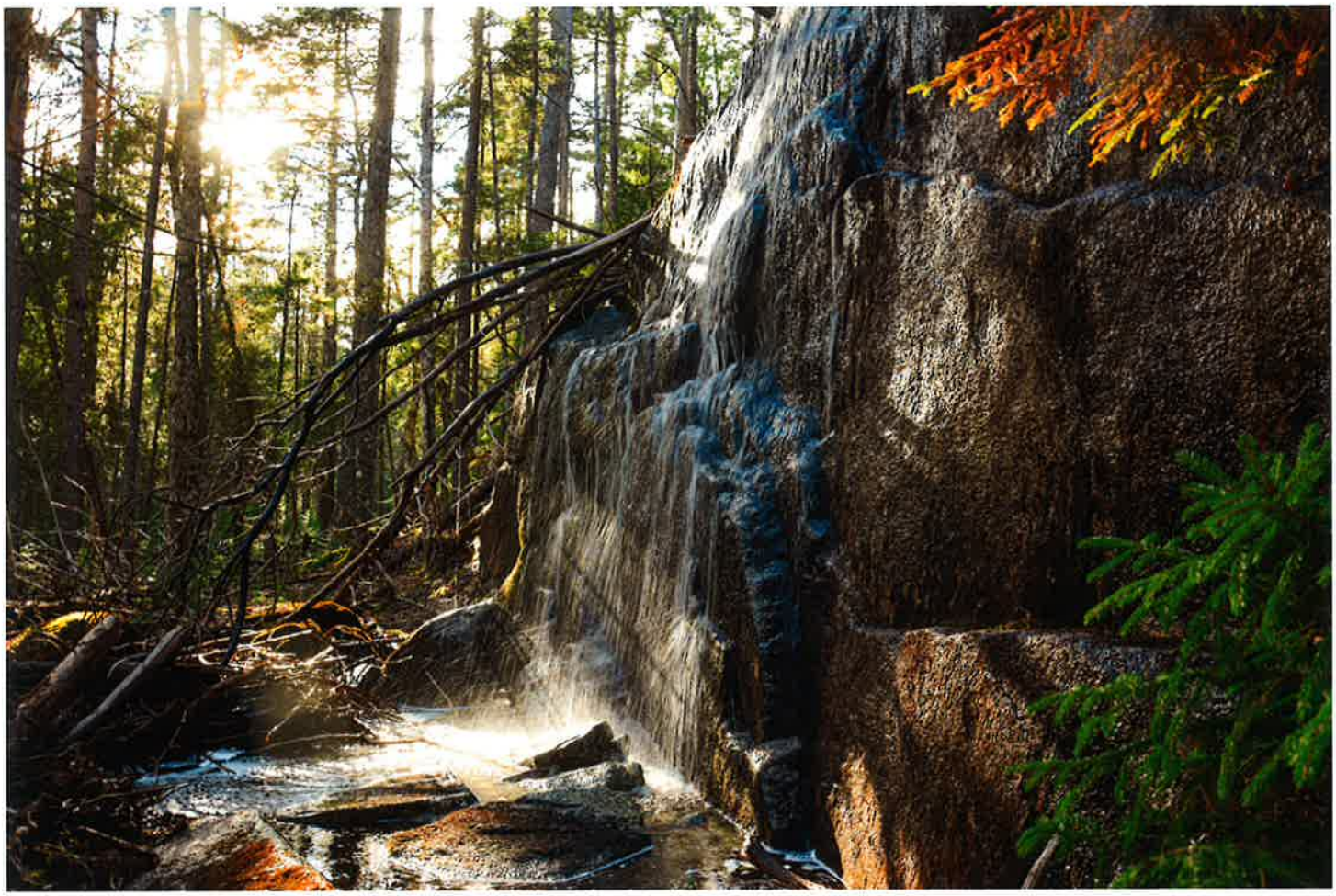
Following the rhythm to a song only we knew

I never thought the end of him would help you and me begin

But I guess, before, I had never seen love when it was true



By Patrik Orcutt




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By Patrik Orcutt

# The Need to Survive

By Katelyn Baker

I've got to get out of here. My heart is pounding, and I'm soaked in gasoline. Some maniac is running around the building with a lit torch, screaming something I can't quite make out. For some reason I can't move. My body won't let me. He's done something. Altered me in some way so it's impossible for me to escape. He wants me here. My bones, muscles, my baby, every part of my being to be here with him. But for how long is the question. What does he want? Why does he want it? What did I do?

I can see an orange glow slowly making its way towards me. However, I notice it's a lot lower than I am. Beneath me? But how? How can I see it beneath where I currently lie? A second floor. A two story building. I see a silhouette of a stairway just outside of my reach. I can smell the gas; I can feel it creep its way inside my nose, burning just a little more every time I inhale. Almost unbearable, it makes me want to stop breathing. But isn't that what my tormenter wants? For me to stop breathing? I knew I couldn't give up. I inhaled and exhaled, pushing the thought of my burning brain cells out of my mind.

The room is getting darker and is starting to fill with smoke. The glow from the orange flame becomes closer. I can feel the heat begin to touch my exposed skin. I had the instant reaction to move away, like a young child who put his hand on a hot stove. Only, it was impossible. I had no control of my movements and muscles. Every limb seemed to be controlled by the figure. If it wasn't the exact way he wanted me to move, I wouldn't. Thoughts started flying through my head at a rate I could barely keep up with. Why in god's name would I be here? And what the hell did I do to deserve this? But through thought upon thought, there was one that grabbed me and made me think back to a time previous to this.

One of my clients, John Foley. I had started sessions with him 2 months ago. He was in a rut. He had committed a life altering crime that ruined his appearance and who he was altogether. It's hard to help someone who did something you can barely stomach, yourself. But I guess that comes with the job. John had come to be because he had been accused of arson and was sentenced to a year of therapy. If he had his way, the meetings would go unattended. But that's where I came in. Talks upon talks, I thought he had made progress. I thought he had changed for the better. Was I wrong? He even congratulated my husband and me on our first child.

I look down at my hands and see nothing but blood. Where was I bleeding? What had been cut? I don't feel any pain, which leads me to no conclusion. But it was there, pools and pools of it. Running down my forearm, my leg, my inner thigh. I try with everything I have to move my fingers, my arms, my legs, but nothing works. I knew I must not have much time. All I could think to myself as I lay there helpless was, "Could this really be it? Will everything end for me in *this* room? What will happen to my baby? Please God, don't hurt my baby. I'd bleed my own blood until there no longer was any more. Just keep baby Caleb safe.

The sounds of sirens and fire engines racing down the street fill my ears. The thought that they wouldn't make it in time made me realize the end was closing in. I had prayed harder than any religious person had prayed before. My eyes were closing; in some way I would say it was a miracle. My fingers regained mobility even for the slightest second. But that one second of movement gave me hope. Slowly and maybe only a centimeter, my fingertips moved. I thought to myself that I must look like an inchworm trying to make its way over to a leaf that lay just an inch away, just one little movement at a time.

I was in shock. Maybe whatever "John," my maniac patient had given me, had been wearing off. He had never been the brightest bulb, so it was perfectly possible. It occurred to me that I might just get out of here, if only I gained the willpower to move, to crawl to an exit. The paralyzed state he had me in, no longer had me chained to his craving for crime. Trying, and then trying again, my arms and legs moved. Slowly but surely, they regained mobility.

The army crawl: All muscle, hardly any leg movement, I moved myself inch by inch to a small bathroom I thought could have a window, due to being on the second floor. The red lights from the police cars on the street reflected off the six by six inch mirror. Or was it a flame? Something told me to keep moving faster and not to look back. I needed to get out. I needed to see my son grow up, graduate, go on first dates and get married. The power of love and the yearning to be alive took over as the flames grew stronger, bigger, and hotter. Then, the smell of burning flesh took over my senses.

Down the stairs I rolled; it was the fastest way down. I couldn't stand. My legs had been sliced and diced, and my bones had been snapped. Pain was one thing, but the fight to see my husband and save my son was the stronger of the two. The door flew

open as I lay at the bottom of the stairs. And someone who I thought to be my husband took my arm and dragged me outside. I hadn't any feeling in my lower leg. It was the thigh and the upper leg muscle, and mostly arm muscle that had allowed me to flail myself down the stairs.

The air was cold, but in a way I didn't care. It felt good. It felt good to be alive. Strength was hard to come by as I lay on the stretcher. Yet I needed it. I needed answers. Who was this man, and what did I do? Before I blacked out on the ride to "Burn Unit 3," the man standing above me answered the questions I had so much wondered about.

"John Foley suffered from split personality disorder. Right and wrong was not obvious to him. He needed the feeling of fire — the larger the flame, the better the reaction. John Foley was pronounced dead upon arrival at the scene. He burned to death in the second floor bathroom. We are calling it suicide. And you, Caroline, are lucky to be alive. Consider yourself blessed. Someone was looking out for you."

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As I recall the events that led to where I am, I realize how strong of a woman I am. If it weren't for my strength and will-power, both my son and I wouldn't have had a chance at life. They say a mother's love is the strongest type of love. Holding my stomach, looking back at the years I spent with my husband, I knew what I needed to do. Without hesitation, I made my decision...

"Doctor, save Caleb, and tell my husband I love him."



By Patrik Orcutt

*Note: As stated in the Table of Contents, all photographs within these pages, including the front and back covers, are the creative works of Patrik Orcutt.*

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